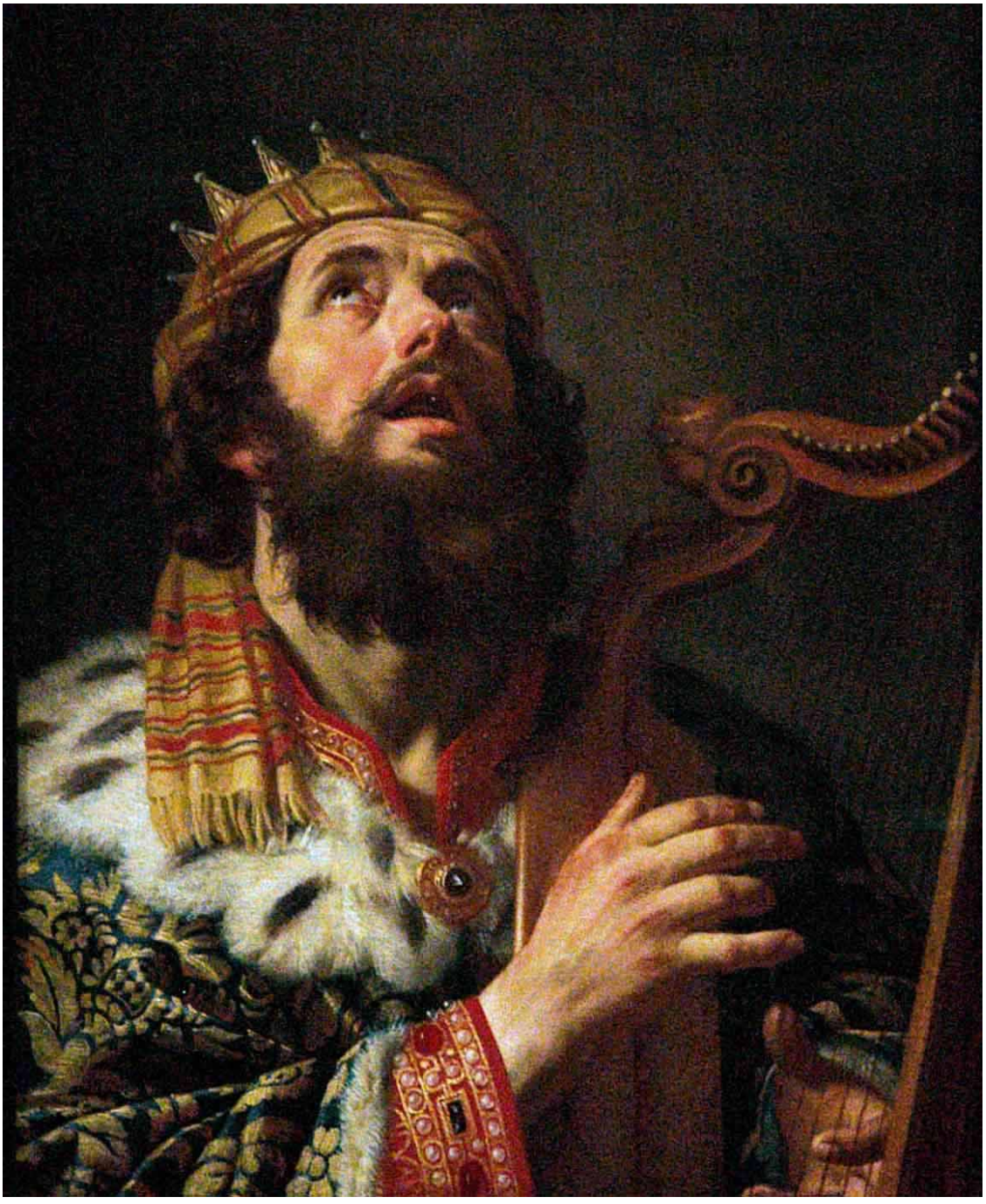
Kingdom and Wilderness: A Journey Down the Rift Valley

by Geoffrey Clarfield (October 2019)



King David Playing the Harp, Gerrit van Honthorst, 1611

> But the knowledge of nature is only half the task of the poet: he must be acquainted likewise with all modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition; observe the power of all the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions and accidental influences of climate and custom, from the spriteliness of infancy to the despondence of decrepitude. He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same: he must therefore content himself with the slow progress of his name; contemn the applause of his own time, and commit his claims to the justice of posterity.—Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, 1759

From the New World, Thinking About King David

Trained as a musician, I became an ethnomusicologist and then leveraged the anthropological side of music towards development anthropology, for when I first came to Kenya during the Ethiopian drought in the mid 1980s, people were dying all around me and I felt that something had to be done.

And so, temperamentally a musician and artist, I have spent much of my career looking at demographic forecasts, economic and social policy, irrigation, farming, pastoralism, biodiversity and conservation, urbanization, refugees and the

mantra of development, “water, health and education,” in the developing world.

I have no regrets, for my work catapulted me into the world of basic survival, of livelihoods, health and economic advancement, the pillars of international development, “the real world” as economists and politicians like to say.

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But not all men of practical reason have lacked an artistic side. The concert pianist Paderewski became the Prime Minister of Poland before WWII and many other politicians could have been artists. Tony Blair had a rock band when he was a student at Oxford. Instead he went viral in a different performing world.

But the greatest unsung musician and poet forced into politics was King David himself. We do not think about him like that for we see him in a religious light. We also see him in a political light and we see his personal life within that context.

We almost never see him as a young, gifted shepherd, a fine harp player, a singer, a poet who had authority and kingship involuntarily thrust upon him by family, prophets and God himself. And so, I look to his psalms as the expression of a tormented poet/singer/song writer who must wrestle with God, faith and authority over a nation and over the challenges of

his own passionate drives.

Clearly he agonized and in the Hebrew Bible the preface to his Psalm 51 includes a musical instruction. It is worth reading the whole thing for it is unprecedented in the annals of ancient literature. No other ruler at the time would have written it. Instead, they would have declared that they were somehow semi-divine and the all powerful descendant of a local God. But instead, this is what the anointed King of Israel wrote and sung, most likely in the privacy of his royal chambers on Mount Zion:

> Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your lovingkindness: according to the multitude of your tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that you may be justified when you speak, and be clear when you judge . . . Do good in your good pleasure unto Zion: build the walls of Jerusalem.

These are clearly the lyrics to a lament that is in contrast with the divine kingship which was the style of the time. David's song is as relevant to us today as it was to him three thousand years ago. And that is part of the magic of Jerusalem.

No one in the middle east plays the Harp of David anymore. It seemed to have died out during Byzantine times. But something like it survives in highland Ethiopia. There, Ethiopian

Christians, who believe they are the direct descendants of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba, play an instrument similar to that of the harp of King David, the Begenna.

The Begenna bears an uncanny resemblance to the ancient Israelite harp/lyre and in addition to Christian hymns, the Ethiopians sing David's psalms as solo recitations. They call them "mizamur," an Ethiopic version of the ancient Biblical word, "Mizmor" which introduces Psalm 51 in the Hebrew Bible. Here is an example:

Making a 21st Century Ascent to Jerusalem

And so, thinking about King David’s psalms, I flew to Israel. When you disembark from your airplane at Ben Gurion international airport, you walk down long pathways with corridors surrounded by transparent glass. You can already see through the glass to the nearby towns on either side of the corridors, the highways and their secondary roads.

It is winter in the Mediterranean and everything is green. You may just as well be in Spain or Italy or Portugal for that matter. But then, as you walk down a final, descending corridor filled with natural light, just before you enter passport control, about fifteen to twenty feet above you on the wall facing you, hang two mosaic floors excavated from ancient sites in the land, as if suspended in thin air. They are more than a thousand years old and have all the stylistic features of the Byzantine/Roman/Hellenistic period.

One is a floor from Beit Shean. It was made during the Byzantine period when the Jewish people maintained a still fragile demographic majority in the Galilee and the Golan. The Greek inscription is a translation from the Bible, “Blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and blessed shalt thou be when thou goest out.” (Deuteronomy 28:6).

I can imagine the TV classicist, Mary Beard perched on a tall ladder explaining to us that despite the religious distinctiveness of the Jews of the Roman and late antique world, they were, even during the early rise of Christianity, still full participants in that multi-ethnic empire that defined the region for more than a thousand years.

Rome is long gone but modern Israel and the Jewish people are still here. Israel is an independent state and part of no empire. Surrounded by hostile enemies, Israel is a leader in medicine, scholarship, trade and industry, not only in the former Roman Lake, this Mediterranean Sea, but around the world.

As I pick up my bags and clear customs, my street Hebrew comes back to me. I hear the various drivers with their rhythmic chants trying to attract customers, “Haifa, Haifa, Haifa, Haifa,” and then repeated, “Haifa, Haifa, Haifa, Haifa!” I am directed to the taxi stand where I will pay the equivalent of $100 US to drive up into the hills of Jerusalem to my brother’s house that overlooks the historic Emek Refaim, one of the ancient borders between the tribe of Judah and its Canaanite neighbours.

My street smarts kick in. I leave the queue and walk over to the Jerusalem shuttle. The thin, wiry clearly Oriental or Sephardic driver (you can tell by his accent) tells me he will take me to my brother’s doorstep after he drops off the other passengers. I will pay him the equivalent of 20 dollars. Off we go.

All the street and highway signs here are in Hebrew, Arabic and English; Hebrew, a language that never died out is now the language of daily life in Israel, of work, of politics, of science, of poetry, of music, of theatre, of film. The Hebrew speaking Israeli lives comfortably in her linguistic cocoon yet, is at the same time bombarded with European and American films and pop culture that is avidly followed. Even still, foreign culture does not take over here.

Israelis translate thousands of books from other languages each year into Hebrew. Israelis are not unworldly. However, they have their own culture and they see the world through their own eyes while at the same time, they are open to the works of other peoples.

Arabic is a living language here. Israel has Arabic speaking minorities—Muslims, Christians, Circassians and Druze—many of whom have fought to defend the state as they have seen what life is like in neighbouring Syria and Iraq. Their daily life is lived in that tongue, a relative of Hebrew that emerged from Arabia with the Islamic invasions of Israel during the 7th century. And English, the language of the British Mandate, has now become the Latin of the 21st century. Shades of Rome! Mary Beard, are you listening?

Israel emerged partly as a response to an Islamic theology that turned a once independent people into a persecuted and "tolerated" religious minority. The story of the rise of Islam is a contested one. Israeli scholars and their Israeli institutions are one of the few places that you can academically and freely explore the origins of this world religion without being accused of "Islamophobia." Ironically, Israel may be the best place to study the history and origins of Islam with academic rigour.

Just before I got on the plane I had just finished Tom Holland's masterful book called *In the Shadow of the Sword*, about the Arabs and the rise of Islam. The idea of the land of Israel and prophetic monotheism is central to this counterintuitive story. Holland's books are a masterful summary and integration of the last sixty years of new scholarship on the emergence of we now call "late antiquity."

We drive and as we drive, we rise. We follow the routes of the pilgrims, Jewish and Christian who have been visiting Jerusalem for 2,000 years often by foot, taking days to pass where we pass in minutes, seconds. But they felt the wind on their shoulders. They felt the sun on their skin. They could smell the flowers, watch the flocks of sheep and their shepherds, hear the shepherds song, feel the stones under their feet and pause to read the Bible and drink from their leather flasks when thirsty. Today we are listening to near eastern pop on the radio-hard, driving, ornamented, orchestrated but retaining that old "debka" beat, which is still played at weddings here on ceramic drums that come from kilns that have been in use for centuries.

We drive past Jewish villages and Arab villages, with their

silver or golden colored mosques. We enter Jerusalem from the east. The Dome of the Rock's golden cupola stands out from the rain, the mist and the clouds. I can hear in my mind's ear the prayers of the Orthodox Jews at the Wailing Wall, a wall that survives from Herod's Temple-a place where Jesus once walked and preached, a place where on the Day of Atonement I have stood in prayer. It is also a place where Josephus, high priest, traitor and historian of the Jewish revolt against Rome two thousand years ago once conducted his own and other's prayers, as he was a descendant of the priests of the Temple.

We pass the Russian Compound built by the Tsar in the 19th century. My grandfather was a foot soldier in the army of Nicholas II. His parent's taxes on their lumber business on the Don paid for buildings like this. We pass Mea Shearim, a transplanted orthodox shtetl giving us a glimpse of the life of my Polish Jewish ancestors, a life ruthlessly extinguished by the Nazis in Europe during WWII but that miraculously survives here, tolerated by the majority of Israelis who are infinitely patient with this explosive, difficult and exasperating hyper religious minority who do not recognize the state that has protected them from hostile invading armies on numerous occasions.

We pass by Jaffa gate through which General Allenby walked when the British defeated the Turks here in 1917. Just inside Jaffa Gate is where Lawrence of Arabia himself stood watching Allenby.

We drive through Rechavia, a Jerusalem stone house and apartment suburb that in the 1930s became home to German Jewish refugees from Hitler, such as Martin Buber and Gershom Sholem and who were themselves visited by the likes of Albert Einstein; a place where the late ethnomusicologist Edith Gerson-Kiwi lived, and who recorded the traditional music of Israel’s ethnic groups before and after independence. Much of this music lies well curated but still unheard and unknown by most Israelis, as it is stored in the national music archives. I know that young musicians will soon rediscover it.

We drive up the hill and I arrive at my brother’s house faced with golden tinted Jerusalem stone. I pay the taxi driver and walk into his dwelling. I sit at his dining room table. The sun is pouring in from the winter rain clouds over the Emek Refaim. Its rays illuminate the living room. I take a piece of bronze age bread, the pita. I mix it with bronze age humus made from the chick pea. I add some olive oil from trees that were domesticated here in the eastern Mediterranean, 8,000 years ago. I pour a glass of wine, from vineyards that go back beyond Canaanite times. King David ate this kind of food. I silently recite in Hebrew the ancient Jewish prayer of thanksgiving.

> Blessed art thou, Oh Lord our God, King of the Universe who has granted us life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this time.

My niece and their children are here to receive me. Her brothers, my nephews, arrive shortly thereafter. We sit, talk, exchange each other’s news, watch and play with their children, eat and sing together. I have come back to Jerusalem. I once lived here, and this is my pilgrimage.

A Vision of the Incense Route to Arabia

I could not linger in Jerusalem for I was on my way to Ethiopia. As I waited for the plane my mind began to wander.

Had we been there to see it, the young man would have inspected his father’s many camels. He would have made sure their feet were unblemished, that they had had enough fodder, that their packs were properly balanced and that they had drunk deeply from the wells near Jerusalem, as they were about to embark on a return voyage of more than 2,500 kilometres to the land of the south in Arabia and the eastern and western Red Sea, what the Greeks later named Ethiopia.

Their caravan would have been carrying the luxury items of the Mediterranean and the Near East, for after 1177, a kind of dark age had descended over the middle east as the Egyptian, Hittite, Mycenean and Mesopotamian empires of the time had suddenly and inexplicably declined, opening up the ancient world to people like the Israelites, plucky little Semites with their own way of doing things, and the Philistines who may have been Greek speaking Mycenaeans whose wanderings reflect in some way the chaos of the Trojan war.

These traders would have carefully wrapped the exquisite pottery of the Mediterranean, they would have carried priceless jewelry, gold, silver and olive oil, herbs, local medicinal plants as well as the elaborate textiles and robes of royal purple from Tyre, home of Phoenician traders, mentioned in the Book of Kings as the kingdom of Hiram, builder of Solomon’s Temple and most likely his palace.

The journey would have lasted for more than a year and they would have been bringing to the near east one of the spiritual engines of the time, the frankincense that provided the temples of Egypt and the Temple of Solomon with the incense that was central to all royal ritual during the Bronze and early Iron ages.

These men, and they may have included women traders, were most likely speakers of an archaic Semitic language, spoken on both sides of the Red Sea in Yemen and Ethiopia, which would have been similar to the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Mediterranean.

They may have practised a religion like the Canaanites, traces of which we find in the archaeological sites of Ethiopia and southern Arabia, or more probably, they may have practised one of the indigenous monotheistic faiths that have stunned the ethnographers of Ethiopia and the Kenyan borderlands during the last century, and that have yet to inform the mind set of students of the ancient near east who believe that monotheism arose only once. Having delivered their cargo to the King's men, princes and princesses of the court, having been wined and dined, shown the sites of the new Jerusalem, they set off on their return trek home.

Perhaps during their time in Solomon's capital they had been exposed in a gentle and subtle way to the concept of the one invisible god that Solomon and his people worshipped, a God who not only protected the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the kings that claimed them as ancestors, but who was also the protector and guardian of all humankind, even these Semitic speaking traders from both sides of the Red Sea, what we now call the Yemen and Northern Ethiopia, with its mysterious city of Aksum that by the 8th century BC we now know was a royal kingdom and a major player in the Red Sea trade with the Mediterranean.

I am now flying Air Ethiopia from Tel Aviv to Addis Ababa capital of Ethiopia. The plane is packed, largely with old and young Beta Israel, Ethiopian Jews who have returned from their exile in the green mountains of Ethiopia near the Red Sea to the land of Israel. I hear the sounds of Hebrew and Amharic fill the plane as friends and family greet each other.

It is winter in Israel, cold, rainy and cloudy and it is "summer" in Ethiopia, blue skies, balmy weather and warm

temperatures. It is the perfect time for a holiday. I ask some of the people beside me who they are and where they are from.

Girma is a young man in his thirties. He is articulate and well dressed. He came to Israel ten years ago. He is married and has two children. He works for the Egged Bus company. He used to be a teacher in Ethiopia but his move to Israel gave him the opportunity to join a dynamic company. He asks me, “did you order a Kosher meal?” I say I did not. “Ah so you are a secularist?” I said I was not and that I follow all the rituals of the Jewish life cycle, something that his ancestors have done with greater consistency than I for perhaps more than 2,500 years since a Jewish presence first came to Ethiopia from Jerusalem.

Then there is a young brother and sister, in their twenties, dressed in the latest Italian fashions. They look like super models. They are soft spoken and respectful in a way that is typical of the old world charm of Semitic speaking Ethiopians. The girl works for a clothing company. She likes her home city of Haifa, and in a beautiful Hebrew with just a trace of the sing song cadences of Amharic, looks me in the eye and says, “I like the State of Israel, I would not live anywhere else. My brother and I are going to Bahar Dar on Lake Tana. We never visited there when we were little. This is our holiday this year.”

I realized that this flight was a four hour recapitulation of the ancient incense trade that linked Israel with Ethiopia and the Yemen and whose results have been far reaching. Yet it is one thing to contemplate this ancient trade and the cultural exchanges which it has generated and it is yet another to fly over it, on a clear day, imagining what it must have been like

to negotiate this journey and its phenomenal landscape, which is as visually dramatic as the history it has given birth to. This is a little of what I saw and how I felt about it.

You can still walk south from Jerusalem. I have done it a number of times. You drive to a road, you have your map, some idea of your destination and then fields, stone walls, olive groves, Biblical ruins, Roman ruins, Islamic ruins and the burnt out vehicles that Israelis have left on the side of the highway to remind their children how tenuous was their war of independence when in 1948, not only did every army in the Arab middle east descend upon them, but so did the Arab Legion and its 50 crack British officers who decided to go to war against the Jews after they had just won theirs against Hitler.

On these hikes you can see the cars winding up and down the hilly roads but you cannot hear them. They appear in the distance as slow moving objects, more like children's toys. On one occasion my guide took me to an old Roman cistern. He undid the metal cover, which exposed a metal ladder and we climbed down. We could hear and see the fresh clear water at the bottom.

My heart leapt and I wondered if any of those who escaped the Roman wrath during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD had make it to this well to quench their thirst before they travelled south in search of safety in Ethiopia or Yemen. Did any of them finally make it to the land of the Queen of the South, in Arabia? Scholars debate this idea passionately.

This is the place near Jerusalem where our Ethiopian incense

traders would have quenched their thirst as they journeyed south. Then one last stop to water their camels as they approached the Judean desert and the Dead Sea.

As our jet turned south, the Dead Sea appeared like a blinding shimmering mirror between the stark desert hills of the Judean desert and the red mountains of Jordan to the East. Our traders would have walked down to the Dead Sea, making sure they had water and food. They would have had local guides as far down the rift valley as the northern tip of the Red Sea. That was the limit of Solomon's authority. The Dead Sea is no different than it was 2000 years ago, except there are now small villages and towns, health spas and a cosmetics industry based on the healing salt of the Dead Sea. The wilderness remains.

According to scholars the incense route was a series of treks from Yemen to Jerusalem. As we flew down the gulf of Suez, Arabia was on our left and who knows how many of the ancestors of the men and women on that plane had made that trek? At what is now Eilat, our traders would have taken the Arabian coastal trail back to their home in the Yemen, one of the two possible origins of the Queen of Sheba. They could have taken boats in the treacherous Red Sea waters or walked through the coastal regions of the mountains of the Hejaz, that lead to the well watered highlands of ancient Yemen, what was once called the Happy Arabia and which harbored a rich and thriving Jewish culture until 1948.

But there were other routes southbound, for in the fifth century there were a group of Jewish mercenaries on the Nile at the island of Elephantine with their own version of the Jerusalem Temple where they sacrificed to the one God. Some

scholars believe that they were driven out and made their way to Ethiopia where they settled in the Simien Mountains and around Lake Gondar. They knew noting of the Talmud which suggest they were there already before the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Until the 1700s they comprised independent Jewish kingdoms which warred with the other Ethiopian tribes who had by then converted to Christianity.

As our plane approached the highlands of Eritrea we flew passed its desert coast, beige, black, purple, past a desert and mountain landscape that was as dramatic if not more so than the Sinai-unusual black rock formations that starkly rose up from the ground, almost alive, defiant, imposing stone monsters, as if to say “just try and survive in my desert abode,” long dried out river valleys that can erupt into flood when the rare rains come.

This is now the land of Arab nomads and Berber nomads who no doubt traded with the Ethiopian and Jewish highlanders for the last two thousand years, both before and after the rise of Islam.

I imagined myself, thirty years younger, joining a tribe, hiring a bunch of camels, walking through the land, with camera, with tape recorder, with notebook, learning the language and culture, recording the songs of these now sons of Ishmael and adding them to the world’s archive. I once did something like that among the Sinai Bedouin and I remember the hardship involved, not washing for days at a time and once, when the tent was full of guests I slept on a rug beside a camel to keep warm. I could no do that now. Perhaps it is a task for a younger man.

You could hear the excitement on the plane. These are people who were rooted in traditional rural Ethiopian Jewish culture, who had lived for millennia in a symbiotic relation with their Ethiopian neighbours and whose ancestors it is thought may have brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.

Many of them still have relatives and friends in Ethiopia. So many of them lost close family members during the wars of Ethiopia. Now they are bilingual. They speak fluent Hebrew and Amharic. Now they have salaries. Now their children are officers in the IDF. Now their children go to university. Now as Israelis they are respected by the rest of Ethiopia as Ethiopians in Israel. And when in Israel they sing at Passover, “Once we were slaves in Egypt but now we are free.”

Their forefathers had left Jerusalem, probably in the fifth century BC. They had survived in Ethiopia. They had suffered their isolation and persecution as subjects of the Ethiopian Emperors who had possessed the minds of European geographers as the mysterious Prester John, ruler of the Indies in a land described by the 18th century British historian Edward Gibbon (1737-1794)

> Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten.

But the Beta Israel had never slept. They had never forgotten Jerusalem and Jerusalem final woke up from its own historical amnesia, for they had somehow forgotten this quote from Isaiah

and so after much hardship, welcomed the Beta Israel back to their homeland.

Beyond the rivers of Ethiopia there is a land where the sound of wings is heard. From that land ambassadors come down the Nile in boats made of reeds. Go back home, swift messengers! Take a message back to your land divided by rivers, to your strong and powerful nation, to your tall and smooth-skinned people, who are feared all over the world.

As we landed on the tarmac of Addis Abba, four short hours from Tel Aviv, the passengers broke out into a round of applause for the pilot. I could hear some of the women softly ululating. They were taking back the message.

An Epiphany Near the Source of the Nile

> The higher Nilus swells,
>
> The more it promises; as it ebbs, the seedsman
>
> Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,
>
> And shortly comes the harvest.
>
> William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*

I flew into Addis Ababa airport and then directly to Bahar Dar, a town on the shores of Lake Tana, the main source of the Blue Nile. I visited remote island monasteries where monks showed me the exact spot where according to tradition, the Israelite Ark of the Covenant lay hidden for centuries.

Ethiopia is a beautiful country with a rich history, wildlife,

lakes, deserts, volcanoes and grasslands. It has more than forty ethnic groups, some still living pre-industrial life styles that remind one of Bible times. Its music and food are distinct and unique. Minstrels still play King David’s harp here.

Ethiopia is mentioned over 35 times in the Old Testament. It is a country that was never colonized. The Ethiopians defeated the invading Italians in 1896 and expelled them from their occupation during WWII, with the help of Orde Wingate who also taught the soon to become Israelis how to defend themselves from marauding Arab bandits. Ethiopia’s last emperor, Hailie Selassie, was a modernizer, a leader of the Pan African movement and according to legend, a direct descendant of King Solomon.

Ethiopia has received many explorers and adventurers such as the Portuguese Jesuit Jerome Lobo, who discovered the source of the Blue Nile in the early 1600s. The most colourful was the Scot, James Bruce, who in the late 1700s fought in the Emperor’s armies.

At the church of Tana Qirqos on one of the islands of the lake, an Ethiopian monk showed me the spot where the Ark of the Covenant used to lie for hundreds of years. He referred to the story of the Kibre Nagast the Ethiopian Book of Kings which tells how Menelik the son of Solomon and Sheba returned to Israel and stole the Ark of the Covenant bringing it to Ethiopia with the help of a priest of the Temple named Azariah. The monk showed me his tomb, a pile of rocks and pillars that mark his grave.

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Within walking distance, a little higher up is a shrine that commemorates the Holy Family's visit to the same island to escape Herod's slaughter of the innocents. The monk explained that once the threat had passed the angel Gabriel himself transported Joseph, Mary and Jesus from this spot back to the Holy Land. I asked myself what this all meant and had my own revelation looking out at Lake Tana from these two sacred sites.

The *Kibre Nagast* or *Book of Kings* is a unique Ethiopian text that tells a story of a son of Solomon and Sheba who comes back from Ethiopia to bring the ark of the covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. Scholars have argued that it was a text that justified the pretensions of Christian Ethiopian kings to rule in the name of Davidic descent. But what if it was a missionary document? What if it was designed to bring the already Judaized tribes an entry to Christianity without losing their Jewish lineage. This makes more sense. I have not seen this theory in any of the academic literature. Bruce brought a copy of the book back to England.

Bruce also discovered the complete, lost biblical Book of Enoch (archaeologists have found fragments of this book among the Dead Sea Scrolls). Is this not another example of a book that would have been part of the canon of Judaized Ethiopians before they converted to Christianity, and having done so retained this book along with many distinct Jewish customs and which were criticized by the Catholic Portuguese who came to

Ethiopia as Jewish customs?

Despite his five years of wanderings in the land of Prester John, James Bruce’s most recent biographer has told me that he was really looking for the lost Ark of the Covenant. The Ethiopians believe it is hidden in the chapel of St. Mary of Aksum in the historic city of Aksum, place of the coronation of Ethiopia’s past emperors. I have been there.

Considering the Nature of Ethiopia and Ethiopians

Addis Ababa is the capital city of Ethiopia. Tomorrow is Orthodox Ethiopian Xmas. Everything is closed, many people have gone to church and will do so again tomorrow, soon to be celebrating with close family and friends, as Ethiopia has its own calendar, its own time system, its own languages and culture. It was and still is a function of the Christian culture of Ethiopia which was saved by Portuguese soldiers who turned the tide for the Ethiopians against the Muslims of Harar in the 1600s. They have left many buildings and structures from their time here.

A few days earlier I stood at the end of the Portuguese Bridge. It is a solid, well built structure that has been in use for centuries. It has spanned the Blue Nile near Gondar ever since then. You can see the Nile river plunging through a black volcanic gorge, far below, having come out of Lake Tana, about a day's walk from the bridge. The bridge is about a kilometre from the Tisisat falls, a remarkable waterfall that has drawn explorers and visitors to this country for centuries. I had vowed to come here ever since I read about it when I was nineteen years old and here I was.

Streams of women, men and children were crossing the bridge. They were carrying holy water blessed by the monks of a nearby monastery, situated on a large hill about a five hour walk away. There had been a saint's festival and they were now returning to their homes.

Some carried packs on their heads, others had pack donkeys. An Ethiopian priest placed himself at the end of the bridge. He blessed those who approached him. They would kneel or crouch down and he would point his silver embedded cross in front of their body. Satan begone!

The bridge was built in the 17h century. Christian, highland Ethiopia had been under attack, the victim of a near fatal holy war by a coastal dwelling Muslim remembered as Ahmed Gran. The King of Ethiopia had reached out to the King of Portugal who then sent the Ethiopians the son of Vasco de Gama, the explorer, with a few hundred well trained marksmen who turned a crucial battle in the Ethiopians' favour.

Why the Portuguese went out of their way to help the Ethiopians is disputed to this day. But religious reasons loom large. They soon became a presence at the royal court, converted one king to Catholicism, hoped that that would turn the tide and his subjects would follow, but instead it triggered court intrigue, civil war, the death of the king and the eventual expulsion of the Portuguese.

Like the French Jesuits in the New World, these priests wrote down everything they heard and saw and today they provide us with a rich tapestry that describes life in 17th century Ethiopia. The Portuguese priest, Jerome Lobo who discovered the source of the Blue Nile spent his nine years in Ethiopia and kept voluminous journals.

The source is about an hour's drive upstream from where I stood. Lobo was a passionate, yet theologically driven geographical, historical and ethnographic chronicler. He wrote that:

The Christianity professed by the Abyssins is so corrupted with superstitions, errors, and heresies, and so mingled

with,ceremonies borrowed from the Jews, that little besides the name of Christianity is to be found here; and the thorns may be said to have choked the grain. This proceeds in a great measure from the diversity of religions which are tolerated there, either by negligence or from motives of policy; and the same cause hath produced such various revolutions, revolts, and civil wars within these later ages.

Modern scholarship suggests that the opposite is true, that the Christianity of the Ethiopians is and was closer to that of the third or even second century AD, and that the Portuguese Catholicism of the 17th century had strayed very far from the beliefs and rituals of the early Church fathers and monks of pre-Islamic Egypt and Syria, from whom the Ethiopians first received their Christian faith.

Perhaps one of the reasons that the Portuguese came to aid the Ethiopians is that at the very least, they saw them as an isolated Christian Kingdom, surrounded by a hostile sea of Muslims, and that they were duty bound to come to their aid. This is not surprising, for Ethiopia is mentioned more than 35 times in the Old Testament and a number of times in the New Testament. Here are just a few of these remarkable quotations:

> And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia.—Genesis 2:12-14

> And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman.—Numbers 12:1-3

> And when he heard say of Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, Behold, he is come out to fight against thee: he sent messengers again unto Hezekiah, saying, –2 Kings 19:8-10

> With twelve hundred chariots, and threescore thousand horsemen: and the people were without number that came with him out of Egypt; the Lubims, the Sukkiims, and the Ethopians. –2 Chronicles 12:2-4

Writers and scholars who have travelled among and studied highland Christian Ethiopians have noticed many Hebraic customs that they practise, such as circumcision, OT dietary restrictions, honoring the Saturday Sabbath—including a belief that their rulers were and are direct descendants of King Solomon, anthropologically demonstrating some strong but unclear connection with ancient Israel.

The Ethiopians speak a variety of Semitic languages related to Hebrew, such as Tigrinya and Amharic, earlier versions of which may also have been spoken in southern Arabia, centuries before the rise of Islam. Above all, Christian Ethiopians believe that they are in possession of the Ark of the Covenant.

It is really a very small church. You can walk around it in a minute or two. It is called the Chapel of St. Mary of Axum in the historic town of Aksum, site of the coronation of Ethiopian emperors. I have visited there and spoke briefly with the young priest who is the sole guardian of the Ark of the Covenant, which at least sixty million Ethiopians believe to be held inside the church.

The sole duty of the priest is to pray for and protect the Ark. He must be pure in spirit. He was selected by the older guardian who passed away a few years back. It is even said that the head of the Ethiopian church itself cannot glimpse the Ark and that many Westerners who have tried, have failed to gain entrance.

This ethnographic practise reminds me of a Christianized version of the main theme of the Golden Bough-the slaying of the priest king by his younger successor. However, in this case the reigning priest is not killed by the next priest, but allowed to die, having chosen his successor as opposed to being murdered. Perhaps this belief and practise is a displacement of the ancient belief that when a king shows weakness he must be dispatched, as was often the case in the ancient world and among many of the world's preindustrial kingdoms in Africa, Asia and South America.

Here is a quote on the topic from Frazer's still controversial comparative study:

> The mystic kings of Fire and Water in Cambodia are not allowed to die a natural death. Hence when one of them is seriously ill and the elders think that he cannot recover, they stab him to death. The people of Congo believed, as we have seen, that if their pontiff the Chitomé were to die a natural death, the world would perish, and the earth, which he alone sustained by his power and merit, would immediately be annihilated. Accordingly when he fell ill and seemed likely to die, the man who was destined to be his successor entered the pontiff's house with a rope or a

club and strangled or clubbed him to death. The Ethiopian kings of Meroe were worshipped as gods; but whenever the priests chose, they sent a messenger to the king, ordering him to die, and alleging an oracle of the gods as their authority for the command. This command the kings always obeyed down to the reign of Ergamenes, a contemporary of Ptolemy II., King of Egypt. Having received a Greek education which emancipated him from the superstitions of his countrymen, Ergamenes ventured to disregard the command of the priests, and, entering the Golden Temple with a body of soldiers, put the priests to the sword.

Considering the Streets of Addis Ababa

I wake up before the sun. I can hear the early morning call to prayer from the mosques of Addis Ababa. As it is the capital city it is a microcosm of the ethnic groups and religions of Ethiopia and the greater horn of Africa which includes Eritrea, Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti and now the independent Southern Sudan. Muslims have tried to conquer Ethiopia a number of times and they have also missionized. During the 20th century entire tribes in the south of the country have converted to Islam, namely the southern Oromo peoples.

But Muslims have also been the traders in small towns and villages and have won converts there. Some experts say Ethiopian Islam is different, more tolerant than its Saudi and Yemeni neighbours across the Red Sea. Today, Ethiopia's president is a democratic leaning, forward looking, somewhat secular Muslim from the south of the country. As he has just brokered the new peace deal with Eritrea, the entire region may be on a path to peace and prosperity.

As the sun was just showing its ray behind the hills of Addis Ababa I then heard the loudspeakers of the Orthodox Ethiopian church, broadcasting prayers and readings from the Bible in the ornate but distinctively Ethiopian melismatic style that they believe was invented by St. Yared, more than 1500 hundred years ago and that forms the basis of their liturgy.

Coincidentally there was an international conference on peace in the Horn of Africa at my hotel while I was in Addis. I managed to exchange a few words with the German ambassador who was in attendance and she was hopeful. The conference was organized by an Ethiopian born Harvard professor of Semitic Studies, a Jew of Yemenite background and raised in Ethiopia, Professor Ephraim Isaac. The Judaism and Christianity of

Arabia were the spiritual midwives of Islam and we find all of their descendants in Ethiopia today. The professor knows this well and he is doing his bit to help them reconcile.

And so, I left the Kingdom of Prester John in the hands of an Ethiopian Jew who cares deeply about its future and took a flight south, to what was once the wilderness beyond the empire of Ethiopia and that had only been occupied by the British after WWII after they had destroyed the Swahili slave trade and the interior power of the sultan of Zanizbar. I was heading for the wilderness.

Spending Time Among the Maasai

My favorite hour of the day in the traditional homeland of the plains dwelling, East African, Rift Valley Maasai, is just before sunrise. For a few minutes as the horizon begins to show signs of light, you hear a cacophony, a symphony of bird life, announcing the beginning of the day. Although it can get very hot later in the day, it is usually quite cool at this time. You need a sweater. Sometimes this dawn chorus lasts for an hour.

A visitor has recorded one such dawn chorus and I am sharing the clip with you below, as I am now looking out at the plains of the Masai Mara(the northern Serengeti), listening to my own dawn chorus, “live” as they say in the music business. If you have any simple tasks or writing to do, listen to this while you work or write. It is a gift from the Maasai God, Enkai, who the elders say lives in the sky.

I suspect that the Maasai tribe of Kenya and Tanzania have received more anthropologists than any other tribe in Africa. In the nineteen eighties, a Catholic Priest and scholar of the Maasai who had lived among them for decades, put together a dictionary and bibliography that ran into the hundreds of books and articles. Today, there must be thousands more entries, and no one has read them all.

Those who are fascinated by the Maasai are afflicted with the condition known as “Masaaitis.” I know I have it. It started with the British in the 1880s. These proud, red robed, cattle herders stand erect and carry Roman looking swords. They were justifiably feared by the Swahili slave traders who fueled the 19th century slave trade from the Congo to the Kenyan coast

and then to on to the Middle East.

The Maasai were also feared by all the other tribes who lived near them, as they had a reputation for being fierce warriors. They were egalitarian and loyal to their age mates, with whom they were circumcised, herded cattle and went on cattle raids. According to Maasai mythology, God gave them all the world's cattle at the beginning of time and so cattle raids were merely "reclamation." The Maasai could also be generous and hospitable.

I think the Maasai reminded the British explorers, soldiers and administrators who first fought them and then ruled them, of the ancient Spartans, who were part and parcel of the classical education they received before "going out to rule" in the colonies.

And then the British realized that the Maasai lived among the most diverse and bountiful game areas in the world, filled with lion, elephant, buffalo, rhino, zebra, giraffe, baboons, monkeys and more than a thousand species of tropical birds. They began to collect and study them and they became the first natural history collection of the National Museums of Kenya, made famous by the Leakey family and where I worked for a number of years.

The Masaai rarely hunted wild animals. Instead, they lived among them as did Adam and Eve, long ago. They told their children and many still tell them, tales of a time when the first men and animals used to talk to one another. Maasailand was a game park in all but name.

The Masaai first encountered the might of the British empire in the late 19th century. They were “pacified” then administered, left alone and a small “elite” went to school and Westernized. It was thought that soon the powers of progress would turn the whole tribe into Kenyan versions of the British. That did not happen.

Today, a majority of the Masaai still live, dress and tend their cattle as they have for centuries. They worship their own god and carry out sacrifices in his honor. Some have converted to Christianity. Many of these have joined the political elite of the country. They still have cattle and kin back on the plains. Together, they are the stewards of the vast herds of wildebeest and the other wild animals that draw millions of people to Kenya’s northern Serengeti, the game park of the Masai Mara where I am now. It reminds me of the Garden of Eden, a place where men and wild animals live side by side and, it should come as no surprise that the Masai tell tales of a time, long, long ago, when animals and men spoke to each other.

I will stop writing as I remember a similar morning when I heard a Masai herd of cows coming my way at dawn. The tinkle of the cow bells made the herd sound like a Balinese gamelan slowed down and heard underwater.

In a few minutes I will soon join my guests for breakfast, get in the jeep and drive out to see the animals. It is time to go.

Walking Among Wild Animals

Kenya and Tanzania are lands of lakes. The largest is Lake Victoria, source of the White Nile, shared by Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. It is the world’s second largest freshwater lake, after Lake Superior. Then there is also Lake Tana in Ethiopia, source of the Blue Nile.

I am on the shores of Lake Naivasha, a rift valley freshwater lake north of Nairobi, capital of Kenya. It is home to numerous hippos, the splayed foot sitatunga which can walk in the marshes, the sacred white ibis, the fish owl and many other wild animals and birds that were once dominant in the delta of ancient Egypt thousands of years ago, but which have subsequently disappeared there. They survive here in Kenya as a kind of unrecognized “Biblical Zoo.”

It was on the shores of Lake Naivasha that Joy and George Adamson of Born Free fame built their house overlooking the water on grounds covered with yellow acacia trees that are home to colobus monkeys. Nearby, cutting a swathe across the horizon, is Mount Longonot, an extinct volcano that I once climbed. I remember peering over the sheer drop at the top and marvelling at the wisps of steam that came out of the sides of the canyon below me. I felt like Dr. Challenger in Arthur Conan Doyle’s science fiction novel *The Lost World* and expected to see grazing dinosaurs through my binoculars.

If you go to Koobi Fora in Kenya’s northern desert Lake Turkana to see the archaeological sites of our ancestors or, if you drive down to the more famous Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania where Louis and Mary Leakey excavated, you will see landscapes that remind you of the deserts of the Southwest United States or Northern Mexico. But that is not what these sites looked like way back when, when our million year old, and sometime three or four million old ancestors, were becoming human. Those environments looked more like Lake Naivasha.

It would seem then that humankind’s love of lakes and rivers may have an evolutionary or genetic component for it was in these kinds of riparian and lakeside environments where our

ancestors went from scavengers of wild animal kills on the plains to hunters, from opportunistic gatherers of fruits and nuts to beings capable of reading the seasons and finding the right food at the right time, going out on the plains and coming back to the shores of the lake.

It was here where we most likely discovered fire, perhaps from a volcanic ember or, after a lightning strike. Once we started cooking there was just no end to evolutionary development-just look at today’s “foodies.”

It is time to get in the boat and drive to an island where you can walk among the giraffes and other wild animals (there are no lions here). This is as close as you can get to time travel.

Sojourning in the Desert

Yesterday we drove from the cool, densely populated, bustling and intensively cultivated highlands around Mount Kenya, down to the northern desert frontier of Kenya, ending up at Samburu Intrepids Lodge on the banks of the Ewaso River.

It is the dry season now and the river is trickling by my tent. I am watching the water flow by me about ten metres away. I hear the birds chirping and the cry of the occasional vervet monkey which inhabits the trees around the river's edge.

Across the river I can hear the voices of Samburu pastoral tribeswomen and children as they bring their laundry down to the river's edge. They know that during the dry season, the crocodiles are still there, barely submerged below the surface of the water. Yet it is as tranquil and quiet here as our

afternoon thoughts on a warm summer day. But just like the primitive instincts in our own unconscious, these prehistoric creatures lurk below the surface of the river, for the crocodile has survived here, from the time of the last dinosaurs.

Samburu is part of Kenya's vast northern frontier. It is an enormous dry country, peppered with acacia trees, wildlife, imposing hills and mountains that rise up from the ground giving the impression of enormous fossilized brontosauri. This hot, dry, savannah woodland, with its distinctive hills and forested green mountains, stretches from here to the Somali border in the east, to the Ethiopian border in the north and to the Sudanese border in the north west. It is not the well watered, farmed Kenya of the south of the country made famous by Karen Blixen in her book *Out of Africa*. It is the land of "Men With Sand in Their Hair."

This is what they called the small group of British officers who patrolled the area from the 1920s until Kenyan Independence in 1962. It was their job to keep the peace, or better still, enforce a peace upon the tribes of Samburu, Arial, Rendille, Turkana, Borana, Gabra, Adjuran and Somali, all sheep, goat, cow and camel herders who comprised their own tribal authorities and who fought and competed over scarce grazing.

During the height of Kenya colony, the Crown forbid anyone other than these patrolling officers entry to this archaic tribal territory. Only after independence did the new Kenya government allow missionaries and development workers to live here. And then slowly, ever so slowly, the Kenyans discovered that foreigners liked to visit this vast northern frontier,

that they longed for the hot, arid lowlands, that they enjoyed the silence and landscapes that often stretched a hundred kilometres in any one direction and whose distant hills could be seen with the naked eye.

Visitors appreciated the same wildlife that exists in the Serengeti but under near desert conditions, where the lion and elephant can be spotted alongside the desert oryx, which died out in Israel and Arabia and which has been re-introduced there from herds that have survived in this part of the world.

I love northern Kenya. I spent four years living and working here. I spent time among the Turkana, the Rendille, Ariaal, the Samburu and the Borana. They are still herding their animals and adhere to their tribal ways. They sing the old songs, dance the old dances and walk hundreds of miles to find the best grazing and water for their cattle.

This is the land that time forgot. When I am here I forget about the traffic jams, the informational overload and the names of the ephemeral celebrities whose unconventional lives and fleeting opinions dominate our radio and TV stations.

Here, I am not worried about fashion or breaking news. Here, I reconnect with that aspect of our ancestors who once wandered across thinly populated, wide open spaces best evoked in stories from the book of Genesis or, in the ancient epic of the Sumerians, the tale of Gilgamesh, the man who searched for the secret of eternal life only to find out that it did not exist. Here, I become forgetful of the present and remember our ancient past.

Telling the Tale of The Man Who Would be King

I started this journey considering the destiny of a king who had kingship thrust upon him and I will end it with a story of a similar nature, a story about a poor English boy, who ran away to sea and found greatness on the slopes of Mount Kenya, creating a kingdom from a wilderness.

It is still dark outside and I cannot see Mount Kenya. In an hour the sun will rise and weather permitting, I will see the snow topped mountain peak rising in front of me from the plains of Ol Pejeta Ranch and Conservancy where I am staying.

I can hear the elephants trumpeting nearby and the sounds of lion on the plain. The birds will soon begin their greeting of the dawn.

The mountain and all that is around it is now part of the Republic of Kenya, an African majority country which, unlike so many other African countries, allowed its former colonial masters to become citizens, own land and participate in the building of this developing country. But it was not always so.

Once upon a time, about one hundred and thirty years ago the people around Mount Kenya, the Kikuyu tribe, lived as independent, warring chiefdoms, as much at odds with each other as they were with the nearby Swahili, Arab and Somali slave traders who stole human cargo from the Congo, brought it to the coast and sold it off to the Middle East and Islamic India. The British only managed to free all remaining slaves in its new Kenya colony after WWI.

In the 1890s into this maelstrom of pre-modern tribal strife and vicious slave traders, entered one of the most remarkable, practically forgotten and uncelebrated men in the history of the country, John Boyes.

Boyes was born in 1873 to a poor family in England. At the age of 12 he went to sea and travelled the world. He saw with his own eyes the power of Britain and the expansion of its empire. He felt cramped by a life at sea and dreamed of the open country of Africa where he felt he might make his mark. Incredibly, he managed to make it to South Africa, near penniless and fight with the British in Matabeleland meeting

many of the notables of the time such as Cecil Rhodes who dreamed of an empire that stretched from the Cape to Cairo. This is where he learnt how to soldier and live off the land.

South Africa was too small on Boyes and he made it to Mombasa on the Indian Coast of Kenya where he fell in with a trader who was selling food to the British and their workers who were engaged in building the railway from Mombasa to Uganda (the famous Lunatic Express). At that time Kikuyu land was a no go zone and any white man who tried to enter the tribal areas around Mount Kenya would be killed.

Not only did Boyes enter Kikuyuland, in the 1890s, but he joined one of the clans, defended it against others, found the guns and ammunition to train them and help them defend themselves from other predatory clans, helped them build an alliance of peace with formerly warring clans and finally fight off the final dissenters. Then all the chiefs recognized his authority and declared him ruler, that is King of Kikuyuland and Mount Kenya.

Boyes brought iodine to the Kikuyu, saving hundreds of lives, new plants and also saved thousands of people from starvation during one of the worse droughts of the 19th century. He always managed to buy food, collect ivory and sell it to the British who were desperate for nourishment. For his efforts in bringing peace to Mount Kenya’s warring tribes and paving the way for expanding British trade and authority in the region, the British tried him for treason and eventually acquitted him. The judge actually apologized to him after his trial.

In 1931, Boyes pointed out to the governor of Kenya Colony that by right he owned Mount Kenya, for he had it offered to him by the Kikuyu chiefs and for which he had given them the requisite number of goats that they had demanded. The authorities did not recognize his claim.

John Boyes, former King of the Kikuyu, later went on to make his living as a big game hunter in the Congo. His last job was driving an ice cream truck in the expanding colonial capital of Nairobi where he died in the 1950s. He is rarely if ever mentioned in the academic histories of East Africa. May he rest in peace.

Taking Leave of the Rift Valley

My safari is over. I am waiting for the plane that will carry me back to Nairobi from the plains of Ol Pejeta. There is one man on the airstrip. He works with a stick and a cell phone. There is a wind sock and a dirt road runway. The sun is bright, the sky is blue. I can see the outline of the Aberdares on one side and Mount Kenya on the other. It is very quiet.

Slowly, I hear a noise in the distance, the buzz of an airplane propeller. I see a small white object in the sky. It appears larger and I see clearly the outline of an eight seater. The pilot lands and stops the plane. We walk up with our bags and get on the plane. He takes off. The rift valley

opens up below us. We can see giraffe, buffalo and zebra wandering through the acacia woodland below us. They are at play in the fields of the Lord. I feel as light as a feather.

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