



**Hagith Sivan**

***Jewish Childhood in the Roman World***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xxxiv + 443. Cloth. \$135.00. ISBN 9781107090170.

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“However one defines childhood, and different societies at different times have defined it very differently, there is no denying that it is a crucial phase of life, the one when experiences are most intense and the one of which the memory is most enduring. When life expectancy was low, it was for many people the only form of existence they ever experienced. Yet until relatively recently, the history of childhood has been largely neglected.”<sup>1</sup> In the last number of years, the neglect has given way to a growing interest in childhood and children in general, and in antiquity in particular, and research has flourished, particularly in Roman studies.<sup>2</sup>

It took longer, however, to spark the interest of scholars in the study of Jewish childhood in the ancient world, particularly in the Roman world. The study of Jewish childhood during this period is very much the study of Jewish childhood in rabbinic literature, a literature that marginalized the role of children in society and never gives them a voice. Many scholars who could deal with that literature were not at all interested in history, classics, archaeology, art history, and religion, all necessary for the study of childhood in ancient society as well as for the study of Jewish childhood. This was the challenge that faced Hagith Sivan, whose study seeks to articulate Jewish childhood

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1. Keith Thomas, “Foreword,” *Childhood in the Past* 1 (2008): 3.

2. Reidar Aasgaard, “Children in Antiquity and Early Christianity: Research History and Central Issues,” *Familia* 33 (2006): 23–46.

in the Roman world and the experience of growing up Jewish.<sup>3</sup> She follows minors into the spaces where they lived, learned, played, slept, and died. She examines the actions and interactions of children with children, adults, both at home and beyond.

The book has three parts. Part 1, “Theories,” is largely theoretical and presents the evidence grouped around several themes that highlight gender commonalities and differences, expressing perceptions of childhoods, patterns of behavior, and much more. Part 2, “Children in the Synagogue,” deals with visuals and meditates on images and how these address and redress childhoods of biblical myths. Part 3, “Autobiographies,” empowers children to speak for themselves on “case” studies placed in four locations during specific Jewish celebrations.

Several questions remain in the background throughout the entire book. To what extent were the childhoods that emerge from the sources particularly Jewish? Or was perhaps Jewish childhood during Roman times not that different from the childhood of a non-Jewish child? How did Jewish children configure in Jewish adults’ identity? How different would Jewish childhood have been in Roman provinces nearer and farther from Palestine? Did Jewish childhood offer opportunities for children to express their Jewishness through obligation, rituals, play, or everyday life? Sivan attempts to answer all of these questions in the course of her study.

Chapter 1, “Theorizing the Jewish Child,” begins by discussing rabbinic lifecycles in relation to actions or obligations of children, showing how they were designed to integrate children into the complex realities of Jewish familial responsibilities. Sivan then discusses in detail the legal concept of “minority” (*katan/a*) in terms of the integration of children into Jewishness. Chapter 2, “Vagaries of Childhood: From Cradles to Graves,” dwells on the moments and activities that punctuated the life of a Jewish child and especially the spaces of childhood, such as home, outdoors, school, labor, and synagogue.

According to chapter 3, “Bringing Up Boys: Contemporary Father-Son Bonding,” fathers had obligations to their sons. The first was to circumcise him. The firstborn had to be redeemed. Fathers had to teach their sons torah and commandments, as well as trades and crafts that were both practical and appropriate. Some sons would be consigned to a life of torah, others to a life of labor, some to both. From childhood and boyhood the child would reach puberty, marry, and the cycle would begin all over again. Chapter 4, “Daughters,” repeats the process vis-à-vis family life and daughters, discussing especially puberty and purity as well as the contribution of daughters to the household economy. The ultimate goal was marriage, motherhood, and perpetuating the cycle.

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3. Scholars seem to have had an easier time studying childhood in biblical texts. See, e.g., Kristine Henriksen Garroway, *Growing Up in Ancient Israel: Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), and Shawn W. Flynn, *Children in Ancient Israel: The Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). See most recently Kristine Henriksen and John W. Martens, eds., *Children and Methods: Listening to and Learning from Children in the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

Chapter 5, “Burdened at Birth: The Misbegotten and the Malformed,” discusses liminal childhoods, focusing on children whose birth was marked by legal and physical disabilities. This includes a discussion of the legal concept of children branded as “bastards” (*mamzerim*) as well as the categories that defy binary foundations of rabbinic gender theory, the androgini, *tumtums*, *sarisim*, and *ayloniot*.

Chapter 6, “Visualizing the Bible,” provides a visual framework for framing Jewish childhood. Sivan explores the role of words and of pictorial imagery in constructing identities in synagogal spaces. How was visual literacy employed to inculcate traditions that groomed children as Jews? Sivan shows how, within the sanctified space of the synagogue, children were cast as archetypes of obedience to parental and divine precepts. Chapter 7, “The Painted Children of the Dura Europos Synagogue,” provides a wide array of painted depictions of biblical children in the various murals of the synagogue. Some of these children served as a lexicon for learning about identity. Children were often depicted within familial or communal contexts. Some were orphans who needed protection. Some scenes delineated a childhood marked by maternal absence. Some were marked by paternal absence. Some even allow us to follow the developmental stages of childhood from birth through adolescence.

The final four chapters are reconstructed “autobiographies” of children within a specific liturgical time. Chapter 8, “Sukkot in a Cave (135 CE),” describes the childhood life of Jesus of Arabian Mahoza, who lived and died during the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136 CE). His last act as a Jew was to participate in the Festival of Sukkot in a Judean Desert cave in which he and his mother sought refuge from the Romans. Chapter 9, “Passover in the Port of Rome (Ostia c. 175 CE),” describes a Jewish Roman girl, a baker’s apprentice, celebrating Passover just after the Antonine plague. Chapter 10, “Sabbath in Tiberias (c. 300),” depicts the Sabbath experience of a fishmonger’s son, and chapter 11, “The Birth of a Wandering Jewess (c. 415–435 CE): The Story of Rachelis Daughter of Eleazar and Esther of Alexandria (Early Fifth Century CE),” follows the life of a girl born in Alexandria circa 400, who was forced to leave her home and wander throughout the Mediterranean in search of respite from persecution and in the hope of living a Jewish life in the diaspora. Sivan admits that in these chapters she intertwines imagination with data. The reader might question the “authenticity” of her historical methodology. I must admit that, when I saw the format of these chapters my first reaction was negative. After I read them, however, the imagination seemed to blend in well and to help the presentation of the data, and one can even forget that some of the material is “fiction.”<sup>4</sup>

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4. Chapter 10 was previously published as “Jewish Childhood in the Roman Galilee: Sabbath in Tiberias c. 300 CE,” in *Children and Everyday Life in the Roman and Late Antique World*, ed. Chirstian Laes and Ville Vuolanto (London: Routledge, 2016), 198–216. One might claim that the author is simply reverting to methodologies used in the writing of history in the ancient world when there was no clearly defined definition of the knowledge included

Hagith Sivan has provided an important study for anyone interested in any aspect of ancient Jewish life in the Roman world, not only in the study of children and childhood at this time. It should be remembered, however, that what Sivan offers the reader is not really Jewish childhood in the Roman world but mostly Jewish childhood in the Roman world according to the rabbis. At times one wonders if those rabbinic traditions really reflect life, whether in Palestine or in Babylonia, although she does deal with areas in the Jewish diaspora outside the purview of the rabbis. There are occasional forays in her work into archaeology, which might corroborate or not rabbinic traditions or which can add much more information, but Sivan's use of archaeology and material culture is limited. The archaeological material could also have been compared with that of the Roman world in general, and far more effort could have been put into the non-Jewish literary sources on children, including those in the writings of early Christianity, for comparison. In all fairness, however, this would have resulted not in a single volume but in many. These comments, then, should not be taken as criticism but rather as suggestions in terms of further research. In sum, Hagith Sivan has greatly enriched our understanding of ancient Jewish childhood and children, and I look forward to her future works on this and other subjects.

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in history. See Arnaldo Momigliano, "The Historians of the Classical World and Their Audiences," *American Scholar* 47 (1978): 193–204.