

Hagith Sivan

Jewish Childhood in the Roman World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xxxiv, 443. Cloth with dust jacket. £105.00. ISBN: 978-1-107-09017-0.

With her book *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World*, Hagith Sivan aims to counter the relative neglect of the study of Jewish children/childhood in recent scholarship of ancient Judaism (xii, xvii). Sivan's monograph specifically sets out to build bridges between the broader study of childhood in antiquity (esp. in the field of ancient history) and the study of ancient Jewish childhood (xviii). Indeed, the author crossed the bridge herself, as can be inferred from the acknowledgments (ix), because she contributed to several workshops and conferences organized by leading ancient historians in the study of childhood in late antiquity and to several of the proceedings volumes. Revised versions of these contributions have been incorporated in the present monograph.¹ After a preface, in which Sivan discusses, among others, methodological issues and the relative neglect of the study of ancient Jewish childhood, her analysis of Jewish childhood in the Roman world is divided into three parts.

In the first part, Sivan examines rabbinic constructions of Jewish childhood. The first chapter studies the various ways the rabbis defined childhood, among others as part of the life cycle, as a state of minority, and as delimited by puberty. The second chapter follows the experiences of children, described in (especially) rabbinic literature and derived from archaeological evidence, relating to birth, maintenance, home, outdoors, work, school, ritual contexts, disease, and death. The third and fourth chapters explore rabbinic views on the different ways that boys and girls should be brought up as Jews, and the final chapter examines rabbinic views on "the misbegotten and the malformed" children. The attainment of Jewish identity, which Sivan shows to be connected with the male, legitimate, well-formed body, and with the study and performance of Torah in rabbinic literature, is a continuing concern in these chapters. Among others, the author makes clear how the upbringing of boys, according to the rabbis, was aimed at attaining this Jewish identity, while the

1 Chapter 4: H. Sivan, "Daughters as Disasters? Daughters and Fathers in Ancient Judaism," in *Children and Family in Late Antiquity: Life, Death and Interaction*, ed. C. Laes, K. Mustakallio, and V. Vuolanto, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion* 15 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 289-308; Chapter 6: Sivan, "Pictorial paideia: Children in the Synagogue," in *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*, ed. J. Evans Grubbs and T. Parkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 532-55; Chapter 10: Sivan, "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. C. Laes and V. Vuolanto (London: Routledge, 2017), 198-216.

upbringing of girls was focused on virginity and maternity, “toward the goals of becoming a wife of a Jew and a mother of another” (168).

The second part of Sivan's book is devoted to the imagery and epigraphy in late antique synagogues, such as in Dura Europos and the Galilee. As in the first part, Sivan is interested in issues of Jewish identity. The first chapter embarks upon a new approach to the education of children by reflecting on the pedagogical function of synagogal imagery. Sivan discusses not only how the depicted biblical scenes forged a Jewish identity in children, but also how the presence of children and young adults, such as baby Moses, Esther, and David (Sivan stretches the period of childhood a bit here) in the depicted stories, stressed the importance of filial obedience and the contribution of children to the survival of the Jewish people. In the second chapter, Sivan draws attention to the ubiquitous presence of children and young adults in the paintings of the Dura Europos synagogue. The author specifically analyzes the absence of mothers and fathers in the depicted biblical stories, as well as the presence of (male) children in the temple-Sukkot panel. Among others, her attention is to the way these depictions appeal to the social experiences of the community members and to the messages these depictions convey about Jewish identity and about the acculturation of children into Jewish ritual life.

In the final part of the monograph, Sivan includes four fictive autobiographies of Jewish children who live in various places around the ancient Mediterranean. For example, Jesus, the son of Jesus and Babatha (the child mentioned in the Babatha archive), tells about his experiences during the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 CE). By means of these fictive autobiographies, Sivan gives a voice and agency to Jewish children of various genders, status, and locations in late antiquity and provides an insight into the different ways these children may have experienced their Jewish identity in relation to Jewish rituals and their surrounding non-Jewish environment. The inclusion of these fictive autobiographies is not without its methodological problems, as Sivan points out as well (xxii, 267-68), but she carefully provides a sociohistorical, archaeological, and literary justification of her reconstructions. In my view, the advantage of Sivan's autobiographies is that they create a personal insight into the lives of children and force one to think more carefully about the experiences of Jewish children in the Roman world.

The volume is brought to a close with a conclusion, an epilogue on Jewish children in Visigothic legislation, a bibliography, and an index of subjects (but, unfortunately, no index of sources). After reading this book, one has gained a much better understanding of what it may have entailed to be a Jewish child in the ancient Mediterranean. Occasionally, however, Sivan's discussions might raise some questions. It struck me, for example, that husbandship (and

fatherhood) is left undiscussed in relation to the upbringing of boys in ch. 3, even though the marrying off of sons is mentioned as one of the paternal obligations in *y. Qidd. 1:7* (Sivan's "point of departure" for ch. 3 [94]). Marriage is also present in rabbinic definitions of the life cycle (see Sivan's discussion in ch. 1). How are marriage, fatherhood, and Jewish masculine identity related to one another? In which respect does the upbringing of boys differ from that of girls in the preparation for the state of marriage? Besides, it seemed to me that the discussion of synagogal imagery in chs. 6 and 7 contains some loose ends that can be developed further in future research. For example, because of the theme of her book, Sivan focuses upon depictions of biblical scenes with children and young adults, but Jewish identity may also have been inculcated in Jewish children via other visual and textual elements (e.g., the frequent portrayal of the menorah, the temple, and the lulav) in synagogues. A more systematic discussion of the function of synagogal imagery and the differences between synagogues in their visual registers may be necessary, perhaps also from a comparative perspective with imagery in churches and other religious buildings in late antiquity. Finally, a number of spelling mistakes (e.g., "a match proposes by" for "a match proposed by" on 159; "Does ... reflected" for "Does ... reflect" on 229), style inconsistencies (e.g., ending abbreviations of biblical writings with or without a dot in ch. 6), and other minor inaccuracies (Figure 6.4, a picture of the Torah niche in the Dura Europos synagogue, is rendered mirrorwise) can be noted in the book.

These shortcomings, however, should not detract from the overall value of the book. Sivan's volume can be regarded as an important achievement which may advance the study of Jewish childhood in late antiquity considerably. To mention several reasons: First, in terms of source material, Sivan does not only focus on rabbinic material or other normative, literary sources (e.g., Sirach, Philo, Josephus), as previous publications on Jewish children or the Jewish family mostly did, but she also demonstrates the value of visual material and archaeological sources for the study of Jewish childhood in late antiquity. Moreover, the author supplements the study of Jewish childhood on the level of (adult, male) discourse (part one of the book) with a hypothetical reconstruction of the experiences and thoughts of children from the perspective of children themselves (esp. part three). In my view, there is much to gain from scholarship that focuses upon the voice and agency of children that is reflected in our sources. Furthermore, in agreement with her previous work, Sivan continuously applies a gender-based approach, as a result of which the reader gains a more complete view of the gendered constructions of Jewish childhood and of the gendered experiences of Jewish children in late antiquity. In general, it seems that Sivan's monograph demonstrates the importance

of scholarly engagement with childhood research in other fields of study, for the attention to the perspective of children, agency, and intersectionality (gender, disability) in Sivan's book can also be recognized in recent publications on childhood in ancient history, including those in which Sivan published herself (see esp. Laes and Vuolanto, *Children and Everyday Life in the Roman and Late Antique World* [2017]).

The rich contents of the book are presumably due to Sivan's admirable expertise in a wide range of themes, sources, and areas relating to Judaism and Jewish children in late antiquity. It is my expectation that Sivan's study will become a standard work on Jewish childhood in late antiquity in years to come. The book is relevant for anyone who wants to dive into the fascinating study of ancient Jewish childhood or wants to teach about it. It is to be hoped that Sivan's monograph will stimulate further research on ancient Jewish childhood and that it will contribute to the integration of this field of study in the broader study of childhood in late antiquity.

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