Book Review


Reviewed by: Andrew Tobolowsky, College of William & Mary, abtobolowsky@wm.edu

In *Old Canaan in the New World*, Dr. Elizabeth Fenton offers a new history of a phenomenon that is well-enough recognized, but rarely described in much depth—what she calls the ‘Hebraic Indian theory’. More typically, it is called the ‘Jewish Indian theory’, but Fenton makes the persuasive argument that the term is historically inadequate. In general, the theory was premised on the tradition of the so-called ‘Lost Tribes of Israel’, who went into Assyrian exile around 722 BCE and vanished from sight. But, as Fenton observes, ‘Assyria conquered the Kingdom of Israel before the development of the religion we now call Judaism’ (3). And anyway, she points out, Jewish Indian theorists were rarely interested in the Jews, or Judaism. They were largely Christian, and white, and their vision of what would make the natives Jewish, or of Jewish extraction, was often ‘a caricature drawn from longstanding anti-Jewish stereotypes’ (4). She, however, keeps the term ‘Indian’ because of the way ‘it evokes the complexity of European and American encounters’—reflecting the erasure of Native American difference and other negative aspects of colonial encounters, but also the actuality of a term that could sometimes be used by the natives for themselves, in the context of these encounters (5).

Overall, this is a fascinating book, with deep relevance for the study of an important and neglected phenomenon—the Hebraic Indian theory itself. It is, essentially, divided into two parts. The first three chapters discuss the history of the theory from the time of Thomas Thorowgood, the English Presbyterian minister whose 1650 and 1660 publications on the subject of the presence of Jews in America—or *Iewes in America*, as the first was titled—are the main subjects of the first chapter. Next is a
consideration of the work of James Adair, who lived in America and offered apparent anthropological and anecdotal proofs of the theory in 1775’s History of the American Indians. Fenton credits him with revitalizing the Theory when it seemed on the verge of fading away. Fenton’s history then concludes with a discussion of Elias Boudinot’s 1816 A Star in the West. Boudinot was an important early American politician whose ‘reputation lent a degree of legitimacy to the Hebraic Indian theory’—though as Fenton takes pains to observe, no less an intellectual than Dr. Benjamin Rush had asked Lewis and Clark to keep a weather eye out for Israelites not much earlier (16–17).

Next, building on this background, the second half of the study analyzes several additional books and how they were both shaped by, and helped shape, the Hebraic Indian theory. Chapter four concerns the Book of Mormon, presumably the most influential presentation of the Hebraic Indian theory that is still read, along with more contemporary Mormon approaches to the question of the whereabouts of the Lost Tribes. Chapter five describes the decline of the theory in the context of ‘Indian Removal’, especially through the lens of James Fennimore Cooper’s The Bee Hunter, while chapter six returns to the intellectual world of the Mormons to discuss ‘hollow earth theories’ of the whereabouts of the tribes. This chapter also concerns what Fenton calls ‘’mound-builder’ literature’, which is to say, settler apprehensions about what might be found in the various native mounds that dotted the countryside—and through the lens of another book, De Witt Clinton Chipman’s Beyond the Verge: Home of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel (1895). Finally, the conclusion offers a series of fascinating insights on the relationship between the older search for the tribes in America and contemporary efforts to search for Israelite ancestry through DNA evidence generally, and through Native American DNA specifically.

Generally, this is quite a valuable contribution to an emerging set of discussions on the topic of the search for Israel—and identifications with Israel—around the world, but especially in America. These discussions include, I admit, my own recent effort, and Matthew Dougherty’s Lost Tribes Found: Israelite Indians and Religious Nationalism in Early America (2021). Among slightly older and more general studies, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite’s The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History (2013) and Tudor Parfitt’s The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth (2003) stand out. But the fact that serious, book-length recent efforts to study such a genuinely consequential historical phenomenon can more or less be listed in a paragraph shows part of why Fenton’s effort is so welcome.

If there is a criticism to be made about the book it is only this—that there is a certain tension between its framing, as a study of the Hebraic Indian theory full stop, and the fact that each chapter is largely focused
on a single book from a single period. At the same time, it is easy to see the advantages of this approach, and Fenton capitalizes on them richly. Most studies of the Hebraic Indian theory in, for example, the era discussed in her first chapter, will of course mention key figures in its development, like Thorowgood, and his notable conversation partners John Dury and Manasseh ben Israel. However, they will not, and could not, give so fully fleshed a picture of that era, those conversations, the twists and turns in British political history between 1650’s *Jews in America* and 1660’s *Jews in America*, the relationship of Thorowgood’s discussion of probability to mathematical philosophies in development at that time—echoes, for example, of Pascal’s Wager—and his use of the writings of Peter Martyr, among other interesting observations. All of this makes one of her central conclusions—that Thorowgood’s books really pose a question, ‘should English Protestants attempt to convert Native Americans to Christianity’—the more striking, bringing it into the circle of a wider range of discussions on just that topic, without which it would be misunderstood (42). Throughout, the way this book weaves considerations of the theory, which is often treated as a niche concern, into the larger context and traces its echoes in contemporaneous arguments is a compelling strength.

Likewise, her chapter on the Book of Mormon is full of nuances that would be missed in other discussions of the relationship between the Book’s narrative and other accounts of Israel in America. Others have made the point that the Book of Mormon itself is a unique contribution—not an attempt like Thorowgood’s, Adair’s, or Boudinot’s to discuss the possibility of Israel in America, but a purported *primary source*, suppos edly an ancient testament of these Israelites themselves. Few, however, have so assiduously plumbed the depth of the dual movement the book inspired—‘the text propels the theory through the nineteenth century, and, through the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, into the present. On the other, it propels the theory beyond the interest of most American Christians’ (115). In addition, the strength of her emphasis on the fact that the Israelites of the Book of Mormon are *not a lost tribe* is crucially important to future discussions, and a matter that is often confused. The people who came to America in this book did so after the Assyrian conquest of Israel, and from the kingdom of Judah rather than Israel. Thus, Mormon theorizing on the future of the lost tribes, who do appear in Mormon thought with a certain frequency, was not solved by this Book, as Fenton notes, but inspired by it. There can have been few studies that more deftly handle both spheres of Mormon ‘Hebraic’ visions, with a nuanced consideration of the work of figures like Eliza Snow and Matthew W. Dalton who would otherwise be neglected. In addition, like all the discussions in this book, it is very well
written, drawing the reader in and making her conclusions crystal clear.

Finally, it is a strength of this work that it traces the impact of the search for lost Israel in American literature, e.g., James Fenimore Cooper and De Witt Clinton Chipman. It is easy, when contemplating the history of identifications with Israel, to focus on visions of Israel in religious contexts, or on the activities of adventurers who either sought the lost tribes or claimed to be of them. Fenton’s discussion of the impact of the theory on culture opens new frontiers in the consideration of its history and impact. Likewise, her insightful account, in the conclusion, of the relationship between the history of the Hebraic Indian theory and contemporary efforts to ‘to isolate and describe DNA markers in Native American populations’ (199) deserves to be the starting point of future discussions.

After all, it is no longer scientific to describe a people’s identity as a consequence of their biological descent in any case. And Fenton is quite right that the idea that native populations will be defined by scientific proof of their ‘origins often contributes to the ongoing erasure of actual Native American peoples through the creation of a pernicious synecdoche in which “Native” genes perform the work of Native American vanishing through admixture’ (200). Her discussion of Tudor Parfitt’s claims about the Lemba—which combine oral histories, catalogues of supposed similarities that ‘could have been written by Thomas Thorowgood or James Adair’, and certain genes to suggest that they are ‘of Jewish origin’—is a case in point (200–201). The importance of the search for biologically genuine lost Jews can hardly be disentangled from notions of sacred genealogy that are not themselves scientific, and this needs to be said out loud.

In short, this is a readable, impeccably researched, and interesting book that makes a material contribution to the further study of what the author calls the Hebraic Indian theory. It, along with Dougherty’s effort, which traced the intersection between theories of Israel in America and nationalism, and a few other studies along the same lines, should jump-start a conversation about a neglected aspect of European imperialism not just in America, but all over the world. The biblically inspired lens through which Europeans viewed those they encountered in their voyages, efforts at colonization, and in both war and diplomacy, played a crucial role in how they proceeded and what the consequences of their actions were. And the responses of those who were viewed through an Israelite lens are as diverse as they are interesting. Dr. Fenton is to be congratulated for shedding new light on this weighty topic with her readable and enlightening study.