


12-2014

New Perspectives on Religion, Race, and Culture

Regennia N. Williams
Cleveland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb>

 Part of the African American Studies Commons, Continental Philosophy Commons, Ethnomusicology Commons, History of Religion Commons, Latin American History Commons, Oral History Commons, Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons, Other Religion Commons, Social History Commons, and the United States History Commons

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation

Williams, Regennia N. (2014) "New Perspectives on Religion, Race, and Culture," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 4, Article 10.

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol4/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Michael Schwartz Library at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Book Review

New Perspectives on Religion, Race, and Culture

By *Regennia N. Williams**

Jacob S. Dorman

Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions

Jacob S. Dorman's *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* offers a meticulously researched study of religion and culture from the late nineteenth century through the civil rights and Black Power eras of the 1960s. "Black Israelite" refers to those religions that "teach that the ancient Israelites of the Hebrew Bible were Black and that contemporary Black people are their descendants." (4) Using evidence from interviews, newspapers, manuscript collections, and other sources, the author moves away from discussions of African American religion as simply the result of acculturation, syncretism, and African survivals in the face of European dominance and argues that these belief systems both influenced and were influenced by religious movements among Europeans, Africans, and Asians. Building upon earlier work by historians Robin D.G. Kelley and Vijay Prashad, Dorman suggests, "Scholars in Religious, Cultural, and African American Studies might consider replacing 'syncretism' with 'polyculturalism' to describe cultural synthesis based not on syncretism's acculturation, authenticity, or retention, but rather on social networks, imagination, reinterpretation, and invention." (19)

Dorman's reinterpretation of the history begins with a consideration of the work of Prophet William Saunders Crowdy, a former slave and Oklahoma famer, whose divine revelation in 1892 inspired him to establish the Church of God and Saints of Christ. In 1903, evangelist Albert Christian helped spread Prophet Crowdy's teachings in Cape Colony, South Africa, thereby sowing some of the first seeds of Black Israelism outside the United States. The transnational nature of Black Israelism is a recurring theme in this study, which also recounts the early 20th-century influence of Anglo-Israelism and Christian missionary movements in India and Wales on the emerging American Holiness-Pentecostal churches, especially after the 1906 Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, which "boasted a form of radical egalitarianism" and welcomed people of all races. (108)

Dorman also chronicles the rise and fall of Black Israelite movements after World War I, including those with ties to New York's Harlem community. During the 1920s, Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford, for example, helped form the Beth B'Nai Israel congregation, the Moorish Zionist Temple of the Moorish Jews, and, finally, Beth B'nai Abraham, which became the largest Black synagogue in Harlem. Influenced in part by the nationalistic teaching of the Jamaican-born founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Rabbi Ford and other Black Israelites—many who, like Garvey, had ties to the Caribbean--also sought to establish a colony for Black Americans in Ethiopia. Although Rabbi Ford died in Ethiopia in 1935, and the colonization plans failed, his work was the inspiration for the formation of Rastafarianism in Jamaica, and Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew's Harlem-based Ethiopian Hebrew Commandment Keepers congregation from the 1930s to the 1970s.

The fact that “these religions are more idiosyncratic and polycultural than they are acculturative and syncretic” (186) is evident in this brief, 187-page book and its more than 50 pages of detailed notes. Dorman provides an engaging study of the complex nature of the creation and evolution of Black Israelite religions on the Great Plains, in the great cities of all regions of the United States, and as a result of the great migrations that carried practitioners of these religions to other parts of the world. This is significant book that makes a valuable contribution to the literature on cultural synthesis and African American history.

* This review was accepted for publication in Volume 101, Number 3 of *The Journal of American History*. For more information, please visit <http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/>.