
The Origins of Black Anti-Semitism in America

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The intense hostility of many Blacks toward Jews has surfaced in the United States periodically since the 1930's. Some of the resentments expressed by Blacks had enough real bases in fact to warrant the protests. But these outbursts of anger erupted in so wide a variety of different and changing contexts that other factors besides those articulated may have sparked the numerous attacks. This seems especially true since Blacks and Jews rarely had much daily contact with one another until they met in the urban enclaves of the North in the 1920's. Yet Black churches, newspapers, and folklore reflected ambivalent feelings about Jews long before these encounters. This paper will explore some of the early expressions of Black animosity toward Jews and show how later eruptions of anti-Semitism were built upon a layer of previously enunciated prejudices. In the paper I shall only highlight the specific attitudes that developed before Blacks and Jews began to interact on a regular basis.

Briefly, my thesis is that many Blacks display anti-Semitic tendencies because (1) they have absorbed a white Protestant fundamentalist culture which sees Jews not only as killers of the Savior but as a people who have never accepted the truth of Christian teachings, and (2) they have imbibed European-American folklore about the cunning and exploitative Jew whose ruthlessly amassed fortune is used to acquire political and economic control of society. There is more mythology than substance in these beliefs, but that does not lessen their impact. These stereotypes have existed among Blacks since their socialization into American culture. Indeed, they were firmly implanted before most Blacks had ever seen a Jew—absorbed and perpetuated in an ethnic folk culture independent of any personal experience.¹ As Richard Wright wrote about his youth in Arkansas and Tennessee before World War II: "All of us black people who lived in the neighborhood hated Jews, not because they exploited us but because we had been taught at home and in Sunday school that Jews were 'Christ killers.' "

“To hold an attitude of antagonism or distrust toward Jews,” he continued, “was bred in us from childhood; it was not merely racial prejudice, it was part of our cultural heritage.”²

The Jew as Christ-Killer

Well back into American history Blacks were exposed to the teachings of Protestant fundamentalist ministers and an absorbing American (and European) concern with wealthy and exploitative Jews.³ Black slaves knew the stories of the Old Testament concerning Moses, Joshua, Daniel, and other biblical heroes. They identified with the Children of Israel whom Moses led out of slavery and into freedom. But they also believed that the Jew had killed their Savior and rejected his teachings and was thus an outcast in Christian society.⁴ Blacks sang spirituals with lines like “The Jews killed poor Jesus,” “Were you there when the Jews crucified my Lord,” and “De Jews done killed poor Jesus.”⁵ Black jingles and folk ditties also included rhymes like

Virgin Mary had one son
The cruel Jews had him hung⁶

and

Bloody Christ Killer
Never Trust a Jew
Bloody Christ Killer
What won't a Jew do?⁷

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the references to Jews as Christ-killers kept cropping up among Blacks in a wide variety of circumstances. In 1859 a female slave disappeared on the day she was to be transferred to a new owner. When found and asked why she did not want to go to her new mistress the following dialogue ensued:

“I don't want to go to live with Miss Isaacs.”
“Why don't you want to live with her? She is a good lady and will make you a kind mistress, and besides, you won't have any hard work to do.”
“Ah! But Mass F . . ., they tell me Miss Isaacs is a Jew; an' if the Jews kill the Lord and Master, what won't they do to a poor little nigger like me!”⁸

In the twentieth century, educator Horace Mann Bond recalled responding to a twelve-year-old Jewish boy who taunted him by shouting, "Nigger, Nigger, Nigger, Nigger," with the expression "You Christ killer!" Bond at first claimed that he had no idea why that phrase came into his mouth, but after reflection he conceded that he had grown up in a house where the family prayed before each meal, read Scripture every morning and evening, attended daily chapel and three services on Sundays. "Of course," he added, "the thought that Christ had been killed and by the Jews, and that this little boy was such a one, may have had a more ancient basis in my twelve-year-old mind than I can now bring myself to admit."⁹ James Baldwin, on the other hand, quite candidly acknowledged that

the traditional Christian accusation that the Jews killed Christ is neither questioned nor doubted, the term "Jew" actually operates in this initial context to include all infidels of white skin who had failed to accept the Savior. No real distinction is made: the preacher begins by accusing the Jews of having refused the light and proceeds from there to a catalog of their subsequent sins and the sufferings visited on them by a wrathful God.¹⁰

And when Hortense Powdermaker did her study of people in Bible Belt communities, two sociologists, Charles Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier, cautioned her not to reveal her Jewish background because the people she would be dealing with, Blacks and whites, still regarded the Jew as "Christ-killer."¹¹

The Jew as Economic Exploiter

Secular stereotypes of the Jew reinforced prejudices already derived from religious teachings. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Black newspapers often featured stories of Jews as pecuniary predators. The *New Orleans Louisianan* wrote, in 1879, that the Jews lent money at usurious rates to nobles and warriors in England after 1066 and thereby acquired great wealth.¹² The *Indianapolis Freeman* informed readers in 1895 about the "immense wealth" of the Jews, who "are today a power in the money market."¹³ The *Washington Bee*, just a few years later, opined that "the time is fast coming when the Jews will be the financial rulers of the world."¹⁴ A writer for the *Colored American*, in 1903, stated: "in an incredibly

short time after the arrival of a Jew in any community he has nearly every family in his debt or under obligation to him.”¹⁵ In 1905 Jessie Fortune, writing about the immigrant Jews on New York City’s Lower East Side, used phrases like “Jews will make money,” “few of them are really destitute,” and the Jew’s “sole aim seems to be earning money.”¹⁶ Then in another *New York Age* article, a few weeks later, the Jewish “race” is described as

tribalistic rather than national in character, and parasitical and predatory rather than conservatory and constructive in tendencies—preying upon and devouring the substance of others, rather than creating and devouring the substance of itself.

As a salesman, as a money-lender, the disposition of the Jew is to take the long end and let the other man take and hold the short end of every proposition . . . as a money-lender holds the purse strings of the world and exacts his own terms of those, whether states or individuals, who need and must have money to finance their necessities.¹⁷

Although their leaders and journals often criticized Jews these same sources nevertheless frequently told blacks to emulate them. “If Blacks were to be accepted,” a Black attorney declared in 1900, “they had to become like the ‘despised Jew, the representative of business and money.’ ”¹⁸ A *New York Age* editorial in 1905 acknowledged that

Prejudice against Jews is almost as general and persistent as it is against the Afro-American people; but it is displayed less, because the Jews are among the wealthy people of the country and know how to advance themselves by properly directing their wealth against those who offend them.¹⁹

James Weldon Johnson, one of the early leaders of the NAACP, also wrote of “the two million Jews” who had a “controlling interest in the finances of the nation,”²⁰ and he urged fellow Blacks to “draw encouragement and hope from the experiences of modern Jews.”²¹ Echoing this sentiment in 1927, that Blacks should emulate the Jews in standing together and making money, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* also noted that “in many ways [the Jew] sympathizes with and helps us. He gets his pound of flesh for doing it.”²² That this theme of Jewish wealth, and what it could purchase, persisted throughout the twentieth century was attested to by Martin Luther King, Jr., when he wrote, shortly before his death in 1968, “Negroes nurture a persisting myth that the Jews of America attained social mobility and status solely because they had money.”²³

Jews in Black Folklore

Folklore is another area in which cultural mores expressed black ambivalence toward Jews. "The persistence of folkloristic expressions of hostility and prejudice that have their origins in social conditions much different from those that presently prevail," folklorist Nathan Hurvitz suggested a little more than a decade ago, "indicates that they serve a purpose in our society. This purpose is to maintain and create cleavages between groups." And in the case of black folklore, that point is certainly true.

There are several humorous tales about a "Colored Man, a Jew, and a White Man" in which the Jew is distinguished from other Caucasians.²⁴ The main thrust of almost all of these jokes is the compulsive Jewish concern for wealth. There are many variations of Black folk humor concerning Jews exchanging checks for cash in the coffins of deceased friends. One frequently told southern tale instructed other Blacks in how to distinguish a "cracker" from a "Jew." "Some white people is crackers and some is all mean and stingy," the narrator relates to his listener. "If one of dem is more stingy than he is mean, he's a Jew; and if he's more mean than stingy, he's a cracker."²⁵ A tale from Brooklyn, New York, in the 1930's also reflects Black impressions of Jews. Richard Dorson, the folklorist, included it in one of his collections. It read:

The local Christian church had burned down and the Jewish Congregation in the neighborhood, very interested in furthering relations between the groups, agreed to let them use their synagogue for their Sunday prayers. And so they had their service in there. And as they were walking out, the two Negroes were walking by after this service and they looked down to see these people coming out of this synagogue. And the one says to the other, "You know, dat dere's the poorest bunch of Jews I ever did see."²⁶

Booker T. Washington

Respected Black leaders like Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois also helped perpetuate myths about Jews, thus reinforcing the prejudices already absorbed from folktales, newspapers, and religious teachings. Washington, who shared the conventional views of his

southern contemporaries,²⁷ began his career, as his biographer Louis Harlan charitably put it, “full of misunderstandings about Jews.”²⁸ And as late as the 1890’s a friend cautioned him to keep his little prejudices about the Jews out of his speeches.²⁹ Washington seems to have thought of Jews as exploitative shopkeepers and usurious creditors,³⁰ and from time to time differentiated the Jew and the white man.³¹ It was not politic, however, to continue denigrating Jews, even mildly, since wealthy Jews could be tapped to help finance Tuskegee; or, as Harlan put it, “in this effort to secure donations to his school it was in his interest to drop his prejudice.”³² And publicly he did so. Many of his twentieth-century writings, in fact, praise the Jews.³³ But in private, at least on one occasion, he seemed to be quite definite about where and how Tuskegee’s institutional funds should be spent. In a 1904 note to his business manager, Washington wrote:

I very much fear that we are getting our trade too much centered in the hands of a few Jews. Whenever we can get equally fair treatment in prices and quality of goods from persons other than Jews, I prefer to have our trade scattered among them. In creating public sentiment in favor of the institution the Jews cannot be of much service.

Yet “where all things are equal with our giving trade to Jews,” Washington continued, he advised doing business with J. Loeb of Montgomery, Alabama, who “stood by us” when everyone else refused to serve Tuskegee Institute.³⁴

W. E. B. DuBois

W. E. B. DuBois also displayed an ignorance of and hostility toward Jews which he would, in later years, repudiate. While on an ocean liner crossing the Atlantic in 1895, DuBois confided to his diary that although he had met two congenial Jews, the others of their ilk had “in them all that slyness, that lack of straight-forward openheartedness that goes straight against me.”³⁵ In his major work, *Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, he wrote definitively of things he had not seen, as if he had, and excoriated Jews, Yankees, and poor whites, but

not “Southern Gentlemen.”³⁶ (Then, as later, Blacks were particularly careful about how they characterized leaders of the white Protestant community.) Several of his fallacious comments about Jews were corrected in a 1953 edition of this classic work, but for half a century DuBois let stand observations like:

I have seen, in the Black Belt of Georgia, an ignorant honest Negro buy and pay for a farm in installments three separate times, and then in the face of law and decency the enterprising Russian Jew who sold it to him pocketed the money and deed and left the black man landless, to labor on his own land at thirty cents a day.³⁷

and:

The rod of empire that passed from the hands of Southern gentlemen in 1865 . . . has never returned to them. Rather it has passed to those men who have come to take charge of the industrial exploitation of the New South—the sons of poor whites fired with a new thirst for wealth and power, thrifty and avaricious Yankees, shrewd and unscrupulous Jews. Into the hands of these men the Southern laborers, white and black, have fallen, and this to their sorrow.³⁸

DuBois also wrote of the “defense of deception and flattery, of cajoling and lying . . . which the Jews of the Middle Ages used and which left its stamp on their character for centuries.”³⁹

Jewish leaders Jacob Schiff and Stephen Wise protested these prejudicial references to Jews and vainly tried to get DuBois to change them. “I . . . continued to let the words stand as I had written them,” DuBois wrote in 1953, “and did not realize until the horrible massacre of German Jews, how even unconscious repetition of current folklore such as the concept of Jews as more guilty of exploitation than others, had helped the Hitlers of the World.”⁴⁰ At that point he not only changed phrases like “the Jew is the heir of the slave-baron” to “immigrants are the heirs . . .,” “enterprising Jew” to “enterprising American,” and “Jews of the Middle Age” to “peasants of the Middle Age,”⁴¹ but he candidly admitted as well:

I am not at all sure that the foreign exploiters to whom I referred in my study of the Black Belt, were in fact Jews. I took the word of my informants, and I am now wondering if in fact Russian Jews in any numbers were in Georgia at the time.⁴²

Conclusion

The persistence of these myths about Jews in the Black culture laid a firm foundation, long before Jews and Blacks would come into almost daily contact, for a strongly negative impression. Jews were perceived as a despised people who had killed Christ and rejected the truthfulness of his teachings, as a money-grubbing exploitative people, and as a group apart from white society. No matter what experiences Jews and Blacks would later have with each other as landlord/tenant, merchant/consumer, student/teacher, welfare worker/welfare recipient, or civil rights leader and advocate, a deep suspicion on the part of Blacks permeated their relationship. James Baldwin, the novelist, wrote in 1948 that he remembered "meeting no Negro in the years of my growing up, in my family or out of it, who would really ever trust a Jew, and few who did not, indeed, exhibit for them the blackest contempt."⁴³

It is therefore somewhat ahistorical to explain later conflicts with and resentments toward Jews on the basis of current events. The heritage of suspicion and distrust made Blacks particularly alert to any real or suspected act of treachery on the part of Jews with whom they came in contact. In fact, the term "Jew" became an epithet used against many white people they hated regardless of that individual's religious background.⁴⁴ But, to quote James Baldwin once again, it is important to acknowledge that "the root of anti-Semitism among Negroes is . . . the relationship of colored people . . . to the Christian world," and that their condition in this country will not be ameliorated by adopting "the most devastating of the Christian vices."⁴⁵

Notes

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1. Abraham G. Duker, "On Negro-Jewish Relations—A Contribution to a Discussion," *Jewish Social Studies* 27 (January 1965): 23; Lunabelle Wedlock, *The Reaction of Negro Publications and Organizations to German Anti-Semitism* (Washington, D.C., 1942), p. 116.

2. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1945); quoted from Perennial Classic edition (1982), p. 70.

3. Clifton F. Brown, "Black Religion—1968," in Patricia W. Romero, ed., *In Black America: 1968, The Year of Awakening* (Washington, D.C.: United Publishing Corp., 1969), p. 351.
4. Joseph P. Weinberg, "Black-Jewish Tensions: Their Genesis," *CCAR Journal* 21 (Spring 1974): 33.
5. Arnold Shankman, *Ambivalent Friends: Afro-Americans View the Immigrant* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 134; Weinberg, "Black-Jewish Tensions," p. 134.
6. Robert G. Weisbord and Arthur Stein, *Bittersweet Encounter: The Afro-American and the American Jew* (Westport, Conn.: Negro Universities Press, 1970), p. 71, n. 15; see also Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Negro Spirituals," *Atlantic Monthly* 19 (1867): 688.
7. Wright, *Black Boy*, p. 70.
8. *Harper's Magazine* 19 (1859): 859–860.
9. Horace Mann Bond, "Negro Attitudes Toward Jews," *Jewish Social Studies* 27 (January 1965): 3–4.
10. James Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto: 1948," *Commentary*, February 1948, p. 168.
11. Shankman, *Ambivalent Friends*, pp. 34–35.
12. "Letter from Washington, D.C.," *Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), October 4, 1879, p. 1.
13. "The Pursuit of Business," *Freeman* (Indianapolis), December 21, 1895, p. 1.
14. Editorial, "Persecution of the Jews," *Washington Bee*, August 18, 1899.
15. "Charity Begins at Home," *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), June 10, 1903, p. 8.
16. Jesse Fortune, "Among the Children of the East Side Jews," *New York Age*, January 15, 1905, p. 2.
17. "Why the Jew Prevails Everywhere," *New York Age*, February 8, 1905, p. 4. See also David J. Hellwig, "Black Images of Jews: From Reconstruction to Depression," *Societas* 8 (Summer 1978): 216.
18. Hellwig, "Black Images of Jews," p. 207; see also Steven Bloom, "Interactions Between Blacks and Jews in New York City, 1900–1930, as Reflected in the Black Press" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1973), p. 303.
19. Hellwig, "Black Images of Jews," p. 208; Bloom, "Interactions Between Blacks and Jews," p. 94.
20. *Ibid.*
21. James Weldon Johnson, "The Negro and the Jew," *New York Age*, February 2, 1918, p. 4.
22. "The Jew Shows Us How in Many Ways," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 22, 1926, p. 14; see also Hellwig, "Black Images of Jews," p. 207; Bloom, "Interactions Between Blacks and Jews," p. 148; Isabel Boiko Price, "Black Responses to Anti-Semitism: Negroes and Jews in New York, 1880 to World War II" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1973), p. 139.
23. Quoted in Seymour S. Weisman, "Black-Jewish Relations in the USA—II," *Patterns of Prejudice* 15 (January 1981): 49.
24. Nathan Hurvitz, "Blacks and Jews in American Folklore," *Western Folklore Quarterly* 33 (October 1974): 324–325; Richard M. Dorson, "Jewish-American Dialect Stories on Tape," in Raphael Patai, ed., *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), p. 116; Richard M. Dorson, ed., *Negro Folktales in Michigan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 75, 76–77; see also Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 275.
25. Quoted in Jack Nusan Porter, "John Henry and Mr. Goldberg: The Relationship Between Blacks and Jews," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 7 (Fall 1980): 138.
26. Richard M. Dorson, "More Jewish Dialect Stories," *Midwest Folklore* 10 (Fall 1960): 138.

27. Louis R. Harlan, "Booker T. Washington's Discovery of Jews," in J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson, eds., *Region, Race, and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 276.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
30. *Ibid.*; Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 260.
31. *Ibid.*; Louis R. Harlan et al., eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, 13 vols. (University of Illinois Press, 1972), vol. 3 (1889-1895), p. 412.
32. Harlan, "Washington's Discovery of Jews," p. 269.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
34. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 8 (1904-1906), p. 97; *idem*, "Washington's Discovery of Jews," pp. 273-274; see also *idem*, *Booker T. Washington*, p. 261.
35. Robert G. Weisbord and Arthur Stein, "Negro Perceptions of Jews Between the World Wars," *Judaism* 18 (1969): 439, fn. 40.
36. W. E. Burghardt DuBois, "The Relation of the Negroes to the Whites in the South," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 18 (1901): 126.
37. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), p. 170.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
40. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Millwood, N. Y.: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1973), pp. 42-43.
41. Herbert Aptheker, "The Souls of Black Folk: A Comparison of the 1903 and 1952 Editions," *Negro History Bulletin* 34 (1971): 16.
42. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1973 ed.), p. 41.
43. Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto, 1948," p. 169.
44. Professor Butler Jones, chairman of the sociology department of Ohio Wesleyan University, observed in 1965 that the stereotypes of Jewish merchants having "sharp" credit practices prevailed in Birmingham and Atlanta in the early 1960's even though most of the merchants in the Black areas of those cities were Southern Europeans of non-Jewish extraction. Tom Littlewood, "Reports of Negro Anti-Semitism Are Surveyed," *Washington Post*, December 25, 1965, p. A5. See also James Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Antiwhite," in Leonard Dinnerstein et al., *Anti-semitism in the United States* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), pp. 126-127.
45. Baldwin, "Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They're Antiwhite," pp. 126-127.

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