

The Beta Israel

Sir, - The tendentious heading ("The Falasha fallacy") which was placed over Christopher Clapham's review (September 10) of two books about the Falashas prejudices the issue.

It shows a curious sense of proportion on the part of your reviewer to describe these people, today few in numbers as a consequence of accumulated misfortune, as of "such historical insignificance". A people who have survived for 2,000 years, stubbornly adhering to their faith in Old Testament Judaism, isolated and disadvantaged, deserve better than this from a professor of politics and international relations. If nothing else - and there is much else - their very existence provides a striking example of the interplay of Jewish-Christian relations which demands intelligent study rather than facile scorn.

Professor Clapham has swallowed hook, line and sinker the arguments posted by Steven Kaplan (in *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia*) and James Quirin (in *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews*) that the Falashas (or Beta Israel as they prefer to be called) are the descendants of an Ethiopian Christian schismatic movement dating to the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, composed of converts to Judaism who became the forebears of the present Falasha community. Far-fetched as this theory is, it raises more questions than it answers. It claims that a gap existed in the continuity of Judaism in Ethiopia from the time of its acknowledged presence in the Axumite kingdom, before the adoption of Christianity in the mid-fourth century, until the appearance of this pro-Jewish schism in the Church. No one has yet explained how or why Christian proselytes should have taken such an eccentric step unless there was an existing community - which local tradition believes - to which they could belong and from which they could imbibe their religious inspiration. There is, so far as I am aware, no legend or record to support the notion of this historic gap.

Kaplan and Quirin, supported by your reviewer, have assumed that certain practices (for example, synagogue design and music) have been acquired from the Christian Church without asking whence they originally came. The question which requires examination is who influenced

whom. Both sides gained in some degree from one another.

The Judaic customs in Ethiopian Christian culture, such as the dietary laws, sabbath observance and circumcision, were introduced as a result of the Jewish foundation on which Christianity was built. Even monasticism, on which the authors place great stress, had a pre-Christian Jewish tradition. It is sad to find that your reviewer should reach the "conclusion that the Beta Israel *aliyah* of 1985-91 was derived from assumptions that historical research has now shown to be mistaken". It is more probable that the historical research, far from being conclusive, was seriously flawed.

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'Lenin's Brain'

Sir, - With reference to Philip Brady's review of my novel *Lenin's Brain* (September 24), I feel bound to come to the defence of my translator Shaun Whiteside who has been blamed for the "cutting out of vital parts" of my text. Delighted though I was to notice how meticulously Mr Brady compared the English and German versions, the textual butchery was mine. Since I felt the relevant passages were self-explanatory elsewhere in the novel, and had posed particular problems in many of the other translations of the book, I chose to omit them in English. Philip Brady could not, of course, have known this, and I appreciate that my own skills in neurosurgery are limited. But I must stress that Shaun Whiteside took no forays into that field and I stand by his translation.

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The US and German POWs

Sir, - In his letter printed on August 20, James Bacque accuses me of not knowing what I think

from day to day. He quotes from a letter I wrote to him when he first showed me some of his material for his book, *Other Losses*, which changes Eisenhower with deliberately starving one million German prisoners to death. In the letter, I said that he had made an important discovery, and added, "You have the quotes from those who were present and saw with their own eyes".

Bacque neglects to add that when I learned that he had made up the quotations he used, I denounced his book. He also neglects to say that I told him in the letter he quotes that, although there was evidence of mistreatment of German POWs on an alarming scale, there was no evidence whatsoever to support his accusation of a million men killed.

The man is a genius at getting his name in the paper. But as John Keegan rightly points out (Letters, August 27), no one believes the absurd charge. The truth is that James Bacque has managed, knowingly or unknowingly, to perpetrate a gigantic hoax that has done far too much mischief.

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'Theory in Practice'

Sir, - I'm glad that when D. S., in the NB column for July 23, actually managed to read some of the "Theory in Practice" essays in the inaugural volumes of the series, he found the experience "unexpectedly entertaining", and even at one point caught one of the contributors espousing sentiments that he had thought the series rubric had proscribed. He really should not be surprised. So sedulous is he to get the series to fit the niche he *did* expect, its apparent attack on the "independent right to life" of literary texts, that the article is not above quoting scripture to suit its purpose.

No mention is made either of the editor's introduction, which for each text attempts to provide relevant biographical and bibliographical information, or of the passages of close attention to the text in each essay where the opening theoretical

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'Black Riders'

Sir, - How much one agrees with Donald Davie's claim (in his review of Jerome McGann's *Black Riders*, September 17) that "poetry's business is telling the truth". But of course he knows what that means. An inevitability of language, and every really good poem possesses such an inevitability, always tells the truth. That, more or less, seems to be the point that his quotation from McGann is rather pretentiously making. It is the point Wordsworth made about poetry that is "not inevitable enough" and Coleridge when he spoke of "the best words" (that is the only words for a given poetic context) "in the best order". Terry Eagleton's claim that "we have begun to register the fact that if literature is concerned with anything, it is not truth or morality but fantasy and desire" is an instance of the "no-one-seems-to-have-noticed-before" syndrome in Lit Crit, intended merely to stimulate a wide audience into thinking that they live in stirring times.

Everyone knows about the role of fantasy and desire in poetry and literature, and how they lead us to Davie's business of "telling the truth". For example, Larkin's ship that is seeking us, the "black-sailed unfamiliar", is death in a great poem, and thus inevitable in terms of that poem. Death's real inevitability, and the random process of its coming about, is something different, as the poet knew quite well: but his poem can none the less lead us, via the security of language, to the true emptiness of the fact. Otherwise we might, as Robert Graves put it, "go mad no doubt, and die that way". Housman's "nature", or his "tears of morning", suggest truth in a similar way. But of course, truth in poetry can be arrived at in many ways.

All this is obvious, as Donald Davie well knows, and maybe implies. I agree with him that "It seems incredible that this should need to be said; and that professors of literature should earn their salaries by denying it".

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