J-Vault for Black History Month

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In honor of Black History Month, throughout February this blog will highlight selections at intersections of Black and Jewish history. Some such publications will make us proud; others -- like this one -- will certainly not. The Jewish community is (rightly) proud of its record in the struggle for recognition of the civil rights of African-Americans, but it is also important to remember that this record is not spotless. The Jewish community too -- and even the profession of Jewish communal service -- was capable of including professionals who might make reference to racist "science" (see the first paragraph quoted below), or refer to African culture with the phrase "*tainted* with African history" (further below; emphasis added).

This week, from the J-Vault: ***Negro "Jews" : A Social Study*** (1933)

The quotation marks in the title speak volumes by themselves about the author's hostility toward his subjects. Excerpts:

> Negro Jews as an organization or social unit are non-existent elsewhere than in America. There is an Indian-Negro sect in the West Indies that historically taboos pork and may thus claim a relationship in consideration of its present rite, and its former questionable ancestry. The only dark skinned foreign group that is Jewish in ancestry and practice is the Abyssinian Jew or Falasha, and scientific investigation places this rather pure strain in the white race. Therefore, the Falasha Jew is not included in this study. Our specific problem as social workers is the so-called "Jewish" Negro in New York City...
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> ...Before attempting to analyze the sociological import of these groups of associations of "Jewish" Negroes, it is essential that we be familiar with their history and background, and have a knowledge of social conditions in New York City and in the West Indies from which a large portion of these adherents derive. Exact names and titles have been disguised, without affecting the underlying facts...
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> ...In 1900, Abraham, a twenty-year-old fish peddler of Norfolk, Virginia, and to some extent a religious mystic, convinced himself, aided by the fact of similarity of occupation, that he was the second Jesus Christ. He gathered about him a group of people, and conducted services as the "Church of Eternity." For several years, as father of the new sect, he conducted business at this stand, until 1908 when he was evicted for being a nuisance...
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> ...His method of raising money was to select a small tradesman in the

neighborhood and direct group members to deal there. Later Abraham would visit the merchant and convince him that as his customers were mostly members of the group he should join. Of course, as a member, the new constituent gave up his possessions to the church... The women who joined had to forswear their marital ties. Husbands and wives became "brothers and sisters" in their mutual relations. They gave one another up to the group; the women were supposed to be held in common, but actually they were reserved to the priests, and in time largely to. one priest, Abraham. This man had a great number of illegitimate children within the group; in the latter period many were children whom he had by his own children. Pregnant women were kept on a "baby farm" which the group owned in Absecon, New Jersey...

...The second group of importance is known as the Church of the Promised Land and Talmud Torah. It was the parent organization of the Sons of Israel. Rabbi Joseph, formerly mentioned in connection with Rabbi Jacob, was the godfather of this institution in Harlem, with a branch in Brooklyn. Rabbi Joseph of Florida, and a "voodoo" man from a nationalistic Negro association, directed the Talmud Torah, which was organized in connection with this church. The group was incorporated July 1921. The group split up in 1922 and Rabbi Jacob organized the Sons of Israel.

Rabbi Jacob's ideas were gathered from the Abraham group, and the Garvey movement from which he had been ousted. He built up a membership of several hundred. This group was the only authentic one of all the "Jewish" Negro groups, in that services were conducted with Jewish aspects, tinged, however, with Mahommedanism. Its entire life was over six years. Rabbi Jacob employed several white Jews to instruct his congregation in Jewish ways, and arranged for the children to be instructed at the Institutional Synagogue Talmud Torah, which is under the auspices of persons prominent in Orthodox Jewish circles...

...The oldest organization, or parent group, is known as the "Church of Eternity." Its membership is composed of a group of Negroes claiming to be Jews. It is located in Harlem in New York City. The majority of the membership is of West Indian derivation... History unfolds the parable in the West Indies during the Sixteenth Century when some eight hundred Jews are reported to have been exiled from England and to have intermarried with the native and Negro populations. Although Christianity was the prevailing enforced religion, Judaism is supposed to have been/ practiced privately...

...Being left to themselves in the West Indies, the Negroes develop certain stories which are all tainted with African history and preceded by African background. And, when added to this is the story of the Bible, of the Jews being delivered by both the Egyptian and Babylonish captivities, these black natives imagine all sorts of fantastic plans for the redemption of Africa. They identify themselves with the Ancient Jews; they think of themselves as the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea...

...The only reason these groups called themselves Jews rather than something non-Jewish seems to be based on the fact that they, Abraham and Gabriel, had run the entire gamut of Christian beliefs. To do something new, and thus attractive, they could become only either Jews or Mohammedans,

as only these groups would not reject them. Abraham and Gabriel could not adopt Mohammedanism because they knew nothing about it and had no way of learning because of their ignorance of Arabic. Jews always recognize Jews as fellows in persecution. Gad (the Arabian) knew Hebrew and Yiddish, and all the group knew the Bible; so it was easy for them to take over the Jewish title. They used to have letterheads with inscriptions in Yiddish and Hebrew, concerning their alleged orphan asylum, old folks home, school, etc. They were thus in a position to prey on the Jews in New York. The movement was almost purely mercenary and lascivious, although some of the leaders were sincere in their misguided beliefs.

Of the entire Negro population of the world which is estimated at 200,000,000, over 224,670 live in New York City within an - area of two square miles. Judaism is professed by four small groups in New York City fast disintegrating because of intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. There is no anthropological verity in their claims. Manifestly engendered by the African desire for free emotional expression and the personal ambition of local religious leaders rather than racial self-assertion, this movement gathered momentum under the Garvey impulse. But being founded in ignorance and self-aggrandizement it has lost power and personnel with the spread of Negro education and Negro internationalism. Therefore, upon analysis, except for its exploitation aspect, the problem resolves itself into a Negro one and, therefore, outside of the realm of Jewish social service— except from the broader humanitarian and internationalistic viewpoint.

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