

A Story of Black-Jewish Deception: The Lies of Jewish Historians

Much of the misunderstanding of the true character of the Black/Jewish relationship falls at the foot of the mostly Jewish historians who have worked mightily to obscure or misinterpret the data available to them. This occurs with alarming frequency in many, many Jewish-authored histories, and when Black historians correct or otherwise reinterpret these misconceptions (a full-time job) they are harshly rebuked. **Ralph A. Austen** of the University of Chicago candidly described one instance in 1994 of how Blacks and Jews in a scholarly setting collaborated in obfuscating the true nature of the historical relationship. Prof. Austen describes a faculty luncheon at the university's Hillel House, where he and Black historian **John Hope Franklin** gave a talk on the American Jewish community in the nineteenth-century South. His words are revealing and instructive:

After the formal presentation, a member of the audience asked a question about Southern Jewish participation in the debate on slavery. As I remember it, Franklin replied that he did not know too much about the subject. I recall very clearly one of the Hillel regulars remarking that since many of the early Southern Jews were Sephardim who had fled Spanish and Portuguese persecution, they must have been sympathetic to the plight of Black slaves.

I remember this statement because it was allowed to pass without comment, although John Hope Franklin and I (we discussed it afterwards) were both aware that Sephardi Jews in the New World had been heavily involved in the African slave trade. Why did two professional historians in a university setting hesitate to provide our colleagues with such an important piece of information? I cannot answer for Franklin but I, as a Jew sitting in a Jewish institution that was entertaining an African-American guest, felt that pointing out the role of Jews in the history of Black slavery would, in this context, have constituted something of a betrayal. I did not want to undermine the sense of solidarity between the two communities which had been reinforced by Franklin's very presence, as well as through his references to our common confrontation with white Gentile Southern bigots.

Franklin and I, in effect, were condoning a benign historical myth: that the shared liberal agenda of twentieth-century Blacks and Jews has a pedigree going back through the entire remembered past. Avodim hayinu! We, the Jews, had also experienced history on the side of the enslaved and always cried out in anguish against the oppression of the enslavers.

For better or worse, it is no longer possible to maintain that this myth has any but the most abstract bearing on the facts of our pre-emancipation relationship with Africans and their New World descendants. Jewish students of Jewish history have known it was untrue and, over several decades, have produced a significant body of scholarship detailing the involvement of our ancestors in the Atlantic slave trade and Pan-American slavery. Until recently, this work remained buried in scholarly journals, read only by other specialists. It had never been synthesized in a publication for a non-scholarly audience. A book of this sort has now appeared, however, written not by Jews but by an anonymous group of African Americans associated with the Reverend Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam.

Prof. Austen is referring to *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews, Vol. 1*, but indicts both Blacks and Jews in a misleading and long-running historical cover-up, which functions to obscure basic truths about the relationship and to paint them over with a sentimentalist propaganda.

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In the realm of Blacks and Jews, as a subset of American or racial history, this is particularly easy given the overload of Jewish writers in the field. Those Black writers who venture into the domain have chosen to self-censor when confronted by Jewish publishers and editors and the hyper-critical eye of their Jewish “colleagues” in academia who police the field with a punitive hand much like the billy-clubbed slave patrols of the plantation South. Even Blacks of eminent stature with unassailable reputations in American academia, like Prof. Franklin, apparently feel bound to cooperate at the expense of truth.

But how were the mythmakers able to concoct a tale of commonality in the face of such obvious and glaring dissimilarities? Most Jewish scholars, as Austen has pointed out, have felt obligated to ignore this historical reality, supplanting it with rank untruths. The well-respected Dr. Hasia Diner, for example, begins her book-length discussion of Blacks and Jews in the more comfortable 1900s, discounting as paltry the numbers of Jews below the Mason/Dixon line and thus perpetuates the secrecy of their encounter there. These are the academic attitudes that support the myth of Jewish invisibility in the American South.

Those who have delved into the subject discern rather quickly why, except for Dr. Bertram W. Korn’s article on the slavery period, there are almost no detailed historical accounts of the Black/Jewish relationship prior to 1930. Upon close inspection, the behavior of Southern Jews at any select period in history is striking for two main reasons; their indistinguishability from White Gentiles in their actions and attitudes toward the Black man, and their unique ability among all Whites to amass extraordinary wealth in this the most racially oppressive region in the world. Both aspects of Southern Jewish experience create insurmountable ethical issues for Jewish scholars who approach all Jewish history with an inflexible image of Jews as historical innocents, biblically purified, and beyond challenge, criticism, or reproach. It is better to ignore or conceal than to confront the troubling moral realities.

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For this reason Jews have taken a proprietary interest in the discourse about Blacks and Jews. Those Blacks publishing outside of this exclusive combine are castigated within it and deemed too “radical” to participate in their delicate and controlled “dialogue.” Blacks who do participate by contributing articles to “roundtables,” or anthologies are often beholden to the Jewish academic or philanthropic power structure or coerced from an unrelated academic specialty to “balance” such collections. They are disproportionately comprised of Jewish opinion, with trace amounts of submissive and agreeable negro testimony, with no Black input at all.

The refusal of the Jewish academic overlords to address the work of Black scholars like Profs. Tony Martin, Leonard Barrett, Harold Cruse, Leonard Jeffries, Legrand Clegg, Yosef A.A. ben Jochannan, Charshee McIntyre, John Henrik Clarke, Ashahed Muhammad, or to include their insights in this alleged discussion, has led to the prevalence of clear biases and distortions in the field. The representative works are filled with unilateral assumptions, unwarranted generalizations that cloud the reality of cooperation and conflict, and all leading to a warped canon filled with fanciful one-sided conclusions unsupported by the historical record.

Almost every Jewish act affecting Blacks with obvious Jewish self-interest is quickly redefined as emanating from Jewish largesse, sympathy, or moral consciousness. By this interpretive method, the setting up of Jewish shops in Black neighborhoods becomes an act of integration and solidarity, rather than a wealth accumulation strategy or an aggressive business tactic, the effect of which on the Black community goes ignored. The credit and loan

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schemes of these merchants become economic “courtesies” and the hiring of Blacks as clerks—a known tactic to secure the trade of other Blacks—is recast as affirmative action, no matter how Blacks themselves view these actions. The accompanying Jewish philosophizing is most often in this vain by Dr. Mark K. Bauman: These kinds of practices, he says,

reflected a sense of association brought about by similar historical experiences of persecution. *Although* the Jews were in a better position to become upwardly mobile, Jewish immigrants and African Americans shared poverty and resided in the same neighborhood during the early twentieth century. At the same time, more-affluent Jews employed African Americans as domestic servants. The empathetic/patronizing nature of such relationships was dramatized in Roy Hoffman's novel *Almost Family* (1983) and Alfred Uhry's play *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987).

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Whereas Bauman had to rely on works of Jewish fiction to support his pollyannish psychoanalysis. Those consulting the actual historical record would necessarily have come to interpretations much closer to reality. The lack of racial honesty that permeates the study of Blacks and Jews in the South skews the character of the available works. Jewish historians are often protecting a cherished image or concocting a self-serving folklore rather than propagating legitimate historical analysis.

Carolyn LeMaster, writing of the early Jews in Arkansas in the 1800s, cannot even bring herself to call the Blacks slaves. Robert J. Zietz, writing of the Jews in Mobile, Alabama, doesn't even mention Blacks or slavery at all in his subject era spanning back to 1844. In writing about the practices of Jewish shopkeepers who enforced Southern Jim Crow laws, Leon Harris makes an all too familiar leap into historical fantasy. By way of expiation and offering not a shred of proof, Harris writes, *“But because the Jews' own days as slaves in Egypt and their own mistreatment as a minority for centuries was never far from their thoughts, they frequently dealt less harshly than many other white Southerners with the blacks.”* This is entirely the fantastical hope and belief of the historian projected onto his subject.

Barnett Elzas' work of a century ago, according to one scholar, “exemplifies the drive of earlier Southern Jewish historiography towards romanticism and Southern loyalty.” Indeed, despite the full participation of South Carolina Jews in African slavery, he viewed their history as “one long tale of glorious achievement.”

So negatively regarded are these Jewish histories that they moved scholar Jeffrey Gurok to conclude that *“Filiopietism—devout ‘ancestor worship’—has afflicted the writing of all American communal histories, but nowhere more destructively than in Southern historiography.”* Gurok goes on to suggest how Jews could have been so badly misled by their own writers:

Indeed the state of Southern Jewish scholarship was at one point so bad that one noted historian observed that not one of the pre-1960 studies of antebellum Jewish life ever explored in any real detail the Jewish connection to the slave system. One can only wonder how comprehensive and conceptually sound these works could have been if this most basic institution of the Old South's political, cultural, social and economic life was either glossed over or ignored. It may well be that Southern Jews did not want to know—or to have it known—what their true relationship with other white Southerners and blacks actually was within that race-burdened society.

Much corrosive historical nonsense is injected into the discourse as off-handed remarks in the writing of scholars that reveal their own racism, or in clumsy attempts to downplay racism among their Jewish subjects. Writing in 1962, Fedora Small Frank seems totally detached from Black

humanity when she writes: “*The concern within the state [of Tennessee] was a natural one as one-third of the wealth of the state was the investment on 111 million dollars in 275,000 slaves.*” Frank here acknowledges no moral issue at all in her treatment of Blacks as no more than merchandise. The state’s “investment” evinces more of her concern than do the lives of the Africans, a perspective that could never exist in reference to Jewish suffering within the Nazi regime.

Rabbi Jacob Rader Marcus is considered the “father of American Jewish history.” His many books and articles have earned him countless scholastic honors in Judaica and his impact in the field is inestimable. When he died in 1996 at the age of 99 his personal library was acquired by Brandeis University which considered it “a major resource.” And yet Marcus’ treatment of Blacks in Jewish history is callous, demeaning, and shamefully typical of Jewish scholarship in the field. He wrote of the Jews of Surinam:

The [Jewish] women...were constantly in the company of Negro slaves who taught them bad habits and spoke to them in the Negro-English dialect. Though the Portuguese Jews kept a watchful eye on their daughters and did not expose them to the crude morals and teachings of the family slaves, superstition was rife, and many people had faith only in the folk medicine of the Negro quacks.

Here, as if comment is required, Marcus appears to blame the moral decay of the Jewish community on the very Africans who were kidnapped, bought, bred, taught and trained by these Jews.

A further representation of this can be found in Marcus’ *Memoirs of American Jews*, a chronicle of colonial Jewish writings. In the introduction Marcus parenthetically compares early American anti-Semitism with what he claims is the utter lack of prejudice of Jews: “*Though markedly unsympathetic to certain Christian doctrines, none of the [Jewish] chroniclers in these volumes manifests any prejudice against his non-Jewish neighbors.*” Marcus requires that his readers accept the basic moral premise that the “neighbors” are white, and that the many “non-Jewish” Blacks around them are to be seen in a sub-human and un-neighborly way. He is wholly indifferent to the fact that some of the Jewish “chroniclers” he profiles in his book were exploiting Black Africans as slaves, even as they chronicled, and were exhibiting the ultimate prejudice.

Though Black Africans were held in Surinam as slaves under the most horrifying conditions, when some revolted, Marcus reckons the Jewish slaveholders to be victims. He complained that, “The whites felt they were being persecuted by their own slaves!” After a Gentile-enslaved African was said to utter a Jewish “slur,” Marcus—again targeting Blacks—asserted that “*anti-Jewish prejudice was not absent on Saint Dominique even among the Negroes.*”

This is how Marcus describes the “indefatigable industry” of Levi Sheftall:

In order to acquire capital, he saved every cent he made, never spending a shilling on himself except for the barest necessities, literally working day and night, and reducing his sleep to an absolute minimum. In the first year of his partnership he saved £150, working with a slave – and like a slave. By the early 1760’s Levi owned a house, a lot, and six or eight Negroes, and could boast that in a period of six years he



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penny never spent a penny on himself and had not tasted his first drink till he was twenty. ...He continued in the butcher business, opened a tanyard, acquired a wharf, a plantation, and forty-four slaves – all this in four years.

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Whereas Blacks must see Sheftall's continual acquisition of slaves as an example of rank immorality, Dr. Marcus presents it as proof of Sheftall's and thus the Jews' laudable drive to succeed in the New World. Similarly, Jewish historian Anita Libman Lebeson calculates the integrity of a Virginia Jew thus: *"In 1817 Sam owned three slaves, two sheets, one clock, one gold watch and one piano. He was a man of substance. The 'best' people in Richmond were his friends."* Here, the three adjacent, unedited sentences tell as much about Jewish author Lebeson as they do about Jewish slaveholder Sam.

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We are told by the Museum for the Southern Jewish Experience that Samuel Levy, who served as Shreveport, Louisiana mayor in 1873, "guided its citizens through...unscrupulous carpetbaggers," showing a clear bias—in 2001!—for the Confederacy! Blacks would have seen the so-called carpetbaggers more as saviors than as ruthless, but Jews, 128 years apart, saw them as threats to white/Jewish Southern solidarity.

No Black man would describe 19th century South Carolina in the terms used in the book *One Hundred Years: Accomplishments of Southern Jewry*, as having *"friendly conditions, a tolerant atmosphere and a slight degree of rooted security."* The author reports that the state's Jews, having been *"put forth dazzling blossoms and magnificent fruits [in] the compassionate soil of America."*

This myopic Jewish racism is demonstrated by Leonard Dinnerstein when he refers to *"an incident concerning the sale of a slave girl to a Jewish woman in 1859 reveals the prevalent Judaeophobic attitudes."* He continues with his example of "anti-Semitism":

On the day the slave was to be sent to her new mistress she disappeared. After a long search, her master *found* the child hiding under a bed. When queried about her actions, the girl pleaded that she did not want to be sold to a Jew. 'I don't want to go to live with Miss Isaacs,' the youngster explained. 'Miss Isaacs is a Jew; and if the Jews kill the Lord and Master, what won't they do to a poor little nigger like me?'"

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In Dinnerstein's example he presents Jewish slaveholding as the natural, accepted order, an insignificant side issue on his way to "proving" the Black crime of "Judaeophobia." The Jewish enslaver is described as in the noble terms "mistress" and "master," whilst the Black victim of this racism gets to be a "slave" and a "nigger"—and, of course, an "anti-Semite." She is twice the victim of Jewish intolerance at the hands of a Jewish enslaver and then as a prop in Dinnerstein's strange ethical argument.

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Vamberto Morais' *A Short History of Anti-Semitism* ([1976], p. 149) is actually discussing how Jews were expelled from Brazil:

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In 1655 Benjamin da Costa, another refugee from Pernambuco, settled in Martinique (then occupied by the Dutch) and with a few other Jews and Negro slaves started sugar plantations on a large scale. As West Indian sugar came to be a strong competitor to that of Brazil, *this is another good example of the economic consequences of intolerance.*

The "Negro slaves" in his example are purely an inhuman prop in this Jewish enterprise. Morais sees no irony or contradiction in his position, or the fact that Jewish presence in these new areas is DIRECTLY related to the growth of the African slave trade.



Thus, Jewish writers have largely approached the Black presence in the Jewish American experience in several ways—either they have ignored it, misinterpreted it, apologized for it—or when confronted by it, they get very angry.

In a nutshell, these distinctly different views of the same data are irreconcilable, and are the source of Black rejection of the field’s racist standards. The deviously routine misinterpretation of the history of Blacks and Jews is at its root a misguided attempt to assure that any researcher’s finished product corresponds with the Jewish public self-image as the holy People of the Book, heroic fighters for justice against the forces of evil, suffering—forever suffering—for their sacred Old Testament birthright. The greatest threat to this flawed Jewish narrative has always been that wildcard discipline known as the Black/Jewish relationship, which has now drawn the aggressive attention of more Black scholars than ever, and who believe that fighting for the holy birthright of their people is just as important.

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