Africana Jewish Journeys
Africana Jewish Journeys:

Studies in African Judaism

Edited by
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and Magdel Le Roux

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Part One: Myths and Misrepresentations

Part Two: Islands and “Insularity”
Part Three: New Directions in Lemba Studies

Part Four: Politics and Resistance
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INTRODUCTION

MARLA BRETTSCHNEIDER, EDITH BRUDER, AND MAGDEL LE ROUX

In recent decades, we have witnessed a new global phenomenon. Throughout the world, tens of thousands of individuals have chosen to become part of the Jewish people, adopting Jewish religious identity either through self-identification or religious conversion. This remarkable phenomenon occurs in areas where Judaism has not historically been known to be present and at a time when anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are on the upsurge in Europe and elsewhere. In West, East, Central, and Southern Africa, several ethnic groups have chosen to embrace Judaism and proclaim that they are returning to long-forgotten Jewish roots. Many clans trace their lineage back to ancient Israel or speak in the trope of the “Lost Tribes of Israel”, affirming that they were among the outposts of Israel in Africa. Many of these communities and individuals want to understand their diasporic history, and the majority are seeking to further their religious education and connection with global Jewry. This phenomenon is developing somewhat in tandem with a growing number of African American Jews and Jewish communities in the United States since the mid-twentieth-century.

We see a similar situation in Asia. There are historic Jewish communities in India. At the same time, some additional ethnic groups in India are newly adopting or sometimes rediscovering a Judaic religious identity and have emerged, for a variety of reasons, as members of the Jewish/Israelite global people. This growth in new expressions of Jewish identity and new geographical areas of Jewish influence marks a significant transition in the history of the Jewish people. These communities' entry or re-entry into the world as Jews implies the necessity of reshaping the standard accounts of collective Jewish experience, both in the contemporary period and historically.

Until recently, this history of Judaism in Africa and Asia has been underestimated. The overall phenomenon, which constitutes an unprecedented turning point in the history of Jewish collectivity, was considered almost
nonexistent by scholars and most community religious leaders of the Global North. The first intention of this book is to examine this phenomenon in both global and local contexts and to challenge the way standard accounts of African—and in some related ways, Asian—Judaism must be reshaped. Our second intention is that the different trajectories to and affiliations with Judaism be perceived from as many angles as possible.

Through the various chapters, drawn from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds, we examine the multiple sources, reasons, and meanings for this shaping or reshaping of modern Jewish identities in a world marked by political upheaval, economic uncertainty, ecological crises, and ethnic and religious conflicts.

This book is made all the more crucial by its commitment to contemporary history and recent events such as group conversion of communities in Africa and mass emigration to Israel of some groups in India. The work here allows for a greater historical understanding of a new reality and a more informed dialogue between scholars of religious boundaries. Scholars' contributions cross borders and break free of constraints prioritizing the Global North and the perspectives of elites from among the centers of the historic Atlantic slave trade and European Christian missionizing. As a book on identity, history, and religion written from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, it reflects the profound changes and endogenous and exogenous controversies aroused by the new reality of affiliation to Judaism. Such a study is undeniably of a political nature.

The net impact of this collective project is to bring cohesion to a disparate and dispersed field of study and to bring together scholars and members of the communities in question working in the fields of Jewish studies and African and Asian studies—disciplines that until now have had very little in common. To grapple with the complexity in this phenomenon and developing field of study, the essays in this book employ a wide variety of methodological approaches from anthropology, phenomenology, history, archaeology, linguistics, political philosophy, genetics, and religious and cultural studies. They offer a network of theoretical suggestions about the religious and cultural aspects of African and Indian Jewish development, in both continents as well as in the African diaspora.

A variety of audiences will likely find the contents herein helpful: members of the various communities discussed, as well as scholars and students interested in the study of the History of Religion, African History, Political Theory, Post-Colonial Studies, Ethnology, Modern Jewish Studies, and Cultural Studies.
Part One: Myths and Misinterpretations
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image of Jews—the one that she had developed during the 1960s when white Jews participated in such large numbers in the Black Civil Rights Movement. In this article, Conaway discusses her conversion to Judaism and her acceptation by the larger Jewish community, considering these both in light of the relationships between urban Blacks and white Jews in the US in that fraught historical moment.

We close this section with Barbara C. Johnson's "Misrepresentation of Jewish Social Organization in Kerala, India through Models of Race, Caste, and Slavery." Johnson looks back on the ancient and changing community of the Indian Jews of Cochin. She frames for readers the politics of scholarship, how easy it can be for "outsiders" to impose presumptions on subjects, and the later's implications. In this work, Johnson argues that outdated and inaccurate paradigms of race, caste, and slavery continue to distort the historical understanding of "Cochin" Jewish social organization in Kerala (southwestern India) and Israel. She criticizes research and analysis by many twentieth-century Western scholars—including her own early work—for over-emphasizing and exoticizing past social divisions among these Indian Jews. In this work, Johnson points out that the former categories of "Black", "white", and "freed slave" Jews ceased to have practical social significance more than half a century ago—noting that outsider emphasis on these labels has had a negative impact on the Kerala Jews themselves.

Part Two: Islands and Insularity

In Part Two, three case studies contribute to the growing body of scholarship on divergent perceptions of Jewishness among emerging communities from the islands of Madagascar and Cape Verde. Taken together, these contributions propose new conceptualizations of Jewish identity in Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa today is still undergoing a long process of throwing off the yoke of colonialism; yet, in "Anti-Colonialism and Jewish Women in Madagascar" Marla Brettschneider notes that many male leaders of communities on the ground have not spoken in this way and have been rather offended at this Global Northern, academic analysis. In her experience, the male leaders with whom she has worked have also shied away from discussing the history of European Christian missionizing in their regions in political terms. At the same time, almost no Global Northern academics have worked with groups of women in communities on the ground. Brettschneider discusses the origins of Malagasy Jewish life as understood by groups of women in the capital city Antananarivo and connects these women's experiences to concrete statistics of life in the...
country in terms of politics, economics, and gendered power dynamics. These women’s continued assertion that Christian missionizing was a tool of European colonialism makes sense in this gendered, political, and economic rendering. Brettschneider grounds this radical analysis in a discussion of Michel Foucault’s conceptualization that in the modern Christian West the soul is in fact the prison of the body, and not—as commonly discussed—the reverse.

Nathan Devir’s essay uses a mixed-methods approach (discourse analysis, socio-historical research, ethnographic fieldwork, and communicative interaction studies) to highlight several major trends in the prevalent belief that Madagascar’s indigenous inhabitants stem from an Israelite pedigree. Through an exploration of these trends as they appear in association or community-based manifestos or creeds, supposed oral histories, and popular journalistic and social media outlets, this study shows how the Israelite model has taken center stage in the identity paradigms of select individuals, communities, and religious associations in Madagascar. The particular groups Brettschneider discusses have publicly proclaimed and advocated such an Israelite identity, and Devir’s contribution complements Brettschneider’s work.

Next in this section, we present the work of Alma Gottlieb on the example of Cabo Verde. In “Recapturing Jewish Roots in Cabo Verde: Changing Diasporic Identities,” Alma Gottlieb asks: What happens when a long-ago, suppressed history of Jewish practice is newly remembered? To answer this question, Gottlieb’s chapter explores the Sephardic Jewish history of the nine West African islands of Cabo Verde from the perspective of contemporary Cabo Verdeans (both on and off the islands) who are now exploring—and sometimes embracing—the Jewish identity of their nation and, in many cases, their own families.

The final chapter in this section, “Concentric Circles of Jewish/Israelite Identity in sub-Saharan Africa” by William F. S. Miles, proposes a conceptualization of Jewish identity in Africa in terms of three concentric circles: an outer ring (“vague Israelitism”), a middle ring of pseudopraxy (“Hebraic eclecticism”), and finally a normative core (characterized by “orthopraxis”). Miles applies this model to Jewish and Hebraic/Israelite-identifying communities in Nigeria and Madagascar, with some reference to Cameroon. The budding phenomenon of sub-Saharan Judaism poses challenges to First World notions of Jewish identity. Future engagement between those in what Miles calls a normative core with Jewish Africans will likely induce increasing numbers of Western Jews to re-examine what “being Jewish” means to them.
In Section Three, we offer new research on the Lemba tribe in Southern Africa. The Lemba have a significant place in the growing Jewish phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa. They are an ancient tribe in the region, with rich histories and traditions. In the contemporary period, these traditions continue to be in transition, and scholars continue to examine the range of histories.

Magdel Le Roux advances her pivotal research on the Lemba with her work here: “Lemba and Other Perspectives on Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe.” The Lemba (in Southern Africa) came by boat to Africa as traders, from a place called Sena on the other side of the Phusela, and they are “children of Abraham.” Many reports and traditions confirm that they were known as builders, miners, and smelters of gold, iron, copper, and other minerals. Scant archaeological or other remains of their involvement in Great Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe, and other parts of Southern Africa are available. Le Roux investigates various accounts and sources that bear witness to Lemba activities on the East Coast of Africa and the interior, while Lemba oral traditions also add valuable information to their involvement and journeys into Africa.

In his work, “Naming Practices among Vhalemba/Basena of South Africa,” Tom Sengani addresses controversies that continue to rage among scholars on the origin of Vhalemba or Basena found in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and other parts of Africa. Whereas some scholars associate these groups with Jews, there are others who allege that they are of Arab origin, with some African scholars linking them with Africa. Members of the Lemba claim that they are of Jewish origin. In this contribution (as a Lemba), Sengani uses critical discourse analysis, as well as Colonial and Post-Colonial discourse theories, to look into factors that have been part of the practice of Lemba members keeping their Jewish-Arabic clan names. Additionally, he analyzes how Lemba people also adopted other names from other cultures and languages. This analysis demonstrates that these languages show traces of tribal travel from Judea, Yemen, and East as well as Southern Africa.

Finally, in this section, we hear from a leader in a Lemba cultural youth organization. Oded Hams Maramwidze is a member of the Dumah House of the Lemba people. In this chapter, he shares his concerns for current trends in Lemba practice, focusing on dietary traditions, Sabbath observance, and the ways in which many Lemba today combine multiple religious traditions. Maramwidze seeks increased interaction between his Lemba community and global Jewish communities as well as transitions in
Section Four: Politics and Resistance
The Pashtuns/Pathans are a large network of tribes, comprised of approximately 41 million people. Aafreedi describes these tribes generally as a warlike people in northeast Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan with a diaspora in India. Many Pashtuns are unaware of or uninterested in the notion of an Israelite origin for their people; however, there has been much interest in Israel in them. In this work, Aafreedi examines the complexities of the Jewish (particularly Israeli) political and also scholarly interest in this tradition. He then clarifies the current trends in the Pashtun/Pathan response to this Jewish, Israeli, and scholarly attention.

This collection of essays contributes new methodological and theoretical paradigms for the study of the Jewish and Jewish-related phenomena in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and demonstrates that Judaism is going through profound changes. Serious attention is needed to what these developments have to offer to the study of the history of religions, historical and contemporary Christianity, Islam, Jewishness, and the myriad local and ancient cultural and religious traditions of these regions. Certainly, this field also contributes to controversial questions regarding "who is a Jew", global Jewish identities, and a range of potentially productive issues in Jewish diversity studies. The blossoming of African and Indian Judaism challenges and redefines conventional Western understandings of what constitutes Jewish identity and ethnicity in a globalized world. A new analytical light is cast by these new trajectories on the evolving reality of contemporary Judaism and may force Western Jews to re-examine what "being Jewish" means to them.

The role of Israel in this arena is crucial in the management of both policy and identity development. In March 2018, the publication of a report appointed by Israel's Diaspora Affairs Ministry considering Israel's policies towards the various kinds of people wishing to affiliate themselves with the Jewish collective in recent years pointed out the important consequences for Israeli domestic and international politics represented by these communities. The recommendations put forward in the report suggested educating members of these communities in Judaism, Hebrew, and Jewish culture as well as providing them with information about Israel, though they did not include any further recommendations specifically encouraging their conversion or immigration to Israel. It is clear that African, African American, and Indian Jews may no longer remain merely the objects of Western recognition but must assume the role of active stakeholders of what it means to claim to be a Jew, anywhere, in the twenty-first century.
Noa Landau and Chaim Levinson, “Israel Ministry Sets Sights on Millions of ‘Potential Jews’ to Improve Country’s Image and Fight BDS”, Haaretz, March 27, 2018

Haaretz
Dr. Navras J. Aafreedi

Jews, Judaizing Movements and the Traditions of Israelite Descent in South Asia

Ahmadiel Ben Yehuda

Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies, The Social Ion, Asian Jewish Life
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Africa, the UK, and Israel. Widely traveled, he conducts "Sacred Visitation" tours of Israel, with an emphasis on the African presence, and has presented at universities and conferences across the US, the UK, Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa, including a series of seminars documenting the migration patterns and cultural parallels to the ancient Israelites found among various West African ethnic groups, in association with Ghana's National Commission for Culture. He currently serves as advisor to the South African jurisdictions of the African Hebrew Israelites and is also a member of the International Society for the Study of African Judaism (ISSAJ).

Marla Brettschneider

is Professor of Political Philosophy with a joint appointment in Political Science and Women's Studies at the University of New Hampshire. She has taught, lectured, and published widely on issues of Jewish diversity politics. The article for this volume emerged from research conducted after Brettschneider published her 2015 book, "The Jewish Phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Politics of Conflicting Discourses.

Edith Bruder,

PhD is a French ethnologist who has an academic multi-disciplinary background in the History of Art and Clinical Psychology. The focus of her research is on the documentation and analysis of the history and the contemporary phenomena of Jewish practices across sub-Saharan Africa, Judaising movements, contemporary diasporas, and particular Jewish identities. Her book, "The Black Jews of Africa: History, Identity, Religion" (Oxford University Press, 2008 and 2012), offers an overview of both past and present Jewish activities across Africa. She founded in 2010 an international scholarly organization—of which she serves as President—the International Society for the Study of African Jewry (http://issaj.com). Her own scholarship and the collective project she is sponsoring through the ISSAJ aim to promote understanding of the global context of Jewish history and practice, and to help bringing together scholars and others working in the fields of Jewish Studies and African Studies—two disciplines that, until now, have had very little in common. Bruder is a research associate at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and a research fellow at Unisa—the University of South Africa. She is the author of "Black Jews, Les Juifs noirs d’Afrique et le mythe des Tribus perdues" and co-editor of "African Zion, Studies in Religion"
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Children of Israel: Emerging Jewish Communities in an Era of Globalization


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The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa? The case of the Lemba

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PART ONE:

MYTHS AND MISREPRESENTATIONS
CHAPTER ONE

BLACK PHILO-SEMITISM

VERSUS RACIAL MYTHS

EDITH BRUDER

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, since the colonial era many African Christians have expressed a general feeling of sympathy towards the Jewish people as well as the idea of having a spiritual relationship with them. Some have taken this idea of a relationship with the Jews a stage further than a spiritual brotherhood, and in the course of the twentieth century more than a dozen disparate ethno-religious groups throughout Africa have begun to identify themselves as descendants of the Jewish people and to claim Hebrew or Israelite ancestry. The evidence for a Black philo-Semitism widely predates this recent upsurge of Judaism in Africa. As early as the nineteenth century, in the United States African American individuals and groups incorporated resources from the Old Testament for the construction of their own religious identities. In African American religious discourse, the rhetoric of deliverance of the Children of Israel, the Exodus, and the concepts of chosenness and diaspora were powerfully invested as their own historical destiny and helped forge their self-renewal. The identification with the Jews of the Old Testament was particularly significant to African Americans who were fighting against racial injustice and for the civil rights of their people. The first organized communities of African American Jews with structured ideologies appeared between the 1920s and 1930s, when several African American synagogues were built in the cities of New York, Washington, Philadelphia, and Chicago, paving the way for a wider surge of an African American Judaism that has been developing and growing ever since. African American Jews now occupy a cultural religious space in both communities, and they challenge the imposed categories of "Black" and "Jewish" that can alternatively refer to ethnic, racial, religious, and sometimes politics issues.

This message of the Old Testament presented similar revelation and significance in Africa in the context of the struggle for physical and spiritual
Black Philo-Semitism versus Racial Myths

From the 1980s, throughout Africa, various communities identified themselves as the authentic descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel and asserted that, prior to the arrival of colonial missionaries, they had already practiced a form of Judaism. One can say that in the African psyche the idealization of the Jewish people associated with great antiquity, learning, and a determination to preserve a religious and cultural cohesion is combined with the belief that Africans are themselves the ethnic heirs of biblical Israel. The development of philo-semitic trends in Africa appear to be the outcome of a long historical and anthropological process and is considered part of the colonial or post-colonial situation.

With the production of the translations in local languages, the Old Testament began to play a key role in the cultural, social, and political life of African Christians who identified with it. African Christians recognized within it their cultural traditions and they used it as an affirmation of their own religious heritage. John S. Mbiti, the prominent African theologian, writes: "[We] opened the scriptures in our own languages and saw the Jewish people in the Bible as a mirror in which we viewed ourselves… We could find anthropological refuge and protection within the pages of the Bible, and nowhere else."

Religions and the religious are deeply involved in globalization, which itself redraws boundaries of various kinds—political, economic, religious, and ethnic. It is conjectured that the current recombination of cultural and religious experience is connected with growing worldwide interconnectedness and coincides with the deregulation of the cultures of the regional blocks in post-colonial Africa. Lehmann notes: "Modernity and globalization are changing the definition of religion itself, at least the definition which has been assumed in Western Europe, of a heritage, a culture imbued in childhood."

Currently, Africans and African Americans who embraced Judaism identify themselves with contemporary Jews, and most claim that they are members of a larger worldwide Jewish community. In asserting a contemporary Jewish identity, they heralded the phenomenon of African philo-Semitism that follows the typologies of philo-Semitism usually presented by scholars that intertwine religious, cultural, and political strands. As noted by Karp, "The key philosemitic act is not to preserve an image of Jews drawn exclusively from scripture but to reconcile the biblical heritage with the disjunctive reality of modern Jewishness."

It is well known that these theological affinities between Black people and the Jews did not prevent palpable tensions and antagonisms—specifically, harsh polemics on Jewish slave trading, anti-Black racism and Black anti-Semitism that developed from the 1940s. These antagonisms...
emerged from the social context and were in competition with the spiritual affinities and the idealization of biblical paradigms of Jewish chosenness. The considerations of Black-Jewish relations are already being extensively examined in scholarly and non-scholarly discussions. In this essay I will leave aside the issue of contemporary social and political tensions between the two communities in order to focus on the symbolic system of racial myths and their interactions at work within the philo-Semitic momentum. For Africans or people of African descent, the scriptures favored the rationale of a common theological and historical provenance with Jews. Interrelations between Black people and Judaism are thus inextricably entangled with the biblical myths—whose process of production is as complex as it is shifting while, at the same time, they all exist synchronically in parallel systems. These pages reveal my personal fascination with the circulation of racial myths that gave birth to polymorph stereotypes, sporadically contradicting or supplementing one another in the elaboration of an African Jewish religious identity. What Goldenberg names “etiological myths” and Pepper “roots metaphor” combine notions of skin color and race associated with complex interpretations that lead to the elaboration of stereotypes of the Other. Black philo-Semitism, as it manifests itself today, has somehow overcome the paradoxes of this relationship, making its own path and choices. In this essay, I will try to offer a brief overview of the developments of racial myths that permeated the history of the relations between Blackness and Jewishness, their circulation in the history of ideas, and the way people of African descent have dealt with them to embrace Judaism. The sets of views, opinions, and beliefs regarding Blackness and Judaism have a mutable development that is constantly shifting within the cultural history of ideas—which makes the theoretical scope of this article expansive. After a brief exploration of the misguided modes of the blackening of Ham, attributed to the scriptures and ancient rabbinic attitudes, I will examine how the Hamitic myth, a racial myth born in post-medieval Europe, became part of an “African genesis” by considering that African “Hamites” were a degenerated branch of the “Caucasian” race related to the Hebrews. In parallel, I will briefly examine how the confusion of ideas linking skin color and Jews, Judaism, or Jewishness ironically reached a peak with the claim of the blackness of the Jews that was incorporated into the theory of racialism by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “scientists”. In this essay, I attempt to analyze the way in which Black philo-Semites operated personal and collective transformations in bypassing or amending the paradoxes that coexisted throughout the mythical history of dark skin and the Jews.
The Curse of Ham: an “Etiological Myth”

Kush Kushim

memushah memorah

Kush
Chapter One

Goldenberg's and Melamed's examinations of the rabbinic works confirm that the pejorative image of Africans was developed from the biblical text in rabbinic literature. In *The Curse of Ham*, Goldenberg demonstrates that the origin of the relation between blackness, race, and slavery is at least in part based on erroneous etymology and interpretation. Melamed comments: "The identification of Ham and his sons as dark-skinned and naturally destined to slavery is post-biblical—the result of later historical and cultural circumstances—and is by no means to be projected anachronistically onto the Bible itself". This idea permeated African American circles. Charles Copher, a Professor of Old Testament in Atlanta and a minister in the United Methodist Church, wrote in 1993: "Racial myths [were] created and employed by the first interpreters of the so-called Old Testament, the ancient Jewish rabbis. They then continue through the use of myths inherited from the rabbis".

What is interesting is that the rabbinic view of the curse of God rests upon a crucial statement: blackness is seen as divine punishment for disobedience. Ham and the *Aethiops*, as descendants of Adam through Noah, could only have a White ancestor, and therefore they became Black through their own doing. Having created an "etiological myth", namely that Black people will descend from non-Black people, rabbinic exegesis attempts to offer an explanation. Another biblical etiological statement is based on the legend of the prohibition of sexual intercourse committed in the ark during the flood—though there is no direct biblical support for it. The prohibition by God, and consequently the sin, are inferred from enigmatic interpretations about the entrance in the ark by pairs, male and female, specially broadcast by Tannaitic traditions from the third century. These traditions transmitted that God prohibited Noah and all the creatures in the ark from having sex and that three creatures transgressed—the dog, the raven, and Ham son of Noah—and were punished. The connection of the punishment to the crime is that the dog and the raven were punished in sexual ways for their sexual sins and that Ham "went forth blackened (*mefuham*)", as mentioned in the *Jerusalem Talmud* Ta'anit 1:6.

David Aaron, an expert in rabbinic literature, explains the choice of the word *mefuham* for "Black" in this passage from a linguistic and semantic point of view as a "paronomasia". The word Ham—he demonstrates—is not etymologically related to the Hebrew root for "hot" and does not mean "dark" or "Black", the confusion deriving from the fact that "Ham" and "hot" are identical in the Hebrew script. If versions of the dog and the raven's punishment vary from one tradition to another, the punishment of Ham is systematically seen as the darkening of his skin, and one can remark that interpretation of texts led over time to a reinforcement of skin stigmas.

*The Curse of Ham*

*Aethiops*

*mefuham*  
*Jerusalem Talmud* Ta'anit

*mefuham*
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associating sin with blackness. Moreover, because Ham's sin took place in the dark, he became dark, according to the “measure-for-measure” principle very common in rabbinic literature. The interpretation of Ham's blackness can thus be considered the result of later historical and cultural circumstances—mean-deviations bending paronomasia and the measure-for-measure principle, none of them bent on establishing a racial policy.

If the slow revelation of these textual manipulations could convince some of the innocence of this passage of the text of Genesis, how have Africans' philo-Semite aspirations been able to counter the charge by the negative etiological statements of the earlier Talmudic-midrashic corpus? They have done this by radically reversing the situation, claiming the “Black blood” of the Hebrews and emphasizing some passages of the biblical text. From the nineteenth century, Afrocentrist texts provided a theoretical basis and recurring themes for African American Jews' doctrine during its formative period. The identification with a great Egyptian or Ethiopian civilization provided the paradigm and the impetus for the eclectic strategies that were utilized by African Americans in their search for a Hebrew/Jewish heritage and the creation of new traditions. In 1915 in Philadelphia, for example, the prophet F. S. Cherry, leader of one of the first Black Jewish groups, the Church of the Living God, the Pillar Ground of Truth for All Nations, elaborated a racial theology asserting the primacy of Blacks in Judaism. Cherry assured his followers that, in a vision, God had called him to bring the message that the true descendants of the biblical Hebrews were African Americans. Citing confused interpretations of the Old Testament, Cherry concluded that God and Jesus were Black and that Blacks were the true original Jewish race.

In the 1920s, Wentworth A. Matthew, a Black man from Harlem who would later be known as Rabbi Matthew, described how, according to the Bible, "Jacob was a black man because he had smooth skin." Black Jews considered that American Blacks were in fact African Hebrews torn from their origins and religion by slavery and who had lost the knowledge of their ancestral heritage: "During slavery they took away our name, language, religion and science, as they were the only possessions the slaves had, and they were pumped full of Christianity, to make them more docile." A new definition of themselves as "Hebrews of Ethiopian descent", which pointed to a common origin and reunification, was proposed by Rabbi Matthew. This phenomenon was accelerated by the spread of information by Jacques Faitlovitch about a Black Jewish Diaspora in Ethiopia, the "Falasha", which reinforced the issue of Black Jewish identity. Brotz emphasized that the knowledge of the existence of the Jews of Ethiopia was "the missing link", which for some African Americans symbolically settled the question of their
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Jewish identity in response to skepticism about the plausibility of an original Black Judaism. African American authors from the Caribbean currents such as Marcus Garvey, J. A. Rogers, George G. M. James, and later figures as diverse as Yosef Ben-Jochannen, Ivan Van Sertima, and Louis Farrakhan, put these conventional themes in more polemic and popularly accessible form. In these groups, the assertion of "great cultural heritage", claiming ties to a biblical lineage, led to the assimilation of Judaism as a source of Black identity. Garvey's ideas reflected the various themes of Black and African history expressed earlier and distilled them into a mythologizing but extremely influential synthesis proclaiming that all Africans were Hebrews, and thus that Hebrews were Black.

African Hermeneutics

From the 1970s, as Africa developed its pride and its "Africanness" through the voice of its intellectuals, the correction of the negative image of Africans in the mythical Curse of Ham evolved in concert. The change of vision operated by African hermeneutics started to mobilize Africans on the presence of Africa in the scriptures showing that Africa and Africans occupy a prominent place in the world of the Bible. New interpretations were developed, in part as a way of establishing African historical and geographical links with the biblical world and in part to correct the tendency in Western scholarship that minimized Africa's presence. African theologians focused on the contribution of Africa in the biblical story and argued that ancient Hebrew society was influenced by foreign nations including ancient African cultures. These themes were discussed in conferences that took place in the 1970s and focused on African hermeneutics. At the Jerusalem Congress of Black Africa and the Bible, held in 1972 in Jerusalem, E. Mveng, a theologian from Cameroon, affirmed the lack of foundation of the myth of Ham and that the Africans of the ancient world were thus neither a cursed race nor an inferior form of humanity. In developing the idea that Kush represented one of the great powers of antiquity, together with Egypt, Mveng asserted that the Bible is the legacy of Africans who have been creators of civilizations. He writes: "Since Genesis, Africa and black Africans are present in the Bible, the Bible's message is our message and the people of the Bible are our people". The African reading of the Old Testament—which intersects with biblical narratives and prophecies that mentioned the existence of Jews in the land of Kush and the account of the Lost Tribes in Africa—continued to shape the thinking of the African common reader and to render the Old