The study of Jews and Judaism in Africa has long been linked to colonial imaginaries and fantasies of discovery. In *The Jewish Phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Marla Brettschneider takes on the contemporary manifestations of this legacy and offers a way forward for scholars and others who wish to engage with African Jewish communities in ways that work against colonial histories, cultural and religious imperialism, and rigidly orthodox and patriarchal interpretations of Judaism.

At the heart of Brettschneider’s approach is a rejection of dominant frameworks that position African Jews as marginal in relation to ‘mainstream Judaism’ and in doing so naturalize African Jews as Other and questionable. Brettschneider coins the phrase ‘Jewish and Jewishly related phenomenon’ as a corrective to existing overarching terminology such as ‘emerging Jews’ and ‘Judaizing movements’ that undermines the experiences of African and African-descended people, many of whom have known themselves to be Jewish (or Jewishly related) for hundreds of years and longer. She notes that existing terminology does not resonate for African Jews, many of whom view themselves as Christians alongside their identifications as Jews or Israelites. She also points out that many scholars and others who embrace terminology for African Jews that emphasizes delimited religious parameters of Judaism do not question non-African Jews’ enactments of a more-complicated relationship to Jewishness that may include a wide range of religious innovations and variations, as well as secular, ethnic, and nation-based Jewish identities that are quite independent of religious belief or practice. Moving away from the dominant framework, Brettschneider instead adopts a Global North/Global South framework that highlights power dynamics and inequalities rather than implicit judgments of legitimacy and authenticity. This framework enables Brettschneider to call into question current demographic conventions that place the majority of the world’s Jews in the United States and Israel, and that entirely fail to account for most of the African Jews in the world. Reversing this failure would demand a rethinking of Jewish diversity not only in relation to race but also in relation to the status of nonrabbinic Jewish practice.

A major strength and innovation of this book is its framing as political philosophy. Brettschneider identifies five strands of political discourse that inform research in this field. The book is organized around these five discourses, with a chapter devoted to each one: state, nation, rabbinic, scientific,
and patriarchal. Her argument is that not only are each of these discourses foundational and unexamined in approaches to African Jews, they together demonstrate the extent to which dominant Jewish discourses are shaped by and invested in Western Christian modernity. Another strength of the book is Brettschneider’s arguments about rabbinic discourse. She demonstrates that rabbinic discourse has historically been contradictory, fractured, and unevenly embraced, yet African Jews are consistently scrutinized according to rabbinic standards (sometimes Orthodox, sometimes not) despite the fact that Jews in the Global North are rarely subjected to the same. This is especially problematic, Brettschneider argues, since many African Jews trace their Jewish origins to prerabbinic times and/or follow traditions that can be understood as Toraitic rather than rabbinic.

Readers should note that this book is less about Judaism and Jewishness in Africa per se than it is about the discourses that inform Judaism and Jewishness in the Global North and persistent problems in how Global North scholars and Jews approach Judaism and Jewishness in African contexts. This approach enables Brettschneider to make important interventions into this field of study, but it also has several drawbacks. Most significant is a flattening of the nuanced histories and experiences of the African and African-descendant people whose practices and theologies constitute this phenomenon. Similarly, Brettschneider invokes anthropology as a source of problematic discourses despite the fact that many of the texts that she builds on or notes as exemplary of the kind of work that should be done in the future are in fact written by anthropologists (see for example Abu El-Haj 2012, Jackson 2013, Seeman 2010, and Tamarkin 2014). Finally, while Brettschneider’s interventions into the research field that defines itself as the study of African Jews and Jews in Africa are groundbreaking in that context, they may be less so for other scholars of religion in Africa who are working in fields that have long critiqued and worked against the kinds of discourses that Brettschneider takes on here. This discrepancy, however, is exactly the point for Brettschneider: why is it, she asks, that scholarship about Jews and Judaism in sub-Saharan Africa is so persistently framed by colonial and imperialist sensibilities? Ultimately, this book serves as a call for future research that works against these tendencies, and it lays important groundwork toward that task.

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