

Old Billy

Jews who are ascetics and Jews who are Negroes — these are surely the most uncommon of Jews. And yet, according to the selections reprinted below from San Francisco's Weekly Gleaner, both types of rarity were combined in the person of "Old Billy," an ascetic Negro Jew who lived in ante-bellum Charleston, South Carolina.

German-born Dr. Julius Eckman, the "Editor and Proprietor" of The Weekly Gleaner, was himself something of a rarity. After officiating in a number of Southern congregations, he came to San Francisco in 1854 as Temple Emanu-El's first rabbi, founded a religious school and a newspaper, and in 1860 went off on a "missionary" venture to China to help restore the old Jewish congregation at K'ai-Fung-Foo in Hunan Province.

"A JEWISH RECHABITE"

In connection with the preceding [an article, copied from *The Asmonean*, on Jewish Negroes in Africa], it may not be devoid of interest to mention that there existed some four years ago in Charleston, S. C., a Jewish Negro. He was then about seventy years of age, and gained his livelihood by carrying newspapers.

We saw him attend Synagogue on the Day of Atonement for some hours with an exemplary devotion — he appeared to be deeply impressed, and wrapt in thought.

One day, it was during the glowing heat of an inter-tropical mid-day, he was observed walking on the burning pavement bare-foot. A gentleman approached him, and humanely invited him to call at his house, where he would supply him with shoes and apparel. The old man gratefully received the offer but in very polite language declined accepting it, stating that the Jews of Charleston had on other occasions offered him substantial aid, which he likewise had declined; that he never would accept charity while he was able to work; that he lived in quite easy circumstances, and that his humble appearance was the mere result of choice and habit. He however

begged for some religious books by means of which he might learn more of his religion, of the principles of which he had but vague ideas.

In relation to his origin he stated that his father had told him that he belonged to the Rechabites, still existing as a separate tribe in Africa; that his father, in accordance with the principles of that portion of our brethren found in the prophet Jeremiah, Chapter 35, had never tasted any wine or other spiritous liquors in his life.

[*The Weekly Gleaner* (San Francisco), January 16, 1857.]

“DEATH OF A WORTHY MAN”

The readers of the *Gleaner* will remember the account given in our first number, of a Rechabite living at Charleston, S. C. We see from a recent item in the [*Evening*] *Telegram* [of San Francisco] that this honest man has at last gone home.

We read:

“Old Billy,” who has carried the [*Charleston Daily*] *Courier* since its existence, has died at Charleston, S. C. He always wrote his own addresses, which made up in honesty what they lacked in poetry, and for years has been a faithful attendant at the Jewish Synagogue on the Day of Atonement, making his appearance on those occasions in a ruffled shirt.

As a number of our readers may not remember the facts, we will briefly mention them.

There lived in Charleston a very old Negro man, who professed Judaism, terming himself a Rechabite. He, in his earlier days, attended Synagogue every Yom Kippur. Of late years he attended quite regularly, and the managers of the Hazel street Synagogue very commendably honored the old man with one of the most respectable front seats.

The old man was a slave; he carried the *Courier* for a series of years, and must have been about 75 years of age at his death.

Meeting him one day in his rounds, walking beneath a very hot mid-day sun, we stopped him, and entered into conversation with him; we asked him whether anything could be done for him to alleviate his labor, he being so old. The honest man replied that he lived quite happy; that the Hebrews had repeatedly offered him

their assistance; but he invariably declined accepting their kind offer; that he would never accept alms as long as he was able to work. He asked us for some books relative to our religion, which we promised him on calling at our house, but he never called.

Honest Billy assured us that he belonged to the ancient tribe of the Rechabites (see Jeremiah); that his father never in his life had tasted any intoxicating drink. A mission to that tribe in Africa might be able to furnish us with some interesting items. Perhaps this may call Mr. Benjamin's attention to the subject.*

Old Billy was a rare instance of honesty; he was universally respected by his co-religionists, and by those in whose employ he labored. He assuredly was more worthy to be a master than thousands whom blind fortune has favored; and we are glad that the death of the old slave was reported with encomiums in the newspaper, while that of many masters is passed over in silence. — [Copied from *The Weekly Gleaner*.

[*Jewish Chronicle* (London), May 11, 1860.]

* Israel Joseph Benjamin — who called himself Benjamin II, an allusion to the famous medieval traveler, Benjamin of Tudela — travelled extensively in America between 1859 and 1862. In 1956 The Jewish Publication Society published an English translation of his *Three Years in America*.

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