

# BOOK REVIEWS

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*This Noble House: Jewish Descendants of King David in the Medieval Islamic East.*

By Arnold E. Franklin. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. xv + 297.

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“People are more akin to their contemporaries than to their ancestors.” This opening epigraph, taken by Franklin from the words of Muslim polymath Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 CE), most aptly encapsulates this book’s stance and arguments. Franklin approaches Jewish society in Muslim lands from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries as a minority group whose social imagination, and hence institutions, were heavily influenced by the hegemonic culture of the majority. His choice of topic is the reconfiguration of this Jewish society’s attitude towards the lineage, and hence the descendants, of King David, a transformation which can be established as having begun around the end of the first millennium. This reconfiguration, for Franklin, was a result of the translation and internalization of the value the majority “Arab-Islamic” society conferred on noble lineage and genealogy, especially on those of the kinsfolk of the Prophet Muḥammad. Tapping a wide array of documentary and literary sources in Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic, Arabic and Aramaic, many of which come from the Cairo Geniza, Franklin presents his findings in a lucid and well-structured manner.

The book comprises five chapters, in addition to an introduction, conclusion and two appendices. In the first chapter, Franklin outlines the new attitude towards the Davidic lineage. By around the tenth century, the Davidic descent had ceased to be a legitimizing qualification specially associated with the two hereditary positions of communal leadership, the Palestinian patriarchate (itself abolished in 425) and the Babylonian exilarchate seated at Baghdad. More and more aspirants began to claim Davidic descent, which now meant, in and of itself, power and authority as a noble ancestry. No longer tied to positions pinned down to particular locales, the lineage also underwent geographical diffusion. Now, just as there was a proliferation of *sharīf*s (members of Muḥammad’s kinsfolk) among Muslims, there was a proliferation of *nesi’im* (sin. *nasi*; here in the sense of the descendants of David) among Jews.

One of the important changes that accompanied this general transformation was that claims to the Davidic lineage came to be substantiated by the display of detailed lists of ancestors. The second chapter of the book first discusses this facet of the story. Franklin insightfully highlights the value Jewish society came to accord a complete and uninterrupted genealogy as proof of a biblical lineage. Franklin also discusses how *nesi’im* publicized their ancestry by choosing names associated with the House of David and by using seals with an image of a lion, an icon also associated with the biblical lineage.

Franklin then turns to the political side of the story in Chapter 3, and presents cases of rivalry for the communal leadership where the lineage of the protagonists was the point at issue. The instances of positive and negative campaigns examined in the chapter make it amply clear that descent indeed mattered as an important asset of a political aspirant. Further, we learn here that *nesi’im* had to confront rival claims to the suitability for the communal leadership based on other kinds of biblical ancestry – advanced by the Aaronic *kohanim* (members of the priestly lineage) and, to a lesser degree, by the Levites. Thus, as Franklin makes it clear, the Jewish valuation of biblical descent was a phenomenon by no means confined to the descendants of David.

The link between the proliferation of *nesi'im* and the eschatological anticipation of the coming of the messiah, widely believed at that time to be destined to appear from the House of David, is discussed in the fourth chapter. Here, Franklin offers a useful overview of aspects of popular and scholarly messianism prevalent in Jewish society at the time. He may not be quite at his best when it comes to documenting the link between this widespread aspiration and the activities of individual *nesi'im*, but the reader will certainly agree that this indeed is an important aspect of the story that Franklin could not leave unaddressed.

The fifth and final main chapter of the book puts the story in a wider perspective by discussing parallel cases of genealogical argumentation among non-Arab Muslims and comparing them with the Jewish case. Franklin finds that these other minority groups were playing a very similar game in which they negotiated their own standing in society in the genealogical terms set by the majority “Arab-Islamic” culture. Thus, he argues, the presence of the descendants of David had a communal significance for the Jews as a whole. With *nesi'im* among them, the Jews could better claim their status as the earliest community of Abrahamic monotheism.

The appraisal of the book’s contributions to the study of Jewish history in Muslim lands per se is a task for an expert in that field. A book review already available at the time of writing (July 2013) commends Franklin for shedding serious light on the genealogical concerns of the Jewish society of the period for the first time. The major criticism raised concerns the insufficient treatment of *kohanim*.<sup>1</sup> The comments in the current review should be read as a response from an Islamicist with special interest in Muḥammad’s kinsfolk who is fascinated by Franklin’s lucid and original presentation of a parallel phenomenon and is convinced of the potential for conversations between researchers of the two religious traditions. A few quibbles about factual errors concerning Islamic history and cases of rather far-fetched interpretation of Arabic sources will be postponed for a future occasion.

One wider question that may be raised in such conversations concerns the way the book frames its interpretation. As mentioned above, Franklin’s stance is constantly to portray the Jewish attitudes as a response of a minority community to the hegemonic culture of the majority. Thus, Jewish preoccupation with the precise knowledge of genealogy, for example, is presented as a translation of the Muslim equivalent. Likewise, when discussing Jewish messianism, Franklin pays special attention to the influence of the ideas concerning the Islamic Mahdi. It often appears, however, that Franklin applies his theory too rigidly to his factual findings: that is, he tends to characterize a phenomenon on the Jewish side as a translation of the Muslim counterpart even when his evidence appears to indicate nothing more than a case of parallelism. Franklin does tell us that the proliferation of *nesi'im*, in the form discussed in the book, is unattested among Jewish society in the Latin Christian lands, so positing Jewish–Muslim interactions is certainly justified, and indeed, my sense is that Franklin makes a persuasive case for translation and internalization. Yet, there is still room for discussing details of how the interactions between the two communities – and the likely process of translation – actually occurred. I wonder if a less rigid application of the overarching theoretical stance might not result in a richer account of inter-communal interactions. Is it not conceivable that the Muslims were also the receiving side in some contexts?

Connected to this, it would appear, is the rather sweeping, and hence somewhat problematic, usage throughout the book of the term “Arab-Islamic” to refer to the posited majority culture. The concept of *nasab* (genealogy) is indeed Arab in origin. But how that concept operated in the society of Iraq or (Islamic) Spain in, say, the tenth century, after the long interactions between different ethnic and religious groups – Jews among them – would not be fully understood if we made too much of its Arab-ness as though we were discussing, say, the Muslim society of the Umayyad period. Here

1 Review by Geoffrey Herman in *Intertwined Worlds*. Available: <http://intertwinedworlds.wordpress.com/2013/04/05/review-jewish-descendants-of-king-david-in-the-medieval-islamic-east/>. Accessed July 28, 2013.

also, a more delicate approach to what constituted the “majority” would likely help us add some nuances to what Franklin has achieved in this book.

In addition to the many parallels that Franklin has brought to light, it may also be profitable to pay attention to differences. For example, one conspicuous difference is the apparent lack of a scholarly discipline of genealogy on the Jewish side. On the Muslim side, a fully developed genealogical discipline was formed and contributed – at least in theory – to checking the uncontrolled proliferation of *sharīfs*. Franklin, however, explicitly states that Jewish society lacked the “kinds of institutions devoted to safeguarding nobility that emerged in Muslim society” (p. 96). Yet, we are told at the same time that the descent of some *nesi'im* could actually be denigrated. How could a *nasi* have been found false in the absence of a special authority? Did the judgment, in other words, in the end depend only on the popular voice? And if that is the case, how can we explain the contrasting situations on both sides? Is the obvious difference in the size of the Jewish and Muslim communities the only possible answer? Following this line of questions may prove useful for furthering our understanding of the Jewish and Muslim attitudes towards their respective noble lineages.

Another conspicuous difference concerns the multiplicity of noble, biblical ancestries on the Jewish side. For the Muslims, the ‘Alid descent (descent from ‘Alī, paternal cousin and son-in-law of Muḥammad) became something we may characterize as the noble ancestry par excellence of Islam at around the same time as the proliferation of the *nesi'im*. The parallel claims by the *nesi'im*, *kohanim*, and, to a lesser extent, Levites that Franklin presents in Chapter 3, thus, are of particular interest for an Islamicist with a comparativist turn of mind. Franklin’s thorough treatment of the *nesi'im* inevitably rouses expectations for another study on the *kohanim*, a subject that seems to be at least as promising, judging from the comments in the review mentioned above.

*This Noble House* is a treasure trove of insights for Islamicists who are interested in the place of lineage and genealogy, or more generally the use of the idealized past for the purpose of legitimization, in Muslim societies. At the same time, there seems to be room for Islamicists to contribute to furthering what Franklin has achieved in this groundbreaking study. It is hoped that the publication of this excellent book will be remembered in the future as a starting point for many fruitful conversations between Islamic and Jewish studies.

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*How Ajātaśatru Was Reformed: The Domestication of “Ajase” and Stories in Buddhist History.*

By Michael Radich. Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 2011. Pp. iii + 202.  
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The present book provides the broadest and most systematic survey to date of the history of the transmission and transformation of the Ajātaśatru (Japanese: Ajase) narrative in the Buddhist world, tracing its two-and-a-half-millennia-long journey from ancient India, across medieval China, to pre-modern and modern Japan. The primary concern of this survey is to explore the process of how the Ajātaśatru narrative was changed, gradually and transculturally, from a patricide-regicide tragedy in its ancient Indian versions eventually into a story about mother–son psychological conflicts in its modern Japanese presentations. Michael Radich has performed an exemplary feat of

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<sup>1</sup> This review is a condensed version of my earlier review of the same book published on H-Buddhism in March 2013 (URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38350>). I thank Prof. Charles Muller (editor of H-Buddhism) and the editor of the present journal for their permission to publish a condensed version here.