



KING OF KINGS

The Life and Death of Haile Selassie I

THE GREATEST STORY
BY ZOHEB MASHIUR



You ever have those mornings when you wake up to people thinking you're Jesus?

Tefari Makonnen Woldemikael was born to the royal line of Ethiopia in 1892, who traditionally claim descent from King Solomon. He started his career as a Ras (Duke), making him Ras Tefari. Upon ascending to the throne he adopted the name he would carry into history: Haile Selassie I.

This is where things start piling up: his coronation name roughly translates to "The Power of the Trinity", and his official title in full went "By the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, King of Kings of Ethiopia, Elect of God". Appearing on the Ethiopian royal heraldry, the Lion of Judah is an ancient Abrahamic symbol that receives special mention in the New Testament as a benevolent entity who will preside over the end times – generally this is read as a metaphor for Jesus.

His coronation in 1930 brought these facts to the attention of some Jamaicans, who began to speculate that the man formerly known as Ras Tefari could well be Jesus reborn, a belief that gradually gained ground. Later years would prove Haile Selassie I to be indeed a man worth watching.

Haile Selassie had the privilege of becoming ruler of the only independent country in the continent still ruled by an African. This independence had been



Khartoum: The Emperor Haile Selassie inspecting Ethiopian troops on parade.

secured in Selassie's infancy through the First Italo-Ethiopian War; laudable for being the first time an African power managed to halt European imperialism, but sadly the name hints at the inevitable sequel. Round 2 was fought early in Haile Selassie's reign, and this time the Italians were headed by Benito "il Duce" Mussolini, a man who tried to ride out the Great Depression by having his country invade things. The Ethiopian

army did quite well for itself, but they were no match against a modern air force spraying chemical weapons.

Defeated but unbroken, Haile Selassie escaped the Italians and after a short pilgrimage in Jerusalem, addressed the League of Nations. In an episode straight out of a big ticket movie, the Lion of Judah walked into the hall and strode to the podium amidst jeers and catcalls from Italian journalists, with calls to order from gentlemen politicians ("Show the savages the door!" yelled the Romanian Chair, leaping to his feet). His speech, delivered in his native tongue, argued that the League's silence jeopardised its very function – to safeguard global security by upholding the sovereignty of the small country. If the world did not condemn Italy and free Ethiopia, all hell would soon break loose.

"It is us today. It will be you tomorrow."

However, real life is not a film. His words fell on deaf ears, and Italy barely got a slap on the wrist. The exiled Emperor retired to England, campaigning to increasingly deaf ears. The League, proven to be a paper tiger, dissolved soon after. In the absence of a world authority, imperialist aggression grew unchecked, until finally, World War 2. Ironically this great disaster provided Haile Selassie the opportunity he needed, for Mussolini's alliance with Hitler made it worthwhile for the Allies to help the Ethiopians regain their liberty. On May 5, 1941, five years to the very day since his exile, the Emperor was restored and the Italians ousted.

Haile Selassie I's later years showed him to be a great advocate of change, presiding over his country's move towards participative democracy and modern statehood. He never lost his

interest in the collective security the League had promised, leading to Ethiopia's presence in the Korean War. A religious man, he nevertheless curbed the power of the Ethiopian church, while also campaigning for its independence. In this context one can only imagine his surprise when he flew to Jamaica in 1961, to be greeted at the airport by hundreds of thousands of marijuana-smokers assembled to see 'Jesus'. He behaved graciously enough to the followers of Rastafari, and while he always stressed that he was no more than a man, he never outright condemned the belief in his divinity. And so the faith spread, particularly after one Bob Marley became a convert.

The Lion of Judah lived long enough to see support for himself and the monarchy erode, until a popular coup ousted him from power. The ex-monarch died shortly afterwards in 1975 from respiratory trouble. No efforts were made to save him. In his lifetime he went from national hero to hated authority figure, and there is comfort in the notion that for 600,000 people today Haile Selassie will forever be divinity in flesh.

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