

**THE ROLE OF THE SEMITIC PEOPLES IN THE  
EXPANSION OF THE WORLD ECONOMY VIA  
THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE:  
A LITERATURE EXTRACTION AND  
AN INTERPRETATION**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

The nature and degree of individual, group, or national involvement in New World slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade has always been a sensitive subject both for political discussion and in scholarly analysis. Over the past few years, sensitivity has been replaced by controversy due to a speech made by Professor Leonard Jeffries on July 15, 1991, in Albany, New York, where, among other things, he linked Jewish finance to the slave trade. Since then, the media, as well as academia, have addressed this issue with varying degrees of energy and concern.

My research on this subject began in January, 1990, while on sabbatical leave at the Goldsmith's Economic Library at the University of London. Earlier versions of this article have been delivered at annual meetings of both the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations in Santo Domingo in May, 1991, and the International Studies Association in Acapulco in March, 1993. The first presentation

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predated by over a month the controversial speech made by Professor Leonard Jeffries. There has never been, to my knowledge, any direct communication between Professor Jeffries and myself.

An extensive literature on slavery offers considerable evidence of participation by Semitic peoples—Jews and Muslim Arabs—in the Levant, Indian, and Mediterranean slave trades. Rather surprisingly, very little research, if any, has been done to focus exclusively on and systematically investigate the nature and extent of their activities in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. What role did they play, either singly or combined, in this salient and intriguing activity which forged the modern world?

This study assesses Semitic participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade by initially extracting and compiling pieces of history from the literature. It then constructs a picture of their involvement in the raiding, capturing, shipping, financing, selling-buying, working, and the treating of black African slaves destined for the New World from the late 15th to early 18th centuries. Lastly, the paper submits a rather novel and daring interpretation of the significance of Semitic endeavors in the creation and expansion of this trade.

The goal of the research is to add to the existing body of comparative knowledge that describes and explains slavery and the slave trade. A focus on Jews and Muslim Arabs, as either “subnational” or “transnational” cultural groups, introduces a different unit of analysis into the study of slavery compared to others underscored in the economic history and political economy literature, such as: slavery and capitalism as modes of production with class relations and exploitation<sup>1</sup>; core-periphery structures of production defining exchange within the capitalist world-system<sup>2</sup>; and, activities of nations or citizens to enhance the power of the state.<sup>3</sup> Understanding the contributions of religious, ethnic, and cultural groups has been spearheaded by others.<sup>4</sup>

The continued importance and sensitivity of slave trade issues require a few preliminary comments. First, the use of

the term "Semitic" is only intended to describe the common geographic origins and cultural ties and, historical unity of two different peoples—Jewry and Muslim Arabs. Race theories are neither employed in nor suggested by the analysis. If race were to be addressed, it would be due only to the perception of Europeans at the time that Jews and Arabs were racially between white Europeans and black Africans. The more relevant question related to race is: why was black Africa to become the major reservoir of slaves? Second, this work should not be construed as placing blame on the Semitic peoples for slavery. There is no attempt to place undue responsibility on any group of people for such a ubiquitous practice spanning time and space. If anything, this study reaffirms the importance of the Semitic peoples in the history of the West. The salient participation of Jewry predominately within, and the critical connection of Muslim Arabs to, Europe should be neither overlooked nor undervalued. Lastly, as insidious as was the institution of slavery and as incendiary have been related issues, the research here is guided by more dispassionate and scholarly motivations. Neither rigid 1990s "political correctness" nor outmoded 1960s "alliance politics" has been allowed to become obstacles to open, social scientific and historical investigation.

### **NATURE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE**

The trans-Atlantic slave trade spanned much of the history of the last 500 years and any historical analysis convinces that it contributed mightily to the making of the modern world. Its creation and development became intimately related to such powerful forces as absolutism, mercantilism, colonialism, capitalism, liberalism, imperialism, rationalism, and nationalism. The repercussions of the slave trade included the clashing of cultures, the destruction of civilizations, man's inhumanity to man, and the fighting of interstate and civil wars.

The slave trade constituted a primitive form of economic interdependence among Europe, Africa, and the New World. It became the "linchpin in a transoceanic network" whereby Europe provided the capital, technology, and entrepreneurial skills; the New World contained available land, and exploitable natural resources and minerals; and, Africa supplied the labor power.<sup>5</sup> The triangular trade in commodities among these regions included such exchanges as: (a) from Europe to Africa—textiles, jewelry, knives, kettles, sheets, and mirrors; (b) from Africa to Europe—gold, silver, palm oil, and spices; (c) from Africa to the New World—slaves; (d) from Europe to the New World—clothes, swords, guns, and machinery; and, (e) from the New World to Europe—sugar, tobacco, cotton, and silver.<sup>6</sup> Slaves were the main commodities within this triangular trade and the "middle passage" carried them to the Americas. The main motivation for this "three-cornered traffic in slaves" was the desire for profit by capitalists and mercantilists.<sup>7</sup>

Slavery and the slave trade also influenced the start, the pace, and the level, of economic growth and development among Europe, Africa, and the New World. Both activities became instrumental in generating the surplus wealth necessary to facilitate early European capitalist accumulation and industrial development,<sup>8</sup> while they simultaneously promoted economic underdevelopment in the periphery of the world-economy.<sup>9</sup>

The discovery of the New World expanded the spatial parameters of the world economy in such a way as to require new or modified forms of production, exchange, and labor power. The eventual introduction of African slaves into the New World was a direct response to the labor shortage brought on by the declines in the native Indian and white indentured-servant populations. African slavery became, in essence, the reaction to the growth and development of an increasingly complex, labor-driven, and labor-starved, colonial economy that was being slowly conditioned by, and integrated into, an expanding world economy.

The manipulation of labor through slavery and the

slave trade during the mercantilist and early capitalist eras undoubtedly transformed the world economy. If the institution of slavery in the New World fostered the restructuring of the world division of labor, then the trans-Atlantic slave trade mechanically provided its life-blood, the black African slaves.

### **THEORY MEETS THE HISTORY OF THE SEMITIC PEOPLES**

The year 1492 marks the date of at least two important events in world history: the discovery of the New World and the expulsion of the Semites from Spain. Were these two separate events to become interrelated by means of the trans-Atlantic slave trade so as to lead to the expansion of the world economy? Did Semitic participation in the slave trade further the integration of New World, African, and European economies to produce a world economy?

The plausibility of these questions rests upon the generalized characteristics of Jews and Muslim Arabs. Jewry economically exploited networks among coreligionists living across many nations, or established what could be termed, "transnational ties." While maintaining economic contacts with Europe, Muslims nurtured an empire spanning from North Africa to India, which was much larger than any single nation possessed, truly, "transnational size." The structural combination of network and size attributes helped expand, and promoted interdependence within, the world economy.

As the Semitic peoples were some of the chief explorers, mercenaries, state agents, merchant-traders, financiers, and plantation owners, it should not surprise if they had been instrumental participants and partners in, or purveyors of, the slave trade. The slave trade, in turn, became crucial in the incorporation of Africa and the New World into the world economy.

An extension of this position includes the view that merchant profits from the slave trade were central in creating

the conditions for the development of capitalism in Europe. Jewry surely made direct and significant contributions to that historical process well beyond the slave trade. The vital contributions of Muslims Arabs toward the European Renaissance are no less real for understanding modern European development.

### **PRIOR RESEARCH ON SLAVERY AND THE SEMITES**

Although abundant literatures on New World slavery<sup>10</sup> and the trans-Atlantic slave trade<sup>11</sup> exist, there has been virtually no major work done, with one possible exception,<sup>12</sup> on the role of specific cultural groups. Such an omission is more necessary to address with respect to the Semitic peoples. This is because Jews were seldom allowed full citizenship and equal political rights within Christian Europe during the 15th-18th centuries.<sup>13</sup> Given Jewish life during this time, one suspects that religious identity rather than nationality was more meaningful to Jewry. Also, Muslim Arabs failed to develop a nation-state apparatus. Their societies were parts of a larger Islam. Religious and cultural traits, more so than nationality, guided their activities as well. These attributes of "nomadic" peoples support a focus on the Semites as religious or cultural groups separate from any national identity.

Much of the exploratory research herein consists of a non-exhaustive review of the vast literature on slavery. Neither a single book, chapter, nor research article was discovered to have been exclusively devoted to Jewish participation in the slave trade. This neglect remains unusual since many of the secondary sources contain evidence to the contrary. They often cite primary sources (usually in Dutch or Portuguese) which allude to substantial Jewish involvement in slavery and slave-related activities. The absence of any work investigating this linkage continues to be quite puzzling, but it does have the effect of minimizing their role in this activity. As suspected here, much more information exists within the primary sources

describing Jewish participation beyond which has been extracted from the secondary sources. That information appears to be neither organized nor disclosed because of the different research objectives of the various studies.

Conversely, a fair amount of research has been done on the relationship between Islam and slavery within Africa,<sup>14</sup> but no specialized work exists on the Muslim or Arab role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This neglect has the effect of supporting the general belief of substantial Muslim Arab engagement in all areas of African slaving.

Since neither a primary focus on nor a systematic inspection of Semitic activities in the trans-Atlantic slave trade existed, then the objective became to comb a broader theoretical and empirical literature, spanning a number of scholarly disciplines, subject domains, and historical contexts. Next, the research endeavored to compile many relevant pieces of information in order to assess the nature and degree of Semitic participation.

### SPECIAL RESEARCH PROBLEMS

Only a few sources identified certain individuals as being Jewish or Arab as opposed to being some nationality. In order to uncover the background of some individuals, names were identified in a book of surnames.<sup>15</sup> Even then, determination of the ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds became an arduous task. Dutch-Sephardic Jews were often forced to use aliases when they traded with Spain and Portugal.<sup>16</sup> Some Muslims were likely to have been black African or Berber, rather than Arab. And, other Arab slavers were probably Christians or even non-religious.

An extremely important, though unfortunately ambiguous, case concerns the House of Coymans. The House of Coymans was the most important one in the slave trade for at least two generations during the late 1600s, either holding or underwriting the *asiento*—the main contract to supply African

slaves to the Spanish colonies in the New World.<sup>17</sup> This family had extremely useful slave trade connections to Spanish and Portuguese officials, and with Sephardic Jews residing in Amsterdam. The first names of the key members were Balthazar, Mynheer, Joseph, Isaac, and Jean. Two sources disagreed about the background of the father, Balthazar Coymans. Leslie Rout asserted he was Jewish and had found ways to get around prohibitions set by the Catholic Church forbidding heretics to be involved in the slave trade.<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Israel argued that he was a Calvinist who moved from Germany to Zurich, then to Antwerp, and finally to Amsterdam.<sup>19</sup> A determination of the Coymans' background has been complicated by their movements, as well as by the possibility of religious conversion. Although the identification problem is open to future research, the more conservative approach was used and they were considered as having been non-Jewish.

## GENERAL FINDINGS

An analysis of the literature found abundant evidence that mainly the Sephardim or Iberian Jews, Marranos, and New Christians, were highly influential in the trans-Atlantic slave trade during the late 15th to early 18th centuries. This finding disputes the common belief that Judaism and slavery have been antithetical practices during the modern era.

The investigation also uncovered that Muslim Arabs, compared to Jewry, played a lesser and mostly indirect role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, even though some Muslims traded slaves at the first European settlements in West Africa.<sup>20</sup> However, Muslim Arabs certainly dominated in the trans-Saharan, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean slavery systems, and cooperated with Jewry in the Levant and Mediterranean slave trades. This finding challenges the generalized conception of heavy Muslim Arab participation in the Atlantic slave trade.

The historical inference drawn here is that the expul-



sions of the Semites from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1521 became necessary events that unknowingly and indirectly spread the Iberian slave culture to other parts of Europe. With each expulsion or practice of inquisition (i.e., during the periods 1480-1598 and 1645-1688), Sephardic Jews were forced to move to the Spanish Netherlands or Holland, and then to parts of France and Britain. Each of these nations ultimately vied for control over, and then possessed, the *asiento*. Sephardic Jews were either pivotal in the accomplishment or had a major interest in the outcome.

Dutch Jews (e.g., Louis de Geer, Benjamin Raule, possibly Isaac Coymans) were the likely developers and investors of slave trade companies in Holland, Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Brandenburg, and Konigsberg. The capital came from Amsterdam and Zeeland.<sup>21</sup>

The wealth of Amsterdam was fundamental to the financing of the 17th century slave trade.<sup>22</sup> Amsterdam's role in banking and minting, and the ability to finance the slave trade, were dependent on the importation of precious metals from Western Africa. It is undisputed that the Jews of Amsterdam and elsewhere dominated the precious metals and bullion markets. It is virtually impossible not to infer that Jewry had a substantial and vital role in slavery and the slave-trade because of mining and bullion interests, not to mention those related to sugar and tobacco.

The treatment of slaves and maroons (i.e., runaway slaves) has been an issue for scholarly research. Christians generally thought the Jews treated their slaves very cruelly, especially in Surinam. Whether this perception was a fact or an element of anti-Semitism remains unresolved. There is little dispute, however, that Jews were quite often in charge of raiding adventures and the severe punishing of the maroons. In response to the cruelty of some Jews, maroons quite often attacked selected Jewish plantations. These Jewish-African conflicts were numerous, well organized, and persisted into the 1800s. Given their names, the leaders of the maroons tended to be Muslims.<sup>23</sup>

As submitted here, some Jews were extremely important in the creation and expansion of commerce, trade, and finance in the world—much of which related to the slave trade. They facilitated slavery and the slave trade by participating in all three legs of colonial trade through networking and financing. It is Jewry's disproportionate, though unmeasured, participation and influence in the slave trade which emerges from the literature.

Many Sephardic Jews also moved to North Africa. They strengthened already existing ties as intermediaries and ransom agents for slave-trading segments in the Muslim Arab population.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the expulsion of Jewry from the Iberian Peninsula and their subsequent movements to Northern Europe widened the interest in and scope of the slave trade across European nations. Their move to North Africa conceivably established linkages between the Mediterranean and trans-Atlantic networks.

## DIMENSIONAL FINDINGS

Although the Semitic peoples did not necessarily invent the institution of African slavery, both groups engaged in the slave trade for many centuries. Their involvement, both directly and indirectly, made slavery more practicable for Christians, as well as for black Africans to enslave their own people. This assertion can be supported by a number of dimensions.

Religiously, all three religions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—advocated the enslavement of nonbelievers. They used the story of Ham from the Old Testament to justify the notion that blacks were cursed to become relegated to slave status forever.<sup>25</sup> This story, followed by later day Jewish education, suggests that the black slavery tradition came from Talmudic and Midrashic sources.<sup>26</sup> Islam and Christianity then borrowed this interpretation to legitimize slavery as a moral practice.<sup>27</sup> Even the earliest Portuguese slavers in the 1440s-1480s quoted Genesis 9:22-26 as the essential underpinning

for black slavery within Portugal.<sup>28</sup>

Culturally, Jews and Muslim Arabs shared a base on the Iberian Peninsula where slavery and the slave trade had their earliest appearances in Europe on a broad and organized basis. A critical meshing of Iberian and Semitic cultures thriving on slavery and the slave trade existed, when these activities were virtually nonexistent in other parts of Europe.

The origins and spreading of slavery and the slave trade are tied to the Semitic peoples. The earliest mass commercialization of black African slaves by the Portuguese occurred during the 1470s and 1480s<sup>29</sup> when Jews and Muslim Arabs were important in Iberian slavery.<sup>30</sup> At roughly the same time, both Arabs and Jews were the first peoples involved in sugar cultivation using black slaves on Atlantic islands off the coast of Africa.<sup>31</sup> Whereas race was unimportant before 1500, thereafter black African slavery dominated on Iberia and was introduced into the New World in 1501.<sup>32</sup>

The European emphasis on slavery emanated from Iberia where Jews lived and Muslim Arabs dominated for centuries.<sup>33</sup> Even the Dutch recognized the Sephardic Jews from Portugal as the first people living in Holland to have been involved in the slave trade.<sup>34</sup> The view here is that the Iberian-Semitic slave culture was a necessary, though not a totally sufficient, factor to account for the origins of modern African slavery. More risky is the assertion that Sephardic Jews were instrumental in the diffusion of a slaving mentality in Europe which then expanded slavery in the New World.

Logistically, after each expulsion or inquisition in Italy and Iberia, Jewry became more and more strategically located within the commercial, trading, and financial sectors of Northern European nations that were to become quite involved in the slave traffic.<sup>35</sup> Sephardic Jewry's importance in the commercial rise and expansion of Holland can not be denied. They "were instrumental in setting up commercial links between Holland, the New World and the Mediterranean."<sup>36</sup> The expansion of colonial trade, and the amassed wealth of Holland and Zeeland were attributable to the Jewish refugees exiled

from southern European nations and the southern provinces of Holland.<sup>37</sup>

Jewish wealth was intimately tied to colonial trade and Amsterdam Jewry became the center of Jewish communities in Europe, the Levant, Barbary, Brazil, and the West Indies. They often specialized in silk, sugar, tobacco, bullion, and the diamond industries.<sup>38</sup> All of these commodities relied on slave labor.

Geographically, the Muslim Arabs were situated between the black Africans concentrated south of the Saharan Desert and the white Europeans residing to the north of the Mediterranean Sea. This location allowed them to play the "middleman" role.

Structurally, the Muslim Arabs had already established a well-defined, African slave infrastructure which included at least minor connections between East and West African slavery networks many centuries before the inception of the trans-Atlantic trade. In addition, they certainly nurtured, if not created, the large-scale slave culture within much of Africa.<sup>39</sup>

Although Christian Europe and Jewry carried on the great bulk of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Muslim merchants connected sub-Saharan Africa with the Mediterranean world and they participated in the regional commerce of West Africa during the Atlantic trade. The Juula, the Muslim trading-community that covered much of western Sudan, supplied both the trans-Saharan and the trans-Atlantic market with at least a few thousand slaves each year. This trade on the West African coast expanded during the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>40</sup>

Between 1500 and 1800, a million slaves were sent to the Americas from Muslim areas in the Senegambia and the upper Guinea coast. Although some have contended that the Arab and African roles in the slave trade have been exaggerated compared to the European role,<sup>41</sup> the Arab and African Muslims facilitated the shipping of approximately 10% of all trans-Atlantic slaves.<sup>42</sup>

Financially, Jewish capital, which had international reach,<sup>43</sup> was used to finance: company shares, goods, commodi-

ties, and slaves related to each of the three legs of the triangular slave trade,<sup>44</sup> and the sugar plantations using slaves.<sup>45</sup> This involvement spanned, at the minimum, both Dutch and British hegemonic periods.

It has been estimated that the Dutch carried 10% of all the slaves across the Atlantic—approximately 450,000 legally, plus a large number illegally.<sup>46</sup> The Dutch West Indies Company (WIC), a state monopoly during the mercantilist era, was the main mechanism for the legal trafficking of slaves.<sup>47</sup> The WIC in Brazil had a relatively large number of Jewish members and contacts, and its commercial policy in the 1630s made Sephardic Jews an instrumental part of Dutch world-trade supremacy.<sup>48</sup>

In Brazil, the Sephardim were underwriting even the Catholic portion of the sugar industry,<sup>49</sup> where they were concerned with the slave labor needed to support sugar production. Furthermore, the spread of the sugar industry from Brazil to the Caribbean by the WIC was dependent upon the role of Dutch Jewish refugees.<sup>50</sup>

Dutch and Jewish refugee planters from Pernambuco, who were tied to the WIC, established and integrated the Caribbean plantation system, the sugar industry, and slavery in the latter 17th century.<sup>51</sup> Also, Jewish capitalists owned a large portion and, possibly, a majority of shares in the WIC, and was surely underwriting much of its trade. Even after the Dutch had lost the main slave contracts, there was the belief that Amsterdam's financiers were still funding the bulk of the slave trade.<sup>52</sup> As late as 1698, "Jewish interests" attempted to gain the *asiento*.<sup>53</sup>

Diplomatically and legally, some Court Jews were engaged in the diplomacy and intrigue to secure the *asiento*.<sup>54</sup> Jewry's international contacts and wealth during the age of the "Court Jew" (1650-1713) marked the height of their influence in modern Europe. By 1650, "a scattered but socially closely intertwined elite of provisioners and financiers had emerged" who were simultaneously state agents and Jewish community leaders, where they often acted for numerous governments.<sup>55</sup>

“The close collaboration and interdependence between them...in different countries, made their activity more thoroughly international and specifically Jewish.”<sup>56</sup>

The breadth and depth of Sephardic Jewry’s connections as state agents in the management of colonial trade, especially outside Britain and France, were unparalleled. Francois van Schoonenberg (alias Jacob Abraham Belmonte) was directly involved in the acquisition of the *asiento* by Holland.<sup>57</sup> Nunes da Costa was influential in the establishment of the Portuguese Brazil Company. The Belmontes were tied to the Spanish *asientos*. Jewish involvement in the evolution of colonial policy included: the Danish Guinea, West India and East India Companies—all relied very much on Sephardic capital in Gluckstadt, Hamburg, and Amsterdam. Jews were also involved in the founding of the Brandenburg Africa Company in 1682 and the minister of marine, Raule, corresponded over the setting up a Brandenburg East India Company. Jeronimo worked as a state agent between the Dutch slave companies, in which he was a major investor, and Portugal.<sup>58</sup>

The evidence—both direct and circumstantial—point toward heavy Semitic involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade over the centuries. The overall picture which materializes is of substantial, though unweighed, Jewish participation in the finance of colonial trade including sugar, bullion, and slaves.

## FINDINGS WITHIN CONTEXT

A number of specific observations and qualifications emerge from the research. Ironically, the expulsion of Sephardic Jews and Muslim Arabs from Iberia meant both groups were initially just as likely to have been slaves as being either slave-traders or slave-owners. This was due, in part, to the perception that the Semites were religiously and racially inferior people. “Blacks, like Moors and Jews were often called ‘dogs’ or ‘bitches’: *cao, cadelo, perro, perra*.”<sup>59</sup> Both white Mus-

lims and blacks were forced to wear a red crescent stitched to the shoulder of their outer clothes.

Anti-Semitism over the centuries obviously impacted upon the functioning of Jewry within, and the attachment of Muslim Arabs to, Christian Europe. The expulsions from and inquisitions on the Iberian Peninsula forced Sephardic Jews to the United Provinces. Perhaps ironically, Spain and Portugal of Catholic Europe were the nations in need of slaves in the New World. They maintained contact, knowingly or otherwise, with Sephardic Jews who moved to Northern Europe, in most areas of colonial trade including slaves.

Continual persecution of the Jewish people throughout Europe limited their options to participate in other economic sectors usually reserved exclusively for Christians. Within predominately Protestant nations in Northern Europe, and in small enclaves of Catholic nations, where persecution was lower and tolerance was higher, Jews tended to become heavily involved in colonial and slave trades. However, they were able to maintain economic ties to those areas where persecution was higher and tolerance was lower—primarily in the Catholic nations of Southern Europe. In part, these ties were maintained because the Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonies in the New World were the main customers of slaves, and the Sephardic Jews in Holland and Britain were some of the chief suppliers. Thus, Jewish involvement in the slave trade transcended political and religious boundaries, and one might say that anti-semitism in Catholic Europe and toleration in Protestant Europe combined to provide Jewry with opportunities in this area.

This earlier and extreme form of intolerance was followed by the gradual acceptance of Jews into essentially Protestant Europe. The Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) ultimately divided Christianity, helped secularize the world, and greatly facilitated the acceptance of Jewry into those nations under Protestant control—Holland, England, Sweden, Denmark, Konigsberg, and Brandenburg. Each of these nations eventually played or attempted to play an important role in

the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The forces of mercantilism and absolutism after the Thirty Years' War provided the rising class of capitalists with new opportunities for profit-making in colonial trade and generally put Jewry in a superior position.<sup>60</sup> These forces, as well as the commercial successes of the Dutch, promoted the toleration of the Sephardic Jews driven from Spain and Portugal.<sup>61</sup>

The monarchs and their mercantilist advisors believed that toleration and protection of Jewish economic activities would enhance the wealth and power of the state.<sup>62</sup> They used Jewish people to: promote favorable trade balances, provide larger supplies of bullion, embellish tax revenues by taxing the relatively wealthier Jews and having Jews use their expertise to extract monies from the general population, and encourage Jewish residents to use their considerable international contacts to finance costly courts and wars. The monarchs wanted state wealth and power to accrue through: the establishment of colonies in the New World, the creation of state monopolies to support colonial trade, and toleration of Jewish economic practices in both the New and Old Worlds. There was the perception that these state goals coincided with Jewish activities in colonial trade including the slave trade, even though Jews were likely practicing commercial capitalism—the pursuit of individual profit.

In essence, Jews were thought of as a form of “human capital” which could not be replaced. Even French mercantilists perceived religious tolerance of the Jews as increasing wealth for the state, whereas “the expulsion of the Moors and Jews from Spain was exhibited as the pernicious result of intolerance.”<sup>63</sup>

Jews also thought of themselves as being major economic contributors to society and, thus, to be desired. When trying to gain reentrance into England in 1655, Menasseh ben Israel attempted to convince Cromwell that Jewish commercial activity would further English power in the Caribbean.<sup>64</sup> Jewish reentrance into England [1655] roughly corresponded with the formation of the Company of Royal Adventurers [1660] and its



initial push into the slave trade [1663-65], and then evolving into the Royal African Company [1672]. Jewish settlement in Brandenburg [1671] is also associated with the creation of the Brandenburg African Company. In sum, the 17th century saw strong ties among mercantilist ideas, state-chartered companies, and the toleration of Jewish economic activities—all facilitating the expansion of the slave trade.

Whereas Europeans wanted mostly strong young males, as objects of economic investment, to be workers in the mines and fields, Muslim Arabs were more likely to use slaves as domestic servants. Sexual, rather than economic, exploitation motivated their slaving. Domestic servants and concubines were possessions of high status and objects of pleasure within Muslim society. This preference rested largely on the view that Muhammad was both a slaveowner and a practitioner of polygamy and concubinage.<sup>65</sup>

Muslim Arabs possessed other motivations for slavery. One included the capture of infidels during *jihads*. These prisoners remained as slaves until they were converted to Islam. Islam, like Christianity, thought slaves should be religiously converted.<sup>66</sup>

Hence, religious ideas and materialistic forces converged to establish and validate slavery and the slave trade. The legacy appears to be nothing less than the creation and expansion of the modern world economy.

## QUALIFICATIONS TO FINDINGS

The main findings do not mean that Jews necessarily possessed a greater propensity than other religious groups to be active participants in the slave trade. Their motivations, values, and methods might not have been meaningfully different from those of Christians engaged in the practice. They do suggest, though, that many Jews were major actors in the process at all levels. Jewry's small percentage of the population in the nations and colonies inhabited allowed them to play a dis-

proportionately greater role in many areas of trade including slaving.

Even though Jews were not dominant in trade among nations, they did tend to specialize in some areas: opium, silk, bullion, diamonds, tobacco, and sugar.<sup>67</sup> Charles Tilly goes further:

...Jewish exiles from Iberia, the Sephardim, then constituted a trade diaspora elsewhere in Europe, using their existing connections to set up a powerful system of long-distance credit and communication that allowed them to establish near-monopolies in precious stones, sugar, spices, and tobacco at various times in the succeeding centuries."<sup>68</sup>

Interests in any of these commodities undoubtedly led to a concern with slavery. For example, sugar and the trans-Atlantic slave trade were inseparable since the bulk of sugar production was in the New World, the production of sugar was extremely labor-intensive, and there was a labor shortage in the New World.

No doubt, sugar was vital to the creation and spread of African slavery.<sup>69</sup> Sugar "pulled" the slave trade: "of the nearly ten million black slaves ultimately sent to America, some 70% were destined for the sugar colonies."<sup>70</sup>

In some instances, Portuguese residents, almost always Sephardic Jews, "had made substantial investment" in sugar bakeries, which was Amsterdam's leading industry.<sup>71</sup> There was the desire of Amsterdam's Sephardic Jews to own sugar plantations in Brazil, and to dominate sugar-refining and the sugar trade.<sup>72</sup> The Dutch and Dutch Jews were instrumental in spreading the sugar industry and slaves to the English and French colonies in the Caribbean during 1645-54. They accomplished this by demonstration, loans, and investment, as well as by supplying sugar-crushing and boiling equipment to the planters.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, sugar and slaves within the triangular trade

arrangement became inextricably interwoven commodities.<sup>74</sup> Some Jews were highly involved in: the sugar trade in all legs of the triangle, including slaves ;<sup>75</sup> the sugar-refining industry in both the Old and New Worlds,<sup>76</sup> sugar bakeries and chocolate factories in Holland, England, and Switzerland;<sup>77</sup> and, sugar production in general as plantation and slave owners in Brazil and the Caribbean, especially in Curacao, Surinam, and Barbados.<sup>78</sup> Jewish involvement, then, transcended nation-state boundaries, Old and New Worlds, and religious prohibitions.

There is no proof that Jewry consciously perceived greater profits to be gained by participation in the slave trade compared to other trading ventures. This notion is also supported by the notion that there was a disproportionate amount of Jewish activity in most matters of trade, commerce, and finance regardless of the commodity area. However, Herbert Bloom, drawing upon many primary documents from the Caribbean and Amsterdam, indicates that while the it was far from being an exclusively Jewish activity, the "slave trade was one of the most important Jewish activities here [Surinam] as elsewhere in the colonies."<sup>79</sup> Also, Jewish participation in the slave trade did not stem from a lack of moral conviction. As discerned here, the most potent and integrative motivations underlying the slave trade were the individual-capitalist pursuit of profit by some Jews and the state-mercantilist drive for power and wealth by their Christian protectors. Although associations were detected between both Judaism and Islam with notions of racial or religious hierarchy, most appearances suggest that profit and status, rather than religious, motivations dominated their thinking, respectively.

Still, the Semitic peoples helped turn black Africans into commodities for sale and owned like chattel. They rationalized economic activities and objectified social relations through the slave trade, thus contributing to revolutionary changes in world trade and production. Even then, they were seen as advancing materialism. Ironically, these strongly religious groups conveyed nonreligious logics which undergirded the early slave trade.

## SUMMARY INTERPRETATION

What if Muslim Arabs had not created and nurtured a slave infrastructure and culture in sub-Saharan Africa? What if Jews and Muslim Arabs had not interacted with Christians in establishing and reinforcing a black African slave culture on Iberia? And, what if Sephardic Jews as purveyors of the slave trade had been neither expelled from Iberia, nor accepted by the Dutch and tolerated by the English? As posited here, the slave trade and, hence, slavery might have been much smaller in scope, much less efficient, shorter in duration, and, possibly, too costly and complex for Christians to have established purely on their own. The latter did not possess the necessary combination of financial capital, international connections, expertise, and infrastructure to buttress a successful slave trade over considerable time.

Muslim Arabs, along with black Africans, had established the slave infrastructure and culture long before the Atlantic trade. Though in relative long-term decline, they were still able to manage parts of a complex Islamic empire which included a portion of black Africa. Large reservoirs of slaves were already organized for the European slavers.

Jewry, rather than most Christians, possessed the cosmopolitan spirit, the relatively unrestrained materialistic drive, the abundant capital, and the international connections to manage the costly and complex triangular slave network. And, Jewry's abilities included linking nations, continents, and oceans.

On reflection, most nations of Christian Europe found great difficulty in financing everyday economic life, not to mention inability to provide: an effective tax structure, an efficient international balance of payments system, a workable and more secure banking system, a profitable stock exchange, an insurance scheme, or even payment for the usual war effort. They generally relied on Jewry to either invent, nurture, or make more efficient these instruments of economic life. The same applies to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, since even

many of these mechanisms facilitated the slave trade.

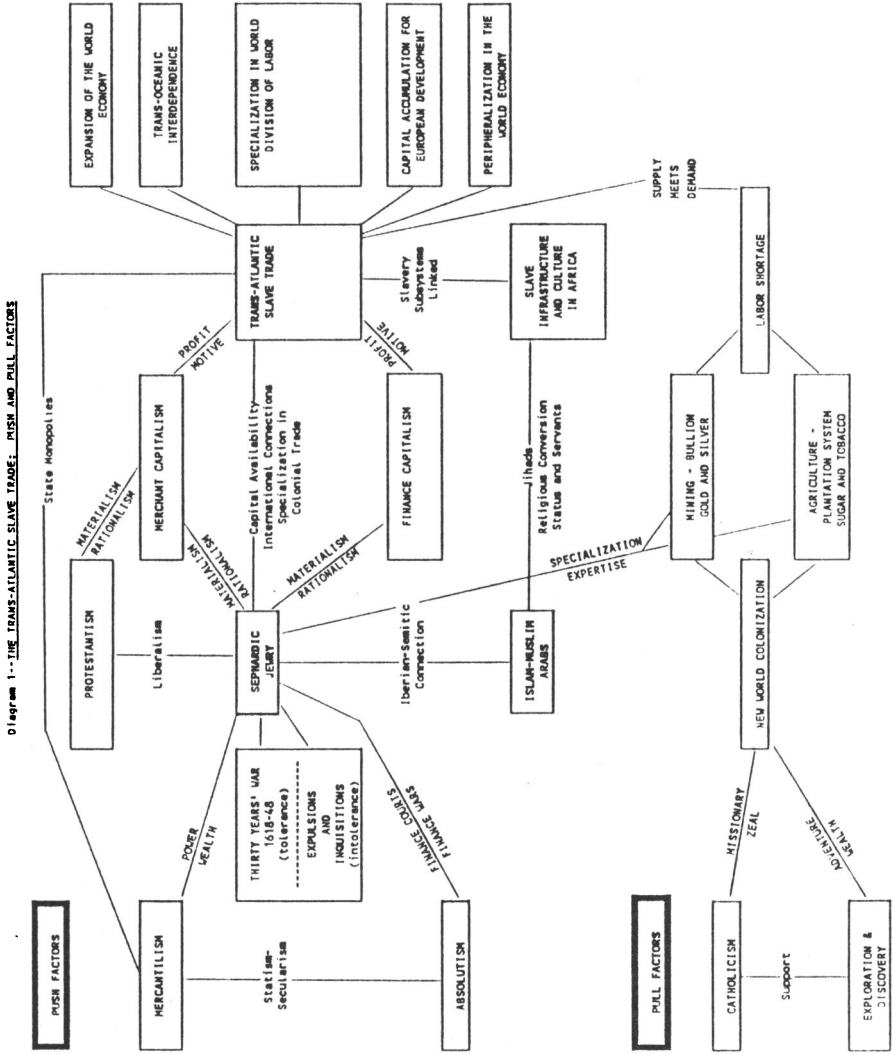
The impression here is, in retrospect, that Christian Europe would have been hard-pressed to establish a vital transoceanic slave network without direct participation by Jewry and indirect involvement by Muslim Arabs. Otherwise, why did Spain and Portugal of Catholic Europe depend so much on them to supply the slaves?

While Catholic Europe's preoccupation with slavery stemmed from "pull" or demand factors, slavery's workability on such a massive scale over centuries rested considerably on the "push" or supply factors related to the Semitic peoples in first structuring and then underwriting a sizeable portion of the African slave trade. As such, the slave trade's costly and risky nature was camouflaged by their contributions. Although the scattered pieces of evidence supporting these assertions are often indirect and circumstantial, the speculation is that New World slavery would have been on a smaller scale and of a shorter duration without Semitic support of and participation in the slave trade.

### **THE ROLE OF THE SEMITIC PEOPLES: A MODEL**

Diagram 1 shows the structure of relations among the relevant elements discovered in the investigation and subsequently employed in the analysis. This framework contains a non-exhaustive summary of those factors found to have influenced the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. These factors are divided into "push" (i.e., supply) and "pull" (i.e., demand) reservoirs, and reflect the order of political, economic, religious, and cultural bases for the trans-Atlantic slave trade spanning a broad sweep of time. The spatial and temporal parameters of the model include: the expulsions and inquisitions on Iberia during the late 1400s, Portuguese hegemony in the 1500s, the Thirty Years' War and Dutch hegemony in the 1600s, and British hegemony in the early 1700s.

Sallie/Role of Semitic Peoples in Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade



## JEWRY AND THE DUTCH SLAVE TRADE

Jonathan Israel unintentionally provides considerable support—both direct and indirect—of Jewry's connection to slavery over time. For instance, even though the Jews of Spain and Portugal had been either expelled or forced to convert to Christianity, they maintained colonial trade ties to Iberia. During the period 1595-1620, almost all Dutch Jewish trade was with Portugal and the Portuguese colonies.<sup>80</sup> This trade no doubt included slaves.

He convinces that Jewish skills and resources related to colonial trade generally and with sugar more specifically were regarded by the WIC as very necessary to Holland's colonial expansion in the New World. Also, many Brazilian emigres settled in the Caribbean, where they cultivated Amsterdam Jewry's sizeable post-1650 trade with the Dutch and Spanish colonies as well as with Barbados and Martinique.<sup>81</sup>

Dutch Jewry's role was pivotal due to the rise of Dutch Sephardic colonies in the Caribbean. Jewish Amsterdam then became tightly linked with Curacao in the 1660s and with Surinam in the 1670s. Curacao, which had the largest Sephardic community in the Caribbean, acted as the center for other Jewish communities on Barbados, Jamaica, Tobago, and Martinique. It functioned as the main port in the trade between Holland and the West Indies to become "a veritable Amsterdam of the Caribbean."<sup>82</sup>

Jewry's commercial collaboration and patronage system, where Court Jews and financiers were connected to Jewish merchants and traders, included the underwriting and trading of slaves.<sup>83</sup> In the Spanish colonies, Amsterdam's Sephardic Jews played a major role in the production of sugar and the running of plantations. In 1694, there were 500 Jews in Surinam who owned 40 sugar plantations and 9,000 slaves. By 1730, 115 of the 400 plantations in "Holland's most prosperous colony" were Jewish.<sup>84</sup>

Finally, Jonathan Israel asks the question as to the role and importance of Jewry during the age of mercantilism. His

answer is that of Jewish penetration into and cultivation of many vital east-west transit, colonial, and precious-metal trades. Their abilities allowed them to link the Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires with the trade routes of Europe and the Levant. The “uniquely close interaction” among Jewish communities provided them the instruments to:

“circulate precious metals and loans internationally more quickly and efficiently than any other network or grouping...no other grouping could match the Jews in the vast scope and range of their operations.”<sup>85</sup>

### **JEWRY, ENGLAND, AND THE SUGAR-SLAVERY CONNECTION**

England’s involvement in the slave trade can only be understood in reference to the explosive growth of the trans-Atlantic slave trade during the late 17th century when more slaves were sold in West Africa than in the previous 200 years combined.<sup>86</sup> An understanding of how and why this trade expanded, in turn, is clearly important in gaining historical perspective on the slave trade during the 18th and early 19th centuries.

The backdrop to the rise of England as a leader in colonial and slave trades was the movement of Dutch and Jewish capital from Amsterdam to London.<sup>87</sup> They were the major subscribers to English state loans, and the chief speculators in other investments—shares in the East India Company, the South Sea Company, and the Bank of England—which amounted to “a veritable Dutch invasion.”<sup>88</sup>

The rise of England as the main slave-trading nation corresponds with the First Anglo-Dutch War during 1652-54, the readmittance of the Jews into England in 1655, and the increase (and zenith) of Jewish commercial activities in London during the reign of Charles II.<sup>89</sup> Thereafter, Jewry had close financial and administrative ties to the major London



slave companies, the Royal African Company and the South Seas Company.<sup>90</sup>

British participation in the slave trade of the West Indies stemmed directly from sugar production. By 1700, English Jamaica produced half of all the sugar consumption in Western Europe.<sup>91</sup> Jews were preeminent in the sugar trade and had a major presence in both Barbados and Jamaica.<sup>92</sup> Even Louis XIV of Catholic France perceived the importance of Jewry in colonial trade with the Caribbean. He mentions that "... London Jews imported a not insignificant proportion of England's sugar imports from the Caribbean..."<sup>93</sup> and that Germany was furnished with sugar, tobacco, and other colonial goods by prominent Jewish merchants in London and Amsterdam.<sup>94</sup>

Although the Dutch West Indies Company dominated the slave trade during the mid-17th century, the English interest in West African trade was growing from the late 1650s. In 1660, Charles II granted charters to the Company of Royal Adventurers, and to the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading in 1663, into Africa. While the first charter concerned gold, the second one gave "the company the exclusive right among English traders to buy slaves on the West African coast."<sup>95</sup> Both were tied to Dutch-Jewish interests.

The importance of the sugar colonies, especially Barbados, in the transition of trade leadership from the Dutch to the British can hardly be disputed. Barbados was the largest of the sugar colonies which was originally supplied with slaves by the Dutch. After the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-54) slaves increased from 5,680 in 1645 to 82,023 by 1667. During this time, European goods were increasingly taken over by London merchants, and slaves were supplied by the newly set up Royal African Company.<sup>96</sup>

The linkages among Jewish communities in Barbados, Amsterdam, and London facilitated the sugar trade. A governor of Barbados stated that this trade was controlled by "thirty Jew families of Dutch extraction from Brazil" who were closely linked with other Jewish communities in London, Amsterdam,

and the Caribbean.<sup>97</sup>

The shift of Spain's slave trade away from Amsterdam to London except for those slaves coming from Curacao, where mostly Dutch Jews and only a few Protestants lived, also involved Jewish factors in London.<sup>98</sup> In addition, Dutch Jewry owned 12 of 23 tobacco-spinning and blending establishments at Amsterdam.<sup>99</sup> And, in the 1680s and 1690s, Sephardic Jews owned a high proportion of the eighty barques in Curacao.<sup>100</sup>

The growth of the trans-Atlantic, triangular trades, and the rise of London as a main colonial center in the late 1600s were crucial to the rise of London and the decline of Amsterdam as the world's financial and trading center.<sup>101</sup> Much of this trade involved slavery and slave-related activities by way of the Royal African Company and then the South Seas Company.<sup>102</sup> The belief here is that Jewish capital, tied to the sugar, tobacco, bullion, and slave trades, likely played a critical role in the transition from Dutch to British hegemony.

## CONCLUSION

This exploratory study started with the premise that further research on slavery was necessary to improve our understanding of the development of the modern world. It also viewed the trans-Atlantic slave trade as having been one of the most vital processes contributing to the creation and expansion of the world economy.

A noticeable omission in the literature became apparent: the absence of any work investigating the nature and extent of Semitic participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. And, while this work reflects the incipient stages of research, a couple of tentative generalizations are in order. Contrary to general belief, many Sephardic Jews had a sizeable and disproportionate involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, while Muslim Arabs played a lesser and more indirect role.

This work does not intend to get embroiled in the issued

debate among Werner Sombart, Herbert Bloom, Fernand Braudel, and Jonathan Israel over the centrality of Jewry in the creation and evolution of European capitalism. Some highly noticeable patterns do emerge, though, which tangentially relate to the discussion. As Jews were forced to move from Northern Italy and the Iberia to the United Provinces and, then, to Great Britain (and to the United States), so do apparently a number of other things shift: centers of mass capital, core-trading dominance in the world economy, state hegemonic-leadership in the political-military sphere, as well as a national concern with slavery or even national preeminence in the slave trade. There are other plausible explanations for these outcomes and their apparent synchronization: increased liberal tolerance of other industrious and enterprising religious minorities in addition to Jewry; embellished standards of Western rationality and more concern with materialistic life; and, the legitimization of profit-seeking at the individual, family, and group levels outside of the state's interests.

Future research requires quantification of the extent of Semitic participation in the Atlantic slave trade for specific periods. There are works which have quantified the number of black Africans enslaved and transferred to the New World, the Dutch share in the slave trade, and the profitability of slavery. Other works have gauged the Jewish share of the Dutch trade with Iberia, Jewish investment in the West Indies Company, and the number of Jewish sugar plantations in Surinam. The number of African slaves transported across to West Africa, as well as those diverted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic markets by Muslim Arabs should also be calculated. Even if only rough estimates are made, they should constitute an advancement toward understanding the origin of and full rationale for black African slavery.

An investigation of the possible linkages among Semitic cultural traits, situational factors, and proclivities toward involvement with the slave trade might prove productive. More work obviously needs to be done in these areas. Only then can we put together more of the missing pieces of the puzzle so as

to improve our picture of a process which either forged, enriched, damaged, or shattered so many civilizations in the world.

What might be the significance of the findings from this investigation? The research revealed that the Semitic peoples, driven by a mixture of religious and materialistic factors, as well as “pushed” by anti-semitism and “pulled” by New World labor needs, became directly involved in and supportive of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Their participation in this activity (and in many others) significantly contributed to expanding and defining a truly world economy and, hence, to the very creation of the modern world.

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