



Devir, Nathan P., *New Children of Israel. Emerging Jewish Communities in an Era of Globalization*. Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 2017, 336 pp. ISBN: 978-1-60781-584-6.

The book *New Children of Israel*, edited by the University of Utah Press, is certainly a relevant contribution to the Jewish Studies' scientific research domain, particularly in the so called developing world. Contemporary Judaizing movements from unknown geographic locations in scientific production's terms, keep on progressing and attracting the concern of very few researchers who are attentive to their unfoldment. Such interest already represents a solid and considerable area of investigation among the social and human sciences, at the international scale, namely on historical, anthropological, sociological and international relations disciplines.

The book was written by Nathan P. Devir, a Jewish Studies, Religious Studies and Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies Professor and a PhD researcher from the University of Utah, who is also the director of the Middle East Center and the Religious Studies Program, who's academic interest converges on the ways Jewish identity is constructed, both at the individual and collective levels, specially aiming to understand how the 'Judaizing', 'neo-Jewish' or 'self-defining' Jewish congregations comparatively perceive and state their own senses of belonging in specific Western, African and Asian locations.

Several relevant social and cultural phenomena produced in the last centuries have been preconized by certain cultural groups or individual figures who have a strong connection to the Jewish matrix realm worldwide. Ambiguity or subjectivity on the role such figures played in cultural, political, historic, economic or other points of view, and their recognition is still in debate. Yet, their imprint or the ways they have been depicted and socially represented is part of our collective imaginary and exists as an unquestionable fact. All knowledge collected and built regarding differences as much as regularities concerning 'Jews', 'so called Jews' or 'self-defining Jews' is, therefore, a valuable effort to contribute to understand not only the current *klal Yisrael* – worldwide Jewish community, but humanity as a whole, in itself.

The structure of the book is light reading as it contains three chapters, one introduction and conclusions. The chapters refer to each of the cases the author intended to comparatively explore and study: The House of Israel, in Ghana, the House of the Righteous, in Cameroon, and the House of Ephraim, in south India. Each chapter contains sufficiently pertinent and very new information on the past and present of each case described and analyzed, regarding the seeds and roots of each emerging community, their evolution and the constraints each one endured and still faces to build their ethnicity and differentiation or otherness in relation to the surrounding national society, to the Jewish external world and to the globalized pressures. More specifically, the aims of the book's author were: to search for the symbolic and ideo-

logic base of each community; to look for patterns in the congregant's oral histories, inherited local narratives and stories; to understand the definition of Jewishness or the notions of intra and interethnic Jewish identity produced in each case studied and their conflicting knots; the role (a privileged) shared heritage and genealogical (Jewish) background play in identity formation of the congregants and the possible influence of other religiosities such as Christianity, Islam, or traditional religions, whether indigenous grass-root, whether mixed with foreign colonial creeds, such as Christianized local movements that tend to privilege the Old Testament over the New; to uncover the ways Judaism grows as a pre-colonial phenomenon in different time-space settings; to observe the degree of impact the media and culture have on the knowledge acquisition of 'how to be a Jew'; and to discern the political consequences of millions of self-defining Jews from developing states conceivable immigration to Israel. To sum, the main objective of the researcher was to stress the definitions of being Jewish in different contemporary unlikely and unexpected contexts.

The book's morphology offers the reader quite a perceptible sequence of the knowledge produced on the selected Judaizing movements. The ever-lasting 'Gordian knot' concerning Jewish identity –or the 'old Jewish question'– is particularly significant and highlighted with the author's present comparative inductive analysis. This is visible because the author stresses three post-colonial 'new' or 'wanting to be Jewish' communities (two in African soil and one in Asian continent; two former British colonies and one former French possession) that face the lack of Jewish ethnic infrastructures, endure corruption issues, and share a strong need of external support. Also, the author noticeably shows that despite the fact that the same kind of slavery that existed in Africa did not occur in the Indian case, not only the House of Ephraim community members belong to the bottom layer of the Indian social pyramid but they share with the African communities a sense of collective victimization, in their case, a common resistance against the social injustice attached to the 'scheduled tribes' oppressive system, as well.

A fourth case of a so called Jewish *Kehila* in Madagascar is unorthodoxically presented however in the conclusion of the book. Even if it is in a dismantling process as justified by the author to include this 'new Jewish' community in the final conclusive part, it could have been integrated in the text's body as a chapter, *per se*, since considerable comparative data was available, useful to specially highlight the possible outcomes of such endeavors, i.e., showing that not always the future of emerging 'new Jewish communities' is realistically bright, although they constitute the complex and plural realm of the ever changing social Jewish history and culture.

The author argues that authenticity concerning the identification categories is not important and resorts to a not so new definition of ethnicity (Nagel, 2000), stating that what matters is the way individuals articulate their own perceptions of what a Jew is and the meaning attributed to those perceptions in their daily lives (Devir, p. 12). It is left to the reader to choose if these self-proclaimed Jews deserve proper recognition as Jews in the full mainstream sense, who have heroically resisted against all odds (e. g. colonialism) or who are simply opportunistic groups who seek the advantages attached to a possible Israeli or international set of aid actions coming from outreach Jewish organizations, according to each reader's own criteria or mindset. Seen in such a polarized fashion, the analysis seems to reject the primordialism paradigm that reasons that ethnic groups tend to sympathize with those belonging to their own group and tend to dislike the 'others', and privilege a Boasian 'cultural

relativism' view, according to which all ethnic groups are equally valid, as much as an instrumentalist approach to identity affiliations, when notions of belonging are manipulated by the elites in order to fulfill certain power-relations goals. Identities are in fact constructed, situational *bricoleur's* byproducts, and a culturally inflected phenomena, as the author well argues. However, the hybridity added to the different intensity levels linked to the ethnic identities are neglected. The old sociometric scales of attitudes could have been of help in this particular range of attachment to Judaism's measure.

A gap in gender balance regarding the feminine voices in this book is apologized for on the account of 'local custom' impeding the author to interview women, when alone. Still, the possible use of mediators or a female advisor or translator during fieldwork, could have resolved the gap.

A note is also due to the Iberian Peninsula Jews as forcibly converted and dispersed during the Inquisition Era. A recurrent mistake is reproduced in this book (pp. 28-29) where those Jews are misjudged as only having Spanish origin, while Portugal –also an Iberian country– had a similar yet different and much longer history of Jewish persecutions and was certainly an imperial power with a much wider influence in Africa and India, comparing to Spain.

Unprecedented religious freedom is declared to predominate in modern post-Emancipation times (p. 52). And it is true that democratizations and technological innovation brought by modernity and blistered in contemporary globalized societies contributed to mingle secularism with human rights and freedom notions of *à la carte* religious individual or communal affiliation choices. A discussion on comparative cosmopolitanism –the *gheniza* world– in the past, like the tolerance experienced by Jews for example in Alexandria, Constantinople, Rome or even/again in the Iberian Peninsula, before the Inquisitions is not mentioned.

Often the local custom and traditional tribal rituals are referred in this strongly convincing book, as foundational basis for certain practices that are also kin to Jewish cultural praxis, such as circumcision, burial of the deceased, food taboos or menstrual seclusion. Regrettably, the author could have explored with greater length the extent to which the local indigenous traditions interfere and mix with other external religious influences resulting in those adopted by the Judaizing movements.

Furthermore, the book is well equipped with a thick theoretical framework and is especially impressive in terms of the multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) ethnography that was for long years carried out by the author in several latitudes. A librarian might be questioning in which section should he or she be shelving this particular book, as a comprehensive range of scientific theories and methodologies were in use to produce it. Nonetheless, given the weight of participant observation and qualitative interviews, the reader may infer that the main ballast is Anthropology.

The contemporary and diverse bibliographic references and the well-organized extra-texts data employed are a sustainable capital that enables the reader to conclude also that an approach to such geographically different emerging Jewish congregations and their thick (Geertz, 1973) or thin descriptions (Jackson, 2014) needs a multidisciplinary army, to fulfill the task, as it was done by the author.

Devir's book is a progress in the field of Jewish Studies, giving voice to those who also claim their Jewishness and who so often do not get recognition from the 'others'. It is in consequence a critical must read to all those interested in Judaism in its most pluralistic form and implausible geographic settings, namely not only schol-

ars but specially policy makers, journalists, and young researchers with a sufficiently openminded spirit to human-Jewish difference. It may harm those stricter viewers of a mainstream righteous wing of Judaism who consider the seed and the fruit as having the same shape and color.

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