Foreword

Ethiopia and the judeo-christian tradition: antiquity to modernity

This volume explores the unique fusion of Jewish and Christian traditions in Ethiopia, beginning with the legendary visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, the appearance of the Jewish community in Ethiopia, and culminating in the modern return of Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews) to Israel in the 1990s. The story begins in antiquity, with the Queen of Sheba's journey to Jerusalem, a formative episode giving rise to Ethiopia's Solomonic tradition. According to Ethiopian lore, the union between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon produced Menelik I. After his visit to King Solomon and his return from Jerusalem with the Ark of the Covenant, Aksum was established as the new Zion. The ascension of Menelik I to the throne marked the beginning of the Solomonic dynasty of Ethiopian rulers, which linked them to Israel and the Hebrew Faith, their title qualified by "the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah."

Until Christianity was introduced in Axum in the 4th century CE, Judaism was the religion of the land. What is unique is that the shift to Christianity did not break the ties to Judaism. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) has combined Old and New Testament teachings to maintain a Judeo-Christian tradition in the dogma and practice of the church. For this continuity, the EOTC refers to Galatians 3:17-18 and Matthew 5:17, where the essence of both teachings is that the previous covenant, ratified by God and including the prophets, is to be honored and not invalidated.

When Christianity was introduced, the population at that time was split. Some, called the Beta Israel (Home of Israel), retained their Jewish religion. Others were converted to Christianity. Since then, the two religious groups, the Jewish Beta Israel and the Christians, have influenced each other religiously and created a unique culture that reflected Judeo-Christianity.

The Beta Israel (Home of Israel), a Judaic community in Ethiopia, retained pre-Christian traditions for centuries, often facing marginalization yet continuing to serve as artisans, blacksmiths, and ritual leaders. Their presence was both socially distinct and culturally integrated, with overlaps in festivals, language, and sacred narratives. They resisted Christianization in some areas (e.g., Kimant), but coexisted in others, forming (along with the established presence of Muslims) the long arc of Abrahamic coexistence in Ethiopia.

During the Zagwe dynasty (12th–13th century), the successors of the Solomonic dynasty and the building of 11 monolithic rock-hewn churches at Roha (later Lalibela) reinforced the vision of Ethiopia as a "Second Jerusalem," where those who could not reach the original Zion, the faithful, could worship in a sacred land if they could not reach the original Zion. This mirrored the duality of Christian theology rooted in Old Testament symbols, a hallmark of Ethiopian religiosity.

At Roha, the Aksumite architecture found itself engraved in the rock-hewn churches, which saintly kings such as Lalibela brought to life, replicating the temples in Jerusalem. And just as Aksum had become a second Zion for housing the Ark of the Covenant, so was Roha to be reckoned as a second Jerusalem for Ethiopian pilgrims who could not make it to the Holy Land. Despite sporadic resistance and misgivings from Western Christians, the church maintained its Jewish foundation and independence while retaining its Christian ethos and elaborate rituals.

After the Zague dynasty, the Solomonic restoration continued this religious synthesis, promoting the idea of a divinely ordained monarchy descended from the house of David and Solomon. The integration of Old and New Testament themes shaped Ethiopia's festivals, art, and church rituals, preserving over centuries a unique Judaic-Christian hybridity rarely seen elsewhere.

In modern times, particularly during the 20th century, because of the worsening economic and political situations in the country, the Beta Israel community increasingly felt the spiritual and ancestral pull toward Jerusalem. This culminated in large-scale migration to Israel during Operation Moses (1984) and Operation Solomon (1991). While the transition brought challenges such as cultural integration, questions of identity, and racial discrimination, the return marked the fulfillment of centuries of longing and prayers.

Today, the legacy of Ethiopia's Judeo-Christian tradition continues to inspire scholars, believers, and seekers. As the chapters in this book demonstrate, the Ethiopian experience offers a powerful model of religious memory, syncretism, and endurance, as well as a rare harmony between the Abrahamic faiths rooted in shared scripture, sacred geography, and lived devotion.

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Chapter 1

The Unison Manifestation of the Old and the New Testaments in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition

Amsalu Tefera

Introduction

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) presents a remarkable theological synthesis, integrating the teachings, rituals, and symbolism of both the Old and New Testaments in a harmonious and unified manner. This concept, known as the "Unison Manifestation of the Old and New Testaments," serves as the foundation for the Church's theology, liturgical practices, and spiritual life. By weaving together elements from both covenants, the EOTC emphasizes the continuity of God's divine plan, honoring the Old Testament's (OT) rituals and prophecies while celebrating their fulfillment in Christ as revealed in the New Testament (NT). This chapter provides a general background to the subject before offering a detailed analysis of the biblical and canonical foundations of the EOTC. It explores how the Church's unique integration of the Old and New Testaments remains aligned with its theology and practices, reflecting a profound spiritual and cultural heritage.

Background

According to the long-standing tradition of the EOTC, Ethiopians adhere to three religious laws or phases. These phases reflect the progression of humanity's relationship with God as understood through Ethiopian theological interpretation. The first phase is the "Law of Conscience" (ሕገ ልቡና), the second is the "Law of the Old Testament" (ሕገ ኦሪት), and the third is the "Law of the New Testament" (ሕገ ወንጌል).

The "Law of Conscience" refers to the period from Creation until the time of Moses. During this phase, there was no written law; instead, humanity worshipped the Almighty God through conscience and reason. Family leaders and patriarchs guided their communities in worship based on their internal moral compass and understanding of God. The second phase, the "Law of the Old Testament," spans from Moses to the coming of Christ. This phase is characterized by the giving of the

Chapter 2

Wax-and-Gold Q'ene: Tracing the Interplay Between the Logos/Christ in Beta Christian Theology and the Gram/Torah (Orit) in the Beta Israel Theology

Selamawit FsHa

Introduction

Q'ene is a traditional Ethiopian poetry form with a rich history and cultural significance. Wax-and-Gold, a type of Q'ene poetry, is known for its sophisticated wordplay, metaphors, and double entendres. Q'ene, particularly Wax-and-Gold poetry, has been a vital component of Ethiopian culture for centuries and is deeply embedded in the nation's literary and religious traditions. The Wax-and-Gold Q'ene, which is known among the Christians and the Beta Israel in Ethiopia, serves as a bridge between the two theological traditions. This chapter explores the complexities of Wax-and-Gold Q'ene poetry. By focusing on its use of wordplay and dual meanings, it argues that Wax-and-Gold reveals the exchange of religious elements between these two religious groups.

Specifically, the analysis focuses on how Wax-and-Gold embody the interplay between the Beta Christian's logocentric and Beta Israel's gram-centric theologies. To understand this dynamic, the chapter will first introduce Jacques Derrida's concept of "interplay" or "trace" as a theoretical framework. It will then explore the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's (EOC) logocentric ideology and Beta Israel's gram-centric ideology. Next, it will demonstrate how Wax-and-Gold Q'ene poetry, through its sophisticated wordplay and layered meanings, embodies a continuous interplay or "trace" and serves as a bridge between the Beta Christian logocentric and the Beta Israel gram-centric theologies. The fourth part of this chapter will provide an analysis of Wax-and-Gold Q'ene poetry. The concluding section will summarize the findings.

Theoretical framework: derrida's concept of "interplay" or "trace"

Saussure's theory of language offers a critique of the process of meaning creation as depicted in the Biblical context. In the Bible, God, through his divine power and reason, imposes language on humankind by naming and defining part of the earth:

Chapter 3

Jews, Their Scriptures, and God's Judgment in Giyorgis Säglawi's Book of the Mystery

Mehari Worku

Introduction

Giyorgis of Sägla (1363–1425) remains one of the most influential figures in 15th-century Ethiopian Christianity, known for his profound reverence for the Old Testament and respect for Judaic traditions. Giyorgis' deep theological convictions were rooted in the belief that both the Old and New Testaments were essential to understanding divine truth, positioning him as a staunch defender of the Old Testament's ongoing relevance. His work emphasized that Christianity's foundation was inextricably linked to its Judaic heritage, often contrasting this view with criticisms of Christians who disregarded the Old Testament. Although critical of Judaism's refusal to recognize Christ, he distinguished Jews from other religious groups and envisioned a unique eschatological role and opportunity for them. This perspective underpinned his defense of Sabbath observance, aligning with the Ewostatewosite movement. Giyorgis' writings, particularly in his *Fəkkare Haymanot* and *Məṣṭafä Məṣṭir*, underscored his conviction that adherence to both Testaments was essential for membership in God's household. Despite personal trials, including disputes with figures like Bitu, imprisonment, and exile, his legacy persisted, influencing Emperor Zär'a Yaʿqob's endorsement of Sabbath observance and solidifying the importance of the Old Testament in Ethiopian ecclesiology.

The life of Giyorgis[1]

Giyorgis was born in Sägla near the Wäläqa river in 1363, to noblewoman ʿƎmmənä Ṣəyon and royal priest Həzbä Ṣəyon.[2] Named likely after St. George of

[1] Unless otherwise stated, all the biographical information here is based on Giyorgis' hagiography ገድለ አባ ጊዮርጊስ ዘጋሥጫ ወገድለ አቡነ በጸሎተ ሚካኤል ዘደብረ ጎል *(Gädlä Abba Giyorgis of Gassəççа wäAbunä Bäsälotä Mikaʿel Zä Däbrä Gol)* (Gassəççа: Abba Giyorgis of Gassəççа and Abunä Bäsälotä Mikaʿel Monastery, 2012).

[2] Dərsanä Uriʿel gives the name as Həywät Bəna. However, since the hagiography's account is corroborated by Giyorgis' self-identification in some of his works as ወልደ፡ ሕዝበ፡ ጽዮን "the son of Həzbä Ṣəyon," I preferred to follow the hagiography. Through apparent theological extrapolations based on Giyorgis' reputation and a reflection on Giyorgis' *die mortis*, a later EOTC tradition gives Giyorgis' birthday and

Chapter 4

The Death of Moses: A Narrative Analysis

Daniel Assefa

Introduction

This chapter explores an ancient Ethiopic text titled *The Death of Moses* (hereafter *DM*), which grapples with the profound difficulty of accepting the death of a great and righteous figure like Moses. How could God allow the passing of a prophet who was granted the unparalleled privilege of seeing Him face to face? Who was present at Moses' death, given that the Book of Deuteronomy neither details how he died nor identifies who buried him? And why did Moses not die like Isaac or Jacob, who were given the opportunity to bless their children before passing? These questions are examined through a narrative analysis of this intriguing and compelling story, following a discussion of the available editions and translations of the Ethiopic text provided by a few scholars.

Background

The Ge'ez text of the Death of Moses was edited by Jacques Faïtlovitch in 1906,[1] based on a single manuscript, with Hebrew translation provided at the bottom of each page. In the same book, a French translation follows the edited Ge'ez text. Ullendorff also produced another edition of DM in 1961,[2] collating one more Ge'ez manuscript, with a new translation in English. Ullendorff's edition has been philologically analyzed by Wurmbrand.[3] Leslau published an English translation of DM, preceded by an introduction and a synopsis.[4] Although a direct *Vorlage* for DM has not been discovered,

[1] J. Faïtlovitch, *Mota Musē (la mort de Moïse) Texte Ethiopien. Traduit en Hébreu et en Français. Annoté et accompagné d'extraits arabes* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1906).

[2] E. Ullendorff, "The 'Death of Moses' in the Literature of the Falashas", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London, 1961, Vol. 24, No. 3 (1961), 419–43.

[3] M. Wurmbrand, "Remarks on the Text of the Falasha 'Death of Moses'": *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies,* University of London, 1962, vol. 25, No. 1/3 (1962), 431–7.

[4] The study of DM in terms of philology does not seem to have attracted the attention of scholars for the last 50 years. Yet, much could be done by taking into consideration more manuscripts for newer editions or the study DM's textual history.

Chapter 5

Maccabean Echoes in Ethiopian and Portuguese Christians' Conflict*

Fantahun Melaku Sisay

Introduction

The impact of Judaism and its literature on the teachings and practices of the Ethiopian Church[1] has been the source of scholarly interest. Hence, tracing the origin of a particular teaching or practice of the Ethiopian Church in Judaism has been an endeavor of Ethiopists and Biblical scholars.[2] Although methodologically, comparing parallel texts, teachings, and practices to identify the textual, cultural, and religious influence of Judaism on Ethiopian Christianity is normative, examining one historical event in Judaism and another historical phenomenon in the history of the Ethiopian Church is not common. The current study attempts to critically and comparatively examine two historical events, the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids in the Second Temple Period (henceforth: STP) and the Ethiopian Christians' resistance against the Jesuits in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and tries to indicate whether the former influenced the latter. In doing this, the study situates the three religious practices observing the Sabbath, practicing circumcision, and abstaining from eating pork—which had a pivotal role during these two conflicts, in

* I gratefully acknowledge Dr. Solomon Gebreyes, Dr. Jan A. Sigvartsen, Dr. Kerstin Maiwald, and Prof. Daniel R. Schwartz for reading the draft and giving me critical comments and suggestions.

[1] In this study, the Ethiopian Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Church all refer to the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church.

[2] Edward Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian (Monophysite) Christianity" *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1 (1956): 216–56; Ernst Hammerschmidt, *Stellung und Bedeutung des Sabbats in Aethiopien* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963); Maxime Rodinson, "Sur la question des 'influences Juives' en Ethiopie" *JSS* 9.1 (1964): 11–19; Hammerschmidt, "Jewish Elements in the Cult of the Ethiopian Church" *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* Vol. 3, No. 2 (July 1965), 1–12; Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 73–130; John T. Pawlikowski, "The Judaic Spirit of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: A Case Study in Religious Acculturation" *Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol. 4, Fasc. 3 (1971–1972), 178–199; Ephraim Isaac, "An Obscure Component in the Ethiopian Church History," *Le Muséon* 85 (1972): 225–58; Kirsten Stoffregen Pedersen, "Is the Church of Ethiopia a Judaic Church?" *WST* 7.2 (1999): 203–216; Afework Hailu, *Jewish Cultural Elements in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church* (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 55, 2020).

Chapter 6

Exploring Selected Oral Literature and Material Culture: Insights into Beta Iseral in Gondar (1632–1667), Ethiopia

Addisie Yalew Mengistu

Introduction

This chapter provides a concise introduction to Emperor Fāsiladas's reign (r.1632–1667) and his architectural accomplishments. By examining oral and written historiographic texts, this chapter emphasizes the significant contributions of the Beta Israel community to the construction projects undertaken in Gondar during Emperor Fāsiladas's rule. The findings indicate that the construction of royal castles and bridges in Gondar during Fāsiladas's reign would have been hardly possible without the contributions of these artisans. Since Gondar's founding in 1636, the Beta Israel have played a crucial role in constructing the Gondrian King's palaces, often referred to as "The Camelot of Africa." Their documented skills in carpentry, masonry, and metalworking, as evidenced by oral accounts and supported by subsequent societal roles, strongly indicate their involvement in various aspects of palace and infrastructure construction. Furthermore, Bağrond Taklu of the Beta Israel was recognized as an architect of Emperor Fāsiladas, alongside Abudul Kerm of the Indian architects. The two critical symbols, namely the Mughal empire of India and the David star of the Ethiopians, carved on the walls of Emperor Fāsiladas's castle reflect the significant contributions of both Indian and Ethiopian architects.

Historical background emperor fāsiladas's time

Emperor Fāsiladas's time (r.1632–67) is considered the longest and one of the most crucial periods in Ethiopian history due to his significant changes in the country.[1] Fāsiladas was a leader who consolidated Gondar as a royal residence.[2]

[1] Emeri Johannes van Donzel, *A Yemenite Embassy to Ethiopia, 1647–1649: Al-Ḥaymī's* Sīrat al-Ḥabaṣha, *Newly Introduced, Translated, and Annotated*, Äthiopistische Forschungen 21 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1986).

[2] George Wynn Brereton Huntingford, *The Historical Geography of Ethiopia: From the First Century AD to 1704*, Ethiopic Spellings Revised by D. Appleyard, ed. Richard Pankhurst, Fontes Historiae Africanae, Series Varia, 4 (Oxford–New York, NY: The Oxford University Press, 1989).

Chapter 7

Contemporary Ethiopian-Israeli Narratives: Apologetics and Resistance

Ran HaCohen

Introduction

This chapter explores contemporary informal narratives emerging among younger Ethiopian-Israelis, shaped by their experiences of discrimination and flawed integration into Israeli society. These narratives, though sometimes based on unverified or exaggerated claims, act as both a critical reaction to the non-Ethiopian ("white") Jewish hegemony in Israel, and a plea for belonging. Rooted more in Israeli realities than in any authentic Beta Israel traditions—largely lost due to generational and cultural gaps—they reflect an identity crisis. Despite limited ties to their ancestral culture, many youths identify as "Ethiopians" within Israel's Jewish majority. The chapter critiques these narratives not to blame their careers, but to highlight the societal failures that necessitated them.

Methodological observations

The popular narratives dealt with here are, above all, uniquely Israeli, and can be understood as a form of resistance[1] to the flawed integration and the discrimination experienced by this group of immigrants. Obviously not all members of the community share these inherently partial, fragmentary narratives, and even those who do may have some skepticism about the veracity of "those things we are told without really knowing if they are true," as one of them told me. Often too recent to be found in formal texts, these narratives stay mostly under the radar, and one must resort to social media to trace them. Nevertheless, they seem to be widespread, persistent, and rather stable among the community.

My perspective is that of an empathic and curious observer, who has been watching the Ethiopian-Israeli community from the outside for almost two decades. My expertise is primarily in textual analysis, rather than in the social sciences. As such, the methodology used in this essay is textual, and no attempt has been made to use in-depth interviews or quantitative tools to analyze the narratives or relate them to

[1] For the concept of resistance (following James C. Scott) in the present context see Steven Kaplan, "Daily Resistance among the Ethiopian Jews" (Hebrew), *Teoria u-Bikoret* 10 (1997): 163–174.

Chapter 8

The Beta Israel: A Brief History, Current Reality, and Identity Politics[1]

Getachew Metaferia

Introduction

Ethiopian Jews were unknown to the outside world until the late 19th century, when European sojourners and explorers encountered them. Then some Europeans wanted to know more about them, while others questioned their authenticity. Their history in Ethiopia, however, is based on oral history and the Ethiopian national epic, the *Kebre Negest*. The Beta Israelis, however, practiced early Judaic religion and persistently prayed for their return to Jerusalem. In Ethiopia, they had a mixed history where they ruled and were also treated as a second class. Nevertheless, they have set their footprints in Ethiopia's long history and political economy. They have also influenced the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, and the vice versa was also true. That history of the amalgamated Judeo-Christianity tradition made the Ethiopian Church unique, and both the Ethiopian Jews and Christians shared some similarities and affinities, unlike in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, they have not lost sight of returning to Jerusalem one day. The prayers of the Beta Israelis were fulfilled when they returned to Jerusalem (Israel) en masse in the 1980s and 1990s. Their return to Israel, however, was acrimonious as they were marginalized and unaccepted by some. That led them to engage in identity politics and rectify who they are, expose their rich culture, and be proud of their that cannot be overlooked, and others must reckon with it.

History and the discovery of a people

The world was made aware of the existence of Black Jews in the northern part of Ethiopia in the eighteenth century. The Scottish explorer, James Bruce, was the first European who came across and "discovered" the Beta Israeli, also known as *Falasha*, at the time. In his book, he gave account of the people and the region.[2] In 1862

[1] This article is part of research the author is conducting. Part of the article appear in other articles by the author.

[2] James Bruce, *Travel to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1768). James Bruce published his travelogue in five volumes that gave account of his travel from 1768 to 1773.