

REVIEW ESSAY

The “White House” of Judaism: Under Renovation, New Hues May Apply

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Edith Bruder and Tudor Parfitt, eds. 2012. *African Zion: Studies in Black Judaism*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 368 pp.

Tudor Parfitt. 2013. *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University. 238 pp.

There is an ancient ivory manor, sturdy in structure but with some weather-beaten façades. It is occupied by several branches of a venerable family who get along fitfully but co-exist nevertheless. But now new folk are clamoring at the gates for entry. They claim that the property belongs to them, too. They also say that the walls are in need of repair, and they are prepared to undertake the renovations. Some of them are clutching newly printed deeds; others say they are previous occupants, about whom the current dwellers have either forgotten or pretend to have forgotten. The befuddled gatekeepers of the house need to decide whom of these claimants, if any, to admit.

Such is the parable of the “white house” of Judaism, whose fractious residents (ranging from Ultraorthodox to Secular Humanist residents) have overwhelmingly, if unconsciously, shared one epidermal trait: whether Ashkenazi, Sephardi, or Mizrahi, they are on the pallid side of the pigmentation spectrum. Increasingly, however, tenancy rights to the ancestral Jewish abode are being claimed by new Jews of color. As for the gatekeepers who by convention choose who gets into the “house of Judaism”: please read on.

Each of the two books under review constitutes an essential contribution to two complementary streams of scholarship that previously have been advanced with relatively little overlap: the one on established and emerging Jewish communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, the other on Black American Jews, Hebrews, and Israelites. Constituted from different types of building blocks—the 2012 book is an edited collection of papers, the 2013 one a compilation from a lecture series—together the two books significantly advance and reinforce the budding literature on the growing importance of Judaism among various African peoples and within a small but noteworthy segment of the African-American diaspora. This synergy is not surprising, given the collaboration of both books’ authors on *African Zion* and the integration of their previous findings in *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas*. Cumulatively, Bruder’s and Parfitt’s scholarship is particularly important for African studies and religious studies, both of which appear slow to acknowledge African Judaism. Case in point: a supposedly comprehensive overview on “Religion in Africa in the

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v14/v14i1-2a7.pdf>

Past Fifty Years” at the 2012 Roundtable at the Centre of African Studies conference at the University of Edinburgh made no mention whatsoever of any Jewish phenomenon on the continent. When I tried in the Q & A to elicit some such acknowledgment or discussion, the effort was met with as much enthusiasm as a plate of pork chops served up on Yom Kippur.

The major aim of *African Zion* is two-fold: to provide an historical (two-century) overview of the evolving representation, conceptualization, and reconfiguration of black Jews in both Africa and the United States, and to explicate how a distinct black Jewish identity has emerged out of Africans’ and Europeans’ understanding of Judaism and Jewishness in the African and African diaspora contexts. To do this, editors Bruder and Parfitt provide a three-part structure for the wide-ranging essays of their book. Part I, after Tudor Parfitt’s presentation of the “(de)construction” of black Jews (evolving perceptions of African Jewish identities from the peak of the African slave trade in about 1800 to the genetic testing of the Lemba in the mid-1990s), focuses on West Africa: three chapters on Nigerian Igbo who have adopted Judaism or have otherwise identified with the Jewish state of Israel, and one on an even newer community of African Jews in Ghana. Part II is the most wide-ranging section of the book. Here we read of Nahum Slouschewsky’s early twentieth-century attempts to retrospectively create a trans-African Jewish proto-empire in antiquity, and equally creative (albeit more scholarly-based) arguments for an Israelite tradition of origin for the otherwise emphatically non-Hebraic (not to mention non-Zionist) cradle of the Hausa people of northern Nigeria and Niger Republic. (Given the virulently violent nature of the Hausa-dominated Boko Haram movement, in league with Al-Qaeda and currently wreaking havoc in Nigeria, the putative Israelite Hausa myth of origin is bitterly ironic if not outright provocative.) This middle section of *African Zion* also contains chapters on Judaic scriptural, liturgical and cultural practices among the Beta Israel of Ethiopia and the Lemba of Zimbabwe and South Africa. The final section of *African Zion* presents the most challenges for actual Africanists, at least as narrowly defined. Here we shift hybridic gears to delve into the otherwise fascinating communities of Jewish, Israelite, and Hebrew-identifying descendants of African slaves (each with its own nuances) from New York City to Dimona in the Negev Desert (with a welcome stopover in the Caribbean, courtesy of Marla Brettschneider, for post-colonial and diaspora studies novelist Jamaica Kincaid.) The concluding chapter focuses on “black” Jews who have no genealogic connection to Africa at all: Dalits (“untouchables”) in Andhra Pradesh, India.

If, by the very nature of an edited collection, the constituent parts of *African Zion* vary by tone, length and quality, *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* is uniformly exemplary in its evenness of form and excellence in substance. Originally conceived as a series of presentations at Harvard University (the 2011 Nathan I. Huggins Lectures), the book recapitulates Tudor Parfitt’s more than two decades of investigations, from the 1984 exodus of the “Falashas” via Sudan to genetic testing of the Lembas in the mid-1990s, into Jews in sub-Saharan Africa and the African diaspora in the U.S. and West Indies. (Parfitt is Emeritus Professor of Modern Jewish Studies at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies [SOAS]. Edith Bruder, who under Prof. Parfitt’s supervision wrote her dissertation [later published as *Black Jews of Africa* and reviewed in this journal in volume 11:2-3] is Research Associate at SOAS.) Parfitt’s deep historical and theological knowledge affords a contextualized understanding of the sensitive topic of race in Judaism, beginning with post-Biblical interpretations (Christian as well as Jewish) of the story of Ham, the son of Noah who was (somewhat inexplicably) punished by having his descendants (later identified as African) “cursed” with black skin. By the nineteenth century, proto-

anthropology had transformed this myth into the pseudo-scientific Hamitic hypothesis, according to which the more “evolved” of African tribes were of Hebrew/Israelite origin. From there, it was a short theo-historical hop to discovering Lost Tribes of Israel in the most unexpected corners of Saharan, Sahelian, and Sudanic Africa. Parfitt’s eminently readable exposition is as much about the internalization by (some) Africans of this belief in Jewish origins as it is about the projection of the construct by (mostly) European missionaries and early ethnologists. In the context of descendants of black Africans in the New World, appropriation of Chosen People and Zionistic paradigms vied with Hamitic internalizations to give rise to self-identifying Black Jewish, Israelite, and Hebrew communities and synagogues in America. What remains inexplicable is why the common nineteenth-century “knowledge” (or expectation) of ancient Israelite descendants across the African continent should have been lost, subject to recovery today as a “new” and “surprising” phenomenon. Parfitt gamely moves in his book from colonial Africa to contemporary Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe where (some) Sefwi, Igbo,, and Lemba emphatically claim Jewish ancestry. Why are these communities so energetic today? Given what Parfitt has documented about real and imagined African Israelites from time immemorial, why do students of Africa, Jewish and not, learn of them today with *de novo* surprise?

We are living in an era in which the color of Catholicism has been turning steadily darker. In Europe, for example, priests are increasingly being recruited from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Evangelical Protestantism is also expanding mightily in these regions. Is the darkening complexion of Western Christianity a precursor to the future of Judaism? The two books under review do not raise the question directly, but do provide incontrovertible elements to engage it. At the very least, the growing phenomena of black African Jews and Jews of African descent ought to be considered through comparative religious studies lens as NRMs (New Religious Movements).

To return to the parable of the “house of Judaism”: traditionally, the gatekeepers—the deciders of admission to Jewry and Judaism—have been the rabbis. Yet of all the diverse perspectives honored through publication in these otherwise inclusive treatments of Jewish identity, it is the *rabbinic* voice which is most conspicuous in its absence. It is as if the authors and editors posed the question “Is Judaism too important to leave to rabbis?” and provocatively (if not problematically) answered in the affirmative.

Not that there will ever be inter-denominational rabbinic consensus on the contentious question “Who is a Jew?” One conundrum that these books brings to mind is that it is neither necessary nor sufficient to practice Judaism in order for the Chief Rabbinate of Israel—the single most influential rabbinic authority that does exist—to consider somebody as Jewish. A vociferously anti-rabbinic overt American atheist is still considered a Jew if her mother was Jewish; a Judaism-devout African who regularly prays, in Hebrew, in a *minyan* (Jewish prayer quorum) would not be considered a Jew by that same Rabbinate, absent maternal lineage or formal conversion. For sure, different rabbis of different denominations will apply different standards and come to different conclusions. Still, the unmediated voice of Judaism’s longstanding “gatekeepers” is relevant, even if disagreement among them about “Black Jews” and “Black Judaism” is inevitable. May future treatments of these emerging African and African diasporic communities provide room for rabbinic voices as well.

In the meantime, *African Zion* and *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* represent significant additions both to the longstanding fields of African studies, Jewish studies, and religious studies, as well as to the budding one of diaspora studies.