REVIEWS


These two very different books are linked. The first is a summary of scholarship concerning the Falasha, a distinctive Ethiopian religious community. It is written to a prescribed formula characteristic of an entire series dedicated to 'Fils d'Abraham.' The second is a scholarly memoire, freer in form, more personal in voice. Kaplan cites Ullendorff frequently and discusses his ideas in his text. Ullendorff refers occasionally to the Falasha, and has a brief passage (pp. 149-52) devoted to them.

Of the two books, Kaplan's will be the more immediately and generally useful to readers of this journal. The Falasha have received considerable media attention recently thanks to their large scale, and occasionally spectacular, exodus to Israel. For over a century and a half they have brooked large in European schemes to missionize Ethiopia. They constitute the most distinctive community now to be recognized as part of world Jewry. On the Ethiopian scene they are just one of a host of distinctive and unusual cultural and religious groups, most noted for occupying the central point on a continuum of judaic influences running from the 'pagan' Qemant to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

For their entire recorded history, which starts over six hundred years ago in the fourteenth century, their identity has been bound up with their religion, a form of Judaism which exhibits no post-Biblical features. The most recent scholarship fully faces the fact that the Falasha exhibit no religious texts, traditions, or customs which could not have been derived from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. For the reader seeking a general introduction to the Falasha, with a comprehensive review of existing scholarship concerning them, and with special attention to religious issues, Kaplan's text is the best available.

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In addition to its assured command of the relevant literature the book benefits from a number of features common to the series to which it belongs: extensive, wide-ranging translations of extracts from Falasha primary texts; serious attention to spiritual life; and well-chosen and reproduced illustrations.

Ullendorff’s book reflects on a career of scholarship and public service which embraces two Zions: Jerusalem and Ethiopia. The author was a student at the University of Jerusalem in its early days in the 1930s. His first direct experience of Ethiopia came as a member of the British military administration of Eritrea in the early 1940s. At the University of Jerusalem he had studied Semitic languages and literatures and it was on these skills that the occupying force drew. Ullendorff did political work and edited a newspaper in Tegreñña, a Semitic language. He returned to Ethiopia on a number of occasions, held the chair of Ethiopian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and was a winner of the Haile Sellassie I Prize for contributions to Ethiopian Studies.

The book does have some vivid evocations of Jerusalem before World War II and of Eritrea during it. However, its principal interest for readers of this journal will probably lie in its conceptualization of its Ethiopian subject matter. Ullendorff is one of the most distinguished living contributors to the Semitist approach to Ethiopian studies, one long-dominant in the field. This tradition reaches far back into the nineteenth century and is an outgrowth of Semitic philology and Biblical studies. It approaches Ethiopia primarily through its literary heritage, largely expressed in the classical Ge'ez, a language closely related to classical South Arabian Semitic, and, in its understanding of culture, privileges literary expression and elite values. Its monuments can be found in every major library in the world, and it found solid purchase within Ethiopia in the national tradition which appropriated a Zionist role for the country.

Ullendorff’s book may profitably be read for its expression of this approach, one to which the Falasha remain a significant phenomenon, ‘... in their living testimony to the Judaized civilization of the South Arabian immigrants [who created classical Ethiopia] and their well-nigh complete cultural ascendancy over the Cushitic and other strata of the original African population of Ethiopia ...’ (p. 150).