

“I Saw You Disappear with My Own Eyes”

Hidden Transcripts of New York Black Israelite Bricolage

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ABSTRACT: To date, scholars have tended to view Black Israelites as mercenary, derivative, or imitative. However, this microhistorical reading of the public, partial, and hidden transcripts of New York Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew's beliefs and ritual practices demonstrates that Black Israelites did not simply imitate Jews, but rather they were bricoleurs who constructed a polycultural religion that creatively reworked threads from religious faiths, secret societies, and magical grimoires. Black Israelite religious identity was imagined and performed in sidewalk lectures and in Marcus Garvey's Liberty Hall; it was embodied through Caribbean pageants, and acted out in parades. Black Israelism was lived through secret Spiritualist and Kabbalistic rituals, and taught openly through Sunday Schools and Masonic affiliates. Finally, it was an identity that was formed and performed in a mixture of Sanctified and Judaic rites. Print culture, performance, and complex social networks were all important to the imagination and realization of this new Israelite religious identity. Recognizing the subversive quality of this bricolage and the complexity of its partial and hidden transcripts belies attempts to exclude esoteric African American new religious movements from the categories of protest religion and black religion. When one combines the study of Black Israelism with similar studies of African American NRM's of the 1920s, it is possible to appreciate a remarkable wave of overlapping esoteric religious creativity that accompanied the much more famous artistic creativity of the Harlem Renaissance.

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One evening after Friday night services had concluded, Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew, head of the Ethiopian Hebrew Commandment Keepers synagogue in Harlem, turned to the dozen worshippers in the audience and began speaking on the familiar theme of his magical abilities. Turning to Brother William, Matthew asked for a witness that he had made himself invisible with a wave of the hand.

“Yes, you did,” corroborated Brother William. “I saw you disappear with my own eyes.”

Immediately, the rest of the worshippers (all women) rose from their seats and shouted ecstatically, “Hallelujah, the Lord loves our teacher.”

“Let us sing ‘Adon Olam,’” the Rabbi roared. “Let us sing so that all our enemies will know that we are the chosen sons and daughters of Jehova.”¹

Matthew was an escape artist; not only could he become invisible but for many years the black Israelites whom he led escaped the study of scholars or repelled their efforts to understand the movement. There have been numerous newspaper articles and a few scholarly studies over the years, but for the most part people either dismissed them entirely or watched them disappear with their own eyes. Black Judaism successfully hid both its origins in Pentecostal churches and its secret knowledge drawn from Freemasonry, Jewish Kabbala, and African American conjuring.

Rabbi Matthew’s movement represents one little-understood form of African American storefront religion during the “Great Migration”—the movement of black Southerners to northern cities in the first half of the twentieth century. Black Israelites, also called Black Hebrews or Black Jews, are African Americans who believe they are descended from the ancient Hebrews and who practice religions that use some elements of Judaism.² Metaphoric identification with the children of Israel and the Exodus narrative has long been an acknowledged feature of African American Christianity in the nineteenth century.³ However, from their origins in the 1890s until the present, Black Israelites have moved from metaphoric identification to literal identification as the people of the Book. There were many sects of Black Jews during the 1920s, from the South to Chicago and Harlem, and many of these had more members than Matthew’s Ethiopian Hebrews or gained more wealth and notoriety. But Matthew practiced a religion that preached descent from the ancient Israelites while pioneering the incorporation of Jewish ritual, Hebrew language, and kosher culinary practices.⁴

While there are more than a dozen brief studies and two books on New York’s Black Israelites, most previous accounts of the movement give an incomplete and sometimes inaccurate description of the movement’s origins and beliefs. To date, scholars have tended to view Black



Fig. 1 Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew. Photo by the M. Smith Studio. Morgan and Marvin Smith Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

Israelite leaders as mercenary, derivative, or imitative. As with many accounts of new religious movements, some observers have portrayed them as hucksters who prey on their praying followers. Other observers have suggested that Black Israelites either imitated Jews or were descended from Jews in Africa or the Americas.⁵ However, with closer analysis of the existing evidence as well as the acquisition of a small collection of vital Black Israelite records by the Schomburg Center of the New York Public Library, we can see that Black Israelites did not simply imitate Jews, but rather were bricoleurs who constructed a polycultural religion that creatively reworked threads from religious faiths, secret societies, and magical grimoires.⁶

This microhistory of the development of Rabbi Matthew's theology reveals how the Jewish ritual that he presented to the world was undergirded by Holiness/Pentecostal Christianity and magical practices borrowed from popular esoteric sources. This is far from a comprehensive list of Matthew's inspirations and sources—a fuller treatment would have to include Freemasonry, Spiritualism, black nationalism, and an African American version of Orientalism.⁷ Yet when one combines the study of Rabbi Matthew's Black Israelism with similar studies of Black Israelism, Black Islam, Rastafarianism, Father Divine's Peace Mission movement, and various New Thought-based black religions operative in

the 1920s, it is possible to appreciate a remarkable wave of overlapping esoteric religious creativity that accompanied the much more famous artistic creativity of the Harlem Renaissance.⁸ These were religions of “subversive bricolage,” the creations of remarkably sophisticated, not “savage,” minds.⁹

Understanding Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew, who died as “Chief Rabbi of the Ethiopian Hebrews of the Western World,” is made more difficult because of the complexity of what James Scott called the public, partial, and hidden transcripts: his rhetoric when whites were present was different than when his audience was exclusively African American, and different again when his audience were all Black Israelites—one of the items he taught at his religious school was “speech in front of mixed congregations.”¹⁰ Similarly, what he told a black newspaper was different than what he would have said to a white newspaper. Towards the end of his life, frustrated at what he perceived as the injustices dealt him by reporters and scholars, he refused to make statements to outsiders at all. It is, therefore, necessary to unearth the partial and hidden transcripts in order to understand the cultural world of early Black Israelites, the intellectual wells from which they drew, and the social meanings they gave to their practice and identity. Paying attention to micropolitics, hidden transcripts, and subversive bricolage also challenges definitions of black protest religion that would exclude esoteric forms of African American religion.¹¹

THE SECRET LIFE OF RABBI MATTHEW

When Rabbi Matthew died on 3 December 1972, his death certificate matched the story he had told as far back as 1937—that he had been born in Lagos, Nigeria, on 23 June 1892 to a Falasha father and a West Indian mother. However, government documents hidden from public view tell a very different story. In 1918, 1920, and even as late as 1969, when he applied for a social security number, Matthew reported that he was born on 23 June 1892 on St. Kitts in the British West Indies, and immigrated to New York in 1913.¹² Community leader Rabbi Hailu Moshe Paris reported that members were upset to discover that Matthew was not born in Africa. “Later, when he passed on, a lot of people did not like that he was from St. Kitts,” Paris related.¹³

Matthew’s parents, Frances Cornelious and Joseph Matthew, raised him as a Methodist, and he later belonged to a “Jesus-only” Pentecostal church. He later described a deep religious faith that was a part of daily life in the Caribbean, writing that “the people of the islands were among the most enlightened, biblically,” and, in accordance with biblical prohibitions, would not eat animals that had died of strangulation or drowning.¹⁴ For Matthew, as for many working-class Protestants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bible not only was a holy

document to be read by a religious authority on Sunday, but was part of the fabric of daily life, a mystical roadmap that promised to guide one through the past, the present, and the afterworld. Like many other devout Protestants, Rabbi Matthew and the people who became his followers committed large portions of the Bible to memory.¹⁵

Matthew's Caribbean childhood provided the first of many performative contexts through which biblical identities came to be embodied. Commenting on a passage from the book of Exodus, Matthew once wrote:

Here I am reminded of the Patriarchal plays at Christmas time, also of David and Goliath and the children of Israel, by which the people of [the] islands were reminded from year to year that they were the children of the house of Israel. In the stories of Joseph in Egypt, Solomon and Sheba, strictly Biblical, are vividly portrayed the same people in America who are "Negroes" and in most part of the British domain [are known] as "darkies."

The plays to which Matthew referred were a feature of Christmas celebrations in Nevis and St. Kitts when roving bands of a dozen or more actors would act out various themes to the accompaniment of several types of music. The celebrations were polycultural, popular, and riotously "impure": topics ran the gamut of popular culture from the Bible to Hollywood movies, and had titles such as "Children of Israel," "Clowns," "Indians and Cowboys," "Cakewalk with Japanese Girls," "Samson and Delilah," "Julius Caesar," and "Tarzan of the Apes." Matthew referred to two of these plays in particular that transmitted the knowledge of Afro-Israelite identity—"David and Goliath" and "Children of Israel." These biblical stories were adapted from plays by Hannah More, an English writer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and were notable for their overwrought language. A small boy was usually picked to play David, which made his feat of memorization all the more impressive, especially when he had to deliver convoluted lines such as: "I bring of your aged Sir the gifts of such plain plates and rural vivands as suits his frugal fortune." No doubt the strangeness of More's turgid language must have added to the pleasure and the power of their enunciation for both performers and audience members.¹⁶

These Christmas-time plays were a local Nevisian variant of carnivalesque masquerade, which democratically recombined the heterogeneous materials available to local people fishing the global crosscurrents of commerce and culture, currents which brought Hollywood movies and English poetry alike as flotsam in the transnational currents of culture. As in many other forms of masquerade, actors became the characters they portrayed, and the entire community was drawn into the performance through the act of participating in the

retelling of familiar biblical stories. When David slew Goliath, or when the Israelites escaped Egypt, time, space, and race became identified with the actors and their audience. The theatrical alchemy of Christmas pageants provided one site where Afro-Caribbean peoples incorporated biblical identities not only into their religion, but also into their very bodies.¹⁷

The Caribbean was not just a border zone where cultures met and meshed; it was also a place whose people frequently left in search of jobs and opportunity. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the catastrophic collapse of world sugar prices, soil exhaustion, natural disasters, and population growth on the older British colonies of Barbados, Jamaica, and Nevis-St. Kitts led to mass migrations.¹⁸ Matthew claimed to have visited Palestine, Egypt, and Haiti, which may indicate that he was among the many West Indian sailors who escaped the poverty of the Caribbean by traveling the world for a time in the merchant marine. Matthew was a stocky, powerfully built young man, 5'4" in height, and he once indicated he was trained as a carpenter. Steady work in the Caribbean was increasingly hard to find, however, and on 9 May 1913, just shy of his twenty-first birthday, Matthew once again boarded ship, leaving St. Kitts on the SS Parima and arriving at Ellis Island in New York after a brief, two-day journey.¹⁹ It was probably in New York that Matthew met and married Florence Docher Liburd, also a native of the British West Indies, and together they had four children. In his first years in New York, Matthew earned a living by performing odd jobs, and by competing as a boxer and a wrestler.²⁰ Afro-Caribbean immigration to the United States ballooned from a scant 411 in 1899 to more than 12,000 per year by 1924, when restrictive legislation was enacted and constricted the flow of new immigrants by 94 percent. Most of these newcomers found their way to New York City, and by 1930 almost a quarter of black Harlem hailed from the Caribbean.²¹

THE HOLINESS/PENTECOSTAL ROOTS OF BLACK ISRAELISM

Matthew's Commandment Keepers Church of the Living God began as a Christian church, and progressively incorporated more Jewish rituals and decreased the prominence of Jesus as the decades passed. Matthew studied theology in Harlem, and on 15 April 1919 founded the Commandment Keepers Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of Truth. At the beginning, when he incorporated the church with the State of New York in 1921, he added "and the faith of Jesus Christ" to the name, an appellation that remained until the late 1960s. The biblical land of Ethiopia had long been a source of hope and inspiration for Christians of African descent, for whom Psalm 68:31 held special resonance: "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon

stretch out her hands unto God.” Matthew was influenced by several teachers and associates who founded churches of the same name, and who also taught variations of Ethiopianism and black descent from ancient Israelites.²²

Matthew’s private records demonstrate his early roots in Holiness and Pentecostal patterns of affliction and healing, belief in the danger posed by doctors and the hazard that could accompany speaking ill of the minister. Baptism and a second baptism in the Holy Spirit were part of the practice of the early Commandment Keepers. In a record of deaths of members, he noted that Philip Ellis “was not a Commandment Keeper. Only he was baptized in Jesus Name, but not in Holy Ghost.”²³ Although there are no reports of spirit possession or speaking in tongues, an early report records that Matthew displayed a placard in the sanctuary reading “Wait for the Power that Fell Pentecost,” and another one, “People Prepare to Meet Thy God. Jesus Saves.” Matthew, who used the title “Bishop” in the first decade of the Commandment Keepers, was part of a wide community of Holiness and Pentecostal ministers with whom he sometimes co-officiated at baptisms.²⁴

Like many Holiness and Pentecostal ministers, Matthew incorporated syncopated “jazzed” music into the prayer service in the first decade of the congregation’s existence. A visitor in 1929 described how worshippers, mostly women, played tambourines, cymbals, triangle, saxophone, and piano. Bishop Matthew wore a skullcap, and played guitar, and then tambourine. Someone called out a number and the group started into the hymn, “The Cloud and the Fire,” which relates the exodus of the ancient Israelites through the desert—“So the sign of the fire by night. And the sign of the cloud by day; Hov’ring O’er—Just before—As they journey on their way.”²⁵ As the hymn progressed, traces of syncopation slipped into the even march tempo, with the tambourines rattling and the triangle striking the off-beats. On the third verse the pace quickened and the volume grew. Bodies began to sway as the tempo increased to a quickstep. They ran out of verses, but kept singing, “jazzing it, evenly, an infectious swing.” There were shouts of “Hallelujah!” and “Praise the Lord!” Finally the music stopped and they pitched into another hymn, again starting slowly and working up to an emotional peak.²⁶ As the decades passed, the instrumentation became simpler—the piano remained, but guitar, saxophone, and cymbals dropped out of the Commandment Keepers’ services.

But, though the use of instruments and the communal singing of hymns are recognizable from Holiness and Pentecostal Christianity, Matthew’s church defies attempts to pigeonhole it in a single religious tradition. Matthew’s growing identification with Judaism developed out of the unique circumstances of Harlem in the 1920s, a time and place that was rich not only in terms of its literary culture, but also in terms of its varied popular culture. In Harlem, Matthew was able to

meet individuals from all parts of the world and all walks of life, and weave his own polycultural Israelite faith out of threads taken from his Caribbean background, Garveyism, conjuring, Kabbala, and Judaism. The bricoleur is created by the culture he or she creates, and in this sense functions more like a spider on a web than a heroic individual weaver standing apart from her creation on a loom. Just as a spider creates webs out of substances extruded from her own body, the religious bricoleur is suspended in webs of personal and societal signification anchored by the physical and cultural structures of island and city life. Some of the anchor points of the urban bricoleur's web would be the anchor lines of the webs of other bricoleurs, not just the material infrastructure of the city itself. Likewise, the spider is fed by the insects she catches in her web, and so in a very real sense is constituted by the very web that she herself constitutes.²⁷

INTERACTION WITH JEWS IN THE 1920s

Even as blacks moved in and whites and Jews left Central Harlem during the 1920s, Jews retained a small presence as shopkeepers, landlords, and residents in the area, bringing them into close proximity to the expanding African American community.²⁸ As the number of Jews in Harlem fell, though, Matthew increased the amount of Judaic ritual in his church and the importance of Jewishness in his faith. In 1923 he celebrated his first Passover; in 1929 his synagogue was receiving some financial aid from Jewish synagogues; and in 1930 Matthew, still using the title "Bishop," celebrated Rosh Hashanah with six Jews of European origins among the 175 congregants. In that same year the congregation purchased a Torah.²⁹

What made Matthew's religion different from varieties of Black Israelism that arose in Memphis, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Chicago, Jamaica, South Africa, and even New York in later decades was the fact that he adopted the ritual forms of Judaism to augment his Black Israelite identity. The congregation retained a belief in the sanctity of Jesus, but began to incorporate elements of Jewish worship, including the use of Jewish prayers such as the Shema and the observance of holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A newspaper story from 1929, entitled "Negro Sect in Harlem Mixes Jewish and Christian Religions," described how Matthew ate kosher meat, wore a skullcap and a prayer shawl, and used some Hebrew. However, the congregation thought of Jesus either as a prophet of the rank of Moses or as divine, and the service itself resembled that of the sanctified church more than that of a Jewish synagogue.³⁰ As the 1920s progressed, Matthew and his followers sincerely came to believe themselves to be Jews, the physical and spiritual descendants of the ancient Israelites. Near the end of his life, looking back on this period during a rare conversation about his

Christian past, he emphasized the individual nature of his religious odyssey. "I got tired of Christianity, of going from church to church," he said. "Got the spirit it wasn't right. Just found this by myself because I wanted Hebrew. Like I was reaching out and discovered this."³¹

Rabbi Matthew's observance of the Jewish holidays combined Jewish rituals with rituals of different origins, including the magical use of oil and incense. On Rosh Hashanah, each congregant received a small bottle of oil. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur alike, the Commandment Keepers burned incense, filled a bowl with oil, and placed two silver coins into the oil. On Passover, Matthew convened a community seder and feast, and chose a "beloved son of the year." In a nod to his past in sanctified churches, Matthew also incorporated foot washing into the Passover ritual.³² He was actively combining Jewish rituals with customs, beliefs, and rituals derived from African American Christianity and conjuring. The beautiful chanting of Hebrew, the observance of dietary laws, and the swaying motions of prayer were some of the most powerful performances in and through which African Americans became Israelites. Yet beneath the public transcript of Jewish rituals and Matthew's sermons lies a hidden transcript that gets closer to the core of Matthew's faith.

"CABALISTIC SCIENCE" AND THE HIDDEN THEOLOGY OF BLACK JUDAISM

Harlem's Black Judaism was part of the black nationalist search for economic and cultural self-sufficiency championed in the interwar period by Jamaican-born organizer Marcus Moziah Garvey. Garvey's mixture of race pride, black nationalism, and messianism inspired thousands of black men and women who were open to alternatives to conventional black Christianity. The United Negro Improvement Association's New York City headquarters, Liberty Hall, became a place where small groups of people who were interested in Black Israelism met, held lectures, and shared ideas. It was through the UNIA that Matthew met his mentor, Arnold Josiah Ford, and others interested in Judaism and esoteric religions. Anthropologist Ruth Landes concluded that Garveyite nationalism was "the essential matrix" of black Judaism in Harlem, and Matthew's followers compared him to Booker T. Washington, Garvey, and the brilliant West Indian orator Hubert Harrison.³³ In the late 1920s Matthew preached to passersby from a stepladder, in the tradition of Harlem's street speakers. One member of the Commandment Keepers remembered, "It was 1927 when I first saw Rabbi Matthew on Lenox Avenue. He was standing on a ladder with a yarmulke on, and he was speaking to a crowd of people. He was preaching that we were not Christians as they had told us, but that we were the lost house of Israel." Matthew's message resonated with the

then twenty-four-year-old woman, who spent her days scrubbing floors and making beds in Jewish households in the Bronx, and who described conditions for black people as “atrocious.” “I heard the call. And when I went to the temple on 128th Street I realized I was in the right place. I did not join the Hebrew faith—I returned . . . In the Bible Jeremiah says he is black. Solomon says he is black. And David was and Samuel was and Jacob was. That’s where I come from.”³⁴ Black Israelite identity was a spiritual means of cultural empowerment in the context of both racist discrimination and black nationalist attempts to organize and uplift the race.

Rabbi L. A. McKethan, Matthew’s student, wrote in 1966 that Matthew had carried on the work of great race leaders such as Booker T. Washington, Hubert Harrison, and Marcus Garvey, as well as earlier black Israelite teachers. “All these were great and learned men in the days of our Rabbi W. A. Matthew, within a space of 20 years they all died, and thus the full responsibility of rehabilitation, and salvaging of which was lost, was placed upon his shoulders,” McKethan wrote. “Many brilliant men fell by the wayside, and some committed suicide under the depression. It is here our leader, our emancipator, proved to be not just a man, but The man. Many have referred to him as being seven men in one, TRULY ANOTHER GREAT MOSES.”³⁵

After 1930, Rabbi Matthew changed his practice to be closer to normative Judaism, but he also retained esoteric religious practices that were holdovers from the era of the black mystics who coalesced around the Marcus Garvey movement in the 1920s.³⁶ One of the most important of these was a Garveyite named Bishop John Hickerson, who also went by the names “The Rev. St. Bishop the Vine” and “Bishop Eshof Bendoved.” Before coming to Harlem, Hickerson had lived and collaborated with George Baker, the future Father Divine, in Baltimore.³⁷ There they developed a New Thought-based doctrine that God dwelled inside the individual. New Thought was a philosophy of positive thinking that had developed in nineteenth-century New England, and which taught, according to Jill Watts, “that God existed in all people, that the channeling of God’s spirit eradicated problems, and that unity with God guaranteed salvation.”³⁸ In 1914 Hickerson founded the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of the Truth in Harlem, identified himself as an Ethiopian, and taught a variation of New Thought. One of his chants was: “God in you, God in me, You God, I God, Everybody be God.” Hickerson’s students showed a similar pattern of New Thought beliefs. Elder Warren Roberson (a.k.a. Roberson), founded a Black Israelite group in Harlem in 1917 called the “Ever Live and Never Die Society,” or simply “The Black Jews.” Hickerson claimed that he had taught Hebrew to Arnold Josiah Ford, and that Ford had then taught Matthew “everything he knows about Hebrew.”³⁹ The fact that Matthew picked the same long, compound name for his church

also indicates his debt to the New Thought/Israelite lineage that ran through Hickerson. The association between Judaism and New Thought that Hickerson helped to establish can be seen in his most famous associate, Father Divine, whose “reputedly ‘Jewish’ doctrine was simply ‘God is within man’.”⁴⁰ In sum, Hickerson helped to spread the New Thought idea that God dwelled inside charismatic leaders and their followers, a concept that was at the heart of the “Jewish,” “Hebrew,” or Black Israelite beliefs of his followers and associates, both famous and obscure.

This Black Israelite/New Thought theology was based on the works of French-American author and publisher William Lauren de Laurence, who made his name by translating and publishing magical works from around the “Oriental” world. His books have been widely circulated and remain highly respected among practitioners of Afro-Atlantic religions such as Santeria and Vodou. De Laurence’s works played critical roles in the genesis of twentieth-century alternative African American religions such as the Moorish Science Temple’s Black Islam, Rabbi Matthew’s Black Judaism, and Leonard Howell’s Rastafarianism. The central theme in de Laurence’s introductions and glosses, like the central theme in the beliefs of Bishop Hickerson, Father Divine, and Rabbi Matthew, is the New Thought concept of the immanence of God. De Laurence favored biblical quotations such as “The Kingdom of God is Within You,” “You are the temples of the Living God,” “The Father is in me, I in Him and we in you,” all of which are strikingly similar to Father Divine’s slogans, and the teachings of the esoteric religious practitioners who studied de Laurence’s books.⁴¹

Rabbi Matthew used de Laurence’s writing to create magical rituals and a “Hebraic” creed that allowed him to be filled with God’s spirit. Matthew based what he called his “cabalistic science” on the most popular of de Laurence’s books, *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* (ca. 1900), a manual of magic that claims to divulge the kabbalistic secrets of the ancient Hebrews. The work purports to be a collection of ancient Hebraic sacred texts, diagrams, incantations, and prayers attributed to Moses and other biblical patriarchs, and, in between long glosses written by de Laurence, includes instructions on the effective uses of the Psalms. De Laurence’s edition of the text appeared throughout Africa and the Afro-Atlantic world, and was banned as subversive by many colonial and post-colonial governments. According to scholar Patrick Polk, *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses’* acceptance in the African Diaspora is due in part to the prestige of Moses within Afro-Atlantic spiritual traditions, as well as the suspicion that whites have not shared the whole Bible, but have hidden the most powerful portions for their own use.⁴² The fixation with Moses in the occult world was reinforced from several sources. On the one hand, the occult in general, and ritual magic specifically, contained a strong strain of Jewish Kabbala. On the other hand,

the occult also drew from the neo-Platonism and Hermeticism that influenced Renaissance Europe so strongly, and Moses became identified with Hermes Trismegistus, the legendary figure who was alleged to have compiled a body of ancient Egyptian mysticism known as the *Hermetica*.⁴³

Matthew's personal papers in the Schomburg Library in New York include two amulets of geometric designs and Hebrew words borrowed in part from *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*. These amulets offer an unparalleled view into the hidden transcript and the private settings where Rabbi Matthew performed the most secret transformative rituals at the hidden heart of Black Israelism. The square amulet in Matthew's personal papers, (Figure 2) was modified from "The Second Table of the Spirits of Fire," found on page 16 of *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses* (Figure 4). What makes the derivation of Matthew's diagram from de Laurence's diagram indisputable is the fact that de Laurence has reproduced a calligraphic error in the Hebrew that Matthew has repeated. The word at the bottom, הכח *Ha-ko-ach*, meaning "The Power," has been miswritten. An errant vertical line closes the gap of

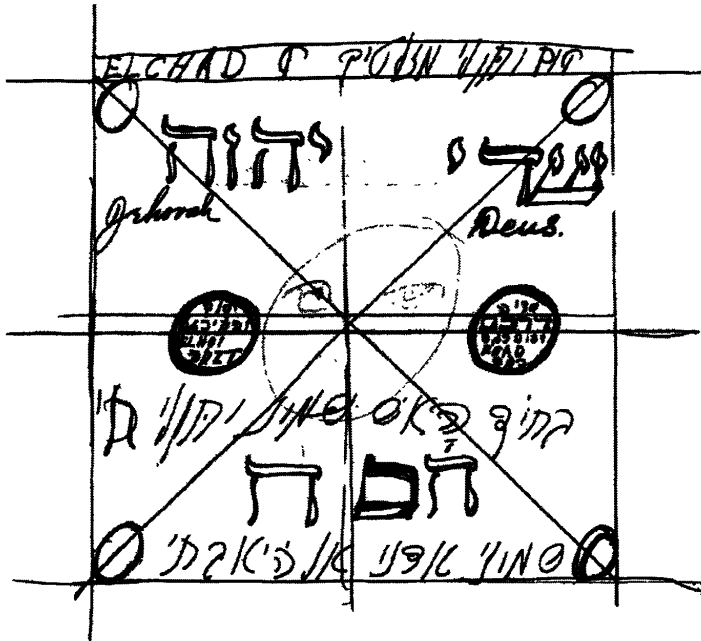


Fig. 2 Square Hebrew Diagram, n.d. W. A. Matthew MS, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

the middle letter, כ *kaph*, making it look like an uppercase “D.” In fact, there is no Hebrew letter with that shape, but in Matthew’s diagram םםם is in the exact same place, underneath the intersection of the diagonals, and Matthew has repeated the same mistake in the letter *kaph*, demonstrating that he used de Laurence’s text as a source for his “cabalistic science.”

The two amulets shed light on Matthew’s esoteric theology, part of the secret knowledge at the heart of his Black Israelite belief.⁴⁴ Matthew wrote several phrases in fractured Hebrew on the diagram, the top one of which can be translated: “Rise and give me good luck.” Just below the median line the Hebrew can be translated: “Within the eighth fire you should give me life,” and the bottom line may read either: “The eighth God should be my father,” or “The eighth God, my God, my father.”⁴⁵ At the simplest level, this diagram appears to be a good luck charm. But at a higher level, this amulet amplifies and expands on Matthew’s theology. In later decades Matthew taught that there were seven “spirits” or elements of God, and twelve heavens, which his daughter explicated in the congregational newspaper in 1965:

Do you know how few of us, *the Black Jews*, know that G-d is *Wind, Water, Fire, Life, Light, Power, and Mind*? This is G-d—the seven elements. Each one of these elements are all gods among themselves, but the creator of these—the one ruler of these, is the one and only. He is G-d. He is in us, out of us, and is all about us; and without Him we wouldn’t exist. Without any one of these gods we would not exist.⁴⁶

Given that Matthew believed in seven elements of God, this diagram appears to have been used to worship and invoke the power and presence of the supreme Creator God, an eighth god who appears through the medium of fire. The repetition of the number eight, the image of fire, and a personal filial relationship with God are noteworthy. Again, the amulet can be translated: “Rise and give me good luck/Within the eighth fire you should give me life/the eighth God, my God, my father.” Remembering that Matthew began in the sanctified church, he may have borrowed this fiery conception of God from the common “fire-baptized” Holiness-Pentecostal conception of God.⁴⁷ The multiple “god-elements” in his theology, however, is what makes Matthew’s creed most like the religions of the Black Atlantic.⁴⁸

Moreover, the ritual use of these diagrams seems to have allowed Matthew to be filled with the presence of God, and to relate to the Creator God as a son relates to a father. The second round amulet (Figure 3) repeats and amplifies this sense of God’s immanence and Matthew’s own power. The diagram consists of several Hebrew sentences printed over a Mogen David, literally a “Shield of David” or six-pointed star, which is a common kabbalistic referent. After some undecipherable words at the beginning of the prayer, the sentence continues: “. . .

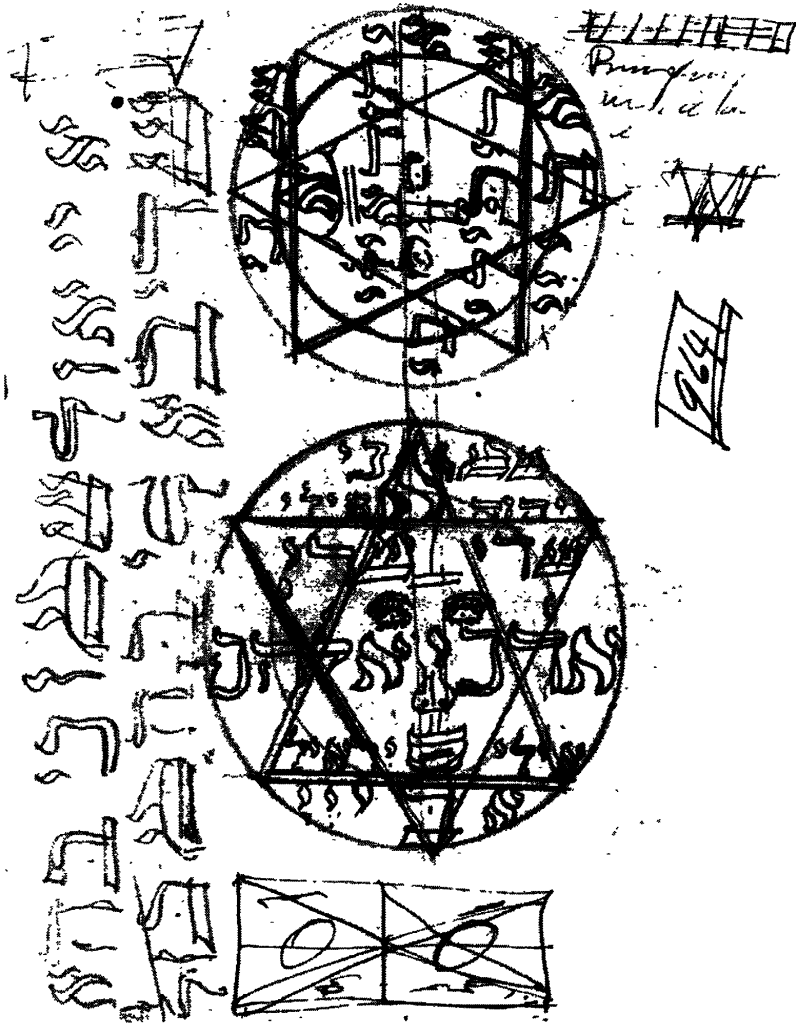


Fig. 3 Round Hebrew Diagram, n.d. W. A. Matthew MS, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Notice the schematic of the “Table of Fire” at the bottom of the page.

Eighth God . . . come God, come to me in the flood.” The words overlaid on top of the Mogen David itself can be translated: “The Name of God is in me, the Lord my God Exalted Lord God is in me, my God will see me, my father God.”⁴⁹ In this second amulet Matthew emphasizes and underlines the immanence of God. After asking God to enter him “in a flood,” he triumphantly proclaims, “the name of God is in me!” What is especially notable here is not just the idea that God is inside



Fig. 4 Table of Fire. William Lauron de Laurence, ed., *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, 2nd edition, (Chicago: de Laurence Company, ca. 1900), 16.

Matthew, but his almost messianic connection with God. It is even possible that through the ritual use of these amulets and incantations, Matthew believed himself able to unify the triune parts of the Pentecostal Godhead: God is the Father, he is the Son, and they meet via the medium of “the eighth fire,” or the Holy Spirit.

The kabbalistic diagrams that Matthew based in part on the publications of de Laurence seem to have provided a ritual blueprint for the embodiment of divine power in a manner consistent with the “reputedly Jewish” New Thought-based practices of Bishop Hickerson and some of the other religious bricoleurs of the interwar era. The “cabbalistic science” that could make one disappear or make God appear inside oneself was a form of both spiritual and temporal power, power that was particularly attractive to Matthew and the mainly poor black people who followed him and his peers. In sum, Matthew’s religious practice was far more complex, and far more interesting, than the picture of Orthodox Jewish conformity that he presented to the world in the later years of his life. Rather, hidden transcripts demonstrate that Matthew used personal networks and print culture to invent a polycultural religion, drawing on such elements as New Thought, Pentecostalism, Caribbean pageantry, and Kabbala.

CONCLUSION

Rabbi Matthew’s Judaic practice included a host of diverse beliefs and practices drawn from his many religious backgrounds and influences. Jewish ideas and rituals did not simply float into the Commandment

Keepers by osmosis, heredity, or institutional affiliation. Rather, Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthew was a bricoleur who, in several gradual and halting steps, and under the influence of ideas and mentors drawn from a variety of sources, transitioned from calling himself “Bishop” to calling himself “Rabbi.” Matthew’s religious identity was imagined and performed from lectures on sidewalks and in conversations about African history in Garveyite halls; it was embodied through Caribbean pageants, and acted out through Garveyite and Masonic parades. Black Israelism was lived through secret Spiritualist and Kabbalistic rituals, and taught openly through Masonic affiliates and Sunday Schools. Finally, it was an identity that was formed and performed in a mixture of Holiness/Pentecostal and Jewish rites. Print culture, performance, and complex social networks were all important to the imagination and realization of this new Israelite identity.

On a larger scale, the rise of mystical African American esoteric religions at the height of the 1920s implicitly critiqued the very “modern” reason, science, racism, and imperialism that justified the subordination of African Americans. Rather than being simply a decade of novels, politics, and rent parties, we can begin to appreciate the Harlem Renaissance as a period of profound religious creativity. Yet the anti-modernism of Matthew and his compatriots was also a product of the quintessentially modern and transnational flows of commerce, people, information, and culture that brought the work of Hannah More to the West Indies and brought West Indians to the U.S. It was years of drought, immigration, and structural adjustments in global commodity markets that altered the Caribbean in the years before the First World War, just as it was broad market forces that restructured the Harlem housing market in the same era, creating a black mecca and an international metropolis in New York. What is pictured, then, is not a dichotomous battle between tradition and modernity but rather novel forms of innovation, creativity, and engaged dissent from the edicts and myths of the modern.⁵⁰

Understanding the complexity of Rabbi Matthew’s religion requires burrowing below the public transcript to unearth the complex partial and hidden transcripts at the core of his polycultural religious practice. All too often, scholars flatten African American religion into a form of protest, stressing its political dimensions over its theological, emotional, or intellectual ones. And while anti-racism surely is a part of Rabbi Matthew’s theology and those of his contemporaries in the Black Muslim, Rastafarian, and New Thought movements, such a reactive definition of black religion abbreviates the humanity of its practitioners and misses the true genius of alternative black religions that delved deep into the treasure house of the Atlantic World and recombined the sparkling cultural artifacts therein. Rather than depicting Harlem’s marginal religious practitioners as aggrieved protestors, weird cultists,

or colorful imposters, examining the partial and hidden transcripts of their faiths allows us to see Matthew and his co-religionists as organic intellectuals who were part of the Atlantic world's circular reciprocity of ideas between disparate races, classes, and nations, much as they themselves circulated transnationally between the far reaches of the globe.⁵¹ When viewed not as hucksters but as polycultural bricoleurs, Harlem's religious innovators no longer disappear before our very eyes.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Arnold Sherman, "The Black Jews of Harlem," *Chicago Jewish Forum* (Spring 1957): 173.

² I use the term Black Israelites because it encompasses every African American faith that teaches descent from the ancient Israelites, from Rastafarians to Pentecostal Christians to Jews, and thereby reinforces the idea that they are all related to one another. It also avoids the mislabeling of people who might have considered themselves Black Hebrews but not Black Jews, for example, or whose religions shifted over time from Pentecostalism to Judaism. Finally, it is consonant with the fact there was much more than just Judaism in the faith of Black Jews. The existing secondary literature on Black Israelites includes Howard Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem: Negro Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Negro Leadership* (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964); Ruth Landes, "Negro Jews in Harlem," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 9 (December 1967): 175-89; Howard Waitzkin, "Black Judaism in New York," *Harvard Journal of Negro Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1967): 12-44; Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, ed., *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); James E. Landing, *Black Judaism: Story of an American Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2002). Landing's book is noteworthy as the first to document the

transference of Israelite theology within black Pentecostal denominations beginning in the 1880s. The result of thirty years of labor, it will be invaluable for future researchers despite the fact that he was not aware of the Israelite archive in the Schomburg Center that forms the basis of the present work.

³ On the identification with the ancient Israelites in African American Christianity, see Katherine L. Dvorak, "After Apocalypse, Moses," in *Masters & Slaves in the House of the Lord: Race and Religion in the American South 1740–1870*, ed. John B. Boles (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 147, 247–66.

⁴ By far the most exhaustive and authoritative compendium of Black Jewish movements in the United States and around the world is Landing, *Black Judaism*.

⁵ Three hypotheses that purport to explain the origins and beliefs of Black Israelism are: descent from Hebrew tribes in Africa, descent from Jews in the Americas, and Black Nationalist emulation of Jewish economic solidarity. It is not useful to attempt to prove or disprove religious beliefs or myths, which have "an immunity which is not granted to any other kind of information upon whose authority people commit themselves to action," as C. Eric Lincoln has written of the Black Muslims (C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, rev. ed. [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1973], 68). Yet none of these theories explain the rise of Black Israelite religions in the Americas, which at their outset bore only a superficial resemblance to Judaism.

⁶ Cultural historians Robin D. G. Kelley and Vijay Prashad have used "polycultural" and "polyculturalism" to describe an anti-essentialist theory of cultural creation. I propose that the terms are also useful in describing the formation of new religions, which often draw upon an astoundingly diverse set of inspirations that fit poorly into the hostile, holistic, systemic, and dichotomous binaries common in early studies of African-American syncretism and "acculturation." See Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), xi–xii; Robin D. G. Kelley, "People in Me," *ColorLines Magazine* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1999): 5–7; Sidney M. Greenfield and André Droogers, eds., *Reinventing Religions: Syncretism and Transformation in Africa and the Americas* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001); Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, eds., *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London and New York, 1994). For a contemporary critique of the acculturative project, see J. Lorand Matory's *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–37.

⁷ I am indebted to the methods and models of microhistory, particularly to the work of Carlo Ginzburg, whose own investigation of a sixteenth-century miller revealed a similar layering of esoteric religious belief underneath a cover of monotheistic conformity; see Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). On African American Orientalism(s), see Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 1–39; Nathaniel Deutsch "The Asiatic Black Man": An African American Orientalism?" *Journal of African American Studies*, 4 no. 3 (2001): 193–208.

⁸ On black Islam, see Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002); Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and The Nation of Islam* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996). On Rastafarianism, see Leonard E. Barrett, Sr., *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997); Ennis Barrington Edmonds, *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert A. Hill, "Dread History: Leonard Howell and Millenarian Visions in Early Rastafari Religion in Jamaica," *Epoché: Journal of the History of Religions at UCLA*, 9 (1981): 30–71; Hélène Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism*, trans. Lily Davis and Hélène Lee, ed. Stephen Davis (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003); Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*, 90–91. Works on Father Divine include Jill Watts, *God, Harlem, USA: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992); Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

⁹ As Robin Kelley notes, "folk culture is actually *bricolage*, a cutting, pasting, and incorporating of various cultural forms that then become categorized in a racially or ethnically coded aesthetic hierarchy" (Robin D. G. Kelley, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Folk'," *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 [December 1992]: 1402). The concept of "bricolage" entered scholarly literature in Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* ([1962] Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 16–23. See also Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), xviii–xxi, 138–39. On bricolage in relation to subcultures, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 104; George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance* (London: Verso, 1996), 12, 47, 78, 87–88. Jean Comaroff offers a theory of "subversive bricolage" that demonstrates how the bricolage of South African Zionist churches destabilizes power structures; see Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 12. Also, see the discussion of conjuring as bricolage in David H. Brown "Conjure/Doctors: An Exploration of a Black Discourse in America, Antebellum to 1940," *Folklore Forum* 23, nos. 1–2 (1990): 20.

¹⁰ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); Wentworth A. Matthew, "Bishop's Ecclesiastical School Curriculum prescribed and divided according to the various capacities and diverse callings in the Ministry of the Word of God," p. 2 of 4 pg. pamphlet (Wentworth A. Matthew Collection, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations [henceforth called "Schomburg Center"]).

¹¹ See, for example, Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Black American: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29–32.

¹² Wentworth A. Matthew, Application for Social Security Number, June 1969. Correspondence, Darrell Blewins, Social Security Administration, to Author, 30 August 1999.

¹³ Hailu Moshe Paris, interview with author, Harlem, New York, 17 May 1999. Indeed, Matthew's African origins are still part of the biography written by Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy, the son of one of Rabbi Matthew's students. See

Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy, "Biography of Rabbi W.A. Matthew," <www.blackjews.org/Bio_of_Black_Rabbis/Biographies_of_Black_Rabbis_in_America.htm>.

¹⁴ Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthew, "The Truth About Black Jews and Judaism in America" Part I, *New York Age* (17 May 1958). Evidence for Matthew's Methodist upbringing comes from Edward Wolf, Jewish Board of Guardians, N.Y.C., "Negro 'Jews': A Social Study," *Jewish Social Service Quarterly* 9 (June 1933): 316. Matthew mentioned his affiliation with the Jesus-only Pentecostal church in W. A. Matthew to Bishop C. H. Brown (28 March 1947): 2 (Wentworth A. Matthew Papers, Schomburg Center).

¹⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, "Latitude, Slaves and the Bible: An Experiment in Microhistory," unpublished paper, UCLA European History Colloquium (5 June 2000): 9; Howard M. Brotz, "Negro 'Jews' in the United States," *Phylon* 13 (Fourth Quarter 1952): 334.

¹⁶ Frank L. Mills, S. B. Jones-Hendrickson, and Bertram Eugene, *Christmas Sports in St. Kitts–Nevis: Our Neglected Cultural Tradition* (no city, no publisher, 1984), 13, 38. Moore's written original was slightly different—*cates*, not plates, and *viands*, not vivands; see Hannah More, *The Works of Hannah More: First Complete American Edition, Volume 1* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1843), 85.

¹⁷ There is a voluminous literature on ritual, performance, and embodiment, including the groundbreaking Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1959), and Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

¹⁸ See Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1998).

¹⁹ Alien Ship List Manifest, *SS Parima*, 11 May 1913, National Archives and Records Administration, New York City, microfilm.

²⁰ "Black Israel: Harlem Jews Keep the Fast of Yom Kippur," 29 September 1934, Black Jews Vertical File, Schomburg Center; J. F. Heijbroek, "Matthew, Wentworth Arthur" in *American National Biography*, ed. A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 275–76.

²¹ Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 12–13, 355–64; Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890–1930* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 113, 128–30, 141; Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem, 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 301.

²² Particularly noteworthy is Bishop John Hickerson, a.k.a. St. John the Vine, a one-time partner of the future Father Divine, who founded his own Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of Truth in Harlem, and claimed Matthew as a student. On Ethiopianism, see George Shepperson, "Ethiopianism and African Nationalism," *Phylon* 14, no. 1 (1953): 9–18; Robin D. G. Kelley, "This Ain't Ethiopia, But It'll Do," Chapter 6 in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, by Robin D. G. Kelley (New York, Free Press, 1994), 129.

²³ W. A. Matthew, *Commandment Keepers Log*, 1919–, Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation MS, Box 1 (1), Schomburg Center.

²⁴ In 1926 he even co-officiated a baptism with Bishop R.C. Lawson, the founder of the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, which would later become one of the major African-American Pentecostal denominations.

"Commandment Keepers Log," 22, Commandment Keepers Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation MS, Box 1 (1), Schomburg Center.

²⁵ Carl Helm, "Negro Sect in Harlem Mixes Jewish and Christian Religions: Come From Abyssinia, Eat Kosher Meat and Have Three Synagogues in Which They Worship," *The New York Sun* (29 January 1929).

²⁶ Helm, "Negro Sect in Harlem."

²⁷ Though this image owes an obvious debt to Clifford Geertz, it owes a less-obvious debt to Mary-Jane Rubenstein of Wesleyan University, who helped clarify the idea that people are constituted by culture. The spider web metaphor could be continued *ad infinitum* if not for the danger of reaching *absurdum* first. For Geertz's famous web metaphor, see Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* ([1973] New York: Basic Books Classics, 2000), 5. The spider web analogy is spun between Marx's base/superstructure dialectic, found in "Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*" in *Karl Marx: A Reader*, ed. Jon Elster ([1859] New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 187. The idea of bricoleurs spinning webs of meaning on the protean webs of other bricoleurs is akin to the idea of the dialogic found in Mikhael Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tx.: University of Texas Press, 1981), which has been put to productive use in religious history by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 16, 236, 281.

²⁸ Jeffrey S. Gurock, *When Harlem Was Jewish, 1870–1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 146–49.

²⁹ Helm, "Negro Sect," *The New York Sun* (29 January 1929), Black Jews Vertical File, Schomburg Center; "Commandment Keeper Meeting Minutes," (7 April 1930), "Ledger," p. 55, Kohol Beth B'nai Yisrael Collection, Box 2, Schomburg Center.

³⁰ 1920 U.S. Census, M300 vol. 286, Enumeration District 1411, Sheet 7, Line 26, reel 1223. The name of the church is taken from 2 Timothy. The dating of the first Passover in 1923 is given by Matthew in 1968. Rabbi W. A. Matthew, "The 51st Annual Conference of the Ethiopian Hebrew Congregations," (30 June 1968), Beth Ha-Tefilah Collection, Schomburg Center. Matthew's successors understand that Matthew's early profession of "the faith of Jesus Christ" was not Christianity, but was in fact the faith of the Old Testament. This explanation does not account for the degree and extent of references to Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the first-hand testimony of observers of Matthew's congregation, the use of Christian rituals such as baptism and foot washing, the network of contacts with Christian ministers, and so on. See Ben Levy, "Rabbi W.A. Matthew."

³¹ J. David Bleich, "Black Jews: A Halakhic Perspective," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 15, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 1975): 65.

³² "Chief Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew and the International Israelite Board of Rabbis Inc., Customs and Traditions of the Black Jews of America (Harlem USA)" Bet Din #011793, 5 January 1993, 4, Beth Elohim Commandment Keepers Collection, folder "I. B. R.," Schomburg Center.

³³ Landes, "Negro Jews in Harlem," 184.

³⁴ Maude McCleod, "I Did Not Join the Hebrew Faith—I Returned," interview with David Isay, *The New York Times Magazine* (26 September 1999): sec. 6, 116.

³⁵ L. A. McKethan, "Another Great Moses," *Malach* (March 1966): 1, quoted in Waitzkin, "Black Judaism in New York," 19.

³⁶ Randall K. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization of a Black Civil Religion* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1978); Susan Nance, "Respectability and Representation: The Moorish Science Temple, Morocco, and Black Public Culture in 1920s Chicago," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (December 2002): 630–31; Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 143.

³⁷ On Father Divine, see Jill Watts, *God, Harlem, USA*; Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine*.

³⁸ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem, USA*, 21–24; Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 144–45, 172–88.

³⁹ T. R. Poston, "'I Taught Father Divine' Says St. Bishop The Vine: 'And He is Not Doing Right by Theory,' Prophet Holds," *New York Amsterdam News* (23 November 1932): 1. Roberson also turns up in David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 222–24, although Lewis gives a stereotyped portrayal of the Black Jews as "weird" cultists and products of "religious hysteria."

⁴⁰ Landes, "Negro Jews in Harlem," 187.

⁴¹ De Laurence's *The Book of Magical Art, Hindu Magic and Indian Occultism* (1904) was a signal influence on Leonard Howell, one of the principal founders of Rastafarianism; see Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*, 90.

⁴² Patrick A. Polk, "Other Books, Other Powers: The 6th and 7th Books of Moses in Afro-Atlantic Folk Belief," *Southern Folklore*, 56 no. 2 (1999): 128; W. F. Elkins, "William Lauron DeLaurence and Jamaican Folk Religion," *Folklore*, 97 no. 2 (1986): 215–18; William Lauron de Laurence, ed., *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, 2nd edition, (Chicago: N.P., 1910).

⁴³ Francis Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 3–55, 84, 110, 115–16, 141, 152, 173, 177, 182, 184, 223, 250, 267, 268, 351, 371, 378, 403, 404–405, 425, 437, 442.

⁴⁴ W. A. Matthew, Hebrew Diagrams, Wentworth A. Matthew Collection, Box 1 (folder 13), Schomburg Center. In the upper right hand corner over the Greek "Deus" is written "שד" a name of God that implies God's magical power and is a common kabbalistic referent. In the upper left corner is יהוה, also known as the tetragrammaton, the unpronounceable Hebrew name of God, which is also a common kabbalistic referent. In English יהוה has been translated as Jehovah, which appears in the diagram below the word. See figures 2 and 3.

⁴⁵ My great thanks goes to Professor David Myers of UCLA for his translation of the fractured Hebrew of these diagrams. The top line is: קים ותגלי מצלמוב. The middle line is: בחדך האיש שמוני הזגלי חי. The bottom line is: שמוני אדני אל יהי אבוהי.

⁴⁶ Shirley Dore, "Who is this G-d We Worship?" *Malach*, (September 1965): 3–4, quoted in Waitzkin, "Black Judaism," 41.

⁴⁷ In 1895, B. H. Irwin of the Fire-Baptist Holiness Church began to preach in Iowa that baptism by the "fire" of the Holy Ghost was a separate third step after

conversion and sanctification. See Vinson Synon, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 61–68.

⁴⁸ Similarity alone does not suggest an evolutionary link between twentieth-century Black Israelism and African religions of prior centuries. On theology and god concepts in the Black Atlantic, see, for example, Joseph M. Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

⁴⁹ The first sentence is: א"י אול שמוני כהא שדי באל' בהמכול. The sentence overlaid on the Mogen David reads: שם כ' יהוה פלי שדי שדי אדני אלהם אילי יראילאבי יי.

⁵⁰ Stephan Palmié investigates Afro-American religion and modernity in *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002). American anti-modernism has usually been discussed among elite euro-Americans, not among African Americans of any class. See T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xv–xx; Michael Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006): 692–716.

⁵¹ On organic intellectuals, see Antonio Gramsci “The Intellectuals,” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 3–23. On circular reciprocity between subordinate and ruling classes in different contexts, see Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, xvi–xxvi; Mikhael M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky ([1964] Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984). Credit for the treasure house metaphor goes to Donald J. Cosentino in Costentino, ed., *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, 1995).



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