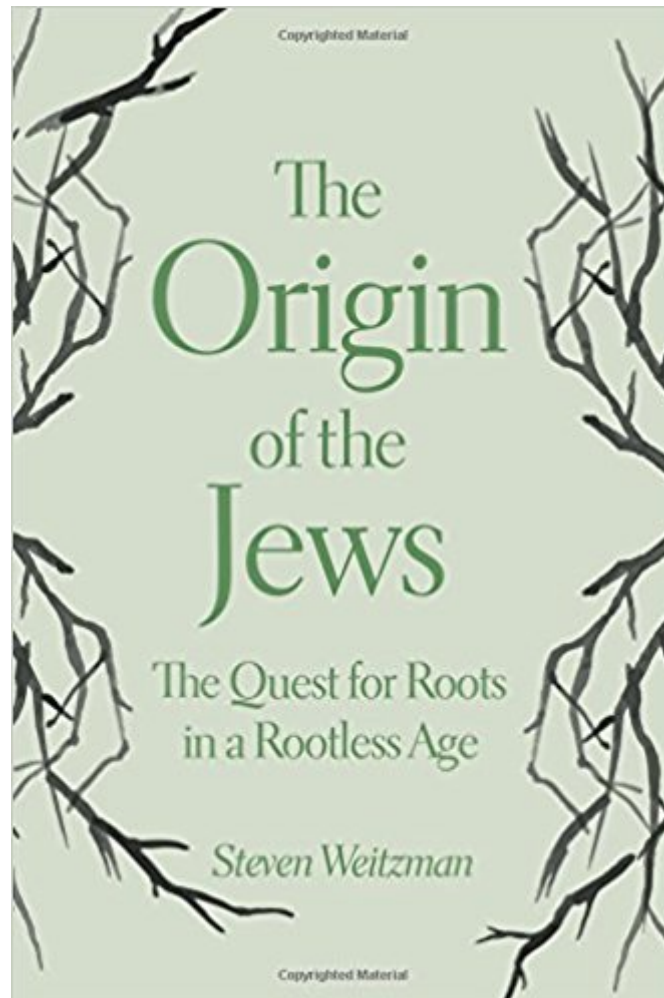




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# The Origin Of The Jews: The Quest For Roots In A Rootless Age



## Synopsis

The first major history of the scholarly quest to answer the question of Jewish origins. The Jews have one of the longest continuously recorded histories of any people in the world, but what do we actually know about their origins? While many think the answer to this question can be found in the Bible, others look to archaeology or genetics. Some skeptics have even sought to debunk the very idea that the Jews have a common origin. In this book, Steven Weitzman takes a learned and lively look at what we know—or think we know—about where the Jews came from, when they arose, and how they came to be. Scholars have written hundreds of books on the topic and have come up with scores of explanations, theories, and historical reconstructions, but this is the first book to trace the history of the different approaches that have been applied to the question, including genealogy, linguistics, archaeology, psychology, sociology, and genetics. Weitzman shows how this quest has been fraught since its inception with religious and political agendas, how anti-Semitism cast its long shadow over generations of learning, and how recent claims about Jewish origins have been difficult to disentangle from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He does not offer neatly packaged conclusions but invites readers on an intellectual adventure, shedding new light on the assumptions and biases of those seeking answers and the challenges that have made finding answers so elusive. Spanning more than two centuries and drawing on the latest findings, *The Origin of the Jews* brings needed clarity and historical context to this enduring and often divisive topic.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Admirably balanced and dispassionate."--Benjamin Balint, Wall Street Journal[A] multicourse intellectual feast. . . . Weitzman's facility with making complex points accessible to the lay reader, and his ease with synthesizing a wide range of research and prior analyses, make this an invaluable resource for both novice and scholar. His rigorous critiques will resonate even for those readers with little or no prior interest in the book's central questions."--Publishers Weekly

"An accomplishment for the academy."--Kirkus

"Weitzman has done his homework; he has read widely and writes well. He has done an excellent job at presenting technical material in an accessible manner. . . . As the subtitle of the book says, we live in a rootless age. People everywhere, not just Jews, seek their roots, their ancestry, their genetic makeup. We yearn to discover who we are; alas, our tools are not always up to the task. But there is pleasure in the pursuit, and we should be grateful to Weitzman for being a reliable guide."--Shaye J.D. Cohen, Moment Magazine

"Weitzman's courageous and illuminating book is essential reading for anyone who wonders or cares about what it really means to be a Jew."--Jonathan Kirsch, Jewish Journal

"Jews have been around since antiquity, and so their origins are not so easy to lay hold of. As of now, no one can say how and why being a Jew got started. But in his new volume *The Origin of the Jews*, Steven Weitzman makes a valiant effort to survey some partial answers."--David Mikics, Los Angeles Review of Books

"It is a brilliant book, not only in execution but also in conception. How is it brilliant in conception? As far as I know, it is unique. . . . Among its other virtues, Weitzman's writing has a humility and softness about it that is rare in academic work, making the book a pleasure to read."--David Hillel Ruben, Jewish Chronicle

"Thoughtful, intricate and wide-ranging."--Devorah Baum, Times Higher Education

"Positioning himself between those who seek origins and those who regard such quests with postmodern skepticism, Weitzman sheds light on variegated accounts of Jewish origins in different realms--from genealogical research and biblical scholarship to archaeology, psychoanalysis, and genetic research. A brilliant book--profoundly original and engaging, exhibiting a rare spirit of exploration. We will all be learning from it for a long time."--Ilana Pardes, author of *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers*

"Weitzman is a spirited and empathetic guide on an expedition through the quest to understand Jewish origins, from biblical studies to the latest investigations in population genetics. He unfailingly confronts the challenges of his inquiry with candor and erudition. The book gathers a remarkable exchange among diverse lines of scholarship in a single captivating conversation."--Noah Rosenberg, professor of biology, Stanford University

"The long duration of the history of the Jews is paralleled by an almost equally long tradition of searching after their roots.

This quest is masterfully narrated and keenly analyzed by Weitzman, who enlists a rich array of disciplines ranging from biblical philology and archeology to psychoanalysis and genetic science. His elegantly accessible prose and imaginative scholarly thinking combine to make this immensely informative book a pleasure to read."--Galit Hasan-Rokem, professor emerita, Hebrew University of Jerusalem"Compellingly argued and very original. Only a scholar whose mind is as fertile as Weitzman's and whose curiosity is as intense as his could have pulled off a book like this with such success."--Saul M. Olyan, author of *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences*"Weitzman's scholarship is sound and informative."--Ronald Hendel, author of *The Book of "Genesis": A Biography*

A thoughtful and engaging book. Weitzman does a superb job providing an overview of different academic disciplines methodology and attempts to understand the origins of the Jewish people. This is a thoroughly original book that successfully bridges an academic approach to a general audience. Others have summarized the content in detail. I found this book honest and thought-provoking.

This book is well-researched and although I don't agree with all of it, it does give a different point of view that I needed to know.

Retired for 3 years, I read a lot of nonfiction. Many books are not worth the time to read: either they dumb down the material, or they are too skewed by opinion, poorly reasoned and using highly selective facts. Many other books are poorly written and get lost in the weeds of academics. Rarely do I find myself reading a book which is intelligent, engaging, informative and well reasoned. Steven Weitzman's *Origin of the Jews* is such a book. Weitzman approaches his material with honest academic caution, weighing different ideas considering their pros and cons and leaving most issues unresolved, rather than accept a theory that remains speculative. He covers six disciplines to show how different fields have approached the subject. Genealogy, linguistics, archaeology, psychology, sociology and genetics. Each get a chapter, presented in a roughly chronological order. He includes insightful cross references, showing how scholarly fields don't develop in isolation. Included in these chapters are summaries of several major theories: Wellhausen and his Documentary Hypothesis; the crucial importance of the Babylonian Exile, Persia and the work of Ezra and Nehemiah; Shaye Cohen and his idea of the role of the Hellenistic age, and Shlomo Sand's work on a modern origin are all covered. There are however some weaknesses. The section on Sigmund Freud seems to me pointless. It could have led to more discussion of origins as illusions, used to support our egos. Also,

there are some missing discussions. No mention is made of Mordecai Kaplan who proposed understanding Jewish history as an evolving civilization with notable epochs (biblical, Talmudic, medieval and modern). Jacob Neusner, and his work on the importance of Babylonian/Persian era on the emergence of Jewish rabbinic teachings. And a third scholar whose work would be interesting in the context of Jewish origins is Thomas McEvilley's *The Shape of Ancient Thought* which investigates connections between Greek and Indian thought and the uncertainty of cross cultural influences. There is also little discussion of similar origin theories in late antiquity studies. Throughout the book, Weitzman clearly presents contemporary ideas of postmodern thinkers like Deleuze and Foucault and nonlinear, non-developmental perspectives which can upset our conventional understanding. This contributes to his discussion of the uncertainty in all these discussions. With all that said, what I appreciated most is Weitzman's honesty in describing the uncertainty in all these subjects. Let me be clear, this is not the typical academic caveats. It certainly reads like a sincere recognition that certainty may evade us, but the discussion can go on.

This was a great book but I think it's important to understand that the majority of the book is a historical analysis of the process that others have used to try to determine the origin of the Jews. It's really not about a new analysis of finding this origin. Bringing together all the different ways of analyzing this issue over many centuries was very interesting and informative but didn't really bring anything new to the discussion.

Two things come to mind as a conclusion from this book (*vasta mole superbus*): 1. All these silly theories are what happen when you don't have actual molecular data to work with. 2. Subject to feedback from reality (in the form of physical data), people can believe anything at all. If you want to know about the latest advances in population genetics, then this book is not for you. Weitzman really says the most interesting concepts in the introduction and a bit more in the conclusion and the rest is just filler. (For the record, that is his speculation on just what is the point of finding origins.) Biggest take-away messages.... \*\*From the book: It gets back to this issue of origins. If you go back far enough, would you find some quintessential Hebrew/ Jew from which all other Jews can be explained? Or would that point be just some arbitrary point along an infinite line? Is there a natural stopping point or is it arbitrary? Yiddish speaking Hasidim could be considered a corruption of what was some idealized Jew that existed about 4000 years ago (but don't tell them that), but then, most of them have a concept of time that \*began\* back in Eastern Europe just a few hundred years ago. (Can you see your way into believing that there is anything Middle Eastern about

shtreimel and bekishe?)\*From sources in the book: The proper study of Jewish origins is obfuscated by the fact that there are \*so many people\* who are weighing in on this conversation who have no business talking about it. And let's be clear: This issue is one of population genetics and nothing else. The other voices in this discussion (sociologists/ anthropologists/ philosophers) are either people who were talking before we had actual (molecular) data to work with or milestones on the way to working with actual data. The whole gang is quoted: i. The post modernists. (Derrida. Foucault.) ii. The sociologists. (Fredrik Barth. He of the constructivist approach, whereby anything that you don't want to deal with in reality is just "socially constructed.") iii. We also get several visits throughout this LONG, expansive book from historical/ biblical sources. Who didn't know that they aren't enough and that they aren't accurate? Who didn't know that people can imagine a history out of whole cloth? (Who hasn't thought that they were a lost tribe? Â Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions) Once you understand that this issue of Jewish origins can be solved by population genetics, then almost the entirety of the book (as in, everything between the introduction and the 8th chapter) becomes superfluous. And for books that are solely focused on the issue of Jewish population genetics, there are better books that have been written. Â Legacy: A Genetic History of the Jewish PeopleÂ Â could be read in preference to this one-- if for no other reason than its brevity. (This book is 328 pages long, but could have just as easily been whittled down to 200 pages. It is just much\_too\_wordy.) Of the book, it's about 291 pages of text over 8 chapters, plus an introduction of 25 pages. That works out to 36 pages per chapter-- though each chapter reads like it is 60 pages. Verdict: The price right now is \$19.25 Kindle and \$26.09 plus shipping for a new hardcover (not out in paperback as of the time of this review). It is not worth that price to me. I would not pay more than \$4 plus shipping for this book.

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