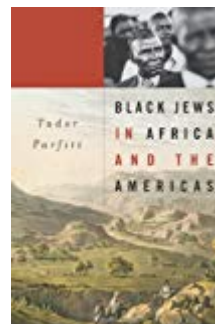
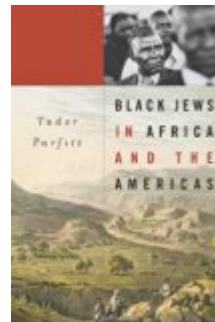


Jacob S. Dorman. *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. xii + 307 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-530140-3.

Tudor Parfitt. *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas.* The Nathan I. Huggins Lectures Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 240 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-06698-4.



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For Western, Christian civilization, there have been two groups that have historically represented the perfect Other: Jews and people of African descent. For more than two millennia, each has been viewed as alien, despite, or because of, the fact that Jews and blacks lived in physical and cultural intimacy with the dominant group, white, Christian, and (mostly) European. For the classical world, Jews and Africans were different, but were hardly “other” in the sense of utter alien-ness that the term implies.

Once, however, Christianity came to define Western civilization, and once truly black (i.e., sub-Saharan) Africans were encountered—and al-

most immediately enslaved—beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, this former familiarity and degree of grudging acceptance faded away. By early modern times, and until today, Jews and blacks have become the West’s Other, the “not” that explains what “we” are. Given this, it is not surprising that the two groups have come to have a similar identity, not in the sense of being the same (though, as we will see, this has in fact happened) but in being the group against which the dominant group defines itself. But, surprisingly, these two “othered” groups have in many cases come to identify with each other. Especially in the case of Africans, both on the continent and in the Diaspo-

ra, identification with Judaism (if not with actual Jews) has become a means of both creating an identity and rejecting the subordinate place in society to which the dominant culture and faith has consigned them.

This historical, cultural, sociological, and religious evolution is the subject of the two books considered here. The first, by Tudor Parfitt, looks deeply and with fascinating historical detail at the place of Jews and blacks in Western culture from biblical times until today. It notes the little-known but important ways in which Africans have come to identify with Jews, or more exactly, with the ancient Israelites, to the point of claiming actual biological descent from them. The second work, by Jacob Dorman, closely investigates a subset of this phenomenon, the rise of many groups within African American society (including the Caribbean islands as well as mainland North America) that while not often claiming Israelite biological descent, have come to identify with Jews and Judaism. They have adopted—and adapted—Jewish rituals and beliefs into a syncretic faith that by design resembles what first-century Christianity was assumed to be, essentially a Jewish messianic movement that honored and worshiped Jesus but had little use for the organized church that eventually triumphed in the Western world, both in Europe and its daughter civilizations in the New World.

Parfitt begins with a consideration of the Lemba, an African group living in modern Zimbabwe. The Lemba have famously claimed to be descendents of Jews, even though their physical appearance, culture, and religious practices have no seeming connection to or evidence of Judaism. He returns to the Lemba at the end of his book, after completing a deep and analytical survey of what Jews and blacks were seen as by the dominant white and Christian culture of the West. Parfitt notes that in medieval times, there were many discussions concerning the relationship of Jews and blacks, usually dividing over the ques-

tion of whether or not those two peoples were part of the same creation (“monogenesis”) or were created separately (“polygenesis”), not part of the Edenic creation described in the Bible.

Along with this came the dispute over the “Lost Tribes of Israel,” whose existence and survival were not only hotly debated but also used to explain the otherness of non-Christians and non-whites, especially Africans. If Africans were descended from the Lost Tribes, that would not only explain their utterly alien appearance, customs, religions, and language, but also permit some Africans, once the Lost Tribe idea became known to them, to actually claim Jewish/Israelite descent for themselves. This, in turn, would give such people (assuming their claim could be proven or accepted) status in Christian society that still accepted the literal interpretation of the Bible, and that understood the ancient Jews to be their religious ancestors, even if they were now scorned for having rejected the later revelation involving Jesus’s messianic appearance.

Both literary and folk traditions, Parfitt notes, contributed to this set of beliefs. The medieval belief in and search for Prester John, the fictitious writings of Sir John Mandeville, and the more truthful, if not necessarily more accurate, writings of Leo Africanus, all contributed to the ideas that there were Jews in Africa, and/or that some Africans were Jews, at least by descent. But a misreading of the Bible also provided the rationale for Othering Jews and Africans; they were both descended from Ham, son of Noah, who had been cursed for seeing his father’s drunken nakedness. (That this was a misreading of the story was ignored.) It also meant that the ancient Egyptians had to be accounted as white, even though they were undoubtedly Africans, if only by location; Egyptians, thus, became “Semites,” descended from Noah’s son Shem. Therefore, all Africans were “lesser,” but some Africans were less lesser than others, with the peoples of northeast Africa

seen as less degenerate or more close to the white and Christian norm.

That Jews, however defined, existed in Africa provides Parfitt with the chance to note some fascinating outcomes of the myth. First, nearly all accomplishments of Africans, e.g., Great Zimbabwe, were ascribed to Jewish, or at least white, invaders, who nevertheless “degenerated” in the African milieu to the point that no modern Africans could build or even remember such remarkable achievements. Second, Africans themselves began to buy into the idea, learning of it perhaps from Christian missionaries. Thus, such West African peoples as the Yoruba, Soninke, and Fulani all came to believe, or have ascribed to them, Israelite ancestry, complete with stories of migration from the northeast. This was part of a larger mythos that superior conquerors from elsewhere (usually from the northeast) came and established states such as the Ashanti kingdom in West Africa and the Tutsi-dominated states of Rwanda and Burundi, among others. Even in South Africa, such peoples as the Xhosa and the Zulu could be claimed as descended from Jewish exiles; but, since these two groups once ruled great areas of southern Africa by conquest, this in turn could be used to justify the white conquest of the same place later on. Conquered Africans, in turn, would take up the idea of Jewish ancestry from missionaries, such as John Colenso, as a way of asserting a respected place in the narrative of their conquerors. As for “proof,” Parfitt notes that any strange African custom or belief could be interpreted as a degenerate or fossilized Judaism and any group whose ancestry was uncertain (and that meant most Africans) could be assumed to be in some sense Jewish, one of the Lost Tribes. In this way, Africans could be linked to Jews and thus in some way honored while still being cast as the Other, justifying the disrespect, oppression, and conquest that was their lot.

In chapter 6 of his book, Parfitt switches his view to the rise of black Pentecostalism in Ameri-

ca, which is the subject of Dorman’s work described below. He notes that attempts to fit Native Americans into the Christian narrative led to the common belief that the Indians were descendents of the Lost Tribes, an idea that was not confined to the Mormons. Equally, the descendents of African slaves also took up the idea that Africans were of Jewish (more properly, Israelite) descent, which would provide a powerful linkage to another but more honored people whose history was also one of endless suffering capped with eventual redemption. This identification became one of the key parts of black Pentecostalism, the assertion that African Americans were Jews, not because they in any way practiced the Jewish faith (though some actually did) but because they had a presumed common ancestry and a very real common oppression. The Old Testament, therefore, became the focus of many black religious movements because of its emotional and eschatological relevance to the African American experience. Jesus, in this view, was not the universal Messiah of the New Testament but the promised Jewish redeemer of the Old. It was, Parfitt notes, a new version of older faiths that he refers to as “Afro-Judaism.” It legitimized the African American quest for dignity and respect by combining the identity of the two groups that had been most scorned and marginalized throughout Western history, blacks and Jews.

Inevitably, Parfitt turns (as all such studies must) to the “Falasha” of Ethiopia, a group that calls itself Beta Israel, the “House of Israel.” The origin and identity of this group has been one of the most controversial in all of African studies, and in modern times their identity as Jews has not been seriously questioned; thus, the development of “Operation Magic Carpet,” which carried most of them to Israel to escape from local oppression over the past forty years. The Beta Israel origin myth is well known: they are descended from Jewish settlers who came from ancient Israel in the time of King Solomon, accompanying his son

Menelik, fathered with the “Queen of Sheba,” who was assumed to be in fact Ethiopian.

Parfitt looks critically at the myth, and concludes that in fact the Beta Israel saw themselves as “Israelites” rather than as “Jews” in the common usage of the term, and that they likely originated as an offspring of Ethiopian Christianity sometime around five hundred years ago. That they adopted some Jewish customs and beliefs is undeniable, but their relationship to actual Jews, or Israelites, is self-constructed rather than historically true. Instead, he asserts, it was only in the nineteenth century that the Beta Israel came to be regarded as “black Jews,” for the simple reason that before that time a “black Jew” was a contradiction in terms. Why then did Europeans come to accept the myth? It was, Parfitt notes, part of the racism and biblicalism of the time. If it were true that there were Jews in ancient Africa, or at least people with some historical, cultural, or biological connection to them, then this would explain how such things as Great Zimbabwe could exist. It confirmed the idea that only outsiders could have built such things, not black people.

Finally, this brings Parfitt back to his starting point, the origin and identity of the Lemba. He notes the astonishing fact that DNA evidence now confirms that the Lemba are linked genetically to peoples of the Middle East, and that they are to a significant degree genetically different from their otherwise physically identical neighbors. How is this possible? Here Parfitt engages in a bit of speculation, but his conclusions are at least plausible. He believes that since sailors from Arabia extensively traded with and settled on the coast from pre-Islamic times, it is not hard to imagine that some of them settled there, moved inland for trade purposes, and then encountered local Bantu speakers with whom they may have intermarried. Since there would be little genetic difference between such people and the inhabitants of the ancient Middle East, that would explain how “Semitic” (“Jewish”) DNA ended up as a substan-

tial part of an African people’s gene pool. It would also explain why some Lemba are said to “look Jewish,” especially in regard to the shape of their noses (which is ironically one of the enduring tropes of Anti-Semitism).

It is one thing to claim Jewish ancestry, but another to be observant Jews. Parfitt notes that today the vast majority of the Lemba are practicing Christians, but that the claim, or accusation, that they are of Jewish descent has led some Lemba to study, and in some cases practice, Judaism in its modern guise, which is largely a product of the central and eastern European “Ashkenazi” community as developed over the past thousand years. It is not unlikely that some Lemba, learning the Old Testament from missionaries, combined scraps of their own cultural mythos with biblical stories and thus saw a relationship with Jews, if only in the sense of a common Otherness and history of oppression. From there, it would be only a short step to asserting an actual Jewish identity as well as ancestry.

Parfitt’s work raises some profound questions, the answers to which lie outside of his admirable study. The most central, which “real Jews” have been wrestling with for centuries, is what constitutes Jewishness, and thus who counts as a Jew? Is it a question of descent, or “blood,” or practice, or belief, or even residence? And, a question that is fraught with every possible danger and controversy, is it possible for blacks to be Jews, or for Jews to be black? In a masterly survey of the two great “Othered” groups of Western history, Parfitt brings these questions to the forefront, offering not so much answers (there may not be any) but historically based insight into the fundamental question of who anyone actually is.

Dorman looks at the same phenomenon as Parfitt, but from a different angle and in a different place. He is interested in how some African American religious groups have come to embrace the idea that they are “Israelite” (but not necessarily Jewish in terms of doctrine or worship), and,

like many African peoples, claim a descent, either biological or cultural or both, from the ancient Israelites. Just as African American Israelitism is a variant of similar movements in Africa, Dorman demonstrates that it is also a variant of uniquely American phenomena, Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Evangelical movement spread far and wide in the United States (and also in the English Caribbean) and inevitably drew to it black Americans; many of them were former slaves, most of them were descendents of slaves, and nearly all of them daily experienced the humiliations and brutality of Jim Crow America. Given the social and political repression experienced on a daily basis, it would not be surprising if many African Americans sought solace in religion, and status in identifying with another faith that the religion of their oppressors honored to a degree as being the source of their own beliefs.

Dorman begins with William Saunders Crowdy, a former slave who ended up as a farmer in Oklahoma. One day in 1890, while out plowing his fields, he claimed to have had a sudden revelation, that black Americans were in fact the descendents of ancient Jews (or Israelites--the difference is significant). Acting on this, Crowdy began to preach, creating the Church of God and Saints of Christ in the process. Crowdy's church was only one of many, black and white, that emerged in these decades, nearly all of them part of the growing Evangelical and Pentecostal movements that flourished throughout America. It is also noted that such things were driven as much by technology as by faith; railroads allowed cheap and rapid travel across the country; newspapers spread news and ideas equally quickly; and steamships (often manned in part by black sailors from both sides of the Atlantic) permitted a flow of such ideas and movements across the ocean, cross-fertilizing religious ideas and social movements for many.

In the United States, many of these groups began to adopt Jewish practices, such as the Passover Seder, the Saturday Sabbath, and ritual bathing and foot washing, not because they wished to become Jews, but because these were assumed to be the common practices of Christians in the first two centuries after Christ. They were modeling themselves after "real Christians" whose beliefs and rituals had since been subverted, corrupted, and discarded by the emerging institutional Christianity centered on Rome and Constantinople. Such beliefs, Dorman notes, were reinforced by the experiences of blacks in the generations before and after the Great War. Massive migration within America, travel to and sometimes combat in such "exotic" locales as Europe and the Near East, and meeting with Africans and Afro-Caribbeans all contributed to a sense that to be a black American was to be something more than a member of an oppressed minority in one country, but rather part of a much wider cultural world that spanned continents and centuries.

Out of this ferment, Dorman argues, came such seemingly different but deeply related movements as Rastafarianism, Garveyism, and even the Nation of Islam, as well as hundreds of new Christian churches. What bound them together was the search for a legitimizing identity that the dominant racist culture was bound to respect to some degree. For some, it was primitive Christianity; for others, it was Islam, for still others it was an Africanizing that led to the adoration of Ethiopia and the near-deification of Haile Selassie; for most, as Dorman notes, it was Judaism, the source faith of Christians (and Muslims) and the faith of a people who, like them, had endured centuries of contempt, oppression, and brutality, the symbolic and real incarnation of the Other. For most, this led to a borrowing of Jewish ideas and practices while remaining Christian, but claiming either literal or symbolic descent from ancient Jews; this was Israelitism. For a few such groups, it meant going all the way, fully adopting contemporary Jewish beliefs, rituals, and customs; the

prime example of this was the life and career of Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford, whose Harlem congregation eventually became almost indistinguishable from white, Ashkenazi ones; not coincidentally, it also raised the question that Parfitt, and many contemporary Jewish organizations and theologians, raise: how is Jewishness defined?

A not-inconsiderable side-note to all of this, Dorman observes, was the nineteenth-century rise of “Anglo-Israelitism,” which asserted that the English were in fact descendents of the ancient Israelites; being thus descended, this would explain the English success in taking over much of the world politically and economically in that century. After all, if they are descended from the “Chosen People,” and enjoy divine protection, then their success is both explicable and morally justifiable. Peoples of African descent, in North America, the Caribbean islands, and in Africa, would naturally draw on such beliefs since as English speakers, they too could see themselves as in a sense “chosen,” and part of a superior ethnic group that might scorn or oppress them but whose biblical antecedents they allegedly shared. Added to this was the influence of Freemasonry, whose quasi-biblical, Old Testament alleged origins and rituals were familiar to many African Americans. Another thread was “Orientalism,” the fascination with and borrowing from supposed cultures, beliefs, and rituals of the Near East, whose exotic nature could be easily adapted to Evangelical claims, both black and white, of ancient, “mysterious,” and sacred descent and beliefs. (A white example of this is the charitable service organization, the “Mystic Knights of the Shrine,” or “Shriners,” with their orientalist, pseudo-Islamic symbols and rituals.)

Dorman is at pains to point out that while black Israelitism was assembled out of many cultural, social, and religious strands, it is not mere syncretism. Instead, the huge ferment of African American religious thought and cultural creation (one aspect of which is the more widely known

Harlem Renaissance) led to true cultural innovation in both ideas and practice. While most of the black Israelite churches have splintered or vanished, and most of their founders largely forgotten, Dorman asserts that their influence remains. Not because, he says, many African Americans have become Jews in the conventional sense (though some have) or have even preserved an “Israelite” strain in their worship and belief, but because they have used such things as source materials to both enhance their own culture and to help them deal with the larger society that even after many centuries, still insists on seeing black people as the Other.

While the history narrated by both Parfitt and Dorman is fascinating, scholars will find their sources and bibliographies even more useful. For Dorman’s work especially, the bibliography is massive and can lead others into documentation and areas of study that few would ever know existed. Both volumes have copious notes that by themselves would make these books worth having for any scholar of African, Israeliteist, or African American religion and culture. It should also be noted that both books are very well written, and accessible to the lay reader; the language is vivid, the terminology clear (and explained where it is not), and the jargon kept to an absolute minimum.

But the value of the two works goes beyond the world of scholarship. General readers, and to be frank, especially Jews and African Americans, will find in them aspects of their history and culture that they scarcely knew existed. Relations between the two peoples have had their ups and downs for well over a century, especially in the United States. Perhaps these two works, and others inspired by them, will help the two historic Others of Western and American history see that their pasts and futures are intertwined in ways that few can imagine. If so, the value of Parfitt’s and Dorman’s work will go far beyond the conventional bounds of historical scholarship.

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