

The Irrevocable Past: History and Image of the Beta Esra'el*

Since May 1991, the Ethiopian Jewish population (or Falasha, or Beta Esra'el) from northwestern Ethiopia resides in Israel (with only a few hundred remaining in Ethiopia). This remarkable ethno-religious minority has always attracted a more than normal measure of scholarly and public attention. Interest in the fate of this group has never been as intense as during the decade of their migration to Israel (1980-1991).

The study of J. Quirin is concerned with the emergence and development of the historical Beta Esra'el in their Ethiopian setting, and provides a timely survey of an era now closed. It is the first scholarly history on this difficult and often intractable subject, and a major contribution to Ethiopian studies in general and "Falasha-studies" in particular.¹ It also summarizes much of current scientific opinion on the Beta Esra'el which has emerged in recent years in various disciplines such as religious studies, literary-historical criticism, ethnomusicology and anthropology.

The book shows the dynamics of a community creating and struggling for its "identity", and provides a notable case-study of a process of articulation of both assimilation and differentiation among ethno-cultural groups in northwestern Ethiopia. Because of its meticulous approach, its careful construction of the narrative based on judicious use of widely scattered and often unyielding sources, and its measured use of oral traditions of Beta Esra'el, Amhara and other informants in Ethiopia, Quirin has produced a kind of standard-work on the subject. It is all the more valuable because he gathered his information from native informants in the original Ethiopian setting of the Beta Esra'el, a feat which can no longer be repeated.² For instance, the information that Beta Esra'el elders might give now in Israel will be less useful because of new biases resulting in reformulations of their tradition. An added quality of Quirin's

* Concerning: James QUIRIN, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews. A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 1992, 336 p.

1. It was published just before S. KAPLAN's study (1993) on the same subject, written at roughly the same time.
2. The author did his research in 1975, some years before the emigration movement to Israel started (ca 1979). The present book is based on his 1977 Ph. D. thesis.

writing is the cool, non-speculative rendering of the story of this fascinating community. He manages to integrate the various, sometimes contradictory, lines of interpretation of the contentious history of the Beta Esra'el into a factual and rather convincing narrative, which allows the debate between adherents of the "assimilationist" and the "persecutionist" view (p. xi) on Beta Esra'el history to be transcended.

In what follows, I will outline the main points of his account, and critically comment upon some remaining questions.

The Historical Trajectory

In the first chapter ("Ethiopia and the Beta Israel in Historical Perspective", pp. 7-39), Quirin presents the main theories about Beta Esra'el "origins", this perpetual question haunting the field. He cites three views: the Lost Tribe perspective (the Beta Esra'el are originally ethnic Jews, descendants from ancient Israelites); the Convert perspective (they are not ethnic Jewish migrants, but Agaw people converted by early Jewish migrants to pre-Christian Ethiopia and who assimilated there); and the Rebel perspective, which holds that the Beta Esra'el primarily emerged as descendants of non-Christian or Christian rebels against the Ethiopian kings who were expanding their authority in their areas. It also posits a formative influence of Christian political or doctrinal rebels (against dominant Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity especially as embodied in the king) on the non-conquered rural Agaw populations. In recent historical and ethno-musicological studies (Kaplan, Shelemay), a modified rebel perspective tends to get the upper hand, although, as Quirin rightly suggests, it cannot explain all the remaining puzzles of Beta Esra'el early history. This is what proponents of this view are also well aware of (Kaplan 1988: 58, 62, 64; Shelemay 1986; Abbink 1990). Nevertheless, the evidence so far tends to support this "rebel perspective" (cf. the Beta Esra'el and general Ethiopian-Christian tradition that both groups have a common descent, pp. 22-23), especially if one takes seriously the point (made by others,³ and often repeated by Quirin in this book) that the Beta Esra'el should primarily be interpreted "within their Ethiopian context".

Quirin's research also confirms the view that Beta Esra'el history before the 14th century is still largely unknown—there are not enough data. The issue of an eventual Jewish or Jewish-Christian presence in Aksum or Zagwé Ethiopia is of course important to determine the source and development of the Beta Esra'el Jewish religion. While indeed no solid evidence of the existence of the Beta Esra'el before the 14th century is available,⁴ Quirin shows that the time-limit for the presence of Jewish/Judaic groups in this misty era can probably be pushed further back. He illustrates this with a discussion of the history of the term *ayhud* ("Jews"): denoting either political or religious (rebel-Christian or even pagan) opponents to dominant Christianity of the time. That is, in addi-

tion to the Beta Esra'el there were much more *ayhud* people, and the Beta Esra'el were never specifically designated by the rulers as *ayhud*, nor was it ever a self-term. The further study of early religious and other documents (as done especially by Getatchew Haile) may prove to hold more clues to questions like the eventual pre-Christian Jewish presence in Ethiopia, the relation of such groups with emerging Christianity, the nature of the mediation of Jewish religious ideas into the Ethiopian tradition. The question has always been: what was the source of these ideas? An ancient Jewish community in Ethiopia, or other mediating traditions? On this issue, the author, despite his preference for a modified "rebel perspective" on Beta Esra'el origins, concludes that: "... there is persuasive evidence that 'Hebraic-Judaic' elements in Ethiopian Christianity must have been due to a pre-Christian Jewish presence in Aksum" (p. 18)—possibly, he adds, Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians. This fascinating question is therefore still open. In the meantime, Quirin wisely takes the modern compromise view: "... whether the ancestors of the Beta Israel-Falasha were a pre-Christian group who refused to convert, or part of the original Jewish-Christian group that split apart, or some combination of the two, they only emerged as a distinctive group through interaction and conflict with the Christian state and society" (p. 21).⁵ Indeed, this—the militant conflict of Beta Esra'el ancestors and conquering royal Christian forces around 1400—is the historical moment or episode upon which recent research has focused.

In a very interesting section (pp. 22-27), Quirin elaborates on the traditional view that Ethiopian Christians (especially the royal house) and Beta Esra'el ancestors saw themselves originally as one, as part of the "Israelites". These ideas were current on the level of the ruling elites, and might explain the politico-ideological background of the conflicts of the "Heroic Age" (p. 40 *sq.*), which led to a split between the two groups. Because of the fact alluded to above, that such political and regional conflicts already started in Aksumite times, the history of the "Fälasha" ("Those who were cut/split off") may well extend back before the 14th century—although next to nothing is known about the religion (of the rebels) at the time. The possible connections between the Beta Esra'el and the rebels against the 9th-century Christian king, Gäbrä Mäsqäl, and his brother, Betä Esra'el—a tantalizing episode (see also Abbink 1990)—are too tenuous to accept as proof for the existence of the Jewish Beta Esra'el in this period.

In the central chapters of the book, Quirin treats the history of the Beta Esra'el on the basis of identifiable sources and oral traditions referring back to the early 15th century. This story was largely known in outline from his earlier works (1977, 1979), but here he has presented it with admirable accuracy, given the sources available. From some documents (e.g. the 14th-century *Gädla Zéna Marqos*) he has uncovered new information (p. 48). From Quirin's account in his Chapter II ("The Heroic Age: Conquest, Resistance, and Falasha Identity, 1270-1632", pp. 40-88), it appears certain that in this age of wars, the term *ayhud* remained vague (cf. pp. 40, 48, 49, 59). It did not connote a clearly defined ethnic or religious group, and only after the crucial phase of the wars with king Yishaq (1414-1430), the *ayhud* of North-West Ethiopia became the "Falasha" or

5. See also ABBINK 1990.

3. Cf. KAPLAN 1985, and ABBINK 1984: 16-17.

4. Although, if TEDESCHI (1988: 20)—not mentioned by Quirin in his discussion of Benjamin of Tudela's testimony—is right, we have the first reference to the Ethiopian Jews in the 12th century.

Beta Esra'el (the latter term not yet used at that stage). Their regions were conquered, their land-rights were declared null and void, and their political and ideological ambitions thwarted.

Quirin adduces a lot of evidence of the anti-Orthodox activities and growing contacts of Christian rebels (often also called *ayhud!*) with the Beta Esra'el ancestors, but all through this era—up to 1632—it always remained difficult to say who those *ayhud* exactly were, as the kingdom's political and religious opponents were lumped together in this category (this meaning of the term probably derives from the *Kibrā Nūgāst*). Thus, the remark that the king (Zār'a Ya'ekob) "... also condemned those whom we must take to be religious Jews of the period" (p. 61) may state too much: how can we know if they were?

The third chapter on the Gondär era (pp. 89-125) is about that surprising episode of Beta Esra'el politico-economic incorporation into the wider (especially urban) society at the time of the Gondär kings (1632-1755). Here the full force of assimilationist tendencies in Beta Esra'el history becomes evident. This is the era where Quirin wants us to believe that assimilationism (due to increased social mobility) and caste formation (the mass of the people as blacksmiths and craftsmen) were both at their height (cf. p. 99). I will come back to this somewhat problematic argument below.

Chapter iv ("The Consolidation of Caste formation, 1755-1868", pp. 126-164) is about developments in the chaotic times of the *zāmānā mäsafint*, the "era of princes". It also describes the opening up of Beta Esra'el society to foreign involvement (Protestant missionaries) and the confrontation with Emperor Tewodros. This is the era where the self-conscious Jewish identity of the Beta Esra'el was decisively established (cf. p. 145). The most significant moment in this period was the "religious revival" occurring in the wake of the two developments just mentioned: in the debates with the Emperor and with the missionaries, their identity as Ethiopian Jews was, so to speak, "confirmed". As a result, communal social separation also increased.

Three points of note in the last chapter ("Splintering of the Beta Israel, 1868-1920", pp. 165-200) are the following: a) The enormous destruction wrought on the community by the Muslim Dervish invaders from Sudan. Villages, prayer-houses, schools were razed to the ground, fields and books burned, cattle and people massacred or chased away. Beta Esra'el society never really recovered from this. b) The widespread employment of Beta Esra'el craftsmen as migrant labourers by Emperors Yohannis IV (on his Mäqäle palace) and Minilik II (in Addis Alām, Ent'ot'o and Addis Abäba). Interesting also is the letter Minilik wrote in defense of the Beta Esra'el against the foreign missionaries (p. 178). c) The tensions and contradictions inherent in the efforts (led by J. Faitlovitch) "to save" Beta Esra'el Jewry: "... in order to preserve Beta Israel culture and save the people from extinction, it was necessary to encourage a careful process of change" (p. 193).⁶ This effort led to an internal struggle, the effects of which are felt even today (in Israel).

Caste Formation as Explanatory Variable

Quirin's book is not only a rich descriptive narrative. It is organized around the notion of "caste formation". This is familiar from his 1977 Ph. D. thesis, and it may be relevant to comment on it. Quirin wants this concept to help explain the fact that the Beta Esra'el, after their defeats in the wars against the Ethiopian kings, did *not* gradually assimilate but maintained themselves as a relatively autonomous group, religiously and socially differentiated.

The idea of caste suggests strict boundaries of descent (*e.g.* ascribed, "hereditary" identity) and dietary habits, limits on inter-marriage, and religious difference, in a kind of naturalized order of social inequality, the classic case of course being Hindu India. There were indeed such boundaries in the Ethiopian case, buttressed by taboos and supernatural fears, but their strength varied with historical conditions, and there was no strict hereditary membership. In the Beta Esra'el case, there was at times more assimilation, at times more differentiation, depending primarily on politico-economic factors (cf. the chapter on the Gondär era). Hence, it is "caste formation" which varies with wider political and socio-economic conditions, certainly before the rigidification of the group boundaries in the 19th century. The religious rationale for Christian Ethiopians to keep the Beta Esra'el apart (and vice versa) probably received its full force only when economic conditions sharply deteriorated.

The point is: the concept of caste cannot really form the "explanatory variable" (p. 27)⁷ for Beta Esra'el history. In the Epilogue (p. 203), Quirin also states that caste analysis was "... a useful organizing tool", which sounds less ambitious. This is indeed what he has done: taking "caste formation" as the *leitmotiv*, the narrative structure for his history, and not as its underlying explanatory factor. The emergence of caste itself needs explanation.

In fact, Quirin gave this explanation in the course of his account: it is medieval Ethiopia's politico-ideological rivalry and territorial and power struggle, culminating in conquest and subjection of only partly evangelized (Agaw) groups, which fuelled the processes of religious rivalry, group differentiation and caste formation. The author does state that both the "conflict-conquest" and the "gradualist-integrative" perspectives on caste formation are needed (p. 30) as explanatory moments. That is true, but the time perspective is vital here. The Beta Esra'el case showed the effects of the first moment in the early phase, before *ca* 1600, when they lost most of their lands. The second phase showed the process of gradual-integrative "caste" maintenance, on the basis of the massive subjection of a rebel population in this first phase.

It seems that Quirin wants to have it both ways: a) In the Gondär period, the Beta Esra'el were "... increasingly defined by their roles within the larger society rather than as an independent people" (p. 117), which meant more upward social mobility, better relations with the kings, land grants, thus more institutional incorporation. b) At the same time, the Beta Esra'el remained socially apart, reinforcing the "caste" lines. But this argument cannot explain how upward mobility was possible in the first place, *i.e.* the substantial number of Beta Esra'el who did assimilate. "Caste" was not invariably a barrier. There

6. On Faitlovitch and his efforts, cf. ABBINK 1984: ch. III (pp. 72-102).

7. Emphasis is mine, J. A.

are contradictory developments here, which are not yet fully clear. *E.g.* Quirin mentions the "... higher degree of acculturation" in the rural Semyen area, the last stronghold of the Beta Esra'el (p. 118). Why there, if the majority of the people in that region were Beta Esra'el, and most of them still tenant-farmers? The Beta Esra'el were not a "caste" yet, but descendants of a vanquished, rural population in a marginal region of the Empire. They had been politico-religious rebels against the kings, and were primarily remembered as such. The Beta Esra'el were no more than a "quasi-caste", partially open and incorporated in the wider society. In the blooming Gondár era, mobility and intermingling were so common, that some kings tried to block it by issuing discriminatory decrees on a "religious" basis (pp. 115-116). The background for this may have been the waxing local competition for resources (*e.g.* land) between groups (increasing "descent thinking"), and the balancing of interest groups (religious, political) in relation to the royal elite. Thus, when economic growth and political peace declined, social boundaries may have hardened, leading in turn to the fixing of "caste boundaries" in the *zamana mäsaftint* after 1755. In the period of the emergence of the provincial nobility as a powerful stratum (pp. 129-130), Beta Esra'el political and economic options narrowed, and "... they became almost exclusively defined by particular occupations" (p. 138). So it is at this juncture that they really sank down to become something like an "occupational caste".⁸ But again, "escape" was more common than is suggested here. This is especially evident from the interesting case of *Dejazmach* Webé's family (pp. 118, 139).

Concluding Remarks

Other critical comments relating to this book can be kept to a minimum. I will mention some minor points. The use of oral sources is very good, but we hardly hear "real-life" Beta Esra'el informants talk (there are no citations). Of course, neither can we check the oral information. This is no problem, but only when Quirin, referring to a written corpus in his possession, says, for example (p. 258, n. 113): "See also Admas Chekkol...", this is not fair, because we cannot get hold of it.

While Quirin's account, in good historical fashion, is based on painstaking research of all possible sources and published works, there is perhaps an *overdose* of scholarly display in that *a)* on many pages, almost every sentence is annotated, and *b)* some notes really are superfluous when they give a whole list of references which are not used in the text, neither for theoretical nor other purposes.⁹ At such moments one recalls Joseph Agassi's lament "Against elitism of excessive scholarship"...¹⁰

The book has some hand-drawn maps which could have been much better: they do not match the quality of the rest of the book. The general Ethiopian map (p. xx) does not give the correct provincial division, and was already long

outdated at the time this book was edited. Also, other details evoke questions here and there, *e.g.* does the word "Zalan" (p. 87) really refer to a now extinct ethnic group or it is simply the Amharic word *zallan* meaning "nomads" or "nomadic pastoralist" (as it still is now)?

Much more can be said about this book. It is a very stimulating historical survey, asking the right questions and providing tantalizing answers. I would say that any historical understanding of the Beta Esra'el community in Ethiopia begins with Quirin's book, especially if read together with the equally valuable historical study of the Ethiopian Jews by S. Kaplan (1993). Its dynamic, interpretative approach of Beta Esra'el history is laudable, as is its respectful attention paid to the way in which this community has been the agent of its own history (cf. p. 201), a point which one expects will continue to be valid in Israel.

Finally, the account is also valuable in its evocation of this community's partly "mytho-legendary" past, now sliding away and being retrieved by its Ethiopian context, as the Beta Esra'el have become the Ethiopian Jews in Israel, in search of what "Ethiopian" can mean to them.

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8. See also ABBINK 1987.

9. For example, p. 223, fn. 99; pp. 224-225, fn. 108-110; p. 248, fn. 258.

10. J. AGASSI, *Toward a Rational Philosophical Anthropology* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff), 1977, pp. 1-8.

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Un nouveau regard sur la gestion des parcours pastoraux en Afrique*

Organisé par le Secrétariat du Commonwealth et l'ODI (Overseas Development Institute, Londres), dans le cadre d'un programme intitulé « The Management and Sustainable Use of Communal Rangelands in Africa », le séminaire de Woburn rassemblait des chercheurs et des praticiens du développement pastoral en Afrique francophone et anglophone. Il faisait suite à deux ateliers de travail antérieurs, le premier en 1990, également à Woburn, et le second en 1992 à Matopos (Zimbabwe).

L'ensemble de la réflexion conduite à travers ces séminaires remet en question la vision conventionnelle de l'écologie des parcours qui a dominé le développement pastoral en Afrique, surtout depuis les années 1950. Selon cette vision, le secteur de l'élevage doit reposer sur un équilibre entre la productivité des pâturages et le cheptel, afin d'éviter une dégradation des ressources jugée inévitable si la « capacité de charge » de ces pâturages est trop souvent dépassée. Cet équilibre permet aussi d'alimenter de façon stable les économies nationales et d'exportation en produits d'origine animale.

Au cours des dernières décennies, la recherche et la préservation d'un tel équilibre se sont matérialisées de multiples façons, notamment par des législations sur le contrôle des charges animales autour des forages à gros débit, par la privatisation individuelle ou collective des pâturages (avec les *grazing blocks* et les *group ranches* en Afrique de l'Est) et par des politiques de commercialisation visant à augmenter les taux d'exploitation des troupeaux par les pasteurs. À la fin des années 1960, ces diverses politiques pastorales furent également confortées par la célèbre « théorie des communs » de Hardin (1968). Selon cette théorie, le pastoralisme africain repose sur une propriété individuelle des troupeaux, et sur l'exploitation de parcours dont l'accès est libre. Dans un tel contexte, chaque pasteur cherchera à augmenter la taille de son troupeau, obtenant ainsi un profit personnel maximal tandis que la perte de ressources (eau, pâturage) sera infime, puisque partagée entre un grand nombre d'utilisateurs. Cette logique ne peut aboutir qu'à une croissance illimitée du cheptel et à une dégradation irréversible des ressources naturelles. Pour contrer cette tendance, le contrôle extérieur des charges animales, la propriété communautaire des trou-

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