Inner city sanctuary: the history and theology of Rochester's Black Jews

Ira Srole
1978

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INNER CITY SANCTUARY:  
THE HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF  
ROCHESTER'S BLACK JEWS  

by  
Ira Srole  

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS  

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM  
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ROCHESTER, NEW YORK  

October, 1978  

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INNER CITY SANCTUARY:
THE HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF
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by Ira Srole

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Master of Fine Arts Degree
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School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
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October, 1978

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Affectionately dedicated to
the members of Tabernacle # 15,
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Rochester, New York,
Rev. Joseph S. Jeffries,
Overseer.
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INNER CITY SANCTUARY: 
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Foreword

"Our church adheres to the Jewish religion and the seventh day Sabbath. As you revert back through the Old Testament and Biblical history, most people back there, they were Jews. This black race, it was Jewish. The foundation was Jewish.

In the creation, God created man from the earth, and that earth was not white. And Adam was not a white man. Now we come on down, from generation to generation, see, and various portions of the Scriptures that we go by will tell us this.

Now, they says Jesus is a son of God. Spiritually, yes. But he was a prophet, sure. Anyone that brings down the word of God to the people, he's a prophet. There are plenty of prophets. But he was one sent from God.

And comin' on down. Moses and Elijah and all. What does the Bible say? They were black and comely. Means good lookin', see?"¹

1. Introduction

My interest in this area began two years ago upon reading an article in the June 15, 1976 edition of the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle entitled "Black congregation holds to Jewish faith." As I read it, I realized that I had found the subject for my master's thesis, or rather, it had found me. It overtook me with complete self-evidence. Photographer Paul Caponigro has referred to this phenomenon as one of being "taken in," a condition in which one's cautious impulses are overridden by the strength of the subject itself. One comes dangerously close to a state of total gullibility.

Prior to this time, I had conceived of the generalized thesis as a strictly photographic endeavor. I was, after all, in an MFA photography program, where the emphasis was decidedly upon the visual. And surely the photographic potential of a black-Jewish congregation was great. Yet I sensed that photographs alone would not be enough to fully convey my interest in this group and its origins.

For one thing, apart from the brief overview contained in the newspaper article, I knew absolutely nothing about the organization. It was obvious that if I wanted to do more than a superficial job of photographing them, I would have to familiarize myself with the people and their observances. Questions arose immediately, some specific, some general, but the main ones were, "Who are they and what do they believe?" The combination of black and Jewish is one which seems at first to be incongruous. There is something
in our culture at large which makes it difficult to appreciate such a mixture. This fact certainly played a part in my own initial attraction to the group.

Perhaps another factor, and one more difficult to analyze, was a desire to know more about myself. My own heritage is Jewish, but I never gave it much thought. I had never realized, in the sense of making real, the personal meaning of my own background. Here was a chance to enter my own house through the "black door," as a family friend has perceptively noted. I decided that if I was going to do justice to the group and to myself, I would have to learn about the organization and the beliefs of its members. If the thesis represented a "crisis" in its broadest definitions, then I was determined that it be a period of opportunity as well as of trial. Thus was this paper conceived.

I first met the congregation on January 15, 1977. A few days before that, I had gotten a call from the Landmark Society. They wanted me to photograph the group's choir, known as the Rochester Acappella Chorus. This was indeed a break for me. In the seven months between June and January I had accomplished little beyond making a few phone calls to various organizations, attempting to get "background information" on the group, as an exercise of simple evasion.

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1. crisis: a) an emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person's life; b) the decisive moment; c) an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs. Web- ster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1965), p.197.
In my thesis notebook, I made the following entry:

"I went to the temple, meeting Nancy (O'Neill of the Landmark Society) there at 6 p.m. Members of the chorus were there, putting on their robes. I met Freddie Jeffries, director of the chorus, Hazel Jeffries the charismatic and attractive 'queen bee' of the congregation, and David Hurt, soloist in the chorus and amateur photographer. I set up two quartz lights and photographed the chorus in the basement, where they sang lined up against a plain wall with a clock at one side. I shot two rolls and then requested that we move upstairs into the sanctuary, magnificent in its decayed splendor. I used two lights, one reflected from a white umbrella, and shot four or five rolls from the main floor and from the balcony.

"The session must have lasted until 9:30 or 10. It had gone very well. The members of the chorus lost much of their camera-consciousness, especially when I was up on the balcony. I got some shots including some young kids who were sitting on the side and running up on the platform, being gently scolded by their mother. The chorus sounded strong and devoted. As I left, I kept hearing their last song over and over: 'Unity, we must have unity....'" ¹

Following my introduction to the chorus, I began to think more seriously about doing some research into the group's origins. I contacted the Local History Division of

the Rochester Public Library, and spoke with the director of the St. John Fisher College library, which is where the Frederick Douglass papers are kept. I also spoke with a member of the staff of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Room of the University of Rochester library. Rabbi Judea Miller of Temple B'rith Kodesh was helpful in getting my research underway. About the same time, I asked Dr. Paul Bernstein, a historian and Dean of Graduate Studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology, to be on my thesis board, along with Professors Owen Butler and Charles Werberig of R.I.T.'s School of Photographic Arts and Sciences.

At our first meeting, Dr. Bernstein suggested that I ascertain the key dates in the organization's history, and then go directly to the primary sources. We agreed that I work out a tentative outline and fill in the key events from the written and oral records.

It was obvious that a tape recorder would be a necessity in carrying out my research. I found the prospect of recording my conversations with members of the church to be exciting. I had experimented with tape recorded "situation dialogues" with my friends during high school and college. More recently, I have become an admirer of National Public Radio's approach to informal interviewing. Here was an opportunity to talk with some of the members and to create a forum for them to provide me with information unobtainable elsewhere.

The importance of the last point became increasingly
obvious as I tried to find information in the library. The amount of published material on the organization is slight to the point of non-existence. One of the more extensive references that I found during the early stages of my research was in *Black Sects and Cults*,¹ which devotes one paragraph to naming the founder and mentioning some beliefs and observances. Most of the other references, and they have been few, merely identify the group as black Jews. Occasionally their authenticity as Jews is called into question.

This is an issue which often arises when I talk about the group. White Jews in particular will bring it up. Let me state at the outset that I am not interested in certifying this group as either Jewish or non-Jewish. I am willing to accept their own self-definition as "adherents to the Jewish religion," which is a term they favor over "Jews." The latter term seems to be inextricably bound to white Jews, and particularly to the descendants of Eastern European Jews now living in the West. I think it accurate to assert that this organization has its own interpretation of what it means to adhere to Judaism, an interpretation which is plainly not the same as that of white Jews. They are essentially a minority within a minority, whether the larger minority group is the community of blacks or the community of Jews. As such, they have particular needs which are met by their own organization. Their degree of conformity to

the norms of the larger communities does not especially matter to them. I raised this very question when I spoke with Hazel Jeffries in her office at the Jordan Health Center:

"I don't know whether this question is relevant, but during those years, do you think the group has moved closer to mainstream Judaism, to white Judaism?

"I don't think that we will. I really don't think so. We're not going to do things the way the majority religion, in this instance being the Jews, would probably do things, and I think that this might cause some controversy as to whether or not we are. There are some things that we will not do, because of our own heritage and our own background. Just like any other ethnic group, I guess. You remember when some Catholics got upset that they weren't doing masses in Latin. There are changes, there'll be some more changes, but they will be particular just to us."¹

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II. Current Theology

Before I began my discussion of the theology of the Church of God Temple Beth El (formerly the Church of God and Saints of Christ), I would like to indicate "where I'm coming from." As I stated, I am Jewish, and attended Hebrew school for several years prior to my Bar Mitzvah in 1962. That training was geared toward encouraging participation in the traditional Hebrew services common to middle class white Jewry in this country. Little attempt was made to translate the Hebrew text, let alone to encourage its understanding or analysis by the student. In the intervening years, I have not taken it upon myself to read the Bible or the commentary upon it. Thus, my own knowledge of the Bible is very sketchy, based more on cultural osmosis than on direct contact. Needless to say, my interest in the Bible has been aroused as a result of the present study, and I intend to fill this gap in my education as soon as possible.

To quote from the church's Doctrinal Synopsis:

We believe that Divine revelation is superior to documentary hypothesis and that the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) which was divinely revealed, is the standard of conduct for mankind; we further believe, according to the Scriptures, that we are built upon the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles of the Jewish tradition. We have our roots deeply planted in the soil of Prophetic Judaism... Essentially, however, we are all adherents of Judaism--a peoplehood and not a race--and a way of life.

We believe in the Shema,¹ in unity, in the

¹. Judaism's single most important prayer: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." (ed.).
spirituality, in the eternity, in the oneness, in the uniqueness and in the sameness of God. He is Superior and Incomparable, Known and Unknown, Transcendant and Immanent, Creator and Redeemer; and all worship and adoration belong to Him.

To obtain the highest form of morality, we fashion our lives according to the precepts of the Torah as formulated in the Halakha, oral and written law; but, to receive the highest quality of inspiration, aspiration, and comfort, we plant our roots in the soil of Prophetic Judaism, which seeks to follow the living insight into the spiritual ideal out to its fullest implication.1

The group traces its theological lineage back to Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. The members believe that Abraham was a black man. Abraham's original name was Abram, which means "the exalted father." God added the name Ham (Black), creating a new name which is interpreted as meaning "the exalted father of blacks," referring to "the specific group of people that God had chosen to represent His will, His theology, to the world."2 In accordance with this, the membership sees Judaism, from its very beginning, as the religion of black people.

Biblical references to Egypt and Ethiopia, both in Africa, imply the involvement of black people in the history of antiquity. Many passages in the Bible are understood to indicate the blackness of the ancient Israelites. Following is a summary of these passages and where they can be found


in the Bible:

"Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." (Psalms 63).

Moses was born in Africa, and married an Ethiopian woman. (Numbers 12:1).

When Moses was summoned by God, he asked for a sign. God told him to put his hand in his bosom. When Moses took it out, it was "white as snow," and when he put it back it turned back to his other flesh. "At the impact of seeing his hand become white, that was enough of a sign for Moses, because he was the chosen one. Prior to that time, Moses never believed that a deliverer could bring the children of Israel out of Egypt, from the taskmaster's hands."¹ (Exodus 4:6-7).

Solomon said, "I am black but comely." (Song of Solomon 1:5).

David said, "I am black as a bottle in smoke." (Psalms 119:83). Jesus, as a descendant of Abraham and David, is also black. (Matthew 1:6).

Jeremiah said, "Our skin is black as ovens." (Lamentations 5:10).

Job said, "My skin is black upon me." (Job 30:30).

In Revelation I, 14:15 as recorded by John, it says "His hair was as wool, and his feet were burnt as brass," referring to Jesus.

¹. Ibid., p.61.
In Matthew 2:13-14, it is reported that Joseph had a dream to take Mary and Jesus into Egypt. They were being pursued by the Romans, who were white. If Joseph and his family were white, they would have been easily noticed in Egypt, "like a white family moving into Harlem. But Jesus being black and being pursued by whites, he was able to blend in with the inhabitants."¹

Jessie Brown, a graduate student at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School and an aspiring minister, concludes, "These references give us our identity, knowing the fact that the ancient Israelites were black."²

During the course of my interview with Brown, he drew my attention to a book entitled Hebrewisms of West Africa by Joseph J. Williams, and a booklet called The Hebrew Heritage of Our West African Ancestors, which is based, in large part, on the Williams book. In their introduction, the authors of The Hebrew Heritage state that their intention is "to provide a sure basis for renewed pride and confidence in the black man's Israelite heritage. To black Jews—and white Jews alike—it should provide further evidence of the universality of their faith."³

Williams, in a detailed and scholarly account, gives evidence to show the religious and cultural similarity of

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1. Ibid., pp.61-62.
2. Ibid., p.62.
West African tribes, particularly the Ashanti, to the ancient Israelites. He finds parallels between the two peoples in word, custom, belief, rite, law, and theology. Without jumping to conclusions, Williams finds the evidence so overwhelming that he cannot help but find that the Ashantis are the descendants of the Hebrews. He writes:

We hope to show in due course that the specific influence from Egypt, that improved and as it were elevated the Ethiopians to a higher plane of civilization, was in all probability a continuous influx of Jewish colonists, trekking up the Nile, an influence that was to eventually spread itself clear across Africa to the Niger, and thence over pretty much the whole of West Africa, when it coalesced with an earlier Semitic influence that had swept down from the North.¹

If this is true, and Brown believes it is, then it would follow that American black people, who were taken in chains from the shores of West Africa, can also legitimately claim the ancient Hebrews as their ancestors. It is difficult to make an objective decision about this theory, as it contradicts much of what we have come to believe on the subject. Yet it is not my intention either to support or to deny the feasibility of Williams' thesis. It is important, however, that his theory is accepted by members of the congregation. They see it as secular and scholarly proof of their genealogical tie to the only trinity that they recognize, that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to the house of Israel.

Central to the group's theology is the importance they place on prophetic revelation. Brown elaborates on this point: "We believe in being led by a prophet, a leader, one person. Secondly, all the Scriptures are our Scriptures. Our doctrine comes from God through His prophets. The Bible says in Amos 3:7, 'Surely the Lord God shall do nothing but He revealeth His secrets unto His servant the prophet.' Now, to find God's secrets you have to search through His prophets. We don't follow man's teaching. We don't follow any angel. But we follow God through His prophets. We find out what God wants us to do, what He's revealing to us. Our emphasis is not on post-Biblical tradition but on the Scripture itself that has the authority of Biblical support."¹ This might be said to be a fundamentalist approach, although this is not a term the members use. They would emphasize, instead, the prophetic aspect of their faith.

Another important element of the group's belief is their emphasis on unity. One of the main objectives of the church's founder, William Saunders Crowdy, a man whom they regard as a true prophet of God, was to bring the black people out from their various Christian denominations. In fact, the function of the organization's original name, the Church of God and Saints of Christ, was to serve as such a unifying factor. When the movement was founded in the 1890's, it was obvious that black people were not ready for

the message that they were the children of Israel. The belief that Christ had been killed by the Jews was far too strong to allow for their open acceptance of Judaism. Crowdy used the term "Christ" in the movement's name as a common denominator that people could agree upon. Once they were brought together, Crowdy felt they could be gradually introduced to the tenets of Judaism, as he understood them. Many of the early members had to practice their faith in secret, turning over a large pot at the door to muffle the sound of their singing, a trick they had learned during slavery. Even today, the members feel that they are still in a period of transition. Eventually, under the guidance of their present leader, Levi Solomon Plummer, who holds the title of Grand Father Abraham, they will be fulfilled in their desire to practice Judaism as it should be practiced.

The congregation views the Old and New Testaments equally. It was man who created the division, they feel, not God. Since man has tampered with the Bible, such distinctions are false. "Any person who is sent by God to do the will of God is equal. We believe in the Thirteen Articles of Faith that Moses is the greatest prophet because he brought everything. Every prophet who came after him only expounded upon it and expanded it. Now, with the New Testament, we believe Jesus was a prophet sent by God because Jesus never gave any credit to himself, whatever he did. He always gave credit to the Father. Jesus spoke of it many times, that he came to do the will of God, not the will of himself. So Jesus'
teaching, Jesus' theology, is the same theology as Moses'. The Old Testament focuses on a nation, the New Testament focuses on an individual who exemplified the same thing as Moses."¹ Thus, the members see Jesus as a true prophet and a son of God, just as every true prophet is a son of God.

The members observe only those Jewish holy days which they feel have Biblical authority, and not those which rest on tradition or post-Torah origin. As stated in their Doctrinal Synopsis, "We especially observe the Seventh-day Sabbath, the Days of Atonement, and the Jewish Ecclesiastical New Year (Abib, or Nisan) which, in addition to having Biblical (Torah) authority, has a universal basis in the existence of all men."²

One of my recollections of my first meeting with the congregation is of a hand-lettered sign posted in the basement of the temple which read "77 Days to Go." The anticipated event was the group's annual trip to their headquarters at Belleville, Virginia. Each spring, as many members who can make the trip attend a week-long reunion, the highlight of which is a huge Passover seder presided over by the Chief Rabbi. I had hoped to attend the meeting in 1977, and had spoken with several of the organization's officials about this possibility. I was not able to attend, however,

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because my request came too late to be considered, and because the leadership discourages visitors at the seder, particularly those wishing to photograph it.

Passover is the largest celebration on the organization's calendar, having the significance of a pilgrimage to their own "Promised Land," and I questioned the members on the role it played in their religious life. I was not surprised to learn that they sense a symbolic tie to the ancient Israelites. The bondage of the Hebrews under the Egyptians is seen as a parallel to the recent slavery of the black people on these shores. This is a theme which has run throughout black religion since its earliest days on this continent, a concern which will be explored at greater length later in this paper. In the words of Jessie Brown: "William Saunders Crowdy brought us out of the 'American Egypt.' Whereas Moses was sent to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt, W.S. Crowdy was sent to bring the black people out of the 'American Egypt' that we were under."¹

Another contribution of William Saunders Crowdy was to emphasize the "Ancient of Days." This refers to those Scriptures which were neglected by other denominations, such as the seventh-day Sabbath, the Jewish New Year, the Days of Atonement, and Passover. He also reinstated the collection of tithes and offerings, and introduced his followers to the Jewish calendar.

¹ Jessie Brown, op cit., p.70.
In spite of the pageantry associated with the Passover celebration, the Sabbath is the holiest of the holidays. It is the special day set aside each week for man to offer praise to God. Of all the days in the year, it stands by itself and is pre-eminent. In the early years of the century, members never worked past four p.m. on Friday and did not work at all on Saturday. They did not handle money and did not light stoves on Saturday—Sabbath meals were cooked on Friday. Members were seated in the temple by six p.m. Friday evening, awaiting the beginning of services at sundown. While the observance is not so strict today, it remains true that "the only lawful thing that we recognize as a legitimate excuse for missing a Sabbath service or doing anything on the Sabbath is illness—it's the only one."¹

Other traditionally Jewish observances are not followed if they are seen to be peripheral to the faith. An example would be the dietary laws. These are regarded as a side issue by the membership, even if they realize that the laws are still "on the books." They feel that while these laws may have been valid in Moses' day, they are irrelevant now. As Brown explained it to me, they are traditions that were carried over from ancient Mesopotamia, and as such are not inherent to Judaism. He said the laws are vestiges of the primitive fear that if a person eats an unclean animal, the spirit of the animal will house itself in that person's

¹ Hazel Jeffries, op cit., p.84.
body, an attitude that is no longer seen as valid in the modern world. Another possible explanation for the dietary laws, he said, is that the Israelites in the wilderness did not have adequate means of keeping meat. With modern means of refrigeration, this is no longer a consideration.

The theological cornerstone of the organization is found in its Stone of Truth or Seven Keys. These were revealed to William Saunders Crowdy, whose story will be discussed in the next section. The Keys are the steps to follow in order to become a member of the church. The first is to recognize that the name of the organization is the Church of God and Saints of Christ. That name appears in Corinthians I, Chapter I, Verse 2, and is the only church name to be found in the Scriptures.

The second Key is that wine is forbidden to be drunk in the Church of God and Saints of Christ. This means in the temple. In the early days, Passover seders, which involve the drinking of wine, were held out of doors in compliance with this Key, which is found in Leviticus 10:9-10.

The third Key is that unleavened bread and water are to be taken for Christ's body and blood (Matthew 26:26-28). This is a means of wedding aspects of Jewish and Christian ritual, and serves as a reminder that Jesus was a Jew.

Number four is that foot washing is a commandment (John 13:1-8), which symbolizes the humility needed to become a member of the church.

Fifth is the Disciple's Prayer, which is the Lord's
Prayer. It is cited in Matthew 6:9-14.

Sixth is that one must be breathed upon and saluted into church with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16 and John 20:22). This appears during the course of the Sabbath service. The congregants "salute" each other with a handshake or a kiss to show that they have nothing in their hearts against their brothers and sisters.

The seventh Key is the Ten Commandments, which are found in Exodus 20:1-18. The members have the highest respect for the Ten Commandments, seeing them as a way to govern their lives, whatever obstacles or confrontations might arise.¹

The Seven Keys, then, are the very heart of the church's theology. They are recited by the congregation at the beginning of every Sabbath service, along with the Ten Commandments. Each one is derived from the Scriptures. They provide a bridge from the long-held Christian beliefs of American black people to the embryonic form of Judaism brought to them by William Saunders Crowdy at the turn of the twentieth century. The next section will deal with Crowdy and the early years of the church. We will analyze the social and religious factors which may have influenced him and his followers.

III. The Founding of the Organization and its Antecedents in American History

Before I get into the subject matter of this section, I would like briefly to indicate how I approached it. As I have mentioned, very little has been published on the organization and its leaders, a fact verified by my experience in many libraries. At the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a branch of the New York Public Library, I was fortunate to discover *The Black Experience in Religion*, one title in the C. Eric Lincoln Series on Black Religion, published by Anchor Books. This book contains an article entitled "Factors in the Development of Black Judaism" by Deanne Shapiro, a formerly-unpublished master's thesis at Columbia University. The article was pivotal in getting my own research under way, being an intelligent analysis of the social and ideological elements of black Jewry in this country. Although it mentions Crowdy and his church only in passing, it contains many footnoted references which I found to be useful.

Thus, I began to construct a network of sources. I made extensive use of the card catalogues and the stacks of Rochester's major public and college libraries. Using this somewhat desultory system, I was able to piece together a picture of the church's history, much in the manner of a jigsaw puzzle. Even if there are pieces missing, and there are, undoubtedly, I feel I can see the overall picture clearly enough to offer the following historical analysis,
which admittedly rests, in part, on inference and hypothesis, based on the evidence available.

Our history begins with William Saunders Crowdy, a black farmer in Guthrie, Oklahoma in the early 1890's. Crowdy was born of slave parents in Maryland in 1847. Little is known of his childhood. In 1863, at the age of sixteen, he ran away from home and joined the Union Army, where he was assigned to the Quarter Master Corps cooking for the officers. After the war, he was mustered out to Oklahoma, and bought a small farm near the town of Guthrie. He did not live there at first, but took up residence in Kansas City, Missouri, where he married a young widow. Both Crowdy and his wife worked as cooks; he for the Santa Fe Railroad, and she for private families.

Crowdy eventually decided to build a house on his land and to take up farming to help support his family, which was soon to include three children. His wife, a city girl, felt this to be a step down in the world, but they managed quite well, Crowdy making a respectable farm out of his hundred acres and holding a job in town as well. Mrs. Crowdy valued education, and was happy when her boys had a piece to say in Sunday school, where their father was a deacon in the Baptist church. He was also a member of the Masons.

The family must have been surprised and worried when Will's behavior began to change. An account of that change appears in the Life and Works of William Saunders Crowdy, a small book written by Crowdy's granddaughter and published
privately by a member of the organization. To my knowledge it is not in general circulation.

The biggest adventure of all came to the family in 1893. The father, happy-go-lucky Will, whom everyone liked, began to act strangely. He often didn't know when people were talking to him but would sit staring for longer and longer periods of time. Sometimes his lips were moving but no sound came....

Years later the Prophet told his followers how frightful it was during those years when the Lord was working with him. Many times after 'awaking' from one of these long journeyings into the unknown when he himself did not remember what had happened, he thought surely he was losing his mind. He was actually physically frightened by the voices that talked to him and that told him what to do and about the things which would happen to him if he did not obey. It was many years before he learned to obey and realize that the voice was not his imagination but actually the voice of God speaking to him. Not only for himself, but he so learned his lesson that he could advise and instruct others to know and to harken similarly.¹

Early in 1893, at the age of 46, Crowdy was felling trees in a new field he had bought when he suddenly heard a "great rushing sound," as though a huge flock of birds had flown over his head. He also heard a voice speaking to him, saying, "Run for your life!" He started running through the woods, blazing the trees as he went. The trail would show that someone had gone that way, for he was certain he was going into the woods to die. As he stopped to rest, he fell into a deep sleep.

In a dream, Crowdy saw himself in a large room. Tables were coming down from the ceiling. As each one got to the

floor, he saw that each one was covered with "filthy vomit," a phrase which appears in Isaiah 28:8. On each table was the name of a church. He was especially interested in the Baptist table, that being his own church. It was larger and filthier than the others, and he resolved never to go into a Baptist church again. When he looked again, he saw a little table coming down, clean and white. The name on this table was Church of God and Saints of Christ. As it reached the floor, it spread until it filled the room, crowding out the other tables.

Next, he was shown seven keys which were let down on the table. The first key bore the inscription "Church of God and Saints of Christ" and had the Scriptural reference for it. The other keys had the injunctions referred to in the previous section, including the Scriptural reference for each one.

Finally, he was shown a Bible and told to eat it up. It tasted sweet in his mouth but bitter in his belly, a description appearing in Revelation 10:2-10. Thus, the whole Bible was indelibly written in him, chapter and verse, line by line.

Crowdy awoke from his vision and made his way home. He had suffered from exposure, having been out for several days and nights. When he got home, he refused to eat, and was "terrified and awed" by his image in the mirror. That night, he was restless, and rose from his bed to write in a tablet. In the morning, he did not remember having arisen during the night. His memory returned, however, when his
wife showed him the tablet and he saw that he had written out the Seven Keys that had been revealed to him the night before.

He began to go into the town of Guthrie to preach on the street. A change had come over him—he could now preach the Bible, giving references, quoting chapter and verse. Gaining confidence in the spirit that was telling him these things, he baptized his wife and his sons, and began to preach in neighboring villages and towns.  

At this point, I think it worthwhile to consider some of the social influences which might have come to bear on Crowdy during this period. I have come across an article entitled "Racial Self-Fulfillment and the Rise of an All-Negro Community in Oklahoma," which deals with the opening years of the twentieth century. While this is a decade after Crowdy's departure from Oklahoma, I feel it might shed some light on the years he spent there, in order to help us to understand the man and his movement.

In general, it seems that the Negroes who came to Oklahoma did so with the idea of permanence, hoping to remain in an area that was "racially more ambiguous" than the South they had left behind. They hoped that the newness of the settlement would tend to offset the South's traditional caste lines. In addition, they expected to do well in the purchase of land, land sale being under Federal jurisdiction.

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However, two important and contradictory elements came into play. There was uncertainty as to what the status of the Negro really was. If the Negroes were not so obviously trapped by the system as they were in the South, the white settlers still had no intention of granting the Negroes full civil and economic rights. It remained a fact of life that they would be excluded from participating in the social and political life of the white communities.

Both factors provided the opportunity for the Negro to attempt a new resolution of the racial problem within the limits of the super-imposed segregated ethos. The Negro chose not to interpret the segregated town sites as the transfer of the ghetto from southern towns. Instead, they viewed this segregation as indicative of a promising future for themselves and other members of their race. They were, at last, emancipated from economic involvement on white-owned lands, and were themselves land owners. The result was the rapid growth in various areas of the Territory, and particularly in Okfuskee County, of a number of Negro enclaves, begun with fantastically high hopes of political and social freedom and of self-direction and wish-fulfillment.¹

At one point, the colored people of Oklahoma had entertained hopes of full sovereignty over the whole territory. Although this vision had been abandoned, Negroes still hoped for limited control over towns and counties where they could demonstrate their capacity for self-government. It was out of such a vision that Boley, the dominant all-Negro community in Oklahoma, came into existence.

The Negro farmer was finding his own self-fulfillment in the ownership of land. It was mostly among the farmers that the ethic of Negro self-determination was to be found and where the greatest disillusionment took place. And disillusionment is really the issue here. In spite of the abundance of land and the apparent openness of the frontier, the realities of racism in this country at the turn of the century made it impossible for the Negroes' inflated expectations to come close to fulfillment. It was because Oklahoma seemed to be so different from the Old South that the hopes of Negroes soared. This encouraged in them the development of unrealistic expectations for racial self-realization. The authors close their piece on the following note:

The degree of disillusionment encountered by Oklahoma Negroes was perhaps as intense a Negro disillusionment as has ever been felt in this nation, and...this disillusionment was proportional to the degree to which the Negroes had achieved a partial fulfillment of their wish to control their own destiny.1

At this late date, it is impossible to say with certainty that William Saunders Crowdy experienced the disillusionment felt by many Black Oklahomans after the turn of the century. However, if we accept the conclusions of the authors, then we might hypothesize that it is entirely likely that he did. Crowdy must have come to Oklahoma with great expectations. He had recently been a soldier in the army which had liberated his people. He had bought a

hundred-acre farm in the frontier, thus wedding his hopes for personal success to the success of the country as a whole. As a deacon, a Mason, and a family man with two jobs, Crowdy gives the impression of having been a stable man with middle class values, with every intention of achieving success as defined by the American ethic.

If Crowdy became disillusioned during the 1890's, it is not difficult to understand why. In many respects, Negroes experienced more overt hostility during that decade than at any other time in their history. Rayford W. Logan has referred to this period as "the nadir" of the Negro experience in America. C. Vann Woodward has written that the South during the 1890's was "the perfect cultural seedbed for aggression against the minority race." He points to economic, political, and social frustrations which were cyclically related to the depression of the nineties. Negroes were the scapegoats of the frustrations which followed crushed hopes for reform.

One such hope had existed in the Populists. The Populists were the political expression of the farmers' upheaval which took place during the 1880's and 1890's. They defied the two-party system, the Eastern alliance, and white solidarity. During the early nineties, the Populists enjoyed considerable success with the Negro voter. While the movement was at its peak, the two races surprised each other by the harmony and good will they achieved. However, when it came to light that their conservative opponents would resort
to anything in order to divide them, including the stealing of Negro votes, the bi-racial partnership fostered by Populism "began to dissolve in frustration and bitterness."¹

Tom Watson, leader of the Populists, told Negro farmers that they were in the same boat as white farmers. It is unlikely that Watson held much affection for Negroes, but he badly needed their votes. In 1892, he wrote of poor whites and Negroes that "their every material interest is identical." He explained the practical function served by racial hatred in words which sound radical even to our own modern ears: "You are kept apart that you may be separately fleeced of your earnings. You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism which enslaves you." During the mid-1890's, Populists spoke of fair treatment, equal justice, and protection under the law. They also spoke of wiping out the color line. Watson dramatized these pledges in a remarkable incident in which 2000 white farmers were called out to protect a Negro clergyman active in a Populist campaign. Such an episode becomes even more incredible when one remembers that during this period, hundreds of Negroes were being lynched by mobs of whites every year. In fact, lynchings averaged 150 per year during the 1880's and early 1890's, and reached a peak of 235 in 1892.

These manifestations of unity were strongly resented by

the southern power structure, and the race issue was their trump card. In addition to the usual jargon of the white supremacists, southern Democrats tried to scare white farmers into believing their land would be confiscated and turned over to the Negroes. They also foresaw the possibility of the Federal government stepping in to secure the Negroes' efforts to vote and to hold office.

The Populists were unable to weather these ferocious attacks. One analyst, Herbert Shapiro, feels that under this pressure, the Populists revealed their inherent weakness on the race issue. He argues that they ended up compromising with the white supremacists, their interest being primarily in securing the Negroes' votes and only secondarily in assuring their fair treatment. He writes, "The Populists sought Negro support but failed to make the commitments that would assure future equality between the races." In placing their emphasis on agrarian interests and not on constitutional rights, the Populists showed they were not prepared to go "all the way" for the Negroes and, in the end, let them down just when black people thought they had found a vehicle to represent their needs within the system.

This was, then, one aspect of the political climate in the United States which had a direct bearing upon the security of the Negro. It was, as we shall see, one manifestation of the trend in American history of offering the Negro

one thing and giving him quite another.

After a period of preaching, converting, and baptizing people in the Guthrie area, Crowdy left town on horseback with his son Isaac. He went first to Texas, where he met harassment from cowboys and buzzards alike. He was often arrested or held for examination of sanity, yet his preaching always convinced the lawmen of his sound mental health. After sending his son home, Crowdy began to travel towards the northeast, converting and baptizing people along the way. The following paragraphs give an interesting insight into what kind of life that must have been:

The great majority of these early converts were white people. Sometimes all of those baptized in a given town were white. The Prophet stayed nowhere but after baptizing the converts or washing the feet of those who had previously been baptized, he would appoint one of them as the Elder in charge and he would journey on, ever towards the east. In spite of his great hardships, the preaching of the Prophet stirred his listeners, especially when he preached that Christ was black. He called himself the "World's Evangelist" and much was written about him both pro and con in the newspapers of that time.

In the year 1896, he reached the city of Chicago and began as usual to preach on the street. He seldom preached the same sermon twice, but would "open his mouth" as God told the Prophet Isaiah, and say whatever the Lord gave him to say. Sometimes the words given him were palatable to his hearers, "but," he said, "they were often like vitriolic acid." Time after time the Prophet was arrested on the streets of Chicago but as soon as he was released, he would go back to another place, often to the very same place, and preach again.¹

¹ Walker, op cit., p.11.
It was while preaching on State Street in Chicago that Crowdy got the idea to organize his followers and form a church. He must have come to believe that both his safety and his credibility would be enhanced with an organization behind him. After instructing a few of his ministers on the proper technique, Crowdy was ceremoniously annointed, and was thus ordained a bishop. Following this, he appointed a Presbytery Board and other officials. The Bishop was the organization's executive head, and was given papers to preach "wherever providence allowed." As reported by his granddaughter: "Throughout all of this time, the Spirit of God was still being manifested through Bishop Crowdy and every man, woman, and child who came in contact with him knew that 'he was not a natural man' (to put it in the oft-repeated words of those who knew him), not like any other man, black or white, that they had ever seen or heard about."

The year 1896 was an important one in the annals of black and white relations in this country. Most famous is the historic Supreme Court decision in the Plessy vs. Ferguson case, in which the Court gave its blessing to the Jim Crow system of racial segregation. One Mr. Plessy, a Louisiana mulatto, had insisted on riding in the "whites only" car of a railroad train. After being arrested and found guilty of violating a state statute, he appealed to the Supreme Court. The Court upheld his conviction, finding

that "separate but equal" facilities were not in violation of his rights. The Court did not define what it meant by "equal" nor did it insist on enforcing equality in concrete terms. By justifying separate and inferior facilities for Negroes, "American society and law had turned the Afro-American community into an untouchable class."¹

This decision was the culmination of a series of anti-Negro actions that were taken in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1873 and 1876, the Court curtailed the privileges and immunities recognized as being under Federal protection. In 1883, it decided that certain parts of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 were unconstitutional. It ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment gave Congress power to restrain states but not individuals from acts of racial discrimination and segregation. Having ruled in an 1877 case that a state could not prohibit segregation in public transportation, it decided in 1890 that a state could require segregation on common carriers. Two years after the Plessy case, in 1898, the Court completed this series of repressive decisions by approving a Mississippi plan for depriving Negroes of the right to vote.

This is a posture which was not confined to the South, but which pervaded American life. In fact, following the Civil War, the nation tended to adopt many hitherto southern attitudes on the race question. It is perhaps one of our

history's greatest anomalies that the North, the undisputed victor in the war, treated the South not as a traitor to be punished, but as a source of emulation. In his analysis of the Reconstruction era following the war, which he calls an "ultraconservative revolution," Eric McKittrick points out that in the first years of peace, the United States spent most of its energy giving amnesty and pardon to the southerners. He says that far less was done for the emancipated slaves by way of land distribution and social planning than was done for the freed serfs in imperial Russia. He reports on the way the North seemed more intent on appeasing the South than in dealing fairly with the newly-freed Negro:

Once the war was over, the problem of dealing both with the Negro and with the readmission of Southern states to the Federal Union dominated all else. But all emphasis was placed on the latter. And again, the first instinct was to change as little as possible. By constitutional amendment the Negro had been given his freedom, but few steps were taken to adjust him to his new status. At the same time, elaborate efforts were made by the administration of Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, to re-establish state governments in the South which would be more or less identical with those in existence before the war. Certain things were rejected almost out of hand. There was no redistribution of land, either with or without compensation. There was no insistence that Negroes be accorded rights of citizenship. Federal responsibility for education and welfare was regarded as being only of the most temporary and limited kind.

During the ten-year period of the late 1860's and early 1870's, a program known as "Radical Reconstruction" was

adopted. These measures were designed to protect Negroes and those southern whites who had supported the Union. Federal troops occupied the South, and martial law was in effect. The entire male Negro population was enfranchised, former Confederate leaders were temporarily forbidden to vote or to hold office, and state governments were established which were heavily dependent on Negro votes.

This system was suddenly undermined when President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered the Federal troops withdrawn in 1877. The southern whites, who had been forced to accept measures they did not want, moved quickly to reinstate the old regime. They were able to do this with relative ease because the temporary programs had not been bolstered by anything systematic in the way of social and economic welfare. There had been no widespread effort to aid the freedmen in acquiring holdings of their own. Priorities had been reversed. The Negro had been given the vote before he had the education or the economic power to use it. Even if one argues that political rights should have come first after all, the Federal government was not prepared to make the commitment needed to preserve those rights.

By the late 1870's, the political, social, and economic systems of the South had come to resemble their counterparts of the pre-war era. But now the Negro was a landless laborer, rather than a legally-bound slave. In gaining his "freedom," he had lost his place in the social system. In slavery, he had a measure of security and protection; following Reconstruction, he had none. His small political gains
and minimal social rights were systematically removed. "One by one, and with no interference whatever, the Southern states now began by law to impose systems of social segregation and disfranchisement which set the Negro entirely outside the mainstream of Southern civic life. By 1900, the process was virtually complete."

We have seen that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, every possible barrier had been placed in the path of the newly-freed Negro. In many ways, his situation was worse during this period than it had been under slavery. He was now being ostracized and segregated. The laws that were designed to protect him were generally ignored, while those which were enacted to oppress him—the Jim Crow laws—were becoming more numerous and more vigorously enforced with each passing year. It was, indeed, the nadir. It was a time when any Negro was fair game for abuse at the hand of any white person.

It is not surprising, then, that Negroes turned to religion with increased fervor at this time. Religion had always played a prominent role in the lives of American black people. It has doubtless been a source of strength and comfort to them during their tormented history on this continent. The slaves were Christianized soon after their arrival in America. They adopted Christianity with a passion, and have been the most consistently devout Christians that this nation has seen.

On reflection, however, it seems strange that black people adopted Christianity with such conviction. It was, after all, the slavemaster's religion. There is something antithetical about learning the Christian message of universal love and brotherhood from a race that is holding your people in bondage. Of course, it was not one of the privileges of slavery to choose one's own religion. Slavemasters encouraged or forced their slaves to convert. One master in the 1830's is quoted as saying, "The deeper the piety of the slave, the more valuable he is in every respect." William Wells Brown, an eloquent refugee from slavery, claimed in 1850 that religious instruction for his fellow-bondsmen consisted "in teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him a slave; and that when whipped, he must find no fault."¹

Most slaves accepted this form of religious instruction, or at least gave their masters the impression that they did. There were, however, significant black responses to religion during the course of the nineteenth century which went beyond submissiveness to outright defiance of one kind or another.

In 1800, a man named Gabriel, a slave of Thomas Prosser of Richmond, Virginia, undertook to organize a slave revolt. His plan was to kill the whites of the area, seize arms and ammunition from the arsenal in Richmond, and strike an

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agreement with the slavemasters for the liberation of all
slaves. The one thousand slaves who were gathered to revolt
disbanded in confusion when a great storm struck that night.
The plot was doomed to failure in any case, since two slaves
had revealed the plot to their masters.

Gabriel was a student of the Bible, and based his de-
sire to lead an insurrection on his religious convictions.
His favorite Biblical hero was Samson, and in imitation of
the great Israelite leader, he wore his hair long. He be-
lieved that from his childhood, God had marked him as a de-
liverer of his people. The exploits of Samson in Judges 15
had particular significance for Gabriel, as he carefully
laid plans to sow destruction throughout Henrico County and
lead the slaves to the establishment of a new black kingdom
in Virginia with himself as king.

Denmark Vesey was a slave who had purchased his freedom
in 1800, the year of the Gabriel insurrection. His travels
brought him into wide contact with the black people of South
Carolina. Like Gabriel, he was a student of the Bible, and
he brought to his reading some interpretations that were
highly unorthodox by white standards, perhaps of African or
West Indian origin. He particularly studied two passages
from the Old Testament, one being the account of Joshua's
siege of the Canaanite city of Jericho. Vesey, with his
mystical intuition and his knowledge of the Scriptures, saw
many parallels between the children of Israel and the black
people of America. Like all the battles of the Israelites,
Joshua's was a holy war, and Vesey was convinced that the same was true for the slaves he had been called to lead to freedom.

Vesey was fascinated by the Biblical stories and used them often in his addresses to the blacks of Charleston. At these religious meetings, he used the Biblical accounts in order to give his listeners self-respect and courage. And courage they would need. In 1822, Vesey organized several thousand blacks, who were equipped only with homemade weapons, in an attack on the whites of Charleston and vicinity. The plot, like Gabriel's, was revealed by an over-zealous slave, giving the militia plenty of time to move in and surround the city. Within 30 days, 131 persons had been arrested, 37 executed, including Vesey himself, 43 banished from the state and/or the country, and 48 whipped and discharged. All this without any white person having been struck a blow.

In the words of Gayraud S. Wilmore:

The dismal failure and the terrible consequences were evidently the price that had to be paid by black men, who could not erase from their minds the conviction that God had aligned himself with them against the iniquitous system of the slaveholders. They came to believe that the blood of slave martyrs was destined to soak the red clay of Dixie for another generation before white men, in a tragic and cataclysmic struggle, would have to pay with many more lives for the blasphemy of holding their brothers in chains.¹

The bloodiest of the slave revolts was led by Nat Turner, born in Virginia in 1800. A precocious child, he

came at an early age to believe that God had ordained him for a special vocation. Later in life, he claimed to be influenced by the prophets of the Old Testament. He took hope and inspiration from the picture of the Lord exercising vengeance against the oppressor. Turner saw a close relationship between Jesus and the great prophets who had called down the wrath of God upon His disobedient people and their enemies, an interpretation of Jesus far removed from that of the missionaries.

Following his father's example, Turner planned to run away from the plantation, describing his purposes as a fulfillment of divination. For thirty days he remained in the woods, but returned to the slaves of Southampton, citing the Scriptural passage "for he who knoweth his master's will and doeth it not shall be beaten with many stripes, and thus have I chastened you." He was going through the same process as that of the Old Testament prophets and which would be undergone by William Saunders Crowdy: a "wilderness experience" followed by the threat of a "whipping" at the hands of God, and finally an acceptance of the role of "prophet."

After 1825, Turner began to see signs in the heavens. He believed that he had been given true knowledge of the faith and was qualified to be a minister of the gospel, phenomena that Crowdy would experience some seventy years later. In his own words, "On the appearance of a sign, I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons." A solar eclipse came and went, but when a strange atmospheric phenomenon occurred in August of 1831,
he was ready. With a band of six men, he killed his master and everyone in the house. They seized his guns and ammunition, and a few days later, at least 70 slaves were involved in the killing of 57 whites in Southampton County. Turner and his group became fugitives, and by the end of October, he was captured. He was tried and convicted, and after a full confession, was hanged. In his confession, he asked rhetorically, "Was not Christ crucified?"

The revolt led to a wave of fear and panic throughout the South, and increased the desire for liberty on the part of the slaves. The effect on the free exercise of black religion was immediate. Laws were passed prohibiting the slaves from learning to read and write and forbidding Negroes to preach, upon pain of whipping. This prompted free Negroes to leave white churches and to begin to assemble their own.

It was not only the black insurgents of the nineteenth century who were influenced by the Bible, and by the Old Testament in particular. Many of the great black leaders and intellectuals of that time made repeated reference to the Hebrews, usually by way of explicit comparison with the black people of America; some made implicit reference to Judaism by repudiating the type of Christianity practiced in America.

In 1852, Martin R. Delany wrote:

Wherever the objects of oppression are the most easily distinguished by and peculiar of general characteristics, these people are the more easily oppressed, because the war of oppression
is the more easily waged against them. This is the case with the modern Jews and many other people who have strong-marked, peculiar, or distinguishing characteristics. ¹

Delaney was born the son of free Negroes in Charleston, West Virginia in 1812. From 1847 to 1849 he joined Frederick Douglass in publishing The North Star in Rochester. Although he was a supporter of Christian missionary work, he believed that white Protestants were the cruelest oppressors of the black race. He became a proponent of black emigration to Africa.

For all his erudition, Delaney was closer to the practical wisdom of folk religion than he was to the churches. To him, it was just bad religion to believe that God would help white people while keeping black people downtrodden "for not half the wickedness as that of the whites." He reasoned that the right use of religion required an understanding of its function and limitations as ordained by God. Delaney felt that God did not expect black Christians to accept white definitions of Christian reality when those definitions presumed white jurisdiction over the progress and destiny of the black race.

Throughout his career, Delaney retained a theology of racial redemption, which he shared with such distinguished churchmen as Alexander Crummell. His was essentially an understanding of God as the liberator of oppressed black

people who were being called by Him out of the land of their captivity to a place He had appointed for them.

Perhaps the leading Negro intellectual of the nineteenth century was Alexander Crummell, born in 1819 in New York. As rector of a leading Episcopal church in Washington, D.C., Crummell had the visibility to express his philosophy of self-help, solidarity, and race pride to a national audience. He advocated efforts by Negroes to achieve equality and superiority along racial lines. He held that the future of the race depended upon moral elevation, to be obtained by self-help, economic development, and racial organization. He spoke out strongly for what he called "the Social Principle." This was the idea of association which "binds men in unity and brotherhood, in races and churches and nations," and without which no nation or people could hope to achieve greatness. Questioning the doctrine of orthodox Christianity, he expounded self-love as a Christian principle which the black race must espouse if it is to cast off its chains and rise to equality with the white nations of the earth.

In 1860, at the beginning of the Civil War, Crummell wrote the following passage:

Three centuries' residence in a country seems clearly to give any people a right to their nationality therein without disturbance. Our brethren in America have other claims besides this; they have made large contributions to the clearing of their country; they have contributed by sweat and toil to the wealth thereof; and by their prowess and their blood they have participated in the achievement of its liberties. But their master right lies in the fact that they are Christians; and one will have to find some new page and appendage
to the Bible, to get the warrant for Christians to repel and expatriate Christians, on account of blood, or race, or color. In fact, it seems to me a most serious thing to wantonly trench upon rights thus solemnly and providentially guaranteed a people, that is, by a constant, ceaseless, fretting iteration of a repelling sentiment.¹

Benjamin Tucker Tanner was the editor of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Christian Recorder from 1868 to 1884, and then of the A.M.E. Church Review until he became a bishop in 1888. He urged support for the colored press on a racial basis. He also encouraged his readers to imitate the Jews who, persecuted like the Negroes, had become the "master of Europe" by advancing along economic lines. Tanner's belief was echoed by Francis L. Cardozo, who served as secretary of state and state treasurer in South Carolina, and as auditor of the United States Treasury from 1879 to 1884. Cardozo believed that the Jews, by devoting themselves to an internal development, had dissipated the prejudice against them. He also regarded the A.M.E. Church as having "done more for real equality" by developing Negro leadership than could have been accomplished if a separate church had never been formed.

Another prominent Negro who believed that the Jews should be emulated was D.A. Straker, the author of New South Investigated, published in 1888. While criticizing southern whites for making a mockery of Negro citizenship rights, he

also told Negroes that if they desired to abolish discrimination, they would have to improve their own condition, since "law inaugurates rights, but industry maintains and protects them." By being industrious like the Jews, the Negro could be the architect of his own future in the New South. He insisted that Negroes should no longer depend on others for their rights, but should unite to secure them for themselves.

Also advocating a vigorous self-help policy was Benjamin Arnett, a Pennsylvania-born minister and politician who became an A.M.E. bishop in 1888. After the repeal of the Black Laws, he told Negroes not to expect any more "pound cake from the Republican Party." In order to secure victory, the race must "vindicate itself." Upon returning from the legislature, he gave a speech referring to the ancient glory of the black race, when the Negro was "sovereign of the civilized world."

Frederick Douglass was still the greatest living symbol of the protest tradition during the 1880's and early 1890's. During his previous career in Rochester during the forties and fifties, he had seen no contradiction between agitation for political and civil rights and an emphasis on middle class virtues, economic independence, and racial solidarity. Oppression and discrimination compelled Negroes to think and act as a "nation within a nation."

Although a layman, Douglass could not help but see religion as both an oppressor and a means of earthly salvation for American Negroes. His writing in 1845 undoubtedly reflects the protest against un-Christian attitudes and
behavior found among the earlier protesters, among them Prosser, Vesey, and Turner:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.¹

After the Civil War, Douglass placed more emphasis on the gospel of wealth and racial cooperation than did most of his contemporaries. Late in life, during the 1880's, he more and more stressed assimilation as the solution to the race problem, and protested vigorously against disfranchisement and economic exploitation. "The real question," he wrote, "is whether American justice, American liberty, American civilization, American law, and American Christianity can be made to include...all American citizens." And, in an article written in 1884, he compared the Negro's condition to that of the Jew:

The Jew was once despised and hated in Europe, and is so still in some parts of that continent; but he has risen, and is rising to higher consideration, and no man is now degraded by association

with him anywhere. In like manner, the Negro will rise in social scale. For a time the social and political privileges of the colored people may decrease. This, however, will be apparent rather than real. An abnormal condition, born of war, carried him to an altitude unsuited to his attainments. He could not sustain himself there. He will now rise naturally and gradually, and hold on to what he gets, and will not drop from dizziness. He will gain both by concession and by self-assertion. Shrinking cowardice wins nothing from either meanness or magnanimity. Manly self-assertion and eternal vigilance are essential to Negro liberty, not less than to that of the white man.¹

The Negro intellectual who referred most frequently to the Jews and the Old Testament was Edward W. Blyden. Born in 1832 in St. Thomas, Blyden has been called the "pioneer theorist of the 'African personality,'" and the outstanding example of the "three way process" which linked the black intelligensia of the United States, Africa, and the West Indies in the embryonic Pan-Africanism of the late nineteenth century.²

Blyden was one of the most distinguished Presbyterian ministers in the world. He was one of the early members in the movement to promote the study of black history and to develop a Biblical and theological interpretation of the origin and destiny of black people. Seeking to pierce the mystery of the enslavement and suffering of God's people at the hands of an unrighteous nation, Blyden underscored the positive implications of the blacks' Hamitic genealogy. He made a point of this in order to refute the claims by white Christians

¹. Frederick Douglass, "The Future of the Negro," (1884), in Brotz, op cit., p.308.
². Wilmore, op cit., p.160.
that the black skin of the African was the consequence of the curse that Noah had invoked on his youngest son, Ham.

In accordance with this, Blyden wrote in 1862:

The all-conquering descendants of Japheth have gone to every clime, and have planted them- selves on almost every shore. By means fair and unfair, they have spread themselves....The Messiah--God manifest in the flesh--was of the tribe of Judah. He was born and dwelt in the tents of Shem. The promise to Ethiopia, or Ham, is like that to Shem, of a spiritual kind. It refers not to physical strength, not to large and extensive domains, not to foreign conquests, not to wide-spread dominions, but to the possession of spiritual qualities, to the elevation of the soul heavenward, to spiritual aspirations and divine communications. "Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands unto God." Blessed, glorious promise! Our trust is not to be in chariots or horses, not in our own skill or power, but our help is to be in the name of the Lord. And surely, in reviewing our history as a people, whether we consider our preservation in the lands of our exile, or the preservation of our fatherland from invasion, we are compelled to exclaim: "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us!" Let us, then, fear not the influences of climate. Let us go forth (to Africa) stretching out our hand to God, and if it be as hot as Nebuchadnezzar's furnace, there will be one in the midst like unto the Son of God, counteracting its deleterious influences.1

The problem of divine intention, which bothered black preachers for generations, was never conclusively solved to anyone's satisfaction. The question was dealt with by the metaphorical comparison of black Americans with the children of Israel. Black preachers identified with the significance of Africa in the history of Judeo-Christian religion and with the belief that God had promised something better for those

who believed in Him. Perhaps the trials of the slave actually prepared him for a special task, as Blyden wrote in 1890:

The Negro race was to be preserved for a special and important work in the future. Of the precise nature of that work no one can form any definite conception. It is probable that if foreign races had been allowed to enter their country they would have been destroyed. So they were brought over to be helpers in this country and at the same time to be preserved. It was not the first time in history of the world that a people have been preserved by subjection to another people. We know that God promised Abraham that his seed should inherit the land of Canaan; but when He saw that in their numerically weak condition they would have been destroyed in conflicts with the indigenous inhabitants, He took them down to Egypt and kept them there in bondage four hundred years that they might be fitted, both by discipline and numerical increase, for the work that would devolve upon them. Slavery would seem to be a strange school in which to preserve a people; but God has a way of salting as well as purifying by fire.1

The most famous and influential Negro leader at this time was Booker T. Washington. Washington came to national prominence at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, where he opened and closed his address to the conference with references to material prosperity. His central theme was that through thrift, industry, and Christian character, Negroes would eventually attain their constitutional rights. Consequently, Negroes must learn trades in order to compete with whites. He blamed Negroes for neglecting skills acquired during slavery, and for the loss of what had been practically a monopoly of the skilled labor in the South at the close of the Civil

War.

Associated with Washington's middle class attitude were the ideas of the value of struggle in achieving success, of self-help, and of "taking advantage of disadvantages." As he put it, "no race of people ever got upon its feet without severe and constant struggle, often in the face of the greatest disappointment." Paradoxical as it might seem, the difficulties facing the Negro had, on the whole, helped him more than they had hindered him; under pressure, the Negro had put forth more energy, which had helped him immeasurably.

In a statement published in 1902, Washington had this to say about the Jews:

We have a very bright and striking example in the history of the Jews in this and other countries. There is, perhaps, no race that has suffered so much, not so much in America as in some of the countries in Europe. But these people have clung together. They have had a certain amount of pride, unity, and love of race; and, as the years go on, they will be more and more influential in this country—a country where they were once despised, and looked upon with scorn and derision. It is largely because the Jewish race has had faith in itself. Unless the Negro learns more and more to imitate the Jew in these matters, to have faith in himself, he cannot expect to have any high degree of success.

In this section I have discussed some of the social and religious forces which may have influenced William Saunders Crowdy. In so doing, I do not rule out the possibility that his visions were the result of purely divine inspiration. I merely hope to indicate the profusion of earthly concerns

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which may have come to bear on his consciousness, some of which certainly had an effect on the man and his followers.

From the foregoing, I have learned that black people's involvement in Judaism is not a new phenomenon. It goes back to the days of slavery, and, if one accepts the Williams theory, extends to the continent of Africa and the days of antiquity. The Old Testament has been a source of sustenance and inspiration to American black people for centuries. They see it as the ultimate source of morality in a largely immoral world. It has given them the courage and fortitude to carry on in the face of unprovoked hostility; it has provided living proof that God's concern extends foremost to those who need it most.

In the next section, I will discuss the beginnings of the movement in Rochester, and will mention some of the social and religious forces which prevailed here during that era.
IV. The Arrival of the Church in Rochester, with some Notes on Local History

Members of the Church of God and Saints of Christ first came to Rochester in 1912, with Elder James E. Phipps as their overseer. In the words of Dr. Joseph W. Barnes, Rochester City Historian, that is "an era of great silence" in the annals of black history in Rochester. Most of the books dealing with the history of black people in this city discuss the activities of Frederick Douglass during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, then jump to an account of the rioting which took place here in July of 1964. Some mention is made of the efforts to erect a monument to Douglass, a statue which was dedicated on June 10, 1899, thanks largely to the work of John W. Thompson, one of the city's leading Negroes. But very little has been recorded of the lives of black people in Rochester during the opening decades of this century.

No paper dealing with the black experience in Rochester would be complete without at least a short discussion of Frederick Douglass. He was at the peak of his career during his years in this city, and was arguably the most prominent Negro in the country at that time. After a trip to England and a speaking tour which took him to many northern states with abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison two years later, Douglass came to Rochester in 1847. He brought Martin R. Delaney and William C. Nell with him to help publish The North Star, an anti-slavery weekly to be printed and published by Negroes. The press was set up in the basement of the
A.M.E. Zion Church on Favor Street. Douglass bought a house for himself and his family on Alexander Street, then at the eastern edge of the city.

He helped to bring the National Negro Convention to Rochester in July of 1853. The gathering attracted 140 Negro delegates and revived the movement for Negro unity. Proclaiming broad objectives for Negroes, the delegates declared that "the doors of the schoolhouse, the workshop, the church, the college, shall be thrown open as freely to our children as to the children of other members of the community." They asserted that "the white and black may stand on an equal footing before the laws of the land," and that "the complete and unrestricted rights of suffrage, which is essential to the dignity even of the white man, be extended to the Free Colored Man also."¹

It is clear that these objectives applied to the local community as well. Determined that his daughter not attend a segregated public school, Douglass enrolled her in a private school on Alexander Street. But she was not given the benefits of integrated schooling even there, for the school mistress was instructing her in private, "in order not to afford the parents of some other pupils." Upon learning about this, Douglass indignantly sent her to a private school in Albany, and later to Oberlin College. His efforts forced the city to integrate School No. 13 on the east side, and some of his younger children attended school there. Segregation was

abolished as official policy in Rochester schools in 1857.

Rochester's proximity to the Canadian border and its location near the mouth of the north-flowing Genesee River made it an excellent depot on the underground railroad. Douglass's fame brought many fugitives to his home and shop. He was the director of twelve Rochester residents who assisted some 400 Negroes to escape to Canada. He worked closely with Harriet Tubman, who was, in his words, the "Moses of her people."

John Brown, the famed abolitionist, was a frequent visitor to Rochester. Brown and Douglass were old friends, but the latter drew back from Brown's plan to raid the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. After Brown's attack met disaster, Douglass had to flee the country.

Upon his return to Rochester in 1860, Douglass became involved in the presidential campaign. After some vacillation, he endorsed Lincoln and worked actively for his election. Yet Douglass's main concern was the repeal of the New York law which disfranchised all Negroes with less than $250 in property. He failed in this effort, which certainly must have dimmed his enthusiasm for the election results.

After the war, Douglass's name came up as a possible candidate for Congress on the Republican ticket in 1868 and 1870, but this never materialized. He was nominated by the Republicans for the New York State Assembly in 1871, but was defeated by 1200 votes, possibly because he had been out of the district on a busy schedule of lectures much of the time. After his home of twenty years on South Avenue was destroyed
by fire, with the suspicion that it might have been arson, Douglass broke his ties with Rochester, and moved his family to Washington, D.C. Upon his death in 1895, his body was returned to Rochester, and was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery.

In the early 1890's, Rochester had a population of about 144,000. Included in this figure are some 500 Negroes, representing only about 0.35% of the total population. At this time, there were some one hundred churches in the city, of which one, the A.M.E. Zion Church, was colored. That church had served as the principal headquarters for Rochester's Negroes since its founding in 1823. It had sent delegates to the National Colored Conference in the late sixties, and helped to rally both whites and blacks for a celebration of the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870.

During most of the nineties, the pastor of the Zion Church was the Rev. James E. Mason. He expressed his views on the mission of the Negro in an address in 1896, which was published in full by the Rochester Post-Express. In exposing the folly of slavery, American Negroes had completed their first great task, he said. It was now up to them to rise from the ignorance and moral degradation that the system had imposed upon them. Through education and religion, as well as by industry and political activity, Negroes would achieve the dignity and responsibility of free men and the respect of their fellows.

The Zion Church remained the only colored church in Rochester for over seventy-five years. This is due, in part, to the decline in the proportion of Negroes in the city's
population, which had stood at about 3.0% of the total during the village days early in the nineteenth century. It was not until after 1900 that the black community developed a battery of societies, reflecting the growth of the colored population after that date. (The city's Negro population was approximately 900 in 1910, stood at about 1600 in 1920, and approached 2700 in 1930, representing approximately 0.4%, 0.5% and 0.8% of the total population respectively). Nearly half of Rochester's 500 resident Negroes following the Civil War lived in the Clarissa Street section of the Third Ward on the west side. By 1900, some 45 Negro families owned their own homes there.

The other district which would become an area of heavy Negro settlement was the Seventh Ward, known as the Baden-Ormond area or the Near Northeast. During the nineties, it saw an influx of Italians and Jews from Russia and Poland. This additional population increased the congestion of this run-down section of town. By 1900 the area had more than 3000 dwellings and a variety of shops, mainly on Clinton Street and St. Joseph Street, now Joseph Avenue. It also had a dozen churches and three synagogues, among them the Leopold Street Shul, as well as five public and four parochial schools. The district was home to Wagner Memorial Lutheran College (which moved to Staten Island and became Wagner College), the Jewish Orphan Asylum, and Germania Hall.

When its population approached the saturation point of 50,000, many old residents, primarily of Irish and German
descent, began to move out. As Rochester recovered from the depression of the early nineties, the newer residents filled the last gaps of land. Jews from Eastern Europe formed new Orthodox synagogues and built a joint Hebrew Religious School and Associated Jewish Charities Building on Baden Street. There were churches established by groups of Italians, Ukranians, Lithuanians, and Swedes.

The Board of Education launched a Social Center program in 1907. Weekly forums and meetings were scheduled at two local schools, which were opened for community use every evening by adults and children. Several prominent visitors to the city wrote enthusiastically about the programs. They proved to be controversial affairs, however, and "Boss" Aldridge seized the first opportunity to cancel them. He cited a costume dance, staged by a group of Jewish girls on a Sunday in 1909, as the grounds for a drastic budget cut.

Protests from the Near Northeast continued after the Social Centers were closed. The Labor Lyceum, expelled from city hall for its emphasis on socialism, opened a new Labor Temple on North St. Paul Street in 1912, and became a center for left-wing activity. The Baden Street Settlement also gained greater importance after the demise of the Social Centers.

Little new investment occurred in the district after 1910. Most of the lots were overloaded. The poorer areas north of the tracks were largely neglected until 1912 when George Eastman proposed the development of model tenements
there. He hoped to improve the neighborhood around his expanding Kodak factories on State Street. The project, however, called for a density that exceeded the limit set by the city's newly-adopted housing code, and it was never undertaken.

In 1920, the Wagner College tract on Oregon Street became the site of the district's first permanent Negro church, St. Simon's Episcopal. A congregation of Negro Baptists opened a church on that street a decade later. The section became the home of other Southern Baptist congregations and other small religious bodies which, like the Church of God and Saints of Christ, held their services in the home of the minister or in storefronts. Some of these eventually acquired more adequate spaces and facilities. Blake McKelvey writes, "As in the case of the Jews before them, a trained clergy was not as important as a dedicated membership, and many of the newcomers from the South had an emotional attachment to their churches and their pastors that assured their success."¹

The Baden-Ormond area began to receive a heavier migration of Negroes during and after the First World War, which exacerbated that neighborhood's crowded conditions. The Baden Street and Lewis Street Settlements attempted to deal with the influx on the east side, and the Montgomery Neighborhood Center appeared in the Third Ward on the west side.

"But the problems arising from congestion within and discrimination beyond the borders of the two districts proved too great for easy solution. ¹

One institution which became a forum of public opinion in Rochester was the People's Sunday Evening. Established in the autumn of 1908 under the leadership of the Rev. Paul Moore Strayer, pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church, the P.S.E. was unique. It expressed certain hypothesis concerning the role of the church in society: the work of God's Kingdom needs to be carried forward along business lines; the church has been soft-hearted but not hard-headed; good people are more efficient and less bigoted in secular affairs than in religious matters; the church is in retreat from points of worldly difficulty; it has been moving from the immigrant neighborhoods of large cities to the suburbs, where it is less needed; the people who heard Jesus gladly are now the farthest removed from the church; the churches have failed to adjust their public worship and parish work to a changing world.²

For these reasons, many otherwise religious people were not going to church. Particularly among the increasing ranks of organized labor, there was a strong antipathy to organized religion, a feeling fostered by the notion that the churches


². Unidentified Rochester newspaper, dated September 29, 1908 in scrapbook in Local History Division, Rochester Public Library, entitled "People's Sunday Evening."
were for the propertied class. To counteract this trend, Strayer proposed "to take the church to the habitual non-churchgoer, to take the gospel of God's fatherhood and man's brotherhood, which is now preached in church, to those who will not come in the churches. The non-churchgoer is an honest and reasonable man, and we aim to put the gospel in such form and present it with such sympathy and reasonableness that he will receive it." ¹

Toward this end, Strayer announced his intention to apply the gospel to personal, industrial, social, and political life, "in a freer way than seems proper in the churches." The meetings, to be held in the National Theater, were to be non-sectarian and would appeal to non-churchgoing Protestants and Catholics, as well as to non-believers. The members of its managing committee held a wide range of religious views, and organized labor was well represented. The services were designed to show the need for religion in daily life.

To accomplish this, the services were "theatrically religious;" they would be religious services adapted to theater use. A choral society would perform, and "stereopticon pictures will be used when needed." There was a schedule of speakers, with each address to be followed by discussion from the floor.

Strayer's underlying belief was that man is a religious animal. He felt that the unchurched needed an outlet for

¹. Ibid., September 29, 1908.
their religious nature. He would provide an institution which would give expression to that spirit.

The discussions covered a wide range of topics. A session in December of 1910 attempted to answer the question, "Has the soul of Rochester kept pace with its body?" Strayer admitted that many would say not, pointing to flagging church attendance and the lack of popular interest in lectures and concerts. He asserted, however, that these were not valid indices. What must decide the question, he said, was the faith of the men and women of the community. Are they loyal to one another, pure in their lives and faithful in the performance of their duties?

"I believe they are," Mr. Strayer said earnestly. "I see progress among those whom I know well enough to judge. The city of Rochester is not only bigger and better, not only more prosperous but kinder and more sympathetic than it was when I first knew it seven years ago. I am sure the city has found its soul."¹

In November of the following year, there was a series of discussions on "the social unrest." Strayer saw unrest as a sign that people were interested in their own welfare and that they refused to accept stagnation. He cited popular education, material prosperity, and the growth of democracy as contributing factors. He pointed to the unequal distribution of wealth in this country. One percent of the people own fifty-five percent of our national wealth, he declared, while millions of people go without the basic necessities of life.

¹. Ibid., December 12, 1910.
Of course absolute equality is impossible, but democracy's passion is for equality of opportunity. Some have so much and others so little. We certainly secure more equality for all. We can multiply the chances of each to develop the best that is in him. All men are not created equal, but democracy will secure for each the chance to live at his best.¹

Strayer invited three guest speakers to the People's Sunday Evening to discuss "Race Prejudice and Pride as Irritants of Unrest" in December of 1911. They were Rabbi S. Moll, of unidentified congregational affiliation, Professor Louis G. Vannuccini, most probably of the University of Rochester, and the Rev. William A. Byrd, pastor of Trinity Church, colored, of Rochester.

In his introduction, Strayer traced self love and family love to love of clan, tribe, and race. A reasonable pride in one's family or race, he said, helps to preserve those units. Race consciousness can lead to race prejudice, the latter being a kind of armor with which races protect themselves. In his opinion, race prejudice becomes bitter only under conditions of pressure and competition. He saw a direct relationship between the size of the Negro population in a given region and the racial prejudice directed against it. Thus, the relatively small number of Negroes in the North at that time meant that they experienced little discrimination. Refuting the notion of America's bad record on the race issue, Strayer offered the opinion that "the prejudice in other countries is far worse in proportion to the pressure of the alien."²

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1. Ibid., November 19, 1911.
2. Ibid., December 10, 1911.
Professor Vannuccini cited instances where in court cases involving Italians, many people had to be excused from jury duty because they would not believe an Italian witness under any circumstances. He said,

I find the root of race prejudice in the child and the family, and the result of its display in the public school especially, is to make the young Italian scorn his own people.\(^1\)

Rabbi Moll expressed his belief in the existence of only one race which embraces all of humanity, a philosophy "preached by a Jewish prophet 2000 years ago." In spite of the Jews' gifts to the world of the Bible, the moral law, and Jesus of Nazareth, those who would create prejudice against them always pick out the weakest individual, trait, or class for derision. If a Jew does a good deed, his nationality is not recognized, but if he commits a crime, he is proclaimed a typical Jew, said the Rabbi. He asked rhetorically,

Who can see the beautiful family life of the Jewish people and retain his prejudice against them?\(^2\)

Reverend Byrd said that he came neither as an alien nor as a foreigner, since the first Negroes came to America in 1620, only thirteen years after the Anglo Saxons. Referring to a local incident, he said,

If it had been a Negro who placed the bomb in the Times Building, I should have had to leave Rochester. And I want to tell you that my people are just as prejudiced as the Anglo-Saxons. And you will always find it so, that when one

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1. Ibid., December 11, 1911.
2. Ibid., December 10, 1911.
race hates another it begets the same feeling in the other.1

Another dialogue on the race issue took place on the pages of The Rochester Sentinel. The Sentinel, which first appeared in 1910, to be published for two years thereafter, was a weekly paper "devoted to the interests of the Colored Race." Reverend Byrd served as its editor. The Local History Division of the Rochester Public Library has just one copy—the July 9, 1910 edition. On the "op ed" page appears a reprint of an editorial in the Times Union entitled "The Race Problem." The editorial comments on a proposal by the Sentinel for the setting aside of two states for settlement only by Negroes, a plan reminiscent of similar attempts in Oklahoma earlier in the decade. Negroes would run the state government and elect congressmen. In that way they would be certain of fair treatment and good government.

Aside from the purely logistical problems of such a plan, the Times objected to this and other proposed solutions to the race problem for two reasons. The first was that the South would not consent to giving up its Negroes, who were needed as laborers in the cotton fields. The other was that the proposals were too dependent upon action by whites rather than Negroes. "There is no record of any race solving the problem of existence for another race," it editorialized. "The solution of the negro problem will depend on the negroes themselves rather than on the whites of the North and South."2

1. Ibid., December 11, 1911.
History teaches that each race must work out its own solution.

Following this is a reply by the Sentinel entitled "No Remedy." In this piece, the editor chided the Times for subordinating the rights of the Negro to the convenience of the white. The Times seemed unwilling to deprive the white man of "one foot of land or possession that he now has." Even while admitting that the Negro did not receive equal justice and was still in a state of economic bondage, the Times was unwilling to consider a proposal designed to elevate the Negro to a position of equality.

The white man needs the Negro as he did in slave days to make him rich. He is unwilling to give him the same opportunity in life that he demands for himself. Why the South in slave days denied the Negro an education, is that no educated people will remain slaves. Why the South will not grant the Negro the same education now that it asks for its youths, is that should the Negro receive it, he will not submit to the inhumanity that is now placed upon him. The problem is not a Negro problem, but it is a Caucasian problem of being able to do the right thing by their fellow man. We say to the Times that if the whites of this country will decide to do the square thing by the Negro, this agitation will cease and peace and harmony will dwell among us.

The Times is very frank to admit to the catalogue of innumerable sins of the white man against the Negro, even here in the North and at the same time it refuses to rise to the dignity of its admission and demand of its people to do justly by the Negro. Every proposition will be impossible so long as the white man desires his own happiness at the expense of life, liberty, happiness and well being of the Negro. Our proposition calls for a mighty change in affairs. It is a readjustment. This means in convenience and suffering to both races, but the end will be far better for both.1

1. Ibid., "No Remedy."
The president of the Rochester Sentinel Publishing Company was George W. Burks. Burks, previously a porter in the Commercial Bank, sued a bootblack at the Powers Hotel who refused to shine his shoes. The county court granted Burks $100 in damages, but the bootblack appealed. Burks's claim was finally denied by the New York State Court of Appeals. In 1910, Burks sued the Temple Theater for refusing to sell him a ticket on the main floor. In this case, the judge ruled that the theater, which had offered to sell Burks a seat in the balcony, had not denied him equal accommodations under the law.

After these setbacks, Burks took the lead in forming the Afro-American Independent Political League. Although short-lived, the League was successful in spawning the Sentinel. Byrd joined the Rev. J.W. Brown of the Zion Church in support of a protest by the Rev. Dr. Algernon Crapsey, rector of St. Andrews Episcopal Church and the city's most radical churchman. (In 1906, Crapsey had been found guilty of "canonical offences" for calling virgin birth and resurrection legends instead of facts. A diocesan court in Batavia had determined that he had impugned the divinity of Christ and the doctrine of the trinity. He wrote an autobiography in 1924 and titled it The Last of the Heretics). The protest was against disparaging references in the Rochester Herald to the Negro's qualifications as a voter. Both Burks and Byrd emphasized the importance to Negroes of improving their educational and economic position.
One Rochester Negro who was active in these areas was Mrs. Hester C. Jeffreys. Mrs. Jeffreys was a friend of Susan B. Anthony, the pioneering advocate of women's rights and a long-time Rochester resident. The Rochester Post-Express reported in 1902 that she had helped to organize the Susan B. Anthony Club, which grew out of the Colored Women's Club of Rochester. One of its objectives was to help the mothers of young children with advice on housekeeping, nursing, and child care. It also had a library which included the works of noted Negro writers.

Mrs. Jeffreys also founded the Hester C. Jeffreys Club. The club encouraged and aided young colored women who were determined to gain useful skills. One member was enrolled in a course in domestic science at the Mechanics Institute, now the Rochester Institute of Technology.

Another of Mrs. Jeffreys's involvements was with the Climbers, a club established for missionary work. Its members worked among the poorer Negroes of the city. Young girls visited with elderly colored people, helping them with household chores and reading to them. The club maintained an orphanage in the South, and locally looked out for the needs of the children of the poor. Mrs. Jeffreys must have been a remarkable woman, for she was "a member of the more prominent clubs whose membership with the exception of herself is composed solely of white women."

No less remarkable a woman is Mrs. Elsie D. Anderson.

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1. Rochester Post-Express, December 16, 1902, p.8, "To Uplift the Race."
At eighty years of age, Mrs. Anderson is the oldest member of the Rochester tabernacle of the Church of God Temple Beth El. The members affectionately call her "Aunt Elsie," and she is loved and respected by them all. I first met her during one of my earlier visits to the temple. I could see that she is both outgoing and shy, teasing and tender, with a warmth of spirit that is enveloping.

Mrs. Anderson, née Dabney, was born in 1898 in Richmond, Virginia. As a young child, she moved with her family to Newburgh, New York, and at the age of eleven, was baptized in the Hudson River, thus becoming a member of the church. Upon the death of her father in 1920, she and her younger brother joined their grandmother in Elmira, New York. Reverend James H. Jeffries, the father of the congregation's present elder, was sent from Elmira to Rochester in that year. He was accompanied by quite a few of the Elmira members, including the twenty-two year old Miss Dabney. After moving to Rochester and marrying John S. Anderson, who later became the steward of the local tabernacle, Mrs. Anderson had a second baptism in the waters of Lake Ontario. She thus reaffirmed her faith in the church.

I was interested in why she had come to feel so close to the church, and we had the following conversation:

"What was it about the church that really got you to join? Can you remember any specific things?"

"I tell you, I love everything that pertains to the church. Because it was instilled in me, being with my
grandmother. Whatever this church curriculum was, I just loved it."

"Was it the people themselves, and the ritual, and...."

"Yes. Back in them days, the people was very much different from what they are now. Love, it was more love shown than it is now. I'm speaking in general, now, not even of the church, but in general there was more love. The older people had more interest in the younger people, you see, you were just brought up different.

"Well, this church, I loved everything about it. How they handled the children, being a motherless child. The interest that they took in me and my two brothers, being without a mother, to help my father. It just struck me. I just loved the church."

"Did the church act as sort of a parent to you, someone who was really helping you when you needed help?"

"Whenever we needed any help, even in Richmond, Virginia. And my father didn't belong to the church. Even then, if the minister of the Church of God and Saints of Christ heard or knew, he'd ask, 'Those Dabney children, do they need anything?' The interest that the minister would show. This was Reverend W.T. Howard, and my two brothers and myself would go into his store. 'Anything you children want, get it, it's OK.' Into his kitchen. 'Anything you want, ask my wife, she'll give it to you.' Many a day we ran out to his stable. He'd feed us and we'd play all around.

"Well, these things shows love. You'd be surprised."
When an elder person do these things, the love that is in the children goes back to that grown person. So it just grew up with the three of us, and we just loved it, the church."¹

I inquired as to which aspect of the church was the most important to her.

"In my younger days, we didn't have a free night. Monday night was sewing circle, Tuesday night was choir rehearsal, Wednesday night was the Daughters' night, Thursday night was the Brothers' night, Friday night was the beginning of the Sabbath, then Sabbath day. Sunday was morning services, and back in church Sunday night.

"Well, I enjoyed being with all of them. When the elderly people went to the sewing circle, they'd take the children. They would be there with the quilts across the table, and we would be under the table, playing. They would give us cookies, ice cream, and we would enjoy that.

"At choir rehearsal, we would enjoy that. If you didn't have nowhere else to go, you'd be there with them, listenin' and learnin'. I love that."²

After making the trip from Elmira by train, Mrs. Anderson and her family stayed at a converted inn on the banks of the Erie Canal, where they lived for about two years. It was both a blessing and a convenience to live close to the elder, as the services were held in his living room. During the twenties, the congregation met at various locations on South

². Ibid., pp.118-119.
Ford Street in the Third Ward, and on Portland Avenue and Ormond Street in the Near Northeast.

It was difficult for a small Negro church to find and keep a home in an era when black people were denied equal access to housing. They did not have the privilege of living or worshipping where they wanted to. Many times the congregation put a deposit on a storefront only to have it returned with no explanation. Individual members had problems, too. In the early fifties, many Negroes had to vacate their homes in order to make way for the Hanover House project. But many could not find housing anywhere else. In some cases, buildings were being torn down while they were still occupied. People were promised first preference in the Hanover development if they would vacate their homes, but these promises often went unfulfilled.

The Ormond Street neighborhood of the Near Northeast is the location of the Leopold Street Shul, which housed an Orthodox congregation from 1886 to 1973, when it was bought by the Church of God Temple Beth El. It is now a National Landmark. Mrs. Anderson remembers the Orthodox congregation and its rabbi. She would watch them from across the street on Saturday mornings. She remembers many beautiful synagogues in the neighborhood, which was largely Jewish at that time. The members of her church and the Orthodox Jews got along well, she recalls, as they both observed the same Sabbath. European Jews occasionally joined them on the Sabbath, although Mrs. Anderson never attended any of their services.
I asked her when the group became more involved in the practice of Judaism.

"Well, I tell you, the prophet brought it here. But at the time, it could not be displayed. We could not participate as we should because of just entering out of slavery, see? He brought it here to us but we could not perform as we should because of slavery.

"So therefore we could not display our religion as we should until the time come. That's why you hear us say we're goin' through the transition now. We're comin' into our own, which we couldn't do just comin' out of slavery.

"Back in ancient history, you know, the Jews was in slavery then, and they came through it. Now time just repeats itself. Now we are just coming out of slavery and goin' through the transition, comin' into our own."1

When she first came to Rochester, Mrs. Anderson did day work. Later, she took up practical nursing in private homes, working with Jewish doctors. She says that financially, things have improved, with people now getting upwards of $3.00 per hour instead of $3.00 per day. Yet it is true, she says, that there is less love shown today. I asked her why that is.

"I don't know. Unless you go back to the Bible, as in the days of Noah. And I'd be blessed from readin' about Noah's time, when it was destroyed by a flood, if it isn't a repetition of Noah's time. And you won't need an ark this 1. Ibid., p.143.
time. I'm telling you, it looks like it's worse!¹

Mrs. Anderson first visited the organization's headquarters at Belleville, Virginia in 1922. The 800 acres of land was still largely undeveloped, and the visitors had to stay in tents. There were also the crude log cabins that the slaves had lived in. Some members were living there at the time, people who had arrived during the mid-teens. Mrs. Anderson never lived there, but she has often made the trip for the Passover celebration.

"You see, we had to fortify Belleville and build it up. See, Belleville was a beautiful place. We had our own stores, we had our barbershop, we had our laundry, we built everything up. And what we had, we had to improve. So we had to go out and do missionary work, naturally, to get the funds to do this with."²

Usually in the company of one or two other young female members, Mrs. Anderson did house to house missionary work in Rochester and vicinity, travelling as far away as Erie, Pennsylvania. They would ring doorbells and introduce themselves as members of the church. Needless to say, the reception they got varied widely. Sometimes householders would slam the door in their faces, and some would turn their dog loose on the poor girls. And sometimes they were invited in for tea, where they would chat and get a nice donation from a friendly family.

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1. Ibid., p.145.
2. Ibid., Vol. III, p.5.
The women would normally travel around from Monday morning until Friday evening, and would not work on the Sabbath. They sometimes stayed away for two or three weeks. A five-cent trolley ride took them to the outskirts of the city. There they would solicit from house to house until they had enough money for the train fare to a neighboring town, like Cuba, Friendship, or Batavia.

At night, they would try to find a room in a local hotel. Some would not take them because they were colored. They might have to go to a home and ask if they could stay on the porch for the night. On occasion, they would be invited inside to spend the night in a spare bedroom, where they would pay for their night's lodging.

On one occasion, the women found themselves in a small town in the depths of winter, and nobody would take them in. Unfriendly people and their dogs chased them away, "and you should see them black skirts runnin'." They finally made it to the New York Central tracks, where they had seen some box-cars on a siding. Peering inside, they saw two men cooking a meal on a stove. The pair seemed to be thoroughly enjoying their warm oasis in the night.

The women explained their predicament. The men, chivalrous to the core, offered their warm car to the women, and retreated to the cold neighboring car for the night. "And here we three got together and we prayed and asked God to take care of us with two men back there (laugh). And we prayed and asked God to take care of us." In the morning,
the men brought them something to eat. The grateful women swept and mopped the floor of the boxcar for their hosts, and then they departed for another town.

I asked if any of the members preached in the street here in Rochester.

"Oh, my Lord, yes. Right up here at the corner. Reverend Jeffries, his father. Oh, yes. You had credentials to preach anywhere in the street at that time. We'd start preachin', singin' and preachin' right in the street, on the corner. We'd have a large congregation there with us."¹

In response to a question, she said she had never witnessed overt harassment of the street preachers here in town. However, incidents were not uncommon in the South. Mrs. Anderson confirmed my question about Crowdy having been arrested.

"Oh, numbers and numbers of times. Shot at, too. 'Dance, old man.' But not a bullet hit him! Put him in jail, turn the key, come back, the door would be unlocked. He'd sit there and wouldn't come out. Oh, yes, we went through a lot. Tomato hit you, never open your mouth; rotten egg hit you, never say a word."

"So the idea was not to be aggressive?"

"That's right. Oh, yes, we been through something."

"Does the church do anything to change laws, unfair laws? Did the church ever try to pressure governments to ...."

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¹ Ibid., p.16.
"No. We never used pressure. Our leader would go to Washington, but he never used pressure."

"How did the people deal with the Depression? It must have been very difficult."

"Very hard. It was an awful hardship comin' along, in many ways. Financial situation was tough. In every way it was a tough time. You hardly knew how you're gonna make it, from one week to the other."

"Do you think the people became more religious, with more intensity, because the times were so bad?"

"For awhile. But then it drifted into.... See, that's been about forty years ago. Well, for awhile, coming out of this Depression, we came into a very good space of time.... We never had crime like we got now. I used to sleep here in this house, every door open. All night long. And I'm scared sittin' here with it open now."¹

Mrs. Anderson, however, is not pessimistic. Her reading of the Scriptures gives her reason to look forward with confidence.

"Well, some peoples is of the idea that there's going to be the end, and the whole world, from one end of civilization to the other, is going to be completely wiped out and there'd be a void. Comin' down from the Scriptures, I don't see that. That the whole civilization is goin' to be wiped out, and there will be no more....

"According to the Scriptures, I don't see that. Because ----

¹. Ibid., p.20.
the Bible says, 'The earth abides forever.' One generation
come, one generation goeth, and the earth abides for-ever.
Well, what does 'forever' mean? No end, doesn't it? ¹

The small churches like the Church of God Temple Beth El
in the Near Northeast have exerted more influence in the
neighborhood than one might expect from churches of their
size. Part of this influence is due to the activity of their
ministers, who play an active role in the lives of their
parishoners. Many, like Elder Jeffries before his retire-
ment, are "working" ministers, who have full-time jobs in
addition to their work in the church. I think that this
makes them better clergymen. They are more actively engaged
in the real-world problems of their congregants and are less
likely to retreat to an ecclesiastical ivory tower.

In this section, I have attempted to etch a portrait of
Rochester's religious and racial life during the opening
decades of this century as it might have affected her small
community of black Jews. At this point in time, it is diffi-
cult to ascertain the extent of racial discrimination that
existed here during that era. The absence of institutional-
ized oppression, such as Jim Crow laws, or of such flagrant
aggression as lynching, does not mean that Rochester was free
of prejudice. As an attitude, racism cannot be effectively
outlawed. Its sub rosa effects are certainly felt to this
day.

The degree of prejudice in a community must often be

¹. Ibid., Vol. II, p.129.
inferred by the observer. One must carefully listen and read between the lines in order to accurately assess its prevalence. Rochester, branded "Smugtown, U.S.A." by Saul Alinsky, has probably been more careful than most American communities to keep its racism under wraps. A black friend has told me that he has encountered it here to a greater degree than in Boston, a city whose racial problems have been widely publicized. Blatant discrimination is easier to identify and to combat than a tacit understanding that certain people must be "kept in their place." The Rev. William T. Brown, pastor of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Rochester, made this point in 1901:

I have said tonight that the system of wage slavery is an intolerable iniquity. And that is exactly what I mean. I mean to say that no words are strong enough to express the hideous and horrible inequity of this system. I believe it to be far more demoralizing and degrading both to owners and owned than Negro slavery was. It is more subtle.¹

Another aspect of Rochester's response to the race problem has been to point an accusing finger elsewhere. The local community has not acknowledged the existence of the problem right here at home. Referring to the court cases pressed by George W. Burks and others, Blake McKelvey reports:

Although the efforts of several Negroes to secure equal treatment in restaurants and shoe shine parlors failed when the courts managed to dodge the question, the press carried many strong editorials condemning lynchings in

¹. Rochester Herald, April 22, 1901.
Southern states.  

And after a black boxer defeated "the great white hope" for the heavyweight championship in 1910, The Rochester Sentinel printed an article which contained the following caution to its black readership:

While it is true that Rochester has been very free from scraps and rioting, we still advise that everyone temper their enthusiasm for the prejudice is as great here as any where.  

A brief look at the experiences of two men who have been prominent in Rochester's black community may be illuminating. One is Mr. Howard W. Coles, who founded the city's longest-lived black newspaper, the Frederick Douglass Voice, in 1935. In spite of a rational, "let's negotiate" viewpoint, Mr. Coles feels he is a man of intelligence who was "buried alive" by the establishment. It wasn't until he began to look for a job that he realized that blacks were being assigned to a life of menial employment, with a peak goal being that of bank messenger.

During the thirties, the Voice founded the Afro-American Co-operative Buyers' League of Western New York, and took initiative in pushing for the Anti-Lynch Bill. Mr. Coles, through his paper, urged the appointment of Negro jurors, nurses, and policemen, and helped to found the Rochester Negro Housing Committee. More recently, the Voice has promoted a platform calling for the hiring of black school

teachers and social workers, the formation of food cooperatives in black neighborhoods, and an end to police brutality against blacks.

Mr. Coles has run for "every possible office on every party line." He says, "I kept running because I felt I could plant the seeds of the idea that this sort of thing wasn't unattainable even to blacks."¹

Dr. Charles T. Lunsford has been a physician in Rochester for 57 years, longer than any other doctor in the city. He was the first Negro doctor in Rochester, and was a pioneer for colored professionals here. He came here in 1921 simply to make a living, but the prejudice he encountered here left him little choice but to become a champion of civil rights.

"When I first came to Rochester," he says, "I was greeted with the words, 'No nigger doctor will ever cross my doorstep.' You have to feel that to understand it. You can't explain it, like the old people say about their religion. But once you've felt it, you spend your lifetime fighting it. I started fighting when I got here."²

Dr. Lunsford became an outspoken and almost lone crusader against racial and religious discrimination in Rochester. During the twenties, thirties, and forties, he fought hard for jobs, housing, and medical attention for blacks, Jews, Italians, and other minority groups. He was able to

speak out more openly than the ministers. He had the financial independence they lacked, enabling him to confront the issues head-on.
V. Conclusion

There is much more that can be written on this subject. Black history is an area that has been sadly neglected, and the story of the black people of America is nowhere near complete. The same attitude which fostered the growth of Jim Crow laws has prevailed in the area of black history. Recent books, like those in the C. Eric Lincoln Series in Black Religion, have helped to fill the gap. But more work is needed if we are to fully understand the contribution of black people to our civilization.

Oral history emerges as an important source of information. Since black people have been systematically deprived of an adequate formal education in this country, many do not have the skills or the inclination to write down their stories in a form which would be useful to traditional historians. But one need not be a writer to impart both the facts and the feeling of one's life and times. In truth, I believe the spoken word to be more valuable than the usual written accounts, revealing, as it does, much about the personality of the speaker. Although such accounts may be difficult or impossible to verify in terms of the subject matter, the insights that one gets into the character of the speaker are in themselves valuable contributions to our understanding of the group as a whole.

Insofar as the Church of God Temple Beth El is concerned, we may draw certain conclusions from the foregoing pages. First, it seems to me that the term "black Jews" is
a handy but ultimately misleading name to apply to this group. It is really a term most useful to outsiders who need a convenient "handle" on the group. It is not a name which the members themselves use. In an attempt to label and categorize, we bring certain expectations to what their beliefs and observances must be, with little regard for what they really are. Verbal structure must not be allowed to interfere with our perception of reality.

If we adhere to the traditional dichotomy between "Christian" and "Jewish," then the group is simultaneously neither and both of the above. It cannot be said to fall squarely into either camp as long as we continue to see the two faiths as mutually exclusive. The church's doctrine is bewildering to strict constructionists of both religions; they cannot account for its acceptance of both the Old and the New Testaments. By embracing all of the Scriptures, the church bridges the chasm between Judaism and Christianity, a distance which is not nearly so wide as standard dogma would have us believe.

Historically, the chief point of contention between Christians and Jews has been the role of Jesus. He has been deified by Christians and rejected by Jews. The Church of God Temple Beth El does not subscribe to either of these extreme positions. The church teaches that the basic theology of Jesus is still Judaism and that he did not deviate from the teachings of the Torah at all. Although there may be some lingering ambivalence in the hearts of some of the
members, they essentially believe that Jesus was a Jewish prophet and not the Messiah. As one prophet among many, he receives a very even-handed treatment by the church. He is neither "kicked upstairs" as in Christianity, nor is he ostracized as in Judaism. He is integrated into the rest of the faith—there is no point in keeping him separate and unequal.

For these reasons, the members see their organization as the only truly Biblical church in existence. By forsaking sectarianism, they feel they are following the word of God in the spirit of prophecy. William Saunders Crowdy brought them out from their various denominations, and for this they will always be grateful.

Crowdy did not bring anything that was not already in the Bible. He helped his followers to reorganize their ideas about the Holy Book by emphasizing humanity's dependence upon all of God's commandments, as brought into the world by His prophets. By preaching the theology of God, Crowdy helped to liberate his people from the narrowness of thought that had enslaved them.

The devotion of the people to Crowdy and his successors in the church is truly phenomenal. He told members who had re-married to go back to their first spouses, and they did. They would miss a day's work at his urging, even if it meant risking their jobs. He established rules for the kinds of clothes and color combinations to be worn for particular seasons and occasions, patterns they follow to this day.
These are just a few examples of the people's devotion to and trust in their leader. And they welcomed his injunctions. By telling them what they had to do, Crowdy and his successors brought living proof of God's concern for His people. They were the bearers of good news to those who needed to hear it.

As we pointed out in the third section, black people needed all the good news they could get during the 1890's. That was a period of much spiritual activity in this country. A host of self-styled preachers traveled around the country, trying to win converts to their particular brand of healing and salvation. Many engaged in bizarre practices and entertained their listeners with exotic mumbo-jumbo. Some were able to attract a sizeable following among the lunatic fringe.

The people attracted to Crowdy were of a different sort. They must have been seekers, or else they would not have left their previous churches. What they were seeking, however, was not an escape from reality but a return to it. They must have felt ready to return to the faith of the law-givers, to the source of moral law in an immoral world. They desired to re-establish a direct link to the origin of spirituality and of righteousness, qualities that are represented in our culture by Judaism. Although Crowdy himself never emphasized the Jewish aspect of his church, for reasons that have already been mentioned, he laid the groundwork for further growth in that direction. His followers knew that they were
embracing a faith that was both old and new—teachings based on the foundations of our culture's spiritual and moral life, yet in a way that had not been enunciated before.

As we have shown, an interest in Judaism and the Old Testament is not new to black people. Ecclesiastical independence has long been a feature of black church life in America. The church was one area of life where black people could control their own destiny. An independent, non-sectarian, self-sufficient organization like the Church of God Temple Beth El is perhaps the ultimate expression of black freedom and black power in existence today. Perhaps the success of the organization can be attributed in part to the achievement of a peaceful revolution in Western religious and racial thought.

As to the future, much will depend upon whether the devotion of the present members will be passed on to their children. There is some indication that the younger generation may not feel as close to the church as their parents did as youngsters. Some of the latter had been "adopted" by the church when they were young, and as a result owe their very existence and well-being to the generosity of the organization. It is not an exaggeration to say, as does Mrs. Anderson, that they "love" their church. Whether today's children feel this degree of affection for the church is debatable. Paradoxically, this may very well be the result of improved economic conditions among the membership. The same has been said of white Jews, i.e., that hard times produce a
devotion and solidarity in the group which tends to soften as the members move up the social ladder.

The degree of success at attracting new members by conversion will also be a key consideration. Converts are frequently the most devoted members of any organization. In choosing a new creed, they are determined that the new "marriage" should succeed. History has shown that the American Negro, upon adopting Christianity, became more devout than the Anglo Saxon from whom he learned his new religion, and in fact began to denounce him for failing to live up to his own precepts of faith. It is likely that new converts to the Church of God Temple Beth El would add new blood and new fervor to the present membership.

A real question is to what degree can the majority religions wean people away from race prejudice. Few have had the courage to demand of their membership that they apply the principles of their faith in dealing with people of all races in their daily lives. It remains a sad fact of life that neither Judaism nor Christianity has solved the race problem. Christians and Jews have simply not risen to the level of their creed. As Emerson said, "Every Stoic was a Stoic, but in Christendom, where is the Christian?"

To the members of the Church of God Temple Beth El, the Bible is not complicated. There is no excuse for not following God's commandments—disobeying is mere foolishness. They obey with a child-like enthusiasm, following Jesus' advice that "Unless you become as a little child, ye cannot enter
the Kingdom." This fosters an openness and a joyousness among the people.

Another reason for joy is that they are the recipients of the message, "You are Israel." As the descendants of Abraham, David, and Jesus, they are the specific group of people chosen by God to represent His will to the world. But "chosen" also means the first to suffer, as did the ancient Hebrews and the blacks of America. A farmer will feed his family before he sells his goods in the marketplace. Similarly, judgment starts at the house of the Lord and only then spreads abroad.

In reclaiming their lost heritage, the church places itself on the cutting edge of history. If Israel does not do God's will, it is the first to be punished. God bound Himself to Abraham. For better or worse, He will deal first with Abraham's descendants, the house of Israel. By placing their faith in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, the members are confident that all will be well.
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Appendix

CENSUS OF RELIGIOUS BODIES, 1936

NUMBER AND MEMBERSHIP OF CHURCHES, 1906 TO 1936, AND MEMBERSHIP BY AGE IN 1936, BY STATES

[Separate presentation is limited to States having 3 or more churches in either 1936, 1926, 1916 or 1906]

<table>
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<tr>
<th>GEOGRAPHIC DIVISION AND STATE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF CHURCHES</th>
<th>NUMBER OF MEMBERS</th>
<th>MEMBERSHIP BY AGE, 1936</th>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>113</td>
<td>98</td>
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<td>New England:</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1 Percent not shown where base is less than 100.
2 Includes 2 churches in each of the following States—Iowa, Delaware, and Tennessee; and 1 in each of the following States—South Carolina, Alabama, Utah, and California, and the District of Columbia.

At this writing, the Rochester tabernacle consists of about fifty families. Of this number, about one-third attend Sabbath services regularly.
It has been more than three years since I submitted my thesis proposal for approval, and over two years since my show was exhibited in the MFA Gallery. The bulk of my working time in the interim has been given over to completing the above paper and to working at a number of jobs, including the teaching of photography in several continuing education programs. I am presently employed full time as a photographer for the City of Rochester, a job that I find satisfying and one that I hope to have for some time to come.

At the beginning of this paper I mentioned how the subject "overtook me with complete self-evidence." If this phenomenon made it easy for me to begin my thesis, it has made it difficult for me to finish it. In the next few pages I intend to discuss the factors which led to my decision to do this particular thesis and the elements which came to influence its conception and production.

In trying to reconstruct my reasons for choosing this subject for my thesis, a few possibilities come to mind. First is the excitement of having made a personal discovery. In learning about the existence of black Jews in Rochester, a fundamental we/they dichotomy broke down. An explanatory digression seems to be in order here.

Most of us have a strongly-held notion, not necessarily of who we are, but of where we are in relation to other people. These ideas, largely illusory, help us to define
ourselves and serve to shield us from the nagging doubts that we all have about our personal identities. Age, sex, race, religion, education, occupation, financial and social status—these factors and others are strong external indicators of where we stand in relation to the rest of the world. The importance each of us places on these variables is directly related, I feel, to our individual insecurity in the face of an often chaotic and always unpredictable world.

My discovery, then, of this group made me realize the illusory nature of much of what I had come to believe. Black Jews, to me, somehow symbolized the "impossible" being real. To paraphrase Eldridge Cleaver, here was the mind and body finally coming together! There seemed something strangely complete, daringly so, about a group which combined the visceral earthiness one associates with black people and the moral intellectualism of Judaism. These, admittedly, are stereotypes. Yet, in retrospect, I am convinced that I was attracted to these people because I pictured them as embodying the best of both worlds. I saw them as ecumenical and universal, a group making a conscious attempt to bridge racial and religious gaps which had not seemed possible before.

How could I convey these ideas photographically? At first I considered a photojournalistic approach. But I realized that I was not confronting a particular issue in dealing with these people. There was no narrative story,
per se. It did not seem to me that the group was experiencing a particular crisis. As a group, they were not especially poor, or ill-housed, or unemployed. They were, of course, oppressed by racism, but no more so, I believe, than any other American blacks. And I did not conceive of my thesis as an invective against racism in America per se.

At one point early on in my thesis involvement, I conceived of the embryonic body of work as a composite portrait of the group. It seemed to me that the best way to reveal the essence of this group would be to portray its members in such a way as to create a complete mosaic composed of individual gems. The whole would somehow be greater than the sum of its parts.

When I showed proof prints of these initial efforts to my thesis board, I got a surprise. The board members did not think that the portrait idea was working. They were unanimous in their feeling that the "personal" pictures of the people were not particularly strong. In my attempt to get close to some of the people, I revealed through my photographs that I was not really interested in them as individuals. These pictures were not portraits in that my intention to say something about the people came through more strongly than the people themselves.

This is a problem in photography which I have been dealing with more recently in my capacity as city photographer. I have been finding that what I think I put
into a particular picture-taking situation is not necessarily what comes out in the photograph. A couple of examples come to mind. On one occasion I was photographing participants in a skiing and skating event at Manhattan Square Park. At the time of the event, it seemed as if I were taking friendly and upbeat people-pictures, along the lines of what Charlie Arnold has aptly called "happy snaps." What came out were pictures that looked forced and not very happy.

Another assignment I get during the course of my work is to photograph the inside and outside of vacant buildings, many of which are fire- and vandal-damaged. My intention in this case is to do the job as quickly as possible, with no aspirations other than to document the conditions as they exist, using an open flash and a wide angle lens. The houses are boarded up and dark. As a result, I frequently get my first glimpse of the interiors when the image appears in the developing tray. To my surprise, many of these pictures are strong, revealing much about the place and the people who once lived there. They are also simply and ineffably photographic.

There is no one-to-one relationship between the picture-taking situation and the photograph that results, at least insofar as my own photography is concerned. Perhaps this perfect correspondence never exists and was never meant to be. This is where the magic of photography truly resides.
That a mechanical process can produce a thing of beauty is remarkable. That a lens, trained on an "ordinary" world, can reveal the extraordinary, is magical. It is precisely this quality, inherent to photography, which drew me to the medium in the first place and which attracted me so forcefully to the subjects of my thesis. And it is no accident that I perceived the same quality—the extraordinary out of the ordinary—to be present both in my subjects and in the medium with which I proposed to document them.

It is clear to me that during the course of my thesis, I truly became "taken in" both by the medium and the subject. To a remarkable degree, my work and my life became one and the same. For the first time, perhaps, my life had a direction and a sense of purpose. I was, finally, a working photographer. I welcomed the editorial and advisory role played by my thesis board. Looking back on it, I regret not having spent more time consulting with Messrs. Bernstein, Butler, and Werberig. There was a surprising degree of unanimity in their perceptions of my work. I found their advice to be very much to the point.

It was at their urging that I shifted the emphasis of the thesis from a composite portrait to a photographic document. It was a matter of realizing where the strength of the photographs really was, and of allowing myself to be informed by the work, not the other way around. It was a
revealing moment—to discover that the thesis had been progressing in a definite direction that had been eluding me. The members of my board were quick to point this out to me.

What was emerging was a sociological and an increasingly historical approach to the subject. The ninety-year-old temple was figuring prominently in my proof prints. The fact that it is located in a blighted section just north of downtown was important. My increasing understanding of the people's history and theology was beginning to show through in the pictures. The photographs were not about these individual people at all. They were about an oppressed minority that had re-interpreted its past and in the process had willed its future. And they were also about a photographer who had responded to these qualities in his subjects, had recognized some of them in himself, and was trying to make public his feelings for these people and for humanity.

At some point it became apparent to me that the thesis was an odyssey of discovery, or to put it another way, an exercise in "doing it." And the specific "it" seemed increasingly less important than the actual physical and emotional involvement in the process of working and being. I got caught up in the day-to-day experience of thesis as process. I took the time to experiment with certain photographic materials. In fact I made an uncharacteristically systematic test of the reaction of various papers to
different developers. This was done in order to be able to achieve a particular print color for a specific image. I tried developing samples of Ilfobrom, Polycontrast, Varilour, Portriga Rapid, and Azo in D-72, ID-62, Super 111, Platinum, Beers, and Amidol developers. I discovered that I liked Portriga Rapid developed in Platinum for the warmest tones, Polycontrast in D-72 for neutral tones, Ilfobrom in D-72 with benzotriozole for cooler tones, and Azo in Super 111 for golden-toned contact prints. All finished prints were toned in selenium for greater richness and archival keeping properties.

The actual production of the prints was a laborious process, but I suppose that is the way I wanted it to be. After repeated searchings of my contact sheets, I made perhaps two hundred 8 x 10 proof prints—quick prints made for comparison and study. These were shown to board members and friends, who helped to shape the emerging body of work with their reactions and comments. The process of making proofs, although quite time-consuming, was an important one in terms of revealing the true nature of the work to me. Experiencing the images as real prints forced me to deal with the embryonic thesis as an entity, helping to unify the elements of vision and craft into a tangible whole. I became aware of the photographic nature of the scenes I had only recently witnessed at the temple and elsewhere. It became clear which images were succeeding as photographic
prints. Elements such as grain, depth of tone, surface, size, color, and sequence began to emerge as points to consider in the making of finished prints.

I now realize that I labored much too hard in the making of the finished prints. This is not something to be regretted, as the long hours spent struggling in the darkroom was a kind of trial by fire that not only improved my printing skills but also helped me to see the photograph as print. On the average, I spent a whole day in the darkroom working on one image. At the end of that day, I usually had eight acceptable prints, half of which were good enough to be considered finished. Of that number, one was to be matted for exhibition in my thesis show, one was to be matted and given to the congregation, and the remaining two were to be used for portfolio and back-up purposes.

Without a doubt, I could have continued working on the thesis longer than I did. In fact, Owen suggested that I do just that, citing the example of the "37th frame" which may be the best one on the roll. But after a year of photographing and three months of intensive darkroom work, the prints were finished and so was I.

No amount of planning or reporting can anticipate or describe the process of doing the work. Ultimately, it is what it is, and must stand on its own merits. If asked for a list of words with which to characterize the endeavor, I would reply: curiosity, anticipation, belief, apprehension,
admiration, revelation, desire, satisfaction.

If there is more, it eludes me at this time. I submit my thesis to the community of students and scholars. It is perhaps for them to write the last word.

October 12, 1980
THESIS PROPOSAL

for
The Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Graphic Arts and Photography
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Inner City Sanctuary

Purpose: To produce a composite portrait of the Black-Jewish congregation which worships at Rochester's oldest synagogue, and to write a paper on the history of the group.

Submitted by: Ira H. Srole

Date: April 21, 1977

Thesis Board

Chief Advisor
Owen Butler
Assistant Professor,
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences,
Rochester Institute of Technology

Associate Advisors
Dr. Paul Bernstein
Dean of Graduate Studies,
Rochester Institute of Technology

Charles Werberig
Assistant Professor,
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences,
Rochester Institute of Technology
Purpose of the Thesis

I intend to make a group of photographs which will serve as a composite portrait of a local congregation and its place of worship. A paper on the history of the group will accompany the exhibition.

Scope of the Thesis

In January, at the request of the Landmark Society, I photographed the Rochester Acappella Chorus. This group is composed of members of a Black-Jewish congregation located downtown in a beautiful and historic synagogue known as the Leopold Street Shul. Some of my prints and slides were used to publicize a fund-raising concert by the Chorus for the benefit of the old building. The congregation hopes to begin restoration work on the temple, a national landmark, in May of this year.

As a result of my visits with the congregation, I have become interested in the people and their religion. I have begun research into the origins and development of this group, which is currently changing its name from the Church of God and Saints of Christ to Tabernacle Beth El. Thus far, my research has not uncovered a great deal of published material on the group. I hope to contribute to the existing literature so as to better acquaint the local community with this branch of Black Judaism in their midst.

My interest in this group is rooted in two areas. One is my undergraduate study of sociology, which gives me a basis for understanding the role of groups in society. The other is
my more recent consideration of spirituality in everyday life. The interface between worldly concerns and spiritual awareness has a fascination for me, and I feel a strong identification with that phenomenon as it exists in the group I am studying. Through my photographs, I hope to show that a deteriorating temple can still be a holy place, and that a purity of spirit can flourish in the material world.

Procedures

Using primarily 35mm and 2½ x 2½ cameras, I will continue to photograph in black and white, with both natural and artificial light. The show in the MFA Gallery will consist of about 30 matted black and white prints. I have also shot some color transparencies, making some into color Xerographs. At this time it is my intention to shoot more color with the Xerox process specifically in mind. The decision whether or not to include the color prints in the Thesis show will be made in consultation with my board.

Having done some reading at the Schomburg Collection of the New York City Public Library, I will continue my research here in Rochester, attempting to place the group in the local social and religious context.

Central to my research will be an oral history obtained in taped interviews with some of the older members of the congregation, whose recollections and observations will be included in the work. The paper will be available for reading in the Gallery during the exhibition, and a copy will be deposited in the Wallace Memorial Library along with my Thesis Report.