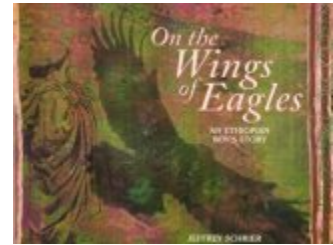


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey Schrier. *On the Wings of Eagles. An Ethiopian Boy's Story*. Brookfield, Connecticut: Millbrook Press, 1998. 26 pp. \$20.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7613-0004-5.

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On the Wings of Eagles is a children's story set in Israel shortly after the evacuation of a group of Beta Israel, or Ethiopian Jews, from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The story was inspired by a newspaper article in which a young boy was seen playing his flute as he stepped from the airplane that brought him to Israel. The book is recommended with caution for its topicality and its sensitive illustrations, but teachers should be prepared to supply a fair amount of background and corrective material. The book also leaves a number of important questions unasked, or consciously glosses over problems regarding the evacuation and the subsequent conditions experienced by the Beta Israel.

Although the story is not set in Africa, it deals with an issue that is truly African in nature. The Beta Israel believe that they are the descendants of Menelik, the son of Solomon and the queen of Sheba. Cut off from the rest of Jewry, they nonetheless continued to practice their faith in isolation. For a long time, the Beta Israel believed that they were the only Jews left in the world, and followed the traditions laid down in the Torah, as well as those handed down to them by tradition. Today, many of their customs reflect pre-rabbinic traditions and they do not follow the later teachings (of which they were unaware).

The Beta Israel are mentioned in Jewish writings of the sixteenth century, and were then accepted as part of the Jewish community, yet today many Jewish people still question whether the Beta Israel have the right to call themselves Jews. When the European explorers encountered the Beta Israel in the eighteenth century (the book uses the word "discovered"), they gradually put them in touch with other Jewish people. In 1975, the Rabbinic council confirmed their identity as Jews, and as a result of this decision, it was decided to evacuate the Beta Israel

who were caught in the crossfire during the Ethiopian civil war. The abrupt move from the rural villages of Ethiopia to the very white, westernized, and mostly urban society of Israel proved an extreme and disorienting transition for many. On their arrival in Israel, they lived in refugee camps, and were slowly integrated into the mainstream community. Many people found it difficult to adapt to the changes foisted upon them in Israel, and to being exiled from their home continent. Despite official recognition of their status as Jews, the Beta Israel have had to contend with blatant racism, including an incident in 1997 when it was revealed that the blood of Beta Israel was automatically discarded for fear that it might be infected with the HIV virus.[1] Their social and economic integration is slow and painful, and the Beta Israel community in Israel is one of the most needy, with poverty and unemployment rates far above the national average. So although the community no longer suffers religious persecution, it has had to come to terms with an entirely different set of problems.

This story, however, romanticizes these disturbing events, and does not mention any of the current problems faced by the Beta Israel. The story starts around a typically American campfire outside Beersheba, Israel. A young boy, Isaiah, tells his story to a group of fellow campers. The idyllic camp setting is hardly an accurate reflection of the segregated townships or refugee camps in which the Beta Israel find themselves. The impression is also created that the boy is accepted without prejudice into the community.

The mood is set with a haunting melody, and we are taken back to a traditional Africa in which storytelling forms the centre of community values. While this may be true to a certain degree, it is nonetheless a stereotype that

does not do justice to the modernized lifestyle of people in Africa. There is little insight into the young narrator's character, and we do not really experience his suffering in Ethiopia; rather, we are told of the awful conditions from which the Beta Israel were saved by the Israeli government. The story seems to be more about government efforts to "rescue" the Beta Israel than about an African boy. From the story, we get the impression that life was awful in Africa, and that the child is grateful to be free from the persecution in Ethiopia. The freedom from religious persecution is certainly a major relief to the Beta Israel, but the book fails to address the often devastating problems they have had to face with regard to integration into a strange community.

The complexities of the Ethiopian war are also glossed over. In the story, we are given the distinct impression that the Beta Israel were the focus of the Mengistu government's attacks. While one cannot deny the evidence of religious persecution, in this instance they were victims caught in the crossfire between other warring parties. The causes of the war, and the issues at stake, are not addressed at all. However, the author does present a vivid picture of the horror of living in a war-torn society. Ethiopia is treated as a place ravaged by war, and therefore unfit for Jewry. There is little understanding of the problems in Ethiopia, and the perspective is wholly that of a Jew looking from the outside at the suffering of fellow Jews, rather than at the Ethiopian people as a whole, or the country's problems. The focus is therefore not on Ethiopia and its problems, but on Israel's heroism at saving these "forgotten" people. Israel

is presented as an earthly Eden to which the Ethiopian Jews want to emigrate without question.

The pictures are subtle and rich in texture, original in their use of artistry. However, dressing Isaiah in his traditional *shamma* does contribute to the overall impression of Africa as an entirely rural, oral community (Pictures of the Beta Israel in the Internet and in books rarely show people in traditional dress, except for purposes of worship). In the first picture, Isaiah stands out from the other children because of his dress, so although he is part of the campfire circle, he is also separate because of his race and dress. The firelight highlights the face of the girl next to him, and his face is in the shadows. The emphasis is on his flute, rather than on him as a person. It is as if the person from Africa is identified through his music and his tradition rather than through his individuality. This perception is borne out by the final picture in the book, in which the focus is yet again on the flute. As the notes appear from the mouth of the flute, they are transformed into a dark, amorphous mass of brown people. The individual identity of the Beta Israel is wiped out, and presented as an extension of the music, an unidentified, unidentifiable other.

Note

[1]. Antell, Rachel. The Ethiopian Jews, or Beit (sic) Israel. www.african.com/ea_credits.htm, 1999.

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