

BOOK REVIEW

Nathan P. Devir. *New Children of Israel: Emerging Jewish Communities in an Era of Globalization*. Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2017. xvi + 289 pp. Photographs. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781607815846.

Little-known communities in Africa and Asia that self-identify as Jewish have gained increasing attention in recent years. With his 2017 book *New Children of Israel: Emerging Jewish Communities in an Era of Globalization*, Nathan P. Devir provides a fascinating insight into these communities.

It all began when Devir, an associate professor at the University of Utah, spent a month in Ghana among ethnic Sefwi who claim to be the descendants of ancient Hebrews. The members of this Ghana community became interested in Judaism in the 1970s as a “kind of impromptu Old Testamentism” (xiii). In studying the scriptures and their own African traditions, the Sefwi noticed common elements between their cultural practices and religious Judaism: circumcision, Sabbath observance, and similar rules regarding food and burial practices.

Based on these commonalities, the Sefwi self-identified as Jews and now call themselves the “House of Israel.” Thanks to the Internet, they eventually connected to the wider Jewish world, particularly in the U.S., and asked for support and guidance. Soon it became clear that the Sefwi were by no means alone in their aspirations. Other self-defining Jewish groups exist not just in Ghana, but also in Brazil, Cameroon, India, Kenya, Madagascar, and Uganda. This list is by no means all inclusive, as the numbers of “new” children of Israel could be in the millions (xiv).

The study of the Sefwi turned out to be only the beginning of Devir’s larger scholarly project on so-called “neo-Jewish,” “Judaizing,” or “self-defining Jewish” communities in Africa and India. In his book, Devir provides an overview of various groups and developments, but mainly examines two other field-based case studies from the developing world: the “Internet Jews of Cameroon” in Africa and “the Children of Eprahim” in India. Most of these neo-Jews were formerly Christians who came from religious communities that focused on the Old Testament, but some went a step further and broke away from Christianity.

A particularly fascinating chapter deals with the “Internet Jews” of Cameroon. For some rural Christian communities in that nation, their spiritual awakening came solely via online connections. Devir writes,

“Its discovery of the postbiblical Jewish religion came about by chance, when some of its members started surfing the Internet in the late 1990s” (117). This group embraced Judaism in 1998. Naming themselves “Beth Yeshourun” (The House of the Righteous), they began practicing Judaism based on what they had found on the Internet.

Of these new communities, all but the Cameroon community claims to be descendant from the ancient Israelites. Genealogy and historical claims play a very important role in these movements. In this context, the best well-known case is that of the Ethiopian Jews.

The Jewish Ethiopians consider themselves descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel. These ten lost tribes were captured and enslaved by the Assyrians around 700 BCE, eventually vanishing from history. However, the Ethiopian Jews saw themselves as the long-lost Israelite tribe of Dan, a view that was ultimately validated by Israeli religious authorities in 1973. Out of the groups discussed in this review essay, the Ethiopian Jews remain to date the only ones recognized by the majority of the world’s Jewry as descendants of ancient Israelites.

In the final chapter, Devir looks at The “Children of Ephraim” in south India—formerly Christianized untouchables, whose claim to descent from a lost tribe started late in the 1980s. These “untouchable yet chosen” people have very little contact with the larger Jewish world (171). The “Children of Ephraim’s” existence and cohesion is due to the vision and organizational talent of one man, Shmuel Jacobi. He is now in his sixties and, as Devir points out, the future of this Judaizing group without him remains rather uncertain.

The question at the core of this book concerns the very definition of Jewishness: what constitutes being Jewish? The diversity among the Jews of the Americas, Europe, and Israel is already impressive, and there is no consensus on the ultimate definition of Jewishness. The rabbis of the Talmud (the traditional body of Jewish law) have historically defined it biologically, based on the mother’s Jewishness. Devir’s working definition of Jewishness follows the view of Caryn Aviv and David Shneer that the idea of “‘the Jewish people’ means not that all the Jews are one but, rather, that all Jews share one thing and one thing alone—they identify as Jews, whatever that may mean” (53). In a complex globalized modern world, although controversial, that is certainly a useful definition of Jewishness.

Devir’s well-written book does not judge, but presents facts and balanced views instead. *New Children of Israel* is an important and original contribution to the Jewish Studies scholarship as well as to the study of the phenomenon of growing globalized religious movements largely due to the Internet.

Gerald J. Steinacher
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska
gsteinacher2@unl.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2019.55

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Hodgson, Dorothy L. 2009. "Becoming Indigenous in Africa." *African Studies Review* 52 (3): 1–32. doi:10.1353/arw.0.0302.
- Kandeh, Jimmy D. 1992. "Politicization of Ethnic Identities in Sierra Leone." *African Studies Review* 35 (1): 81–99. doi:10.2307/524446.
- Sundiata, Ibrahim K. 1996. "Africanity, Identity and Culture." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 24 (2): 13–17. doi:10.1017/S1548450500005060.