Black Judaism
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Introduction

Although I have gathered materials on Black Judaism for thirty years, originally several speeches and articles were to be the extent of my work. It was not until I undertook the task of determining just what black church ministers taught in the nineteenth century that I was able to determine an integrative theme, millennial teachings, and I began to understand that all Black Jewish groups traced their ancestry to the Church of the Living God and the Church of God and Saints of Christ. With that framework in mind it became easier to organize my collection of materials in a manner that made historical sense. Previous interpretations of Black Jewish groups had not fully completed these integrative themes.

I have, in an effort to convey some understanding of Black Judaism, occasionally offered some judgements and opinions. My purpose in this treatment has been twofold: (1) to compile information about Black Judaism in a single source; and, (2) to allow this information to be analyzed, criticized and, I hope, enlarged by the reading public, so that incomplete and missing information and more informed opinions can be brought to bear on the subject.

I have taken several liberties with the use of the English language which may cause concern. Instead of repeating such terms as Afro-American or African-American I have, for brevity’s sake, frequently used the term “black.” I have also made a distinction between “black Judaism” and “Black Judaism.” The difference in capitalization should clarify what is being discussed. References to “black Judaism” are made when the person or activity involved represents a black person or activity accepted by the world’s Jewish community. Black conversion to Judaism would fall into this category. The term “Black Judaism” refers to those persons and/or groups which maintain a clear identity with Black Jewish teachings which are not accepted by the world’s Jewish community. This book is about the latter. “Black Judaism” has been an organized social movement; “black Judaism” has been an isolated social phenomenon.

Also, in order to avoid redundancy, I have avoided repeated references to the fact that Black Judaism is a set of beliefs in a movement that is not acceptable to the world’s Jewish community. Since the use of Jewish nomenclature such as rabbi and synagogue, and the celebration of Jewish holy days such as Passover, are found in most Black Jewish groups, to constantly reiterate the fact that this is unacceptable to the world’s Jewish community would add considerably to the length of the treatment. Even though the Hebrew Israelites in Israel are now having their residence in that country normalized, after more than thirty years, at no time has the government or the various rabbinates recognized them as an integral component of the world’s Jewish community.

Several themes are developed in this work. Black Judaism as an organized social movement had its origins in the Jim Crow American south in 1889. All Black
Jewish groups since that time can trace their ancestry to the Church of the Living God. One of the first outgroup impacts was the founding of the Church of God and Saints of Christ in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1896, from where the movement spread, by 1900, into the major urban centers of the northeast, especially Chicago, Detroit, New York’s Harlem, Philadelphia, and most large seacoast cities from Boston to the Carolinas. Missionaries introduced Black Judaism into southern Africa where its teachings had major impact on the development of African nationalism through the emerging independent black church movement. Black Judaism also spread from Harlem into the West Indies where it became integrated into the teachings of the Rastafarians of Jamaica.

The early movement was an expression of cultural black nationalism and found its expression as a result of racial discrimination and oppression in the American south. The beliefs and rhetoric of the Black Jews became the model upon which the Moorish Divine movement and the Nation of Islam were based, as well as the sense of locally placed nationalism and the development of a community of relief from economic backwardness found in Father Divine’s depression era “kingdoms,” and later among the Black Muslims whose direct predecessors were the Black Jews in Chicago, Detroit, and Harlem. The rhetoric and activities that became so familiar during the civil rights era had their origins in the activities and beliefs of the early Black Jewish leaders, and the impact of the movement has far surpassed the numbers involved. Black Judaism has been a significant omission from African-American history, and many black organizations have actually looked askance at the Black Jews, relegating them to the religious fringe. Yet, Black Judaism is a truly American religious movement, and the successful outcome of the Hebrew Israelite migration to Israel must rank as one of the most important black emigrationist movements since the successful founding of Liberia in 1822.

I have looked, and I found Black Judaism barely alive, but it will reappear in strength during the next Civil Rights era.