


Black gods: The major assertions of the black Jewish movement in America

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The black Jewish movement in the United States is an African American new religious movement often linked to black gods. This religious thought raises concerns and questions. Firstly, if the assertions of black Jews are factual, what happens to biblical Israelites and their historicity? Secondly, what is the background of black Jews, and how does that relate to biblical Israel? Thirdly, what are the primary religious claims of black Jews? This article is a critical evaluation of the religious-historical, biblical and theological assertions of the black Jews in America. The article argues that the religious-historical antecedents, theological and biblical claims of the black Jews in America are untrue and cannot replace scriptural assertions about biblical Hebrews or Israelites. The claims of black Jews are eisegetical, not exegetical. The hermeneutics of the black Jews is incoherent with biblical tenets and theological integrity. Therefore, the black Jewish movement cannot substitute or reconstruct the biblical historicity of Israelites.

Contribution: The article contributes to the subject of new religious movements in the US. It reveals the discourse of black gods within the African American communities, focusing on the ongoing discourse on the black Jewish movement. It explains and evaluates the claims of black Jews in America, refuting their religious-historical antecedents, theological and biblical claims.

Keywords: black Jews; black Israelites; American Christians; Israelites; black people; white people.

Introduction

The new religious movements of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries raise contemporary religious concerns about the black Jewish movement in African American communities.¹ In the US, during the significant influence of insurgent racial nationalism, the black Jews reinterpreted the history of the Bible. It was done through an African lens, asserting that the story of early Christians and Hebrews was the story of black Americans under white oppression. In their assertion, there is an explicit claim that Jesus, David, Abraham and other biblical heroes were black Africans, chased out of Palestine by the Romans into the territory of West Africa. And they are later sold as slaves to the US (Jenkins 2000:104–105). Linguistically, the black Jews hold that the ancient Hebrew language was of the black race and African Americans. So, they revered the Hebrew Scriptures and kept Saturday as Sabbath. They celebrated Passover to mark the beginning of a calendar year.

Identifying African Americans as Jews has become controversial because it raises the alarm on race, ethnic background and self-definition in determining who a Jew is. The problem raises the question of legitimacy on the claim of a group of African Americans who think that others who call themselves Jews (i.e. Orthodox, Conservative, etc.) are imposters (Chireau & Deutsch 2000:6).

This article argues that the religio-historical antecedents, theological and biblical claims of the black Jews in America are untrue and cannot replace Scriptural assertions about biblical Hebrews or Israelites. Their claims cannot compare with biblical narratives because of the uniqueness of the historicity of the Jewish people. The article considers the religio-historical, theological and biblical arguments of the black Jews. Subsequently, the appraisal of the main areas of their assertions reflects its contradictions of Scriptural history, thereby affirming its concoction for racial reasons.

1. I use 'Major Assertions' to refer to the main claims or statements of the black Jews on their religious convictions.

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The historical and ideological background of the black Jewish movement²

Lincoln (2003:156), in his African antecedents, refers to two Africans in both Old and New Testaments. According to him, tradition reveals that Ebedmelech rescued prophet Jeremiah when Zedekiah, the last King of Judah, delivered the prophet to be murdered by a nervous rabble. Instead, they threw him into an abandoned well to die, a place in which Ebedmelech found and rescued him. Consequently, God rewarded his actions by preserving him from Jerusalem's impending destruction and the Babylonian captivity (Jr 38:1–13; 39:15–18). About six centuries later, Simon of Cyrene, an African, assisted Jesus with the cross on his way to Mount Calvary (Mk 15:21). Later, it became the symbol of New Jerusalem. Men from Africa were present during Pentecost in Acts 2:5, 10.

Lincoln (2003:157) appears to trace the divine intention that black Africa was part of the early people who touched Israel's destiny at Abraham's time. So, they 'should be direct and unequivocal heir to the promise after the Pentecost'. The reason given is the movement of Abraham from Ur to Egypt, which continued through the centuries. For instance, the unequivocal inclusion of black Africans in the family of the faith reflects in the event of evangelist Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:26–39). It symbolises the early involvement in the new faith that spreads worldwide. It is an indication of the early work of Christianity in North Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia (Lincoln 2003:157). Lincoln (2003:158) seems to promote the idea that Africa had early civilisations and knew the Hebrew nation from infancy. The simple reason is that Abraham lived in Egypt. Isaac, Jacob (known as Israel) and Moses also lived in Egypt. It could be that they possibly know and have a relationship with the Hebrew nation from its inception. It seems to be why Chireau and Deutsch (2000:7) investigate religious and historical developments in the black Jewish movement. They discover that there is so much influence of Jewish traditions and the combination of Jewish and Christian traditions. It could be why William Christian holds the literalistic notion that the Israelites of old are black people. He concludes in his messages that 'Adam, King David and King Solomon, Job, Jeremiah, Moses's wife, the Queen of Sheba, and Jesus Christ were all black' (Parfitt 2012:84).

Lincoln (2003:159) notes that in 1501, a verdict was issued by the Spanish Crown, permitting the trading of 'freshly caught' Christian and non-Christian Africans in America. It seems the

²The idea is to consider the circumstances that led to the emergence of black Jewish movement in the United States of America. This will involve considering certain theories by scholars in and outside the group. For a better understanding of the background, a connection will be drawn from the African perspective to avoid incoherent theories. Chireau and Deutsch (2000:7) say a cross-section of African Americans sees their identity as allegorical or metaphorical to the biblical nation of Israel; others see their identity as true physical descent. So, they adopt the identity of biblical Israelites and combined Christian rituals and symbols with Jewish traditions. The black Jewish group known as the commandment keepers of the congregation of Harlem are considered the largest community in the city of New York. They outrightly linked their descent to the *Beta Yisroel*, a Jewish community of Ethiopia. The background of this paper focuses on a group of African Americans who claim original descent to the biblical Israel or Hebrews.

harrowing African experience of slavery in a new 'Babylonian captivity in Christian America' led to the ideology of being introduced to a different 'God' known as the 'white man's God'. Lincoln (2003:163, 175) alludes that racism gave rise to racial churches, denominations, American Christianity and black religion.³ It sounds like the experiences of the African Americans in American Christianity led to what was considered the other church. The invisible institution met in the swamps and the bayous with other black believers because of their shared human and spiritual experiences. The black church begins in the context of invisible communion. It spans most of the history of the black experience.

It offers the most accessible key to the complexity and the genius of the black subculture. It reflects both a vision of the tragedy and an aspect of hope of the continuing American dilemma. (Lincoln 2003:164–165)

It looks like the issues within the black people's context in America were problems that the American Christianity or church overlooked. Martin and Zacharias (2003:9) in *The Kingdom of the Cults* observe that 'The cults are the church's unpaid bills'.

The African American communities have been shaped and characterised by religion. Even though it was born among Africans and their children in a different context, the religion seems constructed from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Together, it is a combination of a West African background, the experiences of slavery and Christianity's language in Europe. That seems to provide a religious condition that represents a distinct people in a new context (Albanese 1999:194). It appears as a link between the oppression of the black people and the curse of Ham (Gn 9:25). The argument is that Ham's descendants are cursed, so the blackness was a sign of degradation at God's hand. Lincoln (2003:165) says Ham was not a Hebrew. He navigated through history and revealed that the Jews became the principal advocates in the freedom fight for the black people. They participate in the black struggle in America (Lincoln 2003:169). Historically, the actions of the Jews towards the black people seem to reveal their relationship and the close connection to the freedom fight. It sounds like the black people felt separated from their religious heritage. The vast majority practised the fragments of African religions they remembered (Lincoln 2003:173–174). Even though religion became the primary means of humane contact with white people it was the most potent black socialisation instrument (Lincoln 2003:180). It makes religion to be a cultus because religion requires it (Lincoln 2003:181). Understanding God within the context of black religion is inevitable from the Old Testament. The view of God is ever-present and a fighting God (Lincoln 2003:182).

Genovese (2003:301) expresses that the folk dynamic contributes to the American national culture that shapes an autonomous identity. Genovese (2003:302) observes that 'the racial basis of slavery laid the foundations for the black identity that crossed class lines and demanded protonational

³In p. 175, it explains that Christianity is unconditionally considered the white man's exclusive entitlement.

identification'. The horror of slavery and racism in America forced the black people to venture into nationality rather than class possibilities. In the 1930s, the Moorish black nationalists conclude that race comes first before having a God (Genovese 2003:302).

Moses (2003:534) focuses more on the post-world wars flourishing of numerous urban cults. One of the examples of the cults is the messianic religiosity among the black people in the US. The religion expresses itself in Jewish, Islamic and some form of Christianity. Some of the religions were considered violent and black supremacy in nature. Some rejected their American identity and refused the name Negroes because of the degradation people attached to it. Wilson argues that there was a rejection of Christianity because of the perception that it was slave masters' religion. The refusal led to the acceptance of messianic rhetoric. It led to the claim that chosen people with special history experience favour (Moses 2003:534). There seems to be a historical link between black Hebrews in the US and the Falasha Jews in Ethiopia. Moses (2003) observes that:

Ties certainly exist between the Black Jews and the so-called 'Ethiopian Movement', which originated with the tour of Henry McNeal Turner through South Africa in the 1890s and spread by the 1930s to East Africa, West Africa, and the United States. (p. 534)

Parfitt (2012:91) says Arnold Josiah Ford, a great figure of black Jewish movements in America, expresses the ties better in a song. The song he composed says, 'Ethiopia, Thou Land of Our Fathers'. It results in the Garveyite National Anthem. The perceived ideology of Pan-Africanism, Pan-Islamism and Zionism is a representation of the frustration of black Americans. It expresses itself in the Nation of Islam and the black Jews of America. It reflects an ideology that seems to be a mere social movement rather than messianic rhetoric and religiosity (Moses 2003:535). Moses (2003:535) thinks that the sects of black Muslims and Jews in America are 'purely accidental or symbolic expressions of temporal aspirations'.

There seem to be significant proponents that serve as the founders of the black Jewish movements in the US. Some of these proponents seem to be responding to Anglo-Israelites' ideology to the lost tribes of Israel. Parfitt (2012:69) reveals that the American counterpart became influential and numerically crucial at the end of the 19th century. They:

[P]erceived the British Isles and the United States' white population as being quite literally and biologically descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel. In some versions of this ideology, actual Jews were regarded as impostors. (Parfitt 2012:69)

Landing (2001:11, 13, 37, 39) explains that black Judaism emerged because of the quest for social protest. He refutes the idea of black Judaism emerging through the influence of Jewish slave owners, even though he acknowledges the early conversions to Judaism, but that is not the basis for black Judaism. He seems to connect the emergence of black Jewish movement to the impact of Jim Crow and independent black churches. He creates the impression that the impact of Jim Crow results in the establishment of independent black

churches. John Wilson (1799–1870) is considered a significant proponent of Anglo-Israelite ideology built in scientific racism and Christian phrenology. Wilson attempts to link Britain to the Lost Tribes of Israel. Edward Hine (1825–1891) was the most influential proponent of Anglo-Israelism. He succeeded Wilson. Hine fuelled a new racial and religious identity in the British Isles (Parfitt 2012:69). In the 18th and 19th centuries, the ideology of Israel's lost tribe occupied people's minds. The ideology thrives and emerges into Pentecostalism. Eventually, it resulted in a powerful impact upon the black people of America, mainly through the teaching of Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929). In 1901 at Topeka, Kansas, he led a great revival that served as a critical moment in developing the Pentecostal movement. As an Anglo-Israelite, he held deeply racist views (Parfitt 2012:71).

In 1903, Wentworth Arthur Matthew (1892–1973) appeared to be one of the great black rabbis of the 20th century. He founded the Pentecostal Church of the Living God at Steel Springs, Tennessee and was the minister. The church holds to the racist view that most biblical prophets and other characters, including Jesus, were of the black race. The black communities expressed racist ideology to respond to the doctrine of Anglo-Israelism. So, they made an effort to deconstruct the concept of Anglo-Israelism by the black people. At that time, the Church of the Living God was undergoing the development of 'the black counter-theology with its new racial configuration that inserted all black people into sacred history that was already internalised by many black American Christians' (Parfitt 2012:71–72).

One of the oldest black Jewish organisations in the US is the Church of the Living God, and it appears as the pillar of truth for all nations. In 1886, a self-acclaimed prophet, Frank S. Cherry, a self-educated black seaman, labourer and railroad employee from Chattanooga, Tennessee, was the founder. According to him, he had a vision in his journey to a distant land. He is called to be a prophet and destined to start a church. His church's mission is 'to explain to the world that whereas all black people were not Jews, all true Jews were black. White Jews were impostors' (Chireau & Deutsch 2000:58; Parfitt 2012:88). William Sanders Crowdy is another proponent of the 10 lost tribes of Israelites. He served as the founder of 'The Church of God and Saints of Christ' in 1896. The church emerged out of a self-acclaimed vision of Crowdy. In his response to Anglo-Israelism, he affirmed that black people in America were the descendants of the 10 lost tribes of Israel. Notably, all the self-claimed revelations seem to arise during the era of lynching and the rise of Jim Crow in the US (Dorman 2013:7). It suggests that the idea of oppression and segregation of the black people in America is the reason for the 18th and 19th century black Jewish religious movement (Butts 2020). Matthew, Cherry and Crowdy were instrumental in establishing and developing the black Jewish movement in the US. It is important to note that many black groups in America that identify with Judaism also see themselves as Christians, Muslims or sometimes as

Vodouisants (Members of African Traditional Religion or ATR) (Chireau & Deutsch 2000:9). To increase the movement, Crowdy in 1903 sent emissaries to Southern Africa, Cuba and the Subregion of North America. The campaign results in 50-odd tabernacles in the US, seven in South Africa and a few in North America's Subregion. Other places impacted by the movement are Swaziland, Malawi and Mozambique. The largest most influential black Jewish community influenced by the movement is in Rusape, Zimbabwe (Baer & Singer 2002:117).

The major arguments of the black Jewish religious movement

In the black Jewish religious movement, specific assertions are used as the essential points of their argument to support and justify the religious movement. Their strong arguments are genealogical, religio-historical, biblical and theological. From the biblical perspective, they use biblical passages, mainly from the Old Testament, to support their assertions. Their theological views focus on soteriology, divine election, race and eschatology.

Religio-historical argument

In the 9th century, there seems to be an obscure account of the lost tribe of black Jews or Falashas in Abyssinia⁴ (Moses 2003:535). Moses alludes that the Falashas, who claimed to be beta Israel or simply Israel, trace their heritage to Ethiopia's royal family. They link it to the product of the relationship of Queen Sheba and King Solomon (Parfitt 2012:18). Rabbi Matthew exegetically explains the link. He opines that King Solomon mated with Queen Sheba and begot Menelik I. Kingship begins from her son's line in Ethiopia and progressively for 3000-odd years. Consequently, the presumed unbroken link connects to Haile Selassie, implying that black men are genuine Jews (Bruder 2008: Chap. 4; Ottley 1943:144-145). Some believe their separation from the Jewish family during the Exodus from Egypt, while others move to Ethiopia with the first or second diaspora (Moses 2003:536). Moses (2003:536) asserts that 'An American group called the Ethiopian Hebrews claim descent from the Falashas, but scholars are uncertain of their origins'. Moses (2003:536) claims that some black Jews in the US identified their heritage to the 'lost tribes of Israel' and see biblical Hebrews as initially black people. Some of them were placed in Philadelphia in the early forties by Arthur H. Fauset. Raymond Jones first studied the black Jews in the US, and he focuses on the organiser of the Church of God and Saints in Christ. Bishop Plummer seems to be the first organiser of the Church of God and Saints in Christ. But it looks like Prophet Cherry was the leader who

⁴ The ideology of black Jewish movement comprises of two basic elements known as religion and history. If black Judaism as a form of religious expression is seen by the black people, who see themselves as the true Israelites then, the issue of identity is involved. Therefore, history is important in understanding the genealogical antecedent of the black people and the biblical Israelites, especially within the context of America. The religio-historical argument will explore the genealogical argument of the black Jewish movement in America and part of Africa. The emphasis will be the American context.

supports the organisation known as 'Black Jews or Black Hebrews'. Some of the organisation's characteristics noticed from the inception are '... disdain for swine flesh, keeping of the Sabbath, opposition to all pictures or "graven images," tithing of members, and contempt for Christianity, especially black storefront religion'.

Polemically, black people (Jews and Muslims) seem to consider themselves the earth's first inhabitants. They counter the myth that identifies the black race to the curse of Cain. They present whiteness because of a curse for sinfulness and link it to Gehazi's story, which they consider the first white man. Moses (2003:536) asserts that black Jewish sects averted from mainstream American Protestantism. Moses (2003:536) creates the impression that the black American Jewish separatist's central idea believes that black people are God's chosen people. He implies that biblical Hebrews were black and that could be the reason an independent, self-trained scholar in Detroit known as Jenkins (1969:113, 142) reacts in *The Black Hebrews*. He writes that the Negroes or the black people in America form the other tribes of Israel's nation. Then, Jenkins views Adam's creation out of the ground as a biblical basis for all human beings to be black. He links the white race to the disease of leprosy from Leviticus 13 but excludes Jesus. Jenkins creates the impression that Jesus is from the authentic line of God's chosen people, the black people. He seems to allude that the black people are Jacob's descendants of the tribe of Judah, Benjamin and Levi. He concludes that they are scattered worldwide and experienced persecution like their brothers everywhere. Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthew, who was the leader of Harlem's central congregation, presents Rebecca's twins' story as an illustration, to prove that biblical Hebrews were black. He says that Esau was red and hairy while Jacob was plain and smooth as the black man. So, Jacob was the father of biblical Hebrews, and they were black.

The black Jews of Harlem see themselves as the custodians of the commandment and refuse to identify as Negroes. They hold to strict Jewish orthodoxy and orthopraxy. They juxtapose the slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt and the slavery of the blacks in America. The ideology seems to be from African American Christianity because of their experiences.

They wove together protestant and plantation themes by their choice of metaphors of Israel and the Exodus from Egypt. Just as the biblical nation of Hebrews have been enslaved in ancient Egypt, the enslaved blacks also see themselves leaving lives of bondage in the American Egypt. (Albanese 1999:201)

The black Jews seem to trace their heritage to the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia because J. Arnold Ford emigrated to the supposed origin in 1930. Some black Jews accompanied him. He preaches nationalism and repatriation (Moses 2003:538). Wolfson, who examines the Alliance of black Jews, also creates the impression that their mission was to mobilise African descent people to form a community that holds to Torah and has a cultural affiliation with Judaism (Chireau & Deutsch 2000:7).

There is evidence that the black Jews have the ideology of racial supremacy. Daniel Burke (2019), a CNN religion editor, reveals the confrontational street preaching method by members of the black Hebrew Israelites movement. He refers to the words of Beirich, who says the group has hate towards Jews and white people because of its rhetoric and worldview. According to Howard Brotz, the black people's history in the US attributes to a messianic conception that results in a doctrine of chosen people and black religious nationalism (Moses 2003:537). It appears some of the black Jews separated themselves by migration to part of Africa. In 1967, 190 from Chicago migrated to Liberia to set up a kibbutz but returned within 2 years. In 1969, about 40 emigrated to Israel (Moses 2003:539). It becomes evident that the movement creates the impression that the roots of the black Jews are Ethiopia and Israel. Moses notes that the black supremacist Zionism ideology was from their supposed heritage. Some claim that they have returned to occupy their land and establish God's kingdom ruled by black men. The international ambassador for the Hebrew Israelites, Prince Asiel Ben-Israel, acknowledges a hereditary connection between the returnees with Israel's seed. He cites Genesis 15:13 as the basis for his claim and cites the literary work of Father Joseph Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa*, as academic support (Moses 2003:540; Williams 1930:Chap. 5). He believes that African Americans are the fulfilment of the prophecy. According to the reports of Orthodox Jews messengers, their return is the return of the messianic people. Ben-Israel claims, 'that the Sinai Peninsula and the Holy Land are parts of Africa because they are just separated by a man-made ditch called the Suez Canal' (Moses 2003:541). The reason is American slavery, which has similarities with Israelites' slavery in Egypt (Moses 2003:540). Polemically, the accusation is on Arabs and Muslims because they perceive they converted black people from their ancestral Jewish faith (Moses 2003:540). The argument reflects the black people's migration from Israel to Africa and the US. In agreement with Moses, the apparent assertion that portrays West African culture as Judaic seems to betray the indigenous culture. Then, it appears to leave the culture with strange bedfellows (Moses 2003:541). The Africans who came to the US as enslaved people were primarily West Africa and the Congo-Angola region. They had their trado-religious background that was unique and different from the one they made. Some of the tribal groups include Mandinka, Yoruba, Igbo, Bakongo, Ewe and Fon, and they were followers of Islam and African Traditional Religions (Albanese 1999:192).

Appraisal of religio-historical argument

A rebuttal to black people's assertion in America focuses on the myth of their Hebrew origin or heritage. Moses (2003) says that:

Their adaptations of the chosen people myth are perhaps useful for counteracting the attempts of Western society to oppress black people with a sense of inferiority, but they serve no other function than to replace one set of irrationalities with another. (p. 546)

He further expresses the context in which such myths can thrive, such as urban-ghetto black people. To him, black messianism is an urban-cultic movement that emerges within a context that is black American masses. So, the theory reflects a rejection of the Judeo-Christian tradition and American civil religion. It brings a sense of exclusion from dependence on the oppressive Judeo-Christians. It brings the 'sense of alienation from the great myth of American moral and spiritual superiority' (Moses 2003:546). Wright (1972:164) cites the work of Archie Epps (1968:116, 130-131), who refers to the 'Aspect of Black Religion' by Malcolm X. In his view, 'A disadvantaged group, alienated from the surrounding society, often seeks to create its religious institutions. Sometimes these will take the form of small sects within the dominant religious culture'. Most scholars consider black Israelism a mercenary, derivative, huckster and imitator of Jews. Black Israelism did not only imitate Jews; they creatively constructed a polycultural religion and reworked threads from various religious faiths, secret societies and magical grimoires (Dorman 2007:63). It sounds correct because Albanese (1999:210) avers in her explanation of the combination and creation in new religious movements that there is a separation based on segregation. She notes Marcus M. Garvey's campaign in the early 1900s. He says black people should create an independent state in Africa, and black Israel should campaign for a return to their homeland like Jews in the Zionist movement.

Furthermore, Albanese (1999:210) notes that the search for a separate religion of black people expresses itself in black Hebrews. The group 'self-consciously promoted the African-American people as the true Israel, accepting the Jewish Talmud as their holy book and observing Jewish dietary laws'.⁵ Considering these affirmations, one can conclude that oppression, segregation and slavery of the black people in the US led to reactions that gave rise to neo-black religious movements.

Historically, ancient Israel had a covenant relationship with God through their patriarch Abraham. Albanese (1999:54) explains the irrevocable nature of the covenant relationship between Israel and God. She concludes that 'The origins of Jewry were tied to an ethnic and a religious identity that were fused'. In her explanation of being Jewish from a people's perspective, a culture and a religion, she ties all to Abraham's oldest Hebrew biblical narratives. Then, she connects it to Egypt's experience, Exodus under Moses's leadership, wilderness sojourn and the eventual entry to the promised land. Other unique situations of the Jewish people are the destruction of the Temple, Babylonian exile and later destruction of the Temple in AD 70, which led to the people's scattering. The biblical Jews spread to Europe, the Middle

5. It appears the acceptance of the Jewish Talmud is to legitimise the argument of the black Hebrews in America. I am aware of the rabbinic racism theories. The arguments are that ancient Jewish anti-black sentiment rooted in rabbinic literature is the source of Western racism (Goldenberg 1997:26-27). Goldenberg focuses on the issue of racism in the Greco-Roman society, which is not the scope of my work. However, his conclusion is that rabbinic views of black people from the ancient and medieval sources result in incompetent misreading and misunderstandings. The black Jewish movement in America emanated from the historical struggles of African Americans within the context of slavery.

East and North Africa during the Roman Empire (Albanese 1999:54–55).

From the above explanation, it is clear that the biblical Jews inherit a shared history that reflects a unique record of suffering and links to their strict adherence to the law of Moses and monotheism. It appears that part of the problematic experiences was because of their unwillingness to compromise their conviction. They have a narrative that links to the Holocaust masterminded by Adolf Hitler (1889–1945), which led to the destruction of six million Jews because they are Jewish (Albanese 1999:55). 'Their history and suffering were indissolubly bound to their sense of having been chosen by God for special tasks' (Albanese 1999:55). It is important to note that the biblical Jews are not Jewish because of their experiences. Their Jewishness predates their historically affirmed experiences. In the black Jews' case, the impression created in their responses to oppression and segregation suggests that their experiences define their Jewishness. This idea contradicts the biblical history of Jewish slavery and Exodus. It also invalidates the claim that 'The ultimate roots of Black Judaism lie in the identification of African American slaves with the Egyptian servitude and liberation of the biblical Hebrews' (Parfitt 2012:74–75). Conclusively, the biblical Jews are a people with a unique shared history and suffering, and it associates with the biblical covenant God made with their patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So, the Jews are the chosen people of God because they view their covenant with God as something that sets them apart from the rest of the world.⁶

Furthermore, a rebuttal of the historical narrative of the black Jews on the biblical history of slavery focuses on Brackman's (1994:93) *Ministry of Lies: The Truth Behind the Nation of Islam's the Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*. He paints the picture of people who share in understanding each other's tragic history (Brackman 1994:93). It brings the awareness that the black people and the biblical Hebrews have two separate tragic historical events that might be similar but different. So, any black and Jewish people experience with a comparative insight could lead to their history's distortion and defamation.

Biblical argument

The dominant theoretical position of black Judaism researchers holds the view that 'African Americans after enslavement transitioned from a symbolical and metaphorical to a literal identification with the biblical Israelites through their adoption of Jewish Identity' (Key 2014:32). The transition period appears to be unclear, but Singer (2000:59) alludes to how black people interacted with European Jews. It seems the theory of black Judaism is rooted in an essential principle of hermeneutics in the formation years of black Judaism. The oppression of slavery and racial segregation makes the African Americans find solace in Hebrew

⁶My argument does not suggest that there are no black people that are Jewish. The scope of my research focuses on the black Jewish movement categorised in the 19th and 20th centuries New Religious Movement in America.

Scripture. They allegorise Exodus narrative to fit their story and experiences (Key 2014:32). The black Jewish religious movement uses several texts of Scriptures, most significantly, the Old Testament, to support and justify their narratives. Some use the KJV (1611) of the Bible and some Pseudepigrapha as a standard of faith and practice (Grant 2016). Some groups consider some parts of the New Testament but reject Pauline epistles in America, claiming it is for the white slave masters (Carter 2017; Horton 2016). According to Cherry, other features of the black Jewish movement align with some Jewish ritual practices. They face a particular direction in their prayer and worship time, eastward. The men dress with skullcaps while the women put on blue and white capes with tassels at the ends to imitate the *tallitot*. They observe Passover, sabbath and prohibit pork. They seem to restrict portraying humans in images or pictures and uphold certain Christian practices like singing gospel songs (Fauset 1944:31–36; Landing 2001:340; Parfitt 2012:89). The Old Testament became a preaching tool, especially Moses's redemptive role in the Exodus and the Hebrews' deliverance from Egypt. Bishop Crowdy was the major proponent of this ideology, and he used it to help deal with the stigma of African Americans' racial inferiority (Wynia 1994:31–33).

Strangely, the biblical theory of black Jews begins from the creation story. It links blackness to Adam's creation from the dust of the ground (Gn 1:26–27; 2:7). It insinuates that the earth is black, so man is created black. The black Jews hold to Genesis 15:13–14, Jacob and Esau's story, to argue that the biblical Israelites are black people. Another argument from the Bible comes from Genesis 49. Joseph is viewed as black just as the Egyptians because his brothers, who sold him to Egypt, could not recognise him when famine led them to the place. Windsor (1969) says that Joseph's brothers:

[D]id not recognize him because Joseph had grown up and the Egyptians were a black people like the sons of Jacob. Jacob's ten sons considered Joseph to be another black Egyptian. (p. 34)

This position is seen as a strong argument by the black Jews because they supposed Joseph was not a white person. If not, he would have aroused the curiosity of his brothers. The same supposition is attached to Moses' infancy in Exodus 2. They supposed that Moses was black. If not, Pharaoh's daughter would have known that the baby in the basket is white, and 'it would have been difficult to conceal him from her father's anger' (Windsor 1969:34). Windsor (1969) puts the claim as thus:

After Pharaoh promulgated the cruel decree to extirpate the Hebrew males, only a black Moses would have been able to be concealed effectively for any length of time among black Egyptians. (p. 36)

All the presupposed theories seem to have support with the prophecy of Psalm 63 that says, 'Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God'. Then, it ties to the idea that Moses was born in Africa, and his wife was an Ethiopian (Nm 12:1). Furthermore, they hold to the idea that Moses' encounter with God (Ex 4:6–7), Solomon's statement (Song of Solomon 1:5), David's word (Ps 119:83),

Jeremiah's lament (Lm 5:10) and Job's assertion (Job 30:30) as support for the theory of all humans are black.

Leviticus 13 on leprosy laws is another passage of Scripture used by the black Hebrew Israelites to prove that Jews are black. It is possible that Cherry used the leprosy laws and expounded 2 Kings 5:27. He preached that the original white man was the biblical Gehazi, who became white because God's curse was on him. Subsequently, he used the text of Daniel 7:9 to support the idea that black people have woolly hair. The text's interpretation by the black Jews suggests that the phrase, 'And the hair of his head like a wool', refers to 'a woolly hair like a black man'. So, they suppose that 'Daniel, the prophet, and the people in his environment (the Babylonians) must have had woolly hair for him to dream of God having woolly hair' (Windsor 1969:35–36). This idea relates to Joseph, Mary and Jesus in Egypt (Mt 2:13–14). They use it to support the assertion that even Jesus is black because no one noticed him as a white child in Egypt.

Appraisal of biblical argument

A rebuttal on biblical assertions focuses on the racist character of many of their beliefs. There seems to be a perception of the 'many precedents for biblically-based racism in American religion that predate the rise of the black cults' (Moses 2003:546). Convincingly, the Black Religious Movement in America appears as the black Jewish movement. It reacts polemically to what they perceived as antagonistic American religion. It could be part of the reason Moses (2003:546–547) says that the black cult messianic doctrines to outsiders are usually hostile and ruthless.

As a biblical religion, Judaism is within the context of a tradition enshrined in the Law. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, known as Torah, consist of explicit rules for living prescriptions for ceremonial and moral righteousness given to the people of Israel (Ex 20; Dt 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Nm 15:37–41). The Torah has become the standard for generations. To the Jews, the acceptance of the burden of the Law and its observation make one Jewish. That means, 'Judaism as a religion grew out of a strong Jewish belief in the covenant between God and Israel' (Albanese 1999:58). The assertion of the black Jews does not align with the biblical narrative of the Israelites. Their kind of Judaism seems to change the biblical stories and affirmation about a people in a covenant relationship with God. For instance, the concept of equating the slavery of Israelites in Egypt and Africans in America appears inappropriate. The biblical assertion explains that Israel had been led to freedom by the power of God through Moses. For Africans in America, the argument is that God granted liberty to the enslaved at the time of civil war through Abraham Lincoln (Albanese 1999:201). Therefore, Landing (2001:34) considers the biblical theory as identification theory. He sees black Judaism as a group that identifies with black Jewish teachings, though rejected by the world's Jewish community. It is a social protest group that metamorphosed into a social movement in the Southern part of America during Jim Crow. Indeed, black Hebrew Israelites or Jews' activities

indicate a group that fabricates ideas into a text for their aggrandisement.

Musodza (2019) says that their biblical views are interpreted based on historical errors and eisegesis, not exegesis. The black Jews always cite Deuteronomy 28:68 and Revelation 2:9 to support their opinions on being original Israel. Significantly, Musodza juxtaposes exegesis and eisegesis to show the danger. He says that:

Exegesis is the critical explanation or interpretation of a religious text. In contrast, eisegesis is the process of interpreting a religious text in such a way as to introduce one's presuppositions, agendas or biases.⁷ (Musodza 2019)

As rightly opined by Musodza, the black Jews fallaciously reconstruct the narratives of the Bible. Their change of biblical narrative reflects the eisegesis of Scriptures, promoting their agendas or biases and repudiating suppression and racial segregation.

Prophet Cherry preached that the original white man was the biblical Gehazi, who became white because of a curse (2 Ki 5:27). Windsor (1969:35–36) says that the leprosy laws are to the nation of Israel, so it applies only to them. Therefore, it cannot apply to the white nation or other nations that are not the nation of Israel. Even though Africans knew the infancy of biblical Hebrews because of their vital role in biblical history, Africans are Africans, and Jews are Jews. The two have a unique historical account that can never be confused except if reconstructed for racial purposes. A clear example of a reconstructed narrative is the story of slavery. It was evident in the Bible that Israel would undergo slavery in Egypt for 430 years (Gn 15:13; Ex 12:40–41; Ac 7:6; Gl 3:16–17), but there is no record anywhere about the enslavement of black Africans. Therefore, the hypothesis of the black Jews on this premise is fallacious and unjustifiable.

Another grievous example is Adam's creation from the ground to defend their theory of all humans being black. The presupposition seems to imply that biblical Jews are black. So, a white person can only exist by the impediment, a curse from God. This supposition is drawn from Gehazi's biblical story (2 Ki 5:27) to prove an untrue reason for whiteness. Convincingly, it sounds aggressive and racially polemic towards the white people. As Chireau (2000:24–25) observes, the statement appears to be a reaction to racial prejudices of widely held myths in Western Christianity about Ham's curse (Gn 9, 10). They often use Genesis

7. Musodza (2019) reveals the interpretation of Deuteronomy 28:68, showing the black Jews' interpretation that suggest they are the ones taken into Egypt with ships. So, they used a forced metaphor rather than the historical reality by changing the metaphor of Egypt for America to support their historical reconstruction. In reality, records show that during the Roman empire, some of the biblical Israel were taken as slaves on ships. It was after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans and the revolt of Bar Kochba that they were taken in ships to Egypt. See Münter (1829) reveals historical records of slavery in the Palestinian region. He reveals that some slaves were taken to Egypt in ships and many died in transit by starvation, shipwreck and cruel masters. The historical facts reveal a context that is Palestinian not transatlantic (Josephus 1969:book 6, chap. 9:2; Windsor 1969:84). For the interpretation of Revelation 2:9, the black Jews apply it to their situation in America. There is a clear reconstruction of historical facts. Adeyemo (2006:1576) explains the geographical setting of Smyrna (now Izmir) as a place that was situated north of Ephesus. It was a city in the Roman province of Asia, not a transatlantic region.

9:20–25 to presuppose that Ham's curse directly impacts blackness. It is a twist of the biblical account because it speaks of slavery, not blackness. Noah's pronouncement of a curse to Ham, also translated as Canaan, is that '... He will be the lowest of the slaves to his brothers' (Gn 9:25, CSB).

Theological argument

The black Jews seem to have similar doctrinal beliefs with the black Islamic sects. Moses says their central primary doctrines are the same. The reason he gives is that 'Urban messianic movements share basic similarities in origin and ideology' (Moses 2003:542). Both groups demonstrate that their blackness symbolises their elect status. It could be that their similarities gave rise to the Islamic Hebrews traced to the Ethiopian Falashas. It looks like they claim to have descended from Israel, even though they seem to aver that Falashas are Muslims that are ever resident in their Ethiopian sanctuaries (Moses 2003:544). It appears one of the central doctrines emphasised is the doctrine of divine election. They hold to it firmly because 'Hebrew Israelites practice a theology that says God's chosen ones – black people, Hispanic people and Native American people – have strayed and need to be led back to righteousness' (Eligon 2019). It is an argument embedded in the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau. In defence of their view, the black Jews hold 'that white people are Edomites, the genealogical descendants of Esau, the twin of Jacob' (Kestenbaum 2019). It insinuates the divine election of Jacob over his twin brother Esau. Rabbi Matthew, the leader of Harlem's central congregation, sees Rebecca's twins as the suitable illustration that proves that black people are biblical Hebrews. He supports his hypothesis of divine election by arguing that Esau was red and hairy while Jacob was plain and smooth as the black man. So, Jacob was the father of biblical Hebrews, and they are black (Moses 2003:537).

The black Jews' theological disposition ranges from monotheism, a continuationist view of the prophetic office in the Bible and work-based salvation. Many black Jews reject the Trinitarian nature of God, thereby separating Jesus from God. They seem to suggest that God is divine, and Jesus is a human being and a notable prophet. They refer to Jesus as a prophet who upholds the Torah in words and deeds, so he is a devoted Jew (Horton 2016). The biggest issue with black Jews is not their claim of ethnic origins but their soteriology's inadequacy. Some hold to the view that salvation is by the observance of the Mosaic Law (Butts 2016). So, salvation to them can be attained through obedience to Moses's Law and addressing God as *Yah* or through the bloodline. The confusion in their theology of salvation is the aspect of calling the name of God. Grant (2016) says that black Jews generally refute their doctrine of Trinity but call the true name of Jesus [*Yahoshua*] for salvation. It is possible that Horton's (2016) idea of addressing God as *Yah* is the same with Grant's idea of calling Jesus *Yahoshua*. It seems the concept of *Yah* or *Yahoshua* points to the Messiah, who will politically rescue them from their oppressors and grant them liberty. It could be why their concept of hell is metaphorical. The concept of sin in the black Jewish movement links to 1 John 3:4. They view

the text as the basis for the lack of salvation, which means that all others that are not Jews are members of 'a synagogue of Satan' (Rv 2:7). The text says that whoever practises sin also practises lawlessness, so sin is lawlessness, and it leads to transgression. They see the Law as the laws of *Yah* found in the Torah, and it contains the Ten Commandments, dietary laws and some part of the ritual laws. They teach, emphasise and apply the celebrations found in the Old Testament Bible (Horton 2016).

The evangelistic strategy of the black Jews in America is confrontational. Eligon (2019) asserts that they are sidewalk confrontational preachers who use their 'gospel' to confront others, especially white people who are Jews. They have a particular posture, context and appearance. Eligon (2019) further explains that they mostly use very offensive language, scream and are blunt in their approach to attract listeners. The tactics sometimes end in chaos, as in the case of the Lincoln Memorial (Lee 2019). Shar Yaqataz Banyamyan avers that confrontation tactics make passers-by respect them. Their theological apologetics landed in a national spotlight that went viral because of the clash with mostly white Catholic schoolboys who appear pro-Trump. Banyamyan, a member of the black Jews, says that their disagreement with the schoolboys reveals the country's nature and what they were teaching a century ago. Eligon (2019) refers to Heidi Beirich, who oversees 'The Southern Poverty Law Center', which keeps track of extremists. Beirich says that about 80 nationwide groups have subscribed to the Hebrew Israelite theology. In 2017, the centre considered the hate groups as black nationalist groups.

Appraisal of theological argument

The concept of the chosen, Law, covenant, exile and salvation originate from the Hebrew Scriptures in the Jewish tradition. In the days of Nehemiah, the Jews sought a better biblical exegesis to have self-knowledge and self-revival (Chireau & Deutsch 2000:7). In the black Jewish movement, the theology of divine election did not entwine in biblical exegesis but eisegesis. Chireau (2000:20) explains the theme of chosenness by considering a given slant distinctive within Afro-American inventions of Judaism. He sees a 20th-century tradition of black Jews that would emerge to emphasise chosenness based on a definition of race. The use of the black people's theology of chosen was 'to counter the assaults of Anglo-American supremacy and the stigma of African American inferiority'.

Furthermore, Chireau (2000:21) says that the ideology was metaphorical to encompass racial dimensions; therefore, it employs newly constructed identities through Jewish practices. Indeed, black Jews used the Jewish historical tradition to interpret their experiences in America allegorically. Ultimately, they use it to build alternative religious and racial identities (Chireau 2000:28).

On the theology of monotheism and Trinitarianism, the black Jews hold a similar view with the biblical Hebrews. There is a strong emphasis on the 'Great Shema' (Dt 6:4–9) and

Unitarianism, rejecting God's triune nature. The black Jews see Jesus only as a prophet like the Old Testament prophets and their contemporary prophets. The biblical Hebrews reject Jesus as the son of God and see his claim as blasphemy (Mt 7:28–29; 9:1–3; 26:63–64; Mk 14:61–62; Lk 22:70; Jn 10:24–31). Therefore, black Jews and biblical Israel hold to 'unitarian God', rejecting Trinitarian doctrine. Fruchtenbaum (2018) in 'Jewishness and the Trinity', quotes Rabbi Stanley Greenberg of the Temple of Sinai in Philadelphia. He says one of the elements that consistently appears is, 'one cannot believe in the Trinity and be Jewish'. The statement sounds polemic to the black people who claim to be the original Jews and sometimes hold to Hebrew Bible and New Testament. The rejection of God's triune nature in the Old Testament rejects the Bible's inerrancy, sufficiency and authority. In the Hebrew Bible, the statement of Genesis 1:26–27 provides glimpses of the Trinity. The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament recognise the three persons in the Godhead.

Soteriology in black Judaism focused on the work of the Law. Salvation requirement focused on perfect observance of the Law. Apostle Paul counters the doctrine of salvation that emphasises perfection. After Paul says salvation is not by the work of the Law, he avers, salvation is only by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Eph 2:8–9). It is true because Jesus Christ declares that he is the fulfilment of the Law (Mt 5:17–20). So, the black Jewish religion's fallacy on soteriology is a shift from the gospel of Jesus Christ as the source of salvation. 'Religion says, "Attain"; the gospel says, "Obtain." Religion says, "Attempt"; the gospel says, "Accept." Religion says, "Try"; the gospel says, "Trust." Religion says, "Do this;" the gospel says, "It is done"' (Seamands 1981:70). Jesus is the way to God the Father (Jn 14:6). He is the one who forgives sin (Mt 9:1–8; Mk 2:1–12; Lk 5:17–26). Paul says that salvation is God's gift to man (Rm 5:15–18; Eph 2:8–9) prepared before the foundations of the world (Eph 1:4–5). Israel is a light to the world in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (Is 42:6; 49:6; 52:10; 60:3; Ac 13:47; 26; 23). Actual Israel shines a light on the world, not an aggressive approach like the black Jews.

Conclusion

In America, black Judaism is an offshoot of African American religion that directly responds to the historical African Americans' plight. The worldview of the 'religious movement' was occupied by oppression, segregation and racism. So, they preached that American Christianity is a white man's religion. The ideology 'offered a non-Christian and non-white centered paradigm for black people to liberate themselves from their oppression' (Grant 2016). Black Jews claim Israel's heritage is based on biblical eisegesis, not biblical exegesis. The historical, biblical and theological assertions are hypotheses built on metaphorical or allegorical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. One of the significant historical reasons black Jews reconstruct biblical narratives is their circumstances. Logically, the black Jewish movement in America exists to counter white

supremacy, oppression and racial segregation. Therefore, the historical, biblical and theological assertions of black Jews in America are untrue historical concoctions for racial purposes and liberation from socio-political and religious conditions.

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