

REVIEW ARTICLE

**RELATING BET ISRAEL HISTORY
IN ITS ETHIOPIAN CONTEXT:
DEFINING, CREATING, CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY**

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JAMES QUIRIN, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1992. xviii, 292 pp., Glossary, Bibliography, Index, Photographs, Maps. £31.95.

STEVEN KAPLAN, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*, New York and London: New York University Press 1992. xiv, 231 pp., Bibliography, Index, Map. £39.95.

PUBLICITY surrounding the exposure of the secret Operation Moses—a series of airlifts in the early to mid-1980s to transport Bet Israel (Ethiopian Jews)¹ to Israel from Sudan, where they had walked from Ethiopia — brought the people and their situation to worldwide attention. At this point, concern with the identity of the Bet Israel mushroomed out from Jerusalem, where the Rabbinate were determining their right to live in Israel as Jews under the Law of Return. Now their identity, with further implications for opinions on where Bet Israel could or should be, became an issue for various academics, politicians and others interested in

1. In this article I have used the spelling 'Bet Israel', an Amharic term meaning 'House of Israel', since Bet Israel have insisted to me that this is their name. Both authors of the books under review, however, use the spelling 'Beta Israel', which is the conventional usage.

Ethiopia, Israel and the Middle East. The works of ethnohistory reviewed in this article are therefore of great contemporary significance.

Beginning with their origins—a subject considered to be a major issue by virtually anyone interested in the Bet Israel (although not by the Bet Israel themselves) since it is regarded as the key to their identity—both historians relate these to the Aksumite era, although in different ways. Kaplan depicts fourth-century Aksum as characterized by religious syncretism, with evidence of a continued Jewish presence and cordial relations between Jews and people of other religions. His position is that, in the fourth century, the supposed predecessors of the Bet Israel shared with Christians a common identity as Israelites, rather than identifying themselves as Jews. By contrast, he fails to find a link between Bet Israel religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and ancient Jewish practice, although bridging the distance between ancient and contemporary times and religions must surely be equally difficult in relation to other Jewish communities.

Kaplan's view of syncretism pervades his treatment of other periods of their history. This syncretism is depicted as consisting of shared Hebraic elements and ideas, and a shared identity and politico-religious discourse. One of the main examples is his recurring theme of the opposition between the 'good Israelite' and the 'bad Jew' as a prime category of Ethiopian political and religious discourse. This theme is highlighted, for example, in legendary accounts such as the *Kebra Negust* (The Honour of Kings), which supplies the source of Solomonic empirical legitimacy, in two of the indigenous accounts of Bet Israel origins in Ethiopia and in his hypothesis on the effect of the war between Ethiopian Emperor Kaleb and the Himyarite Jewish convert King Yusuf Du Nuwas on Christian–Jewish relations in Aksum.

Quirin makes the connection with Aksum by conjecturing that the original Ayhud (Amharic for 'Jewish' or 'Jew') were Jewish–Christian dissidents exiled from Christianizing Aksum and Agau, among whom the former 'proselytized a form of Judaism...'. He sees Ayhud religion as becoming further Judaized through the reinforcement of the 'Ayhud or Gedewonite content of their society' in response to intensive Christian proselytization at various periods of their history. In this way, he portrays their religion as developing indigenously rather than through any external influence and thus as having nothing to do with Judaism outside Ethiopia. Quirin therefore identifies the predecessors of the Bet Israel together with their practices as 'Jewish or Jewish–Christian', whereas Kaplan, in accordance with his syncretic approach, identifies biblical practices found in Aksum as 'Old Testament' or 'Hebraic' rather than specifically Jewish.

The position that Quirin adopts in his discussion of the origins of the Bet Israel spills over into his treatment of other historical periods. For example, it is reflected in his loose and arbitrary use of the terms 'Jewish' and 'Christian' and his easy substitution of the two terms for each other in comparing the religions of the Bet Israel and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In making this comparison, he draws up a list of culture traits, emphasizing what he sees as similarities, including

phenomena without religious significance, confusing ritual with non-ritual practices, such as washing with purification, and ignoring or underplaying differences as 'probably of degree rather than kind'.

In the same vein as Quirin, Kaplan sees few real, clear distinctions between the religions. Both historians share the method of comparing the two religions in terms of the quantity of elements, whether religious or non-religious in their nature and significance, which, from the outside observer's point of view, are seen to be held in common. This is presented at the expense of giving sufficient weight to indigenous perceptions of religious differences and similarities. It is this which leads both historians to treat all religious and cultural components as if they were equal in significance and meaning, and therefore to view it as a central paradox that while cultural traits were consciously shared, mutual perceptions held between the two peoples were as 'other'. However, Kaplan does also consider the fuller nature of Bet Israel religion and Ethiopian Christianity, rather than looking simply at the elements they are presumed to have in common. For example, he explains the importance of jubilees and the sabbath in Bet Israel religion, and portrays Ethiopian Christianity as essentially constituting the addition of new beliefs and rituals to Hebraic religion, rather than the abandonment of old ones.

For Quirin, the extent to which components were shared between the two societies proves that Bet Israel identity was not ethnic, religious or cultural. For Kaplan, the shared cultural and religious components substantiate his position that the relationship between the Hebraic religions of the Bet Israel and of the Christians consists of a continuum rather than an opposition and that the Jewish-Christian dichotomy is therefore inappropriate in Ethiopian history. The two historians therefore differ qualitatively in their approach, Kaplan pointing to syncretism in origins and history, Quirin insisting on a Christian emphasis.

Kaplan, in taking his syncretic approach further, demonstrates the interrelatedness of the Bet Israel and Ethiopian Christian discourse in terms of shared key symbols. One of these key symbols is termed 'magical transformations', but within this category he throws together phenomena of a different order of nature. Thus, he places the Bet Israel blacksmiths' ability to create metal objects alongside the Christians' belief in the cross's 'transformation into an object of worship', although the latter is a religious, not a magical, phenomenon. In positing blood as another shared key symbol, he again draws on phenomena of a completely different nature, such as the Amhara's superstition that Bet Israel, in respect of their reputation as *buda* (association with the evil eye), were able to draw blood from their alleged victims, together with menstruation taboos and the practice of washing blood from meat before cooking, these, unlike the first, being extensions of biblical ordainments. Just as in the case of the former 'key symbol', we are speaking of very different types of transformations with different meanings, so in the latter, the meanings bestowed on blood are of a very different kind, and it is only the appearance of language that enables such phenomena to be abstractly grouped together in this way.

To return to Quirin and his denial that the distinct identity of the Bet Israel was religious in character, he stresses instead the concept of 'caste' as 'the main explanatory variable in Beta Israel history'. Thus he presents the economic and political position of the Bet Israel as crucial in defining their identity. Quirin fails to consider in any depth the applicability of the term 'caste' to describe the kind of endogamous, occupational specialist, low-status groups found in Africa, where, in the absence of the Hindu context, it can at best only serve as a metaphor. Instead, he briefly justifies his use of the concept in relation to Ethiopian society by delineating certain features required in the definition of 'caste' and showing these features to be present in the Ethiopian case.

Quirin begins this stage of his analysis by referring to the Gondar period (1632–1755) as the time of the Bet Israel's economic and political 'incorporation' into Abyssinian society, when they became part of a 'new landless class'. Having lost their land following their final conquest and loss of autonomy, they became soldiers in the king's army, masons and builders of churches and palaces, and other artisans, and were able to rise to prominent positions in the army and receive titles and land anew. However, it was during this period of 'incorporation' that segregation was enforced by the Amhara, who prohibited intermarriage with the Bet Israel and forced them to live in separate areas. Quirin therefore distinguishes between economic and political incorporation on the one hand and social incorporation on the other, which, he states, the Bet Israel did not achieve.

During the subsequent 'Era of the Princes'—which was marked by rivalry between nobility for power following the decline of the Gondar kings, beginning in 1755, demand for their skills as builders and masons diminishing as Gondar fell into ruins—the Bet Israel reverted entirely to the occupations of blacksmith, weaver and potter, their land rights were encroached upon, and they were given the label *buda*. Quirin refers to this as the next stage in the 'evolution' of the Bet Israel from a 'low-ranking class' to an 'occupational caste', and he describes the reinforcement and strengthening of a separatist code as constituting the final stage of the 'consolidation' of this process. This separatist code refers to the purity laws of the Bet Israel, whose correct application is attributed by them to Abba Sabra during the fifteenth century, and Quirin refers to a weakening of this code during the Gondar Era. Despite this chronology, Quirin essentially reduces the religious identity of the Bet Israel, on the assumption that this has already been boiled down to these purity laws, to 'an ideological justification (expressed in moral or religious terms) of this rigid separation' as if their 'caste-like' status came first. In doing so, he confuses their attributed social status with their self-ascribed religious identity. To Quirin, therefore, the function of Bet Israel identity was to maintain their separation from Amhara society, while the function of their separation was to maintain their identity. Moreover, as a response to threats to their identity, the Bet Israel developed economic and religious practices that laid a basis for that identity. In this way, Quirin supports his theoretical point that groups construct their own identity and fulfil what he sets out as the task of the historian: to reconstruct ways in which people are 'agents of their own history' within his

theoretical framework, whereby: 'Groups manipulate forces and factors to utilize diverse aspects of their identities in various circumstances in an "instrumentalist" manner'. His central position is therefore built on two core circular functionalist explanations.

Kaplan also places significance on the Bet Israel's economic and political relationship with the Amhara, referring, like Quirin, to their incorporation into and exclusion from Ethiopian society. However, unlike Quirin, he does not define Bet Israel identity entirely in these terms. His stated aims include a wish to 'de-mythologize Bet Israel history' and to correct the tendency to depict Bet Israel religion in a 'static or ahistorical' fashion, as an archaic form of Judaism, which he sees as being connected with evolutionary views on 'primitive peoples'. One method he uses to achieve these ends is to minimize the role of any religious component as a significant factor in explaining the conflict between the Bet Israel and the Solomonic Empire or in shaping historical events in relation to the Bet Israel. He therefore emphasizes the overall context, as if this and admitting the existence of Bet Israel religion were mutually exclusive.

In locating Bet Israel history within the context of the wider stream of Ethiopian history and his concern to deny the role of any 'Jewish/Christian' dichotomy in Bet Israel history, Kaplan makes a point of showing that diversity and diffusion existed among the Ayhud and the later Bet Israel, to the extent that he considers the limits of speaking of Bet Israel as a 'community'. He asserts that it was only during the second half of the sixteenth century that a high degree of political centralization and religious articulation began to exist among the Bet Israel, though he still stresses divisions among the Bet Israel after this period. However, his emphasis on their divisions appears to be restricted to their economic base and extent of incorporation, since he does point out that the Bet Israel of Semien were linked to those of other regions by kinship and religion. He notes too that their economic and social position within the Amhara hierarchy existed alongside traditional leadership at the rural level.

In denying the significance or applicability of the Jewish-Christian dichotomy in Ethiopian or Bet Israel history, Kaplan assimilates the Bet Israel to other groups in Ethiopia by virtue of regional identity or status as subject peoples. Thus for Kaplan, the years of conflict from 1560 to 1632, during which three campaigns were waged against the Bet Israel in ten years, are depicted as the first stage in the wars against the peoples of the Lake Tana region, not as religious wars. He attributes these wars to the growing depredations of the imperial presence in the Lake Tana region, which imposed a financial burden. Kaplan notes the divisions among the Bet Israel during these years between hardliners and accommodaters, between those who were granted land and the dispossessed, and between converts and nominal Christians. In the former case, he interprets the defiance of the Bet Israel not as an assertion of independence but as an example of the typical exploitation of the weakness of authority by vassals.

Similarly, rather than accepting that the Bet Israel were a homogeneous group whose conflicts were determined by their religious identity, Kaplan shows how, at

different times in their history, sectors of the Bet Israel formed alliances with sectors of the Amhara in opposition to the Solomonic rulers, allied themselves to the Amhara and Solomonic rulers in opposition to other Bet Israel and even formed alliances with or against external forces. Thus sectors of Bet Israel are shown helping Muslim troops at the initial stages of their invasion of Ethiopia under Ahmad ibn Ibrahim 'Gragh' ('left-handed'), following the defeat of the Muslims of Adal in 1516, then switching sides to join the Portuguese-Christian alliance. When, in 1620, Susneyos tried to establish Catholicism as the state religion, they are then seen as having sided with the nobles, the *abuna* (the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church) and the peasants in a popular uprising against Susneyos and the Portuguese who supported him. Kaplan thus shows, as does Quirin, the significant and prominent role of the Bet Israel in the history of Amhara-dominated Ethiopia.

Kaplan is also concerned to point out that the Ayhud/Bet Israel were not singled out among the people of Ethiopia for any special treatment. Instead, he stresses, the treatment they received had more to do with the extent of their co-operation with the Solomonic rulers, or their dissidence. An illustration of their differential treatment is when Susneyos ordered the Bet Israel to be massacred in revenge for their support for 'Ya'eqob' (or Takluy), who rose up as a pretender to the throne in 1614. However, he allowed those in Dembeya, who had not been involved in the rebellion against Susneyos, to be saved so long as they converted to Christianity. According to Kaplan, the order for the extermination of the Bet Israel represented a change of policy towards them by the Solomonic rulers. The position of those Bet Israel who were considered valuable to the Solomonic kings was maintained and even improved, while that of those who were perceived as lacking marketable skills declined. Thus he considers the varied status positions among the Bet Israel to have depended on the prestige of their occupations rather than being related to their religious identity, in contrast to Quirin, who equates their occupational with their religious identity. The limits to Kaplan's position can be seen in the restrictions in social mobility that applied to the Bet Israel.

Not only rebellion but the rise of Bet Israel monasticism too is depicted as being connected with Solomonic encroachment, and Kaplan finds a similarity between this and other major monastic movements in Ethiopia, again placing it within the wider Ethiopian context and stressing his denial of Jewishness as a factor in the Bet Israel's opposition to the Solomonic Empire. He portrays monasticism as the articulation of a distinctive, regionally based religious identity against the central institution of the Christian empire, with Bet Israel monasticism distinguished from the others in not being led by a displaced nobility.

The problem with Kaplan's attempt to dismiss or deny the religious identity of the Bet Israel as a significant component in their history is the fact that at various times in that history they were subjected to forced conversion. Thus in 1560, Minas demanded the conversion of the Bet Israel, even though they 'had agreed to submit to imperial rule and were willing to continue to pay regular

tribute', while, as we have seen, the lives of the Bet Israel of Dembeya were spared by Susneyos only if they converted.

Kaplan, in common with Quirin, sees the Bet Israel as a product of historical processes taking place in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries and as not existing as an entity before that period. Both historians portray the Bet Israel as adapting biblical–Hebraic elements from Ethiopian Christianity in order to develop their distinctive Jewish group identity. Thus, for example, Quirin asserts: 'From an obscure origin, the Falasha began to emerge as a distinct group by the 15th century.' Kaplan, like Quirin, characterizes the Ayhud as having originally consisted of 'loosely affiliated groups' who became the more 'clearly defined Falasha'.

Kaplan and Quirin describe the impact of the monks on Bet Israel society and religion in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries in very similar ways. This was a time of the decline of the Bet Israel and of conversions to Christianity. Both authors attribute the survival of Bet Israel religion to the monks and to their emphasis on physical isolation and purity, which Kaplan sees as central to their religious identity. Also, they both see the monks as 'defining and articulating' a religious system which provided the 'ideological foundation' for the organization of their society, and both then make the leap from 'organization' to 'creation', and subsequently, to the 'invention of the Falasha' (Kaplan), or 'From Ayhud to Falasha: The Invention of a Tradition' (the title of one of Quirin's chapters).

Yet factors are found in Quirin's own work which contradict the presentation of the Bet Israel and their religion as becoming 'defined' only late in their history. Little, he asserts, is known about their religion before the nineteenth century, from which we may conclude that equally little can be known about the extent to which their religion was defined at this time. Despite this, he relates that when the monk Qozmos reached the people of Semien and Sallamt in the late fourteenth century, he found that they 'lived in the Jewish faith' and that the Gadl of Zena Marqos, who carried out his missionary activities among the 'Ayhud' before the arrival of Qozmos, describes them as a 'distinctive Old Testament community' who already 'knew well the "law of the Orit"' (Amharic for Old Testament or Pentateuch).

Shelemay (1984) has demonstrated that a significant proportion of Bet Israel and Christian Orthodox liturgies share a common source. This is not the same as concluding—as Quirin does, from the premise that Bet Israel religion received influence and revitalization from Christianity—that their religion was therefore created entirely from Christian elements. The work of Abba Sabra (mid-fifteenth century), whether or not he was originally a Christian, involved the 'correction', not the creation, of life based on the Orit and 'writing a collection of prayers and other religious books'. Thus, in one of many statements of its kind, Quirin surely confuses 'liturgy' with 'identity' and elsewhere with 'religion' in stating that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the 'Falasha' 'created their own identity...from Christian material...[which] allowed them to survive as a group'.

Quirin shares Kaplan's approach in situating Bet Israel history within its Ethiopian context, although for different reasons. While Kaplan is concerned with

syncretism, Quirin sets out his aim of writing 'ethnohistory' without the 'racist' need for external references for purposes of glorification. He implies that external, foreign factors became significant only late in the history of the Bet Israel, as in his 'snapshot' of Bet Israel society just before 'foreign involvement' in 1770–1840. He also writes as if it was the 'Western' Jews among these foreign factors, not the English and Scottish Protestant missionaries, who interfered with the Bet Israel's Ethiopianness.

However, by Quirin's own account, foreign involvement had a major impact throughout the histories of both the Amhara and the Bet Israel. Thus the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was led from Egypt, while monasticism was brought to Ethiopia by missionaries from Syria. Ottoman Turks assisted in the Muslim invasions of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi '*Gragh*' and later tried to influence Ethiopian politics until they were defeated by Sarsa Dengel, while the Portuguese rendered military assistance to the Ethiopian armies in 1541 against Ahmad. Subsequent Portuguese Jesuit involvement had an enormous impact on the course of political events in Ethiopia. The Mahdist invasions from Sudan in the late nineteenth century also made a devastating mark on Ethiopian history. In fact, since the history of Amhara-dominated Ethiopia is characterized by the colonization and subjection of numerous territories and peoples from linguistically and ethnically different backgrounds, it is perhaps not entirely meaningful to distinguish between the 'Ethiopian' and the 'external'.

In the same vein, Quirin also refers to the 'splintering' of Bet Israel society as if it occurred only late in their history, and again, only under what he terms 'foreign' (that is, 'Western Jewish') impact, as if to assume that it was undivided up to that point. This assumption conflicts with his own account of divisions at other times—for example, junior Bet Israel siding with Yeshaq (reigned 1413–30) against their seniors, who fought on the side of their own leader Gedewon during the first of the 200-year series of conflicts which led to the Bet Israel's loss of independence. It is also directly in conflict with Kaplan's portrayal of the diffuse and divided nature of the Ayhud/Bet Israel throughout their history. It may be granted that since, according to both accounts, it is only relatively late in their history that they became a defined—as opposed to diffuse—community, it is presumably only later than this that, for Quirin, they could then 'splinter'.

In 1859, the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, and in 1860, the Falasha Mission, authorized by the Church of Scotland, began targeting the Bet Israel. Quirin does not show these missions as representing something either foreign or strange to Bet Israel religion and culture, probably because Emperor Tewodros permitted them to carry out conversions only to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which Quirin considers anyway to have been practising the same religion as the Bet Israel. Quirin's approach to this part of their history becomes surprisingly personalized: his reasons for the success of the Protestant missions are presented in terms of the persuasiveness of the truth of their message, while he attributes the limits of their success to the tenacity of Bet Israel in holding on to 'sentiment' and tradition and to coercion by other Bet

Israel. Bet Israel leaders attempted to fight these missionaries through the Ethiopian legal system and presented their case before the Emperor Tewodros. Quirin sees this as part of an ongoing controversy in Ethiopia concerning the unity of God. His approach to this period of their history is thus consistently informed by his position on the religious identity of the Bet Israel, namely that they were essentially Christian.

At the root of Quirin's approach is his desire to depict Bet Israel history within its Ethiopian context without external references for purposes of glorification, which he does by equating the referents 'Ethiopian', 'Amhara' and 'Christian'.² Outside this equation, he defines Judaism as 'foreign' and representing 'the ways of the West world' that were taught to the Bet Israel by 'Western Jews'. He has not understood that Judaism is in fact not a Western religion, nor that aspects of Judaism introduced to the Bet Israel upon the arrival in their midst of the Polish-born, French-educated Jacques Faitlovitch in 1904 are not 'Western' in origin but were developed in the religious academies of Babylon and the Holy Land. Nor has he understood that these aspects of Judaism are not in fact specific to 'Western' Jews but are embraced equally by Jews of the 'East', as indicated by Halevy's visit from Turkey, begun in 1867, and the visit to the Bet Israel of the (non-Western) Chief Rabbi Nahum of Turkey at the beginning of the twentieth century, sponsored by the French Alliance Israelite Universelle.

Having identified Judaism with a 'foreign' or 'Western' ethnicity, Quirin's approach indicates a misconception, namely that to concede that Bet Israel religion was distinctive, authentic or, in fact, Jewish, would be incompatible with their Ethiopianness and that, conversely, his argument about how Ethiopian they are is a refutation of such distinctiveness, authenticity or Jewishness. In the service of this equation, Quirin goes against another of his stated aims, namely to incorporate the oral traditions of non-dominant peoples into a more complete writing of ethnohistory. In fact, indigenous points of view of what is important in defining a group's identity or religion and in distinguishing itself from others are not given proper consideration. Instead, Quirin himself decides which Bet Israel or Amhara indigenous perceptions are valid and which are not, while some Bet Israel historical traditions are represented only to be dismissed as 'personalized', their statement of the essence of their religious identity is ignored, while their own views of their origins are dismissed as 'obviously...greatly influenced by Western Judaizing forces'. The most extreme example of this tendency is perhaps when he cites data in which the Bet Israel clearly state their faith in response to pressure from Protestant missionaries: 'God gave us the law by Moses...More we don't want'.³ Quirin dismisses such statements of their faith—in particular, the

2. He shares this approach with Pankhurst, who stresses that the medieval Ethiopian state was a Christian state, inhabited mainly by Christian peasants, ruled by a Christian monarch, and defended by a Christian army (1992: 572).

3. Cited in Negoosie to Flad, in *Jewish Missionary Intelligence*, 14 (April 1898): 55.

fundamental premise of Judaism expressed in the first line of an important prayer known to Jewry worldwide: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord',⁴ as 'anti-Trinitarian doctrine', 'sentiments' and 'traditional arguments' which 'held the day, despite the dedication of the mission'.

Kaplan's approach to the period of Protestant missionizing among the Bet Israel contrasts with Quirin's. To Kaplan, it is the Protestant London Society for promoting Christianity among the Jews that had a fragmentary influence on the Bet Israel and inaugurated their encounter with 'Western modernity'. Thus the Protestant missionaries are treated as no less Western or foreign than the 'Western Jews'. While Quirin sees the coercion of some Bet Israel by others as interfering with the Protestant missions' work, Kaplan, in direct contrast, shows the role of kin in undermining the effectiveness of sanctions imposed by the Bet Israel community against converts. For Kaplan, the main impact of the missions was on Bet Israel self-identification, when they started to consider themselves 'Jews in a universal sense' rather than 'Israelites'.

Kaplan describes the migration of the Bet Israel to the state of Israel as the logical conclusion of their encounter with Faitlovitch. However, in his treatment of earlier attempted migrations to Israel by Bet Israel—for example, those occurring in response to the missions—Kaplan also cites as a factor their 'strong tradition of Exodus as a means of redemption and a powerful attachment to the Holy Land and the city of Jerusalem'.

Another way in which Kaplan differs from Quirin is in his consistent treatment of indigenous historical data with the same degree of seriousness, attention to detail and respect as any other historical data. This can be seen, for example, in his full and detailed consideration of all the arguments for and against the Solomon and Sheba legend as the historical basis for Jewish elements in Ethiopia. Where he does not find literal accuracy in such data, Kaplan nevertheless bestows other kinds of value on it—symbolic, expressive or reflective. For example, he suggests that the rivalry and separation of the sons, Gabra Masqal and Beta Israel, of Kaleb, the early sixth-century Aksumite ruler, according to Ethiopian traditions could be viewed as an expression of growing Jewish-Christian animosity.

Quirin credits Christian monks and influences with creating Bet Israel religion and Protestant missionaries with persuading the Bet Israel of the truth of their message, if only it were not for 'tradition', 'sentiment' and internal coercion. Essentially, he blames 'foreign', 'Western Jews' for 'splintering' the community. Unlike Kaplan, however, he does not attribute major significance to the period of the Great Famine (1888–92) in undermining the religion and community of the Bet Israel. Kaplan treats the diffusion of the Bet Israel as a consequence of this devastating famine as a significant factor in the changing attitudes towards the monks and the decline of monasticism, which he describes as definitive of their distinctive religious tradition, and in the cessation of ritual sacrifice. He therefore sees those elements which distinguished the Bet Israel from world Jewry as

4. Cited by Aragawi, *ibid.*, 21 (July 1905): 98.

becoming significantly weakened before the arrival of Faitlovitch. He thus shows how the undermining and weakening of their society and religion, a process he describes as having been triggered by the Protestant missions, was accelerated by the famine.

It can be seen that even where Kaplan and Quirin draw upon the same data and superficially appear to agree with each other, their accounts of the history of the Bet Israel are essentially different. The crucial difference derives from how each relates history to the definition of Bet Israel identity. To Kaplan, people relate their history for the purpose of defining their identity and shaping their self-image, the latest stage of which he asserts to be the Bet Israel's dissociation of themselves from their Ethiopian past and surroundings, while reshaping their history to stress their similarity with other Jews. Quirin's position differs, in that for him people create their own history and construct their own identity. In fact, however, he himself then recounts and thus defines their identity on their behalf. In this way, he imposes a Christian identity on the Bet Israel, this identity being, for Quirin, definitive of Ethiopianness.

It is an essential strength of Quirin's work that it contains the conditions for the exposure of its own weaknesses. His data is sufficiently sound and comprehensive for the reader to determine where, rather than being supported by his data, his conclusions are based on preference and prejudice. Where such a basis exists, it can also be detected in his style, often permeated with a patronising and judgmental tone. Thus he describes 'the mid-nineteenth-century Beta Israel religious leaders who led a revival during this period', who 'tried to have it both ways', arguing 'on the one hand [that] their practices were based on and justified by the Old Testament—the same book was fundamental to Abyssinian Christianity—and therefore, on the other hand, they should be allowed to maintain their own practices and beliefs and remain distinct and independent from Abyssinian Christianity'. Although Quirin sometimes denies or contradicts his own conclusions, taking into consideration his work as a whole, one can easily perceive this as lip-service.

Although Quirin and Kaplan both adopt particular theoretical positions in relating the history of the Bet Israel, the complexity of the data requires both to be sufficiently flexible to be able to diverge from them and to set out data which set limits to and conflict with their own theoretical standpoints. Inevitably, such a vast and complex history as that of the Bet Israel cannot be reduced to a straightforward equation, any more than the work of any serious historian, such as Quirin or Kaplan, who undertakes the difficult and challenging task of recounting this history.

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