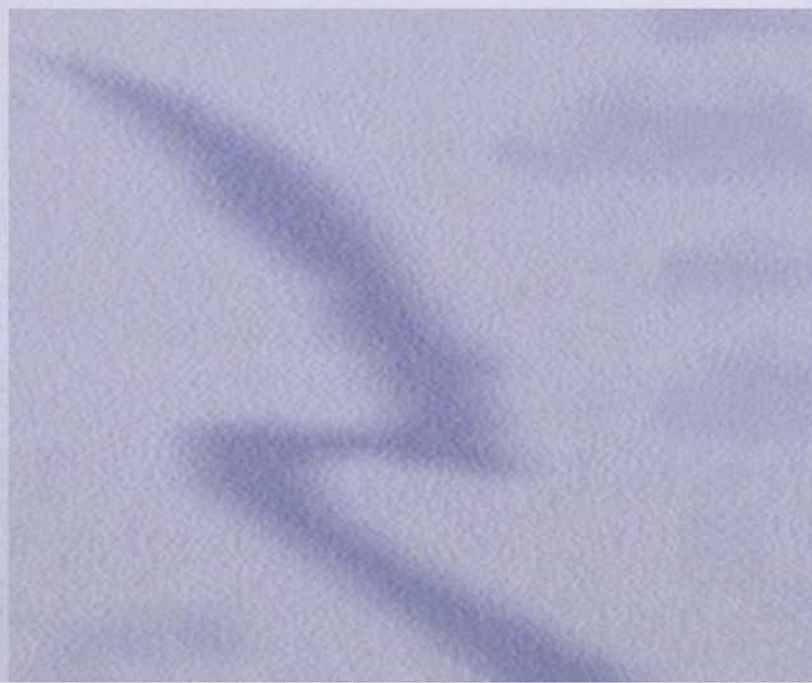


Jews of Ethiopia

The birth of an elite

Edited by
Tudor Parfitt and
Emanuela Trevisan Semi

 Routledge
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JEWS OF ETHIOPIA

This book offers the results of the most recent research carried out in European and Israeli universities on Ethiopian Jews. With a special focus on Europe and the role played by German, English and Italian Jewish communities in creating a new Jewish Ethiopian identity, the book investigates such issues as the formation of a new Ethiopian Jewish elite and the transformation of the identity from Ethiopian Falashas to the Jews of Ethiopia during the twentieth century.

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*Edited by Tudor Parfitt and
Emanuela Trevisan Semi*

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CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1 The construction of Jewish identities in Africa	1
TUDOR PARFITT	
2 Giovanni Ellero's manuscript notes on the Falasha of Walqayt	43
IRMA TADDIA	
3 S. Schachnowitz's novel <i>Salomo der Falascha</i> (1923)	53
SIGRID SOHN	
4 The Falashas in the German Jewish press in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century	65
SIGRID SOHN	
5 Ethiopian Jews in Europe: Taamrat Emmanuel in Italy and Makonnen Levi in England	74
EMANUELA TREVISAN SEMI	
6 Abraham Adgeh: the perfect English gentleman	101
SHALVA WEIL	

CONTENTS

7	Gete Yirmiahu and <i>Beta Israel's</i> regeneration: a difficult path	112
	CARLO GUANDALINI	
8	The Ethiopian Jewish exodus: a myth in creation	122
	GADI BEN EZER	
9	The sacred and secular: the immigration of the black Jews of Ethiopia to Israel	131
	RUBEN SCHINDLER	
10	Birth and death in an Absorption Centre: the process of change among Ethiopian Jews in Israel	142
	SARA MINUCHIN-ITZIGSOHN, RINA HIRSHFELD AND RIVKA HANEGBI	
11	The function of musical instruments in the liturgy of the Ethiopian Jews	155
	RON ATAR	
12	About the Jewish identity of the <i>Beta Israel</i>	173
	AMALELETCHE TEFERI	
13	The relationship between the <i>Beta Israel</i> tradition and the <i>Book of Jubilees</i>	193
	MICHAEL CORINALDI	
	<i>Index</i>	205

FIGURES

11.1	Example of a structural hemiola	158
11.2	The nagarit	159
11.3	The qachel	159
11.4	The senasel	160
11.5	The kabaro	160
11.6	Rhythmic type of prayer	163
11.7	Wanivavo Egzee'aviher li Musye	164
11.8	Correlation of performing groups, text, melody and rhythmic patterns	165
11.9	Wi'etus kimi mer'awee	166
11.10	Yitfesa lisaneeya	167
11.11	Herziga	168

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Tudor Parfitt
Emanuela Trevisan Semi

INTRODUCTION

During the writing of this introduction the rumour spread that the Israeli government had decided to organise a third *aliyyah* from Ethiopia permitting some 20,000 Falash Mura left behind by the previous operations (Operation Moses in 1984/5 and Operation Solomon in 1991) to emigrate to Israel and join their families. In the event this rumour proved to be without any foundation. In recent years some 11,000 Falash Mura, descendants of the Beta Israel who converted to Christianity in the nineteenth century, have emigrated to Israel and have been reunited with their families. But the Ethiopians still living in the compounds in Addis Ababa waiting for *aliyyah* are not expected to leave immediately for lack of sufficient funds for their integration in Israel. The day the last Jews of Ethiopia leave the country in which they were born, and this day is probably not far distant, the historical ties with Ethiopia will be cut. The process that started with the arrival of the missionaries in Ethiopia in the nineteenth century aiming to convert the Jews of Abyssinia will end not only with the re-Judaisation of people previously converted to Christianity but also with the modernisation in an Israeli mould of people coming from an undeveloped part of Eastern Africa. This book deals in some detail with the beginning of this process in the creation of an elite among this people once called Falashas or Beta Israel and today called the Jews of Ethiopia.

It was after the arrival in Ethiopia of the Protestant missionaries that the Jewish world started showing some interest in the Beta Israel, first by sending out Joseph Halévy on a mission of enquiry and subsequently his favourite student at the School of Oriental Languages in Paris, Jacques Faitlovitch. Faitlovitch devoted the rest of his life to the Beta Israel cause. It was he who introduced the Talmudic–Rabbinical Judaism which would eventually replace the

INTRODUCTION

traditional religious practices of the Beta Israel, and it was he who introduced the previously unknown Hebrew language which in time will surely completely replace the ancient Ethiopian languages used by this people. Young boys were sent to study in Europe in order to become acculturated to normative and western Judaism but also to modernity: 25 young Beta Israel were received by local Jewish communities and individual rabbis. At times they strongly supported the youths' efforts to adapt to the western world, and at others they abandoned them. They were supposed to become the elite of the Beta Israel but some of them were more successful than others. Some of the history of what happened is related in this book.

When the State of Israel was founded, Faitlovitch began to organize the *aliyyah* of the Beta Israel to Israel and in 1955 the first group arrived in the village of Kefar Batya in Israel. The arrival of the first group in Israel constitutes the foundation myth of the story of the *aliyyah* of the Jews of Ethiopia. By 2002 there were approximately 85,000 Jews of Ethiopia in Israel, including 23,000 born in Israel.¹ Data show that most of the Ethiopian Jews live in permanent houses that they own while 2,000 live in mobile homes and 3,000 in immigrant absorption centres, but most of the immigrants who still dwell in absorption centres and in mobile homes arrived recently. At the end of 1999 Ethiopian immigrants were concentrated in seven localities: Netanya, Rehovot, Haifa, Hadera, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Beersheva.² Fifty-three per cent of the Ethiopian Israelis aged 25–54 are in the labour market (total Israeli population 76 per cent), most of them are employed in agriculture and manufacturing (men and women) while women are mostly employed in the public services.³ Starting from the first operation (Operation Moses) all Ethiopian immigrant children were educated by institutions associated with the National Religious Party (as was the case with children coming from Arab countries) as a result of the conflicts between the State school system and the religious schools in the 1950s. Boarding-school education became typical of the secondary schooling of Ethiopian Israelis: 62 per cent of Ethiopian boys and 44 per cent of Ethiopian girls in 1997 attended boarding schools.⁴ Recent data show that there is an increase in the number of students obtaining matriculation certificates but the dropout rates are still high: 6 per cent of Ethiopian youth aged 14–17 (9 per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls) had dropped out of school – twice the drop out rate of the Israeli population (in 1997).⁵ In the last years more Ethiopian Jews have been attending institutions of higher education: the number of first-year university

INTRODUCTION

students doubled between 1994 and 1999 from 82 to 176 and most of them are studying technological sciences (a smaller group social sciences).⁶

In general, young Ethiopians who became Israelis do not know the history of the first Beta Israel that were brought to Europe or Palestine and Egypt to learn Rabbinical Judaism during the twentieth century and this book could be a useful tool for filling this gap.

This book covers a variety of topics relating to the Beta Israel, from the function of musical instruments in the liturgy, to a description of the phenomenon of Judaisation in Africa in general and the way the notion of Jews in Black Africa has worked on the western imagination, but mainly, as we have indicated, it focuses on the issue of the birth of an elite among the Jews of Ethiopia.

Irma Taddia discusses an important and unknown source for Ethiopian history preserved at the University of Bologna. This consists of two notebook manuscripts on Wolqayt compiled by an Italian civil servant during the Italian administration in Ethiopia in the 1930s. Both manuscripts concern the 370 Beta Israel, most of them blacksmiths, who dwelled in that region. Sigrid Sohn discovered a novel written in German after the First World War – *Salomo der Falascha* – which, in fictional form, dealt with the life of one of the Beta Israel boys who Faitlovitch took with him from Ethiopia to Europe or Palestine. He arrived in Palestine in 1909 and studied in Jerusalem at the school of the *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden*. He died on his return to Ethiopia in 1920 due to illness. The novel did not aim simply at making the reader aware of the reality of the Falashas but also at placing the events it portrays in the context of Jewish life during the dawn of Zionism. In fact the novel's hero, like the individual upon which the fictional character was based, died before being able to reach his homeland, but unlike the real Salomon he was killed during the Passover riots in Jerusalem.

In another chapter Sohn examines the Jewish press in Germany from 1906 to 1935. At the beginning of the twentieth century German Jews particularly sustained Faitlovitch's effort in offering education to the Beta Israel and this positive attitude can be traced through the press of the period.

Jewish readers were well informed that Faitlovitch travelled throughout the West in support of the Falasha cause, and the fact that the pro-Falasha committee moved from Florence to Frankfurt in 1914 is clearly related to the great interest shown by the press. The subject became an issue full of interest again in 1935 with the

INTRODUCTION

advent of Nazism in Germany, since Ethiopia was seen as a possible destination of Jewish emigration should the situation worsen.

Emanuela Trevisan Semi's chapter is devoted to illustrating the different paths taken by two young people educated in Europe, Taamrat Emmanuel (in Italy) and Makonnen Levi (in England). The first became a well-known Ethiopian intellectual who was named *attaché culturel* in the Ethiopian Embassy in Paris (1948–51) and is a representative of a successful life story in the Beta Israel narrative, while Makonnen Levi is just the opposite – an anti-hero who was obliged to stop his education in Europe and was rejected in both European and Ethiopian societies.

Another chapter deals with the life and times of Abraham Adgeh – another of Faitlovitch's protégés who originated in a village in Woggera and was educated in London, where he acquired the manners and education of his English hosts. He transformed himself into a perfect English gentleman and for the rest of his life in Ethiopia recalled fondly his British education and the years he spent in London.

Carlo Guandalini's chapter is devoted to Gete Yirmiahu, one of the first pupils to be brought to Europe (France, Italy and Palestine) and to learn Hebrew. Gete's correspondence constitutes an important additional contribution to the story of the Beta Israel. The time he spent in the *Hilfsverein* school in Jerusalem was an important event in the life of the boy: he achieved an excellent knowledge of Hebrew and this reflected his aspirations to become a perfect *maskil*. Gete's education was designed to enable him to view himself as part of an emergent Hebrew-based Zionist culture. *Mutatis mutandis* this is the culture with which almost the entire Beta Israel tribe is now grappling to come to terms.

The tensions between Beta Israel life in Ethiopia and the new circumstances in Israel have created and recreated myths of the past and of the present. One of the most dynamic and productive of these myths is the reworking of the long walk from Ethiopia to the Sudan which formed one of the most harrowing parts of Operation Moses. The meanings that this journey has created for Ethiopians and the way in which this episode has been and is being mythologised in the group's narrative are the subject of the chapter by Gadi Ben Ezer. One of the areas of tension which has given rise to a new kind of group narrative is the sense of marginalisation felt by the community. As Ruben Schindler points out, this marginalisation is as true of religious identifications and practise as of other areas, and there is a disturbing sense that the exodus to Israel has been very

INTRODUCTION

costly in spiritual and cultural terms. The massive transformation in the lives of the Ethiopians in Israel and the way in which the immigrants have coped with change and loss is analysed in the paper by Minuchin-Itzigsohn, Hirshfeld and Hanegbi through the stratagem of looking at practices surrounding birth and death in an Israeli absorption centre where two quite different cultural models are in collision. The theme of cultural loss is further explored in the chapter by the ethnomusicologist Ron Atar, who points out that the ancient liturgical practices of the Beta Israel have almost completely disappeared. Specific religious features in the traditional life of the community are explored in the chapter by Michael Corinaldi with particular reference to practices surrounding the Sabbath. One further area of cultural loss may be perceived in the loss of a certain kind of identity. The attempts by a number of scholars to elucidate the origins of the Ethiopian Jews have been seen by some members of the community as an attack on ancient certainties. The traditions of the community, which have been brought into question by some recent scholarship, are defended by Amaletech Teferi while the overall phenomenon of the Judaisation of the Beta Israel is put into a wider African context in the chapter by Tudor Parfitt which positions itself in this debate with the work of Kaplan and others while arguing that the construction of Jewish and Israelite identities forms part of a much wider colonial discourse.

Tudor Parfitt
Emanuela Trevisan Semi

Notes

- 1 Sh. Swirski, B. Swirski, 'Ethiopian Israelis: Housing, Employment, Education', *The Israel Equality Monitor* 11 (June 2002), p. 1.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF JEWISH IDENTITIES IN AFRICA

Tudor Parfitt

The confrontation of isolated societies with the modern world gave rise to certain tensions and confusions and this was nowhere more true than in Africa. The way Europeans saw Africans and their way of life, their religions and social mores was to have a profound impact upon the development of the African continent. Further confusion was to be generated by the amalgamation of traditional African and European or modern elements. These processes may be seen to have started right at the outset of colonial intervention. One of the key areas of confusion was religion.

From mediaeval times until at least the seventeenth century the general assumption in Europe had been that there were four main world religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Paganism.¹ In time the great text-based, priestly religions of India, Japan and China could be approximately accommodated as an extension of this scheme of things as the parallels between them and the religions of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition were so evident. Such religions may have been explained via Judaic models (and often were) but they were perceived as actual religions. The problem arose with the unknown religious systems of Africa, parts of the Americas or Australia where such evident parallels did not seem to exist. What happened in the case of Africa in the realm of religion was reflected elsewhere in the 'savage' world.

The 'savage' religious and philosophical systems of Africa were simply incomprehensible to the colonists, missionaries and others who observed them. They were beyond the limits of the known world and far beyond the limits of their own experience and

imagination. As they were incomprehensible they were sometimes hardly perceived to exist at all. In the context of the Cape, which from the seventeenth century on was a part of Africa which was relatively well known, the culture of the indigenous peoples was regularly described in negative terms: they had no laws, language, reason or religion. In 1634 one traveller noted that they are ‘without any Religion, Lawe, Arte or Civility that we could see’.² This view remained more or less standard, at least for many western travellers, and in white racist enclaves in Southern Africa and elsewhere is no doubt still cherished.

The acute sense of difference traditionally felt by Europeans with respect to Africans may in part be explained by the fact that until the second half of the nineteenth century little was known of the great majority of the African interior or indeed of much of the coastal area. A critical feature of Africans was, of course, that they were black, supposedly quite the opposite of white. Similar suppositions were made of black people as were made at much the same time of American Indians. Were they really human? In 1520 the Swiss medical writer Paracelsus had argued that the black race was of a quite different origin. By the second half of the eighteenth century a full-scale debate emerged between monogenists, who claimed a common origin for the whole of humanity, and polygenists who argued that Negroes were quite simply members of a radically different species. Eventually the idea emerged that the Negroes were a separate species more or less intermediate between Europeans and the ‘oran-outangs’.³

For centuries Europeans had lived in ignorance of Africa. In early mediaeval times the entire eastern world beyond Islam was more or less unknown, and from the time of the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 641 Africa and the Indian Ocean were effectively removed from the European sphere. Even in classical times Africa had been insulated from Greek, Roman and Egyptian influence by natural barriers. In time Muslims and particularly Arabs acquired a good deal of information about the African coasts, and no doubt more than we suspect of the interior, but Europeans had almost none. Even by the time of the Renaissance the Dark Continent was little more than a concept: parts of the littoral were known but the interior was a void of knowledge which cartographers could decorate according to their fancy. Thus Swift’s famous lines:

So Geographers, in Afric maps,
With savage-pictures fill their gaps;

And o'er unhabitable downs
Place elephants for want of towns.

Well into the Renaissance the main sources of information on Africa remained classical texts. Manuscripts and early printed versions of Ptolemy's *Geography*, whether in the original Greek or in Latin translation, normally reproduced four maps of (north) Africa, which illustrates how pre-Renaissance European knowledge about Africa was limited to the Mediterranean coast and the lower Nile. For mediaeval Europe the Bible and the classical texts – chiefly Homer, Herodotus, Pliny and Ptolemy – were the principal sources of information on Africa. In the *Odyssey* (e.g. 1:22) Homer had distinguished between two Ethiopias, one in the east and one in the west, at opposite ends of the earth. Aeschylus considered that the eastern Ethiopia stretched as far as India – and this confusion was to continue until the mediaeval period. This polarised Africa was in time taken to represent the 'admirable Ethiopia' of the Nubian Meroitic civilisation on the one hand, and the savage regions of sub-Saharan Africa on the other. For Herodotus the men of Meroe were 'the tallest and most handsome in the world' whereas the sub-Saharan Negro population were 'dog-faced creatures and beasts without heads'.⁴

This division fed into a mediaeval discourse which was as alive in Islam as it was in Christendom, in which all sorts of expectations were centred on the *bon éthiopien*. Africa continued to be seen as both a terrestrial hell and, beyond the Mountains of the Moon described by Diogenes, a terrestrial paradise. There was some biblical support for these essentially classical ideas. The Nile was often taken to be the Gihon, one of the four rivers of Paradise, described in Genesis as the river 'which flows around the whole land of Cush, where there is gold, and the gold of that land is good' (the other three were the Pison, the Hiddekel and the Euphrates). Many fifteenth-century maps include the river Gihon 'qui descendit de montibus paradisi', and paradise is often presented, as it is on the Munich portolan of 1502, as a walled mountain-top town in Africa. As against the African paradise there was the other Ethiopia – the successor to the terrestrial hell: the Africa of cannibalism and the slave trade, of unbearable heat and decimating disease, of foetid swamp and jungle – the white man's grave, the heart of darkness, what D. H. Lawrence called 'the continent of dark negation'.

This ambiguous view of Africa achieved striking iconographic form in the famous Hereford *Mappa Mundi*, probably drawn by

Richard de Bello in 1289. The map represents a symbolic world with Jerusalem at the centre, paradise at the top, and damned souls being dismissed from the seat of judgement to join the bestial figures which are trooping towards a crescent-shaped Africa that borders the edge of a flat, round world. Africa is divided roughly by an elongated Atlas range: on the one side of it there are illustrations of biblical and classical stories and pious depictions of the lives of the saints; on the other side are deformed savages, some with ocular irregularities like the four-eyed Maritime Ethiopians, the Blemyes with eyes in their breasts or the one-eyed panther-eating king of Ethiopia; then we see hermaphrodites, snake-eating troglodytes, humanoid creatures with mouths so small they are condemned to suck their food through straws. In short, the known side of Africa was more or less an extension of Christendom, the epitome of savagery, of barbarism. The literature produced by the colonisation and exploration of Africa to a remarkable degree maintained this polarity of perception. J. C. Prichard, the eminent English ethnologist of the first half of the nineteenth century maintained that the African ‘races’ with the most pronounced ‘Negroid’ traits ‘deformed countenances, projecting jaws, flat foreheads’ were the most ‘savage and morally degraded’ of the African peoples. On the other hand those tribes with a ‘nearly European countenance and a corresponding configuration of the head’ were the most civilised and the closest therefore to Europeans.⁵ In the course of the nineteenth century a myth known as the Hamitic hypothesis developed into the conventional wisdom of the time. This myth maintained that light-skinned peoples of Egyptian or Indo-European origin had in times past spread across Africa where they still formed an elite in many societies. As they gradually interbred with subject peoples they themselves degenerated. This was the explanation put forward for the apparent decline of a number of African societies from Yorubaland to Benin or Great Zimbabwe. This view persisted well into the twentieth century. Its most forceful proponent was the British anthropologist Charles Seligman whose widely admired and hugely influential *Races of Africa* (London, 1930) stated categorically that ‘the civilisations of Africa are the civilisations of the Hamites’.⁶ Such views were echoed by a number of Germans, notably Leo Frobenius, who was convinced that the Yoruba, for instance, came from Atlantis.

In mediaeval times there was the notion that somewhere in Africa Jewish kingdoms were to be found. Eldad’s famous book *Sepher Eldad* fed into this as did countless other sources including

Sir John Mandeville, who explored the parallel idea that a Christian kingdom existed – connected with the Lost Tribes as well as with the Pygmies and the Amazonians and stretching from East Africa to the Indus and across Africa as far as the Atlantic Ocean – which was ruled over by the Priest King, Prester John. During the fifteenth century, under the influence of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460), Portuguese seamen had been venturing down the west African coast and in 1487 Bartholomew Diaz was blown round the southern tip of Africa, holding out hopes of a sea-route to India which was eventually discovered by Vasco da Gama in 1497–9. Until the Portuguese voyages of exploration brought the African coast within the European sphere, Arab travellers, as we have seen, had much greater contact with Africa than did Europeans, and Arabs produced works of geography and history which revealed some of the continent’s mysteries. In the tenth century Abu’l Hassan al-Masudi noted that the mid-point of what is today Mozambique was the limit of Arab navigation at the time. And in about 1030 the polymath Abu Rayhan al-Biruni confirmed this. Further information was given by Al-Idrisi in the twelfth century, followed by Abd al-Munim al-Himyari in the fifteenth.⁷ Nonetheless, for the Arabs the distinction between the civilised races (such as the Arabs) and peoples such as those to be found in the interior of Africa – the despised Zanj – was clear as day. Ibn Khaldun observed of such folk that they were ‘closer to dumb animals than to rational beings’.⁸

For Renaissance Europe the best known of the Arab historians and geographers of Africa was Leo Africanus (c.1492–c.1550). He was born of Arab Muslim parents in Granada and was originally called Hassan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzān al-Zayyāfī. After the Spanish conquest of Granada in 1492 his wealthy family moved to Morocco, and the young Hassan travelled widely in Africa visiting Timbuktu and the sub-Saharan empires of Mali and Bornu. Captured by Italian pirates off the north African coast on a return trip from Mecca, in 1518 Hassan was compelled to convert to Christianity and was baptised at St Peter’s in Rome on 6 January 1520 as Giovanni Leo Africanus. His most important work was the remarkable *Description of Africa*,⁹ which was written around 1528–9 and was for many years the only source on sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ (He also wrote an Arabic grammar and a manual of Arabic rhetoric.) *Description of Africa* at once became an essential part of the rapidly expanding body of sixteenth-century European geographical knowledge. Translated in 1556 into both Latin and

French, it went through a number of editions in several European languages. An English translation by John Pory, which appeared in 1600, was read by Ben Jonson and probably by Shakespeare and John Webster.¹¹ In *Description* there are frequent mentions of Jews in Africa: he notes that once Jewish law was widely observed, that there were warrior tribes in the Atlas claiming descent from King David, that the Canaanites travelled to Africa, followed later by the Sabeans, and that the ruler of Timbuktu could not stand the sight of Jews.¹² As the major modern source on Africa, *Description* carried great authority. In a postscript to the English edition entitled *A summaried discourse of the manifold religions professed in Africa*, John Pory noted:

At this day also the Abassins affirm that upon the Nilus towards the west there inhabiteth a most populous nation of the Jewish stock under a mightie king. And some of our modern cosmographers set down a province in those quarters which they call the land of the Hebrews, placed as it were under the equinoctial, in certain unknown mountains, between the confines of Abassin and Congo.¹³

John Ogilby (1600–76), the translator and publisher whose work ranged from translations of Homer to his famous series of books on geography and topography, gave further information about Jews in the continent in his *Africa*. He noted of the coast of Guinea:

Many Jews also are scattered over this region; some Natives, boasting themselves of Abraham's seed, inhabiting both sides of the River Niger: Others are Asian strangers, who fled hither either from the desolation of Jerusalem by Vespasian or from Judea wasted and depopulated by the Romans, Persians, Saracens and Christians.

And Ogilby also included the suggestion by Leo Africanus that Jews were to be found in the inland areas.¹⁴

As time went on Europeans got to know Africa better and it became clear that a number of African societies were much more refined and competent than had hitherto been suspected. There were, indeed, as classical sources had suggested, 'good' Africans as well as 'bad' Africans. In some cases it was apparent almost from the outset that a given society did indeed have a religion and a culture and that it was necessary to understand these things. The tension

created between ‘primitive’ on the one hand and ‘refined’ on the other created the need for an extraneous explication for sophisticated features of African society. One explanation was the idea that all savage races were derived from earlier and more sophisticated ones. Thus in 1879 Whately noted that all ‘savages are degenerated remnants of more civilised races’.¹⁵

Sophie Dulucq has shown how the mantle of specific ancient societies was carefully and systematically placed on the shoulders of the more ‘advanced’ groups: the reference to antiquity often conferred nobility: it was often applied to conquerors rather than to the conquered, to nomads rather than to sedentary peoples. In a parallel development the attempt to comprehend led to African religious systems being frequently compared to the religions mentioned in the Bible, and the assumption was frequently made that such and such religion was derived from an Israelite model, from the worship of Baal mentioned in the Bible or from the religions of ancient Egypt also mentioned in the Bible. In other cases other classical models were called upon.¹⁶

The discourse which permitted traces of the Hebrew people, their language and their religion to be found in every corner of the African continent was no doubt aided by the rise of evangelical Christianity. The humanitarianism of the evangelicals had never accepted the polygenist view. As far as they were concerned, ‘God that made the world . . . hath made of one blood all nations of men’ (Acts 17:24–6). It was the evangelical revivals which were responsible for stimulating missionary work in Africa in the first place. Protestant missions – the London Missionary Society (1795) (tellingly it changed its name to The Church Society for Africa and the East in 1812), the Church Missionary Society (1799), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (1813) and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810) all plunged into the African mission field.¹⁷ The British and Foreign Bible Society was originally brought into existence to provide Bibles in Welsh. At its first meeting in 1804, however, the founders resolved to promote ‘the most extensive circulation of the Holy Scriptures both at home and abroad’. Africa was soon to be flooded with Bibles.¹⁸ Had the interests of the Society been restricted to the spiritual needs of the Welsh the future history of Africa might have been quite different.

What did these evangelical missionaries to Africa themselves think about Jews and why did Jews figure so immanently in their discourse of otherness? One nineteenth-century missionary to

Uganda, Harry Nevinson, demonstrated the extent to which there had been an internalisation of British–Israelite discourse. He observed:

The strictly biblical education produced . . . the illusion that both the promises and the threatenings of the Jewish lawgivers and prophets were specially designed for ourselves by a foreseeing Power. We never doubted that we English Evangelicals were the Chosen People and when every Sunday evening we sang the *Magnificat* ‘As He promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever’ we gave no thought to the Jews; and when soon afterwards, we sang in the *Nunc Dimittis* ‘To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of Thy people Israel’ we meant the Missionary societies would spread the light of the Gospel to Negroes, Chinese and Indians, while God’s English people retained the glory.¹⁹

French rationalism also contributed to a more humane view of African society. For the philosophes all men were capable of developing into fully rational human beings.

Once colonists started the long process of making sense of the African interior the literature which already existed started to filter into the European *imaginaire* and ‘Jewish’ constructs started to play a remarkable role in the decipherment of the continent. Even though different circumstances prevailed in each area, the use of an Israelite model seems to have penetrated just about every corner of Africa. As is well understood, the construction of the ‘other’ is regularly a reflection of the self. What frequently happened in the missionary situation was to impose upon others – radically different others – an aspect of the imagined identity of self, and perhaps the more radically different the ‘other’ was, the more necessary this mechanism became.

In West Africa an Israelite discourse was immanent. G. T. Basden’s *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* casually noted that the Ibos were possessed of ‘certain customs which rather pointed to Levitic influence at a more or less remote period. This is suggested in the underlying ideas concerning sacrifice and in the practice of circumcision’.²⁰ According to Basden, the Ibo language had ‘interesting parallels with the Hebrew idiom’. To this day the Ibos themselves cherish the notion that they are somehow descended from the people of Israel: the idea that Ibo and Hebrew or *ivri* are one and

the same word and that the two languages are closely related is quite widespread.²¹ We have already mentioned the remarkable Yoruba people of West Africa. Already in the 1820s the English explorer Captain Hugh Clapperton cited some excerpts of a work by Sultan Belo of Sokoto which was almost certainly influenced by some European work that maintained that the Yoruba were thought to be of Canaanite extraction.²² By the end of the century a Yoruba Christian, the Rev. Samuel Johnson, Pastor of Oyo, wrote a history of his people that more or less absorbed this idea of an Eastern origin. Dispatched to a British missionary society in 1899 the manuscript was 'lost'. The author died in 1901 and it was not until 1921 after many vicissitudes that the work, edited by Samuel's brother, saw the light of day. Johnson imagined that the Yoruba had come from Mecca from the line of Lamurudu – a king of Mecca – a name that was perhaps a corruption of Nimrod, 'the mighty hunter' of the Bible. In any event, according to Johnson there could not be 'the slightest doubt' that the Yoruba came from the East.²³ In 1899 his namesake, the Yoruba clergyman Rev. James Johnson, wrote a catechism for young Yoruba Christians which pointed up the similarities between Yoruba and Jewish practice.²⁴ The idea of an extraneous origin for the Yoruba and neighbouring tribes persisted among Africans. In 1955 S. O. Biobaku claimed that the Yoruba came from the ancient kingdom of Meroe, and Emmanuel Ughulu claimed a Jewish origin for the Esan tribe.²⁵ Similarly the Efik people internalised this general discourse and claimed to have originated in Palestine or Egypt and to have crossed the Sahara to Sudan, from where they wandered into Nigeria.²⁶ In the case of the Peul people of West Africa all sorts of more explicitly 'Israelite' theories were advanced by early anthropologists: were they a Lost Tribe of Israel – or were they rather descended from the Egyptians? Or had a Roman legion gone astray in the Sahara?²⁷ According to French colonial historians the mediaeval West African empires of Songhai and Ghana were both founded by, among others, Jewish migrants from the Near East. They argued that the ruling dynasty in Ghana was itself of Jewish origin and that the burial mounds found in the Niger delta were built by Jews. In 1939 one French historian, M. Robin, observed that there was a group, also in the Niger delta, which was white and which ruled over black people with the assistance of You Houzou – the name of a supernatural creature of phenomenal strength which Robin construed to mean 'Jew'.²⁸

One of the mechanisms in the colonial context which was productive of an imagined Israelite identity was the selection of a

particular group which was supposed both to have superior qualities and to have originated outside Africa. One such group was the Ashanti. By the British they were variously described as virile, courageous, patriotic, organised, constant – in short ‘the most civil and well-bred people . . . in Africa’,²⁹ Friedrich Ratzel enthusiastically endorsed this view: ‘in the judgment of Europeans they are among the best breeds of Guinea – intelligent, industrious and courageous’.³⁰ They were supposed, therefore, to be from elsewhere. Even though the Ashanti themselves made every effort to ‘record their origin as being from Ashanti proper’, Captain R. Sutherland Rattray, who had spent 20 years in West Africa and was ‘without question the leading authority on all matters pertaining to the Ashanti’ opined: ‘I feel sure that they came from the North or North-West’ adding somewhat lamely ‘they do not know this themselves’.³¹ One of the first Europeans to spend much time with the Ashanti was Thomas Edward Bowdich (1781–1824) whose *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* was published in 1819 and formed part of the new descriptive literature which included Burton on Dahomey and Casalis on the Sotho. Noting the ‘Grecian features’ and ‘aquiline’ faces of the Ashanti, Bowdich went on to write *Essay on the Superstitions, Customs and Acts Common to the ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians and Ashantees*, where he argued that the Ashanti people derived from ‘the civilised Ethiopians of Herodotus’.³² Sir Henry Stanley (1841–1904) the explorer, while working for the *New York Herald*, observed a striking similarity between an Ashanti stool and the depiction of a stool he had seen in Thebes in Egypt. Impressed by the workmanship of the said stool he went on to enthuse about the excellence of Ashanti sandals: ‘Sandals! At the very repetition of the word one’s thoughts revert to the inhabitants of Egypt, Syria and Asia Minor’.³³ Anything fine in African culture regularly elicited the reaction that it must be from somewhere else – and the usual locus was Palestine or the Middle East. The so-called Benin bronzes were regularly attributed to lost Israelites, Egyptians or the men of Atlantis, and many other African artistic traditions were explained away as deriving from the art of ancient Egypt.³⁴

A full-blooded Israelite theory with respect to the Ashanti was presented in a detailed study published in 1930 by Joseph J. Williams – a Jesuit member of the Royal Geographical Society as well as of the American Geographical Society – who found traces of Hebrew in the Ashanti language: ‘not a few Hebrew words and possible certain distinctive Hebrew constructions have been grafted

on the native languages of the Ashanti'. He took the name Ashanti to mean the Sons of Ashan which he declared to be a city in Judea. Jewish customs, too, were found aplenty in Ashanti rituals, from marriage rites to purification ceremonies and menstrual seclusion. He found 'certain cultural elements common to the Ashanti and the ancient Hebrews, such as the Ob cult, religious dances, use of "Amen", vowel value . . . endogamy, cross-cousin marriages, familial names, exogamy'. Then there was the similarity between the 'Supreme Being' of the Ashanti and the Hebrew Deity and, remarkably, 'the survival of what has every appearance of being the breastplate and misnefet of the High Priest' complete with the insignia of the Lost Twelve Tribes of Israel. Finally Williams drew a somewhat desperate comparison between the famous golden stool of the Ashanti and the 'Chair of Moses' in the synagogue in Kaifeng.³⁵ Williams reaches the final conclusion that:

the Supreme Being not only of the Ashanti and allied tribes, but most probably of the whole of Negro Land as well, is not the God of the Christians which, at a comparatively recent date, was superimposed on the various tribal beliefs by ministers of the Gospel: but the Yahweh of the Hebrews, and that too of the Hebrews of pre-exilic times.³⁶

In the great lake area of East Africa there was a long-running discourse which placed the origin of some of the indigenous population outside the locus of the lakes and within some imagined biblical or quasi-biblical framework. With respect to Uganda, Herman Norden noted that there was an ancient lineage of 33 kings 'that traces back to King David. It is a proud history. The legends tell of the Uganda people crossing the Nile centuries upon centuries ago and subduing all tribes whose country they traversed. They claim the highest native civilisation in Africa'.³⁷ Sir Harry Johnston, the first British administrator of the Uganda Protectorate and one of the great proponents of the Hamitic myth, thought that Phoenecians or Canaanites had crossed into Africa at some time (here following Leo Africanus), mingled with Ethiopians and descended into East Africa.³⁸ In Uganda missionaries soon added to this discourse. One CMS missionary saw the religion practised in the kingdom of Buganda as a 'mixture of Gnosticism and ancient Egyptianism'.³⁹

The Jewish people soon entered the consciousness of the

indigenous population via the missionaries. A CMS missionary mentioned that at the Ganda court the idea was propagated that 'Jesus Christ was a Jew . . . [and] we Europeans did not follow one of our race, we looked for the truth where it was to be found and we found it among the Jews'. In the confusing circumstances of the early colonial period in Uganda, with so many competing systems and ideologies, truth was at a premium. By the 1890s another CMS missionary observed that 'the customs and manners of the Jews' were of 'the greatest interest' in Uganda. Within a few years one of the most remarkable Ugandans of his generation, Samei Kakungulu or Kakunguru, who had come to fame as a talented military leader on the British side against the Muslims, had decided to be circumcised. By this time he was a power in the land, having been rewarded by the colonial power with a post as a semi-autonomous administrator in a large area centred on Mbale in the eastern part of the country, although he was later suspected of trying to make himself *kabakai* or king. In 1920 he declared of himself and his followers: 'we will be known as the Jews' and in 1922 he published a book which was essentially a guide to Judaism.⁴⁰ He died a Jew (albeit one with some residual belief in Jesus) and his followers in Mbale, known as the Bayudaya, despite persecution under Idi Amin, have maintained their Jewish practices and are now some 600 strong. While not claiming any Israelite ancestry for themselves, the Bayudaya are some of the best known of the African Judaising communities. Until February 2002, when they underwent a formal mass conversion to Judaism, they observed their own kind of unofficial Judaism.⁴¹ I visited the community in 1996 with an orthodox Jewish friend: he found no difference between their mode of practice and that which he was used to in his London synagogue. The first two formal conversions to halakhic Judaism were only carried out in August 2001. A mass conversion of the bulk of the community took place in February 2002, conducted by four Conservative rabbis from the United States and one from Israel.

Many indigenous African peoples simply reminded Europeans of Jews or some other Middle Eastern people physically. Sidney Mendelssohn, a Jewish mining magnate in South Africa, observed on one occasion that when he looked at a crowd of black men at the mines certain faces stood out as being so indubitably 'Jewish' that he was tempted to greet them as brothers in this foreign land.⁴² Writing of Ankole, south-east of Lake Albert, Johnson observed:

The Banyankole, as the people of Ankole are called, are an exceedingly interesting race, the purest, least mixed branch of the great Baima stock which constitutes the ruling caste in all the kingdoms around. In figure they are tall and lithe, and their long thin faces, with a very Jewish nose and lips, suggest a Semitic origin and strongly mark off their features from the bullet head, flat nose and thick lips of their neighbours . . . Captain Speke, who was the first European to travel among them, reasonably assumes, from their own traditions and his own wider observations, that the whole race are closely allied to the pastoral Gallas, who came from Abyssinia. Centuries perhaps before the Christian era, some roving Asiatic race with long-horned cattle came streaming in from Arabia on the east and Palestine on the north and settled themselves in the mountain fastnesses of Abyssinia. Mixing with the agricultural Hamitic Negroes dwelling there, they still retained their Semitic features, their pastoral habits, and their fine breed of cattle . . . the race by their greater forcefulness and pride, subjugated people in their path and though aliens and few in number became . . . the ruling caste.⁴³

Among the neighbouring Tutsis we find one of the most dramatic and topical examples of the phenomenon of an imagined Semitic and Israelite identity. The first explorers to reach the area of Rwanda and Burundi were immediately struck by the differences between what they saw as three groups: the Hutus, the Tutsis and the Twa. These groups shared the same territory, spoke the same language and sometimes intermarried. However, they appeared to look different. The Twa – a tiny minority – were pygmies who were hunter-gatherers in the forests or else acted as menial servants at court and elsewhere. The Hutu, who were the vast majority, were peasants who tilled the soil. The Tutsis were perceived as being quite different: they were ‘tall and thin and often displayed sharp, angular facial features’ and were cattle-herders.

As we have seen, the explorer John Hanning Speke (1827–64), who had gone with Burton to search for the equatorial lakes of Africa, had laid some of the groundwork for an explanation of these differences with his theory that ruling groups in the interlacustrine kingdoms had come from a ‘superior’ civilisation in the north. In *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (London, 1863)

Speke connected them with the Galla of southern Ethiopia. The idea that the Tutsis and similar groups in the area were quite superior to others stuck. In a Belgian colonial report of 1925 the Twa were described, in terms reminiscent of Herodotus, as having ‘a monkey-like flat face and a huge nose, he is quite similar to the apes whom he chases in the forest’.⁴⁴ In another colonial report of the same year the Hutu were similarly disparaged: ‘They are generally short and thick-set with a big head, a jovial expression, a wide nose and enormous lips. They are extroverts who like to laugh and lead a simple life’. But according to the same report the Tutsi was something else again: he ‘has nothing of the Negro, apart from his colour . . . his features are very fine . . . gifted with a vivacious intelligence, the Tutsi displays a refinement of feeling which is rare among primitive peoples’.⁴⁵

In 1926 Mary Hastings Bradley spoke of the ‘sophisticated’ Tutsis who had ‘a precise theology’ and a number of biblical-sounding stories. These, she explains, ‘came down from the north with these tribes of pronounced Hamitic and Semitic origins’.⁴⁶ A Belgian missionary supposed that the Tutsis’ qualities must come from elsewhere: ‘We can see Caucasian skulls and beautiful Greek profiles side by side with Semitic and even Jewish features, elegant golden-red beauties in the heart of Ruanda and Urundi’.⁴⁷ And in 1902 a French Catholic missionary enthused that their ‘intelligent and delicate appearance, their love of money, their capacity to adapt to any situation seem to indicate a Semitic origin’.⁴⁸ The anti-Semitism embedded in this last remark – the Jews’ love of money and their rootlessness – was a feature of the ministry of more than one Catholic priest in Rwanda and no doubt played a role in the horrors which were to engulf the region in the 1990s. After the Second World War the ferocity of the missions’ anti-Semitism was appalling and there was, according to one account I have been given, widespread endorsement of the massacre of European Jewry.

Well before the war ‘scientific’ theories started to circulate suggesting that the Tutsi and also the Masai came ‘from a primordial red race’. Some thought they came from India. A certain Dominican, Father Étienne Brosse, suggested they came from the garden of Eden, while others suggested that the Tutsis were survivors of the lost civilisation of Atlantis. In 1970 Paul del Perugia, a one-time French ambassador to Rwanda, suggested that the Tutsi were ‘Magi’ who had come from Tibet, some of them finishing up in Iceland. He believes the Tutsis were capable of

seeing flying saucers, unlike the more primitive Hutu, and also found reason to include Nineveh, Noah and Babylon in his disquisition on Tutsi origins.⁴⁹

Prunier points out that this general discourse, while being ‘semi-delirious’, was taken as serious science by the German and later Belgian colonial authorities and subsequently came to have an impact upon the native population ‘by inflating the Tutsi cultural ego inordinately and crushing Hutu feelings until they coalesced into an aggressively resentful inferiority complex’.⁵⁰ The idea of a distant Tutsi origin was used by the Hutu against them. As one journalist has put it:

Just like the Nazis, the Hutus were told it was their patriotic duty. The same intention existed – the complete elimination of the targeted group. The same words were used: ‘the final solution’. The mistake that was made in earlier massacres – allowing thousands of Tutsis to escape to live in exile, plotting ways to come back – was not to be repeated.⁵¹

Leon Mugesera, an influential member of the Habyarimana Government said in 1992: ‘The fatal mistake we made in 1959 was to let them (the Tutsis) get out. They belong in Ethiopia and we are going to find them a shortcut to get there by throwing them into the Nyabarongo River. I must insist on this point.’⁵²

As I write, many Tutsis, having absorbed the above over the last century, are moving closer and closer to some sort of Israelite identity. In the wake of the terrible suffering of the Tutsis during the genocide the eyes of many of them fastened upon a distant hope: the idea that they were indeed Jews and as such could expect eventual redemption. In part this was because of the frequent comparisons of their holocaust with that of the Jews which were made in the international media.⁵³ On the website of ‘Kulanu’, the American-based organisation interested in ‘lost’ Jewish communities there is a piece which fits perfectly into the discourse described above by a certain Mel Laney, a blazing eccentric who has been trying to persuade the Egyptian authorities to ‘rebuild’ the Jewish Temple on the island of Elephantine in the Nile as a kind of centre of African Judaism. Laney writes of the Tutsis:

These tall, muscular, highly intelligent, and arrogant warriors claim to be remnants of Israel. . . . The Banyamulenge of South Kivu Province, Congo, have told me the

following: They came from Ethiopia in ancient times to protect the high holy places on Mt. Kilimanjaro, and secret gold and diamond mines, for the House of Israel. They came long before their Watutsi brothers who also migrated to the Great Lakes region from Ethiopia. They claim their ancient sacred calling was the basis for the first legends of King Solomon's lost mines. . . . Watutsi/Tutsi of Rwanda and Burundi have told me the following: Their ancestors were disaffected royal family members from the remnants of the House of Israel living in Ethiopia who migrated to 'The Land of the Everlasting Hills' [in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa].⁵⁴

According to one source there have been attempts to put this Israelite identity into an institutional framework through the creation of a body called 'Havilah'. According to this source there is a growing movement among Tutsi intellectuals in Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda towards a 'Hebrew-Tutsi' identity which no doubt has much in common with the movement among the Luba and further afield among the Shinlung in the eastern states of India. The 'Israelite' Tutsis have appealed to Israel and to the international community in general and have asked them to condemn and take action against all 'anti-Israelite' violence throughout Africa – including the 500,000 Tutsi-Hebrew-Israelites of Rwanda.⁵⁵ In a hostile French-language report from Brussels the accusation is made that the 'process of Judaisation of the Tutsis' is no more than a means of taking over the whole area. According to this report, on 10 October 1999 the Havila organisation met discreetly in Brussels. The article indicates that the term 'Havilah' is used by the Judaising Tutsis to describe the whole region of the Great Lakes. The meeting was adorned with recognisable Jewish symbols such as the Star of David and also with depictions of the 'Drum of Solomon' over which the Lords of Havilah are guardians.⁵⁶ It appears that the Havilah movement has a number of 'research centres' dedicated to the idea of recovering the 'lost memory' of the Hebraic culture of the 'Cushitic' peoples – the guardians of the Mines of Solomon. One of these, the 'Sacega' Centre, is devoted to *'la déconnexion des peuples de Havila par rapport à la mémoire de l'antique Israel, dont ils gardent néanmoins les codes salomoniques et mosaïques, coulés dans des traditions multimillénaires, jusqu'ici épargnées de toute tentative de décodage systématique'* (the cutting off of the peoples of Havilah from memories of Ancient Israel of which they nonetheless

guard the Solomonic and Mosaic codes that are preserved in ancient traditions which thus far have resisted all attempts to decode them). The Israelite Tutsis, inspired by the teachings of the ‘prophet’ Jean Bwejeri, who believes that the Tutsis are literally one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, are drawn by the notion of the salvation of Israel and they celebrated the millennium with the thought that the physical reunification of the Lost Tribes of Havilah and Gihon was underway.⁵⁷

The idea of a Tutsi–Israelite identity unquestionably springs from the colonial fantasies mentioned above: insofar as it stresses the extraneous and superior origins of the Tutsi over against their neighbours, it is unlikely to contribute to the long-term harmony of the region. Jews, it should be pointed out, have had nothing to do with the generation of these myths in the case of the Tutsis. But now there is a perception, which is probably grounded in fact, that the Tutsis are at the receiving end of a kind of anti-Semitic prejudice. Jack Zeller, the kindly president of Kulanu, has observed:

Some day when we western Jews can put on a more humble suit of clothing and when the Tutsi have been able to recover from their recent holocaust, maybe we western Jews can find out more about the Tutsi. Meanwhile, treat them with a well deserved respect as one of our own.⁵⁸

A little to the east of the Tutsi heartlands we find the Masai, a pastoral people of Kenya and northern Tanzania. It is interesting to note that, in the case of the Masai, the chief work exploring these ideas was written by a German, indeed by a German officer, one M. Merker. In his detailed and carefully researched work Merker believed that he had found significant parallels between the Masai’s myths and customs and those of the biblical Hebrews. Merker discovered parallels between the beliefs and customs of the ancient Jews, including similarities in the names of God; in circumcision; in a belief in the figure of Moses (whom Merker identified with the Masai Marumi or Musana); and in a variety of legends which included the stories of the creation of the world, Adam and Eve and the fall, the story of the flood, the theft of the birthright, the bronze serpent, the ten commandments. He concluded that ‘both the Masai and the “oldest” Hebrews originated from the same people’.⁵⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century the idea that specific African tribes were of Israelite or Semitic extraction had become astonishingly widespread. To deal with every tribe that had been so

identified in Africa would require an entire book – particularly if the northern parts of the continent (where quite different factors were in play) were to be taken into account. I shall be obliged, therefore, to be highly selective and present just a few more examples from throughout the sub-Saharan part of the continent. We might start with the Songhois of the Timbuktu region whose upper classes were viewed as special and therefore extraneous. P. A. Talbot observed: ‘the mass of the Songhai are certainly Negroes, though there is little doubt that their ruling families had a strain of Hamitic or even Semitic blood’.⁶⁰ And in a more recent book we hear:

Northward [of Katanga] lives one of the greatest tribes of Central Africa, the Baluba, who are of undoubted Semitic origin. The name Baluba means ‘the lost tribe’, and their language and customs have many Hebrew affinities. Their name for, and idea of, God, with their word for water, and people, and many other words and ideas, show their Semitic strain.⁶¹

I have received a number of communications from the Luba who are fully aware of this discourse. One of them suggested an etymology for the name ‘Luba’ which would convey the sense of Lost Tribe.⁶² The idea of a Jewish identity for the Luba has recently been described in a publication of the United States Institute of Peace. Since the early 1960s, the report observes, ‘Luba administrative, social, and commercial elites have spread all over the Congo country to form an ethnic diaspora that has been viewed with suspicion by the rest of the political class’. According to the report:

As early as the 1960s, the Baluba regarded themselves as the ‘Jews of the Congo’, and some of their most notorious leaders (for example J. Ngalula) were called ‘Moise’. They felt persecuted by most of the other ethnic constituencies, who disliked the privileges the Baluba allegedly garnered under the white administration. During the Second Republic they remained highly visible in politics: President Mobutu’s strategy was to consistently absorb the Luba elite into the highest levels of the political hierarchy in order to better control it. Since 1978 one of the harshest opponents of the regime among the Luba elite has been Etienne Tshisekedi, later named the ‘Zairian Moise’, who, together

with ten fellow Kasaians, led a protracted struggle against Mobutu. . . . In almost all the regions and provinces, the Luba diaspora is implicitly accused of wanting power only for its own people. Like the Shabans, the Luba are threatened with expulsion by the 'native sons'. The grievances of the 'Jews of Zaire' once again resonate.⁶³

This use of a mythology about Jews in which they are perceived as deracinated, wealthy, potent is deeply rooted in the past which was, so to speak, imagined into existence for the Luba by one of the processes of colonialism.

In the Cape the attempt to place the indigenous population into the frame of an imagined biblical community started at the outset of colonial intervention. From the beginning the issue was highly politicised. The Dutch who had settled the Cape at a time of great religious faith believed in the sharp line to be drawn between the saved and the damned. This attitude was transferred to dealings with the African population. The difference between freeman and slave was as evident as the distinction between saved and damned. The Afrikaners were sure that when the Bible spoke of the children of Ham it had the black peoples of Africa in mind, and according to them there was scriptural authority for blacks being maintained in slavery. The Bible became the source book for the maintenance of prejudice. Thus the Hottentots, while generally being regarded in a negative spirit as being devoid of any of the characteristics that might have rendered them human, nonetheless had their very negativity expressed in terms which were culled from the Bible. As Thomas Herbert put it in 1627: 'The natives being propagated from Ham both in their Visages and Natures seem to inherit his malediction.' Features specific to them – such as scarification – were similarly put in a biblical context and in 1612 Patrick Copland observed that 'they cut their skinnes like Baal's priests'.⁶⁴

Two of the main concerns in the classification of the unknown other were religious and 'racial'. Sometimes the two concerns merged. This may be seen in the work of another German, Peter Kolb or Kolben. In 1705 Kolb was sent to the Cape to make astronomical observations although he did not last long in this job. Eventually he turned blind and was dismissed. According to his detractors he spent his time smoking and drinking, although he claimed – as scholars often do when slandered in this way – to be doing research. Regaining his vision the hapless Kolb published a book. The German edition was published in 1719 and was

subsequently translated into Dutch, English and French. *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope* reached a very wide audience and for the next 50 years was the definitive account of the religion of the Hottentots. (In addition he provided painstaking drawings – almost architectural plans – of Hottentot houses.)⁶⁵ It should be remembered that the Hottentots or Khoi, in van Riebeeck's notorious phrase, were perceived as 'black stinking dogs' by the majority of Dutch settlers at the Cape.⁶⁶ Kolb took an altogether more benign view of the Hottentots and argued that they were 'not so stupid, irrational and inhuman as they have been represented among us' and praised their 'most beautiful Simplicity of Manner'.⁶⁷ Kolb agreed that in certain specific respects the religion and culture of the Hottentots were no doubt somewhat alien to European Protestant norms; and to illustrate this he described the 'Ceremony of Pissing' in which old men allegedly urinated on people during initiation ceremonies, weddings or funerals as a way of honouring them. Nonetheless Kolb claimed that the general customs and traditions of the Hottentots were similar to those of the Jews. The Hottentot legend that they had entered the country through some sort of a window was seen by Kolb as a distorted folk-memory of the Ark and the Flood. He enumerated what he saw as the similarities between their sacrificial customs, their moon festivals, their circumcision rites and so on. But he also asserted that the Hottentots could be counted among the children of Abraham, that they were of Jewish descent. Specifically he maintained that they were descended from Abraham via the troglodytes, issue of his wife 'Chetura' (Genesis 25:1–4), although he conceded that they had no knowledge of this distant ancestor. Further proof of this he adduced from the fact that like the Jews they were so resistant to Christianity: after all the Governor of the Cape, Simon van der Stel, who had become the legal guardian of a Hottentot and had raised the child as a Christian, had been warned by his ward that he would live and die 'in the Religion Manners and Customs of My Ancestors'. Recalling this, Kolb concluded that as well as everything else the Hottentots were as 'stiff as the Jews'.⁶⁸ Whereas this reading of the history and religious provenance of the Hottentots had its detractors it also had its adherents. In 1881 the missionary and ethnographer Theophilus Hahn published *Tsunigoam: The Supreme Being of the Khoi-Khoi*⁶⁹ which argued that the religion of the Hottentots was a fossilised remnant of ancient Judaism. It followed also, therefore, that the language of the Hottentots must come from elsewhere. Wilhelm Bleek,⁷⁰ a German

theologian, orientalist and philologist came to Natal in 1851 to assist the Anglican Bishop John Colenso. In his doctoral thesis – a comparative study of Hottentot grammar – he maintained that the Hottentots could be traced back ultimately to North Africa because of the similarities he had observed in the structures of Khoikhoi, Galla, Coptic and Berber.

The Xhosa, one of the most important of the Southern African tribes, were viewed in a similar way. It was generally assumed that their religious structure had developed from some ancient near-eastern religious system. In 1831 the Glasgow Missionary Society had asked its agents to conduct research on the Xhosa with a view to comparing their traditions and customs with those of the ancient Israelites. Subsequently one missionary wrote an essay along the required lines entitled: ‘The Antiquity of Circumcision’. Analysis of their customs, language and religion suggested to other Europeans that the Xhosa were in fact the Bedouin of Southern Africa⁷¹ and the view was common that in fact this nomadic and unsettled people were Semitic Bedouin – Arabs. However this designation too was frequently viewed through a biblical prism: in the 1840s for instance John Appleyard maintained that the Xhosa were of ‘Ishmaelish descent’. The Ishmaelites were the issue of the elder son of the Jewish patriarch Abraham by his hand servant Hagar. Ishmael is viewed as the ancestor of the Ishmaelites and by extension of all the Arabs. The Ishmaelites occur throughout the Old Testament – and are often described in a negative way. But there were other explanations as well.⁷² In 1827 an English settler in the eastern Cape noted that the Xhosa had religious traditions which included ‘some Mahometan and Jewish rites’.⁷³ At the conclusion of the 1835 war against the Xhosa Harry Smith set himself the task of endeavouring to understand the defeated enemy and spent hours discussing Xhosa traditions and customs with a senior advisor of Chief Maqoma: Smith maintained that he had found many things which ‘resembled the Law of Moses’.⁷⁴ A similar definition was provided by Robert Godlonton, editor of the *Graham’s Town Journal* who in *A Narrative of the Irruption of the Kafir Hordes into the Eastern Province of the Cape of Good Hope, 1834–35* argued that it was possible to prove the origin of the Xhosa by reference to their language, which he said clearly showed ‘traces of its eastern origin in the frequent occurrence of words which are plainly of Hebrew or Arabic extraction’. Godlonton then traced back the Xhosa to some Middle Eastern home. For him the colonial fantasy of inserting the Xhosa into the narrative of Christian sacred history served a gauntly

secular aim. As their ancestors had been intruders into the area, the Xhosa did not belong in South Africa.⁷⁵

With the conclusion of the last Frontier War in 1852, the Xhosa more or less gave up armed resistance. Their spirit was broken in 1857 when a 15-year-old visionary and prophetess, Nongqawuse, persuaded them that if they killed all their cattle and destroyed their grain, a host of ancestors would rise from the sea, the Europeans would be driven out of Southern Africa and a golden period of prosperity and well-being would be inaugurated. When the ancestral horde failed to materialise, the starving Xhosa were forced to turn to their enemy for work and food. This story of visions, sacrifice and redemption has such a Hebraic flavour to it that it no doubt added to the conviction that the Xhosa were in some way descended from the peoples described in the Old Testament.

In 1818 a ruthlessly efficient military organisation had been introduced by Shaka, the great Zulu warrior king, which led to violent readjustments in much of south-eastern Africa. Following the assassination of Shaka in 1828, Dingane seized the throne and by the 1850s a new king, Panda, and his heir Cetewayo had established a more or less settled form of government. In 1844 the British annexed Natal. The largely British settlers were acutely aware that to the north there was a powerful Zulu state with a strong military capacity and as a result considerable interest in Zulu customs and traditions was generated. A similar interest no doubt existed among the Zulus with respect to western traditions and customs, and perhaps particularly in the way it was appropriate to react to imperial, colonial, missionary and broadly western sources of power. From a Zulu standpoint the fixing of their own identity faced with such an array of foreigners – from the English to white and black Americans, from Central European to Dutch Jews, from Indians to Malays, from traders to Imperial agents – presented an overwhelming challenge. There were a number of stratagems. One invoked the obvious historical analogy of Sparta in the struggle to understand the Zulus.⁷⁶ The imposition and indeed acceptance of an Israelite identity formed part of this attempt at mutual understanding and fell in between and somewhat complicated the classical opposition of ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’, which was to dominate the future of interethnic relationships in the future.

Serious British interest in the Zulus dates back to the 1830s. Not long after Chaka’s murder Captain Allen Gardiner had started off from the Cape on a diplomatic mission to forge relations with the new Zulu king. Using the opportunity to preach the Gospel,

Gardiner made every attempt to inform himself about this new mission field and particularly to find out about local religions. As he explained in his book *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa* what struck him most about the religion of the Zulus was the immanent albeit almost forgotten presence of the memory of a supreme deity. But immediately he took the customs of the Zulus to be ‘apparently of Jewish origin’. Some of the customs he enumerated included circumcision, the tradition of a younger brother marrying the widow of his deceased brother (levirate marriage), the daubing of the lintels of homes in times of sickness, the festival of the first fruits and so on. As a way of connecting Zulus with Israelite sacred history, while at the same time explaining their colour and the distance in some cases of their traditions from those set out in the Bible, he also mentioned that the name ‘Ham’ was a common one among the Zulus.⁷⁷

As British power was extended further east the same discourse continued. Throughout the 1850s Zulus were identified as Jews. Their settled, pastoral life and their religious and social customs were evidence enough of this. G.R. Peppercorne, the magistrate of Pafana Location, observed to the Native Affairs Commission that in fact the Zulus practised a sort of ancient Judaism: ‘A general type of the customs and laws of the Ama-Zulu may be found in the early history of the Hebrews.’⁷⁸ Peppercorne suggested that any European who wanted to understand Zulu customs had only to read the Old Testament. Zulu polygamy, marriage customs, even attitudes towards work were all described in the appropriate biblical passage. Henry Francis Fynn, who had established a small Zulu chieftaincy in the 1820s and had spent decades living among them noted: ‘I was surprised to find a considerable resemblance between many of the [Zulu] customs and those of the Jews.’ These included: ‘War offerings; sin offerings; propitiatory offerings; Festival of first fruits . . . periods of uncleanness, on the decease of relatives and touching the dead; Circumcision; Rules regarding chastity; rejection of swine’s flesh.’ Fynn concluded that in view of ‘the nature of semblance of many of their customs to those of the ancient Jews, as prescribed under the Levitical priesthood I am led to form the opinion that the [Zulu] tribes have been very superior to what they are at the present time’.⁷⁹ A similar analysis was made by John Colenso (1814–83), the famous Cambridge-educated biblical scholar, mathematician and Christian Socialist, who was ordained Bishop of Natal in 1853. He arrived in Natal the following year and quickly became fluent in Zulu; (he went on to publish a grammar

and dictionary of the language). Colenso was convinced that the two Zulu names for God embraced perfectly the notions of the divine ‘contained in the Hebrew words Elohim and Jehovah’.⁸⁰ So close indeed were the resemblance’s, according to Bishop Colenso, that he frequently suggested that anyone who wanted to really understand the Bible had best study Zulu customs. Zulu ‘habits and even the nature of their country so nearly correspond to those of the ancient Israelites, that the very scenes are brought continually, as it were, before their eyes, and vividly realised in a practical point of view’. Practically everything about the Zulus from their lunar calendar to the order of religious feasts seemed to reflect an Israelite past:

The Zulu keeps his annual feasts, and observes the New Moons as the old Hebrew did. The very Zulus have their festivals at the beginning of the Southern Spring and at the end of our Autumn, corresponding to the ‘feast of the first fruits’ and the ‘feast of the ingathering’ of the ancient Hebrews.

Bishop Colenso was so convinced of the authenticity of the Zulu traditions, and so convinced that they were purer traditions than those preserved elsewhere, that he went on to write important theological works based in part on Zulu oral tradition. Colenso was called ‘father of the people’ by the Zulus and became their advocate: in most matters he took the side of the Zulus. His theological work provoked the most violent protests and vilification (some 140 books were written in opposition to his views) and led to his being deposed from his bishopric. (He refused to budge and for a while there were two parallel Anglican bishops of Natal!) Colenso was not merely a theologian. He threw himself into contemporary anthropological debates, in which he stressed the dignity and humanity of the Zulus while rejecting the social Darwinism which sought to categorise them, like other Africans, as an inferior group lagging behind in the evolutionary race. Colenso’s espousal of an Israelite origin for the Zulus may thus be seen within a liberal tradition and his reading of their traditions as a mechanism in his fight against the forces of racism and conservatism.⁸¹

In 1901 the linguist and magistrate James Stuart spent a day at the Royal Hotel in Ladysmith interviewing three Zulu elders in an attempt to recreate something of the Zulu past. In these conversations one of the Zulus, Lazarus Mxaba, traced Zulu history back

to ancient Israel and Greece. Many customs of the Zulus, maintained Mxaba, were common to Jews as well: he specifically mentioned the butchering of sacrificial meat and the burning of incense for sacrificial and other ritual purposes. He also maintained that the Jews, like the Zulus, slit their earlobes. These common features proved to Mxaba that there had been contact between the Jews and the Zulus in the past. Stuart accepted that such common features existed but could not understand how the Zulus could be descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel since they had lost any knowledge of the Godhead. Mxaba pointed out that even the Israelites had forgotten their God and started worshipping the Golden Calf; if the Israelites could forget in such a short time, clearly it was not surprising that in the course of the centuries the Zulus had forgotten too. Stuart mentioned that in fact there were those in Britain who believed that the British too were descended from the Lost Tribes: Mxaba wanted to know what points in common existed between the British and the Jews. Stuart had no ready reply. Mxaba was unimpressed: he was convinced that it was the Zulus who in fact were the lost children of Israel and that they would be redeemed when they remembered and starting worshipping their lost and unknown God. As Chidester put it: 'By 1900 the comparison between the Zulu and the Jews had been thoroughly internalised in Zulu reflections upon their own religious heritage'.⁸²

By the end of the nineteenth century the white conquest of South Africa was practically complete and the Ndebele and Shona peoples in what was by then called Rhodesia had also succumbed. As we have seen, many of the South African tribes had been awarded an Israelite pedigree. Others, such as the western Sotho or Tswana who inhabited the northern and eastern grazing areas of the Kalahari, were likened to the ancient Israelites, and some observers did note similarities between their customs and those mentioned in the Bible.⁸³ As white settlers moved into the fertile lands north of the Limpopo they were astonished to discover stone-built buildings, old mine workings and, most of all, the remarkable ruins known as the Great Zimbabwe complex. These ruins had first been discovered by a German explorer, Karl Mauch, who spent from 1865 to 1872 in almost continuous travel in little-known parts of Africa. In 1868 Mauch reported that he had found gold to the north-west of the Transvaal on the Tati river, which gave rise to a short-lived gold rush.⁸⁴ In 1871 he came across the Great Zimbabwe ruins. It seemed to him inconceivable that local people, living in their simple adobe huts, could ever have been capable of building these

majestic stone constructions. As we have seen elsewhere, anything fine or sophisticated had to be put in a non-African context.

During his examination of the site, Mauch came across an undamaged wooden lintel (subsequently shown to have been made from an African hardwood called *Spirostachys Africana*). That evening he wrote in his diary:

It can be taken as a fact that the wood which we obtained is in fact cedar-wood and from this that it cannot come from anywhere else but from the Lebanon. Furthermore only the Phoenecians could have brought it here; further Solomon used a lot of cedar-wood for the building of the Temple and of his palaces: further – including here the visit of the Queen of Sheba and considering Zimbabe or Zimbaoe or Simbaoe written in Arabic (of Hebrew I understand nothing) one gets as a result that the Great Woman who built the rondeau could have been none other than the Queen of Sheba.

Immediately, with no scrap of evidence, Mauch declared his deepest conviction that these ruins had been erected by the Queen of Sheba and were in fact a copy of Solomon's temple and palace in Jerusalem and that this entire area was the Ophir of the Bible – Solomon's gold lands. In addition the Queen of Sheba was in fact the Queen of Zimbabwe, and one of the three wise men mentioned in the New Testament was also from this very place.

Mauch's enthusiasm may seem near hysterical but it was entirely in the spirit of the time. Indeed, perhaps unwittingly, he simply followed the assumptions about the place which had previously been made by the Arabs and the Portuguese: that the ruins had something to do with King Solomon. For the Arabs, Solomon legends – and particularly his association with the djinn, were as much conscripted in the explanation of strange places as were such legends in Christendom, and were used in a variety of places in Africa as well as in the Middle East and India.

Not long after Mauch had made his momentous discovery efforts were made to show that Jews had once lived at Great Zimbabwe. In no time at all, the Karanga-speaking Shona people, and specifically the Lemba tribe, were being enlisted as Jews and defined in precisely the same way as so many other African tribes and groups had been before and since. The Lemba living in South Africa had been observed in 1867 by the German missionaries Merensky and

Wangemann in the vicinity of Potgietersrus. They were amazed to discover that the Lemba had a monotheistic religion and that:

God had made the man from the same material as the stones, and then his wife. Then He told them to multiply themselves. All people were killed once by water, the sun was dark and there was a great flood; the sea flowed over the land.⁸⁵

Somewhat later a settler writer in Rhodesia, Richard Nicklin Hall, wrote a book about Great Zimbabwe in which he devoted considerable space to the 'Jewishness' of the surrounding populations. He made a list of 24 supposed similarities of custom and belief and concluded:

Additional parallelisms with Jewish customs could be stated, and all these peculiar practices, together with the lighter skin and the Jewish appearance of the Makalanga, distinctly point to the ancient impress of the Idumean Jews, which can also be traced on the present peoples of Madagascar and of the coasts of Mozambique and Sofala . . . the Lemba tribe of Makalanga is noted for the preservation and observance of these Jewish practices, which are distinctly pre-Koranic in origin.⁸⁶

The Zimbabwe ruins were from the very beginning of the colonial period almost universally considered to be far beyond the capacities of black people: it was believed by the great majority of white settlers that they had been built by the ancient Phoenicians and that they had some kind of a connection with King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This discourse has persisted until today: white Zimbabweans are often quite incapable of accepting that the ruins were built by Africans. As one woman said to me, 'They are baboons, they do not build anything – they destroy'.⁸⁷ The wildest theories are customarily put forward to explain the ruins: that they were built by visitors from outer space, by the Egyptians and so on.⁸⁸ But even today the preferred option is King Solomon and the Phoenicians. In the early days of the colonisation of Rhodesia a great deal hung on these historical issues. It was firmly in the colonial interest to be able to prove that white supremacy was a fact and that subjugation of native peoples was legitimate. In some sense this theory helped to legitimise the British presence: if the country

had once been controlled by a small maritime nation (the Phoenicians) why should it not now be controlled by another small maritime nation (the British). Clearly, if traces could be found of these ancient colonisers, it would serve this particular historical vision. The Lemba with their Semitic-looking customs and apparently Judaic habits fitted the bill admirably and their identification as Jews thus suited imperial needs.

The Lemba tribe live in the Mberengwe/Mposi area of Zimbabwe and are also to be found in small groups throughout north-east South Africa and in central and eastern Zimbabwe. Another similar group known as Mwenye, which has no knowledge of the Lemba of Zimbabwe and South Africa but which also claims Jewish origins, is to be found in southern Malawi. (Mwenye is the preferred name of the Lemba both in South Africa and Zimbabwe.)⁸⁹ Notwithstanding that this tribe is in many respects indistinguishable from neighbouring tribes, for much of the twentieth century a number of Lemba, and particularly those of South Africa, have claimed to be of Jewish or Semitic ancestry, and a number of outside European observers have made similar claims for them for an even longer period.⁹⁰ In 1893 a German missionary called C. Beuster thought that they were probably Baal worshippers and Carl Peters initially perceived 'remnants of the Punic-Baal-Ashera worship'.⁹¹ The Lemba genuinely seemed to have some Semitic-looking features. They did not intermarry, they did not interdine. They had strict laws of purity and severe food taboos. The eating of pork was punished by death. They would only eat meat that had been ritually slaughtered by a Lemba.⁹² It is against this background that the suggestion of Jewishness was made to the Lemba from the very beginning of colonial intervention. The Lemba themselves claim variously to come from the north or from outside Africa. However, a recent and detailed study by the Senior Curator of Ethnography at the Museum of Human Sciences in Harare has categorically rejected any suggestion that the Lemba came from elsewhere. According to this paper the Lemba are purely African and the idea that they came from abroad has been 'invented' by outsiders, who have created 'a false Remba identity'.⁹³ As this is what happened everywhere else in Africa it seems tempting to believe that this is precisely what occurred here too. However, in this particular case there are the strongest grounds for believing that at least some of the Lemba's ancestors did come from outside Africa. It appears that in the relatively remote past the Lemba indeed came from South Arabia. They may subsequently have been connected with a coastal civilisation based on a city,

called Sayuna by the mediaeval Arab geographers, in which religious syncretism ran riot – as we can tell from the various references in the literature. There is some genetic evidence to suggest that the Lemba in fact may exceptionally have had some Jewish antecedents. At the very least the genetic evidence shows that Lemba males originated substantially from outside Africa. In this the genetic evidence supports Lemba oral traditions very precisely. However, their identification as Jews by the earliest explorers and settlers of the region undoubtedly and paradoxically forms part of the discourse which we have described throughout this chapter.⁹⁴

In similar but less ambiguous vein Carl Peters, the founder of German East Africa – who was forced to resign from the German Imperial Service when he was accused of cruelty to the local population and who retired to British South Africa – wrote some years earlier of the Shona of eastern Zimbabwe:

How absolutely Jewish is the type of this people! They have faces cut exactly like those of ancient Jews who live around Aden. Also the way they wear their hair, the curls behind the ears, and the beard drawn out in single curls, gives them the appearance of Aden – or of Polish – Jews of the good old type.⁹⁵

This piece of visual invention is of some interest. There simply is no possibility that Peters came across Shona wearing the sidelocks (*peot*) worn by orthodox Jews. Why did he make it up? Did he make it up? Did he imagine it? It fitted his vision for the Shona to be more or less identical to the Jews from Eastern Europe who were frequently to be seen in German towns. They were powerless, transient, dependent on favours. These were the Jews ‘of the good old type’. The other Jews, the assimilated, successful, powerful Jews of Germany were quite another matter.

What we have seen elsewhere in Africa we find in great abundance in the great island of Madagascar. A considerable literature was produced in the nineteenth century on the supposed Israelite origin of some of the island’s population. This literature entered the popular discourse but largely originated from scholars. One of these was the French Madagascar expert Alfred Grandidier; another was Augustus Keane, a one-time professor of Hindustani at University College London. They both claimed that there were great links between Madagascar and the ancient Jews. In the *Gold of Ophir*,

Whence Brought and by Whom (London, 1901) Keane argued that Madagascar had been the off-shore base for the colony of Havilah, with Tarshish its port of entry, and that Madagascar had links with ancient Israel ‘certainly as early as the time of Solomon and possibly even during the reign of his father David’. Grandidier’s monumental work *Histoire Physique, Naturelle et Politique de Madagascar*, also published in 1901, made similar claims. In 1870 James Sibree, a missionary who served from 1863–1916 in Madagascar with the London Missionary Society, claimed to have met ‘descendants of Abraham’ in East Madagascar, at various places on the island of St Marie Zafin Ibrahim. These people claimed to be Jews and Sibree noted a number of customs which he perceived as being Judaic, including a good deal of beef-eating, fasts before beef and after beef, the purification rituals and the sprinkling of blood on lintels. One of the Zafin Ibrahim spoke of his father, who had been a ‘sorcerer among the Jews’.⁹⁶ Similar views continued to be expressed throughout the twentieth century: a suggestion that substantial traces of Hebrew were to be found in Malagasy was made in *L’hébreu à Madagascar* by Josph Briant published in 1946.⁹⁷

Perhaps the most dramatic and tragic of the consequences of the invention of an Israelite identity in the southern African context may be perceived in the life and work of the so-called Prophet of God, Enoch Josiah Mgijima (1858–1929), whose Hlubi family originally came from Natal. In this case the Israelite theory can partly be traced back to an American context but no doubt the widespread use of the Israelite myth in colonial discourse in Natal and elsewhere played a significant role too.

Enoch Mgijima, was born in Bulhoek in the Queenstown district and began to have visions in 1907 while hunting in the mountains. Convinced that he was a sinner and a drunkard he hesitated before accepting his calling as a prophet. However, in 1910 he saw Haley’s Comet and took this as the longed for confirmation of his prophetic vocation. His most specific and strongly held belief was that he had to reintroduce the religion of the ancient Israelites on African soil. His ideas swiftly attracted a following. Mgijima associated himself with the like-minded Church of God and Saints of Christ, an American church which had been founded in 1896 by a black American, William Crowdy, who was a firm believer in the idea that it was the blacks who were the true and original Israelites and descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes.⁹⁸ After a while, because of the starkly political visions which he continued to have and reveal to his followers, Mgijima was asked to leave the church and he founded his own

organisation, which he called simply the Israelites. In 1920 while sitting on top of Ntabelanga Mountain he received a message directly from God. Many Israelites flocked to the area and built temporary housing for themselves, thus coming into conflict with local people. The following year the Israelites compounded the crime of squatting by refusing to divulge their names for the census. They explained, reasonably, that this was unnecessary as God knew who they were. After the murder of two Israelites the group started preventing officials from coming to their settlement.

A massive force of policemen arrived at Ntabelanga and the two sides prepared for battle. They drew up in formal military formations: the Israelites were armed with knobkerries, assegais, one or two antiquated guns and knives; the police had modern rifles as well as machine guns. Throughout the lengthy negotiations the Israelites were given the opportunity to surrender but they refused, proclaiming: 'We will fight and Jehova will fight with us.'⁹⁹ Mgijima assured them that the police bullets would turn to water and that they would not, could not be harmed. The Israelites fought courageously but the outcome was never in doubt. One policeman was speared, 163 Israelites were left dead on the field of battle and a further 129 were wounded. The massacre horrified both black and a good deal of white public opinion.

At the Conference of the Pan African Freedom Movement in Addis Abeba in January 1962 Nelson Mandela, representing the ANC, picked out the Bulhoek massacre as perhaps the single worst atrocity in the history of South Africa. It is still remembered. Edgar has noted: 'Almost every African household in South Africa knows about the massacre of the people at Bulhoek.'¹⁰⁰ A Bulhoek Massacre Heritage Memorial was unveiled with due ceremony on 27 May 2001.¹⁰¹

We have seen how the myth of the Lost Tribes has penetrated every corner of the African continent. The use and re-use of this myth, and myths about Jews serving an immense array of ideological and spiritual needs, has had a striking impact on Africa. The spread of the myth connecting Africa with the Jews has been spectacular. It arose in the European and Middle Eastern imagination in the early Middle Ages and may be attributed in part to the ignorance of much of the world that was brought about by the breakdown of communications between the Islamic Middle East and Christian Europe. It became an axiomatic feature of medieval thinking about the world. It was used and re-used, exploited and re-invented by colonialism in many distinct loci in Africa, where it

served missionary and colonial interests, and is now a largely ignored but potent and immanent aspect of the imagined past of a surprising number of Africans. But what can all this tell us of the Falashas of Ethiopia?

For hundreds of years Ethiopia was the locus par excellence of the Israelites-in-Africa myth, and until the nineteenth century attempts were still being made to locate the Lost Tribes in this mountainous African kingdom. John Pory, the English translator of Leo Africanus' *Description* refers to Jews of an independent polity in Ethiopia 'who maintain themselves free and absolute'. And this is confirmed by the seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit missionary Balthazar Tellez in *Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia*¹⁰² as well as by Jacques Basnage, the French Protestant historian in 1706, both of whom also claimed that the 'Jews' in Ethiopia used Hebrew in their synagogues (which of course they did not).¹⁰³

Gradually these and other claims of an independent Jewish kingdom in Ethiopia peopled by the Lost Tribes coalesced mainly around the Falashas.

Some of the factors that were responsible for the creation of an imagined Israelite identity in so many different parts of Africa and the world were absent in Ethiopia. For one thing, Ethiopia was a predominantly Christian country. For another, it had a written culture. And for another, it was not colonised until the 1930s and then only partially and briefly. And in any case the invention of an Israelite identity in Ethiopia had already occurred: the national epic of Ethiopia celebrates the Israelite origins of the royal house and this became 'the basic metaphor for legitimacy and authority within Ethiopian culture'.¹⁰⁴ It was even embodied in the 1955 Ethiopian Constitution: 'The imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line . . . [which] descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik, son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen of Sheba, and King Solomon of Jerusalem.'¹⁰⁵

The act of comprehending the otherness of Ethiopians was not strictly part of a colonial enterprise. For those westerners who penetrated the kingdom there was plenty that was strange, but some of the techniques employed elsewhere for the demystification of African societies would not serve here. Nonetheless some of the oddball theories produced elsewhere also surfaced here, such as those preserved in the book of the French missionary Martial de Salviac, who somehow concluded that the Gallas were in fact Gauls.¹⁰⁶ In addition, in independent Ethiopia the missionaries did not have the free rein they had elsewhere in Africa: their activity

was restricted because of the suspicions of the established national church and the court. The missions were only permitted to preach to non-Christians and the non-Christians who held out the greatest appeal were the Falashas – the so-called Ethiopian Jews. The London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews commenced its activities in Ethiopia in 1860 but between 1860 and 1922 European missionaries were never active in the country for more than a few months at a time. The work was done by ‘native agents’. This was in part because two of the society’s missionaries, Stern and Rosenthal, had been imprisoned by the Emperor Tewedros II, and a British Expeditionary Force of 12,000 men under Sir Robert Napier was obliged to storm the imperial fortress at Amba Magdala in order to free them. This intervention saved the missionaries, drove the Emperor to suicide and plunged the country into civil war.¹⁰⁷

There are, however, important parallels which can be drawn between the invention of a new identity for the Falashas and the situation elsewhere in Africa. Before the contact with western missionaries and Jews in the nineteenth century the Falashas had an identity which was essentially constructed from the Ethiopian national epic, the *Kebra Nagast* and the Bible. They participated in the national myth that the first emperor of Ethiopia was the son of King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba. They perceived themselves as Israelites, as did the Christian population to a considerable extent. When James Bruce the Laird of Kinnaird, who travelled in Ethiopia between 1769 and 1774, came across the Falashas they explained ‘that they came with Menelik from Jerusalem’; thus Bruce could note ‘that they perfectly agree with the Abyssinians in the story of the Queen of Saba’.¹⁰⁸ They did not perceive themselves as Jews (*ayhud* in Ge’ez). When Joseph Halévy (the first western Jew to visit the Falashas to our knowledge) was in Ethiopia in 1867–8, he observed that the term ‘Jewish’ was practically unknown.¹⁰⁹ In earlier periods it was used as one of many designations of the Falashas by the Christians, but the term *ayhud* was equally used to describe pagans or Christian heretics.¹¹⁰ Edward Ullendorff, a scholar of Ethiopian languages, has recently noted that in Ethiopia in the twentieth century the Falashas never referred to themselves as Jewish.¹¹¹ As a result of European intervention a new identity was imagined for the community and in time was essentially absorbed by it. This was a categorical identity as Jews – an identity which was somewhat divorced from the stories of the national epic of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (in which ‘Jews’ are

portrayed in a negative way). It appears that, from the sixteenth century on, Ethiopian non-Falasha sources began to suggest that the Falashas had come to Ethiopia after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans: in other words that they were Jews rather than Israelites and this may reflect a Portuguese understanding of Falasha origins.¹¹² By the time the Anglican missionary Samuel Gobat (whose interest in the Lost Tribes included support for the fanciful notions of British Israelism) visited the Falashas in 1830 there was a mixed tradition: as he put it ‘they do not know of what tribe they are; nor have they any adequate idea as to the period when their ancestors settled in Abyssinia. Some say that it was with Menelic, the son of Solomon; others believe that they settled in Abyssinia after the destruction by the Romans’.¹¹³ Gobat, however, was clear as to who they were. He observed that ‘their superstitions are the same as those of the Christians, only that they are modelled after the Jewish fashion’. He never once questioned the Jewishness of the Falashas.¹¹⁴ Their Jewishness became institutionalised, so to speak, when perhaps at the suggestion of Joseph Wolff – the Jewish convert to Christianity, missionary and fervent seeker of the Lost Tribes – Gobat urged the London Society for the Promoting of Christianity among the Jews to take over the mission to the Falashas.¹¹⁵ Increasingly, Falashas began to make historical connections between themselves and Jews – perhaps Egyptian Jews – and particularly with the idea – a quite novel one for them – of being a Lost Tribe of Israel and particularly being the Lost Tribe of Dan.¹¹⁶ In this they were aided by the Jewish ‘missionaries’ who came to save their ‘Jewish’ brethren from the snares laid by the Christian missionaries, chief among whom was Jacques Faitlovitch, who was not merely a great supporter of the Falashas but also one of the chief Lost Tribes enthusiasts of the twentieth century. The myth of the Lost Tribes in the African hinterland propagated so effectively by Eldad ha-Dani 1,000 years before had come home to roost. It had been helped on its way by the wide acceptance of the broad outlines of the Lost Tribes myth in so many mediaeval and later texts. In particular there are two *responsa* (rabbinic replies to specific legal queries) of the sixteenth-century Egyptian Talmudic scholar David Ben Abi Zimra (known as the Radbaz) which are unequivocal. One was: ‘Those Jews that come from the land of Cush are without doubt from the Tribe of Dan’.¹¹⁷ These *responsa* were certainly based on Eldad. The *responsa* now have the force of legal halakhic precedent.

In 1973 the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Ovadiah Yosef,

declared the Falashas to be Jews, ‘descendants of Jewish tribes who moved South to Cush and there is no doubt that the aforementioned authorities who ruled that they originate from the Tribe of Dan carefully investigated and reached this conclusion on the basis of most reliable testimony and evidence’,¹¹⁸ The ruling of the Sephardi Chief Rabbi opened the way for the subsequent mass emigration of the entire Falasha population to Israel. It was the ruling of the Radbaz which he principally invoked: it was the Falashas’ imagined Israelite identity as the Lost Tribe of Dan which gave them the right of entry to the Jewish State. The Israeli Ministry of the Interior, acting on the advice of an inter-ministerial committee, converted the religious ruling of the Sephardi Chief Rabbi into law. Henceforth the Lost Tribe of Dan was entitled to enter Israel and receive automatic Israeli citizenship under the 1950 Law of Return.¹¹⁹

Another Ethiopian group – the Qemant – appear to have once shared many of the characteristics of the Falashas. Ullendorff somewhat perplexingly suggests that they are even more Jewish than the Falashas.¹²⁰ While most Qemant have now converted to Christianity there are still some who cling to their Judaic-animist religion tenaciously: indeed there is a movement of renewal among the Qemant led by Qemant intellectuals in Gondar.¹²¹ And over the last few years an Israelite identity has been proclaimed for the four million inhabitants of Gojjam in western Ethiopia. One of the propagators of this idea, Muse Tegegne, believes that Jews – the Lost Tribes – settled in Ethiopia 3,500 years ago but adopted Christianity ‘to camouflage their Jewishness’. His Geneva-based organisation takes a similar position to that adopted by some Tutsis. ‘Felege Guihon International’, he notes:

stands for the protection of the Nile waters . . . in the Horn of Africa and that of the Great Lakes. It struggles against social stigma in the Horn of Africa and against the genocide in the Great Lakes. It fights inhuman acts perpetuated against the Semitic pre-Talmudic Hebrews of the Nile region in general and that of the Orits (Gojjamis) of Western Ethiopia in particular.¹²²

In addition Tegegne believes that the Ark of the Covenant resides in Gojjam and that it is ‘the home of the legacy of the Queen of Sheba and is the Semitic capital of the region’.¹²³

In neighbouring Somalia a more recent Israelite identification has been made of a group called the Yibro who have made a number

of attempts to get Israeli embassies throughout the world to show an interest in them. Throughout Africa constructions of Judaic identities of different sorts continue to be made and to be internalised. Within the region of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa the same thing may be said: from Somalia to Ethiopia and from Ethiopia to the Yemen the myth of the Lost Tribes in the Red Sea area – the locus in many ways of the most powerful aspects of the myth of the Lost Tribes – with a literary pedigree which goes back a thousand years and more, gets stronger as the years go by.

Notes

- 1 See E. Brerewood, *Enquiries Tracing the Diversity of Languages and Religions through the Chief Parts of the World* (London, 1613), quoted in D. Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville/London, 1996), p. 17.
- 2 D. Chidester, *Savage Systems*, pp. 35–7.
- 3 E. Long, *The History of Jamaica*, vol. 2 (London, 1774), pp. 353–6.
- 4 See M. Van Wyck Smith, 'Waters Flowing from Darkness: The Two Ethiopias in the Early European Image of Africa', in *Theoria* 68 (1986), pp. 67–77.
- 5 J. S. Prichard, *Researches into the Natural History of Mankind*, vol. 2 (London, 1836), p. 97, quoted in *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 5, p. 477.
- 6 C. Seligman, *Races of Africa* (London, 1930), p. 61, quoted in S. Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagined Homes* (London, 1999), p. 115.
- 7 T. Lewicki, *Arabic External Sources for the History of Africa to the South of Sahara* (London, n.d.).
- 8 See K. N. Chaudhuri, 'From the Barbarian and Civilised to the Dialectics of Colour: An Archeology of Self-Identity', in P. Robb (ed.), *Society and Ideology: Essays in South Asian History* (Oxford, 1993).
- 9 The original manuscript of his work in the National Library at Rome is written in sixteenth-century dialectal Italian with traces of Arabic and other Mediterranean languages. Ramusio's first edition transformed this manuscript into an elegant Venetian text. The *Description of Africa* was published in the 1540 and subsequent editions of Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Delle navigationi et viaggi* (Venice, 1540).
- 10 According to the 1588 edition of the *Description*, Leo died in Rome shortly before 1550, but there is some evidence to suggest that he may have returned to North Africa and to Islam.
- 11 E. Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London, 1965), p. 21.
- 12 See J. J. Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews* (New York, 1930), pp. 208, 224, 232, 281, 292.
- 13 J. Pory, *A Geographical Historie of Africa written in Arabicke and Italian by John Leo a More, borne in Granada, and brought up in Barbarie* (London, 1600), p. 379.

- 14 J. Ogilby, *Africa: Being an Accurate Description of the Regions of Aegypt, Barbary, Lybia, and Billedulgerid* (London, 1670), p. 34.
- 15 R. Whately, 'On the Origin of Civilisation', in *Lectures Delivered before the Young Men's Christian Association from November 1854 to February 1855* (London, 1879), p. 22, quoted in M. Le Roux, *In Search of the Understanding of the Old Testament in Africa: The Case of the Lemba* (Ph.D. thesis, UNISA, 1999).
- 16 S. Dulucq, 'Zulu/Spartiates et autres analogies antiquisantes: des usages de l'Antiquité dans l'Afrique des XIX^{ème} et XX^{ème} siècles', in S. Caucanas, R. Cazals and P. Payen (eds), *Retrouver, imaginer, utiliser l'Antiquité* (Toulouse, 2001), pp. 135–40.
- 17 D. Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (New York, 2000), p. 414.
- 18 See E. L. Woodward, *The Age of Reform 1815–1870* (Oxford, 1938), p. 486.
- 19 H. W. Nevinson, *Fire of Life* (London, 1935), p. 432.
- 20 G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London, 1921), p. 31.
- 21 One discourse which I have often heard is formulated by a contributor to the Kulanu list-serve (29/01/2002) who observed: 'Some Ibos feel that the word Ibo and Ivri are related. . . . Many European newspapers called the Ibo "the Jews of Africa" because they are energetic and educated.'
- 22 *Major Denham and Capt. H. Clapperton Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa in the years 1822, 1823 and 1824* (London, 1826), Appendix xii, Section iv, quoted in S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (London, 1921), p. 5.
- 23 S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*, pp. 3–5.
- 24 J. Johnson, *Yoruba Heathenism* (London, 1899), introduction. I am indebted to Professor John Peel for kindly bringing this book to my attention.
- 25 S. Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagined Homes*, p. 120.
- 26 R. I. J. Hackett, *Religion in Calabar: The Religious Life and History of a Nigerian Town* (New York, 1989), p. 21.
- 27 S. Dulucq, 'Zulu/Spartiates et autres analogies antiquisantes', pp. 138ff.
- 28 See A. Holl, *West African Archeology: Colonialism and Nationalism*, in P. Robertshaw (ed.), *A History of African Archaeology* (London, 1990), pp. 296ff. See also D. P. de Pedrals, *Archéologie de l'Afrique Noire* (Paris, 1950).
- 29 J. J. Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews* (New York, 1930), p. 24.
- 30 F. Ratzel, *History of Mankind* (London, 1896, iii), p. 142.
- 31 J. J. Williams, *Hebrewisms*, p. 26.
- 32 T. E. Bowdich, *Essay on the Superstitions, Customs and Acts Common to the Ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians and Ashantees* (Paris, 1821), p. 40, quoted in J. J. Williams, *Hebrewisms*, p. 26.
- 33 H. M. Stanley, *Coomassie and Magdala* (New York, 1874), p. 167.
- 34 See for example F. Willett, *African Art: An Introduction* (London, 1986), pp. 109ff.
- 35 J. J. Williams, *Hebrewisms*, pp. 60, 66–92. It would be tedious to keep

- reiterating that my own view is that there are no Hebrew influences on Ashanti, Hottentot, Zulu, Xhosa or on the languages of the Masai, Luba, Tutsis or any of the other languages which have been viewed as descended from or influenced by Hebrew.
- 36 R. Patai, 'The Ritual Approach to Hebrew-African Culture Contact', in *Jewish Social Studies* 24 (1962), pp. 86–96; J. J. Williams, *Hebrewisms*.
 - 37 H. Norden, *White and Black in East Africa* (Boston, 1924), p. 248.
 - 38 H. Johnston, *History and Description of the British Empire in Africa* (London, 1922), p. 31.
 - 39 M. Twaddle, *Kakungulu and the Creation of Uganda* (London, 1993), p. 9.
 - 40 The same arguments in favour of Judaism were used 100 years later by descendants of Incas in Peru who converted from Christianity to Judaism.
 - 41 M. Twaddle, *Kakungulu*, pp. 284ff; A. Oded, 'The Bayudaya of Uganda: A Portrait of an African Jewish Community', in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 6 (1974), pp. 167–86, 173; K. Primack, *Jews in Places You Never Thought Of* (Hoboken, NJ, 1998), pp. 168–244.
 - 42 T. Parfitt, *Savage-Pictures*, in *Le fait de l'analyse* (Sauvagerie, March 1999), p. 160.
 - 43 T. Broadway Johnson, *Tramps Round the Mountains of the Moon* (Boston, 1909), pp. 184ff.
 - 44 *Rapport annuel du Territoire de Nyanza* (1925), quoted in G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (London, 1995), p. 6.
 - 45 *Rapport sur l'administration belge de Ruanda-Urundi* (1925), quoted in G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 6.
 - 46 M. H. Bradley, *Caravans and Cannibals* (New York, 1926), p. 65.
 - 47 Father van den Burgt, *Dictionnaire Français-Kurundi*, p. lxxv, quoted in G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 7.
 - 48 J. B. Piollet, *Les missions catholiques français au XIXeme siecle* (Paris, 1902), pp. 376–7, quoted in G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 8.
 - 49 P. del Perugia, *Les derniers Rois-Mages* (Paris, 1970), quoted in G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 8. The ravings of del Perugia are somewhat reminiscent of the theories white Zimbabweans are fond of advancing with respect to the Zimbabwe Ruins.
 - 50 G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, p. 8.
 - 51 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 - 52 P. Bones, *Rwanda – The Children's Return*, in <http://www.walkleyindex.com>.
 - 53 See in <http://www.africa2000.com/index/rwanda2c.htm>. Similar developments took place during the Nigerian Civil War with respect to the Ibos. One discourse which I have often heard is formulated by a contributor to the Kulanu list-serve (29/01/2002) who observed: 'Some Ibos feel that the word Ibo and Ivri are related. . . . Many European newspapers called the Ibo "the Jews of Africa" because they are energetic and educated. I thought that this was done to justify their genocide. After all it's OK to kill Jews or people who are like them. . . . They are resented for some of the reasons that Jews are disliked. They value education and have a "can do" attitude. They suffered the way

- Jews have suffered because there was a “silent conspiracy” to destroy them.’
- 54 See in <http://www.ubalt.edu/kulanu/>.
- 55 *Jerusalem Post*, 23.11.1998.
- 56 A report from *Agence France Presse* (18 September 1998) indicated the famous gold mines of Solomon were to be found in the region of Kivu.
- 57 Bruxelles, 18.04.2000 (GLAC) (Grands-Lacs Confidentiel). See <http://www.africa2000.com/indx/rwanda2c.htm>; <http://www.geocities.com/burundibwacu/Doc0052.html>; <http://www.grandslacs.net/bbsgen/messages/98.html>; <http://www.geocities.com/burundibwacu/Doc0052.html>; <http://www.grandslacs.net/bbsgen/messages/98.html>, etc.
- 58 See in <http://www.ubalt.edu/kulanu/>.
- 59 From R. Patai, ‘The Ritual Approach to Hebrew–African Culture Contact’. See also M. Merker, *Die Masai* (Berlin, 1904), pp. 290–332.
- 60 P. A. Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (Oxford, 1926), vol. 1, p. 27.
- 61 D. Campbell, *In the Heart of Bantuland* (New York, 1969), p. 266.
- 62 A part of the letter read: ‘Here is what could be a possible explanation of this statement from linguistics. The source is potentially correct if we take the verb; /kulubakana/ very common in Tshiluba-luluwa. Mwana mulubakana = a confused child, or a lost child. Muluba, shorter form of mulubakana, means a “lost person”. Pl. mulubakana balubakana thus /muluba/ baluba/. Baluba would thus be “lost people”.’
- 63 See in <http://www.usip.org/pubs/pworks/zaire/>; <http://www.usip.org/pubs/pworks/zaire11/chap1-11.html>.
- 64 T. O. Lloyd, *The British Empire 1558–1995* (Oxford, 1996), p. 141; D. Chidester, *Savage Systems*, p. 38.
- 65 Cf. F. Willett, *African Art*, p. 99.
- 66 *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 5, p. 473.
- 67 *Ibid.*
- 68 D. Chidester, *Savage Systems*, pp. 50ff.
- 69 T. Hahn, *Tsuni-Goam: The Supreme Being of the Khoi-Khoi* (London, 1881).
- 70 Wilhelm Bleek, a Prussian student of African languages, was the son of a famous German Biblical scholar, one of those whom Matthew Arnold later called the ‘Higher Critics’. In the next two decades, Bleek worked on the grammars of several South African languages, including the Bantu languages (Bleek selected the name of this language family). See O. Spohr (ed.), *The Natal Diaries of W. H. I. Bleek* (Cape Town, 1965).
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 72 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 75 *Ibid.*, pp. 122ff; R. Godlinton, *A Narrative of the Irruption of the Kafir Hordes into the Eastern Province of the Cape of Good Hope, 1834–35* (Cape Town, 1965).
- 76 See S. Dulucq, ‘Zulu/Spartiates et autres analogies antiquisantes’, pp. 135ff.
- 77 A. Gardiner, *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South*

- Africa* (Cape Town, 1966; 1st ed. London, 1836), pp. 95ff. Chidester's theory has it that at the outset colonists in Southern Africa were persuaded that the natives had no religion. It was only as a second stage that they thought were practising Judaism. In other words at the first stage of colonial intervention local peoples were negated. With further information an Israelite identity might be established. This as a general rule is not what I have found. Gardiner might be a test case. He was one of the first to encounter the Zulus. Like so many others from Columbus on, the Israelite model was the first thing to occur to him. Regrettably, Chidester, to whom I am so much in debt for this section of this chapter, did not quote Gardiner. It is clear that an Israelite identity or influence was the first thing to strike him and generally in the wider discourse an Israelite identity is imposed as a first stage of comprehension.
- 78 See D. Chidester, *Savage Systems*, p. 125.
- 79 J. Stuart and D. M. Malcolm, *The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn* (Pietermaritzburg, 1950), pp. 86ff.
- 80 G. Parsons, 'Rethinking the Missionary Position: Bishop Colenso of Natal', in J. Wolffe (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. 5 (Manchester, 1997), pp. 135–75. J. W. Colenso, 'The Diocese of Natal', in *The Monthly Record of the Society of the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* 4 (November 1853), pp. 241–64, quoted in D. Chidester, *Savage Systems*, p. 133.
- 81 G. Parsons, 'Rethinking the Missionary Position', pp. 135–75.
- 82 See D. Chidester, *Savage Systems*, p. 168. See also M. Le Roux, *In Search of the Understanding of the Old Testament*, pp. 22–5. Over the last century the internalisation of an imposed Israelite identity has proceeded apace in Southern Africa and has helped to spawn such movements as the African Hebrew Community, the Church of God, the Saints of Christ, the Zionist Church and the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, all of which have strong Israelite elements.
- 83 H. A. Bryden, *A History of South Africa* (London, 1904), p. 127; E. Casalis, *The Basutos or Twenty Three Years in South Africa* (London, 1861), p. 180.
- 84 *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol. 6 (c.1870–c.1905), p. 362.
- 85 See M. Le Roux, 'African Jews for Jesus' (paper read at UNISA Conference, Pretoria, 1999).
- 86 See R. N. Hall, *Great Zimbabwe* (London, 1905), p. 101; also T. V. Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City* (New York, 2000), p. 266.
- 87 Recorded and broadcast in 'Solomon's Tribe' (a series of two 40-minute documentaries about the Lemba tribe for B.B.C. Radio Four and World Service, September 1992; producer Julian Hale).
- 88 *Ibid.*
- 89 T. Price, 'The Arabs of the Zambezi', in *The Muslim World* 44:1 (1954), pp. 31ff.
- 90 See T. Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City*, p. 264. See also N. J. Van Warmelo, 'The Classification of Cultural Groups', in W. D. Hammond-Tooke, *The Bantu-speaking Peoples of Southern Africa* (Johannesburg, 1937), pp. 80–2; H. von Sicard, *Ngoma Lungundu* (Uppsala, 1952).

- 91 Carl Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients* (New York, 1902), p. 127.
- 92 See T. Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City*, *passim*.
- 93 A. Ruwita, 'Lost Tribe, Lost Language? The Invention of a False Remba Identity', in *Zimbabwe* 5 (October, 1997), pp. 53ff. 'Remba' is the Shona form of 'Lemba'.
- 94 See T. Parfitt, *Journey to the Vanished City*, *passim*; J. M. Cuoq, *Recueil des sources Arabes concernant l'Afrique Occidentale du VIII au XVI siecle* (Paris, 1975); T. Lewicki, *Arabic External Sources for the History of Côte Africa to the South of Sahara* (London, n.d.); A. Malecka, 'La côte orientale de l'Afrique au moyen age de al Himyary (xvs.)', in *Folia Orientalia* 4 (1962), pp. 331ff.; Abu al-Fidah wrote of 'Seruna', which is certainly an error for Sayuna which looks similar in Arabic script. See also R. E. Gregson, 'Trade and Politics in South-East Africa: The Moors, the Portuguese and the Kingdom of Mwenemutapa', in *African Social Research* 116 (1973), p. 417; H. T. Norris, *The Adventures of Antar* (London, 1980); D. C. Chiciga, *A Preliminary Study of the Lemba in Rhodesia* (unpublished History Seminar Paper, University of Rhodesia, 1972), p. 15; on the genetic evidence see Mark Thomas, Tudor Parfitt, Deborah A. Weiss, Karl Skorecki, James F. Wilson, Magdel le Roux, Neil Bradman and David B. Goldstein, 'T Chromosomes Travelling South: The Cohen Modal Haplotype and the Origins of the Lemba – the "Black Jews of Southern Africa"', in *American Journal of Human Genetics* 66 (February, 2000).
- 95 Carl Peters, *The Eldorado of the Ancients*, p. 127.
- 96 J. Sibree, *Madagascar and Its People*. The Religious Tract Society (London, 1870).
- 97 J. Briant, *L'hébreu à Madagascar* (Antananarivo, 1946).
- 98 In general terms, both in Africa and elsewhere, we see that often Christianity was soon appropriated by indigenous peoples for indigenous peoples. In South Africa the first 'Ethiopian' churches seceded from established churches as early as 1892.
- 99 *The Bulhoek Tragedy: The Full Story of the Israelite Settlement at Ntabelanga* (East London, 1921), p. 23.
- 100 R. Edgar, *Because They Chose the Plan of God: The Story of the Bulhoek Massacre* (Johannesburg, 1988), p. 38.
- 101 Ibid. J. Cochrane, *Servants of Power: The Role of the English Speaking Churches 1903–1930* (Johannesburg, 1987).
- 102 London, 1710.
- 103 D. Kessler, *The Falashas* (London, 1996), p. 84.
- 104 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia* (New York/London, 1992), p. 23.
- 105 E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London, 1968), p. 139.
- 106 *Un peuple antique ou une colonie gauloise au pays de Menelik. Les Gallas: une grande nation africaine* (Paris, 1901).
- 107 H. A. Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (London, 1968, 2nd ed. with introduction by R. L. Hess), p. xxiv; S. Kaplan, 'The Beta Israel (Falasha) Encounter with Protestant Missionaries: 1860–1905', in *Jewish Social Studies* 1 (Winter, 1987), p. 29.
- 108 J. Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (Edinburgh, 1805, ii), p. 406.

- 109 J. Halévy, 'Excursion chez les Falacha en Abyssinie', in *Bulletin de la société de géographie* 5, 17 (1869), p. 287.
- 110 J. Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews: A History of the Beta Israel (Falasha) to 1920* (Philadelphia, 1992), p. 14.
- 111 See Ullendorff's imperious review of Hagar Salomon's book *The Hyena People*, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 52:2 (Autumn, 2001).
- 112 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia*, p. 172, n. 48.
- 113 S. Gobat, *Journal of a Three years Residence in Abyssinia* (London, 1847), p. 467.
- 114 S. Gobat, *Journal*, p. 309.
- 115 H. A. Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia*, p. xix.
- 116 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia*, p. 165.
- 117 M. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jewry* (Jerusalem, 1998), p. 13; S. Kaplan, *ibid.*, p. 25.
- 118 M. Corinaldi, *ibid.*, pp. 111ff.
- 119 M. Corinaldi, *ibid.*, p. 112; T. Parfitt, *Operation Moses* (London, 1985), p. 26.
- 120 See *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 52:2 (Autumn, 2001).
- 121 This movement includes an attempt to revive the language of the Qemant. I spent some time with Qemant leaders in 1998. They lamented the loss of the Falashas, who by this time had departed for Israel: they viewed them as a natural barrier against the Amhara. See also F. C. Gamst, *The Qemant: A Pagan-Hebraic Peasantry of Ethiopia* (New York, 1969).
- 122 See in <http://www.guihon.org>. *The New York Times* (15 August 2000) carried an article about the Yibro which noted: 'The Sultan of the Jews in Somalia is a handsome, silver-haired man named Ahmed Jama Hersi, who does not know the first thing about Judaism. He is a Muslim, as were his ancestors back at least 800 years. But he and his people are treated badly, cursed as descendants of Israelites. The name of the tribe is Yibir, or Hebrew. "Even our young people", he said, "they are ashamed when you ask them what tribe they belong to. They will not say Yibir." Not much is known about the lineage of the Yibir, one of Somalia's "sab", or outcast, clans . . . Mr Hersi, 68, who has been the elected leader of the Yibir for 22 years, was asked to speak at one of the opening sessions of the peace conference two months ago. He noted that the Yibir had suffered terribly during the years of war but wanted badly to forgive and move on. "In the civil war I lost my son, my wife, my brother, my dignity and my self-respect", he told the delegates. "But still I have come here to work for reconciliation." Part of the bad treatment, he concedes, is the support of many Yibir for the dictator Muhammad Siad Barre. When he was overthrown in 1991, Mr Hersi fled the country with surviving members of his family to live in Nairobi, Kenya's capital. But part of it is simply that they are one of the low castes of Somalis, and particularly that they are believed to be ethnic Jews in a strongly Muslim country.'
- 123 See in <http://www.guihon.org>.

GIOVANNI ELLERO'S
MANUSCRIPT NOTES
ON THE FALASHA
OF WALQAYT

Irma Taddia

The aim of this chapter is to introduce and discuss an important and unknown source for Ethiopian history preserved in the Department of History at the University of Bologna since 1991. This source consists of two notebook manuscripts on Walqayt compiled by an Italian civil servant, Giovanni Ellero. They were written during his work in the Italian administration in Ethiopia in the 1930s. It is an extremely rich and valuable collection that I am trying to edit this year as part of a project on Walqayt jointly sponsored by the Ellero family and the Italian CNR (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche).¹

First of all I would like to focus the attention of scholars in modern Ethiopia on the existence at the Bologna University of this corpus of material that represents a solid corpus of documentation, even though not systematic. It remains a priority that the material be catalogued. So we worked in this direction for the last few years and now two volumes have been published.² The third volume now in press deals with the publication of the original Ellero notes on Walqayt that contains also the material on the Falasha I am discussing in this context.³

The Ellero notes on Walqayt are the result of extremely accurate fieldwork carried out by Ellero himself in the area during his work as a civil servant. We have to acknowledge the first-hand Ellero fieldwork, a very meticulous and rich account useful to both historians and anthropologists. Unfortunately, the work remains unfinished because of Ellero's death in the colony during the Second World War. Ellero collected different types of material

including many sources, historical documents and oral material, but he could not work on them. However, his social/anthropological endeavours, notwithstanding that they are incomplete, remain very valuable in a field which – as far as Italian research is concerned – has remained a prerogative of the historians. Although unknown, the Ellero work is one of the best attempts to introduce social anthropology in the study of Italian colonies.

Walqayt is an extreme interesting area for Ethiopian history, a borderland among different states, authorities and political powers. But Walqayt is little known, even by scholars of modern Ethiopia. This borderland is located north of Gondar, between the Angareb and Tekazze rivers, isolated for many centuries because of the mountainous nature of the terrain and its general inaccessibility. Both despite and because of these factors, therefore, Walqayt has played an interesting role in Ethiopian history.

This presentation deals with Ellero's original documentation on Walqayt conserved in Bologna. The Ellero papers contain two handwritten books (Ellero's own handwriting is sure) extremely rich in documentation on the social history of the area. Among other information, the Ellero notes include a description of the Falashas' presence in Walqayt. For this reason I would like to quote here these documents, rare and important for our historical knowledge of the area and its original settlement. These documents remain unpublished. Probably the Falasha presence in Walqayt is less studied in comparison with other areas of Ethiopia; therefore it will certainly be of some interest to give some information on this source concerning, among other matters, Falasha settlements.

The existence of the Walqayt notes is familiar to scholars. We know that Conti Rossini published in 1948 a posthumous article by Ellero on Walqayt in *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*;⁴ therefore scholars of Ethiopia have at least superficially some awareness of Ellero's work on this region. Conti Rossini's version, as he admitted, is an *abregé*, a synopsis of Ellero's fieldwork on Walqayt, and does not testify to the extreme complexity and richness of Ellero's manuscript notes on the area. With respect to the Falasha, the published version is extremely different and less informed than the original fieldnotes, as we will see.

I would like to emphasise, however, that I did not find in Ellero's personal archive the exact text published by Conti Rossini himself. It must be stressed that this article on Walqayt published in 1948 seems to be not an *abregé*, but a scholarly elaboration of the original manuscript – probably by Conti Rossini – on the basis of Ellero's

notes. The exact words do not correspond to any known written material. I am working on the subject, trying to compare these different versions of Walqayt manuscript in order to publish the real Ellero notes.

My research focuses on the social history of Walqayt: I am particularly interested in the land tenure system, Church history and Church manuscript documentation, village political systems and in details of the historical and geographical sources of the Walqayt districts on the eve of colonialism. In this historical panorama, the Falasha certainly play a secondary role, but I would like to mention their role for a better understanding of the historical background of the area.

It is interesting to note here that the material on Walqayt preserved in Bologna has been re-evaluated and re-read in the light of our first fieldwork in the area. During our visit in Walqayt in August/September 1997 we had the opportunity to collect, among other information, sources on the Falasha by oral informants.⁵ Because of the recent war between Ethiopia and Eritrea the Walqayt project was interrupted. We did not have, therefore, any other opportunity to visit the area that is now inaccessible to scholars – as you can imagine – and our first fieldwork was limited, so far, to what we were able to do in the first year of research.

The aim of our 1997 field trip in the area was to establish a first contact with the authorities, the elders and the wider communities, not only in Walqayt, but also in the Gondar area. We had the opportunity to interview many people from Walqayt now living in the Gondar region and at the same time to start the first basic research on Walqayt itself.

Our first fieldwork was extremely interesting, although it was done under very difficult conditions. Walqayt is still an isolated area, not easily accessible via the main road network of Ethiopia. Therefore, we had to walk from Kafta, Humera/Setit *awraja* (the last village accessible now by car) to Addi Remetz, the heart of the Walqayt area (43 km on foot – one way – according to a US map of the 1950s, available in Addis Ababa ‘Institute of Mapping Authority’). Owing to the persistent isolation of this region – as everybody knows Walqayt was a land traditionally left to political confinement and relegation – it appears that I was said to have been the first European to visit the area since 1941, at least according to all the local informants we had the opportunity to talk to. Therefore, everybody can easily imagine that our research trip was extremely challenging.

If we look at the Ellero notes, we may immediately realise the complexity of the main social institutions, languages and cultures of the region, at the crossroads of different civilisations and powers on the eve of colonialism: the Salomonic state, a Mahdist state in Sudan, and the regional autonomy of *Mareb Mellaš* (a complex issue that I shall not discuss here). Very few published works and few known documents mention Walqayt, and the Conti Rossini quotations at the margin of Ellero's published article are rare.

The best-known description of Walqayt then comes from Ellero's papers.⁶ Ellero's notes combine a general geographical description of this mountainous and isolated area, its historical settlement, the nature of its inhabitants and their origins with an extremely detailed account of all the villages of the area, most of them completely unknown to the Italian authorities. He describes the spoken languages, the way of living and the principal diseases of the region, first of all widespread malaria. Walqayt is historically linked to Tigray, although isolated and difficult to reach from Tigray; the language of the people is Tigrinya, with words in Amharic and some local characteristics.⁷

Historical events up to the eighteenth century are a matter of speculation; few documents give us the possibility to have any clear knowledge of Walqayt history and the few elements we have are discussed by Ellero. A mention of churches, monasteries, different territorial districts, the origin of villages and the population is followed by a description of the evolution of a slave economy – of fundamental importance in Walqayt – at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Particular attention is paid to cemeteries (Muslim and Christian) and to Falasha villages in the area which are precisely described.

Ellero's original manuscript on Walqayt⁸ is very interesting, although fragmentary. The material is rich and arranged according to the different communities or districts of the area (called *deš* in Walqayt from *desā* or communal land tenure in the Tigrinya highlands). Ten districts form the province (*awrāḡā*) of Walqayt: I Uefarghef, II Belambà, III Degenà, IV Zuà, V Cacà, VI Scirellà, VII Aurà, VIII Acuorchi, IX Culià, X Solà. The other district of *Mezegà* Walqayt was formed in the eastern side of the area from different parts of previous districts (Uefarghef, Cacà, Scirellà, Culià, Tselolò).

What is more interesting in this context is the precise analysis of the many social institutions described in Ellero's manuscript. The

main districts of Walqayt (*deš*) encompasses *ciqinet* (led by a *ciqa*) consisting of *got* (from *gewot* pl., the root *ge*), very small agglomerates (hamlets). *Got* in Walqayt is the equivalent of *addi* in other Tigriyan areas.

According to oral sources there is no mention of old *rest* and *gult* in Walqayt; everybody cultivated land and inherited the same right from the family. As I have already emphasised, the term *deš* refers to a communal (collective) use of land. In fact, the Ellero manuscript quotes *rest* land in Walqayt – for example *rest* land is quoted in Addi Malei, Belamba (II district) and an old abandoned *rest* in Cacà (V district). Therefore, oral informants seem rather to refer to the main land pattern after the fall of Yohannes IV and the Sudanese occupation. After these events, lands were in fact redistributed in Walqayt, not according to the rights of older owners but according to cultivators. No more *rest* land survived, but a communal use of land was the main pattern, in spite of the traditional *rest* land system before Yohannes. In this framework, we will underline the role of Falasha lands in Walqayt.

The presence of *rest* land and the origin of this phenomenon need more information from a historical point of view. We hope to find material in this direction and to be able to collect oral sources systematically in the next field trips. Moreover, written sources seem very difficult to collect now, because the great bulk of churches are rather new (the oldest ones did not survive to modern times) and Walqayt did not have an important monastic culture if we compare it to Uoldebbà or *Mareb Mellaš*.

Gult land seems to have been a prerogative of some churches and monasteries in this area; *gult* did not belong to any key figure of political power (such as *gulteñña* in other Ethiopian areas). This phenomenon may explain the extreme sense of autonomy of the inhabitants of this area and the weakness of the local nobility. In this case *gult* was not an instrument to reaffirm the role of the state in a peripheral area, unlike in historical Ethiopia.

The most accurate information is related to *gabbar* ‘everybody who pays *gebri* or tribute’ in Walqayt. A precise analysis of *gabbar* (Muslim, Christian, Falasha) and their role in village agriculture would require more space. Here I would like to mention this issue and emphasise the clear perception of rural economy in Ellero’s notes (regarding the main crops, the pattern of cultivation, migrations, family role in agriculture). As I have already emphasised, the aim of my paper is to focus on some material of Ellero’s unpublished

notes in the light of our first fieldwork in the region. Therefore, I am trying to combine written and oral documentation dealing with many topics, including the Falasha settlements in the area.

Two different sources concern the Falasha: there is a separate small chapter at the end of the first manuscript notebook, but we can find some comments on Falasha settlements in various pages of the two notebooks. Ellero pays great attention to the origin of settlements, the description of village society, churches and cemeteries in order to understand the historical pattern of evolution of the Falasha society.

According to Ellero's notes, the Falasha in Walqayt were about 370 (Tseghede excluded). The main informants Ellero quotes to support his material were a Faitlovitch pupil in Addis Ababa, Tesfai Adera, and a Defterà, Desta Zaudie, both from Addi Agau (Uefarghef).

The main areas of settlement where Falasha used to live as *gabbar*, cultivating lands in the villages economy were: Addi Agau, 11 *gabbar* (Uefarghef); Zana and Addis Masno Enghida, 3 *gabbar* (Scirella); Addis Malei, 1 *gabbar* (Belamba); Cafta, 7 *gabbar* (Cafta); Sola (Sola); Sciogada (Aura); Cebaloco, 1 *gabbar* (Degenà); and Chessad Daga (Tsello). Ellero claims there is 1 *mesghid* (in Addi Agau) and 6 *chesci* (2 in Addi Agau, 2 in Scirella, 2 in Chessad Daga).

Falasha strongly believe in the coming of a Messiah (lover of God = *fetaui nai egzabie*) who will certainly arrive from Jerusalem in the form of a normal man; therefore called *negus*. They believe that upon his arrival a true golden age will be instituted, and they believe in this new age. They vaguely remember the Jerusalem temple.

When you ask them about their origins, Falasha answer that they arrived in Ethiopia from Jerusalem, in the period of King Nebuchadnezzar and that they came through Egypt following the route of the Setit/Tacazze river. Their first land would have been Adiabò, and from Adiabò they would have spread throughout the entire Tegray, particularly in the Semien. They would have called themselves simply Israeli, and claimed *Atzie* Denghel Dauit was the king when they arrived.

The members of the original twelve groups (*neghedè*) would have come from Egypt to Ethiopia (the original groups were called Rabièl, Simon, Leu, Yeudà, Sacòr, Zablòn, Dan, Neftalieu, Assièr, Goad, Beniam, Yosief).

In the original settlement of Adiabò they did not have a proper social organisation. They started organising themselves in Semien,

and they chose a chief (*sciium, mesaffenti*) named Ghideon. They did that because *Atzie Degel Daut* encouraged them to convert to Christianity. Six or seven chiefs replaced Ghideon, both named Ghideon as well. The residence of *sciium*, in Semien, was Melatà, near Encet Caf and Mai Tzaalò (where the first Ghideon died).

They call themselves Falasha (emigrants), *chaila* (somebody who disagrees with people) and they are rigorously endogamous. They use Tigrinya as their language and their Christian names are Tigrinya (but we also found Abraham, Ishac, Recà).

Many Falasha spread out in various villages were blacksmiths. They worked for villagers and peasants and they had a particular contract called *comorò (uehul)*: (literally, heap [cumulo]). Falasha committed themselves to repairing tools and to make objects that the peasants require for the whole year, from November to November. The peasants had to provide the iron. The number of new tools was strictly limited and varied according to the number of the members of the family. The Falasha repaired tools for both domestic and agricultural life: knives, *cherfes, marescia*, sickles, needles and so on. As a compensation for this service, the peasants give the Falasha one *ghebetà* of various cereals.⁹

The Falasha celebrate the anniversary of *mehalla* (from the word in Ge'ez, *mehelelà*, 'supplication'), a ceremony celebrated 66 days after *Masqal*. This seems to correspond to the Jewish feast of *Matan Torah* (the giving of the *Torah*).

This is all the information we have on the Falasha in Walqayt. As I have already stressed at the beginning of this chapter, it comes from separate notes at the end of the manuscript.¹⁰ But it seems to me of some interest to the historians of Ethiopia in addition to the material spread out in the notes.

One might here reflect on the social history of the area: according to the written field notes, we stressed the role of Falasha in the *gabbar* economy. In this sense the information on the various villages is very detailed. In many pages of the manuscript Ellero mentions Falasha living as *gabbar* in various areas of Walqayt, and I shall cite here the most important ones where the presence of Falasha settlement is certain.

- In Addi Agau (*deš* of Uefarghef), a village whose inhabitants were of Agau or Falasha origin, there are 14 *gabbar*, all Falasha. All the villagers in Addi Agau celebrate in a collective prayer the feast of *Mehalla* and all the Falasha coming from the region used to attend this ceremony. The tradition refers to a certain

Falasha anchorite (an old hermit) from Semien, who lived and prayed here – a man called Abba Sefrà. In the village four cemeteries testify to the presence of Falasha groups that were once bigger than in Ellero's time.

- In the *got* (*addi*) of Addi Gurmaz (*deš* Belamba) there is a Falasha cemetery similar to the one of Addi Malei.
- In Addi Malei (*deš* Belamba) there is one Falasha *gabbar*. In the abandoned area of Addi Uerari there is a Falasha cemetery (more than 100 tombs). Tradition recalls the presence of ten Falasha families, generically called Addi Agau by Christians and Muslims.
- In the village of Zuà Chidane Mehret (*deš* Zua) the informants recall an old blind Falasha who lived there before the founder Zebbil settled in the village at the time of *negus* Bedemariam.
- In the village of Sechelà (*deš* Scirella) there is a Falasha *gabbar*.
- In the village of Addi Hazila (*deš* Scirella) there are three Falasha *gabbar*.
- In the village of Addi Decchi Bagali (*deš* Aura) there is a Falasha *gabbar*.
- In the village of Sciocda (*deš* Aura) there is a Falasha *gabbar*.

I would like to conclude this brief survey by quoting the similarities between written documentation and my first field information, collected last year in Walqayt.

According to Ellero's written notes, the great majority of Falasha, if not blacksmiths, used to be *gabbar*, or cultivate land and pay tribute. It is known that *gabbar* in historical Ethiopia used to cultivate lands belonging to others (the original owners were called *restegna*) or cultivate village land distributed according to the *desā* system (the communal lands).

When we asked for information about the land tenure system in our field trip to the area, villagers told us about the recent division of Falasha lands among villagers.¹¹ This means that the Falasha still had land in Walqayt before their definitive resettlement in Israel, and lands belonging to the Falasha were divided among villagers in the Walqayt area during the last few years. This attests to the importance and the permanency of some characteristics of Walqayt Falasha. In many respects this confirms my impression that the Falasha were not completely apart from Ethiopian society but were part of it – at least in an area such as Walqayt, which was marginal to the Ethiopian Empire but not so marginal to our reconstruction of historical Ethiopia, according to the available sources. Walqayt was

a less important area, and the land issue was not so crucial. In this peripheral area of the Empire the Falasha represent an important component of society – not least as land cultivators.

Notes

- 1 The Walqayt project was at the beginning an extension of a previous CNR project on the Eritrean highlands. We visited Walqayt in August/September 1997, when Dr Uoldelulul Chelati Dirar and myself did an extremely interesting pilot survey in the area, having thus the possibility to start interviewing people and select informants for future research. The project – scheduled for over the next three years – was suddenly interrupted because of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in May 1998. We received funds from Italian CNR in 1997 and from Dr Gianfranco Ellero (a brother of the Italian civil servant Giovanni Ellero) who supported us on many occasions to whom I would like to express my sincere gratitude.
- 2 See U. Chelati Dirar, A. Gori and I. Taddia, *Lettere tigrine: I documenti etiopici del Fondo Ellero* (Torino, 1997); U. Chelati Dirar and G. Dore, *Carte coloniali: I documenti italiani del Fondo Ellero* (Torino, 2000).
- 3 See G. Dore and I. Taddia, *Il Wälqayt e l'altopiano etiopico/eritreo* (Torino, forthcoming).
- 4 See G. Ellero, 'Il Uolcàit', in *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 7:1 (1948), pp. 89–112.
- 5 See note 1.
- 6 To quote Ellero: 'Il Uolcàit è pressoché sconosciuto agli stessi Abissini, che si limitano a dirlo regione selvaggia e misteriosa' ['Uolcàit is almost unknown to Abyssinians themselves, who define it as a mysterious and savage land']. 'Più che punto d'incontro, il Uolcàit fu barriera contro cui vennero a cozzare interessi contrastanti di Sudanesi da occidente, di Beja da nord, di Tigrini da Oriente, di Amhara da sud. Negli ultimi secoli questi ultimi prevalsero politicamente, ma si limitarono ad inviarti esattori di tributi e *woyzerò* cadute in disgrazia' ['Rather than a crossroads, Uolcàit is a barrier against which many different people happened to fight: Sudanese from the west, Beja from the north, Tegreans from the east, Amhara from the south. During the last few centuries Amhara prevailed politically, but confined it to tax collectors and *woyzerò* fell into disgrace']. 'In un paese, su cui mai i capi del Tigrài riuscirono a consolidare la loro egemonia e che quelli dell'Ahmara ebbero sempre in poco conto, il principio di autorità non è sentito. Il dissidente . . . troverà sempre persone disposte a seguirlo' ['In a country over which the rulers of Tegrài were not able to consolidate their hegemony and that Amhara used to despise, the principle of authority is not perceived. Dissidents will surely find people able to follow them'].
- 7 Oral tradition confirms that Walqayt was incorporated into the Empire during Ba'eda Mariam's rule (1468–78) and was, before this century, a Muslim country ruled by Bejwa (Balaw). During Bakaffa and Iyasu II (eighteenth century) Walqayt was ruled by the central power, but we

have news about rebellions and local power autonomy, lasting to Tekla Giyorghis rule and Yohannes. The Walqayt *awrāḡā* was ruled by a *meslenie* nominally dependent on Semien (in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries) but was in fact autonomous; it is historically linked to Tseghedie and with this district often fought against the central power.

- 8 (Probable etymology in the Ellero notes ‘uelca cherresc = è rimasta nuova, cioè senza benedizione dall’Abuna’) [‘new land, without blessing’]: [but Conti Rossini quotes *welqā qerreč* = ‘è scivolato via’; ‘it slid out’]. Ellero claims no European visited Walqayt, but we have to say that at least Mansfield Parkins passed through the area, describing it as ‘in a delightful state of primitive simplicity’. However, a mention of Walqayt in the literature is found at the beginning of Ellero’s notes (Ellero quotes Beccari, Salt, De Castro, Rava, Tedesco Zammarano, Caccia Dominioni di Sillarengo in the colonial period). A few other scholars mention Walqayt, Huntingford in two different works: ‘Walqayt appears to have been recognised as a province after the end of XV’ and ‘Walaqa – written Waylaqa and then Walqayt is described as a province’.

9 See G. Ellero, *Il Uolcait*, quaderno 2, *passim*.

- 10 For details and quotations on the published literature on Walqayt, see I. Taddia, ‘Land and Society in Wälqayt (Ethiopia)’, in A. Rouaud (ed.) *Les orientalistes sont des aventuriers* (Paris, 1999), notes 25–8.

- 11 For a general survey on land tenure see: A. Bausi, G. Dore and I. Taddia, ‘Materiale antropologico e storico sul “rim” in *Etiopia ed Eritrea* (Torino, 2001).

S. SCHACHNOWITZ'S
NOVEL *SALOMO DER
FALASCHA* (1923)

Sigrid Sohn

While studying the German Jewish Press in the period after the First World War, I came across an announcement in capital letters on the front page of *Der Israelit* advertising a book by the then renowned writer, and editor of the same magazine, Selig Schachnowitz, entitled *Salomo der Falascha*.¹ It was not easy to find a copy of this novel, which up to now seems not to have interested anyone. I found a copy in Leipzig in the Deutsche Bibliothek, which had recently opened a Jewish section called the Anna-Frank-Shoah-Bibliothek.

Salomo der Falascha is a novel – ‘a contemporary story’ as the author himself said in the sub-title; a novel, written in German, which, in fictionalised form, dealt with the life of one of the Falasha boys.

It is not a book which could boast the same historical value as others written about this Falasha people. What value could this novel have? In the introduction to an essay written by his father, the Israeli writer A. B. Yehoshua writes that his father had tried to give his books (which recalled his own past in the Sephardic community in Jerusalem at the beginning of the century) an intellectual legitimacy, since his work could not have the scientific authority which the work of a scholar may command, nor the freedom which a creative writer enjoys. They were simply stories from his childhood, recalling a lost time.² In a similar way, *Salomo der Falascha* is actually a novel which conjures up a world that had not yet been lost but soon would be.

Selig Schachnowitz was born in 1847 in a small town between Lithuania and eastern Prussia. His father, a famous Talmud scholar,

gave him a traditional education in the *yeshivot* of Lithuania, an education which the youth later completed in Germany and Switzerland. From 1908 onwards he was the editor-in-chief of the mouthpiece of orthodox Judaism, *Der Israelit*, in Frankfurt am Main and was renowned for being one of the most prolific orthodox journalists. He very soon made a name for himself as a writer too, with countless historical novels, many of which were translated into other languages. His works, comprising elements of Jewish philosophy, were particularly suitable for young people.³ None the less Schachnowitz always showed an entirely adult knowledge of the environment and the characters he wrote about.

We really know very little about Salomon Isaac,⁴ the real-life person around whom the novel is constructed. As Shalva Weil remarked at the SOSTEJE (Society of the Study of Ethiopian Jewry) conference in Jerusalem in 1995,⁵ Salomon was one of 25 young Falasha boys who Faitlovitch took with him from Ethiopia to Europe or Palestine so that they could be taught Jewish subjects and one day carry out educational tasks or assist in their original communities. Salomon arrived in Palestine together with his cousin Gete Yirmiahu, who had recommended him, after Faitlovitch's second expedition to Ethiopia⁶ in 1908–9. He had been born in Chelga in the region of Sekelt around 1889–90 and had been a pupil of the 'great priests' of Gurabe, with whom he had lived since the latter had settled there about 15 years before. He came from a respectable family belonging to the Oritawi community and was to become a *qes*. In Jerusalem Salomon was entrusted to the care of Mr Goldsmidt, teacher at the Edler-von-Lämel-Schule of the *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden*.⁷

The boy made excellent progress in Hebrew, as can be noted from his diary, and led his life in full observance of religious precepts. Following the principles of the school, he also improved his mind and became familiar with literary, historical and philosophical works. He soon found himself alone in Jerusalem, however, when his cousin Gete returned to Ethiopia in 1912.⁸ At the outbreak of the First World War, contact with his loved ones, including Faitlovitch, became increasingly sporadic and the youth felt isolated and suffered from growing homesickness. He withdrew more and more into himself and contracted hepatitis,⁹ which probably caused his early death. We know that he had contacts with the Christian community of Ethiopia in Jerusalem – where he sometimes passed his time in theological debates with the local clergy without, however, becoming involved with their belief – and witnessed the

entry of the British army into Jerusalem. He suffered increasingly from loneliness and depression from 1918 onwards, which was partly to blame for his failure to learn English. In the Lämél School English was taught in German, a language that he had not yet thoroughly mastered. Disappointment over this failure, continual depression and the cold of the Jerusalem winter undoubtedly did not help his health. He left the school and moved to a small rented room in a Yemenite Jew's house. When Dr Faitlovitch arrived in Jerusalem in 1920 together with Taamrat Emmanuel to take Salomon, a teacher (Faitlovitch's brother)¹⁰ and a doctor from the Hadassah Hospital to Ethiopia, his health was already so compromised that he died on the journey, in a village near Asmara in Eritrea.¹¹

Schachnowitz certainly did not want to be limited to the relatively meagre tale represented by the real Salomon: he had an emblematic story in mind which was to touch upon all the interesting points in the life of these boys, both in their homeland and abroad. All the most poignant vicissitudes of that community were to be interwoven in his novel, starting from the impact which the Christian mission had in that period, especially on the young boys. Schachnowitz aimed at involving the reader so that the latter would be ready to make a moral or concrete contribution to saving this population. The book therefore begins with a full account, in an expressionist style that was typical of those times,¹² of the meeting between the *kahen*, Aba Zague, with Salomo alias Salomon Isaac and Jirmeias alias Gete Yirmiahu (who are not relations here but childhood friends) in the *mesgid* of the village after the evening service. We learn of the possible origins of the tribe, their customs and the first contacts with the outside world. Almost half of the tale takes place in Gondar in Ethiopia.

A long chapter at the beginning of the novel is dedicated to Salomo's home and family and introduces us to a world with completely different material culture and domestic habits. We learn about a home that for its simplicity and devotion is different from those that the young German Jews, who mostly lived in an environment that was being increasingly assimilated, were used to. The father, Nissim, arrives home. Even though the boy has not yet arrived, they start dinner all the same. After the prayer at the end of the meal, the daughter dares complain of her brother's absence and we learn that the father, a well-known blacksmith, has totally different ideas from those of his 18-year-old son, who has recently started working with him. Nissim is a simple man who has always

devoted himself to hard work. He weighs up the world according to his smithy and had grown up in the conviction that every piece of iron can be bent provided it is heated sufficiently and held with a firm hand. He had managed to create the most marvellous artefacts for 30 years following this principle. Now he found himself faced with an iron, his son, who indeed becomes soft but will not be bent. With his dreamer's nature, the youth is not cut out for manual work. For the first time in his life Nissim realises that his first-born has a different character from his own. In the world, as in his smithy, everyone and everything has a precise role: one is the iron, another the fire and a third the wind. These maxims, which are unusual for him, make him happy and he is reconciled with his son. The same evening, a little later, arrives Aba Zague, the old *kahen*, bringing them an old trunk to be repaired which contained sacred ornaments and vestments of the *mesgid*. Nissim does not like the old *kahen*, but treats him with due respect and listens to the old sage's request. Aba Zague convinces Nissim that there are various types of smiths and that Salomon could become a master, as forger of the spirit. He then asks Nissim to consecrate his first-born to the service of *debtera* in the *mesgid*. Nissim agrees and proudly talks of it to his wife and daughter. The wife is radiant, but the sister, who has her father's character, expresses doubts regarding the suitability of Salomo as *debtera* because she considers her brother is not practical and is full of dreams of far-off lands.

The activity of the Christian mission is integrated into the story thanks to the introduction of an English missionary Salomo wants to meet to hear about foreign countries and in particular about far-off Jerusalem. References to the minister, called Goodwon, run through the whole book like a thread, revealing the subtle work of persuasion of the missionaries. Salomo decides to leave with the missionary and traverse the Yemen to Palestine, although he does not hide his intention of wanting to live there with and for the Jews alone. Salomo's father is warned by his daughter and stops their departure. After the usual purification the boy remains in the *mesgid* to be trained. His yearning, however, has not been placated and his work in the *mesgid* does not satisfy him. Rather than pray he prefers to identify himself with the heroes of the sacred scriptures; he identifies Malku, the sister of his friend Jirmeias, with the biblical Ruth, but he realises that as *debtera* he has no right to think about profane things.

In the village arrives a Jewish foreigner, a certain Dr Paltiel, alias Faitlovitch, who speaks about a Pro-Falasha Committee set up in

Italy to involve Jews worldwide in the Falasha cause. This meeting leads to what will become the most important events in the life of Salomo. The boys are curious, although the adults are at first perplexed with regard to the foreigner. Like his predecessor,¹³ Paltiel also wants to take some boys with him to have them educated in the west and in Palestine. Salomo just hears the word 'Jerusalem' and the old flame burns fiercely once more. Again his father prevents his departure and Paltiel takes only the friend Jirmeias with him, promising to come and fetch Salomo when he has come of age, i.e. two years later. Meanwhile, Salomo decides to work in the fields of Jirmeias's father, where he finally seems to have found his right place in the world. Soon he becomes Malku's fiancé, at a ceremony which is described according to the traditional rite.

A caravan of pilgrims going to Mecca arrives in the area and in addition to the many goods required for the imminent marriage, they also bring a letter from Jirmeias, which upsets Salomo again. When the pilgrims leave Salomo goes with them and with Malku's help his disappearance is discovered too late to prevent him from leaving.

At this point Schachnowitz introduces the tale of a previous attempt by the Falashas to reach Jerusalem overland by crossing the Red Sea and the Yemen.¹⁴ Although up to here the life of the young Falasha mainly corresponds to historically known facts, under the guidance of the writer Salomo's destiny now takes another route. He follows the caravan, trusting in the possibility of being able to reach the Holy Land from a certain point in Arabia with the Hijaz Railway, as the missionary had suggested to him. Obeying the dietary rules of his faith, for a long time the youth only eats fruit and bread.¹⁵ The caravan reaches Sa'ana in the Yemen and here Salomo meets a youth in the market, with whom he immediately strikes up a friendship. He is a Yemenite Jew who, in a broad sense, shares the Falasha fate, i.e. that of outcast, and also his yearning for the Holy Land. Jossef ben Meschulam (Yosef ben Meshullam), the young Yemenite, invites Salomo to spend *Pesah* in his community. Salomo recognises the books and prayer scrolls which Dr Paltiel had talked about to him and goes to the *mikveh* to purify himself of the contact with foreigners, although the other Jews present do not seem to worry about it. The meeting with a Yemenite Jew is a biographical element, insofar as the real Salomon was in contact with the Yemenite community in Jerusalem. In the novel, after the rains, Salomo, together with other Yemenite Jewish youths intent on reaching Palestine, sets off along the Hijaz mountains towards the

Red Sea, where they hope to catch the train which will take them to Haifa.

The ecstasy of finally being in the Land where, as he believes, the Messiah would soon arrive, is great and is only dampened by the behaviour of the Arabs, who, because of their rough ways and dirtiness, Salomo sees as defilers of the sacred soil. Here the writer inserts information that is well known and dear to the hearts of his customary readers in Germany. He talks about the clean settlements of the German Jews who work the land and cultivate the fields. For the first time since Salomo left, he remembers his fiancée Malku: she, like Ruth of the Holy Scriptures, used to return home from the fields sitting on top of the cart loaded with hay. Salomo and his companion only stop for a few moments because they cannot wait to reach the Holy City. Their joy and ecstasy upon reaching Jerusalem is endless and while Yosef soon finds a job, Salomo lives each day as a continuous holiday and does not worry about the future. He soon finds himself without any livelihood; then he meets Mr Goodwon, the missionary, in the city streets. Seeing the condition of the youth, Mr Goodwon invites him first to a small Jewish restaurant and then to his mission, where he patiently tries to convince him to convert. Salomo is, however, steadfast and before long leaves the austere environment, which reminds him of his father and the *kahen*. Wishing to return to the Yemenites to find a job, he now meets only with hostility since they know of his stay in the English mission. Other attempts to get a job fail too and in the evening the youth, without meaning to, finds himself once again at the mission. The missionary joyfully welcomes him, hoping to have finally won him over. Goodwon's patience is, however, truly tried. Salomo is immune to any attempt at conversion. He only accepts work in the mission because, he says, that way he can at least stay in the city of his dreams.

The First World War breaks out and the British have to leave the country. Salomo, with no citizenship, must choose between leaving with the missionary or being enrolled in the Turkish army. In the exodus from the city, he falls in with a group of Russian Jews, cheerful young Zionist pioneers who are apparently not worried about the situation. They sing songs which Salomo had already heard in Jerusalem and on the way they tell him of ancient historical heroes, such as Bar Kokhba, who he had not heard about but with whom he felt an affinity. The only flaw seems to him to be that these youths never pray. The group, as we soon learn, is heading towards Egypt, where it intends forming a 'Jewish legion', which, alongside

the British in the war against the Ottoman Empire, tries to regain the country.¹⁶

Unlike the real Salomon, Schachnowitz's Salomo does not therefore suffer from loneliness during the war, but, unconsciously, sets about growing up and becoming a man. Like the real Salomon, he often thinks about his loved ones left behind in Ethiopia. His dream is to be sent to his homeland – in the same way as the ancient heroes, by the Messiah, whose coming in his opinion is imminent – to lead his loved ones to the Holy Land. Only in this way does he think he can justify his disobedience to his father. And as Herzl, referring to the Jewish homeland, had said 'Wenn ihr wollt, ist es kein Märchen', he is convinced that 'Moschiach ist da, wenn wir nur wollen'.¹⁷ Meanwhile, in Egypt, Salomo is trained to be a soldier. He is obsessed by his dream of being a soldier of the Messiah, for whom he is preparing the way with his work. When he listens to the story of the Zionist friend who came from Grodno (a story that is also skilfully intertwined into the tale of the writer and which reflects the story of very many other young Jews who fled from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the century), he is just amazed by the fact that Asher ben David and his friends do not pray or in any way observe the laws of the *Torah*.

Military life is not easy. The young soldiers are in the Egyptian desert for three years waiting to conquer Palestine. Whoever does not comply with Army rules is mercilessly punished. This also happens to Asher. One evening during a quarrel between an English soldier and the legionnaires due to general discontent, Asher, the normally kind-hearted boy who was always ready to cheer up his depressed companions with his jokes, raises his voice and angrily comes back with a rejoinder to a British instructor. He is consequently arrested, taken away and seen no more. Salomo is convinced that this happened because Asher did not pray or observe the religious precepts. All of them are upset by the seriousness of what has happened and Salomo in particular is inconsolable over the loss of his only friend. The loss of a friend is also a biographical element: the real Salomon loses Gete when the latter leaves with Faitlovitch.¹⁸

The next morning the time to leave finally arrives. The route across the Sinai desert to Gaza is once again long and difficult. Salomo is upheld, however, by all his hopes. In his dream this is the march by which he at the head leads his brothers from Ethiopia into the promised land to meet the Messiah, even if there is a small Bedouin on a camel instead of the prophet Elijah at the head of the

convoy. The town Gaza has already fallen and with the banner held high and the song of *Hatikva* on his lips, Salomo imagines he can see the Messiah who is sending him into Ethiopia to lead his people to Jerusalem. Instead of the Messiah, who he is waiting to see from one moment to another, Asher suddenly appears before him – the Zionist friend who has miraculously escaped being shot in Egypt. In the meantime they bury the fallen of the Turkish army on the mount ‘el Muntar’ near Gaza. Salomo must also bury his old Yemenite friend, Yosef ben Meshullam, who had remained in Jerusalem and been sent to fight for the Turkish army.

Upon entering Jerusalem the youths perceive the devastation created by the war. Salomo meets the German doctor who once gave him a hot meal and who now, although belonging to the people who lost the war, is looking after the sick in the hospital built with the money of the German and Dutch Jews. Salomo then goes to visit the quarter of the Yemenite Jews, also soldiers of the Messiah, many of whom had died because the End was not yet nigh.

Once again Salomo is homeless and without money. However, he does not want to associate with the Zionists, who do not observe the *mitzvot*. The long-awaited Messiah has not arrived despite all the signs and omens. Perhaps, Salomo now thinks, Goodwon was right and the Messiah had already come. But in that case how was this inglorious war consistent with the times? Salomo decides to ask Goodwon about it. The missionary, however, is too busy looking after war veterans sheltering in the mission and has no time to allay the doubts of the youth. Meanwhile Salomo with Goodwon’s help finds food and a home in the hostel for soldiers. In the new house he meets people of all religions, but no one can comfort him or give him an answer to his desperate search for the truth. Not even in the gospels, which he decides to read in the end, does he find an answer. Salomo is more perplexed than ever and almost ready to yield to Mr Goodwon when fate plays a hand and he meets Dr Paltiel (Faitlovitch), who, on his way back to Ethiopia, stops in Jerusalem to give a talk about the Falashas. Paltiel has brought with him one of his students and Salomo recognises his childhood friend Jirmeias. Furthermore, right in front of the conference hall, he meets Asher ben David, who, having become an officer in the Palestine police force consisting of British, Arab and Jewish members, suggests the possibility of him also taking part. Salomo hesitates at first. From Paltiel he learns that times have changed and that there are no longer the funds or means to allow him to be educated as promised. The German Hilfswerk in Jerusalem had collapsed with the war and

Paltiel is now returning to Ethiopia where Jirmeias intends to teach in the new school built on his father's farm land. Paltiel, who now seems to Salomo to be less sure, more tired and less imbued with his mission to save the Falashas, suggests to Salomo that he follow him and Jirmeias to Ethiopia after *Pesah*, which they intend spending in Jerusalem. Salomo now realises that all this time spent dreaming of the arrival of the Messiah, who alone could save the Falashas, had been futile and this conclusion allows him to regain his lost equilibrium and finally attain peace. He knows that he cannot return to his homeland unless it is in the wake of the Messiah, as a hero, because he has been guilty of disobedience towards his father. From this moment on he avoids contact with Paltiel and Jirmeias; he even avoids Goodwon, whose scheming he has finally understood, and therefore has no other choice than to accept Asher's invitation and join the police force.

The mature Salomo no longer has idealistic motives in carrying out his new work. His task is now to keep order in the streets of the Holy City, a task to which he applies himself with zeal. He is strict with anyone who does not respect others and in particular with whoever disturbs the Jews praying at the Wailing Wall. The rabble of the city calls him the 'black terror' or even the 'black Satan' and avoid him because they fear his vehemence. When he is on duty at the Wall, where he watches over Dr Paltiel and Jirmeias one day, he is particularly severe.

It is the time of *Pesah* (Passover) and unrest increases in the Old City.¹⁹ The evening of the *seder* Salomo is on duty and protects the homes of the Jews. There is, however, an unusual calm in the air which worries the police and in particular Asher. As could be expected, on the very first day of *Pesah*, the riot breaks out. Salomo manages to free the Sephardic synagogue, but when he arrives at the Wall he is wounded by gunshot: he falls and dies there.

Paltiel arrives with his following in Ethiopia at the end of the summer. The returnees are warmly welcomed. Many things have changed during their four years away. The old *kahen* is dead and a young and more open-minded one has taken his place. The school on the land of Becher, the father of Jirmeias, is ready. Nissim, Salomo's father, the blacksmith, is no longer quick tempered as in the past and has even acquired the habit of going to pray in the *mesgid*. There is, however, the sad news which has to be given to the relations according to the rigid traditional rules. There is an outbreak of grief and Nissim blames himself for his son's death. One consolation exists for everyone: Salomo died as a result of his

yearning for the Holy Land, a longing which is also that of his people, as Dr Paltiel added.

Schachnowitz's Salomo, like the real Salomon, died before being able to reach his homeland, even though he did not die due to illness but was killed in defending his cause. What is common to the two is their strong yearning: the yearning of Salomo for the Holy Land and the arrival of the Messiah and the yearning of Salomon for his homeland. The role played by the missionary is particularly worthy of note; he was a true seducer who knew how to exercise all the most convincing techniques of argumentation.

From a stylistic point of view, it should be noted that in telling the story of the Falashas, Schachnowitz keeps some historical names whilst changing others, such as that of Salomon himself or Faitlovitch. When he speaks of the Messiah, he uses a real anachronism: he does not use the Hebrew transcription which should be *Meshiach*, but the Ashkenazi pronunciation *Moshiach*, which was certainly not known to his Salomo or even to the Yemenite Jewish leading figures.²⁰

The book did not therefore aim just at providing an example and making the reader aware of the reality of the Falasha people; it also aimed at impressing Jewish thought, through the language, structure and subject-matter, on Jewish young people, as Schachnowitz's biographer points out.²¹ The novel had therefore been published in serial form in the cultural supplement of the newspaper *Der Israelit* in 1923, three years after Salomo had died in 1920 in the Passover riots in Jerusalem.²² The decision to have the leading figure die in the notorious uprising in Jerusalem²³ may be seen as a homage to the young martyr of the Falasha cause – put on the same footing as the heroes of the Zionist cause and all the victims of the pogroms in Jewish history.

As has been seen, Selig Schachnowitz's novel was situated in a period in which the Jewish press had shown particular interest in the affairs of this Ethiopian population. More ambitiously, the author puts forward a reflection that includes and links the fate of this population to that of the renaissance of the Jews in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Notes

- 1 Cf. *Der Israelit*, 64:31, 2.8.1923. Schachnowitz was known to the German public for other works he had published. The trilogy *Messiasbraut*, *Feuerzeichen* and *Abraham, Sohn Abrahams* gives a fascinating account of the period between 1650 and 1750 when Sabbatai Sevi

- dominated the Jewish scene in Europe. Other novels are *Marelaika*, *Luftmensch*, *Jenseits* and *Merkamaiers Weg zum Kreml*, which deal with then current or recent topics. *Im Judenstaat der Chazaren* was translated into several languages and also published by the Publishing House Omonuth in Tel Aviv. Cf. M. Auerloch, *Selig Schachnowitz* (Berlin, 1933) in *Jüdisches biographisches Archiv*, Munich.
- 2 Cf. A. B. Yehoshua, 'Alla ricerca del tempo sefardita', in *MicroMega* 5 (1997), pp. 183–98.
 - 3 Cf. M. Auerloch, *Selig Schachnowitz*.
 - 4 We have decided to call the boys Salomon Isaac, not Salomon ben Yitzchak or Salomon Yitzchak as he signed himself, and Gete Yirmiahu, not Getié Jeremias as Faitlovitch called the boy, because these names are closer to Amharic, the original language of the Falashas. Cf. also Sh. Weil, 'The Life and Death of Salomon Isaac', in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi, *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 40–9.
 - 5 Cf. Sh. Weil, *ibid*.
 - 6 As for the proper names of the Falashas, it has also been decided to standardise the country Abyssinia by always calling it Ethiopia except in the titles of works.
 - 7 Cf. e.g. 'Der neunte Geschäftsbericht des Hilfsvereins der deutschen Juden', in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 75:27 (7.7.1911), pp. 315–16. It is likely that the Mr Goldsmidt mentioned by Sh. Weil is Julius Goldschmidt from Frankfurt am Main, who for years had been actively involved in the Falasha cause and who, in March 1914, was elected first president of the International Pro-Falasha Committee, of which the chief Rabbi of Florence, Dr Margulies, was honorary president. Cf. *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 78:12 (20.3.1914).
 - 8 While Sh. Weil talks of a first trip by Gete to Florence and Paris, from where he would only at a later time accompany Faitlovitch to Ethiopia, on 19 June 1913 the weekly *Der Israelit* reported on the Pro-Falasha movement, saying that Faitlovitch had left Europe in mid December 1912 to go via Alexandria, Egypt, to Jerusalem to fetch the young Falasha Gete Yirmiahu, student in the *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden* school, and take him to Ethiopia as a member of the Pro-Falasha movement.
 - 9 Cf. Sh. Weil, 'The Life and Death of Salomon Isaac', pp. 40–9.
 - 10 Information received from E. Trevisan Semi, who consulted Faitlovitch's diary. The diary is to be found in the Souransky Central Library, University of Tel Aviv.
 - 11 Information received from E. Trevisan Semi, who consulted Faitlovitch's diary. The diary tells of the death of Salomon Isaac on 21.06.1920 near Asmara.
 - 12 Just take, for example, the books written in a very similar style by M. Brod in the same era.
 - 13 Faitlovitch's teacher, the Orientalist Joseph Halévy.
 - 14 Cf. 'Mémoire sur les Juifs d'Abyssinie ou Falashas', in *Archives Israélites 1852–1853*. It is said that in that period the Negus gave the Protestant missionaries, who had been in the country for some time, permission to convert the Falashas. Having heard that other Jews

- existed in Jerusalem and that, according to the missionaries, the Messiah had already come, there was a mass exodus of the Falashas towards Tigré, on the north-western border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, in an attempt to reach Palestine. Not knowing the exact route, they became lost and, weakened by hunger and disease, had to give up. Many died and the few survivors had to turn back. Cf. also J. Faitlovitch, 'Die Falaschas', in *Jüdische Presse* (Erste Beilage) 3 (1907), p. 29. Cf. also S. Kaplan, 'The Beta Israel (Falasha)' in *Ethiopia – From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York/London, 1992).
- 15 S. Schachnowitz, *Salomo der Falascha* (Frankfurt am Main, 1923), p. 89.
- 16 This is, of course, based on historical fact. Cf. Y. Slutsky, 'Haganah' in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem, 1973), col. 1064–74.
- 17 S. Schachnowitz, *Salomo der Falascha*, p. 152.
- 18 Cf. n. 8.
- 19 Schachnowitz is referring here to the riots in Galilee and Jerusalem, which occurred at almost the same time as the San Remo Conference of 1920 at which the victors of the First World War substantially confirmed the general terms of the Balfour Declaration. Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky had already viewed the perpetuation of the Jewish Legion in which Salomo had enrolled in Egypt and had openly organised the self-defence activities during the Passover riots in Jerusalem in 1920, to which Schachnowitz refers here and in which the leading figure dies. Y. Slutsky, 'Haganah' in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 7, col. 1064. Cf. also W. Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York, 1972).
- 20 S. Schachnowitz, *Salomo der Falascha*, p. 99.
- 21 Cf. M. Auerloch, *Selig Schachnowitz*.
- 22 Cf. n. 19.
- 23 The year of Salomon's death is a biographical fact. Cf. n. 11.

THE FALASHAS IN THE
GERMAN JEWISH PRESS
IN GERMANY DURING
THE FIRST HALF OF THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY

Sigrid Sohn

For some years now scholars have concentrated on reconstructing the last years of the Falasha community in their original land, Ethiopia, mainly but not only through J. Faitlovitch's important accounts, such as the book he wrote after his second journey to Ethiopia¹ or the countless articles he published in that period. Faitlovitch made it his life's work to bring spiritual and material aid to this people, who he considered Jewish brothers in every sense of the term and who had long remained in ignorance of the existence of other Jewish life in the rest of the world. In addition the life stories of his pupils, i.e. the Falasha boys who Faitlovitch had taken to Europe and Palestine so that they could be taught 'post-biblical' Judaism, are currently being investigated.² Faitlovitch did his utmost to raise funds within the Jewish community (first European and then American) for educating his pupils in order to make them, as it were, more 'kosher' in the eyes of western Judaism.

The lives of Taamrat Emmanuel, Gete Yirmiahu (or Getié Jeremias as Faitlovitch called him), Salomon Isaac and also of others have therefore been explored by scholars.³ My contribution is intended to broaden this investigation via the Jewish press in Germany,⁴ in which news regarding this population began to systematically appear (c.1906)⁵ until the early years of Nazism (c.1935). The information which may be gleaned refers to two very different periods from a historical-political point of view. The first

period going from 1907 to 1914 is distinguished by items simply describing the Falasha population. It is a period which marked an important moment of transition for the Jewish people: the rise of political Zionism, the large-scale pogroms in Russia and the exodus of the survivors to western Europe, usually on their way to America.⁶ All these situations were daily topics of conversation in the Jewish communities.

The post-war period from 1921 to 1934 – the era of the Weimar Republic, the economic crisis in Germany and not least the rapid ascent of Nazism – is less rich in narrative information and more rich in appeals for help for their so-called ‘black brothers’. Upon examining the press of the period it is interesting to note the selection of news on this remote population and the methods of presentation.

A short piece of news was first published towards the end of 1906 in the weekly *Der Israelit*. The paper announced a conference by Dr Faitlovitch in March of the following year and took the opportunity of giving a brief summary of Falasha history and the work of Faitlovitch, who was also asking for timely help for that people.

The next two years saw much more news. Most of the German Jewish press reported an account given by Faitlovitch at the General Meeting of the *Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden* on 3 March 1907 on the history of the Falashas. A series of articles by Faitlovitch and a long article by Albert Katz were also published. The latter article was imbued with consideration for this people and insisted on the fact that there was no doubt over their Jewishness, although some doubt already seems to have arisen at that time. It also mentioned the Pro-Falasha Committee set up in Florence under the chairmanship of the Chief Rabbi Margulies, well-known in German circles. The author hoped that a similar committee would also be set up before long in Germany. The subsequent year followed the well-known dispute between the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, Faitlovitch and the Italian Pro-Falasha Committee. The expedition under the guidance of Nahoum, ex pupil of the Jewish seminary of France and of the *Ecole nationale des langues orientales vivantes*,⁷ organised by the *Alliance*, was widely reported, together with the report by Nahoum directly from Addis Ababa in March 1908. The debate was particularly lively in the monthly *Ost und West*, the official mouthpiece of the *Konferenzgemeinschaft*, ‘affiliate’ as it were of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. Nahoum’s accusations of Faitlovitch and the latter’s justifications and answers were the favourite subject matter of the entire year. Faitlovitch and

Margulies were interviewed and both showed how Nahoum had been naturally led to make various errors, while Margulies made widespread statements about the money which was allocated by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) for building a school in Eritrea for the Falashas and which was instead withheld by the *Alliance* in view of the new mission of enquiry, from which Faitlovitch was excluded for personal and subjective reasons.⁸

Readers were informed that Faitlovitch travelled throughout the West, including England, to publicise his work and to collect signatures from Chief Rabbis in support of his cause. The *Hilfsverein* also stated it was ready to give its support to the school planned for Eritrea by Faitlovitch, in which he hoped to be able to employ some Yemenite Jews as teachers.⁹ It was by then more than obvious that the German Jewish press was unconditionally in favour of supporting Faitlovitch and the Italian Pro-Falasha committee, despite Nahoum and the *Alliance*. This partiality was so pronounced that Nahoum's account was published late and without any comment. Lack of space was the official excuse. There were continuous appeals, supported by professional people, Rabbis and scholars all over Europe, begging readers to materially commit themselves to the cause upheld by Faitlovitch. Every time Nahoum's report was published, an article by some Rabbi or scholar followed more or less directly, articles in which Nahoum's work was criticised and Faitlovitch's was supported.¹⁰

The dispute between the *Alliance* and the *Hilfsverein* was not new. Ever since the founding of the *Hilfsverein* in 1901, there had been a great deal of tension between the two and many were convinced that the very founding of the *Hilfsverein* had been an act of separation within Jewry. The aim of both institutions was the material and spiritual support of Jews in Eastern Europe and in Asia. The antagonism between the two became so strong that it also reflected on secondary issues and small everyday episodes, such as the collection of funds for immigrants from Eastern Europe¹¹ let alone on an issue of primary importance such as that of the Falashas.

The matter finally subsided and the next piece of news appeared following the publication of Faitlovitch's book in 1910. In an article, I. Elbogen recalled that one century before, Ludwig Markus, a contemporary of Heinrich Heine (who gave him the nickname 'King of Abyssinia'), had aroused interest in the Falashas through his studies. The author thanked Faitlovitch in the name of world Jewry and pointed out that in the book the course and results of the expedition organised by the *Alliance* was disputed, Faitlovitch

having reached completely different conclusions. The author even asked for public pressure to be brought so that the *Alliance* might revise its position on the matter.¹² The dispute effectively produced some after-effects also in that year. Extracts from Faitlovitch's book were published and his work was praised, as was the work fostered by the local committees on behalf of the schools in Ethiopia.¹³

In 1911 the *Hilfsverein* announced that it now owned and directed the Edler-von-Lämelsschule in Jerusalem, run until then by the Frankfurt Association for the Education of Jewish Orphans in Palestine.¹⁴ The *Erstes Morgenblatt der Frankfurter Zeitung* published a long article on the native Jews of Ethiopia, emphasising that, following Faitlovitch's activity, the Christian mission was complaining of a marked decline in conversions.¹⁵

In 1913 readers of the German Jewish press were told of a new expedition to Ethiopia by Faitlovitch, accompanied by Gete Yirmiahu, his pupil.¹⁶ The situation that the two found in Ethiopia was reported and also how Gete immediately wrote a letter to Margulies and the Italian Pro-Falasha Committee begging for help.¹⁷ Soon after, the same newspaper published an article in which the church complained of the failed Christian mission in Ethiopia, fearing that Faitlovitch would even manage to take back the Falashas already converted by Flad. A circular letter of the same mission followed with a detailed description of the methods of conversion. The Jewish author commented that he hoped the Pro-Falasha Committee could also take up the suggestions regarding education.¹⁸

The next year saw a turning point, not just in the Falasha cause. It was immediately before the First World War. On August 1 that year, Germany declared war on Russia and two days later on France. The outbreak of the war hit most of the population like a cataclysm. Such an event had been unthinkable for many people and seemed to belong to an earlier age.¹⁹

In March *Der Israelit* published a series of letters sent through Faitlovitch to the European communities. They contained acknowledgement and gratitude. The *kahen* of Armatchoho²⁰ in particular thanked the distant brothers for having looked after the young Falashas and especially the son of his brother, 'Isac Salomon' (*sic*), and of having taught them Hebrew and the *Torah*. The most important event, however, was the news published by the *Allgemeine Zeitung für das Judentum* in March (1914) regarding the meeting of the Pro-Falasha Committee in Frankfurt, to which all the most important members of the international movement had been

invited. The agenda included the third journey of Faitlovitch to Ethiopia, the material maintenance of the Falasha people so that they would not fall into the hands of the missionaries, the establishment of a small school in the province of Dembea, of which Gete Yirmiahu, already educated in Europe and Palestine, was headmaster, and the persistent appeal by Margulies to transfer the head office of the Pro-Falasha movement to Frankfurt (*Ir woem b'Isroel [sic]*)²¹ because the Florence community was not a suitable place since they were numerically too few. After much discussion, it was decided to transfer the committee to Frankfurt under international management and under the chairmanship of Julius Goldschmidt.²² As I have already said, the times were anything but favourable for the Falasha cause or for the Falasha boys in Germany and Palestine, as may also be seen from Salomon's biography.²³ Germany lost the war and the consequences are known. The political-economic crisis should not be underestimated and Faitlovitch's cause consequently faded into the background at the very moment it seemed it might finally enjoy some success.²⁴

Problems of an ethical nature were now added to the practical ones. At the end of 1920 newspapers published reports that the *burschenschaften* (student associations) had forbidden their companions to wed 'Jewish or coloured women'. This news meant that Judaism had suddenly taken on racial connotations. Furthermore, the same page also stated that America had issued a ban on immigration.²⁵

The Falashas were still talked about, but in more lugubrious tones. It was mentioned in January 1921 that Faitlovitch, appointed by the American Joint (*sic*), had again gone to Ethiopia from Palestine, taking with him a doctor and medicines for a hospital and also laden with books.²⁶ In September the same newspaper mentioned a letter from Faitlovitch to the Pro-Falasha committee in Italy, in which he warned of the great danger hanging over the heads of the Falashas who were by then again being discriminated against for their religion and even being accused of ritual murder.²⁷ In November news arrived from Jerusalem that Faitlovitch had returned from the journey with four Falasha boys who were to be educated in Palestine. An official Ethiopian delegation also arrived shortly afterwards in Jerusalem, from whom Faitlovitch, in a reception he had organised, implored clemency and better conditions for his protégés. News came from Italy that King Vittorio Emanuele had received the Rabbi of Verona and asked him among other things of news about the Falashas.

In the meantime a singular affair had occurred in Vienna regarding a 'Jewish negro at the University of Vienna', as the press release headline stated, who was supposed to be a Jew from Ethiopia, a certain Tahara Mehmod Tahara (*sic*).²⁸ The youth had asked the Jewish university commission if he could become a member of a Jewish student association. When he was told that only Jews could be accepted as members, he replied that he was Jewish and was studying medicine at the university of Vienna. They had other students come who, talking in Arabic with the coloured youth, found that he was a descendent of a Falasha family of Ethiopia.

Apart from the obituary of Margulies in March 1923, the news in this entire period was limited to short releases of a few lines. The mission started to publish lists of the latest baptised Falashas – although the figures were promptly denied by Faitlovitch.

As pro-Falasha activity slowly resumed, a long article by I. Scheftelowitz was published in the *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, which, using more or less scientific arguments and based especially on the feast days, customs and external aspect, was designed to call into question the Jewishness of the Falashas.²⁹ The reaction of the press was not long in coming. Indignation was the most common feeling. In the *Wiener Morgenzeitung* on 3.5.1923, Dr Chajes replied in calm tones to Scheftelowitz, defining his arguments as hardly probable.

The article under discussion had served, however, to bring the subject matter to the notice of the press. In 1927 the *Gemeindeblatt der Israelitischen Religionsgemeinde zu Leipzig* published a statement by the German Pro-Falasha committee. It again spoke of Faitlovitch's work, also stating that one of the Falasha youths was at that moment in Leipzig to receive a western education. Mention was made of the plan to inaugurate a seminary in Addis Ababa for young teachers, in which a specialist from Germany was to work as teacher.³⁰

After four years, in 1931, Scheftelowitz took the opportunity to open up the Falasha question again when reviewing a book by Hermann Norden, *Durch Abessinien und Erythraä*,³¹ which described the journey made by the German-American author in 1929. The book was reviewed positively and acted as a stimulus for talking about the Falashas again, partly correcting and integrating his previous point of view. By then he agreed that it was the duty of all Jews in 'civilised' countries to support and encourage Faitlovitch's work, since the Falashas strongly wished to belong to the Jewish world. He also spoke about the school set up by

Faitlovitch in Addis Ababa and supported by the American Pro-Falasha Committee, the headmaster being a young Falasha called Taamrat Emanuel, who had been educated in Germany and in Italy. In conclusion he recalled Abraham Ben Meir, a Falasha boy he had known personally and who was then residing in Paris.³²

In the January 1932 issue of the *Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin*, Kurt Lubinski went over the history of the Falashas in a very long article furnished with many photographs. The article also recalled the 'Falasha mission' (*sic*) established by Faitlovitch in Addis Ababa, meticulously describing every detail of the structure, including the small synagogue. Following the article there was an editorial giving a brief chronological account of the development of the Falasha situation over the previous 25 years, from when Faitlovitch, with the help of Dr Paul Nathan of the *Hilfsverein*, had made his second journey to Ethiopia.³³

After a gap of another two years, the matter was taken up again in the *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, which had already talked about the Falashas at the beginning of the year and now reported that the feared conflict with Italy had broken out in Ethiopia. The young Falashas and their problems in tackling western culture were fully discussed in a subsequent article. This stimulated other articles, always furnished with photographs, concluding in December of the same year with an article which spoke of fights between Ethiopians and Falashas, in which the latter were compared to the Maccabees.³⁴

In conclusion it may be said that the German Jewish press proved highly favourable to the entire story of the Falashas. Despite the more than unfavourable times, German Jewry had tried to give its support to Faitlovitch both in Germany and in Palestine. The subject matter undoubtedly became an issue full of interest again in 1935 with the advent of Nazism in Germany, since that far-off African country was seen as a possible destination of emigration should the situation worsen – a hope abandoned after Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, even though Mussolini himself continued to talk about Ethiopia as a possible destination of emigration for Jews until around 1940.³⁵

Notes

- 1 J. Faitlovitch, *Quer durch Abessinien* (Berlin, 1910).
- 2 See E. Trevisan Semi's chapter in this book.
- 3 Cf. e.g. I. Grinfeld, 'Taamrat Emmanuel: Forerunner of the Revival of Ethiopian Jewry', in *Peamim* 22 (1985), pp. 59–74 (Hebrew); Sh. Weil, 'In Memoriam: Yona Bogale: One of the Leaders of the Beta Israel', in

- Peamim* 33 (1987), pp. 125–7 (Hebrew); E. Trevisan Semi, ‘From Wolleqa to Florence: The Tragic Story of Faitlovitch’s Pupil Hizkiahu Finkas’, in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 15–39; E. Trevisan Semi’s communication at the III International Conference of the Sosteje in Milan 1998; Sh. Weil, ‘The Life and Death of Salomon Isaac’, in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, pp. 40–9.
- 4 My research has unfortunately been limited to those newspapers and magazines of which I found the original copies or are on microfilm in Frankfurt University Library and which were not always complete for obvious reasons, even though the library has an extremely well-stocked catalogue. I thank Emanuela Trevisan Semi for having given me some important information and for having found some missing articles in the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Public Library of New York.
 - 5 Some articles on the Falasha had already appeared in the German press in the mid-nineteenth century, but they were sporadic. Cf. S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York/London, 1992), pp. 140. Cf. also W. Leslau, ‘A Supplementary Falasha Bibliography’, in *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 3 (1957), pp. 9–25.
 - 6 These facts are generally well known. For those who wish to have further information, however, see M. Brod, *Streitbares Leben* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979) pp. 231ff.; S. Sohn, *Der junge Max Brod: Expressionist, Zionist und Freund Franz Kafkas*, MA thesis (University of Venice, 1983), pp. 80ff.
 - 7 Cf. *Ost und West* 8:2 (1908), p. 140.
 - 8 Cf. *Jüdische Rundschau* 8:8, 21.2.1908, pp. 68ff. Cf. also E. Trevisan Semi, ‘Faitlovitch, Margulies and the Alliance: Which Educational Policy for the Ethiopian Jews in 1907?’, in A. Crown (ed.), *Noblesse Oblige: Scholarship and Community: Essays in Honour of David Kessler OBE* (London, 1998), pp. 145–59.
 - 9 Cf. *Jüdische Rundschau* 11:8 (13.3.1908), pp. 99ff.
 - 10 Cf. e.g. the article of the Chief Rabbi of Prague, Dr Emanuel Schwartz, in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 72:24 (17.6.1908), pp. 286ff. For the long dispute between the Alliance and the *Hilfsverein*, see the article by Z. Szajkowski, ‘Conflicts in the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Founding of the Anglo-Jewish Association, the Vienna Allianz and the Hilfsverein’, in *Jewish Social Studies* 19:1–2 (Jan.–Apr. 1957), pp. 29–50. Cf. also T. Parfitt, ‘Rabbi Nahoum’s Anthropological Mission to Ethiopia’, in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi, *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, pp. 1–14.
 - 11 Cf. *Jüdische Rundschau* 29 (17.7.1908), pp. 282ff.
 - 12 Cf. *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 74:30 (29.7.1910), pp. 352–4.
 - 13 Cf. *Der Israelit* 40 (7.10.1910), p. 3.
 - 14 Cf. *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 75:27 (7.7.1911), p. 316.
 - 15 Cf. F. Schwally, ‘Die einheimischen Juden Abessiniens’, in *Erstes Morgenblatt der Frankfurter Zeitung* 51:41 (10.2.1911), pp. 2ff.
 - 16 Also see Sigrid Sohn, *S. Schachnowitz’s Novel*, in this book, n. 8.
 - 17 Cf. *Der Israelit* 54:25 (19.6.1913), p. 3. Also see Sigrid Sohn, *S. Schachnowitz’s Novel*, in this book, n. 8.

- 18 Cf. *Der Israelit* 54:26 (10.7.1913), pp. 3ff.
- 19 Cf. S. Sohn, *Der junge Max Brod: Expressionist, Zionist und Freund Franz Kafkas*, pp. 75ff.
- 20 In *Der Israelit* 11 (2.3.1914), p. 3, the place is indicated as Armatshevo.
- 21 Transcription of the expression 'ir waem' in the yiddish pronunciation.
- 22 Cf. *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 78:12 (20.3.1914), pp. 140ff. Also see Sigrid Sohn, *S. Schachnowitz's Novel*, in this book, n. 7.
- 23 Cf. Sh. Weil, 'The Life and Death of Salomon Isaac', p. 40–9.
- 24 I found some community balance sheets in the Frankfurt town and university libraries, which go up to 1916 inclusive. An estimate for 200 marks and an expense incurred in 1914 for another 200 marks are to be found for the Pro Falasha Committee under item 25, chapter 18 of the balance sheet of the Israelite community in Frankfurt am Main for 1916, while the expense was recorded as being suppressed in 1916.
- 25 Cf. *Der Israelit* 61:52 (30.12.1920), p. 2.
- 26 Cf. *ibid.* 62:4 (27.1.1921), p. 5; cf. *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 85:3 (4.2.1921), p. 4; cf. also Sigrid Sohn, *S. Schachnowitz's Novel*, in this book, n. 10.
- 27 Cf. *Der Israelit* 61:35 (1.9.1921), p. 5.
- 28 '(Ein jüdischer Neger an der Wiener Universität.) Dieser Tage erschien in Wien ein Neger vor dem jüdischen Hochschulausschuss und sprach die Bitte aus, man möge ihn als Mitglied aufnehmen. Als man ihm erklärt hatte, dass in einer jüdisch-studentischen Korporation nur Juden Aufnahme fänden, erwiderte er in einem gebrochenen Deutsch, er heiße Tahara Mehomed Tahara, sei Israelit und studiere an der medizinischen Fakultät der Wiener Universität. Seine Eltern wohnen derzeit in Alexandrien. Der Hochschulausschuss liess einige jüdische Studenten aus Palästina und Ägypten kommen, die sich mit dem Neger in arabischer Sprache verständigt haben. Es stellte sich heraus, dass der Negerstudent tatsächlich einer israelitischen Negerfamilie in Abessinien entstammte.' Cf. *ibid.* 55:16 (19.4.1923), p. 5.
- 29 Cf. I. Scheftelowitz, 'Sind die Falaschas Juden?', in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 67:31 (1923), pp. 244–9.
- 30 *Gemeindeblatt der Israelitischen Religionsgemeinde zu Leipzig* 3:20 (20.5.1927), p. 2.
- 31 H. Norden, *Durch Abessinien und Eryträa* (Berlin, 1930), translated from English by K. Soll.
- 32 'Ein anderer intelligenter junger Falascha, Abraham Ben Meir studiert jetzt in Paris. Dessen brennender Wunsch ist es, zu seinem Volk bald zurückzukehren, um sein in Europa sich angeeignetes jüdisches Wissen ihm zu vermitteln.' Cf. I. Scheftelowitz, 'Hermann Norden', in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 75 (1931), pp. 472–6. Abraham Ben Meir died in Paris in 1933, cf. E. Trevisan Semi, 'From Wolleqa to Florence', p. 37, n. 33.
- 33 K. Lubinski, 'Die jüdischen Falascha Abessiniens', in *Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin* 22:1 (1932), pp. 10–12.
- 34 *Israelitisches Familienblatt* 37:8 (21.2.1935), p. 14; 37:46 (14.11.1935); 37:51 (19.12.1935).
- 35 Cf. the article by S. Minerbi, 'Il progetto di un insediamento ebraico in Etiopia (1936–1943)', in *Storia contemporanea* 17:6 (Roma, December 1986), pp. 1083–137.

ETHIOPIAN JEWS IN EUROPE

Taamrat Emmanuel in Italy and
Makonnen Levi in England

Emanuela Trevisan Semi

In the early 1900s, 25 boys from the Falasha or *Beta Israel* community,¹ some of whom were related, migrated from Abyssinia to Palestine and Europe to be educated in western Judaism and ‘modern civilisation’. There they had to cope with the demoralisation and loneliness typical of migrants adapting to a new environment without the support of their community. Many became ill with pleurisy, tuberculosis, depression : a few succeeded and a few died.

The boys who came to Europe were welcomed by local Jewish communities and individual rabbis in different ways. At times they strongly supported the efforts the youths were making to adapt to the western world and at others they abandoned them for lack of money, interest and commitment.

Some of the youths were educated in Palestine, but the majority were scattered throughout France, Italy (including the colony of Rhodes), Germany, Austria, Switzerland, England, Serbia and Egypt. Some were moved between various countries; they contracted illnesses and attempts were made to allow them to change climate for the sake of their health.²

Ten boys were educated in Palestine: six from 1909 onwards in the Lämél school, a school belonging to *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden* in Jerusalem, established by orthodox German Jews.³ The other four boys were under the care of the Professional School of the *Alliance* in Jerusalem from 1926. These boys were generally in touch with the Ethiopian Christian community in Jerusalem, and

were less isolated than the boys in Europe because they lived together with other Falasha youths.

This chapter will deal first with Jacques Faitlovitch,⁴ the man who took the boys out of Ethiopia; then I intend to focus my attention on two boys: Taamrat Emmanuel who was trained in Paris (1905–7) and in Florence (1907–20) and Makonnen Levi who was trained in London (1927–31).⁵

The role of Faitlovitch

Faitlovitch's main interest was to promote and implement educational projects among the *Beta Israel*. From the beginning of his activity in Ethiopia until his death, he worked with great determination and energy towards this goal. In East Africa, the concrete result of Faitlovitch's educational activity was the establishment of the school in the Dembea (a region of Ethiopia) in 1913, and it culminated in the foundation of the Addis Ababa school in 1923. Faitlovitch believed that education was necessary to lift the group out of its isolation and restore contact with world Judaism in order to bind, maintain and regenerate what he called a lost branch of Judaism.

Yaacov/Jacques Faitlovitch (1881–1955) was a pupil of Joseph Halévy at the Sorbonne in Paris at the turn of the century, but originally came from Lodz in Poland. He became famous for his work in Abyssinia, and was even known as the 'Father of the Falashas'. A neo-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jew, he was also a universalist convinced of the need to widen the traditional confines of Judaism by seeking groups of people with distant Jewish origins or by following the paths of proselytism. Linked to Nahum Sluschtz and to the Parisian circles, he shared their pan-Hebrew vision and their adventurous spirit. He was also a Zionist, linked to the future President of Israel, Itzhak Ben Zvi as well as to revisionist circles.⁶ He settled in Tel Aviv in the 1930s.

Joseph Halévy, his teacher in Paris, was the well-known traveller and scholar of Semitic languages who, on his return to Paris in 1868 after his travels in Abyssinia, brought with him Daniel, the first *Beta Israel* to come to Europe. In his memoir Halévy writes that Matamma (a town near the Sudan border) was to become the central point of activity for the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (AIU) 'whenever this Association shall deem it fit to undertake the regeneration of our Abyssinian brethren'.⁷ Regeneration, or the ideology of regeneration, played an important role for the network

of *Alliance* schools in the Middle East and North Africa, and also for the movement created by Joseph Halévy and Faitlovitch in favour of the *Beta Israel*.⁸ Behind the network of *Alliance* schools lay the perceived need for the regeneration of the Jewish communities, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. The belief in the importance of education was typical of mid-nineteenth-century French society in general and of the European Jewish communities in particular. The fight against prejudice and backwardness was considered a moral and religious duty of members of the *Alliance*. But the AIU, which had a strong sense of solidarity with Jews in suffering, also had a reaction of ‘embarrassment and distaste when faced with oriental Jews [who were] perceived as rough, superstitious and ignorant’, as Aron Rodrigue has pointed out.⁹ The Oriental Jew was a sort of mirror in which the enlightened and modern Jew contemplated the stigma of ‘difference’ – precisely what he was trying to conceal. This ambivalent attitude showed by *Alliance* members towards Oriental Jews may explain why they were so reluctant to act for the Jews of Ethiopia.

The path Daniel, the first *Beta Israel* boy to arrive in Europe, was expected to follow was that of full assimilation to Western Judaism and acceptance of the ideology of emancipation followed by the French Jews through the AIU in Paris. But Daniel was not accepted in the *Alliance* schools in Paris. He was sent back to Alexandria in Egypt where he died shortly afterwards. The *Alliance* claimed that he was a slave bought in a slave market in Africa and not a Jew.¹⁰ Faitlovitch followed in the footsteps of Halévy. He spent most of his life between Ethiopia and the West, becoming a veritable Jewish missionary, and he considered the rescue of the Lost Tribes in Africa and elsewhere his real *raison d’être*. Each time he returned from his numerous trips to Ethiopia, Halévy’s pupil was almost always accompanied by adolescents whom he then tried to place in a Jewish centre or with a rabbi somewhere in Europe or Palestine. The destination and the fate of the boys were often decided during the journey from Ethiopia to Port Said. Faitlovitch was a controversial figure: some considered him an annoying schemer, incompetent and opportunistic; others saw him as a true missionary and idealist. Here are two contrasting descriptions of Faitlovitch from prestigious representatives of American Judaism.

In August 1921, Luis Marshall, then President of the American Jewish Committee, described Faitlovitch’s arrival from Abyssinia to Jerusalem, penniless and accompanied by several Falasha youths, in very critical terms:

It is a story of ineptitude. Nothing has been accomplished. There is nothing to show for our expenditure. He has taken a number of gentlemen on an excursion to Abyssinia and as soon as they get there paid their expenses for a return trip. He jumped from Italy to Palestine, from Palestine to Abyssinia. Now he is planning to jump back to Palestine, and again to Abyssinia. He has the activity of a flea, and so far as I have been able to observe he likewise possesses some of the annoying qualities of that insect. I do not understand on what possible theory he is gallivanting around the Orient with the children of whom he speaks.¹¹

Some months later David De Sola Pool, then US representative of the Zionist Commission in Jerusalem to help implement the Balfour Declaration, after meeting Faitlovitch in Jerusalem, described him in quite different tones:

Faitlovitch is here in Jerusalem, fundless and owing money for his hotel expenses . . . I regard him as a rare type in our Jewish life. He is perhaps the only missionary we have, and I cannot but think that he has devoted himself to the cause of the Falashas in a spirit of real idealism.¹²

In actual fact Faitlovitch attempted to involve European Jewish Communities in his educational work until the period following the First World War. He found considerable support for the education of the young *Beta Israel* in Germany right until the moment when economic conditions in the country became so serious as to render the continuation of the support increasingly difficult. In 1927 Faitlovitch wrote to the head of the school in Frankfurt attended by Yona Bogale,¹³ one of the youths who would later become a great leader of the Ethiopian community:

For 22 years I have considered the aim of my life to be to awaken the whole world Jewish population to the Falasha question. Both at home and abroad committees have been formed to provide significant means, both from the Jewish viewpoint and from the generic cultural view, to actively promote the Falasha question. The war destroyed the work so laboriously carried out and devalued the money collected in Germany. . . . Two and a half years ago I managed to have a Falasha boy settled in your institute. With enormous

pleasure I noted that, even though the boy had no cultural education and very little preparation in any field, and did not even know how to count from 1 to 10, today he is sufficiently educated as to master the German language and has also reached a certain mastery in other scientific subjects that corresponds to (the ninth year of) secondary school. . . . Leaving aside the boy's scientific progress, he has also laid the basis for a religious education so that once he has finished his schooling and returns to Abyssinia he will be able to live and demonstrate the Jewish religion to his fellows and acquire, or re-acquire, numerous Falashas as brothers of world Judaism.¹⁴

At the end of the 1920s he was anxious about the Jewish future in Europe and he turned his attention to America.

In 1929 he wrote:

I may informally opine that an American education would be very desirable for the more capable of your students and that such students upon their return to this country could be of material assistance in extending American culture and prestige in Ethiopia'.¹⁵

He did not, however, succeed.

The scant American participation was dictated by the greater distance – and therefore by the higher costs in sending the youths – and also by disagreement regarding the educational policies to undertake and by doubts of Faitlovitch's organisational capacities.¹⁶

When Cyrus Adler, chairman of the American Pro-Falasha Committee, explained the lack of interest in the United States regarding increased involvement in education, he expressed a different view on the paths to follow. He said he was against the scattering of the youths and believed they would be better concentrated in a single area, in Palestine:

My own opinion as to Doctor Faitlovitch is that it would be best if he could find employment in the Oriental Institute in Jerusalem. As a student in the Ethiopic dialects, they cannot find his superior. Moreover, it would be in accord with his plan of educating teachers for the Falashas in Palestine, which would seem to me much more rational than scattering them all over the world to bring back to

Abyssinia the indigestion of many cultures. We do not want to make cosmopolitans of the Falashas, but rather simply to give these folk the opportunity once again to know Judaism in their own environment.¹⁷

Perhaps Adler's view simply stemmed from his not wanting to be too involved in Falasha matters, but certainly the idea of scattering the boys all over the world gave rise to many problems and created bitterness, ill health and disappointment amongst them.

According to the first essays published on the boys trained in Palestine (Solomon Isaac, Gete Yirmiahu, Yona Bogale),¹⁸ we can assume that, except Solomon Isaac who was very isolated, they seemed less lonely than the others trained in Europe. Some of the boys who were settled in Europe later wished to move to Jerusalem, but the bad climate as well as difficult economic and general conditions in Palestine prevented Faitlovitch from satisfying their wishes.

However, in Palestine, unlike in Europe, it was not possible to count on help from individuals and institutions. Moreover, the school in Jerusalem where the first boys had been educated, Tushia School, had closed. On several occasions Faitlovitch considered the possibility of opening a school for the Falashas in Palestine, but the idea came to nothing. In a memorandum presented in New York as early as 1922, he had stated:

It is my view that the best place for such a school would be Palestine. This is not very far from Abyssinia and the contact with the Jews of the Holy Land would be a tremendous advantage in the training of Falashas for teaching their people at home. This school may later develop into a centre of instruction for Jews from other isolated countries.¹⁹

In 1938 he once again seriously considered this hypothesis as the situation in Ethiopia, occupied at the time by the Italians, had become critical.²⁰

But the difficulties in Palestine were hardly less than those encountered elsewhere. From the beginning of his work Faitlovitch tried to use all his personal contacts, especially among Orthodox rabbis in Europe, to convince them of the importance of the task he had taken on in the name of Jewish solidarity, of the fight needed to prevent the work of the Protestant missions that were very active converting the Falashas in Ethiopia, and of its importance for

Jewish honour and prestige. So he did with both Taamrat and Makonnen. Taamrat was educated by Rabbi Zvi Margulies in Florence and Makonnen by Levine, a headmaster of a Jewish School in London.

Taamrat Emmanuel's life

Taamrat Emmanuel (c.1888–1963) was born in Azazo, a village near Gondar. He was the son of Terunesh, a noble Christian woman,²¹ and Fanta Dawit, a Falasha²² who converted to Christianity and took the name of Gabra Maryam. The question of the names of Falashas is controversial. J. Tubiana wrote that unlike what happens in the Amhara name system, in which the child's name precedes the father's, amongst the Agaw (the Falashas are generally considered of Agaw origin) the father's name is put before the child's.²³ Tubiana quotes the case of Taamrat's father (Fanta Dawit) whose own name was Dawit and whose paternal name was Fanta. When he entered the service of the future Emperor Theodorus, he stopped calling himself Dawit and took on the Christian name of Gabra Maryam (Servant of Mary) to better pass unnoticed. Tubiana concluded that further research was necessary as to the origin of the two names of Taamrat Emmanuel, as neither is his father's name. I noticed through further investigation that Falashas did adopt the Amhara name system but also that Faitlovitch made a significant change: he changed the second name, the father's name.

Through one Amharic letter written by Faitlovitch we see that Taamrat was the first name of the boy. In this letter, Faitlovitch mentioned Taamrat Emmanuel as Taamrat Dawit (and Gete Yirmiahu as Gete Wondmagegnehu).²⁴ The second name, Dawit, was his father's name before his conversion. Faitlovitch used to replace the paternal name of the young boys he took with him, in order to educate them in Europe or Palestine, with a Jewish name and to add it as the second name. So Taamrat Dawit became Taamrat Emmanuel, Gete Wondmagegnehu became Gete Yirmiahu, and Makonnen, son of Gobiaw become Makonnen Levi.

Taamrat as an adolescent was 'discovered' in the Swedish mission in Asmara and converted to Judaism by Jacques Faitlovitch during his first trip to Abyssinia in 1904–5. After studying in Paris (two years) and in Florence (ten years) he left Italy in 1920 for Ethiopia where he was appointed as headmaster of the school created by Faitlovitch in 1923. He stayed in Ethiopia, except for one year he

spent in New York (1931), until 1937 when he was obliged to flee under the Italian occupation. He repaired to Egypt, which he left in 1940 for Sudan in order to help the Emperor to come back to Ethiopia. He was *attaché culturel* in the Ethiopian Legation in Paris (from 1948 to 1951) and he died in Tel Aviv in 1963.²⁵

The encounter that took place between Faitlovitch and Taamrat in the Abyssinia of the early 1900s was a coming together of two extremely distant universes, rich in reciprocal mythical symbologies and representations that set in motion certain processes, the developments of which are still discernible today.

Western ideas had first made themselves apparent to Taamrat through the Protestant missionaries and their schools in the city of Asmara and were tinged with the Italian culture of the colonies. When he was sent to Paris to continue his studies, he was rapidly influenced by the European and Jewish cultures he found in the *École Normale* of the Alliance. This of course was a culture imbued with the recurrent notions of 'race'. The *Bulletin de l'A.I.U.* described the arrival of Taamrat and his companion Gete Yirmiahu in Paris, and noted: 'One did not quite know what to do with them when they arrived in Paris. Although they are black-skinned, they do not have the flattened mask of the African negro'²⁶ perhaps to reassure the reader that these 'blacks' were of a superior strain.

Taamrat had disembarked at Marseilles on his way to be educated in Paris, where he arrived on 11 August 1905. He was the living proof of a mythical African Orient in which Judaism could enact a process of universal purification. He himself, however, was barely aware of the 'regeneration' project which involved himself, his companion and the many other young men who would follow. After only two years in France, he was sent to Italy. In Faitlovitch's view the *Alliance* school in Auteil had an insufficiently Jewish atmosphere and was too western, and he preferred the climate of the Rabbinical college in Florence, at the time run by Rabbi Zvi Margulies, founder of the first of the pro-Falasha committees.²⁷ In Florence Taamrat received the title of *maskil* (first degree of Rabbinical instruction) in 1915 and of *shohet* (ritual butcher) in 1916. In these years, just before the outbreak of the First World War, the values of democracy and liberalism, which had been advocated by the likes of Giuseppe Mazzini and Carlo Cattaneo in the mid-nineteenth century, were still considered part of a shared heritage. Trapped in Italy by the outbreak of the war, Taamrat remained until 1920, an eyewitness to the unrest and upheaval of the period.

Taamrat between two cultures

The world in which Taamrat lived was therefore that of the cultured Judaism and Zionism of Margulies (1858–1922), Chajes (1876–1927), the future Rabbi of Vienna, and of Faitlovitch; but it was also that of the assimilated culture of Italian Jewry and the values of Italy of the period. Taamrat had the opportunity to meet Italian scholars of Ethiopia like Enrico Cerulli and Carlo Conti Rossini as well as to read Italian Ethiopian studies, and to appreciate their rigour and seriousness. Taamrat's mythical 'West' with all its positive connotations had to come to terms with the rapid changes taking place first in Italy and then in Ethiopia, and ended in disillusion and disappointment.

Taamrat was nominated head of the school founded by Faitlovitch in Addis Ababa in 1923, and from Ethiopia continued to observe with great lucidity and disenchantment the development of certain ideologies in Italy and their repercussions in Ethiopia, which contrasted starkly with the utopian vision that was to inspire him until the end.

Taamrat may have hoped deep down that he would be exonerated from a commitment that had been a burden to him since his time in Florence and about which he was extremely sceptical. His scepticism played an important role in the decisions he made against Faitlovitch. Responding to the initiatives which, even during the First World War, Faitlovitch had undertaken in Switzerland, Taamrat wrote:

I congratulate you for your work . . . I lack however the animating force, perhaps also the faith, to follow in your giant footsteps: it seems beyond my strength to undertake the affairs of the Falashas, not to mention your titanic projects . . . We will discuss it after the war, let us for now try to live.²⁸

In October 1936, after dealings with the Italian occupation in Addis Ababa, Taamrat dreamed of devoting himself to literature and leading 'a Bohemian life'.²⁹ He refused Faitlovitch's proposal to meet in Egypt, declaring he wished to abandon his post as headmaster. He wrote:

Thank you for all that you have done for me from my childhood. Now, heart and mind order me imperiously to no longer correspond because of the miseries of reckoning

debit and credit with friends. That my very modest work has kept the friends of the Falashas busy I have known since I was twenty-five. But I hoped that, in return, my activity might merit the attention of my protectors, masters and friends. Instead the best (years) of my life have passed in enforced idleness.³⁰

In actual fact Taamrat strongly doubted that Faitlovitch's 'holy work' and his enormous efforts would produce any successful results. In a letter to the Director of *Israel*³¹ in February 1926 (the Directors then were Dante Lattes and Alfonso Pacifici), he freely expressed his reservations and wrote:

whereas as much as the founder of the movement (Faitlovitch) has new skies and new lands in his sights, where the people to whom he has dedicated his energy will one day form a single body of universal Judaism and will go forth together sharing their joys and their sorrows, I who have followed him closely for over twenty years, am unable to abandon my doubts.³²

He was not sure whether Jewry – Italian in this case – really wished to recognise that there were Jews in Abyssinia. His conclusion was that if the work had continued to vegetate or had ceased completely, 'starting it (would have been) more damaging than fruitful'.

In fact Taamrat had never shared Faitlovitch's utopian dreams. Many dramatic events occurred that affected Falasha projects: the economic crisis of 1929 and difficulties in collecting funds amongst American Jews, the rise of Hitler and the gradual destruction of German Jewry (which had shown more solidarity towards the Falashas than any others), the occupation of Ethiopia by a racist and anti-Semitic regime, and finally the *shoah*. Taamrat often mentioned the misfortune linked to the Falashas and to those who tried to help them. In 1918, he wrote: 'As soon as one begins to talk about the Falashas, wars break out and if anyone . . . becomes particularly interested, something terrible happens to them'.³³

Taamrat reproached Faitlovitch for following a project that was too ambitious and unrealistic as far as the education of young people was concerned, for Faitlovitch believed the approach should be more cultural than professional in order to train future teachers, rabbis, doctors and lawyers, and he proposed an educational model

that corresponded to a strictly European Jewish example. Taamrat also criticised him for not giving full recognition to the ancient Falasha traditions.

Taamrat often used the arguments put forward by C. A. Viterbo,³⁴ who did not agree with the short- and medium-term pro-Falasha projects, as counter-proposals to Faitlovitch's ideas. He therefore declared himself in favour of moving the school from Addis Ababa to Gondar so that it would be closer to the regions inhabited by the Falashas, and also approved of a school with an artisan-professional approach to guarantee the advancement and survival of his people.

Viterbo had been preoccupied by that fact that the Falasha school was situated in Addis Ababa, far from the pupils' families, and criticised Faitlovitch's decision in which 'the convenience of a delegation before an emperor prevails', and which ignored the consequences that would arise from studying so far from home.³⁵ In the report of his trip, Viterbo wrote that the Falashas:

must not become little Europeans. They cannot all become knowledgeable or great scholars. Instead the school must be designed for a large group of pupils and must take into account the fact that they must return to be peasants, shepherds, blacksmiths and artisans like their fathers and grandfathers. The aim of the school must not be to transform the lives of the Falashas, but to help them to improve, both for their personal and for the general benefit.³⁶

On this question, Taamrat quoted Viterbo's opinions in his letters to Faitlovitch: 'the school that Viterbo sees for the Falashas concentrates on agriculture and manual labour'.³⁷ And Taamrat added that the Italian lawyer had not been surprised at certain local customs, but had even appreciated their unusualness. Thus, using Viterbo's opinions, he expressed his own thoughts on the issue, recalling that:

(Viterbo) was by no means scandalised over certain customs . . . which would seem to be in open contradiction with some post-Biblical or Talmudic institutions, as an extremist would be. On the contrary, open-minded as he is, he wishes some of the particularly good customs could be developed. And I agree with him, especially regarding the prayer ceremonies.³⁸

The disagreement over where the school should be situated became most bitter when the disagreement between Faitlovitch and the Union of Italian Israelite Communities reached its peak in April 1937, when Viterbo returned to Italy.³⁹

Italy had given Taamrat the language that permitted him to communicate with the world; Italian was his favourite language and the one he used most, with sporadic use also of French. It is true, as Grinfeld notes, that Taamrat's link with Italian culture had already begun before he came to Europe, when he was a student in the Swedish mission in Asmara, then an Italian colony.⁴⁰ In 1931, when he followed Faitlovitch to the United States to convince the American Jews of the importance of providing financial support for the American Pro-Falasha Committee, he gave his speech in Italian, an oddity the press did not fail to point out:

An Abyssinian student, the first Jew from that country to step on American soil, was present and spoke to the guests. His speech, all in Italian, was translated by Mrs Kavovitz, the only woman of the 800 present who could speak Italian.⁴¹

That event marked the beginning of the interest shown by the American philanthropist Lillia Kavovitz (later Kavey) for the Abyssinian Jews, which lasted until the 1970s. It was Mrs Kavey who, 40 years later, wrote: 'While studying in Italy, he and a young Italian Jewess fell very much in love. She wanted him to marry her, but his decision was one of self-sacrifice'.⁴² It is not known whether this somewhat romanticised interpretation of the events was in fact true. It is, however, certain that in Faitlovitch's diary for 1920 he mentioned a series of clashes with Taamrat.⁴³ Faitlovitch had just arrived in Italy from Switzerland, where he had fled during the war. He then planned to set out for Palestine and Abyssinia, but had to fight to persuade Taamrat to go with him on his fourth journey to Ethiopia. In Florence, after a month of discussion, Taamrat gave in and agreed to set sail with him from Naples. In addition, we do know that Taamrat never married or had a family.

The Italy of those years remained particularly dear to Taamrat, and as we have seen Italian was perhaps the language dearest to him. He wrote in the elegant handwriting of the early 1900s, in a cultured Italian in which he occasionally made use of Hebrew, mainly to record festivities, rituals, greetings and at times discuss a delicate issue, while he employed Amharic to describe people,

places and objects. Some of his scientific writings were also published in Italian. And – an example of Italian oddity – when in 1938 he fled to Egypt to escape the likely execution awaiting him in Ethiopia after he was suspected of involvement in the attempt on the life of Rodolfo Graziani, the Italian Governor, the Italian embassy used him as a translator,⁴⁴ perhaps forgetting that he had been wanted in Ethiopia a year earlier.

Grinfeld claims that the privileged link Taamrat had with the Italians was due to the fact that he held Italian citizenship. It was, however, more than that; it was linked with his active and daily identification with Italy. He identified for example with the young Italian Jews who died at the front in the First World War or with those who killed themselves when the racial laws were promulgated. He was fond of certain representatives of Italian Jewry, such as the lawyer Raffaele Ottolenghi, the treasurer of the Italian Pro-Falasha committee (who also left him a small inheritance) or the Rabbis who had introduced him to Rabbinical Judaism, like Margulies or Chajes. At Chajes's death in December 1927, Taamrat wrote that he had spent 'the best time of his life with him' and that he owed his knowledge of Hebrew and of Italian to him because:

when I went to study Hebrew with him, it was quite impossible for him (using a strange, original and pleasant method) not to interest me in Italian philology, history, literature and culture in general. I owe to him alone my love for Zion.⁴⁵

Closely linked to Chajes, Taamrat tried to help his grand-daughter, who was in financial difficulties, when he was in Paris in 1949 as cultural attaché to the Ethiopian embassy. He remained close to Viterbo who – asking Taamrat's help in autumn/winter 1936–7 in his search for the Falasha communities spread throughout Ethiopia – had quite by chance saved him by taking him away from Ethiopia when the attempt on Graziani's life took place. It was with great irony that he commented on Viterbo's presence in Ethiopia, once the Italian occupation had ended: 'Together with the Fascists the Lord also sent me Viterbo'. He was an enthusiastic reader of and subscriber to the Italian Jewish newspaper *Israel*, 'a romantic recollection of my youth', as he wrote in a letter in which he asked Viterbo to continue sending it to him in Paris.⁴⁶

The Italy with which Taamrat identified himself was not the colonial Italy of East Africa. From that Italy he fled. Indeed the

Italian Fascist and colonial regime soon reared its head in Ethiopia itself. Yet while the colours of shirts were being changed in Italy and military uniforms were being donned, Taamrat conserved the liberal education he had received at the beginning of the century and interpreted the 'Fascist madness' through those eyes. Writing to Faitlovitch in the days after the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa, Taamrat censured the transformation of people he knew with subtle irony. He commented, for example, on the arrival of the Italian Ethiopian scholar Martino Mario Moreno in these terms: 'I don't know whether you remember Dr. Moreno, the learned Ethiopian scholar. Now he is no longer a scholar of the Orient or of Ethiopia: I have seen him dressed as a warrior.'⁴⁷

In a letter dated 12 June 1936, a month after the Italian entry into Addis Ababa, he wrote that the people were perplexed about the Italian attitude, which was apparently mild: 'Who knows how long this kindness will last?'. Taamrat had no illusions about the reality of the regime, about which he had formed a sufficiently clear idea during his conversations with various Italians. Quoting a discussion with Mario Appelius, a very popular journalist of the period, he had confided to Faitlovitch that 'many hours of conversation with him left me with the idea of a radical change in Italian thinking'.⁴⁸

Economic difficulties were also not slow in coming: 'Life is become excessively expensive. The *thaler* has disappeared, the *lira* is not accepted by my countrymen';⁴⁹ and he therefore saw his pupils employed as servants by the Italian colonists.

Censorship and control of the press created trouble for Taamrat, not only in terms of his links with the Italian authorities, but also in terms of his relations with Faitlovitch. One episode in particular, described by Grinfeld,⁵⁰ which led to the closure of the Falasha school in Addis Ababa in March 1927, had unpleasant repercussions. An anti-Fascist article published in France had been translated into Amharic⁵¹ together with a brief introduction on Mussolini, both written by Taamrat; this unleashed the furious reaction of the Italian Legation⁵² and the consequent closure of the school. One sentence in the introduction read: 'The Italian people have considerable respect for and appreciation of liberty. But we who know this country are amazed to see a dictator calmly reigning over these people.'⁵³ While Taamrat was in Aden getting a visa that would permit him to disembark in Egypt (according to colonial law, as an Ethiopian he did not have the right to hold a passport), after the terrible reprisals that followed the attempted assassination of Graziani, he was granted an interview with the Italian consul. As

the head of the school in Addis Ababa, he rightly suspected that he was wanted by the Italian authorities in Ethiopia and, fearing to return to Addis Ababa, was seeking an escape route. He described the meeting in a long extraordinary letter written from Alexandria in Egypt once he had reached safety. Taamrat's feelings of disappointment and irritation at the meanness and presumption of an Italy that differed so greatly from the one he had known strike readers of his correspondence who are aware of the privileged relations that linked him to Italy. Again in May 1936, just after the Italian occupation (letter of 24.5.1936), he hoped to leave Ethiopia: 'How much I have sacrificed for this Ethiopia' and two months later he added: 'my only hope is to end my life in Italy or somewhere else' (letter of 17.7.1936).

During his conversation with the consul, Taamrat⁵⁴ had to reply to certain insinuations, which he did with his usual frankness. Understanding that precise accusations were being levelled against him, he declared:

Until 5 May 1936 I was against the Italian occupation, but . . . afterwards given the situation I resigned myself and no matter how difficult it was to work under a dictatorship – naturally I could never have collaborated – I decided with great patience to take up my teaching job again.

The consul then asked him why he had been against the Italian occupation and Taamrat simply replied that it was because he was an Abyssinian, and to the question that followed as to why he was against the dictatorship, he replied: 'Yes, but yes! And that was your fault, or rather thanks to you. I was young when I went to Italy where I was taught about democratic systems and learned to detest both Caesar and Napoleon. I have read and admire your Mazzini.' Taking advantage of the situation to express his opinion, he denounced the colonial regime:

We natives have been abandoned to wretches who treat us like dogs. And tell me why have you come to Abyssinia? To make us happy? . . . What are you doing in Spain? You have massacred us because we are barbarians, and who are the barbarians in Spain? The Franco–Anglo–Russians or you and Hitler with your regimes? . . . For me any civilisation is barbarous when it can use nothing but the spilling of innocent blood to teach its civilisation. And I again repeat

these are ideas I have learned in no other place but Italy. Now at fifty I cannot rid myself of these ideas, even if you, my teachers, change your flag and shirt every day.

Increasingly carried away, Taamrat recalled the massacre of 32 Falashas, shot by 'a small officer, a black shirt'. The consul then defended himself, saying that Italy had never been anti-Semitic (the conversation took place about a year before the promulgation of the racial laws in Italy) and used as proof the fact that several Jews had been working in the consulate for some years. At that moment two of them working in the clerk's office (one was an Adenite Jew) suddenly entered the room anxiously repeating 'We are very happy! We are happy with the Italians!' whereupon Taamrat replied with sarcasm 'Congratulations, you happy men!', and quickly left the consulate.⁵⁵

The image of Italy as a bearer of the values of liberty and democracy clashed with the other new rough and aggressive image, creating a painful conflict that Taamrat found hard to absorb. He retained his critical judgement of what was happening in Italy and noted that most of Italian Jewry wasted its time trying to adapt to the new regime, and also lost its ability to critically judge events and failed to prepare their defences while it was still possible and were thus caught unawares.

Taamrat had understood that he risked compromising his Italian friends and the pupils in Addis Ababa when he took refuge in Egypt and had chosen to neither write nor reply to letters. He justified his silence with Faitlovitch after the promulgation of the racial laws, ironically parodying a verse from the Bible: 'I said I do not write, and it was so. And the evening and the morning, and then the evening and then the night, and Taamrat saw everything . . . and, behold, it was good.'⁵⁶ Taamrat had not shared the optimism concerning Fascism held by Viterbo. Nor did he believe in the reassurances about the good intentions of the regime regarding the Falashas. After the promulgation of the racial laws, Taamrat found some satisfaction in writing to Viterbo reminding him that, in the end, the facts had proved him right.⁵⁷ In an extremely harsh and bitter letter written in January 1939, he observed that the Jews in Italy were experiencing 'moments of trial when very few are prepared for the battle . . . they are dazed at the moment and will need time to recover'.⁵⁸ Taamrat also expected little good to come from the Italian colonialist 'aggressors' and '*camorristi*',⁵⁹ and his correspondence with Faitlovitch and Viterbo reveals this on several

occasions. In a letter he recalls that ‘during the short time I was in Addis Ababa in their company I observed ignoble acts regarding contracts carried out by people I considered *spotless*’. In particular he described an episode of fraud committed by Italian occupiers (with the help of an Italian bank) against N. J. Rieger, a German Jewish doctor who had studied in Frankfurt am Main and (in 1933) fled to Ethiopia, where he opened a clinic.⁶⁰

In 1939, when Faitlovitch was planning to travel to Italy from the United States where he was hoping to get help from the Italian Union of Jewish Congregations, Taamrat – who had observed the reality of the Italian situation with a much more careful and critical eye than Faitlovitch – considered the trip both dangerous and completely useless: ‘as regards your hard work, I do not know what can be expected other than absolutely nothing, which I regret I say almost cynically’.⁶¹ The Italian Jews, who had already been excluded from all activities, would find themselves completely trapped just a few months later. The great clarity Taamrat displayed on various occasions invites reflection on how much an eye moving between two cultures can perceive.

Taamrat managed to bring together the best of the values he had received from the two cultures. He was supportive of and loyal to his teacher, who introduced him to European and American Judaism, and to those who exposed him to the liberal, democratic Italian culture. However, he was also loyal to himself and respectful of his own dignity. Taamrat never forgot he had been born an Ethiopian and could not tolerate seeing the contempt shown towards his fellow-countrymen by the occupying foreigners from a country caught up by ‘Fascist madness’. He refused to join Faitlovitch in Palestine right at the moment when, after great difficulty, he had been granted an entrance visa by the British. He chose instead to work for his own country, together with other Ethiopians who had taken refuge in Egypt, to aid the re-entry of the Negus to Ethiopia.

The life of the man who had arrived in Florence in the early 1900s at the age of 19, full of hopes and dreams, and who died in Tel Aviv in 1963 embittered and disappointed, thus mirrors some of the transformations that the *Beta Israel* would have to face during this century.

Makonnen Levi, an Ethiopian boy in London

The story of Makonnen Levi, Taamrat’s nephew, who was raised in Europe 20 years later, is quite different. It is an emblematic case and

is a good illustration of the lack of involvement by the community when individual commitment could not be continued. It also shows the tendency of the communities to favour a technical, practical kind of education rather than the intellectual one Faitlovitch aimed at. Finally, it is interesting to note the unrealistic expectations the community had regarding this youth who, after a few years of study in a country whose language and customs were unknown to him was expected to complete an entire cycle of studies that European Jewish students would have taken much longer to finish.

In 1927 two young men – Abraham Adgeh⁶² and Makonnen Levi Makonnen – arrived in London. Makonnen Levi⁶³ was accepted by the Townley Castle School (31 March 1927), whose headmaster was Samuel Levine.⁶⁴ Makonnen arrived in London on 1 August 1927⁶⁵ and was sent back to Ethiopia on 14 September 1931⁶⁶ after a Jewish organisation advanced the money for his return voyage. The four years he spent in London must have been extremely difficult for the boy because a year after his arrival, Levine, who was giving him hospitality and providing for his education, went bankrupt after a disastrous law suit and was forced to close down his large establishment at Putney and later to reopen his school on a very reduced scale. Levine therefore tried to free himself of the irksome responsibility the boy had become.

The only account we have from the boy – and it comes to us via Faitlovitch – seems to show that a year after his arrival in London everything was going well. On 4 September 1928 Faitlovitch told Levine that his *protégé* Levi had written to say he felt very happy with him and his family and that he was satisfied with his studies. Faitlovitch, who enclosed a letter to Makonnen Levi in Ethiopian, wrote saying he wanted to hear Levine's opinion on the boy.⁶⁷ Faitlovitch had the habit of keeping occasional contact with the people educating the boys and corresponded with the boys as often as he could, given his incessant travelling, sometimes asking his sister Lea to look after the matter. A sketch of the boy comes to us from the *Jewish Chronicle*.⁶⁸ The title of the article – 'A Falasha Student in London' – highlighted the story. The article underscored the certain Jewishness of the Falashas as an indirect response to those Jewish circles that questioned it, and strengthened the call to Judaism by mentioning the mythical royal links of the Falashas, guaranteed to influence the readers. It also mentioned that the boy was the son of a teacher and hoped to become a teacher himself. He may indeed have been the son of a *debtera*, a local cantor/teacher.⁶⁹ The article continues:

At Mr. Levine's Jewish School, Townley Castle . . . is a sixteen year old student, Levi Makonnen, a descendant of the retinue of Jews given to the Queen of Sheba by King Salomon. He comes from Gondar, in Abyssinia, and belongs to a race known as the Falashas who are unmistakably Jews, and who observe Jewish customs. Levi Makonnen, whose father is a teacher, arrived in London speaking only Abyssinian and the medium between him and Mr. Levine was a few words of Hebrew . . . Levi habitually begins his studies at dawn, and it is his ambition to return to Abyssinia as a teacher.

Levi's father's name was Gobiaw and his mother's Taitu. She was one of Taamrat's sisters and belonged to the Amhara noble class; Makonnen's father converted to Christianity in order to marry her.⁷⁰ Levi is not a name found in Ethiopia. As is demonstrated by other examples, Faitlovitch was ready to convert or reconvert people once belonging to the Falasha Jews, even if they were born of a Christian mother, like Taamrat, Tadesse and Makonnen.⁷¹ In the case of the Falasha boy educated in London, Faitlovitch gave him Levi as a second name. But in the correspondence concerning him he is always referred to by Levi as his first name. Only Taamrat, his uncle, called him Makonnen. The practice introduced by Faitlovitch proved successful and in the Jewish communities he was known as Levi.

When the above-mentioned article was published, Levine was already in serious economic difficulties and had already tried to get rid of the boy. On 16 November 1928, a few months before the article appeared, Schonfeld of the Adath Isroel Synagogue that had already given hospitality to Adgeh, the other Falasha boy, replied to Levine, explaining that he had the same problems and therefore could not take on the second boy.⁷² He added, 'the more difficult is to keep up the willingness of contributors, some of whom have already fallen off after 6 months'. The contributors, frightened by the fact that a professional career would have required too many years of study, tried to direct the boy towards a practical career. This was a common attitude amongst the leaders of the communities giving hospitality to these youths. It created enormous dissatisfaction and bad feeling amongst the boys themselves, who felt they had been deceived as Faitlovitch had promised them professional careers (medicine, engineering, law) and they instead, after an initial period, were increasingly directed towards trades.

Schonfeld invited his colleague to contact the chief rabbi J. H. Hertz for help:

Surely the wealthy Anglo-Jewish community of which he is head, ought not to throw the responsibility for doing something for the Falasha on the shoulders of a struggling schoolmaster. With the tiniest effort he ought to be able to procure the cost of the upkeep of the boy.

This, however, did not help for Hertz's reply was negative. Three months later⁷⁴ Hertz wrote to Levine that the American Pro-Falasha Committee had also replied that they could do nothing to help. Hertz recalled that he was inundated by appeals and had no funds available. The only step to be taken was to turn directly to Faitlovitch to obtain funds for the 'Falasha boy'. Another two years passed before Faitlovitch – who always had enormous difficulties in financing the upkeep of the school in Addis Ababa – replied to the request. He begged Levine to be patient and to keep the boy for a short while longer until either he personally or the boy's uncle, Taamrat, came through London.⁷⁵ On 12 April 1931 Taamrat received a telegram⁷⁶ to inform him that Makonnen Levi 'must leave my house before April 20, cable him maintenance'. Taamrat answered a week later on 15 April with a desperate 'please keep Makonnen meantime'.

This was the start of an agonising correspondence regarding the poor boy who the people in London simply did not know how to get rid of. More importantly, they did not know who would pay for his return journey. The Ethiopian Embassy was also involved and wanted nothing to do with the affair until the London Board of Deputies agreed to pay for his return home.⁷⁷

In the long letter he sent to the Ethiopian Embassy, Levine recounted the whole history of the affair and even dared – quite inappropriately given the addressee of the letter – to make observations about the boy, revealing the stereotypes and exaggerated and contradictory expectations held in Europe regarding African boys, as well as the inevitable disappointments that followed. On the one hand, the youths were considered ignorant little savages without any cultural background who were to be regenerated in Western Judaism or rather transformed into Western Jews. On the other hand, they were seen as brilliant young men who were expected to attain brilliant achievements in an unrealistically short time.

With these kinds of premises, it is no wonder the boys were a

source of disappointment and frustration.⁷⁸ Sometimes their stories had tragic endings. Levine explained he had been involved in the matter by Faitlovitch and had been a supporter of the Falasha movement in 1925. He had agreed to take a Falasha boy into his school after being assured that there was a small committee in London that would supervise the education of the boy and generally see to his interests and welfare. He declared that he had been misled 'as there was no committee at all'.

When the situation became difficult, Faitlovich asked him to continue to give hospitality to the boy until he was able to set up a small committee to finance the boy's studies. But his many commitments took him to Paris, Berlin and the United States, and he did not follow up the matter. This was Faitlovitch's usual behaviour: he would create certain situations and leave the individuals who had in some way become involved in the Pro-Falasha program to work them out as best they could.

Levine also complained about the boy. He claimed he had been told that 'the selected boy would be a particularly brilliant one who would justify an education eventually for the University'. Levine complained he had paid out no less than £500 in expenses for his board, lodging, education, clothing and pocket money, while the boy was 'very ordinary in intelligence' and he had not noted in him 'the slightest sign of brilliancy in any subject'. He was 'quite satisfied that he is incapable of imbibing anything more than a very ordinary education. He knows English pretty well in all its branches: he is a fair correspondent and has some notion of French and is fair in arithmetic.' To him: 'he has been a very great disappointment and there is no justification for [his] . . . heavy outlay of money. It is possible he may become a good business man.'⁷⁹

Levine describes Makonnen Levi in a very contradictory manner: on the one hand he shows no signs of brilliance, he is incapable of little more than an ordinary education, he is disappointing and yet, on the other hand, he has learnt English well, he knows a little French, he is fair in arithmetic and might become a good businessman.

In the exchange of letters between Levine and the various Jewish institutions, the main subject was simply how to find the funds to send the boy back to Ethiopia as soon as possible: 'The boy ought to be got back to Abyssinia somehow but how is the money to be raised for the purpose of repatriating him? The uncle in New York apparently is not prepared to do anything'.⁸⁰ When, after a request from New York⁸¹ Rabbi Israel Mattuck of the Liberal Jewish Syna-

gogue in London was forced to explain why the English Jewish community had refused to help the Falashas,⁸² he enclosed a letter by C. Montefiore⁸³ and his comments throw some light on the matter. Montefiore wrote that the Anglo-Jewish Association (AJA) 'refused to help the Falashas, on the ground that we had our hands full with Iraq, Persia, Palestine, etc. These lads were imported into the country against everyone's advice by Schonfeld of the Adas Israel. As was to be foreseen they didn't want to go back to their own country' and Mattuck added that 'the difficulty felt here about such cases is not felt in America. England, being so much nearer than America to the countries where candidates for charity live, has to exercise special caution for reasons which I am sure you will readily appreciate'.

It was also a question of respecting the spheres of influence and taking into account the fact that the Jews in the countries under broad British control, such as Iraq, Iran and Palestine, had to be helped by the English Jewish institutions. Moreover, it was necessary to be careful not to become too involved in situations with countries considered so near as to make disengagement possible, and Ethiopia was one of these countries.

The argument that the boys had arrived without there being an established agreement and only on the basis of individual arrangements was often used in similar cases. It was Faitlovitch's usual way of operating: he would first obtain the agreement of an individual or of a small committee formed expressly for that case, then would disappear, maintaining nevertheless some responsibility for and authority over the boy.

From the collection of Taamrat's letters⁸⁴ we know that several years later Makonnen was accused of murder. This took place during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1937. We do not know whether it was a political action to be ascribed to the Ethiopian resistance to the Italians which perhaps he, due to his English education, supported from the outset, but Taamrat's letters are ambiguous and seem to suggest just a murder. More than that, his cousin Tadesse Jacob, during a private conversation,⁸⁵ explained it by his bad conduct on his coming back from England. We do know that he died at a young age in 1940 from illness.⁸⁶

Conclusion

I have drawn a picture of two *Beta Israel* boys, Taamrat Emmanuel and Makonnen Levi, who like other Falasha pupils had to face

bitterness and disappointment during their lifetime. Both of them were taken out of Ethiopia by Jacques Faitlovitch, the Jewish missionary who was also known as the ‘Father of the Falashas’, in order to be educated in western/Ashkenazi Judaism and transformed from *Beta Israel* to Jews of Ethiopia. Taamrat had been completely involved in Faitlovitch’s dreams, spending long periods in Italy. He was dedicated throughout his life to the education of his own group even though he did not share all Faitlovitch’s views by any means. Makonnen had the experience of a short educational program in London with a Jewish family which faced serious economic difficulties and could not afford to maintain him. Makonnen died a few years after he had been accused of murder. Here we have two completely different lives and two characters who played peculiar roles in the shaping of the group’s identity.

Taamrat is representative of a successful life story in the *Beta Israel* memory, a story which speaks of a very cultivated man who was given important posts in Ethiopian society. He was a man who tried to do his best for his community and has become a real hero to be recalled by later generations in order to construct a positive and honourable image of *Beta Israel* identity. Makonnen is just the opposite, an anti-hero who was obliged to stop his education in Europe and who was rejected both in European and in Ethiopian society.

If Taamrat is still well known and respected among *Beta Israel*, Makonnen is not, even if he suffered and paid a high price for the illusion of western Jewish education.

Beyond the interest that the story of each of Faitlovitch’s pupils holds intrinsically, these accounts are in reality examples of successful and unsuccessful individual strategies put into practice to overcome the culture shock of trying to conform to a western Jewish model. They show the paternalistic attitudes and prejudices shown by Jewish institutions and communities but also the importance these narratives may have for the reshaping of the self-image of the *Beta Israel*.

Notes

I am grateful to Tudor Parfitt and Shalva Weil for their valuable comments.

- 1 The term Falasha is considered derogatory nowadays, after the immigration of the community to Israel, but it was quite common to use it during the time that is under investigation in this paper and in this context it will be used here.
- 2 On one of these boys, Hizkiahu Finkas, see E. Trevisan Semi, ‘From

- Wolleqa to Florence: The Tragic Story of Faitlovitch's Pupil Hizkiahu Finkas', in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 15–39. See chapter 6, this book, p. 101ff.
- 3 One of these boys was Solomon Isaac (Yitzhak), see Sh. Weil, 'The Life and Death of Solomon Isaac', in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia*, pp. 40–9.
 - 4 On Faitlovitch see E. Trevisan Semi, 'De Lods à Addis-Abeba, Faitlovitch et les Juifs d'Ethiopie', in *Les Cahiers du Judaïsme* 10 (2001), pp. 60–71. On his educational work see E. Trevisan Semi, 'The Educational Activity of Jacques Faitlovitch in Ethiopia (1904–1924)', in *Peamim* 58 (1994), pp. 86–97 (Hebrew); 'Faitlovitch, Margulies and the Alliance: which Educational Policy for the Ethiopian Jews in 1907?', in A. Crown (ed.), *Noblesse Oblige: Scholarship and Community: Essays in Honour of David Kessler OBE* (London, 1998), pp. 145–59.
 - 5 For the second boy see chapter 6, this book, p. 101ff.
 - 6 On this period of Faitlovitch see E. Trevisan Semi, 'Universalisme juif et prosélytisme: l'action de Jacques Faitlovitch, "père" des Beta Israel (Falachas)', in *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 216 (1999), pp. 193–211; and T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi, *Judaizing Movements* (London, 2002).
 - 7 J. Halévy, 'Travels in Abyssinia', in A. L. Loewy (ed.), *Miscellany of Hebrew Literature*, series 2, vol. 2 (London, 1877), p. 252.
 - 8 E. Trevisan Semi, 'The Ideology of "Regeneration" and the "Beta Israel" at the Beginning of the XXth Century', in *Reeh-Revue européenne des études hébraïques* 2 (1997), pp. 141–54.
 - 9 A. Rodrigue, 'Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries', in *Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860–1939* (Seattle/London, 1993), pp. 5–7.
 - 10 *Revue sémitique* (January 1906) p. 94. Sh. Weil informed me that according to an unproven opinion Daniel 'looked' like a *barya* and came from the Sudanese borders. Faitlovitch in his book *Quer durch Abessinien: meine zweite Reise zu den Falaschas* (Berlin, 1910), pp. 77–9 mentioned Daniel's twin, *Debtera* Barok and added photos of both twins.
 - 11 New York/Joint Archives/Abyssinia 1921–31 (hereafter *Joint*), letter of 21.8.1921 to Schneiderman.
 - 12 *Joint*, 7.11.1921.
 - 13 On Yona Bogale see Sh. Weil, 'In Memoriam: Yona Bogale', in *Peamim* 33 (1987), pp. 140–3 (Hebrew).
 - 14 Faitlovitch Collection in Sourasky Central Library in Tel Aviv University (hereafter *Fait. Coll.*). I thank Simha Zaharur, director of the Readers Services Division of the Library for her help. Letter of 7.3.1927, *Fait. Coll.* file 99.
 - 15 *Fait. Coll.* file 117. Letter of the Legation of the United States of America, Addis Ababa, 13.3.1929 to Faitlovitch in reply to his letter of 12.3.1929.
 - 16 Jewish Theological Seminary Archives (hereafter *JTS*) *JTS Adler* 26, letter of 25.5.1927 to Chajes in Wien.

- 17 *JTS Adler* 26, letter of 25.5.1927.
- 18 On Solomon Isaac see n. 3 and S. Sohn (chapter 3) in this book; on Gete Yirmiahu see C. Guandalini in this book; on Yona Bogale see n. 13.
- 19 *Fait. Coll.* file 93.
- 20 Report of the Chairman of the American Pro-Falasha Committee Elias Solomon, *Fait. Coll.* file 127.
- 21 According to Tadesse Jacob, private communication, Addis Ababa, May 2000.
- 22 Taamrat (as many others until recently) used the term ‘Falasha’ with no negative overtones.
- 23 ‘Noms Falacha’ in *Nouvelles de l’ARESAE*, January–March 1995.
- 24 The letter is *Tomara ehiwna*. I am indebted to Ambessa Teferra for the translation of the letters from Amharic.
- 25 For a more detailed story of Taamrat’s life see E. Trevisan Semi, *L’epistolario* (Paris/Venice, 2000), pp. 14–53.
- 26 *Bulletin de l’A.I.U.* 33 (1905), pp. 206–7.
- 27 Faitlovitch’s educational ideal is well-summarised in what he himself wrote to the American Pro-Falasha Executive Committee: ‘To have a good Jew and a perfect cultured man, a real pioneer of our ideals’. Letter of 26.12.1922, *Fait. Coll.* file 127.
- 28 Letter of 4.6.1918. E. Trevisan Semi, *L’epistolario*, letter no. 7.
- 29 Letter of 16.10.1936. E. Trevisan Semi, *L’epistolario*, letter no. 53.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Fait. Coll.* file 99, February 1926.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 From Rome, 15.1.1918. E. Trevisan Semi, *L’epistolario*, letter no. 4.
- 34 Carlo Alberto Viterbo, an Italian lawyer sent to visit the Falashas in 1936 by the Union of Italian Jewish Communities didn’t share Faitlovitch’s educational projects for the Falashas.
- 35 C. A. Viterbo, ‘Relazione al Ministero dell’Africa italiana dell’opera svolta in A.O.I. in rappresentanza dell’Unione delle Comunità Israelitiche Italiane’, in F. Del Canuto (ed.), *Israël – Un decennio 1974–1984* (Roma, 1984), pp. 87–8.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 37 Letter of 15.2.1937. E. Trevisan Semi, *L’epistolario*, letter no. 56.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Letter of 21.4.1937. E. Trevisan Semi, *L’epistolario*, letter no. 58.
- 40 Y. Grinfeld, ‘Taamrat Emmanuel – Forerunner of the Revival of Ethiopian Jewry’, in *Peamim* 22 (1985), p. 66 (Hebrew).
- 41 Lillia Kavey Arch. 71b., 12.3 1931 (Jewish and National Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Hebrew University Jerusalem. Henceforth *L. Kavey Arch.*). I am indebted to Steve Kaplan for indicating this archive to me. The speech was given to the Women’s Division of the American Pro-Falasha Committee.
- 42 L. Kavey, ‘The Falashas Revisited’, *Women’s League Outlook* (Fall 1968), p. 18. *L. Kavey Arch.* 71.
- 43 During January and February 1920, Faitlovitch noted in his diary certain phrases regarding Taamrat, whose meaning is rather obscure. In particular the fact that once Faitlovitch had decided to leave,

- Taamrat decided to return alone to Addis Ababa without him. On 17 February the entry reads: '*finalement arrangé*'. Faitlovitch's diaries are housed in the Rare Books Department of the Sourasky Central Library.
- 44 Y. Grinfeld, 'Taamrat Emmanuel', p. 68.
 - 45 Letter of 15.1.1928. E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 20. Taamrat had read of Chajes' death in Addis Ababa in *Der Israelit*.
 - 46 Letter from Paris 3.9.1948. E. Trevisan Semi., *L'epistolario*, letter no. 116. Archivio *privato Viterbo*. I would like to thank Giuseppe Viterbo who gave me access to the letters of his father C. A. Viterbo.
 - 47 Letter of 14.5.1936. E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 43.
 - 48 Letter of 5.6.1936. E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 46.
 - 49 Ibid.
 - 50 Y. Grinfeld, 'Taamrat Emmanuel', pp. 67–8.
 - 51 The article was translated by *Revolution prolétarienne* and published in *Berhanna Salam*, 17.3.1927.
 - 52 According to Y. Grinfeld ('Taamrat Emmanuel', p. 67) this episode cost Taamrat two days in prison, but I have found no trace of this in the letters. In his letter of 9.4.1927 (E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 15) Taamrat says that the Legation had at first believed that the translator was Weinziger, the former Austrian consul and editor of the journal, but once the real identity of the translator was known, they demanded his arrest. The Ras instead responded with the arrest of Ghebre Krestos, accused not of having published the article but of having broken the regulation by which the *ras* was to inspect each article regarding foreign affairs before it was published. Taamrat added: 'Thanks to the personal intervention of the Ras nothing has happened to me. . . . I had to close the school for a day.' The one who was punished was Ghebre Krestos, considered the person responsible, who was fined a hundred tallers and imprisoned for a month while, added Taamrat, 'I returned to celebrate *Purim*, which is in any case the feast of those who have escaped danger'.
 - 53 Letter of 9.4. 1927. E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 15.
 - 54 Alexandria 19.9.1937 to Faitlovitch, *ibid.*, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 67.
 - 55 Ibid.
 - 56 Letter of 6.10.1938, *ibid.*, letter no. 72.
 - 57 Ibid.
 - 58 From Zamalek 18.1.1939, *ibid.*, letter no. 73.
 - 59 In his letter from Cairo of 20.4.1939, he reported episodes of fraud committed by Italians in Ethiopia that he had known about, *ibid.*, letter no. 76.
 - 60 Letter of 20.4.1939, *ibid.*, letter no. 76.
 - 61 Cairo 18.1.1939, *ibid.*, letter no. 73.
 - 62 See Sh. Weil, chapter 6, in this book.
 - 63 I found the documentation related to the case in the archive of the London Board of Deputies (ACC/3121/C02 – Levi Makonnen, Abyssinian-born child raised by English family/correspondence about settlement) (hereafter *BD*) and, as it was considered compromising, it was to remain secret until 2023. However, I was in the end permitted to consult it (my thanks to the descendants of the Faitlovitch family and especially to Dr Henry Grunwald).

- 64 In the archive he is known also as Samuel Levene.
- 65 Letter of 29.7.1931, *BD*.
- 66 Letter of 17.9.1931, *BD*.
- 67 'In all his letters hither, our protégé Levi reports on you and your family's kindness to him and says he feels very happy in your midst', *BD*.
- 68 15.2.1929.
- 69 According to Tadesse Jacob his father was an expert in Ge'ez. I thank Sh. Weil for this information.
- 70 I got all this information through a private conversation with Tadesse Jacob (Makonnen Levi's cousin) in Addis Ababa (May 2000). According to Weil, Taitu, one of Taamrat's sisters, was not Makonnen's mother.
- 71 Tadesse Jacob was the son of Taamrat's sister Yeshareg (Christian) who married a Falasha, Negusse Jambas.
- 72 Letter of 14.11.1928 in which he evidently asked Shonfeld to look after the second boy as well.
- 73 11.3.1931, *BD*.
- 74 2.6.1931, *BD*.
- 75 Letter from Leven to H. M. Bakkala, first secretary of the Ethiopian Embassy of the 20.7.1931, *BD*.
- 76 The telegram was sent to the address of the Pro-Falasha committee in New York.
- 77 On 18 July H. M. Bakkala, first secretary of the Ethiopian Legation, was available to receive him and on 20 July Levine told Bakkala the whole story regarding the boy, *BD*.
- 78 This did not happen with Adgeh, see pp. 101ff., this book.
- 79 Letter of 20.7.1931, *BD*.
- 80 Letter of 2.9.1931 to D'Avigdor Goldsmid, *BD*.
- 81 From Isaac Landman, *Fait. Coll.* file 142.
- 82 Letter of 27.4.1931, *BD*.
- 83 Letter of 24.4.1931 from Montefiore to Mattuck, *BD*.
- 84 E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*. See letters 59 (Aden 10.6.1937), 60 (Aden 7.7.1937), 64 (Cairo 5.8.1937). From the letters it seems that Makonnen murdered someone who was connected with the Italian occupation and with the Faitlovitch school.
- 85 Addis Ababa, May 2000.
- 86 Letter from Addis Ababa of 5.6.1940 to Carlo Alberto Viterbo from Menghistu Isaac, another Faitlovitch pupil, head of the Falasha school in Addis, after the departure of Taamrat: 'We are sorry to inform you that on the 22 of April 1940 our brother Maconen (*sic*) Levi, the nephew of our Professor Taamrat Emanuele (*sic*) died because of a very hard and terrible illness' (in Italian). Private archive Viterbo family, Florence.

ABRAHAM ADGEH

The perfect English gentleman

Shalva Weil

Abraham Adgeh in a research context

Abraham Adgeh was one of the 25 *Beta Israel* pupils whom Dr Faitlovitch brought out of Ethiopia to study in Europe. Faitlovitch's vision, elaborated elsewhere,¹ was that the boys whom he planted in the orthodox Jewish communities of Palestine and Europe would return and educate their brethren in the villages in Ethiopia. The lives of several of these pupils have been documented, particularly since the mass immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel from the 1980s on and the renewed interest in this unique group of people. Examples of scholarship in the field include the obituary of Yona Bogale recalling his life's work,² reconstruction of the tragic life of Hizkiahu Finkas,³ the life and death of Solomon Isaac,⁴ the trips of Menguistu Yitzhak and Mekuria Tsegaye to Europe,⁵ detailed information on Taamrat Emmanuel,⁶ and more. In the last SOSTEJE (Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry) conference, which took place in Milan, Italy, in 1999, further light was shed on other pupils, including Gete Yirmiahu, taken out of Ethiopia by Dr Faitlovitch. This chapter, then, contributes to the growing academic body of knowledge on the fascinating lives of Dr Faitlovitch's pupils.⁷

Each pupil educated in Europe had an individual personality and story; each experienced a complete metamorphosis as a result of his contact with a new non-Ethiopian culture. Abraham Adgeh was different from most of the other *Beta Israel* who studied in Europe. He represented a 'new' type of *Beta Israel* man – a more worldly

one, a more cosmopolitan one, the Ethiopian hero of a particular historical period. And yet, he eagerly imbibed the English education he was given. In time, he became the epitome of an English gentleman, despite the fact that he never abandoned his Ethiopian identity.

Methodology

This chapter is the culmination of work which began in the mid-1980s and has continued until the present day. The information contained in this paper relies on oral interviews and two hitherto unpublished letters in the possession of friends in the English Jewish community which adopted him. For 50 years, few in the West mentioned Abraham Adgeh until in 1985 I started asking questions about the 'Falasha boys', who the octogenarians of the orthodox English Jewish community remembered vividly. The quest to know more about Abraham Adgeh, which I began 16 years ago, has come full cycle, as I report for the first time upon my findings about Abraham and his life.

The interviews on Abraham Adgeh were conducted with family members, including his daughter, and with Ethiopian Jewish immigrants to Israel who knew or who had heard of him. In addition, I interviewed three other pupils of Dr Faitlovitch who had been educated in Europe about Abraham between the years 1986 and 1988. The interviews with the late Hailu Desta and Yona Bogale took place in Jerusalem and in Petah Tikva, Israel, respectively; the interviews with Tadesse Yacob took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and in Israel.⁸

This paper is also based upon letters found referring to Adgeh, which can be found in the Faitlovitch collection in the University of Tel Aviv Library, and which have been published,⁹ as well as hitherto unpublished letters from Abraham Adgeh in Ethiopia to his adopted family and friends in England. The latter letters differ from others commonly presented on the Faitlovitch pupils in that they are not gleaned from archives, but are private letters gathered from a private source. In this sense, their publication is more valuable in that there is no public access to the letters. Like the genre of the diary, letters provide insight into the individual; unlike the diary, the letters were written for others to read and their re-reading after decades does not really represent an intrusion into a private world.

The Ethiopian background

Abraham Adgeh was born in the village of Charbita in Woggera, Ethiopia, in 1910 and spent his childhood as a goatherd. According to Hailu Desta, when Adgeh was about 11 or 12 years old, he saw a white missionary with an interpreter passing by on a horse. He said to himself: 'If that Ethiopian (interpreter) can speak another language, why can't I?' That very day, Adgeh determined to run away from home in order to improve his education. As opposed to some other pupils, therefore, Adgeh was not recruited directly by Dr Faitlovitch from his village, but, driven by an inner force, he was motivated to improve his destiny.

Abraham Adgeh thus ran away in the company of a merchant and headed for Wollo, where he stayed with Hailu Desta's father, who was then governor of the region. As Hailu Desta recalled: 'Some years before Ras Haile Mariam took Yedju, my father went to Dase, the main town of Wollo, because he was called by Negus Michael, the father of Lijj Yiassu, the Crown Prince, to construct Churches.'¹⁰

According to Hailu Desta, Abraham persuaded him to run away together with him to the 'Falasha school', just opened by Dr Faitlovitch in Addis Ababa for the *Beta Israel*.¹¹ However, after more than a fortnight of travel, Hailu's father found them and returned them to Wollo. They stayed in Hailu's father's house for six months and then ran away again. This time, they walked for three months and reached Addis Ababa on foot. According to Hailu, on the way, they subsisted on shrubs and berries, but the journey took longer than it should have done because Hailu fell ill. Hailu Desta explained: 'When we arrived, Abraham headed straight for the Mission (*sic*).'¹² I searched for my mother's relative Dejazmatach Hailu Negusi'.

After ten days, Abraham came and found Hailu and introduced him to Taamrat Emmanuel, Dr Faitlovitch's first pupil, who had been discovered by Dr Faitlovitch in a Christian mission school in Asmara. Taamrat was selected by Faitlovitch to be the principal of the school,¹³ and he persuaded Hailu to join the school, too. The two friends thus embarked upon the course of studies decided upon by Dr Faitlovitch, his sister Leah (who returned to her native Paris later that year) and Taamrat Emmanuel. Abraham and Hailu learned foreign languages, religious studies and secular subjects. The curriculum included Hebrew (reading, grammar, translation

into Amharic), Bible, prayers, Oral Law, Jewish history, general Jewish culture, Amharic language, Ge'ez, some French, arithmetic, geography, Jewish studies and other subjects.¹⁴ In 1925 they were both selected to leave for Europe together with Makonnen Gobiaw (Lowie, later Levi), Taamrat Emmanuel's nephew. Abraham Adgeh was then about 15 years of age, Hailu Desta about 12 years of age, and Makonnen Gobiaw about 17.¹⁵

On 26 June 1926 they arrived in Europe via Port Said.¹⁶ This time, Dr Faitlovitch's destination was France. He had arranged for his sister, Leah, to receive them in her home in Paris and had already dispatched the necessary money to her to cover the journey of the boys to London.¹⁷ Hailu Desta related:

We all arrived in Marseilles, where we all received the vaccination for yellow fever. Then we were taken to Madame Leah in Paris. After three days, I became sick and stayed there with Madame Leah for six months. I thought I (would) die. I had a high fever that would not stop. But Abraham and Makonnen went off to London. When I was better, I was sent to Germany.¹⁸

Thus Abraham and Hailu were separated. Hailu, now Elazar Desta, was sent to Germany, where he moved from Jewish community to Jewish community, and Abraham and Makonnen were sent, as planned, to London. Dr Faitlovitch had made arrangements for the two boys to be 'adopted' by the ultra-orthodox, largely German Jewish, community of London, belonging to the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. This London community had been founded by Rabbi Avigdor (Victor) Schonfeld, the father of the late Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld,¹⁹ who believed in combining Judaic studies with secular pursuits according to the motto *Torah we-Derech Eretz* (*Torah* and Worldliness), developed by the German Jewish philosopher Samson Rafael Hirsch.²⁰ Dr Faitlovitch had persuaded Rabbi Avigdor Schonfeld of the importance of taking in two *Beta Israel* boys and Ralph and Ronald Levy, then young members of that community, recalled going from door to door in the London suburb of Highbury, collecting money for the 'Falasha boys' education. Makonnen lived with Samuel Levine and his family, orthodox Jews who lived in the London suburb of Hampstead, and Abraham occasionally met him. Abraham was adopted by the Levy family, although most of the time he actually lived in a rented room with a landlady. Mr Levy was a respected dentist in the

community and he and his family took complete responsibility for him and arranged for his education.

Abraham attended the St John's College in Green Lane, Highbury, a prestigious local school, where he learned English, French and other subjects. In addition, he learned Hebrew and Jewish studies at the Adath Yisroel Hebrew classes. He attended synagogue every week with the Levys, and my own father, David Dimson, exactly the same age as Abraham Adgeh, who was a member of that congregation for only a short period of time, recalls 'the two little black boys'²¹ who used to sit in front of him in synagogue.

In fact, there is nobody from that community from that time who does not remember the extraordinary sight of the two dark-skinned boys, who were part and parcel of Highbury's orthodox Jewish community, in an era when Britain could sport remarkably few 'coloured' people at all. When I questioned my uncle, Mr Fred Weil, who was an active member of the Adath Yisroel community, he immediately related the story of the black boys, and particularly Abraham, who used to be part of their group of friends. Fred Weil pulled out a photograph of the 1929 Hebrew classes annual picnic somewhere in Britain. In the picture can be seen a group of young Jews complete with Homburg hats, and, seated, Abraham Adgeh, dressed like the others but noticeable because of the colour of his skin. Abraham, more than Makonnen, was very popular and developed real friendships with members of the community. Such was his relationship with the Homa family, who shared with me the letters they received from Abraham after his return to Ethiopia.

Abraham, like all the *Beta Israel* pupils that Dr Faitlovitch brought out of Ethiopia, remained alone almost the whole time he was abroad. In 1927 Taamrat Emmanuel, in a letter from Addis Ababa dated 9 April 1927 to Dr Faitlovitch, mentions the three boys – Abraham, Hailu and Makonnen – who left Ethiopia together,²² but Dr Faitlovitch appears to have lost all touch with his protégés. Thus, Faitlovitch asks Taamrat in a letter in May 1927 from New York, which no doubt crossed with Taamrat's original letter: 'Que fait Abraham et où est-il au présent?'²³

It appears that both Dr Faitlovitch and Taamrat Emmanuel visited at least once, and possibly more times, during the time that Abraham was under the care of the Levys. Abraham's host, Ralph Levy, recalled that Dr Faitlovitch came to visit, in the company of 'a very impressive figure, Dr Emmanuel'. The reference was, of course, to Taamrat Emmanuel, the headmaster of the *Beta Israel*

school in Addis Ababa, and later close aide to the Emperor Haile Selasse. This significant visit appears to have taken place in 1931 when Taamrat Emmanuel and Dr Faitlovitch were indeed on their way back from their fund-raising trip on behalf of the Falashas in the United States and on their way to Ethiopia via Europe. The visit is confirmed in a hitherto unpublished letter written from Addis Ababa dated 1948, kindly lent to me by the Homa family of London, in which Adgeh writes explicitly about ‘our old teacher Professor Taamrat Emmanuel’ and the difficulties in maintaining the Falasha school open after the Italian occupation. He writes: ‘I think you had met him in London when he came to visit us on his way to America around about 1931.’

Some time between 1932 and 1935, Abraham visited France. Indeed, Tadesse Yacob, another pupil of Dr Faitlovitch who studied in Cairo, mentioned that Abraham Adgeh visited Paris and stayed with the other *Beta Israel* pupils who were living there;²⁴ Yona Bogale confirmed that they had met there and were in touch with Dr Faitlovitch’s sister, Madame Leah.²⁵

During the period that Abraham was in England (1926–35), he became educated in a wide range of subjects, as was the norm among the Jews who pursued both secular and religious education. He adopted the style of his hosts and was known to be charming and polite, again in the spirit of the orthodox German Jews, who became so well assimilated to English life. According to all accounts, he had a dry sense of humour, was always joking and liked apples! In fact, he became the perfect English gentleman!

The English gentleman in Ethiopia

In 1935 Abraham was recalled to Ethiopia to defend his country against the fascist Italian occupation. Dressed in a suit and his best boots, he returned home. According to Yona Bogale, he returned to the *Beta Israel* village of Ambober in the Gondar area, where he had left behind his betrothed wife-to-be, the daughter of *Qes* Towabu Melko of Ambober.²⁶ Abraham married and his wife gave birth to Malka, whom I first met in Israel in the 1980s. Her given names were Ymitu (‘let come’) and Negus (‘king’) because, in the words of Abraham Adgeh in one of his letters to the Homa family in London, ‘she was born when our King was (had) immigrated to London during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia’.

However, Abraham, who had become attuned to the cosmopolitanism and modernity of London, could not continue to live in a

village which did not have running water, books or a daily newspaper. Abraham's wife divorced him and married the *Beta Israel* villager, Ezra Shatta, whom I interviewed in Lod, Israel, before his death in the late 1980s. It was Shatta, who composed *aslekach* (odes) to Dr Faitlovitch in the village of Ambober in 1956, nearly a year after the *Beta Israel* of the village of Ambober, Gondar, heard that their benefactor had died.²⁷ Ezra and his wife, who gave birth to seven live children, continued to live in Ambober, until their emigration to Israel in Operation Moses (1984–5).²⁸

Abraham Adgeh returned to Addis Ababa and stayed in the Falasha school run by Taamrat Emmanuel. It was here that he was temporarily reunited with his friend Hailu Desta, and several of the other students who had now been forced to leave Europe and return to Ethiopia. However, the Italian occupation continued unabated, and all the pupils returning from Europe were destined to be sent off to the war. Taamrat Emmanuel bitterly reported in a letter written in 1935:

There are six young men with me between the ages of 18–25 who have studied in Europe (Germany, England, France and Switzerland). One is destined for the northern army, where he will be both a soldier and a translator for the European officers who are in government service training the army; another already left a few weeks ago for the north as a translator for the Ethiopian Red Cross doctors . . . the fruits of youth upon whom I relied to revive the Falashas, and they are now going to offer themselves up as canon fodder: modern professors of civilised peoples!³⁰

Abraham Adgeh was sent to Massawa to act as an interpreter because of his excellent command of languages. On 3 January 1937 the Italian Jewish emissary Viterbo met the Amhara General Biroli and requested Abraham's transfer from Massawa because of ill health.³⁰ It appears probable that Adgeh was part of Viterbo's design to set up a technical/agricultural school for the *Beta Israel* in Gondar and not in Addis Ababa.³¹ In 1939 Abraham Adgeh took up a senior position in the municipality of Gondar. During this period he assisted the *Beta Israel* by moving the Gondar market from Saturday to Thursday, thereby enabling them to sell their pottery and metal work in the market and improving their economic situation. After a disagreement with the governor of Gondar Province, Abraham moved to Addis Ababa in 1941 after the

Italians withdrew. He took up a position in the Ministry of Commerce and was in constant touch with Taamrat Emmanuel. In a letter to Dr Faitlovitch written on 6 March 1942 after Taamrat returned to Ethiopia with the Ethiopian resistance army, Taamrat reports on the whereabouts of all his pupils in the new Ethiopian government, including Abraham Adgeh, who received a post in the Ministry of Commerce.³²

He subsequently took up a position translating British law into Amharic for a British judge in the High Court – a job he was perfectly qualified to perform with his British education and background in government. It is during this period that he wrote a book on the Falasha village entitled *My Small Village*, which, according to Malka, he was forbidden to publish and was subsequently lost. Malka herself was sent to the best school in Addis Ababa. It is significant that her father, who raised her, placed such a high value on education, and insisted that Malka learn fluent English, a language which served her well after her move to Canada, where she currently resides.

The later years

In the late 1940s Abraham moved to Harar in the south, where he lived with another woman and her son. Malka was sent to boarding school there. However, he kept up contact with Taamrat. In a hitherto unpublished letter to the Homa family of London in late 1948, Abraham mentions that Taamrat ‘is now working under Ethiopian Government and a few months ago he has left for Paris as an adviser of Ethiopian Legation there’.³³ Indeed, Messing writes of Taamrat: ‘He did accept the post of Cultural Attaché at the Ethiopian Embassy in Paris. It was in his quiet office that the diplomatic battles were fought to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, while violent events in Eritrea made the headlines’.³⁴

In the 1960s Abraham transferred to Eritrea, where he married a local woman, with whom he had one son and one daughter. He then transferred to Addis Ababa, where he became the head of the purchasing and maintenance division of the Addis Ababa municipality, a position which he retained until the early 1970s. In 1972 he was fired from his job due to his political opinions, which were perceived to be against the Emperor. According to his daughter Malka: ‘He was an intellectual, always thinking ahead. He knew how to influence. He held a different ideology from other Falashas who supported the Emperor. When the Revolution came, he was

very happy'.³⁵ Abraham died in 1975 and was buried in the cemetery in Addis Ababa with a Star of David above his grave.³⁶ Most of his *zamad* (extended family) came to live in Israel in the 1980s.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have recalled the life and times of Abraham Adgeh, one of the more successful pupils of Dr Faitlovitch, who may not have realised Dr Faitlovitch's dream of bringing Jewish education to the Falashas, but who succeeded personally in improving his position. The picture that emerges is one of a gifted individual who acquired the manners and education of his hosts and continued to place great importance on education. In Ethiopia, he would fondly recall his days in England. In brief, this chapter provides documentary evidence for the extraordinary story of an Ethiopian boy who originated in a village in Woggera, but who in the course of his life managed to transform himself from an Ethiopian goatherd into a perfect English gentleman!

Notes

My thanks go to Ramsey Homa, who kindly entrusted me with the originals of the letters from Abraham Adgeh to his late parents in London.

- 1 E. Trevisan Semi, 'The Educational Activity of Jacques Faitlovitch in Ethiopia (1904–1924)', in *Peamim* 58 (1994), pp. 98–103 (Hebrew).
- 2 Sh. Weil, 'In Memoriam: Yona Bogale', in *Peamim* 33 (1987), pp. 140–3 (Hebrew).
- 3 E. Trevisan Semi, 'From Wolleqa to Florence: the Tragic Story of Faitlovitch's Pupil Hizkiahu Finkas', in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on the Ethiopian Jews* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 15–39.
- 4 Sh. Weil, 'The Life and Death of Solomon Isaac', in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, pp. 40–9.
- 5 B. Mekuria, 'The Long Journey of the Young Beta Israel from Lasta', in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, pp. 296–300.
- 6 I. Grinfeld, 'Taamrat Emmanuel – Forerunner of the Revival of Ethiopian Jewry', in *Peamim* 22 (1985), pp. 59–74 (Hebrew). See also: E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario di Taamrat Emmanuel: Un intellettuale ebreo d'Etiopia nella prima metà del XX secolo* (Torino, 2000).
- 7 Cf. E. Trevisan Semi, C. Guandalini and S. Sohn in this book.
- 8 I am deeply indebted to these three individuals (Hailu Desta, Yona Bogale and Tadesse Yacob), with whom I forged deep relationships.
- 9 I. Grinfeld, 'Taamrat Emmanuel'; E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*.
- 10 Interview with Hailu Desta 4.8.1986.
- 11 Hailu Desta, and Yona Bogale too, specifically told me that the school

- began in 1921. This is emphatically denied by Yitzhak Grinfeld (personal communication, 26.2.01.) and in the literature. It appears to me that both dates may be true. Faitlovitch may indeed have started the school in 1921, but it only opened officially, and in full force, in 1923. Meanwhile, news of the school had reached the *Beta Israel* villages.
- 12 It is significant that Hailu Desta refers to Dr Faitlovitch's school as the 'mission'; I have also heard Dr Faitlovitch referred to as a (Jewish) 'missionary'. For further elaboration of this point, see E. Trevisan Semi, 'Universalisme juif et prosélytisme: l'action de Jacques Faitlovitch, père des Beta Israel (Falashas)', in *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 216 (1999), pp. 193–211.
 - 13 The school, which was established by Dr Faitlovitch, was directed by Taamrat Emmanuel, Dr Faitlovitch's first pupil to study in Europe, as principal. The school functioned until 1937, after the Italian occupation, when Taamrat Emmanuel was forced to leave Ethiopia. It struggled on (not really functioning) until 1941 after the end of the occupation, but Dr Faitlovitch's attempts to revive it failed (Y. Grinfeld, 'The History of Ethiopian Jews', in *Yeda Am* 26:59–60 [1995], pp. 234–8 [Hebrew]). By this time, the school had changed its location in Addis Ababa from a site near *Ras Makonnen* Bridge not too far from Filwoha. Eventually, it operated from Gullale (Y. Grinfeld, 'Jews in Addis Ababa. Beginnings of the Jewish Community until the Italian Occupation', in G. Goldenberg and B. Podolsky [eds], *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, 14–17 April 1980*, [London, 1980], pp. 251–9).
 - 14 Taamrat Emmanuel, 'The School for Falasha Children in Ethiopia at the time of the Italian Invasion (1935)', in *Peamim* 58 (1994), pp. 98–103 (Hebrew).
 - 15 On Makonnen see E. Trevisan Semi, in this book.
 - 16 Interview with Hailu Desta 11.11.1986.
 - 17 E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 16.
 - 18 For further information on Hailu Desta in Germany, see E. Ullendorff, 'Two Amharic Letters by the Falasha Leader Taamrat Emmanuel', in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* 35:2 (1972), pp. 192–200.
 - 19 Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld was born in London in 1912 and was the Presiding Rabbi of the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations of Britain since 1933. During the Second World War, he saved thousands of Jews from Nazi Germany. After the war, he founded the Jewish Secondary Schools Movement in England. He published several books on Judaism and Jewish religious education, e.g. S. Schonfeld, *Why Judaism?* (London/New York, 1963).
 - 20 M. Brauer, 'Torah and Derech Eretz in our Times: The Attitude of the Halacha to Academic Studies', in Y. Shaviv (ed.), *The Kingdom of Priests and the Holy Nation: Volume in Memory of David Cohen* (Har Etzion, 1989), pp. 44–67.
 - 21 This expression is recalled with absolutely no derogatory connotation.
 - 22 E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 15.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, letter no. 16.
 - 24 Interview with Tadesse Yacob, 21.3.1988.

- 25 Interview with Yona Bogale, 26.2.1987.
- 26 Interview with Yona Bogale, 15.3.1987.
- 27 Sh. Weil, 'An Elegy in Amharic on Dr Jacques Faitlovitch', in *Peamim* 33 (1987), pp. 125–7 (Hebrew).
- 28 Interview with Ezra Shatta, 17.5.1987. Part of a letter originally written in English in 1935 from Taamrat Emmanuel to Charles D. Isaacson, New York City, two months after the Italian invasion. The letter is preserved in the Faitlovitch collection and appears in Hebrew in the journal *Peamim* (vol. 58). Since the file number of the letter is not mentioned in the journal, the excerpt from the letter has been translated by me from Hebrew back to English.
- 29 Taamrat Emmanuel, *The School for Falasha Children*, p. 101.
- 30 Y. Grinfeld, 'The Hebrew School in Addis Ababa at the Beginning of the Italian Occupation (1936–7)', in *Dor le-dor* 5 (1992), pp. 51–84 (Hebrew).
- 31 D. Summerfield, 'The Impact of the Italian Occupation on the Beta Israel', in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, pp. 50–60. See chapter 5, this book, pp. 74ff.
- 32 E. Trevisan Semi, *L'epistolario*, letter no. 108.
- 33 Taamrat worked in Paris in this position from 30 September 1948 until 31 March 1951.
- 34 S. Messing, *The Story of the Falashas: 'Black Jews' of Ethiopia* (Connecticut, 1982).
- 35 Interview with Malka, 1985. It must be remembered that this interview was held in Israel during the heyday of the reign of Mengistu Haile Mariam. It could be that today Malka would analyse things differently.
- 36 A photograph of the grave was sent to me by Malka from Canada on 7.12.1987.

GETE YIRMIAHU AND *BETA ISRAEL'S* REGENERATION

A difficult path

Carlo Guandalini

This chapter investigates the letters of Gete Yirmiahu, one of the first Falashas to be brought to Europe by Faitlovitch to receive a Jewish education: he was also one of the first Falashas to learn to speak Hebrew. The letters constitute an important additional contribution to the recent history of the Falashas:¹ indeed the analysis of the letters tells us more of Gete's personal experience and shows us in which way the young student was aware of the so-called regeneration of the *Beta Israel* through education, in Europe and *Eretz Yisrael*: the concept of regeneration arises also from the letters of Gete, who is an important witness to the *Beta Israel's* emancipation.

We shall investigate Gete's correspondence from two points of view: first, we shall try to correlate the events told by Gete with the objective reality of those years, which were marked by important events like the so-called Language War in Palestine, the *Hilfsverein's* interest in the issue of the *Beta Israel*² and the threat of conversion to Christianity in Ethiopia. The second approach is philological: we want to examine the Hebrew learned by Gete and used in his letters. We must remember that at that time Hebrew was developing again as living language and it is of some interest to remark some peculiarities of Gete's Hebrew in this context. Now we shall recall the biographical outlines of Gete's life.

Gete Yirmiahu was born in about 1888 and, like Taamrat Emmanuel, was brought to Europe in August 1905 by Faitlovitch.³

Faitlovitch wanted to give to his pupils all the instruments to become *maskilim*: later, they were supposed to return to Ethiopia as teachers in order to take part in the process of the *Beta Israel*'s regeneration.

As we know, the two boys' arrival in Paris aroused a lot of curiosity but also a certain dismay: they studied at the *École Normale d'Auteil* but they did not receive an adequate education. In 1906 Gete was transferred to the rabbinical school of Florence, under the supervision of Rabbi Margulies, because in Paris his education was deficient, especially as far as the Hebrew language was concerned.

In the year 1908 Faitlovitch went again to Africa, thanks to financial support from the Rothschilds brought about through the good offices of Rabbi Margulies. Gete followed Faitlovitch. In May 1909 the French Jew left Ethiopia and reached Egypt with Gete and another Falasha, Solomon Isaac, Gete's cousin. From Egypt, they arrived in Jerusalem, where the pupils studied in the *Hilfsverein*'s school, while Faitlovitch came back to Europe.

Faitlovitch's real goal was the project to build a school in a *Beta Israel* area. Because of the hesitation of the Alliance he applied to the *Hilfsverein* and obtained their spiritual and material support. In 1913, after he received the necessary money, Faitlovitch came back to Ethiopia with Gete, who was obliged to interrupt his studies in Jerusalem in order to become teacher in Dembea's school, which was opened between the end of 1913 and the beginning of 1914.

The First World War did not allow Faitlovitch to return to Ethiopia until the year 1920 and prevented him from sending money to the school. It nonetheless continued to function more or less under the supervision of Gete and his brother Yosef. Yirmiahu Gete died in the year 1947.

The letters

The fourteen letters examined date from 1910 to 1932. They represent two distinct groups: the letters from Jerusalem (five letters, written from 1910 to 1912) and the letters from Ethiopia. In the first period (from 1913 to 1914) we find four letters addressed to Gete's cousin, Solomon, and four letters addressed to Rabbi Margulies; then, after a very long silence, we find a letter dated 1932 addressed to Faitlovitch.

We can consider the first group of letters as a preparatory period: they describe Gete's training as an agent of regeneration and concern his frenzied activity as a student in Jerusalem. The second

group represents the period of accomplishment: from those letters we are informed about Gete's return to his homeland in order to open the school. If the letters from Jerusalem are addressed to Faitlovitch, who expressly wanted to know the progress of his pupil, the letters from Ethiopia are addressed to Solomon (who was still living in *Eretz Yisrael*),⁴ in order to inform him about the progress of the mission, and to Rabbi Margulies, who was continuously asked to plead *Beta Israel's* cause. The very last letter from Ethiopia is addressed to Faitlovich after a long silence and presents a very difficult situation, as we shall see later.

Letters from Jerusalem

The aim of these letters is to inform Faitlovitch about the progress and difficulties of Gete's education, and in particular his study of the Hebrew language. We note a certain anxiety in Gete's words: his desire to learn is not always satisfied because of the lack of tuition, often caused by a shortage of money. In these letters we also find criticism about the pedagogic method and an echo of the Language War which involved students and teachers in *Eretz Yisrael*. Gete clearly thought that returning to Ethiopia when he did was detrimental to the good of his studies.

As mentioned above, the main purpose of the letters from Jerusalem is to offer a detailed account of Gete's studies to Faitlovitch, who seemed very interested in the matter: in fact, we read in the first letter (18 Av 1910): 'Dear Mr Faitlovitch, in your letter you asked me if my studies are going successfully: well, I can tell you that I'm making some progress' and in the second letter (9 Shevat 1911) we read: 'So many times you indicated your desire to know the progress of my studies from my arrival in *Eretz Yisrael* until now.' It is clear that Faitlovitch wanted to know the situation of Gete's studies in view of their next journey to Ethiopia, especially with respect to the foundation of a school in Dembea.

In those letters Gete describes his studies in some detail. From his first letter we know the name of his *melammed*, Yaakov Rabinovitz, who he observed was 'a good teacher . . . and we love his lessons'. Gete studied algebra and Jewish history from the Babylonian captivity until the Golden Age in Spain; he also learned some Arabic but, as he tells us, 'it seems to me that I'm wasting my time as I would like to study Hebrew literature and the natural sciences'. He also studied the geography of Africa, Asia and *Eretz Yisrael*; Hebrew poetry – Yalag, Pines, Steinberg, Yehuda Halevi and Bialik;

moreover, he read some works of Palestinian prose literature, although 'very few'. Of course, he took lessons in *Tanakh* and the Hebrew language, and in his free time he went on reading books in Hebrew, in order to improve his knowledge of 'the language of our fathers'.

Gete's desire to learn may be perceived also in his complaints about missed hours with a private teacher: 'My level is not so as high as to understand all we study in the classroom.' This kind of complaint appeared earlier in the same letter, where he stressed the fact that Mr Efraim Kohen, the headmaster, could not supplement Gete's allowance because of the *Hilfsverein*'s decision. In the second letter (*Shevat* 1911) we learn from Gete's words that a private teacher had given him some two-hour lessons from *Shavuot* until *Kippur* in order to improve his Hebrew.

In that period in *Eretz Yisrael*'s schools there was a hard struggle between two opposite groups: those who wanted to adopt German as the language of instruction and those who wanted to use Hebrew.⁵ Gete himself was involved in this, and he wrote to Faitlovitch in the first letter: 'The best and principal lessons are taught in German . . . for this reason I would maintain the *status quo*.' He advised Faitlovitch that he could make progress only with a teacher of German: 'I'm very sorry that the others are making progress while I am not.' The same concept is repeated in the third letter:

There are no scientific books to read in Hebrew, they are written only in foreign languages; moreover, there are new teachers that come from Europe to our school: they teach science in German . . . for this reason I have no scientific education . . . Dear Mr Faitlovitch, could you apply to the *Hilfsverein* members and ask them to concern themselves with the problem, so I can get some hours each day to learn scientific subjects in German.

To Gete, staying in *Eretz Yisrael* was important for his scholastic, religious and social education. As he explained in his fifth letter to Faitlovitch, 'I go to the synagogue: there I find young friends who know Talmud, *halakot*: with them I enjoy myself studying *berakot*.' From these letters we see that Gete was well integrated into the life of the *yishuv* and why it was that he left Jerusalem with a broken heart.

The seriousness and diligence of Gete may be seen in his criticism of his cousin Solomon's behaviour: Solomon did not seem to achieve

the same excellent results. In the fifth letter, Gete himself reported to Faitlovitch that his cousin was making very poor progress indeed.

My friend is lacking in the fundamentals of grammar; he hardly speaks Hebrew and makes a lot of mistakes . . . Moreover, he does not like my advice: if he paid attention to me, his situation would be better in many things, both in Hebrew grammar . . . and in foreign languages. But Solomon has lost hope . . . My words bother him because he has doubts about his studies. I'm sad because he doesn't study algebra, I advise him but he doesn't listen to me . . . and suspects that I want to injure him, so he gossips about me saying that I have done him harm. For this reason, I don't care anymore about him. Please, Mr Faitlovitch, could you look after him?

These words are very interesting, especially if we compare them with Solomon's scholastic situation some years later: in fact, the diary of Solomon, written in an excellent Hebrew, reveals how much linguistic progress he made during his stay in *Eretz Yisrael*.

The importance of his stay in Jerusalem as a fundamental tool to increase his knowledge was always present in Gete's mind. The rather sudden decision of Faitlovitch to return to Ethiopia with his pupil – a decision taken after the *Hilfsverein* had shown an interest in the school – had an ambivalent effect on Gete: the Germans' help made him happy but, on the other hand, he considered the new trip premature at a time when he was making such rapid strides in his studies.

In the fourth letter we read:

I can see that you are doing well and working hard: on the 8 of Av 1912 you were mentioned in the magazine *Ha'or*, which had an article about Ethiopian Jews: I have also read that the *Hilfsverein* decided to open the school you are working for, and to send you again to Ethiopia with the two young men you brought to Europe the first time. . . .

I read about the trip with contrasting feelings and I thought: if I do not understand myself yet, how can I go and teach others? Therefore, I am very surprised, and I beg you, dear teacher, to allow me to stay in *Eretz Yisrael* for two more years, so I can study the *Torah* and the Hebrew

language: I shall be very happy to make progress in my studies and, within this time, I could achieve a deep knowledge of the *Talmud* and the *halakot*. . . . Now I am told that I have to leave in order to be a teacher and a guide, but I am really afraid . . . of teaching a foreign language I have not yet mastered and which is not so clear to me.

Nevertheless, Gete had to leave Jerusalem: in 1913 he went to Ethiopia with Faitlovitch. From there he started a correspondence with his cousin Solomon Isaac in Jerusalem and with Rabbi Margulies in Florence.

Letters from Ethiopia

In the first letter to Solomon (16 *Shevat* 1913) Gete presses his cousin to study and exploit his time in Jerusalem. There is some evident sadness in the letters at having to leave *Eretz Yisrael* prematurely:

Dear friend, please do not think I have forgotten you, because you are constantly in my mind there in your loneliness. I just advise you to make good new friends who can teach you something useful. . . . Do not worry about us, because worry will distract you from studying and other things and when you leave Jerusalem and come back to Ethiopia you will not be a good teacher. You will eventually come back to Ethiopia and we shall have a good time together.

Also the first letter to rabbi Margulies (4 *Shevat* 1913) shows us how nostalgic Gete was for Palestine:

My dear teacher, I came back home without seeing you. On Sunday, 12 of *Tevet* 1913, I left our source of life, *Eretz Yisrael*, and the Holy City, Jerusalem. When I left the city, I was full of yearning, I was unsure what to do and my heart was broken. . . . This city taught me the living Torah that cures whoever needs to be cured. I shall kiss its dust in my dreams and when I awake I shall be upheld by the hope that all its lost sons will reach the Holy Land.

Gete describes to Margulies all the mishaps and the dangers of the trip in Ethiopia: it is interesting to read that among these dangers he also includes the threat of Christian missions:

We have many enemies: aren't they the missionaries who convince us to forsake our faith and embrace their faith? Those missionaries are now building a mission in Gondar: for this reason we are waiting for your help, hoping that – thanks to your interest – we shall be saved from the enemies of our *Torah*.

The danger of conversion to Christianity is the subject of another letter from Ethiopia. On 24 Av 1913 Gete writes to Solomon about Faitlovitch's work, which was well received by the Falashas. Then he tells him about a moving event which he witnessed.

Dear friend! I'm going to tell you a wonderful thing: the case of a Falasha who was going to embrace Christianity. After *Pesah* we reached a village called Qounzela: in Qounzela some brothers told us that there was a Falasha who in some days was going to convert to Christianity together with his whole family. But his old father, faithful to the *Torah*, visited us and cried bitter tears for his lost son, for his son was destined to become a *goy* to all intents and purposes. . . . Then Faitlovitch brought that man as well as his wife to the village.

The tale ends with Faitlovitch persuading the man to abandon his plans; he did not abjure his religion, to the joy of the whole village: 'How happy were his old father, his relatives and all the people standing there: his old father cried for joy and blessed Faitlovitch forever.'⁶

Despite the difficulties of the journey, the return to Ethiopia was a joy for Gete, who was once again able to embrace the members of his family. In the second letter to Solomon we read about the meeting with his parents after many years: 'Dear friend, I cannot explain all my feelings when I came home and I saw my parents, I am only saying "*hinneh mah tov u-mah naim lirot horim*".' Gete gives Solomon news about his family: he visited all Solomon's relatives and gave them his letters. We note also an interesting event that is told in the same letter: 'Dear Solomon, a relative of yours came and asked me about your health. She asked me: Why didn't you bring Solomon to Ethiopia? I know, he's dead, or maybe you sold him as a slave.' It was well present in the historical memory of the *Beta Israel* that, at the end of the previous century, after the Dervishes invaded western Abyssinia, some Falasha were brought to Sudan as slaves.

On Sunday, 28 *Av* 1913, Gete wrote to Margulies about the progress of his mission, stressing the fact that *Ras* Walda Giyorgis, who exercised his jurisdiction in Dembea, welcomed them:

He showed signs of friendship to Faitlovitch; Faitlovitch entrusted me to Walda Giyorgis and asked him to visit me when I was there with my compatriots. The *ras* listened to his words and promised to watch over me, saying that nothing bad would happen to me.

In the same letter we read about the opening of a school near Gondar, as the local Falasha had requested:

Mr Faitlovitch has decided to grant the request of our brothers exiled in Africa: they want to build a little school in Gondar. . . . He shall send me to my homeland . . . together with my brother, who came with us to Asmara in order to study Hebrew and the customs of our Jewish fathers: now he can read *siddurim* . . . and I hope he'll become a perfect Jew.

As we learn from Gete himself, Faitlovitch decided to give a traditional Jewish education also to Gete's brother, Yosef, to let him help Gete in the school of Gondar.

On 27 *Tishri* 1914 Gete wrote again to his cousin Solomon, announcing the visit of Faitlovitch to Jerusalem: 'In three weeks you could meet with our dear Mr Faitlovitch.' The tone used by Gete towards Solomon is always paternal and anxious: 'I was told that you were ill: why didn't you tell me about your condition? Now, don't be afraid of sickness and misfortune: be strong and brave, keep yourself healthy, try only to improve and reach your goal.' As we know, Solomon did not reach his goal: on the way to his homeland he died of sickness without accomplishing the mission he fought for.

Let us take a look at Gete's last letter, which dates from 23 *Adar* 1932. This letter is addressed to Faitlovitch and breaks a very long silence. Gete described the difficult situation that forced him to abandon his mission for some time:

Here a fierce war has broken out, it is impossible to use the roads, people are killing each other in Dembea we saw many atrocities: for this reason I did not receive any news from you and surely, during that period, until now, you

must have considered me a rebel. . . . Will you forgive me? . . . But please remember that, at the beginning, I used to follow you everywhere. Do not have doubts about me . . . Your words are impressed upon my heart, I am not telling you lies. . . . I only hope not to die without seeing you again.

We know very little of Gete's last years: he spent his life teaching Hebrew in the little school near Gondar, supported by his brother, but no other documents tell us so much about his activity as the letters we have just examined.

Now we shall examine Gete's letters from a philological point of view, trying to outline some peculiarities of the Hebrew he had. We see that Gete tried to use a literary Hebrew, of as high a level as possible. His language is full of biblical forms – syntactical and morphological – which represented in Gete's mind the correct Hebrew. This sort of purism was probably due to the scholastic education that Gete received: Hebrew was and remained a literary language that he tried to use in a colloquial way. First, he learned Hebrew through the Bible, then through secular poetry and *belles lettres* that were influenced by the *Haskalah*. Even the Hebrew he tried to learn as a spoken language in *Eretz Yisrael* was still an artificial mix which depended on the speaker's own taste and ability. In this sense, he had the same experience as the members of the second *aliyah's* writers, whose Hebrew was characterised by experimentation: they wanted to use all its layers, keeping in mind that the most literary Hebrew was and remained biblical Hebrew.

The main peculiarity is the use of the so called *vav* consecutive form.⁷ Beside the *va-yiqtol* form expressing the past in a narrative context, Gete uses the *ve-qatalta* form to express the future.⁸ The form *ve-lamadeti* is used here with a consecutive sense, as we remark in the third letter: '*Im hevrat ha-ezrah tasim lev le-devareka ve-natnah li eizeh shaot ba-yom.*'

In the fourth letter we find another biblical pattern, the absolute infinitive used as an intensive form. This construction is present in the third letter, too: '*Ve-im lo yiheh toreaḥ le-adoni yakol tukal le-panot el hevrat-ha-ezra u-le-dabber el libbah.*'

Another biblical peculiarity is the use of *terem* plus *yiqtol* to indicate an action in the past or in the present: equally, the form *yadati* is used as *ani yodea*. In the fourth letter we read: '*Ve-omer ani ki terem lo avin le-atzmi ve-attah hinneni holek le-lamed et ha-aherim*' and, in the last lines: '*Be-kol zot bi-reshutka hinneni omer*

betah yadati she-adayyin lo higati le-madregah zu li-hiot moreh shel safah zu.'

Gete's inclination to use biblical forms shows us his desire to create a high-level language which could reflect his cultural enrichment and which could correspond to the idea of the perfect *maskil* he wanted to be. Mastering Hebrew language was the most concrete proof that he was sharing the Jewish *Haskalah* in every sense. Therefore, the holy language, *leshon ha-qodesh*, was a tool to fortify Gete's identity as a Jew *lefi halakah*.

It is not surprising that in his last letter, dated 1932 and written in a period of crisis as mentioned above, we find his first spelling mistake: he twice wrote *akshav*, 'now', with *alef* and *bet* instead of *ayin* and *vav*.

The analysis of Gete Yirmiahu's letters gave us a further tool to investigate Faitlovitch's mission in Ethiopia and helps us understand how powerful but problematic was his impact on Gete himself. Gete's involvement with the regeneration of the *Beta Israel* contributed in no small measure to the history of his people.

Notes

My thanks go to Emanuela Trevisan Semi who kindly entrusted me with the letters from Gete Yirmiahu.

- 1 The letters are taken from the *Faitlovitch collection* in Surasky Library of Tel Aviv.
- 2 See chapter 3, this book, pp. 53ff.
- 3 See chapter 5, this book, pp. 74ff.
- 4 On Solomon Isaac, see Sh. Weil, 'The Life and Death of Solomon Isaac', in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel: Studies on the Ethiopian Jews* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 40–9.
- 5 See R. Sivan, 'Le-parashat milhemet ha-safot', in *Leshonenu La-'Am* 35 (1984), pp. 99–144.
- 6 See this story in E. Trevisan Semi, 'La solidarietà ebraica e i Beta Israel nella corrispondenza Faitlovitch – Margulies', in F. Israel, A. M. Rabello and A. M. Somekh (eds), *Hebraica Miscellanea di studi in onore di Sergio J. Siena per il suo 75° compleanno*, Istituto di Studi Ebraici (Torino, 1998), p. 566.
- 7 In the fifth letter: '*Aval hu hityaesh mi-zeh va-yyomer li sibbot aherot*'. In the seventh letter: '*Me-Gondar . . . shalah oti le-vet horay im ahi she-ba ba-derek le-qabbel oti va-emtza be-shalom et avi ve-immi, ehay ve-ahayotay ve-kol mishpachotay*.'
- 8 Thus we find in the first letter: '*Af ki yitnu li moreh germanit efshar li le-hakin et atzmi ve-lamadeti be-hesheq gadol ve-im lo tzar li meod*.'

THE ETHIOPIAN JEWISH EXODUS

A myth in creation

Gadi Ben Ezer

This chapter deals with the story of the journey of the Ethiopian Jews via Sudan and its transformation into a myth. This subject has interested me for quite a long time; indeed I have been engaged in research on this journey for the last 15 years. In what follows I shall discuss the turning of the individual stories of the journey into a collective myth.

It seems to me that there is no need for an elaborate presentation of the details of that exodus in a book of this kind. Suffice to say that I refer to the journey by foot from Ethiopia towards the borders, the western border of the Sudan in particular, then their plight as refugees in the Sudan, until they arrived in Israel. During this process, which took place between 1977 and 1985, some 20,000 Ethiopian Jews left their homes in Ethiopia. Motivated by an ancient dream of returning to the land of their ancestors, to Jerusalem, they embarked on a secret and highly traumatic exodus to Israel. Due to various political circumstances they had to leave their homes in haste, go a long way by foot through unknown country towards the Sudan and stay for a period of one to two years in refugee camps until they were brought to Israel. A fifth of this group – 4,000 migrants/refugees – did not survive the journey.

One could ask: is this journey, which took place around 15 years ago, relevant for the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants living now in Israel? And if it is, in what way? These questions are even more pertinent since part of the community in Israel today did not go through this experience at all, either because they arrived years later, via Addis Ababa (which is a story which merits a separate study), or

because the community includes many children and adolescents who have already been born in Israel – an estimated 10,000 such children are now living in Israel.

Recent research points out that the story of the journey is still very relevant and that it is of relevance to all persons within the community. This includes individuals who did not participate in the journey.

I have reached this conclusion on the basis of research projects which I have conducted, assisted by my students, over the last three years. This is not the place to describe in detail these research projects. Let me, however, stress that these projects included, among other things, an analysis of scores of occasional lectures by central figures in the community, a study of interviews with Ethiopian Jews in the written and electronic media, and an examination of various theatre plays, dance and other shows in the last three years, put on by Ethiopian immigrant performers.

An analysis of these materials points to the fact that not only is the journey still remembered and discussed by Ethiopian Jews, but that it has become a vantage point for viewing their life in Israel. Thus, it seems to me that a process is taking place by which the journey is acquiring a meaning which is far more than the event itself. In my view the journey is in the process of turning into a myth.

I am using the concept of myth following Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson,¹ who do not view it as a ‘mere archaic relic but a potent force in everyday life, part of our collective unconscious’. Furthermore, these authors claim that ‘old myths are constantly reworked and new myths continually created as people make sense of untidy and traumatic memories and give meaning to their lives’. Following these scholars and others (cited below), I think of myth not as an untrue story but as a living memory, either of recent or long past events, which continues to play a role in people’s lives and is a living force in the present.²

In order to understand this process we should attempt to discern the meaning of the journey in the eyes of Ethiopian Jews.

In a research project which I have conducted, 45 young people were interviewed in the tradition of the narrative interview and their personal stories were analysed. Three central themes were found to be the major dimensions of meaning through which Ethiopian Jews constructed their journey experience: First, the theme of Jewish identity; second, the theme of suffering; and third, the theme of bravery and inner strength. At conferences of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry (SOSTEJE) I have

presented in some detail the theme of Jewish identity and that of bravery and inner strength.³ However, I would like to stress that the three themes through which the Ethiopian Jews view their journey are crystallised and consolidated within one central image of the journey: the Biblical exodus out of Egypt. That is, Ethiopian Jews saw themselves as re-living and re-experiencing the journey of their forefathers, the Israelites, who set out of bondage and embarked on a difficult and lengthy journey to the Land of Israel. Like the early Israelites they were also guided by God, to God's country; they were nourished by His help and by His ability to care for them. The Ethiopian Jews, as the Israelites, had to struggle against various physical difficulties, face enemies on their way and endure tremendous suffering.

Following their journey, the Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel with a heightened sense of Jewish identity and an already emerging Israeli identity. They felt that as individuals and as a community they had been tested, selected and purified through their suffering and had therefore earned their 'right' to enter Israel, God's land, and to fully participate in Israeli society. They had developed and consolidated a self-image as a brave and resourceful people who had successfully stood up to the many challenges of the journey. They saw their arrival in Israel as a restoration from the state of exile. They viewed themselves as a part joining its main body, to become a 'whole' again. In Israel, they believed, among their fellow Jews, they would feel more complete.

The three dimensions of their self-perception following the journey corresponded to three major ethos already playing a major role in Israeli society. I refer here to the ethos of Jewishness (or Jewish identity), the ethos of suffering, and the ethos of bravery and heroism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on these ethos. Let me again refer you to the full project where these are described in detail.⁴ In view of correspondence between the ethos of Israeli society and the dimensions of self-concept of Ethiopian Jews that have consolidated during the journey, it was reasonable to assume that Israeli society would see the Ethiopian Jews as having a strong resemblance to itself, at least in relation to these all-important dimensions of identity, and would thus embrace them wholeheartedly and accept them as their brethren.

The reality of the encounter of Ethiopian Jews with Israeli society, however, was not as expected. From the point of view of the Ethiopian Jews it might be summed up as a failure to feel the sense of completeness and belonging they had expected, and instead they

experienced a continuing struggle to realise their identity: the authenticity of their own Jewish identity had been put into question, their suffering was not acknowledged and appreciated, and, instead of acquiring an image of a brave and resourceful people, they were (and still are) viewed by Israelis as helpless-dependent-resourceless people who were saved from starvation by the Israelis. Thus, the heritage of their journey was neither confirmed nor acknowledged.

In the face of such a reception by Israeli society Ethiopian Jews went on a social struggle. In a sense, as they perceived it, the journey to Israel had not ended. In their words, ‘we arrived – yet we did not arrive’, meaning: we reached the land of Israel but have not yet reached Israeli society. Their journey will continue until the wider society confirms their self-image following their journey and sees them as they view themselves. Within that struggle, the story of the journey and its elaboration as a myth has a special place. The psychologist Rollo May⁵ writes in his study of myths in the United States:

Myth refers to the quintessence of human experience, the meaning and significance of human life. . . . The myth is a drama which begins as a historical event and takes on its special character as a way of orienting people towards reality. The myth, or story, carries the values of the society: by the myth the individual finds his sense of identity.

Myths, I further believe, are particularly potent when a collective identity (and sometimes when an individual identity) is at risk. In his study of a small commune outside Marseilles, Lucien Aschieri has shown how for a threatened community, memory must above all serve to emphasise a sense of common identity.⁶

Myths can also serve, according to Roland Barthes,⁷ as a ‘system of communication’. Rossana Basso,⁸ for example, pointed out in her study of a children’s strike, that events or actions could be a prey of myth if there is a collective action that puts them at the centre of a system of communication. The story of the journey of the Ethiopian Jews seems to have acquired these characteristics of a myth: it is a story that makes sense of untidy and traumatic memories; it is a means of finding and keeping one’s identity; and it has become a system of communication, a vehicle for conveying desired messages to themselves as well as to Israeli society.

Let me discuss, first, the telling of the story within the Ethiopian community and then I shall shift my focus to its recounting to other

Israelis. The story of the journey is told within the community, within families and among friends, between generations and within the same age group. It is recounted in gatherings on holidays or vacations, following burial and during mourning rituals, and on days of remembrance for their loved ones. A forest of remembrance has been created at Ramat Rachel, near Jerusalem, where relatives have planted a tree for each of those who died on the journey. The events of the journey are recounted on the special memorial day when they gather at that place. Yet, it is told not only on holy days and formal occasions. Often when adolescent friends meet, on vacation from their boarding schools, they recall their journey and share their experience. The elderly, too, share their stories when they meet after a long time, when they sit together and drink coffee, in the three-rounds time-consuming ceremony of *buna*, when people talk and share.

Some elements of the story seem to stand out and repeat themselves. Others are variations on the themes, or are more personal. The story of the journey incorporates and introduces the history of the community. It includes, besides the journey itself, a condensed history of the community in Ethiopia, at least what they consider its essential features (as, for example, the state of exile, a separate existence as an ethno-religious entity and a sense of non-belonging in spiritual terms, etc.). It also includes traditions of how they arrived in Ethiopia and prophecies of their return. And it includes the history of the Jews before their departure. The story of the journey connects them to their recent past, that of the journey, as well as to their further (Ethiopian) and mythical (Hebrew) past.

I have identified several functions of the telling of this story amongst themselves.

The first function is a re-affirmation of their identity: important elements within their identity are re-stated. This is important since they are encountering a new society, which brings up questions of identity typical of such a phase, as well as the need for change. During this period they feel that they have to go through, or are already undergoing, a reconstruction of identity. This aspect is of special importance for the Ethiopian Jews since the most central elements of their identity and self-concept have been questioned within Israeli society.

The second function of the telling of the story among themselves is cohesiveness: it connects the members of the community to each other and makes them feel as one entity. The telling of the experience reminds them of their mutual fate, their sharing of adversity

and their success in overcoming challenges. The sharing of the past brings about a sense of direction in the present and 're-aligns' them for their stride into the future.

And the third function is that it serves as a source of strength: it is a spring from which they draw the energy needed for coping with the unexpected difficulties of their resettlement.

Through recalling the continued existence of their people in spite of hardships over many centuries, the story assists them, lifting them up and stirs the force of life in them. In view of these functions, it is not surprising that the story of the journey serves the entire Ethiopian community, including individuals who reached Israel in a different manner.

Let me now shift our attention to the telling of this story to other Israelis. The story of the journey plays a central role in the social dialogue that has evolved between Ethiopian Jews and Israeli society. When interviewed in the media on other subjects, Ethiopian Jews seize the opportunity to promote their own view of themselves. Through the journey-story they try to convey to Israeli society those aspects of their self-perception which are most important for them: those of their Jewish identity, the fact that they earned their right to Israel through the suffering of the journey, and their self-image as brave and resourceful people. What could better convey Jewish identity than stories of *kiddush ha-Shem* (Jewish martyrology) which are included within the narratives of the journey? Or what could better contradict Israeli perceptions of them as miserable dependent people than the stories of heroism and ingenuity on their way? What could replace the information included in the narratives in explaining the reason for their journey 'home'? That they were persecuted and discriminated against as Jews in Ethiopia and felt that they did not belong there, which conveys a message that stands in contrast to the image of 'people who came because of hunger'. Or, what could be more powerful than the experience of reliving the Exodus of the Israelites to convey the idea that they share the same ancestors as the present-day Israelis? It is important to note, however, that the social struggle of the Ethiopian Jews was not limited to their efforts to convey important messages to Israeli society through emphasising the journey experience. The struggle also includes a use of other means such as various political measures. Yet, even these political measures were, in many instances, within the frame of reference of the journey, as was reflected in interviews made in relation to these actions.

The story of the journey, I believe, is 'a myth in the making'. It

is still a first- and second-hand memory transmitted within and outside the group, but it has already acquired those aspects which play a part in condensing the factual and reworking them into a collective story whereby the meaning of it is its central essence.

The study of the different processes of transmission of memory has been carried furthest among the anthropologists and historians of Africa, due to their special dependence on oral sources.⁹ Some Africanists have tried to disentangle the process by which immediate memory is transformed into formal tradition. This can sometimes be quite rapid: the lives of African prophets, for example, can be transformed into myths within a space of two or three years.¹⁰ Africanist Joseph Miller, on the basis of field work in Angola, has shown how when memory of the Angolan War passes beyond personal oral histories which are eye-witness accounts, and beyond informal memory which includes second-hand accounts, what is then needed, and indeed is synthesised by the societies he researched, is 'a simplified, stylised account which concentrates on the meaning of the story'.¹¹

The story of the journey is still being told by people who have gone through it. Nevertheless, it is beginning to change from a personal story into a collective memory. Some elements of the group's story are already being emphasised and given a place of importance. Some of my interviewees were already orienting themselves according to these collective aspects of the story as if these were coordinates to which their personal account should refer. It is very understandable that people who have experienced the hardships of the journey will participate in the process of turning it into a collective myth.

This process is even more evident when it is seen among people who have not gone through the journey. In a recent workshop which I conducted a woman who arrived in Israel five years ago chose as her personal subject of presentation the story of the journey. Although she herself had not gone through the journey, she related to it explicitly as her story. She belonged to this story and it belonged to her. Myths created by particular groups are not a new phenomenon in Israeli society. Various groups of immigrants (or *aliyot* as waves of immigrants are called in Israel) have created different myths. These centre around who they had been (i.e. their past identity), the way they were received in Israel, the hardships they went through, or on what they have contributed in their new place. These myths often serve as a means to legitimise claims for certain political or social rights. For example, the myth of the

chalutz (the pioneering Israeli) or the *tzabar* (the born Israeli), created by Ashkenazi Jews, was maintained in order to preserve the power of the social elite and as a means to motivate others towards a certain model of conduct. The case of the myth of the disadvantaged or discriminated of the North African immigrant group (*aliyah*) also served as a way of penetrating into the political arena, or of promoting status. Almog¹² writes about the 'Zionist myth of the 1948 generation', and other scholars, such as Yablonka¹³ and Segev relate various myths which play a role within Israeli society.

It can be assumed that since every group of immigrants which arrived in Israel created its own myth, then those who did not develop such a myth are 'missing' as a group in Israeli consciousness. Thus, the first settlers, who came mainly from eastern and central Europe in the last century and built the first little villages and towns, presented society at large with the myth of 'the drying of the swamps'; the second and third immigration wave, coming in the 1920s and later, mainly from Russia, the Ukraine, and the Baltic republics, created the 'New Hebrew Man' and the 'religion of (manual) work'. The North African Jews, in particular, created the myth of discrimination, which includes an idealised picture of their previous existence in Morocco. On the other hand, those who did not have a myth surrounding their immigration wave seem to lack a dimension as a distinct group in Israeli consciousness, as, for example, the Egyptian Jews.¹⁴

The story of the journey, which is turning into a myth, is thus extremely important, since it serves as a means of opening up a space for the Ethiopian Jews as a group in Israeli consciousness. We still do not know how this process will continue to unfold, and whether the story of the journey will be part of the Israeli tapestry of social myths.

Notes

- 1 R. Samuel and P. Thompson, *The Myths We Live By* (London/New York, 1990).
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 3 G. BenEzer, 'Ethiopian Jews Encounter Israel: Narratives of Migration and the Problem of Identity', in R. Benmayor and A. Skotness (eds), *Migration and Identity*, International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories, vol. 3 (New York/Oxford, 1994). By the same author, 'Bravery and Inner Strength in Ethiopian Jews. Narratives of the Journey to Israel', paper presented to The Second International Congress of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry (Jerusalem, Beer Sheba, 21-5 May 1995).

- 4 G. Ben Ezer, *Narratives of a Migration Journey: Ethiopian Jews on Their Way to Israel (1977–1985)*, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Essex, 1995).
- 5 R. May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York/London, 1991), p. 26.
- 6 P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford, 1988, 2nd edn.).
- 7 R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris, 1957).
- 8 R. Basso, 'Myths in Contemporary Oral Transmission: A Children's Strike', in R. Samuel and P. Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*.
- 9 P. Thompson, *The Voice*, p. 143.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 O. Almog, 'The Zionist Myths of the Fighting Tsabar of the 1948 Generation', in *Maarachot* 333 (1993), pp. 40–8 (Hebrew).
- 13 H. T. Yablonka, *Survivors of the Holocaust: Israel After the War* (New York/London, 1998).
- 14 G. Abramson (ed.), *Modern Jewish Mythologies* (Cincinnati, 2000).

THE SACRED AND SECULAR

The immigration of the black Jews of Ethiopia to Israel

Ruben Schindler

Introduction

There is an Ethiopian proverb which states, ‘unless you call out who will open the door?’ The Jews of Ethiopia have been shrouded in silence for centuries in the Highland Plateau of Ethiopia, cut off from the mainstream of Judaism. When Jews from the West finally reached Ethiopia the response by the Ethiopians was, ‘are there Jews who are also white?’ It is only in the past three decades that the door of the Ethiopian Jewish Community was opened, enabling a glimpse of their lives.

The Jews of Ethiopia have been referred to by various names, including Falashas, Kayla and *Beta Israel* (the House of Israel). They are most frequently called Falashas.¹

Leslau² notes that the name Falasha can best be explained as deriving from the Ethiopic *falasa*, ‘to emigrate’. The term is pejorative, meaning stranger, and originated among the native population. Ethiopian society was structured upon land tenure called *Rist*, which played an important role in the lives of its citizens. *Rist*, in its most general sense, referred to inherited land use. It dictates the claims individual persons could make to inherit specific strips of land by virtue of their descent from the ancestral first holder of the land.³ Quirin⁴ suggests that land ownership among the *Beta Israel* was the exception and not the rule.

The Jews of Ethiopia have also been referred to as the Kayla. Schoenberger in her work on this subject,⁵ points out that the name

is used in more isolated rural areas and refers to both the people and the crafts they produce. The term is of *agaw* origin, the *agaw* people being the original inhabitants of the area.

Origins

It is often thought that the *Beta Israel* are descended from the Biblical tribe of Dan, one of the ten lost tribes carried away by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. After the death of King Solomon, a schism developed and ten of the twelve tribes seceded and under Jeroboam formed the Northern Kingdom. The Kingdom capitulated 200 years later and the majority were deported to Assyria where they soon lost their separate identity and assimilated.

Leslau offers a number of other views of their origins:

When the Hebrews left Egypt at the time of the Exodus, a portion of them migrated south and reached Ethiopia; still others affirm that they have descended from Jews who came after the destruction of the First or Second Temple [. . .] The Jews of Yemen may have sent forth missionaries who converted these African tribes to Judaism.⁶

Finally, Kaplan⁷ proposes that the *Beta Israel* could be converted *agaw* (Cushitic-speaking Ethiopians) and he dates their appearance as late as the fifteenth century.

The earliest reference to the *Beta Israel* community is contained in the diary of Eldad ha-Dani, a ninth-century merchant and traveler who professed to have been a citizen of an autonomous Jewish state in Eastern Africa inhabited by the tribes of Dan. Bleich in his seminal work on the subject notes ‘although scholars such as Abraham Ibn Ezra and Meir of Rotherberg expressed reservation with regard to the variety of Eldad’s narrative, the Rabbinic luminaries such as Rashi, Ravad and Abraham ben Maimon, cite Eldad as an unquestioned authority’.⁸ Bleich suggests that there appears to be sufficient available evidence suggesting the origins of *Beta Israel* to the tribe of Dan, and inextricably tied to the Jewish people.⁹

Marginality: individual and community identity

In Park’s seminal article, the author addresses the concept of marginality. He refers to the many autobiographies written by new immigrants. Within these narratives he notes:

The story of the marginal man; the man who emerging from the ghetto in which he lived in Europe; is seeking to find a place in the freer, more complex and cosmopolitan life of an American city. In these immigrant autobiographies the conflict of cultures, as it takes place in the mind of the immigrant, is the just conflict of the 'divided self' the old self and the new. And frequently there is no salifying issue of this conflict, which often terminates in a profound disillusionment.¹⁰

What Park wrote almost 70 years ago parallels the experiences of many immigrant groups, including the Jews of Ethiopia. Throughout their long exile, as mentioned, this community has sought to ascend to Zion and Jerusalem, which they viewed as their centre of spirituality and survival. For the Jews of Ethiopia their yearning to reach the Holy Land was reflected in their long exile spanning hundreds of years.

Marginality presupposes a certain cultural inequality encompassing the religion, customs and habits of a particular group. This would also include differences in the relationship between the dominant culture and traditional cultures, with the latter facing considerable strain. As a long-standing immigrant society the success of integration is very much dependent upon the reciprocal relationship between the host society and the newcomers. It should be noted that one of the challenges facing modern society is for the newcomer to negotiate these conflicting pressures.

It is well known that migration is not an isolated traumatic experience which manifests itself either at the moment of departure or separation from one's place of origin, or at the moment of arrival in a new unfamiliar environment. Migration falls into the category of 'cumulative' and 'tension' traumas, with reactions that are not always spectacular but have profound and lasting effects.¹¹ Thus, it is not only important to help new immigrants in dealing with the process of bereavement, but it is also vital to enable them to hold on to what Denford has defined as the 'non-human world'.¹² This includes familiar objects such as artefacts and clothing which serve as vital functions for their sense of identity. Not only was it difficult and often impossible for the Ethiopian Jews to take along personal belongings, but upon arrival many immigrants discarded their traditional attire for Western dress. Denford suggests that seemingly insignificant ornaments may be highly important to maintaining a sense of identity.

Emigration as a period of upheaval requires sensitivity from the host community to provide continuity from the past to the present. The maintenance of stability throughout the early stages of immigration is vital for personal identity. This sense of continuity can be splintered easily when the immigrants' names are deleted and new Hebrew names are conferred. It is not only the self that faces uncertainty but roles of the family that are compromised. Bahrani explains:

Family hierarchy is reflected by imparting different names to a person according to his rank and status. Therefore, a person could be called one name by his father, another by his grandfather and yet another by his brother. The incorrect use of one's name is seen as an offence.¹³

In this context it is important to mention Erickson's thesis¹⁴ in which he suggests that the idea of identity and the development of personality are not confined to the brief period of childhood and the nuclear setting, but that each stage of the life cycle has its crises and developmental resolutions. In addition, the models of the self which are incorporated in the identity are assimilated in a number of social settings. Alba adds that the appeal of Erickson's approach is in 'its suggestion that the individual's personality and identity are informed by ethnicity not just on the conscious surface but also at deeper levels. Accordingly, individuals may be ethnic in their "identities" even if they consciously reject their ethnic backgrounds.'¹⁵

As mentioned earlier, the issue of religious status has become a source of stress for Ethiopian Jews. The response of the community was of deep hurt, pain and anger. A people that had sustained centuries of deep antagonism and hostility in their host country suddenly faced discrimination in their new-found land. Bennet, Wolin and Macavity stated that 'family identity is the family's subjective sense of its own continuity over time, its present situation, its character . . . shared belief systems are the implicit assumptions about role, relationships, and values that govern interaction in families and other groups.'¹⁶

Glazer and Moynahan,¹⁷ Greeley¹⁸ and Enloe¹⁹ stress the importance of religion as a force that strengthens ethnic identification and the family. For the Ethiopian community and family, religion provides distinctive and important meaning in human existence. Myths also characterised Ethiopian culture in that Israel exemplified the

ideal state, the Promised Land, and there was the conviction that only the pious and devout abide in the Holy Land. For the Ethiopian Jews, myths were of critical importance, providing a sense of personal identity and making possible a sense of community, as well as supporting moral values and dealing with the inscrutable mystery of creation.

The issue of religious identity is further reflected in the question of the status of the Ethiopian community. The controversy over whether the immigrants are inextricably part of the Jewish community continues to be raised. As Corinaldi suggests:

Two major questions have arisen with regard to personal status of the *Beta Israel*. The first . . . concerns the validity of their marriages and more particularly, their divorces. The second rests on the possibility that, either in whole or in part, the *Beta Israel* community is comprised of descendants or converts whose conversions were not in accordance with *halakah* (Jewish law).²⁰

The issue of status has been resolved in part by the Chief Rabbinate, by requiring the men to convert by ritual conversion.²¹ Immersion in the *mikveh*, the ritual bath, has caused a vehement protest on the part of many members of the community. They felt that their very identity had been impugned.²²

The problem has been compounded in light of the fact that marriage and divorce within Israeli society are conducted by the Rabbinate under State auspices. The *qessoch* (Rabbis) have been denied this privilege. Their inability to officiate at marriages places their role as spiritual counsellor in a most vulnerable position.

Another concern relates to the religious practices and rulings of the Jewish community the world over. For example, the 24 books of the Jewish Bible have formed the basis for religious activities throughout the centuries. For the majority of these communities religious practices have been modified by several centuries of Rabbinic legislative discussions and rulings collected in the tractate of the *Talmud* and subsequent commentaries. The *Beta Israel* differ substantially from other Jewish communities by virtue of their lack of contact with the Talmudic tradition. Thus, any differences between Ethiopian religious practices and the practices of the rest of the world Jewry may be interpreted in the context of this historic reality.

Another major strain relates to the transition from their rural homes in the Gondar and Tigre region in northern Ethiopia to

urban centres in Israel. This migration presented a major challenge in guarding their religious practices in regard to ritual purity.²³

For example in the *Beta Israel* community in Ethiopia, a woman giving birth to a male child was secluded for an extensive period of time (40 days), and twice as long for a girl.²⁴ In addition, the process of purity entailed complex rituals, such as shaving one's hair, fasting and sacrifices. While the latter was given up in time, the problem of isolation and 'contamination' of others by social interchange for an extended period was simply unfeasible.

Finally, religion as a unifying bond was challenged by major family changes. The gradual shift from an orthodox patriarchal structure to an egalitarian one, brought about limitations in the authority of heads of households. Economic demands brought about an increase in dual careers in the family, further mitigating the boundaries required for religious supervision. Finally, the dramatic increase in children leaving home to study in State religious schools usurped the role of the father as educator even further.²⁵

Secularisation

There are many factors which influence marginalisation. Secularisation is an important component of this process. The large Ethiopian immigrant movements in 1985 and 1990 came face to face with a society that was in the main secularised. The latter is a natural development of modern society where the world of science and empiricism are central.²⁶ For the Ethiopian community this 'new world' was in stark contrast with their way of life based on religious faith and belief. Furthermore, this was counter to the agrarian, rural and highly structured society in which they lived.

Bryan Wilson, in his important essay on secularisation, saliently points to this shift. In the secular world Wilson notes: 'the theologians were caught in a system in which the world was not merely factually known, but in which it was evaluatively interpreted'.²⁷ Furthermore, the agrarian way of life and the work of the land, which was seasonal and often unpredictable, gave way in their new society to a rational way of utilising resources. Prayers for rain, the increase of crops by supernatural influence, the adoption of the sacred for survival were dramatically excised from the activity of the *qessoch* whose role was now to provide religious leadership and inspiration. Productivity was now a function of proper and often sophisticated planning engaging computer technology.

Peter Berger²⁸ supports this view, suggesting that the shift from the sacred to the secular has now become a part of our psyche inextricably bound to our consciousness and culture. Furthermore, society no longer seeks religious answers to questions of natural phenomena. But this was precisely what the Ethiopian elders and their religious emissaries were taught. This view was thus shattered upon their arrival in Israel.

An additional dimension of secularisation deals with the power shift from the sacred to the secular. Wilson has defined secularisation as a 'process of transfer of property, power, activities . . . from institutions with a supernaturalism frame of reference to . . . institutions operating according to empirical, rational, pragmatic criteria'.²⁹

Indeed, in Israel, power remains in the hands of traditional religious establishment. They make the decisions about religious status and how Judaism is defined. Furthermore, the establishment has accumulated more power because of the special political role it plays. This is an important change since the issue of resources is central. The Rabbinate is a recognised government institution and thus has access to funding. The funds are utilised for manifold religious purposes covering a wide range of activities. Human resources are needed to dispense charitable works, synagogue construction and the supervision of dietary facilities. While the end product is the sacred, the resources distributed provide a large network of people with income who are indebted to the power brokers.

Deshen and Shoked³⁰ and Deshen³¹ point to the importance of defining secularism within the contextual cultural milieu. They suggest caution in delineating the frame of reference in its contemporary meaning. Certainly for the *qessoch*, the Rabbinical authorities of the Ethiopian community, the issue was their diminished significance of the moral, ethical and emotional statue which they represented and edified. In a short period of time religious influence was superseded by Western values. The long-standing cultural and religious separation from the dominant State institutions in Ethiopia was no longer relevant or desirable in Israel.

It should be noted that there have been various important extensions of secularisation theory. As Martin suggests, secularisation varies enormously, within regions of the world and the cultural areas they comprise.³² Examining secularisation from a historical point of view, he suggests:

A crucial historical circumstance was the presence of a religious monopoly as some degree of pluralism. Thus, in England and Holland there was some degree of pluralism, and in the U.S.A. an even greater pluralism that led to the separation of church and state. The conclusion that followed from these historical comparisons was that religion flourished most luxuriously under modern conditions where church and state were separated and where there was religious pluralism and competition.³³

Within the Israeli context, the religious establishment continues to view itself as the regulator of matters which are sacred or divine. On issues of personal status, such as marriage and divorce, and questions of religious practices there are no alternative institutions which have the legal power to adjudicate queries of a religious nature.

Within Israeli society, one must also be aware of the impact of social differentiation. This view suggests the yielding of all measures of monopoly whether in a religious or political nature. Within a global context Barker has identified this phenomenon,³⁴ and in the Israeli scene one recognises the growing number of 'returnees' to Jewish belief (*hozrim bi-teshuvah*). This phenomenon should be viewed within the context of the search for spirituality but is often motivated by religious political parties.

For the Ethiopian community, however, the search for spirituality has been compounded. Prior to Operation Moses (1985), any Ethiopian who emigrated to Israel had been required to undergo ritual conversion if he wished to be fully accepted as a member of the Jewish Community – this despite the ruling of some religious authorities that, although there may be questions as to the status of individual Ethiopians, the *Beta Israel*, as a group, was undoubtedly Jewish. This policy caused considerable discontent among the Ethiopians, but it was adhered to for the most part.

Within several months of the termination of Operation Moses, this issue of religious identity took on political overtones and spawned activists, protests and national debate. Some Ethiopians who had already been living in Israel for several years began to encourage their newly arrived brethren to refuse any kind of conversion process, specifically citing ritual immersion as akin to the forced baptism that had periodically been the fate of the *Beta Israel* in their native country.

Most Israeli Jews are not ritually observant and the involvement of the religious establishment in issues such as the determination of Jewish identity has long rankled among segments of the population who advocate a full church–state division. For them and for others concerned with civil rights, the issue of Ethiopian religious identity became the latest example of religious coercion in a democratic country.

At the time of writing, the situation had settled into something of a mutually tolerable status quo. The Chief Rabbinate continues to require ritual immersion prior to marriage, but otherwise holds the Ethiopians to be fully recognised as Jews. For those Ethiopians who refuse to be bound by this decision, two options exist. Several of the Ethiopian religious leaders continue to perform marriages, although these ceremonies are not recognised by governmental authorities as legal. And one recognised religious leader, the Chief Rabbi of the city of Netanya, has performed legal marriages for Ethiopian couples without the requirement of ritual conversion.

In concluding this section, one must state the important contribution of Casanova and his thesis on secularisation.³⁵ He suggests that religious institutions are retaining their goal of the sacred and broadening their spiritual quest to issues of universal appeal. He argues that by the 1980s religion had inverted its position of privatisation and marginalisation and acquired a public voice. In many areas of the world subjects such as euthanasia, Aids, abortion were addressed. In Israel parallel declarations were made emphasising tolerance for new immigrants and acceptance of diverse ideologies. It is too early to evaluate the efficacy of these declarations; we can only note that the divide between immigrant communities and the host country has not been dramatically curtailed. The public aspiration of religion to achieve more sacred values encompassing the country as a whole has yet to be achieved.

Conclusion

Eighteen years after Operation Moses, the feeling of marginality remains. At a recent Ethiopian conference of young leadership some 200 second- and third-generation participants spoke freely of their settlement. While gains have been made particularly among young women and their growing role in the work force, the concerns linger.³⁶ The feeling of being distanced from other immigrants in the big city,³⁷ and the concern about loss of community and the close

family ties that they once knew are still of major concern. Perhaps the most salient issue, however, is the inability to reconnect to their heritage, culture and religion. Many feel that by becoming Israeli, and being caught up in the world of technology and market forces, they were sacrificing their personal and communal identity. The third generation is calling for the return to a life which was more substantive than the one they have now. It is perhaps best summed up by a young woman in her early twenties who noted:

We left Gondar with our families and trekked to the Sudan with the Rabbis and elderly leading the flock. It was like Moses leading the people out of Egypt, but once we arrived his sceptre was gone.

To modify this sense of marginality is the challenge facing the *Beta Israel* and, no less, Israel society.

Notes

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- 3 S. D. Messing, *Highland Plateau Amhara of Ethiopia* (New Haven, 1985), pp. 110, 185.
- 4 A. J. Quirin, 'The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopian History: Cast formation and Culture Change. 1270–1868', unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Minnesota, 1977).
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- 6 W. Leslau, *Falasha Anthology*, p. 9.
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- 25 R. Schindler, Interview with Paraprofessional Women in Caravan Village, Rosh Hayin 25 Kil from Tel-Aviv (1992).
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- 27 B. Wilson, 'Secularisation', p. 10.
- 28 P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York, 1969), p. 107.
- 29 B. Wilson, 'Secularisation', p. 12.
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BIRTH AND DEATH IN AN ABSORPTION CENTRE

The process of change among
Ethiopian Jews in Israel

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We propose in this chapter to analyse the process of coping with change through the study of two stages of the life cycle, birth and death, among Ethiopian immigrants living in one of the Israel Absorption Centres.

Why the life cycle? Because it is a concept which allows for an understanding of the conflict on different levels. First of all, this concept expresses the internalisation of vital sequences such as childhood, adolescence, maturity, old age and death. It expresses the internalisation of 'time' according to the sequence of past, present and future. And, finally, the stages of the cycle, which come to expression through the rituals of passage, reflect values of crucial significance for the culture.

Geertz¹ has described the 'methodological themes' that he found relevant to an ethnographical understanding of modern thought. In this particular book, he referred to three themes: the use of convergent data, the explication of linguistic classifications, and the examination of the life cycle. 'The concern with the life cycle', he wrote:

is not precisely biological in nature, though it stems from a sensitivity to the biological foundation of human existence. Nor is it precisely biographical, though it sets social, cultural and psychological phenomenon in the context of careers. Passage rites, age and sex role definitions,

intergenerational bonds (parent/child, master/apprentice) have been important in ethnographic analysis because, marking states and relationships almost everyone experiences, they have seemed to provide at least reasonably fixed points on the swirl of our material.

These 'fixed points' of Geertz lead us directly to a better understanding of the principles of change as described by Turner. He writes:

The status changes are not only of the individual who is the object of the ritual, but also of those persons who are related to him by ties of blood, marriage, economics, political authority and the like. This structural insight helps us to understand how each individual life cycle is bound and interwoven with the life cycles of other individuals. The individual passage from stage to stage leads to changes in the life cycles of all other members of the family and their personal fulfilment.²

In every immigrant group, the previous cultural context of the life cycle reflects the continuity of customs and beliefs which have proven their usefulness in the past. However, in the context of the new society, this significance became questionable; and there is pressure to adapt to new customs and beliefs whose usefulness has not yet been proven.

The dimension of the conflict can be measured by the distance between the internalised customs and the new ones. In our experience with the Ethiopian Jews, we were witness to the fact that as yet there was no new recognised social pattern which could allow the community to watch over its individuals as it did in the past. *The expression of the conflict* emerged through the personal solutions that individuals framed for themselves as a compromise between the old and the new.³

There are certain areas in the life cycle which are more open to change and others which stand strongly against *all* change because they relate to the more deeply rooted values of the society. As such, the two stages of birth and death are highly structured and have been witness to fewer basic changes than have taken place in other areas. It may be that this more structured cultural frame is related to the fact that the cultural passages of birth and death are connected to the true time of the biological moment.

These two stages of the life cycle are characterised by several structural similarities. Both of these stages create new social spaces. In *birth* the new space is filled by the infant and by the new roles assumed by those around him. In *death* also a new space is created, and this space must be occupied by the heirs to the different roles previously filled by the deceased. The new-born infant and the deceased are the reason for the rituals but have a purely symbolic presence.

The two stages of birth and death are related by a number of common principles. For instance, both these stages are related to the area of impurity which can contaminate others who come in contact with them. These areas of impurity require certain specific rules of ritual behaviour, in order to prevent contamination. The process of immigration to Israel affected the community's ability to observe these traditional rules of behaviour, so this has become one of the areas of cultural conflict.

From an anthropological point of view, birth and death are defined as stages of passage. We will use the definitions of Van Gennep,⁴ Turner⁵ and De Vos⁶ for the rituals of passage. They described these rituals as universal, each passage composed of three phases:

- separation
- transition
- re-incorporation.

In the Ethiopian culture, in the first phase of separation, there is the need to isolate the source of impurity: in birth, it is the mother and child; in death, the body of the deceased. In the phase of transition, we have all the rituals needed for the recognition of the new status. In the last phase of re-incorporation, we have the entry into society according to the classification which the society bestows.

Setting

The Absorption Centre we chose for the purpose of our fieldwork was populated by Ethiopian immigrants. They came to Israel in Operation Moses (1984–5). This particular Absorption Centre was chosen since most of the *olim* arrived there directly from the refugee camps of Sudan, and thus it was possible to accompany them through their first meetings with the new society.

Birth

The biological and cultural themes of the period of fertility are synchronic in the Ethiopian culture. During this period, childbirth is the most important function of the woman.

At time of childbirth, it was culturally accepted for the woman to go to the home of her parents, which, in most cases, was in another village. This was especially true for the first pregnancies. Ideally, the birth should take place in the *Ya Dam Bet* where the mother and her infant, who were perceived as impure, were separated from the community; however, in fact, many births took place in the family dwelling.

If we return to the situation in the Israel Absorption Centre, we see that in Israel drastic changes took place in all three phases.

In the phase of *separation* at the time of birth, the deviation from the familiar cultural pattern begins in the hospital when the Ethiopian woman is asked to bare parts of the body that in Ethiopia, even at the time of birth, were covered, thus causing feelings of shame and tension. Even the position during labour is different. 'Here', as we have been told by an informant, 'you see everything, even how the baby comes out.'

As another informant described:

In Ethiopia the mother remained fully clothed during labour, both in defence of her modesty and because of her shame in having her body uncovered. She crouched in a special position wherein her knees were widespread and her stomach tended forward. The infant was delivered from behind and the woman giving birth is not witness to her infant's emergence. Older woman, preferably the mother of the pregnant woman, who themselves have given birth in the past, care for her. During the labour, the woman gave no vocal expression to her pain and preserved a state of great restraint. After the birth, one of the midwives stayed with her for at least a day. Everyone who came into contact with the woman in labour was considered impure, and they waited outside the village until sunset and at the end of the day went through the purification ritual.

As a result, according to the report of the obstetrics team at the Barzelai Hospital in Ashkelon, there was an increase in the number of Caesarean sections among Ethiopian women. It may be that this

increase can be explained by the cultural shock of the women giving birth in an Israeli hospital.

If we consider the three phases of passage, in Israel, at time of birth, the first phase of separation becomes very problematic and practically non-existent, whereas, in Ethiopia the mother and the infant were separated quickly from their social group. The *Ya Dam Bet* (the hut of blood), where they stayed during this period, was surrounded by a circle of stones which symbolised the boundary between the two worlds, the pure and the impure. If a son was born, the woman, together with her infant, separated herself from the community in the *Ya Dam Bet* for 40 days; if a daughter was born, for 80 days.

One informant explained that the reason for the different duration of separation from the community is found in the writings of the *Torah*. However, during our fieldwork, we were given additional explanations:

I do not know if it is or isn't written in the *Torah*, but there was a time when daughters were very precious because few were born. So that when a daughter was born, the mother had more time – 80 days – to watch over her and take better care of her.

During the period of transition in Israel the mother and the child remain part of the everyday life of the community. When the mother with her infant leave the hospital they return straight to their home. This situation gives rise to many guilt feelings since there is no separation between the impure world which they represent and the pure world around them. Thus, they 'become' a source of contamination for others. The area of impurity is concretised in the woman's body and in the body of the infant, so that every interaction with members of the family and community becomes a source of fear and discomfort. *The borders of impurity moved from a geographical area to the body (mother-child); this fact caused the woman to lose the safe territory which the society had built for her; now all the responsibility of being a source of impurity fell on her.*

We found a wide range of compromises, such as: the woman would create a corner of separation in the living room, or the man would leave the house. The woman prepared food – or didn't; and some would serve the food and others wouldn't. What was definite, according to all our informants, was that the couple had no sexual intercourse during this period.

In the second phase of *transition* the mother and infant in Ethiopia remained in a prolonged isolation from the community. According to Van Gennep, this isolation symbolises the time needed in order for society to agree to accept the infant as a new member of its society; and at the same time it protects the mother-child couple from all wishes or demands against them by the community. This period was perceived as potentially dangerous for both the mother and child. That is to say that birth is a time when the mother and child are vulnerable to the supernatural beings that may harm them.⁷

The ritual of circumcision takes place on the eighth day after the birth of the male child, both in Ethiopia and in Israel; but there are marked differences in the celebration of the ritual. In Israel the ceremony is public and festive; in Ethiopia it was carried out next to the isolated *Ya Dam Bet*, and was not a festive occasion for the community.

In the beginning, the staff of the Absorption Centre organised the circumcision ceremony (*brit milah*) in the Synagogue as is often done in Israel. This seemingly simple act of good intentions provoked a sense of disorientation among the *olim*, who could not understand how it was possible to allow a source of impurity to enter the holy Synagogue. When the mother entered the Synagogue together with the infant, the *olim* reacted with anger: 'In her house let her do what she wants, but not in the Synagogue where one says the name of the Lord.' Afterwards, they also refused to pray in that Synagogue. Later on, such ceremonies took place in the Absorption Centre's clubroom.

We emphasise again how in this second stage of transition the woman in her physical being becomes the moving cause of the transmission of her impurity. It thus becomes understandable why negative and aggressive feelings may be directed towards her.

One of the difficulties in keeping these laws during the phases of separation and transition is the new structure of the extended family. In the past, it had been based on a system of mutual obligations, allowing for complementary roles within the family. However, as a result of the immigration and the break-up of the extended family, neighbours and friends joined together in order to provide for the traditional needs of the new mother and child. And yet, despite this support, there still exist the uncertainty and the ambivalence toward performing the previously accepted rituals in the new environment.

In Ethiopia, on the last day of this period of transition, the mother

fasted, shaved off her hair and the infant's hair, laundered her clothes, washed her dishes and immersed both herself and the infant in flowing water. A group of women accompanied them to the river.

The blessing of the *qes* (religious leader) after sundown permitted the re-entering of the mother with her infant into the community. This is the phase of *re-incorporation*, when a public ceremony, called *Aerdar* (after the name of one of the holy texts), was held in the compound of the synagogue. This ceremony included the sprinkling of pure water on the mother and the infant.⁸

The ritual of *Aerdar* was continued in Israel but took place in the family's caravan in the presence of the visitors. In Israel, too, the mother was purged of any possible sins committed within the impure period by the symbolic punishment of a 'beating' by the *qes* and the custom of sprinkling pure water over the mother and the infant.

As part of the ceremony the *qes* would symbolically strike the mother three times with a cluster of twigs, the number of twigs corresponding to the number of days of the separation phase. One of the mothers described how: 'The *qes* gave me three blows, but very gently, in case I, perhaps, touched someone or offended him in my thoughts, or said something to someone.' During this ceremony the infant received his/her name which endowed him/her with a social identity.

At the end of 40 or 80 days (depending on the baby's gender) the father, according to his economic means, prepared a celebration for the community. In Israel the phase of re-incorporation began too soon, but it may be that there are several passages at different times that symbolise this phase.

The analysis we have brought here of the theme of birth has emphasised the fact that childbirth is not an individual matter but a complicated structure that includes the extended family and the community. In Israel the breakdown of the mother-father extended family has created a vacuum in the functions of both systems. This situation reveals the long and arduous path the Ethiopian immigrants have to transverse in order to find the solution that will fill this social vacuum.

Death

In the rituals of death, we see that the deceased and the mourners comprise two different states of being in which both, simultaneously, are passing through the same phases. However, between

the deceased and the mourners there passes a semantic bar, dividing the world of the pure and the impure. These phases are the same as those we described in the previous section on birth: separation, transition and re-incorporation.

It is important to recall Hertz's description of the collective representation of death:⁹

- Death is not felt as an instantaneous destruction of an individual life.
- Death is rather to be seen as a social event, the starting point of a ceremonial process whereby the dead person becomes an ancestor.
- Death is like an initiation into a social afterlife, making it a kind of rebirth.

For the Ethiopians in the Absorption Centre, there were three different 'meetings' with death: 1) there were those members of the family who died in Israel; 2) there were the endless announcements that were reaching the community in Israel about the deaths of family members left behind in Ethiopia; and 3) there were the delayed responses to the significance of deaths that took place during the long journey to Israel. In this chapter we will refer only to the deaths that occurred in Israel.

When the staff of the Absorption Centre received notice of the death in hospital of one of the immigrants, the situation was already very different from what it would have been in Ethiopia. There – the first phase of *separation* – the death took place in a completely different frame of reference. But here, even in the continuation of this phase, the preparation of the deceased's body for burial, is not carried out by the family but instead by the medical and religious establishment. On the other hand, during the phase of *transition*, the role of the family and the community remains important and centres mainly on the rituals relating to the ascent of the soul to heaven.

In accordance with the cultural pattern in Israel, the tendency of the Absorption Centre was for the agents of the establishment to inform the members of the family of the death of its member as quickly as possible, 'before anyone else knew'. This is an example of how the staff of the Absorption Centre, without being aware of the significance of their act, could have 'hurt and insulted' the mourners at a most sensitive moment in their lives. However, in this case, the situation was handled sensitively through the successful

intervention of the translators (Ethiopians) and the social workers, who had learned the importance of considering the mourners' sense of honour at the time of death in the family. For the Ethiopians, the ritual of informing members of the family of a death is a very structured one. Ritually, a number of respected people in the community who are related to the family of the deceased would be assembled. This group would keep the knowledge of the death secret for a number of hours, until the family would be gathered together towards the end of the day, this being the appropriate time for such an announcement. If these conditions had not been fulfilled, the mourners would feel that they and the deceased had been dishonoured, and thus might react depressively or with aggression.¹⁰ Immediately upon receiving the information, the family would stand together and begin its lamentations, while those who brought the tidings remained with the mourners as a support group. Others of the Absorption Centre would join the group; and with the quick spreading of the news, people from other Absorption Centres also began to arrive.

The immigration of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel disrupted the established networks of kinship based on obligations and rights. Funerals have now become an opportunity to restructure these networks and allow, if necessary, the creation of substitute ones. An informant told us: 'I go to all the funerals so that when someone in my family dies, everybody will come to the funeral.'

Thus, there is a marked difference in the size of participation in the mourning rituals. As informants told us: 'In Ethiopia, I participated in the funerals of members of my family and of my friends, but here all Ethiopians are my family.' And indeed, great numbers of Ethiopian immigrants arrived from all over the country in order to be present at the funeral.

In Ethiopia, as in other African communities, participation in the funeral is almost obligatory. If someone is absent he can be suspected of complicity in the death of the deceased.¹¹ At one of these funerals, we saw three *qessoch*, who performed the funeral ceremony and led the customary prayers. When they left the cemetery grounds, the male mourners stood in a circle around the three *qessoch*, who preached sermons of comfort and support and of the bond to reality.

There is a great difference between the cemetery structure of Jews in Ethiopia and in Israel. In Ethiopia graves of the community had been ordered hierarchically. In Israel there is no such obvious distribution.

Back in the Absorption Centre, those who came to comfort the mourners acted according to the accepted cultural customs in Ethiopia. They did not immediately enter the space where the mourners sat, but stood opposite them, grieving together with them while executing the ritual movements. The lamentations related to the good qualities of the deceased. Here we see the continuation of the patterns where the community asks to be accepted as participants in the mourning and appears as witnesses for the good of the deceased in order to help the soul's ascent to heaven.

From the moment when the announcement of the death was received until the end of the week of mourning, visitors were expected to taste of the food that was served in memory of the deceased. This refreshment was prepared mostly by the immigrants in the Absorption Centre. They also organised a collection of funds for the large feast that closes the seven days of mourning. Respected members of the community carefully listed the names of all contributors together with a precise record of the contributions.

The phase of *transition* is composed of many ritualistic ceremonies, such as the seven days of mourning (*shivah*) in which the mourners lament and pray. During this week it is customary for the mourners to wear their clothes inside out, thus expressing their grief and symbolising the fact that their world has been overturned. This period ends with a feast for which an animal has been slaughtered.

On the thirtieth or fortieth day, members of the family meet again in order to lament and pray for the deceased. And finally, after a year – or whenever it becomes possible – all members of the family together, or each member separately, must prepare a memorial feast called *tazkar*, which includes prayers and feasting. The *tazkar* ceremony symbolises the phase of *re-incorporation*. It is now that the mourners can divide the property and the traditional roles of the deceased; and, simultaneously, the deceased can take a new place in the world of the dead. Lately it has become the accepted 'fashion' in Absorption Centres for members of the community to express their need for traditional mourning rituals by having *tazkar* feasts in memory of family members long dead, for whom such feasts were often held while still in Ethiopia. The meaning of the 'fashion' can be interpreted by the concept of the *don* (gift),¹² as a universal value related to the system of mutual obligations within specific social boundaries. Among Ethiopian Jewry, this pattern of a system of obligations and rights exists as a basic value, giving expression to a sense of solidarity. In the present situation, those persons

participating in ceremonial rituals for new acquaintances feel the need to reciprocate, and thus, through this interchange, new social relationships are established and covenants are strengthened. The reconstruction of relationships and covenants is highly significant for this community, broken by many deaths and separations.

Conclusion and summary

By the analysis of these two stages in the life cycle, birth and death, we have tried to demonstrate the interplay between three dominant factors: the Absorption Centres, the Ethiopian immigrants organised as a community and the individual Ethiopian – all of whom are involved in the process of coping with the new reality.

True, we are aware that this process already began during the transitional period in the refugee camps in Sudan, when the Ethiopian Jews could not observe the principles of ritual purity, an essential part of the ritual passage of birth and death.

However, in our study the Absorption Centre provided the setting for observing the meeting between two cultures as well as the ensuing pressures which speeded up the process of change.

The concept of Absorption Centre can be understood as a planned organisation, on a national level, set up according to ideological principles whose goal is to lead to the absorption of the new immigrant in the host society. At the same time, the individual within the Ethiopian community is participating in the double game of control and compromise within the new conditions, as dictated both by the Absorption Centre and the Ethiopian community itself.

The stages of birth and death as experienced in the Absorption Centre reveal the process of change 'expressed' by the individual Ethiopian's decision about the interaction between the two cultures. Here we are witness to the conscious choice that has not as yet been institutionalised and internalised.

From the point of view of the individual Ethiopian, both birth and death are exceptional events; but from the point of view of the community and its social continuity, these events are recurrent, are an important factor in everyday life. They are expressed by public rituals and by the strengthening of social ties.

This process becomes especially apparent when we analyse the importance of the symbolic frontier between pure and impure as it is found in both of the stages of passage. This theme separates the two worlds through a series of taboos which must be observed

scrupulously. Because of the present lack of control over their observance, the individual can become a source of contamination for the collective.

Another common denominator for both of these stages is the concept of the three ritualised phases of separation, transition and re-incorporation. These phases are important culturally, both for the individual and for the community, in their search for solutions to the cultural conflict. Both stages clearly reflect the interaction between the three factors: the individual, the Ethiopian community and the Absorption Centre.¹³ In a social sense, therefore, the two stages are dependent upon the contextual framework of the society.

This process can be better understood with the help of Turner's concept:

The situation of the man passing through these rituals is unclear because he is moving through a space where he no longer has the attributes of the past and as yet has not acquired those of the future. A man in passage has two qualities: he has lost his classificatory role and at the same time has not yet acquired his new classificatory status.¹⁴

The tendency of the community is for cultural continuity; whereas the individual, in order to continue as a member of the community, must find his way between solutions for coping with new factors in his or her life and between the accepted pattern of behaviour in his community of origin.

We have here the confrontation engendered by the meeting between two different cultural models, one familiar and tested while the other has not yet proven itself. The Ethiopian immigrants are faced with the need to belong to their community as a safe and trusted framework. At the same time, there is the strong desire to be part of the new society which, as yet, is still strange though very close in terms of their mythology of identity. Here, then, is the substructure of the difficulty of coping, revealing and suffering connected with dealing with change.

Notes

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THE FUNCTION OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN THE LITURGY OF THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS

Ron Atar

Introduction

The Ethiopian Jews called *Beta Israel*¹ immigrated to Israel in two phases, with the help of operations initiated by the Israeli government: Operation Moses in 1984–5 and Operation Solomon in 1991. The drastic change in the way of life of the Ethiopian Jews in their new country had a major effect on the social and spiritual atmosphere of the congregation as well as on its religion. Once in Israel, its members started to drift away from their cultural heritage. The traditional practice of prayer that dates back hundreds of years has almost entirely vanished.

Within the liturgical repertory, the prayers appear to be the most original compositions of *Beta Israel*, showing hardly any influence from the co-territorial religious traditions. Part of the repertory is written, but a large number of the prayers are transmitted orally from generation to generation.²

These prayers change with each performance, but nevertheless the entirety of the repertory impresses us as integral. This integrity results from the many repetitions that form the basis of both the text and the music of the prayers. Although no entire piece is fixed, large parts of text and music recur in a variety of combinations. The connection between text and melody is not codified, the same text may appear with different melodies and vice versa.

The text of the prayers combines and/or paraphrases texts from various sources: *Dawit* – the Book of Psalms; *Orit* – the Bible (which

is to say the Old Testament as used by the Orthodox Ethiopian Church) and apocryphal and pseudo-epigraphic books. The community of *Beta Israel* speaks Amharic and Tigrinya. The prayers, however, are performed mainly in languages that are no longer used in everyday life: Ge'ez (most of the text) and Agaw (a smaller part of the texts).

According to Alvarez-Pereyre and Ben-Dor:

Ge'ez was the spoken language of Ethiopians in the first millennium. It is retained now as the liturgical language and the language of the holy scriptures by Ethiopian Christians and Jews. Agawegna is a general designation for a family within the Agaw languages spoken in north-western Ethiopia.³

Today, the *Beta Israel* congregation does not understand these languages; the text of the prayers is understood only by the priests (*qe*, plural: *qessoch*). Like Ge'ez, Agawegna is believed to be a language that at some time in history was spoken by the Ethiopian Jews. But Ge'ez has been studied and is generally understood by scholars today; Agawegna is hardly known and its translation presents problems.⁴

The service consists essentially of prayers, benedictions and a sermon, prayers being its central part. The benedictions and the sermon are spoken, while the prayers are always sung. All parts of the service are performed by the *qessoch*. The rest of the congregation does not partake in the performance; it only listens to it, receives it. Its role is limited to responding 'Amen', 'Hallelujah' or 'Maharee' (Mercy). Furthermore, the *qessoch* are not merely executors of religious ceremony, they are responsible for all religious and spiritual aspects of the life of the congregation.⁵

The system of learning and transmission of the liturgical repertory is complex and has barely been researched.⁶ The information I received from the elders of the community is often ambiguous and conflicting. The *qes* usually studies with monks (*manakosat*) over a period of about seven to ten years. The learning process consists of observing and listening to the prayers (text and music together) many times. After his years of study, the disciple returns to the community where he is examined by the local *qessoch*. He has to answer a series of questions and if accepted, he receives written approval signed unanimously by the group of the examiners. Only those who lead an impeccable personal life are accepted.

The monks are considered to be the highest authority in the religious hierarchy of the *Beta Israel*;⁷ they are believed to be the founders of the liturgy. The Jewish monk who played the most important part in the evolution of the liturgy was Abba Sabra who lived in the middle of the fifteenth century. The *qessoch* believe that he was responsible for the composition of several prayers and for establishing the order of the liturgical cycle; he wrote some of the liturgical books and introduced the severe laws of purity and isolation.⁸ The *manakosat* lived in monasteries that later became pilgrimage places.⁹ In the course of the 1970s, the tradition of monasteries disappeared and the role of the *manakosat* was taken by the *qessoch*.¹⁰

In the liturgy of the *Beta Israel*, the text is inseparable from its music. All the prayers are performed with melody, and the majority of them in a flexible, non-metric, recitation-like performing style. The *qessoch* term for liturgical text is *qalocc*. The term for music is *zema*, a word that is used only in the context of liturgical singing. The concept of *zema* includes all the melodies of the liturgy, the recitative-style melodies as well as the metered pieces. Although, as can be seen, the *qessoch* make a conceptual distinction between text and music, they do not regard them as components that exist on their own rights. Whenever I asked a *qessoch* to sing only the melody, or say the text without music, he was unable to do so.

Music and melody are so strongly connected that we cannot speak of musical phrasing per se. The articulation of the text and that of the music are one and the same thing. Thus most of the music is syllabic; each syllable of the text corresponds to one note of the melody.

The large-scale form of the prayers is structured by the performance: sections performed by one or two *qessoch* alternate with sections sung by the entire group of *qessoch* who act as a choir. This performing practice results in three basic forms in the liturgy:

- Antiphonal: the choir repeats the musical-textual unit that was performed by the soloist.
- Responsorial: (a) the choir completes the musical-textual unit that the soloist has begun or (b) the choir responds with a short formula to the completed musical phrase of the soloist.
- Hemiolic: the combination of these two that results in a structural *hemiola*, a peculiar feature of the *Beta Israel* prayer.

In the third performing type, the alternation between soloist and

choir occurs within a two-part musical phrase that consists of six short melodic units (3 + 3). There are three exchanges between the soloist and the group set against a two-part melodic arrangement. In this way the ternary structure of the alternating performance and the binary form of the melody results in a structural hemiola.¹¹ We find this form, for example, in the prayer *Wanivano Egzee’aviher li Musye* (see Figure 11.1), which is used in the ceremony of the first day of the year (*Berhan Saraqa*).

As can be seen, the essence of the prayer is expressed by the recited text, its form is defined by text-articulation and by the alternating groups. It is striking then to see that such a text- and voice-oriented performance is often accompanied by instruments – a feature of the *Beta Israel* liturgy that is unique in the Jewish liturgical tradition. According to the *qessoch*, the use of instruments is inspired by the Book of Psalms, specifically Psalm 149, verses 2–3 and Psalm 150, verses 3–4. Only percussion instruments are used and always in relation to holidays or fasting days such as the *Seged*,¹² the beginning of the month (*ya-Caraqa Ba’al*), weddings and funerals. The use of instruments is forbidden during Sabbath and *Astasreyo* (Day of Atonement).

The *Beta Israel* community uses the following instruments:

- *Nagarit* (Figure 11.2). A barrel-shaped drum, made out of tin and cowhide. The origin of the word *nagarit* is from the verb *nagara* that means ‘to speak’.¹³ The *qessoch* explained that the role of the *nagarit* is to open the heart and interpret the text.
- *Qachel* (Figure 11.3). A plate-like gong of varying diameter, which is struck with a small metal rod, curved at its end. The *qachel* is also called *metke*. The word means ‘to match’. This meaning hints at the rhythmic function of this instrument. The non-Jewish Ethiopian *qachel* differs from *Beta Israel* instruments. It is a small bell used for both religious and secular music of the orthodox Ethiopian Christian.¹⁴

Principle of alternation	Solo	Choir	Solo	Choir	Solo	Choir
Melodic distribution	A	B	AB	A	B	AB

Figure 11.1 Example of a structural hemiola.



Figure 11.2 The nagarit.

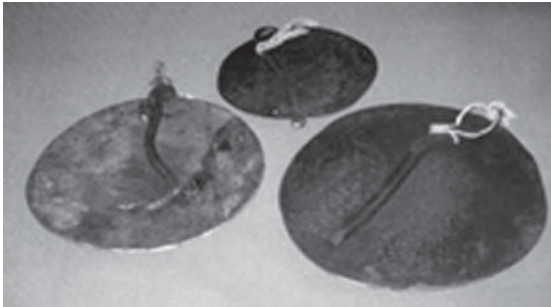


Figure 11.3 The qachel.

- *Senasel* (Figure 11.4). This instrument is a sistrum, 15 cm high, built of a metal handle with a frame attached to it. The frame is punctured with two to three holes on each side. Metal cords are stretched between the holes. The cords go through small metal squares. The *senasel* is played simultaneously with the *qachel*. It appears also in the liturgy of the Orthodox Ethiopian Church.¹⁵
- *Kabaro* (Figure 11.5). Similar to the *nagarit*, it is also a barrel-shaped drum though smaller in size. The *kabaro* is played at weddings and other joyful occasions. The *qessoch* say that it may also be used during prayer if the *nagarit* were missing.



Figure 11.4 The senasel.



Figure 11.5 The kabaro.

Playing the instruments is considered an honour. Only a few *qessoch* may play in the prayer, normally not more than two. Even during the holidays, only certain prayers are accompanied by instruments. The instruments, however, do not have an entirely fixed place in the liturgy. Although they are thought of as means to enhance the festive spirit, and thus high prestige is attached to them, they are not indispensable. The prayers can be performed without instruments.

It was a special difficulty of my fieldwork that the performances were inconsistent, or so it seemed to me. The same prayer was never performed exactly in the same manner unless I specifically asked the *qessoch* to do so. Another problem was the inaccuracies in their definition of the instruments, their roles and their names. Only toward the end of my research could I establish that they use four instruments: *nagarit*, *qachel* (*metke*), *kabaro* and *senasel*. At the beginning of my research, it seemed to me that the distinction between the *nagarit* and the *kabaro* was not important to the *qessoch*. Only when specifically asked did they distinguish between these two instruments and specify for me on which occasions they were used. Then I learned that normally, *Beta Israel* used solely the *nagarit* for the practice of the prayers, and only in its absence, in very small or distant *Beta Israel* villages, did they use the *kabaro*. In the course of my three-year-long research, the *qessoch* did not mention the use of the *senasel*. Only later, during an informal conversation did I hear about its existence: it had no independent part but was used to double for the *qachel*. The *qessoch* never gave me a complete list of the instruments they used.

It appears that such flexibility is an inherent part of the musical attitude of the community: the same flexibility that characterises the performance of the text and the melody is apparent also in the use of instruments. Other researchers faced similar problems. For instance Tourny found that the same musical term was used for more than one phenomenon.¹⁶

Obviously, the multiple versions of the same prayer created a great difficulty in determining its final version. In spite of this flexibility, it is possible to find an underlying conception in the musical system as well as in the use of the instruments. The basic function of the instruments remains the same in most prayers, and typical functional and concrete structural patterns keep returning. As far as I know, apart from Tourny's dissertation, which devotes one chapter to the instruments, there has been no study of the instrumental practice of *Beta Israel*. In my research I made an attempt to

outline the basic framework for the use of instruments, by trying to answer the question how instrumental accompaniment is connected to the melodic and textual structures of the liturgy.

Research and method

The incentive to my research was given by the corpus of 24 prayers recorded in 1986 by S. Arom, F. Alvarez-Pereyre and A. Nahmias, within the framework of collaboration between the French National Centre for Scientific Research (Paris), the Research Centre of Jewish Music and the Israeli National Sound Archives.¹⁷ Eleven *qessoch* participated in the research. They emigrated from different parts of Ethiopia in which *Beta Israel* lived: Tigre, Gondar, Wagara, Walqait and Semian.¹⁸ The informants for this specific research were three of these eleven *qessoch*: *Qes* Imharen or *Qes* Yirmiahu Pikado, *Qes* Makonnen or *Qes* Yosef Taia and *Qes* Samay or *Qes* Samuel Naga.¹⁹ Because of the hurried exodus of the Ethiopian Jews in 1981–3 (the time that preceded Operation Moses), the community was not able to bring its instruments. Therefore the 1986 recording contains only the vocal parts of the prayers. The *qessoch* who immigrated to Israel during Operation Solomon (1991) were able to bring out their instruments.

In their study of the Ethiopian Jews' liturgy, Arom and Tourny analysed the modal, rhythmic and compositional aspects of the prayers.²⁰ However, since they based their work on the 1986 recordings that did not contain the instrumental accompaniment, they could not gain a picture of the final form of the music. My aim was to continue the work they had begun. However, I based the analysis on the complete performance of the pieces, that is: performances with instruments. My focus was on the rhythm; more specifically on the issue of how the instruments articulate the rhythmic structure.

At the first stage of the research, I attempted to record the instrumental part over the existing recordings, following the playback method.²¹ I asked the *qessoch* to listen to one of the recorded prayers of the 1986 collection and enter with their percussion parts whenever appropriate. I noticed that they began to sing together with the tape. As a result, these first field recordings contain three layers: the old recording, together with the singing and the percussion parts that was performed over the recording. In the course of my research, I came to the conclusion that because of the rhythmic flexibility that characterises all of these layers, it is extremely

difficult to transcribe and understand the underlying rhythmic structure, so it was necessary to record the pieces anew, now in their integral form. For the purpose of this paper I selected 12 from the 24 prayers I recorded. All the examples of this article are based on these new recordings.

The systematic segmentation of the prayers to musical phrases and melodic units, the repetition of these units with small variations and the rapid alternation between the performers were the most prominent musical characteristics of these performance. To reflect this structure most faithfully I chose the system of paradigmatic transcription. This system allowed economical graphics and revealed the repetitive arrangement of the prayers.²²

Results and analyses

After transcribing and analysing the material, I found that the corpus of the twenty-four prayers can be divided into five groups according to the rhythmical aspects of the instrumental accompaniment.

The 'rhythmic' type

Fifteen out of the 24 prayers are accompanied by a regular rhythmic pattern, which is repeated from the beginning of the prayer until its end. This rhythmic pattern includes five rhythmic units. The *qessoch* beat with the *qachel* only in the first, third and fourth units. The *nagarit* joins the *qachel* in the first unit (see Figure 11.6).²³

The first beat appears usually on the second or third syllable of the word. This phenomenon creates an upbeat of one- or two-eighth notes which allows the performer to apply somewhat different lengths of textual units (during the upbeat) to the regular rhythmic frame. The first beat is the strongest and more fixed, while the placing of third and fourth beats in the temporal framework is more free. All the beats appear on the accents of the prayer language – Ge'ez. The syllables are sung together with the beats played by the instruments.²⁴

When transcribing the prayer, I found that the length of this basic rhythmic pattern varies according to the number of syllables in the



Figure 11.6 Rhythmic type of prayer.

textual unit. Its length is between five-eighths to seven- or eight-eighths. The flexibility of the length of the rhythmical pattern and the instrumental beats, co-ordinated with accented syllable in the performance, creates an accompaniment with a weak rhythmic frame.

The 15 prayers that belong to the 'rhythmic' type are especially festive. They are performed generally at three annual festivals: *Berhan saraqqa/tazkara abraham*; *Ba'ala masallat* and *Fasika*.²⁵

The performers, the *qessoch*, stand in a circle or in a semi-circle and accompany their singing with slight body movement.²⁶ These movements are synchronised with the regular rhythmic pattern that accompany this group of prayers. On the first beat the *qessoch* lightly bow down and by the end of the pattern they rise.

Qes Makonnen and *Qes* Imharen mentioned several times that the instrumental beats go together with the melodic units and reinforce the melodic articulation; or, in their words, the function of the instruments is to watch over the melody.

The melodic units are of different lengths and thus may be accompanied by as few as two or as many as five rhythmic units. The sequence of shorter and longer melodic-rhythmic phrases creates a complex overall form for a larger section within the prayer. The alternation of phrases of various length is not arbitrary; I found overall three basic large-scale formal arrangements. One of them, presented in Figure 11.7 (*Wanivavo Egzee'aviher li Musye*), is a typical solution. Here the prayer is composed of two parts: the first is antiphonal, while the second is hemiolic (part A and part B). The first part is a sequence of four large essentially identical phrases (the first of the melodic phrases is notated in Figure 11.7). The phrase has two sections: the first is performed by the solo and is composed of a shorter and a longer unit, the shorter containing two and the longer four rhythmic patterns. The second section of the phrase is performed by the chorus and contains a similar sequence of melodic-rhythmic patterns. Thus we have a melodic phrase composed of the sequence of two–four–two–four, as for the number of rhythmic patterns. The second part contains five essentially

Figure 11.7 *Wanivavo Egzee'aviher li Musye*.

identical phrases (the first phrase is notated in Figure 11.7). Here we find the following sequence: two (solo) – two (chorus) – four (solo) – two (chorus) – two (solo) – three (chorus).

The complex correlation of performing groups, text, melody and the number of rhythmic patterns is summarised in Figure 11.8.

Furthermore, this research clearly shows that the number of the rhythmic patterns and their place in the musical phrase enhance the binary structure of the hemiolic part.²⁷

The ‘regular beat’ type

Only one prayer belongs to this type, the wedding prayer *Wi’etus kimi mer’awee*. This is an interesting case of a combination of metrically free and measured sections. The first part is metrically free and ornamented. The other two parts are measured, and performed with a regular beat played by the *qachel* and the *nagarit* simultaneously (in this prayer the performance is also possible with the *kabaro*).

The text of this prayer was described by the *qessoch* as *salot* – a hymn prayer.²⁸ The beat is further emphasised by foot stamping, a flexible head movement and an energetic shoulder movement. Although the text belongs to the liturgy, the movements belong to secular Ethiopian music (*zefen*).²⁹ Figure 11.9 provides the transcription for the free section (A) and for the measured section (B). The beat is marked with X.

Principle of alteration		Solo		Chorus					
Textual distribution	U1	A		A					
Melodic distribution	Part A	A	B	A	B				
Rhythmic patterns		2	4	2	4				
Principle of alteration		Solo	Chorus	Solo	Chorus	Solo	Chorus		
Textual distribution	U1	A	B	AB	A	B	AB		
Melodic distribution	Part B	A	A	B	A	A	B		
Rhythmic patterns		2	2	4	2	2	3		

Figure 11.8 Correlation of performing groups, text, melody and rhythmic patterns.

A

B

Figure 11.9 consists of two musical scores, A and B, for the prayer 'Wi'etus kimi mer'awee'. Score A shows four instruments (U1, U2, U3, U4) with alternating Solo and Chorus sections. Score B shows nine instruments (U I to U IX) with alternating Solo and Chorus sections. The notation includes treble clefs, a common time signature, and various rhythmic values such as quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, along with rests and dynamic markings.

Figure 11.9 Wi'etus kimi mer'awee.

The following nine prayers are unmeasured and can be divided into two types. Here the musical instruments have an ornamental role. The beats are performed by the *qachel* in all the nine prayers. The gap between each of these beats prevents the possibility of exact measurement.³⁰

The 'ornamental type'

Four prayers belong to this type, and they are essentially four versions of the same melody. They are all antiphonal. The variations in the melody result from the fact that the basic melodic line is applied to different texts. The prayers of this type are sung in a psalmodic manner; thus their range is rather limited compared to the other types. There is no systematic order as to where the beats appear – each recording presents a somewhat different solution. Clearly, the function of the instruments here is more ornamental

than in the other types; nevertheless, even here they serve to punctuate aspects of text and melody (the emphasis of certain syllables with a beat and delay). The beat functions somewhat like an anchor, which the music moves away from and returns to. Despite the a-systematic appearance of the beats, there are two places in which the beats appear in all four prayers: the beginning and the end of each musical phrase. A typical example for this type is the prayer *Yitfesa lisaneeya* used on the *Seged* day (Figure 11.10).

The ‘ornamental-semantic’ type

This group consists of four prayers which are also psalms. The melodic movement is minimal and revolves around a recitation tone. The informants suggested that the role of the instruments here is purely ornamental, the resonance created by the *qachel* is the augmentation and glorification of God. This generic function of the instrumental accompaniment is carried out in a rather concrete manner in the rhythm. In the course of the transcription, I noticed that most of the beats fall on one of the denominations of God. Thus there is also a semantic aspect to the instrumental accompaniment in this case.

The two denominations that appear most frequently in the liturgy are unique for *Beta Israel*.³¹ One denomination is *Egzee’aviher*. This is a combination of three words in Ge’ez, the meaning of which is ‘the good and magnanimous God’. This denomination appears at the end of each musical unit in two of the four prayers (*Zegevre* 1, *Zegevre* 2). The beat always appears on the word *her* (‘good’). The second denomination is *Herziga*, or *Herzigani*. This denomination is in Agawegna dialect, unique to *Beta Israel*. As we can see the word *her* appears also in this denomination. The word *Herziga*

The image shows a musical score for the prayer *Yitfesa lisaneeya*. It consists of seven staves, labeled U I through U VII. Each staff contains a line of musical notation with lyrics written below it. The lyrics are in Ge'ez script. Above the staves, there are some performance instructions: 'Solo' above U I, 'Chorus' above U II, and 'Solo' above U III. The score is divided into two main sections by a vertical line. The first section contains staves U I, U II, U IV, U V, and U VI. The second section contains staves U III and U VII. The musical notation includes various rhythmic values and melodic lines.

Figure 11.10 *Yitfesa lisaneeya*.

appears in the prayer *Herziga* – used on the *Fasika* (Passover prayers) in many combinations. According to the informants (*Qes Yirmiahu* and *Qes Yosef*) *Herziga* is the name for God in Agawegna dialect.

The word occurs most frequently in combination with other words, which accordingly refer also to God, such as: *Yinawa Herziga*, *Alshawe Herziga*, *Yiwa Herziga*. Wherever we hear any of these words in the prayer, usually a beat appears on their last syllable. In addition, beats occur on other denominations of God, even in languages other than Ge'ez or Agawegna. In Figure 11.11, we can see that a beat occurs on the word *Nigusa* – that means ‘king’ in Amharic (unit 3 at the chorus part).

The figure displays a musical score for the prayer 'Herziga'. It consists of 16 vocal parts, labeled U I through U XVI, and a basso continuo part at the bottom. The score is divided into two main sections: 'Solo' and 'Chorus'. The lyrics 'Her - si - ge' are repeated across the parts. The basso continuo part shows a rhythmic pattern with a beat on the word 'Nigusa'.

Figure 11.11 *Herziga*.

The 'declamatory' type

The public prayer ends with the blessing of the congregation by the *ges* (*burake kahen*). This is one of the few texts that is recited in its entirety in Agawegna dialect.³² Unlike all other parts of the service, the blessings are recited and not sung.³³

These blessings appear at the end of four prayers (whose particular function is to close the ceremony). Two of these prayers are of the rhythmic type (*Alvo baidi amlak* 1 and 2), and the other two are of the ornamental-semantic type (*Herziga* 1 and 2 – in the last solo unit). The blessings are accompanied with fast and unmeasured beats on the *qachel*.

Conclusion

Most of the *Beta Israel* prayers are sung without any instrumental accompaniment. Yet, although instrumental accompaniment is not necessary to the performance, it gives another dimension to the prayer, diversifies it and emphasises its rhythmic aspects. According to their rhythmic character the prayers can be grouped into two principle types:

- The majority of the prayers belong to the rhythmic type. In this type, the text adapts itself to a flexible rhythmic pattern played constantly through the prayer. The definite rhythmic frame made the prayers of this type immeasurable.
- The rest of the prayers belong to the ornamental type. In these prayers the percussion instruments have an ornamental value. These beats have no structural musical function. They are ornaments, performed in an irregular way and accompanying the vocal lines that are essentially in free rhythm.

Notes

This chapter is based on my dissertation: *Rhythmical Aspects in the Liturgy of the Ethiopian Jews*, M.A. Thesis (Bar-Ilan university, 1998) (Hebrew). I would like to extend my many thanks to Professor Judit Frigyesi for her invaluable help and advice in writing this chapter.

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 - 4 D. L. Appleyard, 'The Beta Israel (Falasha) Names For God', pp. 104–5.
 - 5 One of the important ideas in tradition is the *Himanut*. This is the realisation of the written laws of the Bible as applied by the *qessoch* to the everyday life of the people. For an insightful study about the religious tradition of see: S. Ben-Dor (ed.), 'The Religious Background of Beta Israel', in *Saga of an Aliya: The Jews of Ethiopia. Aspects of their Linguistic and Educational Absorption* (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 24–38.
 - 6 K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual*, pp. 101, 189.
 - 7 The religious hierarchy of *Beta Israel* is discussed at length in O. Tourny, *Musique liturgique des Beta Israel, une Analyse* (Lettres et Arts Université Lumière-Lyon 2, 1993), pp. 9–10; K. Kaufman Shelemay, 'Zema: A Concept of Sacred Music in Ethiopia', in *World of Music* 3 (1982), pp. 55–6; idem, 'The Musician and Transmission of Religious Tradition: The Multiple Roles of the Ethiopian Dabtara', in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22:3 (1992), pp. 253–4; K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual*, pp. 78–88.
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 - 10 K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual*, p. 87.
 - 11 O. Tourny, *Systematique de la musique liturgique des juifs d'Ethiopie*, Thèse de Doctorat (EHESS, Paris, 1997), p. 100.
 - 12 For a detailed study about the *Seged* day (*Beta Israel* pilgrimage festival and partial fast day) see S. Ben-Dor, 'The Sigd of Beta Israel: Testimony to a Community in Tradition', in M. Ashkenazi and A. Weingrod (eds), *Ethiopian Jews and Israel* (New Brunswick, 1987), pp. 140–59.
 - 13 K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual*, p. 77; O. Tourny, *Systematique*, p. 220.
 - 14 M. Powne, *Ethiopian Music: an Introduction* (London, 1968), pp. 22–3.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.
 - 16 O. Tourny, *Musique liturgique des Beta Israel*, p. 36. Shelemay notes in

- Music, Ritual and Falasha History* that ‘multiple and interlocking taxonomies exist in the minds of priests, who cannot always elaborate on them’ (p. 101). Hayon emphasises the task of identification and analysis of these taxonomies. See M. Hayon, ‘Beta Israel Prayers, Oral and Written Tradition: Analysis of a Service for the New Moon’, in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, p. 211.
- 17 The full research team was composed of F. Alvarez-Pereyre, S. Arom, S. Ben-Dor and O. Tourny.
 - 18 F. Alvarez-Pereyre and S. Ben-Dor, ‘The Formal Organization of the Beta Israel Liturgy’, p. 235.
 - 19 These three *qessoch* came to Israel in 1981–3 (before Operation Moshe in 1984). In Ethiopia, *Qes Imharen* (*Qes Yirmiahu*) lived in Semien-Manata. *Qes Makonnen* (*Qes Yosef*) and *Qes Samay* (*Qes Samuel*) both lived in the Shire region in Tigre district. Today, *Qes Yirmiahu* lives in Upper Nazareth and has some duties at the religious council of the city. *Qes Yosef* and *Qes Samuel* live in Kiryat-Gat. *Qes Yosef* is the head of the congregation at the Ethiopian Jewish synagogue in the city.
 - 20 O. Tourny, *Musique liturgique des Beta Israel*; idem, ‘Structures litaniques singulières dans la Liturgie des Juifs d’Ethiopie’, in *Ndroje balendro: Musiques, Terrains et Disciplines, Texts, offerts a Simha Arom*, Selaf No. 359, Dehoux (Paris, 1995, V. Dehoux et al. eds), pp. 147–60; idem, *Systematique*.
 - 21 This method is described in S. Arom, *African Polyphony and Polyrhythm: Musical Structure and Methodology*, Book no. 3 (Cambridge/Paris, 1991).
 - 22 The theoretical aspects of the paradigm is elaborately discussed in: F. Alvarez-Pereyre and S. Arom, ‘Ethnomusicology and Emic/Etic Issue’, in *World of Music* 35:1 (1993), pp. 7–33; S. Arom, ‘New Perspectives for Description of Orally Transmitted Music’, in *World of Music* 23:2 (1981), pp. 40–58.
 - 23 Tourny called this rhythmic pattern *Rythme ‘5’*, see *Musique liturgique des Beta Israel*, p. 37. He enlarged his explanations about the prayers that accompanied this rhythmic pattern in *Systematique*, pp. 230–40. Kaufman Shelemay writes in her discussion about the instrumental accompaniment in the liturgy of *Beta Israel* that ‘the *Beta Israel*’s liturgy evidently utilises only one rhythmic pattern comprised of three drums and gong beats punctuated by two pauses’ (*Music, Ritual*, p. 188).
 - 24 K. Shelemay, *Music, Ritual*, p. 184.
 - 25 *Berhan Saraqa/Tazkara Abraham* listed in *Beta Israel* calendar as *re’esa awda amat* – the head of the year, a translation of the Hebrew *Rosh ha-shanah*; *Ba’ala masallat* – the Feast of Tabernacles. This feast is parallel to the Jewish *Sukkot*. The third feast is *Fasika* – derived from the Hebrew name *Pesah* and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. For detailed studies of *Beta Israel* festivals and fast days, see K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual*, pp. 47–53; S. Ben-Dor, ‘The Religious Life of Ethiopian Jews’, in Y. Avner (ed.), *Beta Israel: The Story of Ethiopian Jewry* (Tel Aviv, 1987), pp. 58–63.

- 26 Other scholars also noted the presence of body motion: Arom noted that some of the measured prayers call for body movement. See S. Arom and F. Alvarez Pereyre, *Liturgies juives d’Ethiopia*, Maison des Cultures du Monde, Paris (in the attached note-book); K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual*, pp. 188–9.
- 27 See in my dissertation, *Rhythmical Aspects in the Liturgy of the Ethiopian Jews*, pp. 88–90.
- 28 K. Kaufman Shelemay, *Music, Ritual*, p. 102.
- 29 These movements are described as a popular Ethiopian folk dance in D. L. Horwitz, ‘Dance at the Ethiopian Disco: Tradition or Change?’, in T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *The Beta Israel in Ethiopia and Israel*, p. 193.
- 30 One prayer from this group – *Nifuhu qarne be’ilite sirq* – for the new year is unique in its change from unmeasured (in the beginning) into measured (at the end). This happens because the intermissions between the beats become shorter as the prayer progresses.
- 31 D. L. Appleyard, ‘The Beta Israel (Falasha) Names For God’, p. 110.
- 32 I. Grinfeld, ‘Passages and Words not in Ethiopic in Beta Israel Prayers’, in *Peamim* 58 (1994), pp. 133–4 (Hebrew).
- 33 K. Kaufman Shelemay, ‘A Comparative Study: Jewish Forms of Sacred Music in Ethiopia’, in I. Adler, B. Bayer and E. Scleifer (eds), *Yuval* 5 (1986), p. 371 (n. 8).

ABOUT THE JEWISH IDENTITY OF THE *BETA ISRAEL*

Amalelech Teferi

Introduction

With the dramatic airlift of May 1997, officially at least, all the Ethiopian Jews left Ethiopia. The long struggle for their recognition as part of the Jewish world had reached its apogee. Nevertheless their immigration to Israel did not bring to an end the question of their Jewishness. There are few other Jewish immigrant groups in Israel which have been studied as extensively as the Ethiopian Jews. Hundreds of papers and books have been and continue to be written about them. Every aspect of their life, culture and religious practice has been scrutinized and studied both inside and outside Israel. The underlying question of many of these studies is in fact the following: 'Are Ethiopian Jews real Jews?' This challenge to their Jewish identity does not emanate from the Rabbinate (the supreme religious body of Israel), which recognized their Jewishness and granted them the right to immigrate to Israel as Jews. Surprisingly, the challenge originates from academic circles, specifically Ethiopianist scholars, who have in recent years developed a theory which denies the direct link of the Ethiopian Jews to any Jewish group. One of the leading scholars advocating this theory is Steven Kaplan of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Basing his work on the findings of James Quirin¹ and Kay Kaufman Shelemay,² Kaplan has elaborated a model which describes the Ethiopian Jews as descendants of Judaized Christian sects of the fourteenth century. Kaplan goes even beyond this denial of the Jewishness of the Ethiopian Jews and has concluded that Ethiopian Judaism is nothing more than 'an invention'.³ In this chapter we shall try to

analyse all the arguments developed in the model and see if there is in the culture and history of the Ethiopian Jews, any particular reason to render their Jewishness questionable.

The model

The basic elements of the model can be given in the following citation from Kaplan:

From a cultural perspective there appears to be little question that the Beta Israel must be understood as the product of processes that took place in Ethiopia between the fourteenth and sixteenth century. During this period a number of inchoate groups of *ayhud* living in Northwestern Ethiopia coalesced into the people known as the *Falasha*. Their emergence as a distinctive people was the result of a variety of political, economic, and ideological factors. . . . From the early fourteenth century onward, a gradual process of disenfranchisement took place that eventually deprived many of the Beta Israel of their rights to own inheritable land (*rist*). Denied this crucial economic asset they pursued a number of strategies to retain their economic viability . . . they probably began to supplement their income by pursuing crafts such as smithing, pottery, and weaving. Thus the vague religious and regional bases for their identification were supplemented and further defined by an occupational–economic distinction.⁴

The main points of the model of the above cited author, and others who propagate the same theory, are the following:

- The model suggests that Ethiopian Jews were in fact Ethiopian Christians who for unknown reasons abandoned their Christian faith and shifted to a ‘Judaized’ religion.
- These *ayhud* went to war against the dominant Christian rulers. As a result, after their defeat they refused to come back to the Christian faith. And because of this their land was confiscated and they became the ‘Falasha’ or the land-less.
- The Falashas had to turn to metal work, pottery and other handicraft services to have a means of survival since their land was taken away. Due to their specialization in manual work they were despised and segregated and this pushed them to

radicalize their religious difference with their neighbours and develop a sense of belonging to a different people.

The model stipulates that in less than 300 years – from the mid-fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth century – a schismatic Christian sect evolved into a new self-identified Jewish group calling themselves *Beta Israel* and named by their Christian neighbours Falasha.

Several difficulties are presented by this model:

- It is based on the assumption that *ayhud*, even though it originally means Jews, refers exclusively to Christian heretics.
- It fails to explain why and how the *ayhud* movement was initiated.⁵
- Who was the ‘ideologist’ who started the *ayhud* movement.⁶
- It fails to analyse the psychological implication of the mutation undergone by the *Beta Israel*.
- It does not give an explanation of where the *Beta Israel* got the set of criteria to define Judaism.

There are certainly many other limitations in this model, but for practical reasons, this chapter will deal with these aspects only. Some definitions are necessary before getting into the core of the subject.

Definitions

Jewishness

Since the whole issue of the origin of Ethiopian Jews is related to their Jewish identity, I would like rather boldly to give a definition of what Jewishness means.

It is a very difficult question and there cannot be a single and simple answer to it. The Jews are not a nation, nor are they a race or a language-culture group. The notion that the Jews are a race is a die-hard notion inducing people to forget that Judaism is first of all a religion. The *halakah* (Jewish religious law) considers a person a Jew if he/she is born of a Jewish mother or if he/she has undergone conversion.⁷ What defines the Jews as such is their attachment to the *Torah* and the observance of religious rites and customs but not their belonging to the same race. In the thousands of years of Judaism, the Jews moved from one country to another. While in the

Diaspora they interpreted the laws differently; sometimes they changed the rules but they never modified the main idea behind Judaism.⁸ The first and basic idea of Judaism is about the uniqueness of God based on the teachings of the *Torah*. At this point I would like to mention that the Ethiopian Jews entirely fulfil this basic requirement. Indeed, one can write a lot on the differences of practice with normative Judaism but that, by no means, implies that the Ethiopian Jews have a different religion.

Falasha, Beta Israel or Ethiopian Jews

A lot has been written on the different names used by the Ethiopian Jews,⁹ stipulating that the evolution in the names used by this group (from Falasha to Ethiopian Jews) is related to the latter's desire to be identified as real Jews. This, I believe is a biased reading of the facts and an unjustified accusation of the Ethiopian Jews wanting to recast their identity. Here one needs to consider three elements to understand the situation:

Falasha is not a generic name that applies to all the Jews in Ethiopia. It is more specific to Ethiopian Jews from Gondar and the Semien regions. People, for example, from the Lake Tana region are not called Falasha, nor 'Buda' nor are they specialized in handicraft work. For that matter the 'Budans' in that region are the Christians.¹⁰ The Ethiopian Jews identified themselves as *Beta Israel* and never accepted the term Falasha, which their Christian neighbours use to call them. They considered it offensive. When they moved to Israel, like any new Jewish immigrant group, they started to be called in reference to their country of origin: Ethiopian Jews.¹¹ The purpose is not to change their identity but this is what all Jews immigrating to Israel get called: those from Poland become 'Polish Jews', from Tunisia 'Tunisian Jews', from Iran 'Iranian Jews', etc. The *Beta Israel* have naturally become the Ethiopian Jews. A striking parallel may be given with the Indian Jews who prior to immigrating to Israel were known as the *Bnei Israel*. Once in Israel they became 'Indian Jews' and in their case too there was some controversy over their Jewishness.

Sources

Almost all the authors who worked on the Ethiopian Jews admit the existence of a Jewish presence in Ethiopia since early times. They also admit, given the remarkable Jewish features displayed by

Ethiopian Christianity, that the Jewish influence on Ethiopian culture was very important. Some relate this Jewish presence to the Yemenite Jews, others as an offshoot of the Judaism of Elephantine in Egypt.¹² But none of them has succeeded in giving a satisfactory explanation of where these Jews came from and the exact period to which their presence should be dated. Even the defenders of the model of the recent origin of the Ethiopian Jews accept fully the early presence of Judaism in Ethiopia and its important role in shaping Ethiopian Christianity: 'There can be little question that prior to the introduction of Christianity in the third and fourth centuries, Judaism had a considerable impact on Aksumite culture'.¹³ Like other scholars, the advocates of the model, are not capable of explaining the origin of this Jewish influence, but where they differ from others is that they deny any survival of this Jewish presence in the Ethiopian Jews.

The main argument given by the advocates of the recent origin of the Ethiopian Jews is based, in fact, on two assertions. First, there is no recorded history of the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopian history before the fourteenth century and the first mention of a Judaized group known as *ayhud* exists only since the fourteenth century. Second, the first mention of the term Falasha dates back to the sixteenth century.¹⁴

There are two things that the authors of the model seem to overlook. First, the fact that the name Falasha is recent does not necessarily mean that the Ethiopian Jews did not exist prior to the fourteenth century. The most it indicates is the change in the status of the *Beta Israel* in society, but by no means their coming into existence. Second, the authors seem to forget that there is no written record even for the history of Ethiopia itself prior to the fourteenth century except for the few epigraphic documents of the Aksumite period and earlier. And as Kessler puts it:

early written records of Ethiopia are so scarce that its history can only be reconstructed with the aid of the relatively few foreign contemporary documents available, by conjecture based on surviving legends, and from later histories compiled by Christian writers who do not attempt to conceal their prejudices.¹⁵

The defenders of the model, in their wish to integrate the Ethiopian Jews into the Ethiopian setting, base their studies almost exclusively on Ethiopian sources, in other words Royal Chronicles and Ethiopian oral traditions. The reliability of these sources is

doubtful. Most of the time chronicles are written by scribes whose role is to praise the king and glorify all his achievements. One cannot expect them to give an objective account of what happened. The only thing one can be sure of is that the chronicles will contain indications of events that were considered important during the reign of the king. Therefore, a first mention in the chronicles should not be taken as the sign for the birth of something, but solely as a consideration of its importance in the political arena of a given period. The threat of an organized Jewish movement seeking autonomy or independence must have become of a great importance in the fourteenth century, requiring the intervention of the central power and the Emperor to tackle the problem, and thus was mentioned in the royal chronicles. It is obvious that if the Ethiopian Jews had not had such ambitions, there would be no mention of their existence. This is true also for the Muslims, who were numerous in the lowlands from the beginning of Islam. But they kept a low profile until they organized themselves into armed forces and invaded the highlands, events which were fully reported in the chronicles of the time.

The exclusive use of chronicles and Ethiopian oral traditions cannot constitute an accurate documentation, specially if authors are selective and only take into account elements which fit their model. In his historical study of the *Beta Israel*, Kaplan makes the following statement:

Finally, it should also be noted that at least in the hagiographic sources, the *ayhud* of the Lake Tana region are credited with distinctive ethnic or religious characteristics. According to Gadla Gabra Iyasus the ‘children of the Jews’, whom the saint confronted in Enfranz, had migrated to Ethiopia from Jerusalem after the destruction of the Second Temple.¹⁶

But, he discredits this valuable account when he adds that:

the cult they maintained should in no way be seen as identical to either ‘normative’ Judaism or later Falasha religion. Rather, they should be regarded as being among the more Judaized groups in the spectrum of medieval Ethiopian belief. . . . The *ayhud* of earlier sources are not identical to the Falasha of later texts. Important cultural, social, and religious differences exist between the two.

Kaplan does not analyse the significance of this account, nor does he explain who these *ayhud* of Lake Tana were and where they come from. He disregards the main information contained in this source which seems to indicate the existence of a Jewish population in Ethiopia. He simply states, without any proof, that the *ayhud* identified in the source cannot be directly related to the *Beta Israel*.

Kaplan adopts the same attitude towards outside sources, which were all dismissed as legendary or unreliable, except for those bringing supportive arguments to the model. Medieval Jewish authors (e.g. Eldad ha-Dani or Benjamin of Tudela) and European authors (e.g. James Bruce) are all accused of having the intention to 'carefully shape the image of the *Beta Israel*'.¹⁷ Thus none of them is taken into account in the elaboration of the model.

From Christian to *ayhud*

The advocates of the Christian origin of the Ethiopian Jews are scholars with an African-Ethiopianist background.¹⁸ Looking at their work, one cannot help but think that they are missing a very important aspect in their analysis of the history of the Ethiopian Jews, which is the psychological dimension. They do not seem to understand fully the implication and meaning of their theory at the human level.

If we take the model as true, it means that an aggregate of Christian people from the Northern part of Ethiopia initiated a movement questioning all the foundations of Christianity. They refused to believe in Jesus and in the New Testament, and came back to the Mosaic laws of the Old Testament. I do not think that any of the authors are really conscious of what this kind of change means for people who were born Christians.

To go from Judaism to Christianity, one need only to accept Jesus as the Messiah. The reverse requires the denial of the very foundation of Christianity, which is Jesus. There are relatively few examples in history of this kind of *démarche*; for instance the case of the Jews of San Nicandro, who under the teaching of their charismatic leader Manduzio converted to Judaism at the end of the Second World War.¹⁹ But in this case there was contact with the Italian Rabbinate and normative Judaism. Moreover, the new converts never had to go through war, hardship and suffering to defend their newly acquired religious identity. The same is true of the Khazars or the *Shomrei Shabbat* who came into contact with Jewish individuals or groups.²⁰

If we follow the model, the *Beta Israel* opted for Judaism without any obvious reason and shaped their religion without any contact with outside Jewish influence. The need to go to the foundations of Christianity, namely Judaism, is a kind of search that must result from a spiritual and intellectual need that cannot be satisfied by answers given by Christianity. With the Protestant movement in Europe, there was this trend of questioning. Some of the dogma of the church were refuted but the basis of Christianity was never challenged. In the case of Ethiopia, again if we follow the model, the *Beta Israel* went beyond this limit and cut themselves off from the Christian religion in that they adopted exclusively the Old Testament or *Orit*, rejecting all the teachings of the New Testament. If, as Kaplan puts it, 'given the limits of literacy in traditional Ethiopia . . . it is hard to believe that isolated *ayhud* of the Lake Tana region were literate',²¹ then how can he explain that a group of illiterate and superstitious peasants came to question the existing religious ideology and to deny the authenticity of the New Testament and refuse to follow it? Why on earth would people who were born and raised as Christians want to become Jews in a country where most of the Jewish laws stated in the Old Testament were kept?²²

Usually when a religious movement of this importance is started in a country, there is a trace of the founder(s) of the new religious ideology. In the case of Ethiopian Judaism, however, there is no single person who can be identified as the initiator of this 'revolutionary' movement. True, people like Abba Sabra and Abba Saga, two Christian monks who have joined the *ayhud* movement, are granted, by the advocates of the model, a leading role in the shaping of the *Beta Israel* religion. Kaplan²³ writes that 'the monks must be credited with being the crucial catalysts in the "invention" of the Falasha'. But Kaplan seems to forget that the two monks joined a pre-existing movement and that they did not initiate it. The most they might have done was to contribute to 'changing' some aspects of the *Beta Israel's* religious practices. And even this alleged role of the two monks is questionable.²⁴

With all the superstition and ignorance prevailing in the Middle Ages, it is hard to believe that people rejected their Christian faith without any apparent reason unless they were under threat of death. But once again there is no evidence for this. On the contrary, what we know is that these *ayhud* sacrificed their lives and lost their land or *rist*²⁵ for the sake of keeping their religion. In traditional Ethiopia, the one who does not have land or *rist* is 'nobody' and

when the *Beta Israel* preferred to give up their land in order to keep their faith it was more than just a sacrifice: it was to accept being cut off from all sources of prestige and dignity – it was to accept being cut off from Ethiopian society. Thus, it is difficult to believe what Kaplan writes in his study of the *Beta Israel*. ‘Given the fluidity of religious identity during this period and the lack of clear borders between different forms of Judaism/Christianity, the move from one group to another needs not to have necessitated any radical change or conversion’.²⁶ There is no basis for this kind of statement since all the studies related to the history of Ethiopian Jews²⁷ show that the *Beta Israel* endured a lot of suffering and hardship to keep the laws of the *Torah* and maintain their differences with their Christian neighbours. The most dramatic example may be given by the following citation from Kaplan himself:

The resistance of the *Beta Israel* to capture, enslavement and conversion was moreover remarkably fierce. While Radai and his family eventually surrendered . . . other *Beta Israel* martyred themselves. One woman in particular is remembered for leaping off the edge of a great precipice shouting, *Adonai help me*, and dragging her captor with her to his death.²⁸

While reading this, I cannot help making the parallel with the tradition of martyrdom that developed in Judea during the Greek occupation, to die *al kiddush ha-Shem* (to sanctify His Name).²⁹

It needs little psychology to understand that the Ethiopian Jews can hardly be taken for just ‘Judaized Christians’; because it is unrealistic to believe that they underwent so much suffering and persecutions for ‘slight’ religious differences with their neighbours.

If the model is true, and the *Beta Israel* are not related to any outside Jewish group, then it means that they have succeeded in ‘re-inventing’ Judaism and found their way to the *Torah* alone. Merely for achieving this ‘miracle’, I think they deserve to be counted as part of the Jewish people. The authors of the model fail to appreciate this simple but important fact. The unshakable faith of the Ethiopian Jews in the ‘truth’ of the Old Testament and their refusal to follow the New Testament is by itself an indicator of the continuity of their religious tradition. Otherwise in their isolation from the rest of the Jewish world, how could they be so sure that they were not wrong? How did they come to think that there was a

truth other than Christianity? What was there, in the Ethiopia of the fourteenth century, that rendered Judaism particularly attractive, so that people would convert to it even though it meant the loss of their lives and livelihoods, and also the loss of their social status, to become member of a despised cast? The model fails to answer these basic questions. It is hard to find a single convincing reason outside the fact that the *Beta Israel* clung to their Jewishness because it was their true identity, for which they were ready to die and not something recently acquired.

Similarities with their neighbours

One other main argument presented by the defenders of the model, as evidence for the Ethiopian and Christian origin of the *Beta Israel*, regards the similarities that exist between the Ethiopian Jews and their Christian neighbours. But we shall see in the following section that this argument does not amount to much.

Ethnic similarities

‘Despite some important differences, most notably their identification as a despised semi-caste group of craftsmen . . . they (the Ethiopian Jews) were on the whole remarkably similar to their Christian neighbours in language, dress, diet, family structure.’ This is taken from a monograph written by Kaplan.³⁰ But once again the author seems to be overwhelmed by his African-Ethiopianist background and his model, and fails to make an accurate analysis of this kind of statement. Because what he declares about the Ethiopian Jews is true of all other Jews elsewhere in the world. Jews in the Diaspora present great similarities with their neighbours. Many Polish Jews are physically and culturally indistinguishable from Christian Poles, the same is true for North African Jews who are indistinguishable from their Arab neighbours. This is related to the very nature of their historic experience in different parts of the world. Under the impact of diverse civilizations, the Jews have developed different blends of physical types which vary from one country to the other. The result was that, in their appearance, dress, language and culture, Jews are hardly to be distinguished from other groups in the region where they live. ‘Diversities are sometimes as great, or even greater, among separate Jewish ethnic groups as similarities.’³¹

Cultural similarities

'Both communities (Ethiopian Jews and Ethiopian Christians) . . . dressed in the same way . . . ate the same food . . . drank the same beverages . . . sung and danced the same way.'³² Cultural similitude between Jews in other parts of the world and their neighbours is the same as that of the Ethiopian Jews. East European cooking is reproduced by Jews of that region who also have the same folklore songs and dances. The culinary similarities are even greater in Jewish communities living in Islamic countries. The cooking in North Africa is identical to the cooking of their neighbours. Jews from India eat curry and their women wear sarees. Jews from Tunisia and Morocco used to wear until recently the same traditional outfits, as their neighbours. Jewish women in North Africa wear the 'hand of Fatima', which is a sort of talisman used by Muslims against the evil eye. The Mountain Jews of the Caucasus, who call themselves the *Bani-Israel* (Sons of Israel) and are said to practice 'such primitive customs as marriage by capture and purchase, polygamy and blood feud, believed in talisman and amulet protection against evil spirits and demons'.³³ There has been no debate on the authenticity of these Jews who have integrated in their culture so many alien practices.

All these examples show us that the existence of cultural similarities cannot be taken as an argument for the Ethiopian and Christian origin of the *Beta Israel*. There is no example of a single Jewish community which did not share the cultural and ethnic features of its neighbours.

Furthermore, the main specificity of the Ethiopian situation, which should render the question of similarities between Ethiopian Jews and their Christian neighbours a minor element, is the nature of Ethiopian Christianity itself. Ethiopian Christianity is the most 'Jewish' Christianity in the world. Even Kaplan admits this fact when he writes:

No church anywhere in the world has remained as faithful to the letter and spirit of the Old Testament as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Numerous biblical customs have survived in the practice of Ethiopian Christians. Thus, for example male children are circumcised on the eighth day of birth. The Saturday Sabbath long held sway in Ethiopia and figured prominently in the ritual, liturgy, theological literature, and even politics of the Church.

Traditional Ethiopian dietary laws conform closely to those of the Old Testament, and the three-fold division of churches in Ethiopia clearly replicates the architectural structure of the Temple of Jerusalem.³⁴

On the basis of this comment, there is nothing strange for the two religions to display similarities. The model creates a confusion, by insisting on the similarities between the two communities and omitting to mention that they both share the same Jewish cultural background. If something is odd in the whole situation, it is not the fact that the Ethiopian Jews display Jewish cultural features, but rather that the Ethiopian Christians have retained so much of Jewish culture in spite of their Christianity.

Architectural similarities

Pankhurst, in his analysis of the similarities between Ethiopian Jews and Ethiopian Christians, mentions that the places of worship of the two communities have ‘the same structure and architectural division’.³⁵ But this sharing of the same architecture with their neighbours is not specific to the Ethiopian Jews. Wherever we go ‘the architecture of the synagogues and its interior decoration always reflect the local and contemporary styles. In medieval Spain, under the dominant influence of Islamic architecture, the synagogues were built in classic Moorish style’.³⁶ The same is true in Eastern Europe, where all synagogues had the same architecture as the churches.

Monasticism

Another central element for the model is the presence of *Beta Israel* monks, which is taken as the undeniable proof of the Christian origin of the Ethiopian Jews.

Monasticism is believed to have been introduced by Abba Saga and Abba Sabra in the sixteenth century. This is one case where the so-called ‘oral tradition’ of the Ethiopian Jews is given as proof of the supposedly central role played by these two monks in the shaping of the religion of the *Beta Israel*. Except for this questionable ‘*Beta Israel* tradition’, there is no concrete evidence for the introduction of monasticism by these monks. Norris has quoted an Arabic source, from the sixteenth century, where a Yemenite King went to war against Ethiopia and came across Ethiopian Jews. The

King wanted to kill them, thinking they were Christians, but they told him that they were ‘the people of the Book’ and that they followed the laws of Moses. To prove what they were saying, ‘they brought their books, their priests and their monks and they made it plain to him that their way of life and their practices conformed with their books’.³⁷ The author of this text is Abu’l-Mocali, who quoted early Arabic sources to write this anecdote. This source seems to indicate that monasticism existed in the tradition of the Ethiopian Jews long before the conversion of the two monks to Judaism. In the absence of proof of its recent introduction, the *Beta Israel* might have had this institution from early times.

Furthermore, monasticism is not a ‘Christian institution’ as Kaplan suggests.³⁸ There are examples in the history of the Jewish people where some communities have adopted monasticism. The Jewish sect of the Therapeute³⁹ or the Essenes practiced monasticism. Rosenberg writes the following about the Essenes: ‘they lived in separate communities, most of which were celibate and monastic in organization’.⁴⁰ Therefore, the existence of *Beta Israel* monks should not be taken as something bizarre and particular to the Jews of Ethiopia. And above all this aspect of *Beta Israel* culture cannot be presented as an argument to the model in support of the Christian origin of the Ethiopian Jews.

Animal sacrifice

It is not clear what the authors working on Ethiopian Jews understand by ‘animal sacrifice’. Does it refer to a ritual slaughter of animals for human consumption or of a religious performance which involves the killing of an animal and the burning of some of its parts on an altar as an offering to God? This seems to be the case indeed for the Jews of Elephantine who use to practice animal sacrifice for religious offering in a temple.⁴¹

It is highly doubtful that a religious type of animal sacrifice and offering was practiced by the *Beta Israel*. For that matter, Ethiopian Christians who have kept almost all the laws of the Old Testament do not practice any animal sacrifice. Besides, if following the theory developed in the model that the *Beta Israel* have developed their religion from Ethiopian Christianity, then one should find the practice of sacrifices in both religions. But this is not the case.

Supposing that animal sacrifice really existed in the *Beta Israel* tradition, this does not provide any proof for the Christian or non-Jewish origin of the Ethiopian Jews. On the contrary, this would be

an indication of their Jewish origin and, even better, a suggestion that the *Beta Israel* left the Promised Land before the destruction of the First Temple and the promulgation by King Josiah of a law forbidding the offering of sacrifice elsewhere than in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Missing ‘Jewish’ elements

The advocates of the model use the existence of missing ‘Jewish’ elements as yet another central argument in support of the Christian and Ethiopian origin of the Ethiopian Jews.

Hebrew

Ethiopian Jews do not know Hebrew. Once again the Ethiopian Jews are not unique in the Jewish world. Since early times, through deportation and immigration, the Jewish people adopted other languages. The best-known examples are the adoption of Aramaic and Greek. During Ezra’s time, the importance of Aramaic grew to such an extent that the reading of the *Torah* in the Temple was followed always by a translation or *Targum* of the Hebrew texts, because no one outside the learned understood Hebrew. During Greek domination, Hebrew was understood by only very few people. To allow the people to read the Bible, it was translated in the third century into Greek and became known as the Septuagint.⁴² More recently, translations have also been done by German- and English-speaking Jews.

Jews in the Diaspora, always spoke, and still speak, the language of the region where they lived. Thus, the fact that Ethiopian Jews speak Amharic is no exception, in this regard, to the widely spread tradition of the Jewish people of adopting the language of their neighbours. Today, outside the State of Israel very few Jews know Hebrew except the religious Jews. In fact, historically, Hebrew was spoken as a national language only during the existence of the Jewish state in biblical time. In the Diaspora, the Hebrew language was used exclusively for religious matters, and Jews adopted the language of the places where they settled. If it was not for the tenacity of Zionist idealists, Hebrew would not have come back to life and become the national language of modern Israel.⁴³

The following are a few examples taken from the ‘The History of the Jewish People’, written by Ausubel,⁴⁴ to show the situation of

some Jews in other parts of the world, in regard to their knowledge of Hebrew and Judaic laws, compared to the situation that existed for the Ethiopian Jews.

The Jews of India have ‘remained in ignorance of the Hebrew language and of written law for many centuries’. They claim that they lost their Jewish Bible when they were shipwrecked while journeying by sea to India around the second century BC. The Jews of Kurdistan have preserved only few of the fundamental customs of Jewish religious life (circumcision, Shabbat, kosher food). They lived throughout their long history in virtual isolation from the rest of the Jewish world. Yet (allow me to say it again), there has never been a lengthy debate, as in the case of the Ethiopian Jews, to find out about the Jewishness of these communities. The little that was known about them was readily accepted as enough to justify their identity.

Kashrut

Ethiopian Jews follow the dietary restrictions commanded in the *Torah*. When it comes to the separation of milk and meat, the *Beta Israel* keep the Biblical law ‘you shall not cook the young in its mother’s milk’ to the letter. The only missing element in their *kashrut* rules is the extension made by early rabbis to prohibit the consumption at the same meal of any milk product with any meat product. This extension eventually came to include also the use of separate sets of utensils. These laws are contained in the Talmud, which never reached the Ethiopian Jews and thus explains their ignorance of these rules.

Talmud

Ethiopian Jews do not know about the post-Biblical literature known as the Talmud. Both Palestinian and Babylonian *Talmudim* are the compendium of Jewish law and lore. The first was completed in the year 370 CE and the second, which is the most important one was finished only in the fifth century CE. No wonder then, that the Ethiopian Jews do not have any knowledge of this rabbinic literature and the halakic rulings it contains, since, according to their tradition, they were cut off from outside Jewish influence long before the first century CE.

Festivals

Hanukkah and *Purim* are not celebrated by the *Beta Israel*. Neither festival is part of the festivals commanded by the *Torah*. They are both celebrated in commemoration of the victory of the Jewish people over their enemies.

The fact that the *Beta Israel* don't know about *Hanukkah* can be explained by their claim that they left Israel at a much earlier time than the victory of the Maccabean warriors over the forces of Seleucid king in 165 BC.

The situation is different when it comes to *Purim*. This victory is believed to have happened in the fifth century BC under the King Xeres of Persia. The Ethiopian Jews know about this festival and the fast of Ester (*Tzom Ester*) that goes with it. And religious people respect it.⁴⁵ But the Ethiopian Jews do not celebrate the festival. This can be explained by the fact that *Purim* is a secular festival which took a religious flavour in later centuries,⁴⁶ thus becoming an 'official' Jewish festival.

The Danite origin

Almost all authors, except for the religious one, reject the possibility of a Danite origin for the Ethiopian Jews. There is a more than thousand-year-old Jewish tradition that considers the Ethiopian Jews to be descendants of the Lost Tribe of Dan. The first author who mentions this tradition is Eldad ha-Dani, who during the ninth century wrote an account claiming that 'he was a subject of an independent Jewish kingdom situated in East Africa, that his country was inhabited only by Jews and that these were the Lost Tribes of Asher, Gad, Naphtali and Dan'. The advocates of the recent and Ethiopian origin of the Ethiopian Jews dismiss this account and other authors' testimony as mere legend. Kaplan even suspects another author of putting words in the mouth of the *Beta Israel* to trace their origin from Dan and he writes: 'The possibility cannot be dismissed that Obadiah asked the Jews he encountered if they were from the Tribe of Dan, and they then answered in the affirmative.'⁴⁷ This statement is simple speculation. What Kaplan fails to explain is what can be the motive of these people to pretend to belong to this Tribe when they were not? The appealing prospect of emigration to Israel did not exist at that time, and there is no clear reason for these people to lie. Furthermore, when Ethiopian Jews in Israel today claim that they are descendants of this Lost Tribe, they

are accused of wanting to 'recast' or 'reshape' their Jewish identity or of fabricating a pure invention.⁴⁸ The claim of some Ethiopian Jews in Israel, to be descendants of the Tribe of Dan is not, as Kaplan seems to think, opportunistic behaviour,⁴⁹ but it is what they perceive on the basis of the narratives of their ancestors. Their immigration to Israel has opened for most of them the first opportunity to express themselves and tell their 'history' directly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to answer most of the arguments brought up by the advocates of the recent Christian and exclusively Ethiopian origin of the Ethiopian Jews. It shows that the first mention of Judaized groups in Ethiopian chronicles cannot be taken as the 'date of birth' of the *Beta Israel* since historical documents even on Ethiopian history itself are very scarce. Besides, relying exclusively on Royal Chronicles cannot represent the past very accurately. It has also demonstrated that Ethiopian Jews are not unique in the Jewish world in displaying ethnic and cultural similarities with their neighbours. As a matter of fact, there is hardly a single Jewish group in the world that does not have these similarities. Besides, most of the so-called Christian practices, like monasticism, have in fact existed in the history of the Jewish people and actually are not of Christian origin. The 'missing Jewish elements' of the model (*kashrut*, *Hanukkah*, *Purim*) were shown to be Jewish traditions which have evolved into standard elements of Judaism only at a much later time, and the use of Hebrew is not compulsory for a Jewish identity. It is evident that the authors of the model have neglected two basic elements: the psychological dimension of their theory and the knowledge of the history of the Jewish people. By disregarding these two aspects in their model, they misunderstood, misinterpreted and tried to misdirect almost all aspects of the history and culture of the Ethiopian Jews. It is hard to evaluate today all the implications of this model on the future of the Ethiopian Jews and on the process of their integration in Israeli society.

Notes

- 1 J. Quirin, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopian History: Caste Formation and Culture Change 1270–1868*, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Minnesota, 1977).

- 2 K. K. Shelemay, *Music, Ritual and Falasha History* (Michigan, 1989, 2nd edn).
- 3 S. Kaplan, 'History, Halakha and Identity: The Beta Israel and World Jewry', in *ISSR* (Israel Social Science Research) 10:2 (1995), pp. 13–24. Idem, 'The Invention of the Ethiopian Jews: Three Models', in *Cahiers des Etudes africaines* 132 (1993), pp. 645–58. Idem, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1992) pp. 8–9.
- 4 S. Kaplan, 'The Invention', p. 647.
- 5 The Ethiopian Jews are presented as if they were the result of political chaos that took place in the fourteenth century, but not as the instigators of the turmoil. The question to ask is: what was then the reason for the political instability and why were the *Beta Israel* concerned about it and why did it affect their life so much? The model fails to answer all of these questions.
- 6 The model attributes to two Christian monks, Abba Saga and Abba Sabra, a prominent role in the shaping of the religion of the Beta Israel. They are believed to have introduced innovations such as monasticism, new religious practices, liturgies and sacred literature.
- 7 'A convert is a full Jew in every respect. *Halakah* forbids a Jew from embarrassing a convert by referring to his or her former status.' See: R. A. Rosenberg, *The Concise Guide to Judaism: History, Practice, Faith* (New York, 1994), p. 207.
- 8 N. Ausubel, *Pictorial History of the Jewish People, from Bible times to our own day throughout the World* (New York, 1969, 21st edn), pp. 3–10.
- 9 Sh. Weil, 'Collective Designation and Collective Identity among Ethiopian Jews', in *ISSR* 10:2 (1995), pp. 25–40. See also: S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia*, pp. 8–9.
- 10 Not all Jews are blacksmiths or potters or craftsmen. Not all blacksmiths or potters or craftsmen are Jews; they can be Christians or Muslims or pagans. The craftsmen are not despised because they are Jews but because of their profession. This is not specific to Ethiopia. In almost all African countries the cast system for the craftsmen exists and those who belong to it are despised, for example in Senegal and Mali.
- 11 Kaplan ('The Invention', p. 653) cites Halévy who writes 'I managed to ask them in a whisper, *Are you Jews?* They did not seem to understand my question, which I repeated under another form, *Are you Israelites?* A movement of assent mingled with astonishment, proved to me that I had struck the right chord.' This story is taken by Kaplan as an evidence for self-identity redefinition by the *Beta Israel*. But this incident can thoroughly be explained by two facts. First, the term 'Jew' or 'Jewish' is not a generic term used universally by all Jews to designate themselves. The best example can be taken from Italy, where Jews are called the *Ebrei*, which means 'Hebrew' in Italian (*ebraico* is the adjective) and the term *giudaico* or any related word is not used to designate a Jew. And, of course, if one asks the same question 'are you a Jew' in Italy, the reaction will be exactly the same as in Halévy's account (I made an experiment). The second, and most important, fact is related to the evolution of the term 'Jew' itself, which derives from the name of the tribe of Judah, one of the twelve Tribes of

Israel. When, after the reign of Solomon, the independent 'kingdom of Yehuda, or Judah, was established in the southern part of Israel, its people were given the name of *Yehudim*, Judeans or Jews' (N. Ausubel, *Pictorial History*, p. 3). Those who belonged to the other Tribes, except for the Tribe of Benjamin, formed the Kingdom of Israel and were known as the Israelites. When the Kingdom of the Ten Tribes disappeared, only the kingdom of Judea or the Jews (and their Benjaminite allies) remained. Their name became, progressively, the universal word to designate all that is related to Israel and its religion. Hence, there is nothing surprising for the Ethiopian Jews to identify themselves to Israel and not to Judah, since in their tradition they always claimed to be part of the Kingdom of Israel or to belong to the lost Tribe of Dan.

- 12 D. Kessler, *The Falashas: A Short History of the Ethiopian Jews* (London, 1996, 3rd revised edn).
- 13 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, p. 17.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 65–6.
- 15 D. Kessler, *The Falashas*, p. 77.
- 16 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, pp. 62–3.
- 17 S. Kaplan, 'The Invention', p. 649.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 646.
- 19 E. Trevisan Semi, 'The Shibboleth of Complexity', in S. Kaplan, T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi (eds), *Between Africa and Zion* (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 30.
- 20 N. Ausubel, *Pictorial History*, p. 29.
- 21 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, p. 76.
- 22 R. Pankhurst, 'Falasha Manuscripts and Their Illustration: An Historical Discussion prompted by a Visit to Gondar, Ethiopia, in 1990', in S. Kaplan, T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan Semi, *Between Africa and Zion*, pp. 80–93. See also S. Kaplan, 'The Invention', p. 647.
- 23 S. Kaplan, 'The Invention', p. 73.
- 24 Kaplan argues for the prominent role of these two monks by bringing forward a so called '*Beta Israel* tradition'. This is one of the rare times he accepts a *Beta Israel* tradition as reliable and accepts it without questioning its authenticity. He does not say where he found it, nor why it should be taken as reliable when all other oral traditions of the Ethiopian Jews are dismissed as untrustworthy.
- 25 *Rist* or possession of land is a fundamental asset in traditional Ethiopian society.
- 26 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, p. 185.
- 27 See D. Kessler, *The Falashas*; D. Friedmann, *Les enfants de la reine de Saba: les Juifs d'Ethiopie: histoire, exode, intégration* (Paris, 1994); and S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*.
- 28 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, p. 87.
- 29 N. Ausubel, *Pictorial History*, p. 77.
- 30 S. Kaplan, 'Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel: Between Preservation of Culture and Invention of Tradition', in *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* 35:1 (1993), p. 38.
- 31 N. Ausubel, *Pictorial History*, pp. 2–3.
- 32 R. Pankhurst, 'Falasha Manuscripts', p. 93.

- 33 N. Ausubel, *Pictorial History*, p. 221.
 34 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, pp. 17–18.
 35 R. Pankhurst, 'Falasha Manuscripts', p. 92.
 36 N. Ausubel, *Pictorial History*, p. 84.
 37 H. T. Norris, 'The Himyaritic Tihama, Evidence for a Multi-Racial Society in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Arabia', in *Abbay Cahier*, 9 (1978), p. 110.
 38 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, p. 69.
 39 D. Kessler, *The Falashas*, p. XX.
 40 R. A. Rosenberg, *The Concise Guide*, p. 61.
 41 D. Kessler, *The Falashas*, p. 45.
 42 Ibid., p. 16; R. A. Rosenberg, *The Concise Guide*, p. 13.
 43 N. Ausubel, *Pictorial History*, p. 2.
 44 Ibid.
 45 W. Leslau, *Coutumes et croyances des Falashas (Juifs d'Abyssinie)* (Paris, 1957), p. 88, n. 5.
 46 R. A. Rosenberg, *The Concise Guide*, pp. 226–7.
 47 S. Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, p. 173, n. 61.
 48 S. Kaplan, 'Ethiopian Immigrants', p. 38.
 49 S. Kaplan, 'The Invention', p. 652.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE *BETA* *ISRAEL* TRADITION AND THE *BOOK OF JUBILEES*

Michael Corinaldi

Introduction

Beta Israel halakah is a subject of research to which proper attention has not yet been devoted. Haim Ben-Sasson has already stated that anyone wishing to look carefully into the religion of Jewish sects ‘must of necessity devote more attention to the *halakah*. . . . The *halakah* constitutes the viewpoint determining the society’s mores and revealing, wittingly, or unwittingly, its approach to life’s problems.’¹ Ben Sasson here refers to the Karaites, but the same applies when one attempts to study the *Beta Israel* tradition.

The *Book of Jubilees*, henceforth *Jubilees* (in Ge’ez, *Kufale*), had a substantial influence over the *Beta Israel* community. *Jubilees* enjoyed canonical status in their tradition, and the community’s fundamental laws, such as *attentkugn* laws and Sabbath laws, are based upon it. In this chapter, we shall confine ourselves mainly to the Sabbath laws.

The centrality of the Sabbath

The theological theme that characterises *Beta Israel* tradition is the centrality of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is pictured as a divine princess, radiant and full of joy and, through the cycle of weeks, it is the focus of communal religious life.

This centrality of the Sabbath in *Beta Israel* tradition is based on *Jubilees*. According to *Jubilees*, the Sabbath is characterised by the

yearly cycle from 7 to 49 Sabbaths. Every seventh Sabbath is a festival. *Jubilees* speaks of the Sabbath's sanctity and commandments in 12 passages throughout the book. The book concentrates on the theological theme of the Sabbath, which is 'a holy day and a blessed day' (2:27) and specifies the Sabbath commandments (see especially chapters 2 and 50).

Beta Israel adopts the cycle of Sabbath: every seventh Sabbath is celebrated as the Sabbath of Sabbaths – *Sanbat Sanbat*.² The *Sanbat Sanbat* is called also *Sabi Sanbat*. The *Sabi Sanbat* of every year are counted beginning on the first month of the religious calendar, the month of *Nissan (Lissan)*. Every third *Sabi Sanbat* (that is, the twenty-first Sabbath of the year) is known as *berev*. After an additional 21 weeks, there is a second *berev*. There are only two *berevs* every year and they are characterised by a special liturgy: 'Prayers of Moses and passages from Exodus, Psalm 119 and the Book of Disciples are read.'³ The second *berev* is not reported in the scientific literature, and it was through the *qessoch* that, recently, I have come to be informed about it.⁴

The cycle of Sabbaths is concluded every year by the last *Sabi Sanbat*, that is, the forty-ninth Sabbath of the year. This jubilee *Sanbat* is reported by Shelemay. She provides a description of the observance:

Priests congregate in one village on a rotating basis to hold a vigil. . . . Prayers are said through much of the night and all Sabbath day until sunset. Dancing marks the end of the Sabbath afternoon liturgy.⁵

Jubilees stresses that the Creator gave the People of Israel alone the privilege of keeping the Sabbath: 'I will now separate a people for myself from among the nations. They, too [together with the angels in Heaven], will keep Sabbath. I will sanctify the people for myself and will bless them as I sanctify the Sabbath day'. Accordingly, *The Liturgy of the Seventh Sabbath* (an original *Beta Israel* book of liturgy)⁶ states that 'it is precisely the Sabbath, a direct gift from God, which sets Israel apart as a Holy Nation' (f. 1vab).

The festival of *berev*, while not called by this name, is emphasised in the *Liturgy of the Seventh Sabbath*:

God said to Moses, 'I have given you Sabbaths and festivals, and with (them) rest. Proclaim My Name on the

fourth Sabbath in the fifth month. I am He Who Is and Will Be, and My Name, too, is eternal'. [On account of] the Sabbath on the seventh day, he who, with faith in God, petitions and gives thanks, praises and [bows down,] washes himself and prays with a steadfast heart to Him, he will not lack those who watch over him. This is the law of those who observe the Sabbath of God, He who grants life (and) He who honours those who honour the Sabbath (f. 1ra-va).

'The fourth Sabbath in the fifth month' is the *berev*. However, some scholars incorrectly report that this holiday falls on the third Sabbath in the fifth month.⁷ Devens refers to this annual holiday as being 'fixed probably as the fourth Sabbath of the fifth month',⁸ but the word 'probably' must be omitted, since it is clear, as the text says, that the holiday falls indeed on the fourth Sabbath of the fifth month. The *Beta Israel* year consists of, alternately, 12 months of 29 and 30 days, according to the lunar observations (and a leap year supplements the missing days, according to the solar calendar). Thus, the first four months total 17 Sabbaths, and the fourth Sabbath of the fifth month is the twenty-first Sabbath.

The central value of the Sabbath is a main theme in rabbinic literature: 'If Israel keeps one Sabbath as it should be kept, the Messiah will come. The Sabbath is equal to all the other precepts of the *Torah*' (*Exodus Rabbah* 25:12). This is also stressed in the Babylonian *Talmud* (hereafter TB): 'God said to Moses: Moses, I have a precious gift in my treasury whose name is the Sabbath, and I want to give it to Israel. Go and tell them' (TB *Bezah* 16a).

The centrality of the Sabbath in *Te'ezaza Sanbat*, the main source of *Beta Israel* Sabbath laws, is parallel to that in normative Judaism: God loves most those who keep the Sabbath and hates most those who do not. The Sabbath is equal to all the other commandments taken together.⁹ And as Leslau states, 'the Sabbath is understood as a female figure which in her conversation with God asks him to forgive the sinners if only they keep the Sabbath and honour her'.¹⁰

Sabbath laws

Jubilees and *Beta Israel halakah* alike are extremely severe in the matter of Sabbath desecration. The Sabbath commandments are expressed in terms of absolute and scrupulous abstention from any type of work. Any transgression invokes capital punishment. The

express norms of the *Te'ezaza Sanbat* are largely based on *Jubilees*.¹¹ Moreover, Talmudic *halakah* distinguishes between the scriptural principal commandments *Avot melakah* – ‘Fathers of work’, which includes derivative forms of forbidden labour and rabbinic prohibitions relating to the Sabbath called *shvut* [rest], whereas *Jubilees* and *Beta Israel halakah* make no such distinctions. All Sabbath prohibitions are treated by *Jubilees* as being scriptural (principal) and, therefore, punishable by death. I report here the conclusions of my study about four main typical transgressions thus punishable, in the *Jubilees* and *Te'ezaza Sanbat*.

Sexual intercourse on the Sabbath

The prohibition of cohabitation on the Sabbath is to be found among earlier sects, such as the Samaritans¹² and Saducees,¹³ as well as later sects such as the Karaites. Sexual intercourse on the Sabbath is regarded, by contrast, in Talmudic *halakah* as *oneg shabbat*, or ‘Sabbath pleasure’ (TB *Baba Kama* 82a; *Ketubot* 62b). There is no explicit scriptural source for this prohibition. However, it may be understood from the textual proximity in *Jubilees* (50:8) of ‘desecration of that day (Sabbath)’ to ‘whoever lies with his wife’ that the prohibition derives from the holiness of the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8, ‘Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy’). *Jubilees* states the prohibition of *tum'ah* (defilement) on the Sabbath (2:25). Aescoly cites another version of this verse: ‘Whoever defiles this day and lies with his wife . . . shall die.’¹⁴ The concept is that uncleanness or defilement cannot coincide with holiness (‘he who lies carnally with a woman shall be unclean until the evening’ – Leviticus 15:18). In Karaite *halakha*, the prohibition originates from the *Book of Precepts* of Anan.¹⁵ Anan based it on the verse ‘six days thou shalt work but on the seventh day thou shalt rest, in ploughing time and in harvest thou shalt rest’ (Exodus 34:21), interpreting ‘ploughing’ as marital intercourse. This interpretation of Anan is rejected sarcastically by Ibn Ezra (Exodus 20:8). Later Karaite sources base the prohibition on the concept of *tum'ah* – defilement.¹⁶

Conversation about profane subjects

The prohibition of conversation about profane subjects derives from Isaiah 58:13: ‘If thou turn away thy foot because of the Sabbath and call the Sabbath a delight . . . [thou] shalt honour it, not

. . . pursuing thy business nor speaking thereof.' Obviously, the prohibition refers first, as is common, to normative Judaism and the sects, to the transaction of any business on the Sabbath. The Talmud explains that 'not pursuing any business' means that only profane matters are forbidden, but not 'divine matters'; 'not speaking thereof' means that 'thy conversation on Sabbath shall not be like on weekdays'.¹⁷ However, in *Jubilees* 50:8, the prohibition is wider: 'Whosoever says he will do something on it' – and, in the *Damascus Covenant* (10:18), it is specified with reference to five different Sabbath prohibitions on lying and four other types of conversation about profane matters.¹⁸ The parallel text in *Te'ezaza Sanbat* adds shouting and quarrelling ('he who speaks aloud or seeks a quarrel') and according to *Abba Elyas* the prohibition includes four other types of communication, such as lying and cursing: 'Guard thy tongue and thy voice from uttering lies, evil guile, and abuse . . . keep anger from thy heart.'¹⁹ These prohibitions, like all Sabbath prohibitions, are considered to be of scriptural origin and punishable by death.

By contrast, rabbinical *halakah* considerably modified the severity with which talking about profane or secular matters was treated, setting up a difference between scriptural and rabbinical prohibitions – *shvut* (see e.g. *Tosefta, Shabbat* 16:21).

Travelling and walking

The prohibition derives from Exodus 16:29: 'Abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day'; and Isaiah 58:13: 'If thou turn away thy foot because of the Sabbath'. Early *halakah* interpreted the written law literally as a categorical prohibition of walking on the Sabbath, although views differed over its nature and its extent.²⁰ Talmudic *halakah* does not include this prohibition among the 39 instances of prohibited works. This is, therefore, not a scriptural prohibition, but a rabbinical one that prohibits walking outside town beyond a distance of 2,000 cubits (a little more than half a mile). This boundary is also limited to the Sabbath 'bounds' known as *tehum Shabbat* (Sabbat limit) (TB *Sotah* 30b and *Eruvin* 51a). In *Jubilees* (50:12) it is written: 'Every man who goes on his way'. Albeck²¹ holds that this prohibition is absolute,²² but other scholars hold that in the context of *Jubilees* (50:8) – 'he who will set out on a journey' – Albeck's interpretation is not accurate.²³

As to the *Beta Israel, Te'ezaza Sanbat* and *Abba Elyas* say: 'On

this day keep your feet from walking'.²⁴ Therefore, in *Beta Israel halakah*, based on the literary and scrupulous interpretation of Exodus 16:29 and of *Jubilees*, even walking for non-religious purposes is prohibited. *Beta Israel halakah* is more stringent since it prohibits all walking not required for holy purposes. Rabbi Nahoum reports that, on the Sabbath, people do not leave their dwellings, except for going to the *mesgid* – synagogue.²⁵

The prohibition against riding any beast on Sabbath is, in *Jubilees* and *Te'ezaza Sanbat*, punishable by death. The Jerusalem Talmud indicates that riding a horse on the Sabbath transgresses the scriptural commandment of animal's rest. However, the accepted rule in Talmudic *halakah* is that riding is a rabbinic prohibition – *shvut* (*Mishna, Betzah* 5:2) and not a capital offence. Nevertheless, a death penalty was imposed by rabbinical regulation on a person who in Hellenic times rode a horse on the Sabbath, not because he merited it, but as a temporary emergency measure.²⁶

In *Jubilees* and *Te'ezaza Sanbat*, any travelling is absolutely prohibited, including sailing (*Jubilees* 50:12), as Abba Yitzhak writes:

We wanted to go by sea to meet our distant brothers, but how could we do this without contravening the Sabbath commandment?

A ship at sea moves under (some form of) power and, if there is no rest, that means that the Sabbath is not observed.²⁷

The prohibition applies to any stretch of water, sea or river and even to cross a river on foot is forbidden.²⁸ However, according to the rabbinical *halakah*, sailing is permitted during the Sabbath, provided the ship had set out three days earlier.²⁹

Kindling

In the rabbinic *halakah*, the prohibition of kindling of fire (Exodus 35:3: 'Ye shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the Sabbath day') relates only to the act of kindling a flame on Sabbath itself, whereas the lighting of candles on the eve of the Sabbath and leaving them lit is not only permitted but obligatory (TB *Shabbat* 25b). The prohibition is found in *Jubilees* and *Te'ezaza Sanbat* in similar terms: 'Whoever lights a fire' (*Jubilees* 50:13). It is unclear whether *Jubilees* differs from rabbinic *halakah* in this regard.

According to early Karaism, the prohibition included lighting candles on the eve of the Sabbath (see the sources of the first Karaites cited in *Adderet Eliyahu* #27).

As to the *Beta Israel*, we must rely on long-established practice. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources, based on accounts given by Falasha refugees, attest that candles were not lit on the Sabbath eve.³⁰ The Karaite Abraham b. Yitzhak Bali wrote that ‘between Yemen and the tribes there is a Christian kingdom . . . They (= the tribes) do not kindle light on Sabbath eve and they do not like to live near people who kindle light.’³¹ Faitlovitch criticised this proof, claiming that this letter is of legendary character and written by a Karaite willing to strengthen the Karaites’ tradition.³² This criticism should be rejected as the references mentioned above and the letter include particulars on Falasha refugees which seem to be real. The late Yona Bogale (the President of the Israeli Council for Ethiopian Jews and *aliyah* leader) has observed that the prohibition on kindling on the Eve of Sabbath is the community practice, down to the present, but Faitlovitch influenced the community to modify this tradition.³³ It would seem that Faitlovitch succeeded and some Falasha villages changed their practice. However, the *Beta Israel* tradition remains stricter than normative *halakah*: even keeping food warm on the Sabbath is forbidden. In this regard the *Beta Israel* tradition conforms to the principles of early *halakah* and Bet Sham-mai’s view that all work should be completed before Sabbath.³⁴

In *Jubilees* and *Beta Israel* tradition there are many other examples of stricter prohibitions than are to be found in Talmudic *halakah*, such as carrying any burden on the Sabbath (Jeremiah 17:21–7: ‘And bear no burden on the Sabbath day . . . neither carry forth a burden out of your houses’– *Jubilees* 50:9 and *Te’ezaza Sanbat*). According to the Talmud, however, the prohibition which also derives from the above prophetic writing is a qualified one.³⁵ There is one main difference between *Jubilees* and *Beta Israel* tradition. *Jubilees* forbids the waging of war on the Sabbath. Such was the case also in early *halakah* until the Hasmonean period.³⁶ Eldad ha-Dani states that the tribes conducted defensive war on the Sabbath.³⁷ *Te’ezaza Sanbat* omits the prohibition. This omission supports Faitlovitch’s reports that in *Beta Israel* tradition defensive wars were not forbidden. This is the only exception to the dogmatic and absolute abstention from all activity in *Beta Israel* traditions – the *Beta Israel* were permitted to defend themselves on the Sabbath.

It should be noted that, according to actual community practice, the death penalty for a breach of a prohibition punishable by death

remained theoretic and was in practice replaced by ostracism – the ban (*herem*), as reported in interviews with community *qessoch*, 1985–6 and 1998.

The foregoing demonstrates that the admonition, both in *Jubilees* and Falasha *halakah*, for resting on the Sabbath and avoiding weekday activity, is parallel to (or, more precisely, derives from) the absolute and strict practices of early *halakah*, rather than to the admonitions formulated in later talmudic times and rabbinical *halakah*. So much so that, in *Jubilees* and Falasha tradition, it involves complete passivity and abstention from all activity not necessary to maintain sanctity.

To conclude, *Beta Israel* Sabbath laws, largely based on *Jubilees*, are in line with the strict view of the early *halakah* that survived among the sects of the Second Temple, such as that of the Judean desert sect,³⁸ which, in turn, differs in approach from Pharisaic law. Apocryphal sources argue that the Sabbath laws and their penalties ‘are not to be regarded as exceptional but as a stage or branch of the early *halakah*’.³⁹

***Beta Israel* luni-solar calendar**

However, on two main issues there is no similarity between *Beta Israel halakah* and *Jubilees*. *Jubilees* adopts the solar calendar and criticises the lunar calendar: ‘There will be people who carefully observe the moon with lunar observations, because it corrupts the seasons and is early from year to year by ten days’ (*Jubilees* 6:36). The *Book of Enoch* (hereinafter *Enoch*) writes that the required adjustment for the lunar calendar is of 80 days in a cycle of eight years. In fact, the solar year is of 365 days, 48 minutes and 46 seconds and thus, in a cycle of eight years, the required adjustment of the luni-solar calendar is of 90 days and 6½ hours. The Coptic Church adopted the solar calendar of 12 months of 30 days and a thirteenth month – *pagumie* of five days (and every fourth year six days), whereas the *Beta Israel* adopt the luni-solar calendar which, as said above, consists of 12 months of, alternately, 29 and 30 days, according to the lunar observations. In order to adjust the lunar and the solar year, *Beta Israel* inserted an intercalary month of 30 days (compare *Enoch* 74). A number of prominent scholars have omitted to note that in the *Beta Israel* calendar every fourth year has 13 months, while the Falasha calendar requires an adjustment of three intercalary months of 30 days (three leap years) in every cycle of eight years. Aescoly writes, basing himself on Abba Yitzhak

(response 3 in A. d'Abbadie, 'Réponses des Falachas') that *Beta Israel* regulates every fourth year a *pagumie* – thirteenth month of 14 days⁴⁰ (according to Aescoly, the *pagumie* is inserted in a leap year and thus, it is the fourteenth month). Aescoly's opinion is inaccurate, since it does not conform with *Beta Israel* tradition – probably he misunderstood Abba Yitzchak's response. Faitlovitch, who criticised Aescoly,⁴¹ also reports on an intercalary month of 30 days every fourth year, but he was acquainted with the required adjustment of the *Beta Israel* calendar of more than an intercalary month every fourth year.⁴² However, Faitlovitch cannot specify the cycle of years in which a third intercalary month should be added.⁴³ In my interviews with prominent *qessoch* (Qes Nogat and Qes Berko Ben Baruch, 1999) they referred to a cycle of eight years as in *Enoch* (74:13–16). The question, however, still requires further research.

On the other hand, the *Beta Israel* agree with the book of *Jubilees* that the festivals should fall on a fixed month, as in the Bible. Passover (*Pesah*), for example, should be observed on the first month (*Nissan*): 'Observe the month of spring, seeing that it was in this month of spring that you went free from Egypt at night' (Deuteronomy 16:1; see also Exodus 23:15 34:18). The Ethiopic version of the Bible writes 'the month of *Miyazya*', which in Ethiopian seasons is not the month of spring, but the Falasha translated this as 'the month of *Lisan (Nissan)*'.

Faitlovitch reported that Abba Kendie, a *likat kahanaat* (the major Falasha priest) of the region of Semien, translated, literally, 'the month of *Abib*' as 'the month of Spring', i.e. 'the month of *Maskerem*'. Faitlovitch explained that the error of Abba Kendie, like other 'errors' in the Falasha tradition, was due to a false translation from the Ethiopic version of the Bible. Abba Kendie's wish was to schedule Passover at the beginning of our spring, but he was mistaken, due to the fact that he was not acquainted with the seasons in *Eretz Israel*. Following Faitlovitch's intervention, Abba Kendie accepted his word – this word coming, as Abba Kendie said, 'from Jerusalem' – and agreed that Passover should be celebrated at the same time as all Jews throughout the world.⁴⁴

The date of the festival of *Shavuot*

The second difference between *Jubilees* and *Beta Israel* tradition is the date of the festival of *Shavuot*. In the Falasha tradition, *Shavuot* – *Ma'erar* (from the Ge'ez root *arara*, 'to harvest') is celebrated on

the twelfth day of *Sivan*. The ‘morrow of the Sabbath’ (Leviticus 23:15) is interpreted as meaning the day after Passover. Thus, the date of *Shavuot* was set on the fiftieth day after the last day of Passover. On the other hand, according to *Jubilees* (15), ‘the festival of the first fruits of the harvest is in the middle of the third month’. *Jubilees* interpreted ‘the morrow of the Sabbath’ to mean the Sabbath after the end of the Passover festival, that is the first Sunday after Passover which, under the solar calendar, always falls on the twenty-sixth of *Nissan*, so that *Shavuot* is always on Sunday, the fifteenth of *Sivan*.⁴⁵ I have no explanation for this difference between the *Beta Israel* and *Jubilees*. However, this point does not detract from the canonical superiority of *Jubilees* in the *Beta Israel* tradition.

Finally, it is interesting to quote an eleventh century Muslim scholar, Al-Biruni, who, comparing the central faith of the four religions, writes:

The *Shahada* (namely, the Muslim declaration of faith: ‘There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet’), sincerely recited, is the symbol of Islam. The Trinity is the symbol of Christianity. The observance of the Sabbath is the symbol of Judaism. In much the same way, metempsychosis (namely, the transmigration of souls) is the symbol of Hinduism. He who does not believe in it does not belong to them and is not reckoned as one of them’.⁴⁶

Despite all the differences between the doctrines compared by Al-Biruni (the Christian Trinity, the Moslem *Shahada*, the Hindu metempsychosis and the Jewish Sabbath), Al-Biruni was right in drawing the parallel, due to the centrality of the Sabbath to Judaism. Al-Biruni’s saying is especially right in the context of *Jubilees* and *Beta Israel* tradition, where the Sabbath is indeed all important.⁴⁷

Notes

- 1 H. H. Ben-Sasson, ‘The Early Karaites – Outlines of their Social Theory’, in *Zion* 15 (1950), p. 42 (Hebrew).
- 2 J. Faitlovitch, ‘The Presumed Laws of the Falasha’, in *Tarbiz* 7 (1936), pp. 373–9: 375 (Hebrew).
- 3 W. Leslau, *Falasha Anthology* (New Haven, 1951; New York, 1969, 2nd edn), p. 31.
- 4 Interviews with *Qes* Nogat, 1998, and *Qes* Berko Ben Baruch, 1999.

- 5 K. K. Shelemay, *Music, Ritual and Falasha History* (East Lansing, 1986, 2nd edn; reprinted 1989), pp. 52–3.
- 6 See the critical edition by M. S. Devens, *The Liturgy of the Seventh Shabbat* (Wiesbaden, 1995).
- 7 See W. Leslau, *Falasha Anthology*, p. 31: ‘The Sabbath of Sabbaths is celebrated on the third Sabbath of the fifth month’.
- 8 M. S. Devens, *The Liturgy*, p. 156.
- 9 J. Halévy, *Te’ezaza Sanbat (Commandments du Sabbat)* (Paris, 1902), pp. 20–1.
- 10 W. Leslau, *Falasha Anthology*, p. XXXII.
- 11 See, for example, the parallel texts in *Jubilees 50:8–13* and *Te’ezaza Sanbat*, in M. Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jewry* (Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 61–2.
- 12 R. Kircheim, *Karmmei Shomron* (Frankfurt am Main, 1851), p. 27 (Hebrew). See also the MS by the Cohen, Ya’acob ben Uzi (beginning of the twentieth century), ‘The Laws and Customs of the Israelite Religion’, chapter 3. The MS – written in Hebrew, Samaritan script – is based on the writings of the Samaritan Cohanim Av Sacuha ben Sa’ad Hasudi Hadenfi and HaCohen HaLevi Pinchas ben Yitzchak ben Shlomo (nineteenth century). This chapter was published in *A.B. – The Samaritan News* 821 (July 2002), p. 26.
- 13 See references in A. Z. Aescoly, ‘Law and Custom among the Jews of Ethiopia (the Falasha) in the Light of Rabbinate and Karaitic Tradition’, in *Tarbiz* 7 (1936), pp. 35–56; 121–34:37 (Hebrew).
- 14 L. Finkelstein, in *Monatshrift* 76 (1932), p. 529.
- 15 A. E. Harkavy, *Books of the Karaites* (St. Petersburg, 1903), p. 140 (Hebrew).
- 16 M. Corinaldi, *Personal Status of the Karaites* (Jerusalem, 1984), p. 134 (Hebrew).
- 17 TB *Shabbat*, 113a–b and 150a; cf. *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 368.
- 18 Y. D. Gilat, ‘Regarding the Antiquity of Several Sabbath Prohibitions’, in *Bar Ilan* 1 (1963), pp. 106–19, 255 (Hebrew).
- 19 J. Halévy, *Te’ezaza Sanbat*, p. 46.
- 20 Y. D. Gilat, ‘Regarding the Antiquity’, pp. 107ff.
- 21 H. Albeck, ‘Das Buch der Jubiläen und der Halacha’, in *Berlin Lehranstalt f.d. Wissenschaft des Judentums* (BLWJ) 47 (1930), pp. 1–60: 9.
- 22 A. Z. Aescoly, ‘Law and Custom’, p. 45.
- 23 Ch. Tchernovitz, *History of Hebrew Law*, vols 1–4 (New York, 1945, 2nd edn), vol. 4, p. 367 (Hebrew).
- 24 Cf. *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 369.
- 25 H. Nahoum, ‘Mission chez les Falachas d’Abyssinie’, in *Bulletin de l’Alliance Israelite Universelle* 33 (1908), pp. 100–37:125.
- 26 TB *Sanhedrin* 46a; *Yevamot* 90b; TJ *Hagigah* 11b; cf. M. Elon, *Jewish Law, History, Sources, Principles* (Philadelphia/Jerusalem, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 515–16.
- 27 Responses 2 and 7 of Abba Yitzhak, in A. d’Abbadie, ‘Réponses des Falachas dits Juifs d’Abyssinie aux questions faites par M. Luzzato’, *Archives Israelites* 12 (1851), pp. 179–85, 234–40, 259–69.
- 28 A. d’Abbadie 1845, #228, in A. Z. Aescoly, ‘Notices sur les Falaches ou

- Juifs d'Abyssinie d'après le "Journal de voyage d'Antoine d'Abbadie", in *CEA* 2:1 (1961), pp. 84–147: 112.
- 29 TB *Shabbat* 19a; Maimonides, *Hilkhot Sabbath* 30:13; *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* #248:1.
- 30 See R. Ovadiah Bertinoro's letter, 1488, in A. Ya'ari, *Letters from Eretz Israel* (Tel Aviv, 1943; Ramat Gan, 1971, 2nd edn), pp. 132–3 (Hebrew); *Resp. Radbaz*, IV, #29; R. Yitzhak Akrish, *Kol Mevaser* 57b; H. Ludolfus, *Historia Aethiopica*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main, 1681; reprinted: Osnabruck, 1982), p. 57.
- 31 Bali's letter was edited by J. Gurland, *Judische Literatuur in St. Petersburg*, vol. 3 (St Petersburg, 1866), pp. 27–35: 33; cf. A. Z. Aescoly, 'Law and Custom', p. 39.
- 32 J. Faitlovitch, 'The Presumed Laws', p. 374.
- 33 A. Cohen, 'Da Ambober a Gerusalemme: Dal diario di Aharon Cohen (1976)', in C. A. Viterbo and A. Cohen (eds), *Ebrei di Etiopia due diari (1936 e 1976)* (Firenze, 1993), pp. 95–203: 137.
- 34 *Mishnah, Shabbat* 1:5–8; TB *Shabbat* 22b, cf. A. Z. Aescoly, 'Law and Custom', pp. 39, 49; and I. Ben-Shalom, *Bet Shamai* (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 172ff. (Hebrew).
- 35 TJ *Shabbat* 1:1; TB *Horayot* 4a; *Bezah* 12a; cf. Y. D. Gilat, 'Regarding the Antiquity', p. 115.
- 36 For the history of the *halakhah* on this matter see M. D. Herr, 'The Problem of War on the Sabbath in the Second Temple and Talmudic Periods', in *Tarbiz* 30 (1961), pp. 242–56: 242ff. (Hebrew).
- 37 A. Epstein, *Eldad ha-Dani* (Pressburg, 1891), p. 38.
- 38 See B. Sharvit, 'The Sabbath of the Judean Desert Sect', in *Bet Mikra* 21 (1976), pp. 507–16: 515 (Hebrew); Sh. Talmon, *The World of Qumran from Within: Collected Studies* (Jerusalem, 1989); H. Shanks, *The Mystery and the Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York, 1998).
- 39 Y. D. Gilat, 'Regarding the Antiquity', p. 119.
- 40 A. Z. Aescoly, 'Law and Custom', p. 127.
- 41 See Aescoly and Faitlovitch's dispute in *Tarbiz* 7 (1936), pp. 373–87.
- 42 J. Faitlovitch, 'I Falascia e il Messia', in *La Settimana Israelitica* 4:35 (September 1913).
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Cf. Y. Susman, 'The History of the Halakhah and the Judean Desert's Scrolls', in *Tarbiz* 59 (1990), pp. 11–76: 30.
- 46 Al-Biruni, *India* (Hyderabad, India, 1958), p. 38 (Arabic); cf. Y. Meron, 'The Sabbath and the Jews as seen by Moslems', in *CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly* (Spring 1998), pp. 69–76: 69.
- 47 On Jewish identity in general, see M. Corinaldi, *The Enigma of Jewish Identity* (Jerusalem, 2001) (Hebrew).

INDEX

- Aba Zague 55, 56
Abba Eliyas 197–8
Abba Kendie 201
Abba Sabra 157, 180, 184, 190 n6,
191 n24
Abba Saga 180, 184, 190 n6, 191 n24
Abba Yitzak 198, 200–1
Abd al-Munim al-Himyari 5
absorption centres for Ethiopian
immigrants to Israel 144, 152
Abu Rayhan al-Biruni 5, 202
Abu'l Hassan al-Masudi 5
Abu'l-Mocali 185
Addis Ababa, Jewish school in
103–4, 107, 110 n11, n13
Adera, Tesfai 48
Adgeh, Abraham xiv, 91, 100 n78,
101–9; relations with Taamrat
Emmanuel 105–6, 107, 108
Adgeh, Malka 106, 108, 109, 111 n35
Adiabò 48
Adler, Cyrus 78–9
Aerdar ritual 148
Aeschylus 3
Aescoly, A. Z. 196, 200–1
Africa: Arab knowledge of 5;
Christianity in 41 n98; craftsmen
despised in 190 n10; European
knowledge of 1–5, 6–7; imagined
Israelite identities in 6–36, 37–8
n35, 40 n77, n82, 42 n122;
Protestant missionaries in 7–8,
11–12
Africanus, Leo *see* Leo Africanus
Agaw people 80, 132
Agawegna language 156, 167, 168,
169
Alba, R. D. 134
Albeck, H. 197
aliyyah: Ethiopian xi, xii, 131–40,
155, 173
Allgemeine Zeitung für das Judentum
68
Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU)
75–6; disputes with Faitlovitch
and Pro-Falasha Committee
66–7; disputes with *Hilfsverein*
der deutschen Juden 67–8; school
in Jerusalem 74
Almog, O. 129
Alvarez-Pereyre, F. 156, 162
America: education of Ethiopian
Jewish boys in 78–9; Pro-Falasha
Committee in 85, 98 n41
Amhara name system 80
Among the Ibos of Nigeria (Basden)
8
Anan ben David 196
Anglo-Jewish Association (AJA) 95
animal sacrifice: among Ethiopian
Jews 185–6
anti-Semitism: against Tutsis 17
antiphonal liturgical music 157, 166
Appelius, Mario 87
Appleyard, John 21
Arabs: knowledge of Africa 5;
Lemba originating from 28–9
Aramaic: used by Jews 186
architectural similarities: between
Ethiopian Jews and Christian
neighbours 184
Arom, S. 162, 172 n26
Aschieri, Lucien 125
Ashanti: imagined Israelite identity
of 10–11
Atar, Ron xv

INDEX

- Ausubel, N. 186–7
ayhud 33, 174, 175, 177; of Lake Tana 178–9, 180
- Ba'ala mascalat* (feast) 164, 171 n25
- Bahrani, Z. 134
- Bakkala, H. M. 100 n77
- Bali, Abraham b. Yitzhak 199
- Baluba: imagined Israelite identity of 18–19, 39 n62
- Barker, E. 138
- Barthes, Roland 125
- Basden, G. T. 8
- Basnage, Jacques 32
- Basso, Rossana 125
- Bayudaya (Uganda): Judaism practised by 12
- beasts: prohibition to ride on Sabbath 198
- Bello, Richard de 4
- Belo (Sultan of Sokoto) 9
- Ben Ezer, Gadi xiv
- Ben Meir, Abraham 71, 73 n32
- Ben-Dor, S. 156
- Ben-Sasson, Haim 193
- Bennet, L. A. 134
- berev* festival 194–5
- Berger, Peter 136–7
- Berhan Saraqa/Tazkara Abraham* (feast) 164, 171 n25
- Bet Shammai* 199
- Beuster, C. 28
- Biobaku, S.O. 9
- Biroli, General 107
- birth: in Ethiopian Jewish culture 145–8, 152; in life cycle 143–4
- al-Biruni, Abu Rayhan 5, 202
- blacksmiths: Ethiopian Jews working as 49
- Bleek, Wilhelm 20–1, 39 n70
- Bleich, D. 132
- blessings: at end of Ethiopian Jewish service 169
- Bogale, Yona 77, 101, 102, 106, 110 n11, 199
- Bologna University: collection on Ethiopia 43
- Book of Precepts* (Anan) 196
- Bowdich, Thomas Edward 10
- Bradley, Mary Hastings 14
- Briant, Josph 30
- Brosse, Father Étienne 14
- Bruce, James 33
- Bulhoek massacre 31
- business transactions: prohibition on Sabbath 197
- Bwejeri, Jean 17
- calendar: Ethiopian Jewish 195, 200–1
- Cape, Dutch colonisation of 19
- Casanova, J. 139
- caesarean sections: among Ethiopian women 145–6
- cemeteries: of Jews in Ethiopia 150
- change: principles of 143
- Chajes, Dr 70, 86
- Chelati Dirar, Uoldelulul 51 n1
- Chidester, D. 25, 40 n77
- Christianity: in Africa 41 n98; conversion of Jews to xi, 118, 179; Ethiopian 183–4; Ethiopian Jews seen as originating from 173, 174–5, 179–82; evangelical 7
- circumcision: ritual of 147
- Clapperton, Hugh 9
- cohabitation: prohibition on Sabbath 196
- Colenso, John 23–4
- collective identities 125
- collective memories 128
- collective representations: of death 149
- colonisation: of Cape 19; of Rhodesia 27–8
- construction of ‘other’ 8
- conversation about profane subjects: prohibition on Sabbath 196–7
- conversion: to Christianity xi, 118, 179; Ethiopian Jews required to perform ritual 135, 138; to Judaism 179–80, 190 n7
- Copland, Patrick 19
- Coptic Church *see* Ethiopian Orthodox Church
- Corinaldi, Michael xv, 135
- craftsmen: despised in Africa 190 n10
- Crowdy, William 30
- cultural loss experiences xv
- cultural similarities: between Ethiopian Jews and Christian neighbours 183–4
- cultures: confrontation between 153; Ethiopian 134–5, 144; Ethiopian Jewish 145–52

- Damascus Covenant* 197
- Dan Tribe: Ethiopian Jews seen as originating from 34–5, 132, 188–9
- Daniel: education in Europe 75, 76, 97 n10
- death: collective representation of 149; in Ethiopian Jewish culture 148–52; in life cycle 143–4; penalty for Sabbath prohibitions 198, 199–200
- declamatory type: of liturgical music 169
- defilement (*tum'ah*): concept of 196
- Dembea: Jewish school in 75, 113, 114
- Denford, S. 133
- denominations of God: used by Ethiopian Jews 167–8
- Description of Africa* (Leo Africanus) 5–6, 36 n9, n10
- Deshen, S. 137
- Destà, Hailu (Elazar) 102, 103–4, 107, 110 n11, n12
- Devens, M. S. 195
- Diaspora: Jewish cooking in 183; languages used by Jews in 186; physical appearance of Jews in 182
- Diaz, Bartholomew 5
- dietary laws: followed by Ethiopian Jews 187
- Dimson, David 105
- Diogenes 3
- don* (gift): concept of 151–2
- Dulucq, Sophie 7
- Durch Abessinien und Erythräa* (Norden) 70
- Dutch colonisation: of Cape 19
- Edgar, R. 31
- education of Ethiopian Jews: in America 78–9; in Europe xiii–xiv, 74–96, 103–5; in Palestine xii–xiii, 74–5, 78–9, 114–17
- Egzee'aviher* (denomination of God) 167
- Elbogen, I. 67
- Eldad ha-Dani 34, 132, 188, 199
- Ellero, Gianfranco 51 n1
- Ellero, Giovanni 43–4
- Ellero notes on Walqayt 43–5, 46–8, 49–50, 51 n6, 52 n8
- emigration to Israel *see aliyah*
- Emmanuel, Taamrat xiv, 55, 71, 80–2, 96, 101, 111 n33; asked to support his nephew in London 93; head of Jewish school in Addis Abeba 103, 110 n13; and Italian occupation of Ethiopia 87–90, 99 n52, 107; love of Italy 84–7; relations with Abraham Adgeh 105–6, 107, 108; relations with Faitlovitch 82–5, 98–9 n43; views on fascism in Italy 89–90
- Enloe, C. 134
- Enoch*: on lunar calendar 200
- Erickson, E. 134
- Erstes Morgenblatt der Frankfurter Zeitung* 68
- Essay on the Superstitions, Customs and Acts Common on the ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians and Ashantees* (Bowdich) 10
- Essenes: monasticism among 185
- Ethiopia: Christianity in 183–4; European views of 3–4; history of 177–8; imagined Israelite identities in 32–3, 35, 42 n121; Italian occupation of 71, 87–90, 107; Jewish influences in 176–7; Jewish schools in 75, 84, 103–4, 107, 110 n11, n13, 113, 114, 119; journeys by Faitlovitch to 54, 68, 69, 71, 113; land tenure systems in 47, 50–1, 131, 174, 180–1; Muslims in 178; names in 80, 134
- Ethiopian culture: myths in 134–5; rituals of passage in 144
- Ethiopian Orthodox Church 183–4; adopting solar calendar 200
- ethnic identities 134
- ethnic similarities: between Ethiopian Jews and Christian neighbours 182, 189
- Europe: education of Ethiopian Jews in xiii–xiv, 74–96, 103–5; knowledge of Africa 1–5, 6–7; Protestant movement in 180; views of Ethiopia 3–4
- European Jews: prejudices about Oriental Jews 76
- Exodus*: as image of journey by Ethiopian Jews to Sudan 124; Sabbath prohibitions in 196, 197, 198

INDEX

- Faitlovitch collection (University of Tel-Aviv Library) 102
- Faitlovitch, Jacques 75, 98 n27; dispute with *Alliance Israélite Universelle* 66–7; dispute with Union of Italian Israelite Communities 85; journeys to Ethiopia 54, 68, 69, 71, 113; letters from Gete Yirmiahu to 113–14, 115–17, 119–20; ‘missionary’ activities of 34, 110 n12; promoting education of Ethiopian Jewish boys in America 78–9; relations with Taamrat Emmanuel 82–5, 98–9 n43; reporting on Ethiopian Jewish religious practices 199, 201; support for Ethiopian Jews xi–xii, 34, 65, 71, 75, 76–80, 118; taking Ethiopian Jewish boys to Europe and Palestine xiii, 54, 63 n8, 91, 94, 95, 96, 101, 112–13; visits to Britain 105; visits to Germany 66; visits to Italy 90; visits to Palestine 55, 69, 119
- Faitlovitch, Leah 103, 104, 106
- family identity 134
- Fanta Dawit (Gabra Maryam) 80
- Fasika* feast (Passover) 164, 168, 171 n25, 201
- feasts: of Ethiopian Jews 49–50, 151, 164, 171 n25, 188, 194–5, 201
- Felege Guihon International 35
- Finkas, Hizkiahu 96–7 n2, 101
- fire: prohibition on Sabbath of kindling of 198–9
- Frobenius, Leo 4
- funerals: among Ethiopian Jews in Israel 150
- Fynn, Henry Francis 23
- gabbar* land tenure system 47, 50
- Gama, Vasco da 5
- Gardiner, Allen 22–3, 40 n77
- Geertz, C. 142–3
- Ge’ez language 156, 163, 167
- Gemeindeblatt der Israelischen Religionsgemeinde zu Berlin* 71
- Gemeindeblatt der Israelischen Religionsgemeinde zu Leipzig* 70
- Geography* (Ptolemy) 3
- German: as language of instruction in Palestine 115
- Germany: Jewish press on Ethiopian Jews in xiii–xiv, 62, 65–71, 72 n4; visits of Faitlovitch to 66
- Gihon river 3
- Giyorgis, Walda 119
- Gobat, Samuel 34
- God: denominations of 167–8
- Godlonton, Robert 21
- Gold of Ophir, Whence brought and by Whom* (Keane) 29–30
- Goldschmidt, Julius 54, 63 n7, 69
- Gondar, Jewish school in 119
- Grandidier, Alfred 29, 30
- Great Britain: Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations 104, 110 n19; visits by Faitlovitch to 105
- Great Zimbabwe ruins 25–6, 27
- Greeley, A. 134
- Grinfeld, Y. 85, 86, 87, 99 n52, 110 n11
- Guandalini, Carolo xiv
- Hahn, Theophilus 20
- halakah* (Jewish religious law): Ethiopian Jewish 195–6, 198, 199–200; Karaite 196, 199; Rabbinical 175, 193, 197, 198; Talmudic 197, 198, 199
- Halévy, Joseph xi, 33, 75, 190 n11
- Hall, Richard Nicklin 27
- Hamitic hypothesis 4
- Hanegbi, Rivka xv
- Hanukkah*: unknown to Ethiopian Jews 188
- Havilah movement 16
- Haynon, M. 171 n16
- L’Hébreu à Madagascar* (Briant) 30
- Hebrew: as language of instruction in Palestine 115; use in Diaspora 186–7; used by Gete Yirmiahu 120–1
- Heine, Heinrich 67
- hemiolitic liturgy 157–8, 164, 165
- Herbert, Thomas 19
- Hereford Mappa Mundi (de Bello) 3–4
- Herodotus 3
- Hersi, Ahmed Jama 42 n122
- Hertz, J. H. 93
- Hertz, R. 149
- Herziga* (prayer) 168
- Herziga/Herzigani* (denomination of God) 167–8

- Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden*:
disputes with *Alliance Israélite Universelle* 67–8; school in Jerusalem (Eidler-von-Lämel school) xii, xiv, 55, 68, 74
- Himanut* 170 n5
- Hirsch, Rafael 104
- Hirshfeld, Rina xv
- Histoire physique, naturelle et politique de Madagascar* (Grandidier) 30
- history: of Ethiopia 177–8; of Ethiopian Jews xiii, 176–7, 178; *see also* origins, of Ethiopian Jews
- The History of the Jewish People* (Ausubel) 186–7
- Homa family 105, 106, 108
- Homer 3
- horses: prohibition to ride on Sabbath 198
- Hottentots (Khoi): imagined Israelite identity of 20–1
- Hutus 13, 14, 15
- Ibn Ezra, Abraham 196
- Ibn Khaldun 5
- Ibos: imagined Israelite identity of 8–9, 37 n21, 38–9 n53
- identities: collective 125; of Ethiopian Jews xv, 33–5, 70, 124–5, 126–7, 135, 138–9, 139–40, 173–89, 190 n5, n11; ethnic 134; formation of 134; imagined African Israelite 6–36, 37–8 n35, 40 n77, n82, 42 n122
- al-Idrisi, Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn al-Sharif 5
- Imharen (*Qes*) (Yirmiahu Pikado) 162, 164, 171 n19
- immigrant groups: cultural context of life cycle 143
- impurity: created by birth 144, 145, 146; created by death 144; frontier with purity 152–3
- Indian Jews 176, 187
- Isaac, Menghistu 100 n86, 101
- Isaac, Nissim 55–6, 61
- Isaac, Salomon 54–5, 62, 63 n4, 79, 101, 113, 115–16; letters from Gete Yirmiahu 117, 118, 119
- Isaiah*: Sabbath prescriptions in 197
- Ishmaelites 21
- Israel: emigration of Ethiopian Jews to 57, 63–4 n14, 131–40, 155, 173; Ethiopian Jews in xii–xiii, 122–3, 124–9, 134–6, 137, 143–53, 155–69; major ethos in 124; secularisation in 137, 138; *see also* Palestine
- Der Israelit* (newspaper) 53, 62; reporting on Ethiopian Jews 66, 68
- Israelite identity of Africans: imagined 6–36, 37–8 n35, 40 n77, n82, 42 n122
- Israelites 191 n11
- Israelitisches Familienblatt* 71
- Italy: occupation of Ethiopia 71, 87–90, 107; Taamrat Emmanuel's love of 84–7
- Jabotinsky, Vladimir Zeev 64 n19
- Jacob, Tadesse 95, 100 n69, n70, n71, 102, 106
- Jerusalem: Jewish schools in xiii, xiv, 55, 68, 74; Passover riots (1920) 61, 64 n19
- Jewish Chronicle* 91–2
- Jewish cooking: in Diaspora 183
- Jewish identity of Ethiopian Jews 33–5, 124–5, 127, 176, 181–2, 186–8, 189, 190–1 n11; disputed 70, 135, 138–9, 173–5, 178–9, 189, 190 n5
- Jewish press in Germany xiii–xiv, 62, 72 n4; on Ethiopian Jews 65–71
- Jewish schools *see* schools
- Jewishness: definition of 175
- Johnson, James 9
- Johnson, Samuel 9
- Johnson, T. Broadway 12–13
- Johnston, Sir Harry 11
- Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile* (Speke) 13–14
- Jubilees*: criticism of lunar calendar 200; importance for Ethiopian Jews 193; Sabbath in 193–4, 196, 197, 198–9, 200; *Shavuot* in 202
- Judaism 175–6; centrality of Sabbath in 202; conversion to 179–80, 190 n7; monasticism in 185; practised by Bayaduya (Uganda) 12; Rabbinical xi–xii, 135, 175, 193, 197, 198

INDEX

- kabaro* (musical instrument) 159, 160, 161, 165
- Kakungulu (Kakunguru), Samei 12
- Kaplan, Steven 98 n41, 132; disputing Jewish identity of Ethiopian Jews 173, 174, 178–9, 180, 181, 182, 185, 188, 189, 190 n11, 191 n24
- Karaite *halakah* 196, 199
- kashrut* *see* dietary laws
- Katz, Albert 66
- Kaufman Shelemay, Kay 171 n23, 173, 194
- Kavey (Kavovitz), Lillia 85
- Keane, Augustus 29–30
- Kefar Batya xii
- Kessler, D. 177
- kindling of fire: prohibition on Sabbath of 198–9
- Kohen, Efraim 115
- Kolb(en), Peter 19–20
- Krestos, Ghebre 99 n52
- Kulanu: website of 15
- Kurdistan, Jews in 187
- Lake Tana: *ayhud* of 178–9, 180
- Lämel School *see Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden*, school in Jerusalem
- land tenure systems: in Ethiopia 47, 50–1, 131, 174, 180–1; in Walqayt 47
- Laney, Mel 15–16
- languages: of instruction in Palestine 115; used by Ethiopian Jews 156, 163, 167, 168, 169; used by Jews in Diaspora 186
- Lawrence, D. H. 3
- learning of liturgical repertory: among Ethiopian Jews 156
- Lemba tribe: imagined Israelite identity of 26–7, 28–9
- Leo Africanus 5, 36 n9, n10
- Leslau, W. 131, 132, 195
- Levi, Makonnen xiv, 90–5, 96, 99 n63, 100 n67, n84, n86, 104
- Levine, Samuel 91, 92–4, 100 n77, 104
- Levy family 104–5
- Levy, Ralph 104, 105–6
- Levy, Ronald 104
- life cycle: birth and death in 143–4; concept of 142–3
- liturgical practices of Ethiopian Jews xv, 157–69, 194–5
- The Liturgy of the Seventh Sabbath* 194–5
- Lost Tribes: myth of 34, 36, 132, 188
- Luba *see* Baluba
- Lubinski, Kurt 71
- lunar calendar: criticised by *Jubilees* 200; of Ethiopian Jews 195, 200
- Macavity, K. J. 134
- Madagascar: imagined Israelite identities in 29–30
- Makonnen Levi *see* Levi, Makonnen
- Makonnen (*Qes*) (Yosef Taia) 162, 164, 171 n19
- manakosat* (Ethiopian Jewish monks) 156, 157
- Mandela, Nelson 31
- Mandeville, Sir John 5
- maps: of Africa 3–4
- marginalisation: sensed by Ethiopian Jews in Israel xiv–xv, 139–40
- marginality: concept of 132–3
- Margulies, Zvi 66, 67, 80, 81, 113; letters from Gete Yirmiahu to 114, 117–18, 119
- Markus, Ludwig 67–8
- Marshall, Luis 76–7
- Martin, D. 137–8
- Maryam, Gabra (Fanta Dawit) 80
- Masai: imagined Israelite identity of 17
- al-Masudi, Abu'l Hassan 5
- Mattuck, Israel 94–5
- Mauch, Karl 25–6
- May, Rollo 125
- Mehalla* feast 49–50
- memory: transmission of 128
- Mendelssohn, Sidney 12
- Merensky 26–7
- Merker, M. 17
- Messing, S. 108
- Mgijima, Enoch Josiah 30–1
- migration 133–4
- Miller, Joseph 128
- Minuchin-Itzigsohn, Sara xv
- missionaries in Africa: activities among Ethiopian Jews xi, 33, 34, 56, 118; Protestant 7–8, 11–12
- monasticism: in Judaism 185
- Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 70

- monks: among Ethiopian Jews 156, 157, 180, 184–5, 190 n6
 Montefiore, C. 95
 Moreno, Martino Mario 87
 mourning rituals: among Ethiopian Jews 151
 Moynahan, D. P. 134
 Mugesera, Leon 15
 music: paradigmatic transcription of 163; used for prayers 157–69, 170–1 n16
 musical instruments: used in Ethiopian Jewish liturgy 158–62, 171 n23
 Muslims: in Ethiopia 178
 Mussolini, Benito 71
 Mwenye: imagined Israelite identity of 28
 Mxaba, Lazarus 24–5
My Small Village (Abraham Adgeh) 108
 mythologisation: among Ethiopian Jews xiv; of journey by Ethiopian Jewish to Sudan xiv, 122–9
 myths: concept of 123, 125; in Ethiopian culture 134–5; in Israeli society 128–9; of Lost Tribes 34, 36, 132, 188
- Naga, Samuel (*Qes Samay*) 162, 171 n19
nagarit (musical instrument) 158, 159, 161, 163, 165
nagusa (king) 168
 Nahmias, A. 162
 Nahoum, H. 66–7, 198
 names: in Ethiopia 80, 134; used for Ethiopian Jews 131–2, 176; used for Jews 190–1 n11
A Narrative of the Irruption of the Kafir Hordes into the Eastern Province of the Cape of Good Hope, 1834–35 (Godlonton) 21
Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country in South Africa (Gardiner) 23
 Nathan, Paul 71
 Nevinson, Harry 8
Nifuhu qarne be'illite sirq (prayer) 172 n30
 Nongqawuse 22
 Norden, Hermann 11, 70
 Norris, H. T. 184–5
Odyssey (Homer) 3
 Ogilby, John 6
 Operation Moses xiv, 122–9
 Operation Solomon 162
 Oriental Jews: prejudices of European Jews about 76
 origins: of Ethiopian Jews xv, 34–5, 132, 173, 174–5, 176–7, 179–82, 188–9
 ornamental type: of liturgical music 166–7, 169
 ornamental-semantic type: of liturgical music 167–8
Ost und West (journal) 66
 ‘other’: construction of 8
 Ottolenghi, Raffaele 86
- pagumie* (thirteenth month) 200, 201
 Palestine: education of Ethiopian Jews in xii–xiii, 74–5, 78–9, 114–17; language struggle in 115; visits of Faitlovitch to 55, 69, 119; *see also* Israel
 Pankhurst, R. 184
 Paracelsus 2
 paradigmatic transcription: of music 163
 Parfitt, Tudor xv
 Park, R. E. 132–3
 passage: rituals of 144, 145, 146, 147–8, 149, 151, 153
 Passover (*Pesah*): among Ethiopian Jews 164, 168, 171 n25, 201; riots (1920, Jerusalem) 61, 64 n19
 patriarchal structures: among Ethiopian Jews 136
 Peppercorne, G. R. 23
 personality: and identity 134
 Perugia, Paul del 14–15
 Peters, Carl 28, 29
 physical appearance: of Jews in the Diaspora 182
 Pikado, Yirmiahu (*Qes Imharen*) 162, 164, 171 n19
 Pory, John 6, 32
 prayers: of Ethiopian Jews 155–6, 157, 158, 161, 162–9, 170–1 n16
The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope (Kolb) 20
 Prichard, J. C. 4
 Pro-Falasha Committee xiii, 66, 68–9, 73 n24; in America 85, 98 n41

- prohibitions on Sabbath 196–200
 Protestant missionaries: in Africa
 7–8, 11–12
 Protestant movement 180
 Prunier, G. 15
 Psalms: Book of 158
 Ptolemy 3
Purim: unknown to Ethiopian Jews
 188
 purity rituals 136, 152; *see also*
 impurity
- qachel* (musical instrument) 158–9,
 161, 163, 165, 166, 167, 169
 Qemant: imagined Israelite identity
 of 35, 42 n121
ques (pl. *qessoch*) (priestly
 authorities of Ethiopian
 community) 135, 136, 137, 148,
 150, 156, 157, 162, 170 n5, 171
 n19; playing of musical
 instruments by 161, 162, 164
 Quirin, James 131, 173
- Rabbinate: in Israel 137
 Rabbinical Judaism 135; *halakah*
 (Jewish religious law) 175, 193,
 197, 198; introduced in Ethiopia
 xi–xii
 Rabinovitz, Yaakov 114
Races of Africa (Seligman) 4
 Radbaz (David Ben Abi Zimra) 34,
 35
 Ramat Rachel: forest of
 remembrance at 126
 Ramusio, Giovanni Battista 36 n9
Rassegna di Studi Etiopici (Rossini)
 44
 Ratzel, Friedrich 10
 re-incorporation phases: in rituals of
 passage 148, 151, 153
 regular beat type: of liturgical music
 165–6
 religions in Africa: European views
 of 1, 7
 religious status of Ethiopian Jews
 see Jewish identity of Ethiopian
 Jews
 responsorial liturgy 157
 Rhodesia: colonisation of 27–8; *see*
 also Zimbabwe
 rhythmic type: of liturgical music
 163–5, 169, 171 n23
 rhythms: used in Ethiopian Jewish
 liturgical music 162–9, 171 n23
 Rieger, N. J. 90
rist land tenure system 131, 174,
 180–1
 rituals: *Aerdat* 148; of circumcision
 147; of conversion 135, 138; of
 death 148–9, 150; of mourning
 151; of passage 144, 145, 146,
 147–8, 149, 151, 153; purity 136,
 152
 Robin, M. 9
 Rodrigue, Aron 76
 Rosenberg, R. A. 185
 Rosenthal 33
 Rossini, Conti 44–5, 46
 Royal Chronicles of Ethiopia 177–8,
 189
- Sabbath: centrality in Judaism 202;
 in *Exodus* 196, 197, 198; in *Isaiah*
 197; in *Jubilees* 193–4, 196, 197,
 198–9, 200; practices of Ethiopian
 Jews xv, 193–202
Salomo der Falascha (Schachnowitz)
 xiii, 53–62
salot (hymn prayer) 165
 Salviac, Martial de 32
 San Nicandro, conversion to
 Christianity of Jews of 179
Sanbat (*Sabi*) *Sanbat* (Sabbath of
 Sabbaths) 194
 San Remo Conference (1920) 64 n19
 Schachnowitz, Selig 53–4, 55, 57, 62,
 62–3 n1, 64 n19
 Scheftelowitz, I. 70–1, 73 n32
 Schindler, Ruben xiv
 Schoenberger, M. 131–2
 Schonfeld, Avigdor (Victor) 92–3,
 95, 104
 Schonfeld, Solomon 110 n19
 schools: in Ethiopia 75, 84, 103–4,
 110 n11, n13, 113, 114, 119; in
 Jerusalem xiii, xiv, 55, 68, 74
 secularisation 139; among Ethiopian
 Jews 136–7; in Israel 137, 138
 self-perception: of Ethiopian Jews
 124, 127
 Seligman, Charles 4
senasel (musical instrument) 159,
 160, 161
 separation phases: during rituals of
 passage 144, 145, 146, 149, 153

- Septuagint 186
 sexual intercourse: prohibition on
 Sabbath 196
 Shaka (Zulu king) 22
 Shammai (Ha-Zaken) 199
 Shatta, Ezra 107
Shavuot: among Ethiopian Jews
 201–2
 Sheba, Queen of 26; Ethiopian
 national epic of 32, 33
 Shelemay, K. *see* Kaufman Shelemay
 Shoked, M. 137
 Shona: imagined Israelite identity of
 26–7, 28–9
 Sibree, James 30
 Smith, Harry 21
 social spaces: created by birth and
 death 144
 social ties: strengthening of 151–2
 Sohn, Sigrid xiii
 Sola Pool, David de 77
 solar calendar: adopted by Ethiopian
 Orthodox Church 200
 Solomon (King): Ethiopian national
 epic of 32, 33; gold mines of
 16–17, 39 n56; legends of 26
 Somalia: imagined Israelite
 identities in 35–6, 42 n122
 Songhois (Timbuktu): imagined
 Israelite identity of 18
 SOSTEJE (Society of the Study of
 Ethiopian Jewry): conferences
 54, 101, 123–4
 sources: of Ethiopian history 177–8
 South Africa: imagined Israelite
 identity of tribes of 20–9, 30–1, 40
 n77, n82
 Speke, John Hanning 13–14
 spirituality: search for 138
 Stanley, Sir Henry 10
 status changes 143
 Stern, H. A. 33
 Stuart, James 24–5
 Sudan: journey of Ethiopian Jews to
 xiv, 122–9
 Sutherland Rattray, R. 10
 Swift, Jonathan 2–3

 Taddia, Irma xiii
 Tahara, Tahara Mehmod 70, 73 n28
 Taia, Yosef (*Qes* Makonnen) 162,
 164, 171 n19
 Talbot, P. A. 18

 Talmud: unknown to Ethiopian Jews
 187
 Talmudic *halakah* 197, 198, 199
tazkar (memorial feast) 151
Tazkara Abraham/Berhan Saraqa
 (feast) 164, 171 n25
Te'ezaza Sanbat 195, 196, 197–8, 199
 Teferi, Amalelech xv
 Tegegne, Muse 35
tehum Shabbat (Sabbath limit) 197
 Tel-Aviv University Library:
 Faitlovitch collection 102
 Tellez, Balthazar 32
 Tewedros II (Emperor of Ethiopia)
 33
 Therapeute: Jewish sect of 185
 Thompson, Paul 123
Torah we-Derech Eretz (Tora and
 Worldliness) 104
 Tourny, O. 161, 162, 171 n23
 transition phases: in rituals of
 passage 144, 147–8, 149, 151, 153
 transmission of liturgical repertory:
 among Ethiopian Jews 156
 travel: prohibition on Sabbath 197–8
Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia
 (Tellez) 32
 Trevisan Semi, Emanuela xiv, 63
 n10, n11
 Tsegaye, Mekuria 101
 Tshisekedi, Étienne 18–19
*Tsuni-Goam: The Supreme Being of
 the Khoi-Khoi* (Hahn) 20
 Tubiana, J. 80
tum'ah (defilement): concept of 196
 Turner, V. 143, 144, 153
 Tutsis: imagined Israelite identity of
 13–17
 Twa people (Rwanda/Burundi) 13, 14

 Uganda: early colonial period 12
 Ughulu, Emmanuel 9
 Ullendorff, Edward 33, 35
 Union of Italian Israelite
 Communities: dispute with
 Faitlovitch 85
 Union of Orthodox Hebrew
 Congregations of Britain 104, 110
 n19
 University of Bologna: collection on
 Ethiopia 43
 University of Tel-Aviv Library:
 Faitlovitch collection 102

INDEX

- Van der Stel, Simon 20
 Van Gennip, A. 144, 147
 Van Riebeeck, Jan 20
 Vienna: Ethiopian Jew attending
 University of 70, 73 n28
 Viterbo, Carlo Alberto 84, 86, 89, 98
 n34, 100 n86, 107
 Vittorio Emanuele (King of Italy) 69
 Vos, G. de 144
- walking: prohibition on Sabbath
 197–8
- Walqayt 44, 45, 51–2 n7; Ellero notes
 on 43–5, 46–8, 49–50, 51 n6, 52 n8;
 Ethiopian Jews in xiii, 44, 48–51;
 project 45–6, 51 n1
- Wangemann 27
- Wanivano Egzee’aviher li Musye*
 (prayer) 158, 164
- war: prohibition of Sabbath to wage
 199
- Weil, Fred 105
 Weil, Shalva 54, 63 n8, 97 n10
 Whately, R. 7
- Wiener Morgenzeitung* 70
- Wi’etus kimi mer’awee* (wedding
 prayer) 165, 166
- Williams, Joseph J. 10–11
 Wilson, Bryan 136, 137
 Wolff, Joseph 34
 Wolin, S. T. 134
- Xhosa: imagined Israelite identity of
 21–2
- Ya Dam Bet* (hut of blood) 145, 146
 Jacob, Tadesse *see* Jacob, Tadesse
 Yehoshua, A. B. 53
 Yibro tribe: imagined Israelite
 identity of 35–6, 42 n122
 Yirmiahu, Gete xiv, 54, 63 n8, 68,
 101, 112–13, 120; letters of 112,
 113–21
 Yirmiahu, Yosef 119
Yitfesa lisaneeya (prayer) 167
 Yitzak, Menghistu *see* Isaac,
 Menghistu
 Yoruba: imagined Israelite identity
 of 9
 Yosef, Ovadiah 34–5
- Zafin Ibrahim tribe: imagined
 Israelite identity of 30
 Zague, Aba 55, 56
 Zaudie, Desta 48
 Zeller, Jack 17
zema (melodies of liturgy) 157
 Zimbabwe: ruins 25–6, 27, *see also*
 Rhodesia
 Zimra, David Ben Abi (Radbaz) 34,
 35
 Zulus: imagined Israelite identity of
 22–5, 40 n77