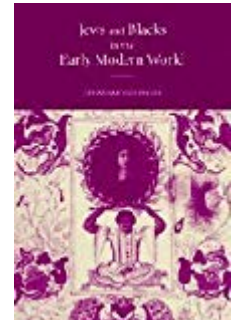


Jonathan Schorsch. *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiii + 546 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-82021-9.



Reviewed by Alyssa Sepinwall

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The late 1980s and mid-1990s witnessed an outbreak of tensions between blacks and Jews on American college campuses. As the famed civil rights era alliances between the groups declined, Nation of Islam (NOI) spokesmen like Louis Farrakhan and Khalid Muhammad began preaching that Jews were "bloodsuckers" who had dominated the Atlantic slave trade. Denounced by black leaders such as Jesse Jackson, the NOI was joined in these charges by Afrocentric professors such as Leonard Jeffries. The NOI also published a text entitled *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* presenting these claims.[1] Leading historians of slavery such as David Brion Davis and Seymour Drescher refuted the NOI's allegations, and they were joined by the American Historical Association, which passed a resolution decrying the NOI's misuse of historical evidence.[2] While the controversy has abated, it has not dissipated completely. Today, a reader looking on Amazon.com for information on "blacks and Jews" will first encounter the NOI's *Secret Relationship*, along with a large number of reviews praising its "well-re-

searched" treatment of Jewish involvement in the slave trade.

Jonathan Schorsch's *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* revisits this controversy. Schorsch, who was trained as a historian at Berkeley, is a faculty member in the Department of Religion at Columbia University and an editor at *Tikkun* (a progressive and iconoclastic Jewish monthly based in San Francisco). His position in the debate is somewhat contrarian. On the one hand, he decries the "specious and outrageously myopic charges" of the NOI's book (p. 1). He also aims, however, to criticize existing Jewish scholarship on the slave trade, which he sees as overly apologetic and built on "feel-good polemics" (p. 1). Though Schorsch does not name the targets of his criticism, he makes clear that he does not mean Davis, Drescher, or Eli Faber (whose works he praises), but rather scholars of Jewish history who have glossed over the subject of slavery.

Schorsch's book is supra-Atlantic in scope (covering both the Atlantic and Mediterranean). He says that his theoretical methodology "is less that of Jewish studies than cultural studies," and

that he hopes his research can add to the history of the African diaspora (p. 4). Nevertheless, the book's primary contributions and intended audience are in the field of Jewish history. Schorsch examines Jewish attitudes towards and interactions with blacks in the early modern period largely to understand Jewish acculturation. He focuses on Sephardic Jews since Ashkenazim were less numerous in both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World lacks a single overarching thesis. Indeed, the author declares himself to be using an "antinarrative" form, and insists that "I make no pretense of connecting the results of the text's microstudies into a linear entity--'Jewish Discourse About Blacks' " (pp. 294, 295). The text is thus not an easy one to summarize. The introduction does, however, make clear Schorsch's contention that the early modern period marked a "falling away of the ... centrality of Hebrew-language and halakhic discourse" for Atlantic world Jews as they adopted the mores of their neighbors. Jews' treatment of their slaves consequently "closely resembled that of their host populations and was ... lacking in Jewish particularities" (pp. 7, 11).

One trajectory of the book examines what early modern Jews believed about blacks. Schorsch criticizes black and Christian scholars who have claimed that Jews invented anti-black prejudices through the story of the curse of Ham. Several well-documented chapters refute these allegations. Chapter 1, a case study on the fifteenth-century writer Yitshak Abravanel, shows the complexities of early modern Jewish thinking about Africans. While Abravanel, like other Jews, sometimes discussed Africans in a negative way, he also spoke positively of them, drawing on both Talmudic sources and on Renaissance humanism. [3] Chapter 6 also deals with this issue. Schorsch argues that the portrayal of a "blind, stubborn anti-Black racism, stemming from the Jews" only reaffirms stereotypes about Jews' "theological

blindness and stubbornness" (p. 138). He concludes that "the 'Jewish' source of the curse on Ham remains an invention of twentieth-century Christian polemicists" (p. 152).

Another topic covered by the book is Jewish interactions with blacks in both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Schorsch finds that Jewish slave owning and slave trading "remained minimal" in both places (pp. 50, 53). When Jews did own slaves, it was often to serve as a marker of status (p. 68). Chapter 3, one of the book's most engrossing, aims to reconstruct daily life for blacks in Mediterranean and European Jewish society using rabbinical responsa (answers to queries from believers about how Jewish law applied to daily situations). Schorsch notes, for instance, that slaves and ex-slaves who wished to practice Judaism were often well integrated into the community, at least in the early part of the period. Chapter 9 seeks to reconstruct master-slave interactions among Jews in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch and British Atlantic. The author cautions, however, that this task is difficult since relatively few responsa were produced in the Americas.

Chapter 7, "Inventing Jewish Whiteness: The Seventeenth-Century Western Sephardic Diaspora, Part 1," and chapter 8, "Inventing Jewish Whiteness: The Seventeenth-Century Western Sephardic Diaspora, Part 2," are particularly illuminating. Schorsch argues that the concept of whiteness allowed Jews to "include themselves in the dominant culture ... in a way they could not as non-Christians" (p. 167). He points out that early modern codes of racial exclusion were unstable, and that Jews were sometimes described as "black and ugly" (pp. 169, 179). He further suggests that it was "equations of Jews and Blackness that inspired some Jews to argue their own Whiteness" (p. 186). Growing anxiety about whiteness led to increased distancing from non-white servants and slaves, particularly among Amsterdam's Jews. Where once young men of mixed race had been

able to study in yeshiva, and "circumcised Negro Jews" could be called to the Torah, these practices ended after the mid-seventeenth century, as did race-blind burials (pp. 195-197). Schorsch observes, however, that these exclusions were not uniquely Jewish, but emulations of Christian racial practices.

Chapter 10 looks at black-Jewish interactions in the long eighteenth century. Schorsch finds some Jewish abolitionists, but deems it unsurprising that there were not more, given the relatively limited extent of abolitionism among Gentiles before 1800. Moreover, he notes, "Jews were barely tolerated outsiders.... To weigh in against the host majority on a central and contentious issue like slavery held little appeal for [them]" (p. 291). In the conclusion, Schorsch adds that Jews spoke less often about blacks than Christians did, and certainly not with any greater hostility. He notes that "not once have I come across a statement by a Black in the Americas pointing out Jews as slave owners or slave traders, much less owners harsher than Christians"; any contemporary black enmity against Jews relating to the slave trade is thus anachronistic (p. 299).

Schorsch's book is extremely valuable for anyone interested in black-Jewish interactions. It is also extraordinarily learned, as Schorsch draws with equal ease on Hayden White, David Brion Davis, and Talmudic exegetes. Even as the book is more an analysis of previous microstudies and of printed primary sources than a presentation of new archival material, the range of Schorsch's reading--across Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Italian, Hebrew, Ladino, and English--is remarkable. There is much of interest here for scholars of early modern Atlantic, Jewish, and African diaspora history. Schorsch's emphasis on the in-betweenness of Jews in the Atlantic world, on their uneven integration and need to affirm their whiteness, is especially significant.

Some aspects of the work may, however, limit its usefulness to Atlantic world scholars and their

students. The first is the book's writing style and structure. In addition to its "antinarrative" form, Schorsch concedes that one of his study's early reviewers criticized its "Baroque" writing style. Rather than revising it, Schorsch responded that the book's difficult writing was essential to his goals; for him, Baroque is "a term I will wield as a laurel and a program" and "preemptive exhaustiveness" was necessary because of the controversial nature of his topic (pp. 12, 13). While the amount of documentation may serve his purposes, it is less clear that the prose style does. Readers may find themselves struggling with sentences such as "Presenting the contentious quality of the original material as such serves as a way of coping with--I do not say harmonizing--the necessity of grasping its conflicting and conflicted interpretation. The riot of particularity on paper does greater justice, to my mind, to the irreducibility of historical events" (p. 13).

Another proviso which Atlantic scholars should bear in mind relates to the book's scope. The title suggests that the study covers black-Jewish interactions throughout the early modern world, and it is indeed impressive that the author was able to treat both the Atlantic and Mediterranean in his first book. At the same time, it is worth noting that the work really focuses on Protestant and Muslim areas, and deals to a much lesser extent with the Catholic empires. Moreover, the study contains occasional errors on the history of the latter, such as the author's reliance on another scholar's assertion that France abolished slavery in 1818, instead of 1848 (p. 11).

Finally, the book's theoretical approach departs in some crucial ways from that of Atlantic historiography. Like many Atlantic world historians, Schorsch is interested in intercultural interactions and he uses religion as a site for examining these exchanges. His operating question, though, appears to be to what extent did Jews make their slaves and ex-slaves feel welcome in practicing Judaism. The author takes the partici-

pation of non-whites in Jewish rituals as a positive sign and their exclusion as a negative one, which today's Jews must acknowledge and seek to avoid repeating.[4]

This kind of approach, drawn from Jewish historiography's focus on acculturation and identity, is at odds with the way Atlantic historians treat master-slave relations. They frequently study violence, resistance, and the agency of slaves; they read slaves' non-participation in their masters' religion as an attempt to hold onto the culture of their ancestors.[5] Schorsch, in contrast, is more concerned with the tolerance/intolerance of masters. Furthermore, while he criticizes other Jewish studies scholars for focusing on instances of affection between masters and slaves, he sometimes does the same himself. He stresses intimacy between master and slave without much discussion of violence: "Slaves necessarily got caught up in their owners' family affairs, daily happenings, arguments, romances" (p. 263); "masters became caught up in the lives, culture, and characters of their underlings" (p. 264). This analysis may reflect the biases of his sources, but "reading against the grain" might have helped him to paint a more complex picture of master-slave interactions among Jews.

Notwithstanding these issues, Schorsch has fulfilled his main objectives admirably, further disproving the NOI's claims about Jews and slavery, while also making visible the complexity of Jewish interactions with Africans. Both of these accomplishments are welcome ones, and one can look forward to Schorsch's future scholarship in this field.

Notes

[1]. See Nation of Islam Historical Research Department, *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews* (Chicago: Nation of Islam, 1991). Also see, for instance, David Bird, "Church and Civil Rights Groups Assail New Remark by Farrakhan," *New York Times* (June 28, 1984): p. A22; and "Khalid Muhammad Dies at 53," *Washington*

Post (Feb. 18, 2001): p. C6. For excerpts from Farrakhan's and Muhammad's remarks on Jews and Judaism, see (http://www.adl.org/special_reports/farrakhan_own_words2/farrakhan_own_words.asp) and (http://www.adl.org/special_reports/khalid_own_words/khalid_own_words.asp).

[2]. See "AHA Council Issues Policy Resolution about Jews and the Slave Trade," *AHA Perspectives* (March 1995), at: (<http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/1995/9503/9503AHA.CFM>); David Brion Davis, "Jews in the Slave Trade," *Culturefront* 1, no. 2 (1992): pp. 42-45; idem, "The Slave Trade and the Jews," *New York Review of Books* (December 22, 1994): pp. 14-16; "Jews Were Never Dominant in Slave Trade, Pitt Historian Says" at: (<http://www.pitt.edu/utimes/issues/27/3295/19.html>); and Eli Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade: Setting the Record Straight* (New York: New York University Press, 1998). According to Seymour Drescher, "It is unlikely that more than a fraction of 1 percent of the twelve million enslaved and relayed Africans were purchased or sold by Jewish merchants even once.... At no point along the continuum of the slave trade were Jews numerous enough, rich enough, and powerful enough to affect significantly the structure and flow of the slave trade or to diminish the suffering of its African victims." Seymour Drescher, "Jews and New Christians in the Atlantic Slave Trade," in *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450 to 1800*, ed. Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), p. 455.

[3]. Schorsch notes that he chose to transliterate the original Hebrew names of biblical figures instead of using their more familiar English equivalents. He says that he did this "not out of fawning literalism or religious fundamentalism, but in order to produce an effect of *Verfremdung* (estrangement) that will hopefully inoculate readers against lazy assumptions about 'Judeo-Christian' homogeneity.... It is not clear to me that Ham [Cham] and Ham, for example, intend the same

figure or produce the same set of connotations" (p. 16).

[4]. The following comments are illustrative: "Yet their generosity in manumitting slaves went alongside an almost total exclusion of their colored slaves and their slaves' children from participation in the religious life of the community" (p. 232); and "A low level of familiarity with Jewish practices seems to have been attained by at least some slaves. On some levels colored Jews in Surinam were allowed to join the community.... But ultimately ... they were denied equality as community members, as people" (p. 253).

[5]. Classic studies of agency and resistance in New World slave religion include, Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), esp. pp. 130-148; and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 33-60.

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