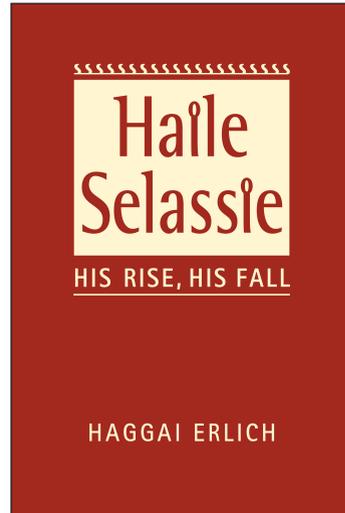


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Haile Selassie:
His Rise, His Fall

Haggai Erlich

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1800 30th Street, Suite 314
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telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

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1

A Political Icon



Haile Selassie: His Rise, His Fall is a biography of one of the mysterious icons of the twentieth century, who reigned absolutely more years than any other ruler in our time.¹ The main argument follows Haile Selassie's greatest skill—how to read global situations and use them to ensure Ethiopian independence as well as his own personal advantage at home. The survival of Ethiopia, its territorial integrity, and its opportunity to advance in the world were all dependent on Haile Selassie, especially on his masterful ability to play the external-internal game. The following chapters tell and analyze the multifaceted story of modern Ethiopia at home and in world affairs, while examining Haile Selassie as a human being, flesh and blood.

Haile Selassie was born Tafari Makonnen, the son of Ras Makonnen, a relative of Emperor Menelik II (1889–1913). Ras Makonnen had been involved in nearly all affairs of the then thriving Christian Ethiopian empire: the victory over Western imperialism (culminating in the March 1896 battle of Adwa against the Italians), territorial expansion at the expense of local Muslims, and the cementing of Ethiopian independence. Young Tafari grew up in the town of Harar, his renowned father's citadel. His mother died soon after his birth, and his father was usually absent before dying when Tafari was fourteen years old.

Fragile in body but iron willed, young Tafari found himself swimming in a sea of palace intrigues in the capital of Addis Ababa.

If his father had been a loyal number two in the kingdom, Tafari sought to outdo his legacy. He would prove most manipulative at political combinations at home and in international affairs. He managed to exploit World War I to dispose of Menelik's official heir and assume the title *ras* (literally, "head") and successor of the new empress, Zawditu (1916–1930). In the 1920s Ras Tafari was tasked with confronting the old guard of Menelik's generation—older, experienced warlords, proud and self-assured—who strove to preserve Ethiopia's conservative feudal system. Ras Tafari opened Ethiopia to the West and joined the League of Nations in 1923. He gradually built a new layer of "Young Ethiopians," better educated and loyal to him. By the end of the decade, he was the only man left standing. With the sudden and mysterious death of the empress in 1930, Tafari was crowned Haile Selassie I. He was also proclaimed, as were all previous emperors, a descendant of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba. Like them, he became the "Lion of Judah."

Haile Selassie I was a power-hungry ruler. He saw centralization of his control as a way to ensure independence in facing foreign ambitions—mainly Italian. However, provincial rivalries, jealousies, and intrigues encouraged Mussolini's aggression and ultimately contributed to the breakout of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War and Ethiopia's consequent defeat. In 1936 the proud Lion of Judah became a humiliated refugee. He traversed years in exile, nearly forgotten in a little English town. Nevertheless, he managed to snatch a moment of glory away from that misery. His speech at the League of Nations, warning of what was to be expected from appeasing aggressive dictators, earned him a place in world history. In 1940, when Italy entered World War II on the side of Germany, the British called upon the exiled king to organize guerrilla fighters inside Ethiopia. The emperor returned and quickly rebuilt his power. As the Italians had destroyed the old provincial nobility, he became the undisputed ruler.

The following years saw Haile Selassie at his best as a reformer. He introduced innovations in the service of his own power: modern bureaucracy, renewed armed forces, new education system, and a parliamentary constitution (1955) that defined his full power in Christian Ethiopian concepts. He also managed to release Ethiopia from Britain's sphere of influence and strengthened his country's connections to the United States. These steps helped him win the international diplomatic battle for Eritrea and gradually annex the ex-Italian colony to his empire. Subjugating the Eritreans to his abso-

lutism and abolishing the rights they had obtained under the colonialists would prove counterproductive to stabilizing his rule.

Meanwhile, Haile Selassie toured the globe, enjoying his prestige as a symbol of the antifascist struggle. However, this time, winds of change started blowing into his biblical kingdom. Pan-Arabism energized young Muslims in Eritrea, and students returning from the West could hardly accept their political status as obedient subjects. In December 1960 his most trusted security men revolted, and he barely managed to survive. Haile Selassie considered it a revolt of ungrateful children, and it, along with a chain of disasters in his close family, marked the beginning of old age, loneliness, and conservatism. During his remaining years in power, the emperor did little to change the system and face Ethiopia's growing challenges—its backward economy, feudal politics, resentful minorities, and corrupted elite. Paradoxically, he developed education at all levels, as if preparing a new, modern generation to take over after him. In foreign affairs he still proved able to march with the times, changing his orientation from the Western powers to Africa. The emancipating continent adopted Haile Selassie as a father figure. In 1963 the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was established in Addis Ababa as a permanent headquarters. The emperor continued to enjoy his international standing—thriving on receptions and honors—while gradually sinking into old age and allowing no meaningful progress in his own kingdom.

The Lion of Judah, in a way, lived indeed like a descendant of King Solomon. According to Jewish tradition, King Solomon wrote three of the Bible's books. He is said to have composed the scroll *Song of Solomon* when he was young, a book full of poetic energy. In middle age he wrote the *Book of Proverbs*, full of wisdom. As an old man, he wrote *Ecclesiastes*: "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of Vanities, says the Preacher, Vanity of Vanities, All is vanity. What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?"²

This book considers the life of Haile Selassie in three parts: Chapters 2 through 4 describe his early life; his midlife is covered in Chapters 5 through 9; and Chapters 10 through 12 recount his enduring hunger for power in contrast with his deterioration, culminating in his brutal murder and humiliating end in a hidden grave.

Following his death, Haile Selassie remained a unique icon. He was, and still is, even identified with a religion. In the 1920s, black people in the Americas were redefining their self-awareness. One of their prominent leaders, Marcus Garvey, had been quoted saying

“Look to Africa, when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is at hand.” After Tafari was crowned in 1930, the Rastafarian movement began.³ For millions of followers, Tafari’s ascension to the crown was the realization of Garvey’s prophecy. Thus, an international movement was born upon a triple foundation: the expectation of redemption to all blacks; a set of spiritual, biblically based Christian-Ethiopian beliefs; and the concept of Haile Selassie as a messiah, the reborn son of God. Haile Selassie, the Rastafarians believe, would redeem the blacks and return them all to Africa, the mother of humankind.

The Rastafari movement spread thanks to the world-famous singer Bob Marley and to the magic of reggae music, as well as through the bold cultural power of Rasta hair. Young people from all over the world, from all backgrounds and colors, identified with the urge for spiritual freedom expressed through Rastafari, and with the iconic image of its messiah, Haile Selassie. In 1968 the Jamaican-born Marley and his group transformed the famous song “Crying in the Chapel,” a purifying Christian hymn (with over fifty different versions, including one by Elvis Presley), into: “Haile Selassie is the Chapel. . . . That man is the Angel, Our God, the King of Kings.”⁴

While the myths and iconography of Haile Selassie merit study, we shall study Haile Selassie as just a man: as a king who derived power from the religious culture of Ethiopia, but who was ultimately an earthly politician, and a meaningful historical figure with all dimensions of strength and weakness.

Among Ethiopians Haile Selassie remained a controversial figure. No discussion of their modern past can avoid him. As the years pass, Ethiopia changes rapidly. New forces, emerging ethnic and religious groups, new regimes, and new challenges provide ever-renewed perspectives. We shall confine ourselves here to just a sample. After *Time* magazine published in 2011 a list of “Top 25 Political Icons”—including Haile Selassie,⁵ dozens of responses were published on the Tadias Online Magazine, including the following:⁶

ANTONIO: His Majesty did a lot for Africa and for Ethiopia.

Though he was not perfect and made mistakes, we should honor him and other African leaders for the good that they accomplished. My hope is that Ethiopia and other African countries do not forget their past in an ever increasingly global community. Always remember who you are and pass it on to the next generation.

TERU LEB: We need to appreciate what we had and what we have instead of always complaining and complaining and complaining. Let us appreciate him for the good he did. The bad has been elaborated for too long already.

ABDISA: He was the most outstanding leader in the modern history of Ethiopia. . . . After him the great people of Ethiopia are leaderless.

TSEHAI: Atse Haile Selassie did a lot for Ethiopia. He definitely could have done more. Let us not forget Ethiopia had nothing when he came to power. It was dark age. It is unfortunate that his life ended up with a tragedy.

YELMA SELESHI: The 1974 revolution swept away the monarchy and the ruthless faux-capitalist system that had reduced the masses to tenants whose fate was controlled by an archaic ruling class. . . . But in many ways history has been kind to the emperor because of the manner and dignity in which he shouldered the unprovoked and brutal attack on his people by a madman named Benito Mussolini. His speech before the League of Nations, proudly and intentionally delivered in Amharic, was as timeless as it was prophetic. I am no fan of Haile Selassie but listening to that speech still gives me chills. We must give credit where it is due.

DEGITU: The longevity of his rule itself makes characterization of his era very difficult. He had both progressive and stagnant periods during his reign. After all is said and done though, his positive contributions far outweigh his negatives. Of course he could have done much better than he did. . . . His impact on the self-esteem and pride and identity of Ethiopians and Africans is immeasurable. . . . And look what we did to him and his loved ones. We insulted him, we disgraced him, and finally we murdered him in cold blood and threw his body in an unmarked grave. . . . We the merciless, we the vengeful, we do not have the most elementary form of decency to name a single establishment after him in the capital or anywhere else. A person who impacted the country and the world so positively in all conceivable spheres of our life is a nobody among us Ethiopians.

MUNIT: Haile Selassie was in power for over 6 decades. . . .

No human being should be allowed to rule more than 10 years. That's even way too much.

Haile Selassie remained an enigmatic curiosity, not only for Ethiopians. Opinions polarize, as shown in the following three examples.

The Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, famous for her blunt language, wrote after interviewing him in 1972, as he approached his eightieth birthday:

Among today's Italians, when discussing Haile Selassie, the sense of guilt and shame is such that they react by seeing only his positive traits: the merits of his past actions. His portrayals always brim with excessive respect, unwarranted admiration and delusion. They go on and on about his priestly composure, his regal dignity, his great intelligence. . . . They never dare tell us if he was something more, or less, than a victim. For example, that he was an old man hardened in principles which were centuries out of date; that he was the absolute ruler of a nation which has never heard the words *rights* and *democracy* . . . oppressed by hunger, disease, ignorance and the squalor of a feudal regime which even we [in Europe] did not experience during the darkest years of the Medieval period. . . . He [Haile Selassie] never had the time, nor the means, to live through the age when one learns to distinguish between right and wrong. Raised among plots, intrigues and cruelty, he learned to survive through cynicism and all his life was focused on the struggle to conquer power and to hold onto it. He achieved this without any scruples, often turning to methods which would have shocked the Borgias and Machiavelli put together.⁷

The Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski did more than anyone else to engrave the memory of Haile Selassie in negative terms. His best seller *The Emperor*, published in 1978, portrayed him as a caricature of a demonic, old, and senile ruler. It is doubtful if Kapuscinski really studied relevant history and if he based his descriptions on authentic evidences.⁸ He accused the emperor of robbing the poor: "The Emperor himself amassed the greatest riches. . . . He and his people took millions from the state treasury amid cemeteries full of people who had died of hunger, cemeteries visible from the windows of the royal palace."⁹

Kapuscinski further wrote that Haile Selassie

ruled a country that knew only the cruelest methods of fighting for power (or keeping it), in which free elections were replaced by poison and the dagger, discussions by shooting and gallows. He was a product of this tradition, and he himself fell back upon it. Yet at the same

time he understood that there was an impossibility in it, that it was out of touch with the new world. But he could not change the system that kept him in power, and for him power came first.¹⁰

Kapuscinski came from a communist dictatorship that he apparently wanted to ridicule. He hardly understood Ethiopia—neither the country’s religious-political culture nor its African and Eastern sensibilities.¹¹ Surely Kapuscinski did not study Haile Selassie prior to the emperor’s last years. We are therefore better off relying upon the words of Nelson Mandela, an equally iconic African figure, who first met with Haile Selassie in 1962. Mandela wrote in his memoirs:

Ethiopia has always held a special place in my imagination, and the prospect of visiting Ethiopia attracted me more than a trip to France, England and America combined. I felt I would be visiting my own genesis, unearthing the roots of what made me African. Meeting the Emperor himself would be like shaking hands with history.¹²

All studies of twentieth-century Ethiopia in one way or another deal with Haile Selassie. The history I present is derived from a rich collection of literature, books, and articles produced by my predecessors and my colleagues—none was indifferent in presenting his/her perspectives—as well as my own archival research. I do not claim to do justice to Haile Selassie’s multidimensional and long history. My only aim has been to understand one of the complex and enigmatic personalities who sculpted today’s Ethiopia, and in doing so, became one of the iconic symbols of the twentieth century.¹³

Notes

1. Japanese emperor Hirohito ruled longer, from 1926 to 1989, but he was hardly the political absolutist Haile Selassie was.

2. Ecclesiastes 1:2.

3. For example: M. G. Smith, Roy Augier, and Rex Nettleford, *The Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica* (Kingston: University College of the West Indies, 1960), p. 5.

4. For the lyrics and more see the “YouTube Guide” at the end of this book.

5. Here is the list: Mohandas Gandhi, Alexander the Great, Mao Zedong, Winston Churchill, Genghis Khan, Nelson Mandela, Abraham Lincoln, Adolf Hitler, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Ronald Reagan, Cleopatra, Franklin Roosevelt, the Dalai Lama, Queen Victoria, Benito Mussolini, Akbar the Great (who established the Mogul Dynasty in the sixteenth century), Vladimir Lenin, Margaret Thatcher, Simón Bolívar (“Liberator of South America”), Qin Shi Huang (the emperor of China from 259 BCE to 210 BCE), Kim Il-Sung (North Korea’s dictator, 1948–1994), Charles de Gaulle, Louis XIV, Haile Selassie, and sharing last place, King Richard the Lionheart

and Saladin. See http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2046285_2045996_2045928,00.html.

6. <http://www.tadias.com/02/06/2011/what-do-ronald-regan-and-haile-selassie-have-in-common>.

7. Oriana Fallaci in June 1972, quoted in *Intervista con la Storia*, 6th ed. (Milan: Rizzoli, 1981), pp. 509, 519.

8. See a discussion of the Polish journalist in Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *King of Kings: The Triumph and Tragedy of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia* (London: Haus Publishing, 2015), pp. 206–208.

9. Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 160.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102.

11. See Harold Marcus, “Prejudice and Ignorance in Reviewing Books About Africa: The Strange Case of Ryszard Kapuscinski’s *The Emperor*,” *History of Africa*, Vol. 17, (1990), pp. 373–378.

12. Nelson Mandela, *A Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), p. 255.

13. Here is a partial list of books written on Haile Selassie (some by more scholars, some by interested observers). The majority cover a certain period or issues, though some are closer to a full biography. A truly authoritative biography of Haile Selassie would necessitate a volume of thousands of pages. Asfa Yilma (Princess), *Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia* (London: S. Low, Marston, 1936); Asfa-Wossen Asserate, *King of Kings: The Triumph and Tragedy of Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia* (London: Haus Publishing, 2015); Brian Buckner-El, *Haile Selassie, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah* (iBooks, Lulu.com, 2011); Christopher Clapham, *Haile Selassie’s Government* (London: Longman’s, 1969); Angelo Del Boca, *The Negus: The Life and Death of the Last King of Kings* (Addis Ababa: Arada Books, 2012); Haile Selassie, *Selected Speeches of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie First, 1918 to 1967* (Addis Ababa: 1967); Paul Henze, *Layers of Time: A History of Ethiopia* (London: Hurst, 2000), chapters 7–8; Indrias Getachew, *Beyond the Throne: The Enduring Legacy of Emperor Haile Selassie I* (Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2002); Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Hans Wilhelm Lockot, *The Mission: The Life, Reign, and Character of Haile Selassie I* (London: Hurst, 1989); Harold Marcus, *Haile Selassie I: The Formative Years, 1892–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Harold Marcus, ed., *My Life and Ethiopia’s Progress: Haile Sellassie I, King of Ethiopia*, Volume 2, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994); Anthony Mockler, *Haile Selassie’s War* (New York: Random House, 1984); Leonard Mosley, *Haile Selassie: The Conquering Lion* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964); Anjahli Parnell, *The Biography of Empress Menen Asfaw: The Mother of the Ethiopian Nation* (Kealakekua, HI: Roots Publishing, 2011); Zewde Reta, *Tafari Makonnen razmu yasultan guzu* (Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2005); Zewde Reta, *Yaqadamawi Haile Selassie Mengest* (Addis Ababa: Delhi, 2012); Christine Sandford, *Ethiopia Under Haile Selassie* (London: J. M Dent, 1946); Christine Sandford, *The Lion of Judah Hath Prevailed* (London: J. M. Dent, 1955); Haile Selassie, *Selected Speeches of Haile Selassie* (New York, 2000); Seyoum Haregot, *The Bureaucratic Empire: Serving Emperor Haile Selassie* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2013); David Talbot, *Haile Selassie I, Silver Jubilee* (The Hague: Van Stockum and Zomm, 1955); Theodore M. Vestal, *The Lion of Judah in the New World* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011); Edward Ullendorff, ed. and trans., *The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Sellassie I: 1892–1937* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).