

Biography of Rabbi W.A. Matthew

By
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Chief Rabbi W.A. Matthew

Matthew, Wentworth Arthur (23 June 1892-3 Dec. 1973), rabbi and educator, is believed to have been born in St. Marys, St. Kitts, in the British West Indies, the son of Joseph Matthew and Frances M. Cornelius. Matthew gave seemingly contradictory accounts of his ancestry that put his place of birth in such places as Ethiopia, Ghana, and Lagos, Nigeria. Some of those lingering discrepancies were partially clarified when Matthew explained that his father, a cobbler from Lagos, was the son of an Ethiopian Jew, a cantor who sang their traditional liturgies near the ancient Ethiopian capital of Gondar. Matthew's father then married a Christian woman in Lagos and they gave their son, Wentworth, the Hebrew name Yoseh ben Moshe ben Yehuda, also given as Moshea Ben David. His father died when he was a small boy and his mother took him to live in St. Kitts, where she had relatives who had been slaves on the island (Ottley, 143).

In 1913 Matthew immigrated to New York City, where he worked as a carpenter and engaged in prize fighting, though he was just a scrappy five feet four inches tall. He reportedly studied at Christian and Jewish schools, including the Hayden Theological Seminary, the Rose of Sharon Theological Seminary (both now defunct), Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and even the University of Berlin, but there is no independent evidence to corroborate his attendance at these institutions. In 1916 Matthew married Florence Docher Liburd, a native of Fountaine, Nevis, with whom he would have four children. During the First World War, Matthew was one of many street exhorters who used a ladder for a pulpit and Harlem's bustling sidewalks as temporary pews for interested pedestrians. By 1919 enough people were drawn to his evolving theology of Judaism and black nationalism that he was able to found "The Commandments Keepers Church of the living God The pillar and ground of the truth And the faith of Jesus Christ." He attempted to appeal to a largely Christian audience by pointing out that observance of the Old Testament commandments was the faith of Jesus; however, it became apparent that visitors often missed this point and assumed that any reference to Jesus implied a belief in Jesus. To avoid this confusion with Christianity, Matthew ceased to use the title Bishop and removed all references to Jesus from his signs and later from their papers of incorporation.

The transition from a church-based organization holding Jewish beliefs to a functioning synagogue that embraced most of the tenets of mainstream Orthodox Judaism was

accomplished by Matthew's association with Rabbi ARNOLD FORD. Ford was a luminary in the Universal Negro Improvement Association, a black nationalist organization led by MARCUS GARVEY. Rabbi Ford offered Hebrew lessons and religious instruction to a number of laypeople and clergy in the Harlem area. Ford worked with both Matthew's Commandments Keepers Congregation and the Moorish Zionist Congregation led by Mordecai Herman in the 1920s before starting his own congregation, Beth B'nai Abraham. In 1931, after Ford emigrated to Ethiopia he sent a letter to Matthew granting him "full authority to represent Us in America" and furnishing him with a *Shmecah*, a certificate of rabbinic ordination (Ford to Matthew, 5 June 1931). Throughout the rest of his career, Matthew would claim that he and his followers were Ethiopian Hebrews, because in their lexicon Ethiopian was preferred over the term Negro, which they abhorred, and because his authority derived from their chief rabbi in Ethiopia.

As an adjunct to his congregation, Matthew created a Masonic lodge called The Royal Order of Aethiopian Hebrews the Sons and Daughters of Culture. He became a U.S. citizen in 1924 and the following year created the Ethiopian Hebrew Rabbinical College for the training of other black rabbis. Women often served as officers and board members of the congregation, though they could not become rabbis. In the lodge there were no gender restrictions and woman took courses and even taught in the school. Religion, history, and cultural anthropology, presented from a particular Afrocentric perspective, were of immense interest to Matthew's followers and pervaded all of his teaching. The lodge functioned as a secret society where the initiated explored a branch of Jewish mysticism called *kabballah*, and the school sought to present a systematic understanding of the practice of Judaism to those who initially adopted the religion solely as an ethnic identity. While the black press accepted the validity of the black Jews in their midst, the white Jewish press was divided; some reporters accepted them as odd and considered their soulful expressions exotic, most challenged Matthew's identification with Judaism, and a few ridiculed "King Solomon's black children" and mocked Matthew's efforts to "teach young pickaninnies Hebrew" (*Newsweek*, 13 Sept. 1934).

Matthew traveled frequently around the country, establishing tenuous ties with black congregations interested in his doctrine. He insisted that the original Jews were black and that white Jews were either the product of centuries of intermarriage with Europeans or the descendents of Jacob's brother Esau, whom the bible describes as having a "red" countenance. Matthew argued that the suffering of black people was in large measure God's punishment for having violated the commandments. When black people "returned" to Judaism, he believed, their curse would be lifted and the biblical prophecies of redemption would be fulfilled. Most of the black Jewish congregations that sprung up in the post Depression era trace their origin to Matthew or William Crowdy, a nineteenth century minister whose followers also embraced some aspects of Judaism, but unlike Matthew's followers, never abandoned New Testament theology. When Matthew spoke of the size of his following, he appeared to count many of these loose affiliations and he also included those who expressed an interest in Judaism, not just those who adhered to his strict doctrine of Sabbath worship, kosher food, bar mitzvahs, circumcision, and observance of all Jewish holidays. The core of his support came from a few small congregations in New York, Chicago, Ohio, and Philadelphia. Many of his students established synagogues in other parts of New York City; often they were short-lived and those that thrived tended to become revivals rather than true extensions of Matthew's organization.

During the second world war, two of Matthews sons served in the military and the congregation watched with horror as atrocities against Jews were reported. In 1942 Matthew published the *Minute Book*, a short history of his life's work, which he described as the "most gigantic struggle of any people for a place under the sun." Matthew would later publish *Malach* (Messenger), a community newsletter. Having supported the Zionist cause, the congregation celebrated the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, but by the 1950s their dreams of settling in Africa or Israel had been replaced by a more modest vision of establishing a farming collective on Long Island. The congregation purchased a few parcels of land in North Babylon in Suffolk County, New York, and began building a community that was to consist of a retirement home for the aged, residential dwellings, and small commercial and agricultural industry. Opposition from local residents and insufficient funding prevented the property from being developed into anything more than a summer camp and weekend retreat for members, and the land was lost in the 1960s.

When a new wave of black nationalism swept the country during the civil rights movement, there were brought periods of closer unity between blacks and Jews, but also painful moments of tension in major cities. Matthew enjoyed a close relationship with ADAM CLAYTON POWELL JR. in Harlem, with Percy Sutton, who as Borough President of Manhattan proclaimed a day in Matthew's honor, and with congressman Charles Rangel, who was a frequent guest at Commandment Keepers. Matthew also became affiliated with Rabbi Irving Block, a young white idealist who had recently graduated from Jewish Theological Seminary and started the Brotherhood Synagogue. Block encouraged Matthew to seek closer ties with the white Jewish community and he urged white Jewish institutions to accept black Jews. Matthew applied for membership in the New York Board of Rabbis and in B'nai B'rith, but was rejected. Publicly they said that Matthew was turned down because he was not ordained by one of their seminaries; privately they questioned whether Matthew and his community were Jewish at all. After reflecting on this incident and its aftermath, Matthew said, "The sad thing about this whole matter is, that after forty or fifty years...they are planning ways of discrediting all that it took us almost two generations to accomplish" (Howard Waitzkin, "Black Judaism in New York," *Harvard Journal of Negro Affairs* 1967, 1.3).

In an effort to circumvent Matthew's leadership of the black Jewish community, a "Committee on Black Jews" was created by the Commission on Synagogue Relations. They in turn sponsored an organization called Hatza'ad Harishon (The First Step), which attempted to bring black people into the Jewish mainstream. Despite their liberal intentions, the project failed because it was unable to navigate the same racial and ritual land mines that Matthew had encountered. Matthew had written that "a majority of the [white] Jews have always been in brotherly sympathy with us and without reservation" (*New York Age*, 31 May 1958), but because he refused to assimilate completely he met fierce resistance from white Jewish leadership. As he explained,

We're not trying to lose our identity among the white Jews. When the white Jew comes among us, he's really at home, we have no prejudice. But when we're among them they'll say you're a good man, you have a white heart. Or they'll be overly nice. Deep down that sense of superiority-inferiority is still there and no black man can avoid it. (Shapiro, 183)

Before Matthew's death at the age of eighty-one, he turned the reins of leadership over to a younger generation of his students. Rabbi Levi Ben Levy, who founded Beth Shalom E.H.

Congregation and Beth Elohim Hebrew Congregation, engineered the formation of the Israelite Board of Rabbis in 1970 as a representative body for black rabbis, and he transformed Matthew's Ethiopian Rabbinical College into the Israelite Rabbinical Academy. Rabbi Yehoshua Yahanatan and his wife Leah formed the Israelite Counsel, a civic organization for black Jews. Matthew expected that his grandson, Rabbi David Dore, a graduate of Yeshiva University, would assume leadership of Commandments Keepers Congregation, but as a result of internecine conflict and a painful legal battle, Rabbi Chaim White emerged as the leader of the congregation and continued the traditions of Rabbi Matthew.

Matthew and his cohorts were autodidacts, organic intellectuals, who believed that history and theology held the answers to their racial predicament. Hence, their focus was not on achieving political rights, but rather on discovering their true identities. They held a Darwinian view of politics in which people who do not know their cultural heritage are inevitably exploited by those who do. In this regard, Rabbi Matthew, NOBLE DREW ALI, and ELIJAH MOHAMMAD differ in their solutions but agree in their cultural assessment of the overriding problem facing black people.

Further Reading

The largest collection of papers and documents from Matthew and about black Jews is to be found at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

Smaller collections are at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati.

Brotz, Howard. *The Black Jews of Harlem: Negro Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Negro Leadership* (1970).

Landing, James E. *Black Judaism: Story of an American Movement* (2002).

Ottley, Roi. *New World A-Coming: Inside Black America* (1943).

Shapiro, Deanne Ruth. *Double Damnation, Double Salvation: The Source and Varieties of Black Judaism in the United States*, M.A. Thesis, Columbia University (1970).

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