

The Story of the Ethiopian Jews

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Ethiopia is the land of ancient Hebraic people. These Hebraic people are a major part of the Jewish Diaspora. They are descendants of Hebraic Israelites of long ago. They have been given different names by different people. Some writers have called them the “Black Jews of Africa.” Many, including the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, refer to them as the “Falasha,” and some refer to themselves as “Beta Israel.” Most recently, some Israeli officials have called a group of Ethiopian Jews stranded in Gonder and Addis Ababa as “Felas Mora” (“Falasha”). “Beta Israel” means “From the House of Israel.” For political reasons, the census on the Beta Israel population has been defined narrowly to include only a small number of people. The Jews of Ethiopia prefer being called Ethiopian Jews, or better yet, “Ethiopian Beta Israelis.” Judaism is their religious and ethnic identity.

From the earliest days of historical records, historians have tended to show that one of the earliest footholds of Judaism was in Ethiopia. Archaeological records also indicate frequent physical and cultural migration of Hebraic culture and people from both sides of the Red Sea and along the Nile River basin. Archaeological remains of the old cities of Metehara, Axum, Hawolti, Adigelemo, the Temple of Yeha, and the port of Adulis in Ethiopia provide very convincing evidence as to the strong and earliest presence of Hebraic people and culture in Ethiopia. Epigraphic research has also put forth evidence that suggests that Ethiopia is the origin of the Semitic script. Ethiopic, the language spoken by the early Ethiopian Jews, is the only Semitic language which has never been changed. Rather, it developed into the present day Ge’ez and Amharic. Some scholars consider Ethiopic the ancestral language of Hebrew, Arabic, Geez, and Tigrinya.

In terms of religion, from the earliest days to the present, Ethiopian Jews have practiced the earliest forms of Judaism, which existed in the pre-Judaic Culture of early Israelites and pre-Talmudic Judaism. This is confirmed by archaeological findings in many parts of Ethiopia, such as from early Axumaite culture, the incense burners and animal sacrifices objects discovered by archaeologists. There is additional supporting evidence, including the island of Tana Kirqos in Lake Tana. Ethiopia is the land of Metsehafa Orit (The Tanakh or Old

Testament) and the keeper of the Tslate Musi (the Ark of the Covenant). The Tslate Musi was in the hands of the Ethiopian Jews up until 330 AD.

Perhaps the earliest Hebraic people came to the land of Ethiopia during the time of the prolonged drought and famine in Canaan at the time of Abraham. These are ancestors of the Qemant, who worship the Lord in the same manner as Abraham did. They pray and make sacrifices in selected tree groves and practice *biret mila*. A second group of Hebraic people arrived in Ethiopia during the 300 years of Israeli bondage in Egypt. According to our elders, a large contingent of Israelites came and settled in Ethiopia during the time of Moses, the Prince of Egypt. According to oral tradition, Ethiopian historians believe that Moses visited Ethiopia as Pharaoh's emissary on several occasions and eventually married an Ethiopian princess. A large group of Levites also came to Ethiopia carrying the Ark of the Covenant, or Tslate Musi, during the time of Emperor Manasseh of Israel, who sought to desecrate the Temple and forcibly convert the children of Israel into pagans. The Tslate Musi was kept on the island of Tana Kirqos in Lake Tana for more than 900 years. These Levites are believed to be ancestors of the Quara Jews. There is also the legend of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. It is told that the first-born of the tribes of Israel came to Ethiopia accompanying Menilik I, the son of King Solomon. This traditional history was the history of the Ethiopian monarchy, of which it was claimed that they were converted to Christianity with the belief that the messiah was Christ. Therefore, they saw no contradiction with the Old Testament and indeed believe more in the Old Testament and considered themselves Judeo-Christian. The State was called "King of Kings from the tribe of Judah." The Star of David is their symbol of power and ordination. It was the highest ordination for the country until the time of the last emperor of Ethiopia, who claimed that he was the direct descendant of King Solomon of Israel and The Queen of Sheba. Other Hebraic people arrived at different points, including at the time of the destruction of the Temple and the persecution of the Jews in Babylon.

The history of Ethiopian Jews has never been told in a way that is based on archaeological and historical facts. Most writers have recognized the fact that Ethiopian Jews were the founders of the early Ethiopian state and the Church of Ethiopia. But they have been denied credit for their contributions to the history and civilization of Ethiopia and world Jewry. In the past, the history of Ethiopian Jews was told by different groups of people including: (a) foreign scholars using particular methods of data-gathering, analysis, interpretation, and presentation, (b) the

Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which sought to annihilate and demonize the Ethiopian Jewish population as the Antichrist, (c) foreign missionaries who sought to convert the Ethiopian Jews to Christianity, (d) the Italian invaders of Ethiopia who forced a large number of the Judaic Qemant to accept Catholicism, (e) Egyptian and Arabic scholars who sought to deny the presence of Jewish people in Ethiopia, and (f) travelers who passed through the scattered Jewish communities of Gonder without conducting in-depth observation. Often, the stories told are incomplete, or distorted to fit the writers' political agendas, viewpoints and/or personal experience. In fact, many "scholars" have written about the "Beta Israelis" as if they are an isolated group who lived in the mountains of Ethiopia, were later discovered by European travelers, and then became the subject of "world politics."

The earliest forms of state government and the state super-structure were the contributions of Ethiopian Jews. Ethiopia as a state has been on the map of the world since the history of the fertile crescent and the Greek or the Oriental world. We see Ethiopia mentioned several times in the *tanakh*, the Old Testament; in Greek and Oriental inscriptions; and in Egyptian hieroglyphics. If we trace back from the original, highly complex society, we can find evidence of early Neolithic civilization all over Ethiopia. This society was transformed into a proper state around the 7th century BC. This early period is called the pre-Axum civilization, but we prefer to call it the Zion-Axum period. During the Zion-Axum period, Judaism was introduced into Ethiopia and it quickly replaced the worship of the Sun God and the Serpent. Up till 330 AD, Judaism was both the state and popular religion of the Ethiopia Empire. During this period, hundreds of temples were built in Metehara, Yeha, Axum, and Adulis. Around 330 AD, Zion-Axum dynasty was succeeded by Christian-Axum dynasty with the conversion of Emperor Ezana to Christianity by a Syrian missionary from Egypt. The Christian-Axum dynasty survived until the 9th century and was then replaced by a Jewish kingdom headed by Queen Yeodit, the beautiful daughter of Gideon.

The treatment of Ethiopian Jews during the Christian-Axum period was very brutal and destructive. Between the 7th and the end of the 9th century, Ethiopian Jews repeatedly rebelled against the repressive Christian emperors. Finally, they defeated the Christian forces and established a Jewish kingdom under the leadership of Queen Yeodit. Eventually, the state capital was moved to Adeyva (Roha, now called Lalibela) by a descendant of Zage, and the Zagwe Dynasty was established. Zage was the half brother of Menilik I, the son of Queen of

Sheba and King Solomon. Zage was also a son of King Solomon born from the Queen of Sheba's escort or lady-in-waiting. Thus, the founders of both the Zagwe and the Solomonic dynasties were descendants of King Solomon of Israel.

After three hundred years of rule, (from the end of 10th century to the end of 12th century), the Zagweyees were very powerful, focused on fighting for greater Ethiopia and on building a large metropolitan center and controlling the Red Sea. The architecture of this period is the most outstanding work in the history of the world. The Zagweyees were competing with the Egyptians over the development of the Nile valley, resulting in Egypt coming to the conclusion that this Jewish leadership had to be moved from power and vanquished. The Zagwe Dynasty was defeated by the Solomonic group with the active help of Egypt through the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. (When the Egyptians took control of the patriarchy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Church fell under Egyptian Coptic leadership and this continued until Emperor Haile-Selassie came to power and removed the church from the direct control of Egypt.) After the fall of the Zagwe Dynasty, a large number of Ethiopian Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity, killed, or sold into slavery. Those who managed to escape these atrocities fled to central and southern Ethiopia and settled in Gonder, Tigray, Gojjam, and other parts of Ethiopia. From the 14th century AD onwards, the majority of Ethiopian Jews were ostracized, isolated, and forced to live as landless peasants.

From the 14th-16th centuries, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church amassed great wealth and political power. It owned one-third of the land in the empire and forty percent of local governmental appointments were made by the church. This gave the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tremendous power and influence on affairs of state. The Ethiopian emperors were powerless without the recognition and support of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Due to the nature of church doctrine and its policy of forced conversion, the silent Islamic population was forced to rebel against Emperor Lebne Dengel. Emperor Lebne Dengel was killed during the Islamic uprising and the central government collapsed. The Islamic uprising was defeated only with the assistance of the Portuguese, who provided arms, training and a few combat soldiers. By this time, the center of political power had shifted to Gonder in north-

central Ethiopia, which was inhabited by Ethiopian Jews. Gonder became the capital city of Ethiopia.

In 1747 the Gonderian dynasty collapsed and the kingdom was divided among various feudal lords. Once again, in 1847, a Jewish emperor, Tewodros II, appeared and begun to reunite and modernize Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, especially the Egyptian Patriarch, would not recognize Tewodros as the legitimate Emperor of Ethiopia. First of all, Tewodros was born to a Jewish family in Quara. Secondly, he sought to separate church and state. Third, Tewodros wanted to introduce technological change in Ethiopia. The church was very backward in its thinking and could not reconcile technological changes with religious faith. It saw Tewodros's attempt at introducing technology as an act of blasphemy. Fourth, Tewodros wanted to educate the masses. The church resisted this because it saw education of the masses as a threat against church doctrines and its control of the populace. There were many church-instigated uprisings and bloodshed in several parts of the kingdom.

After Emperor Tewodros committed suicide rather than be captured by the British invaders, Emperor Yohannes VI took the reigns of power. Emperor Yohannes was a Christian fundamentalist and he ordered the forced conversion of the Jewish and Muslim populations of Ethiopia. Once again, Ethiopian Jews were subjected to brutal religious persecutions.

Currently, there are more than 100,000 Ethiopian Jews living in Israel. There are more than a million Hebraic Ethiopians still living in Ethiopia, a large number of who practice Judaism. However, Ethiopian Jewry is in a precarious situation. There are more than 800 synagogues and temples scattered across Ethiopia. Many of these synagogues are now empty and abandoned. Unless we quickly move to protect our synagogues, burial grounds, and sacred places, we are bound to lose our Jewish identity and heritage. The immediate action needed is the establishment of Jewish community centers in Addis Ababa and Gonder, and the provision of access to modern academic, scientific, and religious education.