Book Reviews

Edith Bruder


William F.S. Miles


There are most likely two major audiences for a pair of books about black Jews in Africa. First, of course, are the scholars interested in the religions of Africa; and second, Jews interested in the idea of Jewish ‘peoplehood’ and what comprises Jewish identity. Indeed, the numerous ‘Judaizing’ groups whose assertions of Jewish identity arose in the twentieth century in more than a dozen African nations cry out for explanation. How did they come to this self-proclaimed identity, what is their theology and practice, and is there a definitive answer to the question, ‘Are they Jews?’ Although the numbers of Africans practicing Judaism in some form are tiny compared to the overall population, there are tens of thousands in this curious demographic, and the implications for Israel—which is currently home to 130,000 Ethiopian Jewish citizens, many of whom are struggling to adapt—are potentially significant.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Ethiopian Jews, who have been studied and written about abundantly, won recognition from the Israeli Rabbinate. However, the other Judaizing communities on the African continent have not come close to receiving the same acceptance or attention. Bruder’s The Black Jews of Africa remedies that neglect and shines a wide and revealing spotlight on these unrecognized groups and how they came to construct their Jewish identity. Moreover, as she states in her introduction, their existence ‘challenges existing western racial ideas on what constitutes Jewish identity and ethnicity’(5). However, Bruder concerns herself with tracing their development and describing their current communities; she does not attempt to arbitrate the challenge to the prevailing ideas of Jewish identity.
In a different type of book, William F.S. Miles, a Northeastern University political science professor who has been visiting Nigeria since the 1970s, narrates his intense and personal encounter with the Igbo Jews of Abuja. Miles engaged them not as an academic, even though he focuses on Nigeria professionally, but as a Jew intrigued by the religious practice and self-proclaimed identity of coreligionists he was unaware of until 2008. In his anecdotal *Jews of Nigeria*, he introduces us to the people he has come to know, their individual paths to Jewish self-identification, and how religious life is practiced among the Igbo Jews (whom he has dubbed ‘Jubos’). Like Bruder, Miles believes that the black Jews he writes about should give all those interested in the boundaries of the Jewish people ‘something to wrestle with’ (ix).

Bruder’s comprehensive work began as a doctoral thesis supervised by Tudor Parfitt, a veteran scholar in this field. She examines both mythical and historical accounts of a Jewish presence in Africa from ancient to modern times. Bruder brings into sharp focus how their putative Hebraic origins were introduced to them by the European colonial powers. Her purpose is ‘to review the processes and the immensely complex interactions that shaped these new religious identities’ (4), and she ambitiously seeks ‘to disentangle—in regions with little written history—the true from the likely and unlikely’ (99).

Her book is organized into three sections. Part 1 provides a background in the common biblical tropes that contributed to the formation of ideas about Africa in ancient times, including the concept of the Lost Tribes, the land of Kush, the relationship between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the creation of the Great Zimbabwe, and the medieval writings of Eldad HaDani, Benjamin of Tudela, and others. Part 2 introduces the once-prevalent idea of the shared blackness of Africans and Jews. As implausible as it sounds, evidence that ‘black’ was a symbol for evil and otherness from Roman times to the nineteenth century is plentiful. She cites the Roman historian Tacitus, who pejoratively characterizes Jews and Africans similarly. ‘What was seen as their physical ugliness—long nose, flat feet, and hairy body—was merely a component of their blackness’ (46). Seventeenth-century travelers ‘accepted stereotypes of Jewish racial otherness, including the belief that Jews were black-skinned’ (47). Bruder introduces the Hamitic hypothesis, according to which some black groups originated ‘in the north’ as descendants of the biblical Ham. The theory was used to explain the discovery of African civilization and accomplishments, such as the Great Zimbabwe.

Bruder provides abundant and fascinating accounts of the ways in which Europeans consistently and creatively misinterpreted their observations of African practices. For example, Henry Flynn, stationed in the Natal in 1820 as part of the Native Affairs Commission, believed he had found practices among