
What are the textual crossroads of southernness and Jewishness? How do factors such as race, gender, and class inform the makeup of southern Jewish identity? Who defines southern identity and its ethnoracial composition? In her intriguing new book, Two Covenants: Representations of Southern Jewishness, Eliza R. L. McGraw attempts to address these and other questions surrounding what is perhaps one of the most underrepresented subjects in both southern and Jewish American studies. Pulling from a variety of sources—novels, films, literary criticism, records of property ownership, autobiographies and memoirs, and even Southern Baptist religious pamphlets—she emphasizes the hybrid nature of southern Jewishness and its place within our national identity.

From the outset, McGraw makes clear that her study rests upon different, but complementary, critical assumptions. In reference to her theoretical framework, she uses an apt architectural metaphor, describing her text as a house: “The foundation on which the study of southern Jewishness stands is constructed of critical understandings of race, class, and gender that in turn form a base for a study of ethnicity and region” (p. 8). As such, the various chapters of her book function as separate cultural rooms, each of which can be entered as a separate critical space but also connects to and is contextualized by adjoining rooms of discourse. In this manner she employs the strategies of ethnicity and postcolonial theorists (e.g., Werner Sollors, Karen Brodkin, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Michael Rabin, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha) and gives a careful reading to the property records of Uriah Levy and Jefferson Levy (owners of Monticello), the memoirs of Lillian Hellman and David Cohn, the critical and autobiographical works of Louis Rubin and Eli Evans, the film version of Driving Miss Daisy, the trope of the Wandering Jew, and the representation of Jews by southern African Americans.

McGraw’s book is a significant contribution to both Jewish and southern studies for a number of reasons. First, while the scholarship of the South deals only marginally with southern Jewishness, Two Covenants more fully elaborates on the cultural identity. Similarly, it helps to fill in the “southern gap” in Jewish American studies, a field where notions of Jewishness are usually defined within northern urban contexts. It also places the growing field of whiteness studies, as articulated by such critics as Brodkin and Jacobson, within a regional and ethnic context. As a point of cultural jointure, it relies upon a reading of hybridity that precludes any essentializing notion of either Jewishness or southernness. Finally—and perhaps most notable—it presents a component of African American and Jewish relations that is often overlooked when approaching the civil rights movements: its southern roots. As McGraw makes abundantly clear, the story of race relations in the South is in many ways informed by the role of the southern Jew.

Two Covenants is not without its weaknesses. Where, for instance, is a critical reading of one of America’s most contemporary Jewish American writers, Memphis native Steve Stern? Nonetheless, in her analysis of Jewishness and
its links to southernness, McGraw provides an insightful reading of these two commutable identity structures.

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Touch someone’s religion and you touch their all. Adding to the dangers inherent in handling religion is the extremely varied and quarrelsome nature of Baptist religion. The difficulties that assail the secular historian are multiplied for the historian of religion. On the one hand, all religious traditions have a certain “inwardness” that can only be grasped by one who has believed and practiced them. The outsider looking in always misses much of the vital essence of the tradition. On the other hand, sincere believers have great difficulty in seeing their own faith clearly and greater difficulty in being fair to those wings of their own denomination with which they are not in union or sympathy. The *odium theologicum* rages hottest where two religious parties share enough in common to provide a wide battleground.

Bill J. Leonard has undertaken this delicate task and traversed this dangerous ground with great success. He is a lifelong Baptist and author of several previous books on the Baptists of America, as well as a veteran of the wars of the Southern Baptist Convention. In the preface he relates his own pilgrimage and gives his reader a clear idea of where he stands in the Baptist battlefield.

Quite apart from the volcanic nature of much Baptist life and history, the sheer variety within the Baptist tradition almost defies treatment in a fairly short work. However, Leonard manages to convey the complexity of the long history of the Baptists as well as their many divisions and subsects without getting bogged down in detail or giving any of them too cursory an examination. African American Baptists, northern Baptists, Southern Baptists, Calvinistic and General Baptists, Primitives, Old Regulars, Two Seeders, Independents, and Seventh Day Baptists all come in for respectful and adequate treatment.

In addition to covering various theological trends and subdivisions, he explores their widely different methods of preaching, singing, worship, and evangelism. Leonard also does a masterful job in detailing the sometimes glowing and often spotty record of the Baptists in regard to the issues of the larger world around them such as religious liberty, slavery, fundamentalism, civil rights, gay rights, and women’s rights. He particularly focuses on the recent conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention and the close association of many members of that denomination with the hard right in politics.

In short, this book covers everything important about the Baptists of America and does it with respect, balance, and an obvious, genuine love for this often cranky and ill-tempered people. It would make an excellent text for a class on Baptist studies.

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