Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions

Jacob S. Dorman

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Book description

Winner of the Byron Caldwell Smith Book Prize

Jacob S. Dorman offers new insights into the rise of Black Israelite religions in America, faiths ranging from Judaism to Islam to Rastafarianism all of which believe that the ancient Hebrew Israelites were Black and that contemporary African-Americans are their descendants. Dorman traces the influence of Israelite practices and philosophies in the Holiness Christianity movement of the 1890s and the emergence of the Pentecostal movement in 1906. An examination of Black interactions with white Jews under slavery shows that the original impetus for Christian Israelite movements was not a desire to practice Judaism but rather a studied attempt to recreate the early Christian church, following the strictures of the Hebrew Scriptures.

A second wave of Black Israelite synagogues arose during the Great Migration of African-Americans and West Indians to cities in the North. One of the most fascinating of the Black Israelite pioneers was Arnold Josiah Ford, a Barbadian musician who moved to Harlem, joined Marcus Garvey’s Black Nationalist movement, started his own synagogue, and led African-Americans to resettle in Ethiopia in 1930. The effort failed, but the Black Israelite theology had captured the imagination of settlers who returned to Jamaica and transmitted it to Leonard Howell, one of the founders of Rastafarianism and himself a member of Harlem’s religious subculture. After Ford’s resettlement effort, the Black Israelite movement was carried forward in the US by several Harlem rabbis, including Wentworth Arthur Matthew, another West Indian, who creatively combined elements of Judaism, Pentecostalism, Freemasonry, the British Anglo-Israelite movement, Afro-Caribbean faiths, and occult kabbalah.

Drawing on interviews, newspapers, and a wealth of hitherto untapped archival sources, Dorman provides a vivid portrait of Black Israelites, showing them to be a transnational movement that fought racism and its erasure of people of color from European-derived religions. Chosen People argues for a new way of understanding cultural formation, not in terms of genealogical metaphors of ‘survivals,’ or syncretism, but rather as a ‘polycultural’ cutting and pasting from a transnational array of ideas, books, rituals, and social networks.

‘Black Israelite’ is a loose term describing religious groups who believe that the ancient Israelites were black, and that black people today are their descendants. Black Israelites (alternative terms used are: Black Hebrews, Black Hebrew Israelites, African Hebrew Israelites) could include black Jews, Christians, Rastafarians, or even black Muslims.
**About the author**

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**Reviews**

*Chosen People* offers a fascinating look at Black Israelites, people who resided in the interstices of groups and ideas we commonly separate—Blacks and Jews, religion and politics, history and identity, cultural theory and historical documentation, Christians and Jews. Dorman situates his subjects in an incredibly rich context, illuminating not only those African Americans who believed in the blackness of the ancient Hebrews, but also the many social, political, and cultural forces operating in post-emancipation African American history. It is fascinating reading for anyone interested in American religion, history, or culture.
—Cheryl Greenberg, Paul E. Raether Distinguished Professor of History, Trinity College

Jacob Dorman has written a masterful (even paradigm-shifting) book on Black Judaism, a genuine *tour de force*. Carefully combining a close reading of primary artifacts/evidence with substantive life-history interviews, critiques/re-readings of various secondary literatures, and even a healthy dash of what I’d call a decidedly ethnographic sensibility, Dorman has crafted a powerful and meticulous portrait of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Black Jewish leaders who institutionalized versions of Black Judaic subjectivity in the United States that can still boast many adherents all around the country and the world today. *Chosen People* is an engaging and thoughtful read for students and scholars of Jewish studies, Africana studies, religious studies, and American history. —John L. Jackson, Jr., Richard Perry University Professor of Communication, Africana Studies and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

Jacob Dorman has not only established himself as the leading historian on Black Israelites, but has made an immense contribution to our understanding of the African Diaspora, religion and modernity, and the vexing problem of cultural identity. The research is prodigious, the scope impressive, and his telling of
how African-descended people embraced and transformed Judaism is truly dynamic. Most importantly, *Chosen People* reminds us that people are not merely inheritors of tradition but its creators. —Robin D.G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

Jacob Dorman extends historical narratives of African-American religion beyond ‘Black Jews’ to the kinship between Black Israelites, Ethiopians, Rastafarians, and Holiness-Pentecostal Christians, with Freemasons, Conjurers and Mystic Scientists forming a bricolage of ideational, rather than hereditary, traditions. This is a fascinating study that shifts models of African American cultural transmission and religious innovation from ‘roots’ to ‘rhizomes,’ and from ‘syncretism’ to ‘polyculturalism.’ —Yvonne Chireau, co-editor of *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999)

Dorman’s book draws an intricate web of connections between Israelites, black Jews, Holiness, Pentecostal, and Anglo-Israelite groups, all with a skilled reading of the meaning of religious symbols. —*Religion in American History*

This book should be on the shelf of everyone who studies the history of US religion. Historian Dorman traces the incredibly tangled and complex story of the polycultural influences behind what are sometimes popularly called ‘the black Jews,’ more precisely referred to as Black Hebrew or Black Israelite religions. Understanding Black Israelite faiths, he shows, “requires comprehending their relationship to much larger movements: Freemasonry, Anglo-Israelism, African American conjuring, New Thought, the Garvey movement,” and others. The genealogies of the movement are “primarily intellectual, literary, and social, not genetic, organic, or natural.” Dorman provides a richly detailed social history of the bricolage of Black Hebrew movements, tracing along the way the lives of figures that even scholars in the field may know little about: William Crowdy, Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford, and Wentworth Arthur Matthew, among others. The book’s introduction is a bracing extended essay and meditation on some misleading metaphors (syncretism, roots) that should be replaced with more fruitful conceptions to help readers understand “that vast primordial soup of the Black Atlantic dialogue, a source not bounded by heredity.” Indispensable. Essential. Most levels/libraries. —Paul Harvey, Professor of History and Presidential Teaching Scholar, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

**Book explores rise of American black Israelite religions.**

*The University of Kansas* (Lawrence, Kansas), January 31, 2013


Christianity was their own faith, but for some white slave owners, religion also served as a way to maintain order among their slaves. “Most Black Israelites who believe that Jesus and the ancient Israelites were black have actually been Christians. But Christianity, in the black experience, has sometimes been seen as unsavory because of its ties to social control during slavery—it was something slave masters used to keep slaves quiet, to prevent them from rebelling,” said Jacob Dorman, University of Kansas professor. “That connection has led a lot of African-Americans to want to experiment and try other religions—Judaism being one of them.”

Dorman’s new book, *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions*, chronicles religions that teach that ancient Israelites were black and that today’s African-Americans are their descendants. The book was published this month by Oxford University Press. Dorman is an assistant professor of history and American studies at the University of Kansas.
The book argues that black Israelites do not come from interactions with white Jews during slavery but rather from attempts to recreate the early Christian church among Freemasons and Holiness and Pentecostal Christians in the 1890s. It follows the rise of black Israelite synagogues in northern states and the advent of a black nationalist movement that led a group of African-Americans to resettle in Ethiopia in 1930. “Today, thousands of African-Americans consider themselves to be Hebrew Israelites or Jews,” Dorman said.

In recent history, however, relations between blacks and Jews have also been tense at times. In 1991, riots ensued in New York after a white Hasidic Jew struck two black children while driving in Crown Heights, killing one of them. A rumor started that emergency responders rushed to help the Jewish men in the car, but not the children. When the news spread, an eruption of anti-Semitic violence left one Jewish man dead—despite the fact that he wasn’t involved in the crash. “It created a lot of consternation among blacks and Jews because it disturbed the narrative a lot of white Jews believed, which was that blacks and Jews were united in the civil rights movement,” Dorman said. It was a moment when underlying tensions between the two communities came to light.

“I became very interested in not just the conflict between white Jews and blacks, but the similarities in their ideas about nationalism,” Dorman said. When Dorman started researching the topic, unearthing a small collection of materials at a Harlem library, “there were only four or five books on black Jews,” he said. Only a few more have been published since then, but a book by another author on black Jews in Africa and the Americas will be published in February. Dorman takes this as a sign that the topic is edging closer to becoming mainstream. “It’s an interesting, exciting and growing field of study,” Dorman said.

**KU Prof Explores Black Israelite Roots in Kansas**

 Interviews (audio, 28 minutes) with Michael ‘Devar’ Long (a member of the Ohev Sholom synagogue in Prairie Village, Kansas) and Jacob Dorman (Univ. of Kansas history professor), by Susan B. Wilson and Monica Sandreczki, **KCUR 89.3 FM, April 11, 2013**  

Highlights from the interview with Jacob Dorman:

**On Black Israelites’ customs:**  
“Some practice all the same festivals, read from the Torah, keep the dietary laws. Then there’s other groups like the Church of God and Saints of Christ (which started in Lawrence, Kansas in 1896), and they also follow many of the same festivals, but they have their own liturgy which is very unique, and really quite beautiful. So there’s many forms of Judaism that are quite robust, and that have changed over the last century. But you could say the same thing about Ashkenazi or Sephardic Judaism of today—it’s quite different than it was practiced 150 years ago in Eastern Europe. Religions are always changing and evolving, and I would love it if more Jews of European descent actually visited and came to appreciate some of these forms of Judaism created by Black Israelites because they are quite exceptional and quite beautiful.”

**On the criticism the movement’s received by European Jews:**  
“Black Jewish leaders of the 1920s ... started to form synagogues as opposed to churches. They started to form more Judaic forms of Black Israelitism during the Harlem Renaissance. And they tended to preach
that they were the true Jews, and that white Jews were imposters, descended from Edom. That they were Edomites and not true Jews. Most white Jews probably saw the black Jews as illegitimate as well. There were some exceptions to that. There were several efforts during the Civil Rights Movement to try to bring these two communities closer together. But neither group really wanted to validate the other group and that's only starting to change, really in the last decade.”

On Black Israelite sects in contemporary America:
“In the last decade, there’s been a maturation for a less divisive rhetoric. Michelle Obama’s cousin, Rabbi Capers Funanye leads a congregation on the south side of Chicago and has actually been accepted into the Chicago Board of Rabbis. So he is someone who is accepted by everybody—by Black Jews, by white Jews. There’s more and more African Americans who have multi-generational histories of practicing Judaism who are becoming part of the majority white communities and schools, including in the Kansas City area. So, there’s a process that happens over generations and I think the Jewish community as a whole is becoming much more diverse through the incorporation of Israelite groups... There’s a real interest among many more progressive Jews in moving beyond a racialist definition of Judaism and accepting and welcoming people of color.”

How New Religions Are Made
Cultural mashup? Syncretism? The Black Israelite Movement serves as a case study . . .

Q&A with Jacob S. Dorman, Religion Dispatches, October 3, 2013
http://www.religiondispatches.org/books/7329/how_new_religions_are_made

What inspired you to write Chosen People? What sparked your interest?
When I was in college I was interested in the similarities between Jewish and Black nationalisms, and began to learn Jewish and African American histories at Stanford University with Clayborne Carson, George Fredrickson, Sylvia Wynter, Mark Mancall, Arnie Eisen, and Tudor Parfitt.

A chance encounter led me to visit the Original Hebrew Israelites of Dimona, Israel, and the experience was so powerful that I set out to study the antecedents of Black Israelite movements. At that time, Shlomo Levy, a Columbia University graduate student who was himself the son of one of the leading figures of the New York Israelite community, had begun to work with the Schomburg Center of the New York Public Library to collect papers from a dozen or so Black Israelite synagogues. I wrote an honors thesis on a small part of that collection, and then returned in graduate school to use the rest.

Working towards my doctorate at UCLA I was fortunate enough to study Black Atlantic religions with Donald Cosentino, and African-American and West Indian histories with Brenda Stevenson, Gary Nash, and Bobby Hill. I was also inspired by seminars I took with Carlo Ginzburg, Peg Jacob, Lynn Hunt, Henry Yu, and others. I wanted to thickly describe African-American Judaism from microhistorical, Black Atlantic, and African-American Studies perspectives.

The question of ‘authenticity’ that had dominated the accounts of so many white Jews was of little interest to me. What had gone missing in the limited literature on the topics was an attempt to tell the story of Black Israelites as an instance of African-American history (in the hemispheric sense, including the West Indies), and an attempt to write Black Israelites into the larger stories of American religion and of Black Atlantic religions.
You describe a variety of fascinating (and largely unknown) figures in American religious history. Which one of them fascinated you the most?
Prophet William Saunders Crowdy stars in two chapters and is a largely unknown but remarkable figure who deserves to be on a postage stamp for the impact he had on US religion and culture. But without a doubt, I was most fascinated by Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew. That is because I had access to sources at the Schomburg and in newspapers over half a century that allowed me to clearly see Rabbi Matthew’s religious evolution, and his polycultural bricolage of his own Israelite tradition combining Holiness-based Israelite churches, Judaism, conjuring, West Indian festivals, Central European occult practices, and freemasonry. Although Matthew tried his best to hide this religious bricolage, his papers offer a rare opportunity to see how new religions are made.

Is there anything you had to leave out?
Tons. I came to see Black Israelites as being very closely related to Black Muslims. Not only was there overlap between the groups’ memberships, but it was not uncommon for groups to blend elements of both Judaism and Islam in the 1920s, as in the 1970s.

I think African-American adoption of both religions are variants of Black thought about ‘the East,’ and deserve to be thought of as Black forms of Orientalism—not in a pejorative sense, but in an affirmative and romantic sense. So at one point the book was at least twice as long, before I decided that the Islam/Orientalism piece needed to be a book of its own.

Even then, the Black Israelites book continued for five more chapters concerning interactions and race relations between white and Black Jews during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. Thankfully, Oxford University Press’ readers reined me in, and I was left with the much more compact, and much more readable text as it stands today, which focuses on the period from the nineteenth century to the 1930s.

Some scholars may wonder how large these groups were, especially since African American Protestantism is assumed to be so large and powerful. How do you respond to those searching to answer that ever-elusive problem of how ‘representative’ these groups and leaders were?
One of the joys of writing this book has been watching its focus expand. I started with the papers of New York Black Israelite synagogues—small groups to be sure. But the clues I found in those sources soon led me to many more numerous groups.

The first black Israelite churches, founded at the turn of the twentieth century, were mega churches with two to three thousand members each in New York and Philadelphia—not to mention affiliates across the Midwest, South, West Indies, and even South Africa.

Israelite ideas were popular in the Holiness movement, and played an indispensable role in the evolution of Pentecostalism, the most numerous Christian movement of the twentieth century. I could find important antecedents in the Anglo-Israelite, who had representatives both here and in Britain, and even make a cameo in E.P. Thompson’s classic, The Making of the English Working Class.

And so, for me, the process of writing this book was a real eye-opener that demonstrated that even small, some might say, ‘marginal’ religious groups are connected in so many ways to so many other groups, crossing lines of space, race, and time. It led me to rethink the utility of the ‘marginal’ and to discover just how rich those religions are as a way of understanding the world and much larger movements, religious, cultural, political, and otherwise.
Did you have a specific audience in mind when writing?
Well, obviously, this is my first book and my tenure book, so it had to fit certain conventions of academic writing—and I wanted it to do some theoretical work that would necessarily limit its audience.

But at the same time, because it was with Oxford, which has such strong trade and academic businesses, I felt that I wanted to write a book that academics would respect but that lay people would also read. I have been inspired by the marvelous writers of the New Yorker, and so I tried to write the book with some of the literary qualities of the best non-fiction I read in that magazine (as I was also filling my head with academic writing).

In sum, I thought of my audience as a New Yorker audience—educated, but not necessarily academics or specialists.

You have a pretty strong critique of Melville Herskovits and his pathbreaking work. How do you think he would respond to your emphasis on ‘polyculturalism’ as opposed to ‘syncretism’ as a description of the way diverse cultures meet?
Well, the problem with the premise is that even if we could send a copy of the book back in time to 1940, when Melville Herskovits was writing The Myth of the Negro Past, he would not have read the last seventy years of anthropology, so the idea of polyculturalism wouldn’t make any sense to him. On the other hand, I would like to think he would agree with polyculturalism, and with developments in the humanities more broadly, if we could bring Melville Herskovits to the present, and along the way give him time to read Fernando Ortiz and Arthur Huff Fauset, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, Sidney Mintz, Richard and Sally Price, Deleuze and Guattari, Stephan Palmié, John L. Jackson, Andrew Apter, and J. Lorand Matory, as well as many religious studies scholars who have questioned and refined ‘syncretism,’ such as Bruce Lincoln, Charles Stewart, Rosalind Shaw, and A.J. Droge.

The differences in the humanities now and then are at the heart of my critique of syncretism: Herskovits formed his theory of syncretism and the ‘acculturative continuum’ in the 1920s and 30s. An awful lot has changed since then. We have moved away from culture as a set of ‘rigid, predictable patterns,’ as Herskovits put it.

What I argue in the book is that not only did Herskovits develop his theory of syncretism in an earlier era, but he developed his concept of culture from his work studying racial types in his little-mentioned 1920s physical anthropology. Knowing this helps explain some of syncretism’s weaknesses: its cultural holism, its depiction of cultural formation as the result of hostile, binary, systemic confrontations with little human agency, and its depiction of culture as metaphorically genetic.

In contrast, the cultures created in the Americas are imaginative, endlessly porous, and riotously ‘impure.’ To me, thinking of cultural formation as polycultural bricolage simply does a better job than syncretism in reflecting the anthropology, religious studies, and humanities of the present, rather than those of the past.

What alternative title would you give the book?
I went through so many titles, before I settled on this one with the help of my friend Ranjit Arab, a talented editor now at the University of Washington Press. I love Chosen People because I think that expresses what is at the heart of Black Israelite identity: an assertion of chosenness, a reframing of history and the sacred.
My regret about the title is that you would never know the book contains histories of white Israelites, or documents the important role the Israelite idea played in the rise of the Pentecostal movement. So I am afraid it is going to take the book a while to find its many audiences. I briefly considered something about ‘the Israelite idea in America,’ but I didn’t want to dutifully follow that idea in every era from the Puritans to the present.

**How do you feel about the cover?**
I love the image, which was taken by a wonderful photographer named Alexander Alland, Sr., and only printed once, as far as I know, in a magazine spread in the thirties. I was very fortunate to find Alland’s son, Alexander Alland, Jr., an emeritus anthropology professor at Columbia University, who was generous and kind enough to let me use the image.

I get a lot of complements on the cover. I like that it depicts actual ritualistic religious experience, that it signifies that the movements I discuss were not abstract, but lived by thousands of people, for whom they reshaped their religious worlds and their identities alike.

I also like that there is a woman in a white headscarf making eye contact with the photographer behind the central figure. Something was happening in that space where Alland set up his camera.

**What’s your next book?**
My next book will describe polyculturalism at a larger scale, and is inspired by African American Islam and the long and rich history of representing Islam in American popular culture.

While there are extensive literatures on enslaved African Muslims and twentieth century American Black Muslim movements, my next book explores new ground by documenting the prevalence of Orientalist representations of Muslims, Arabs, and Moors in nineteenth century American popular culture in forms such as sheet music, circus performances, minstrelsy and magic. African-Americans not only consumed these images, but they helped to create them.

For some, Orientalist scholarship and performance informed their critique of white supremacy and directly led to Pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism, and Black Muslim movements. By establishing the linkages between performance, religion, and politics, this book will show their interrelation and contend that religious ideas can spread in carnivalesque spaces, without being inauthentic.