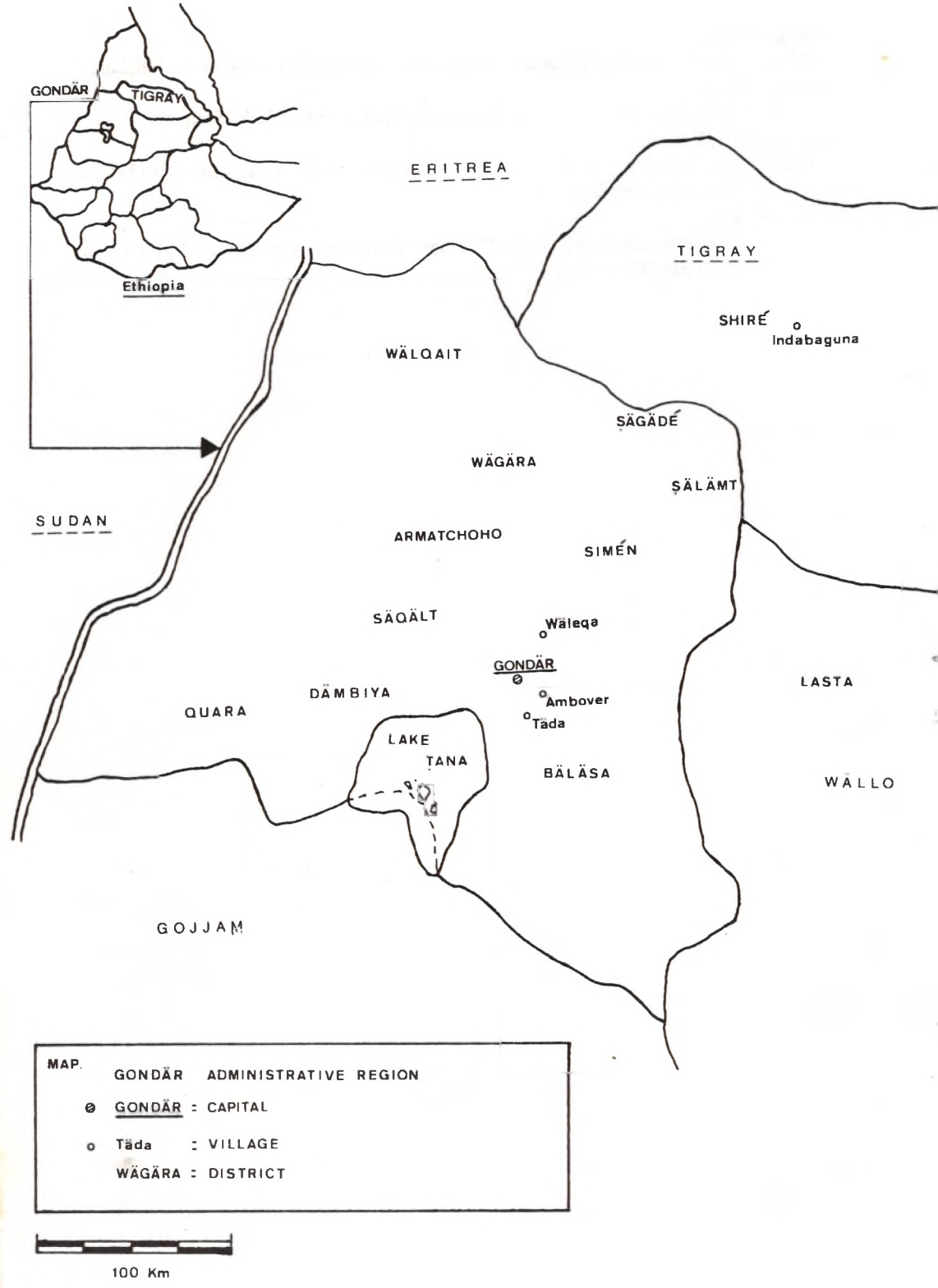

GONDÄR
TIGRAY
Ethiopia
ERITREA
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SUDAN
ARMATCHOHO
SIMÉN
SÄQÄLT
Wäleqa
GONDÄR
LASTA
DÄMBIYA
Ambover
QUARA
Täda
LAKE
TANA
BÄLÄSA
WÄLLO
GOJJAM
MAP.
GONDÄR ADMINISTRATIVE REGION
GONDÄR : CAPITAL
Täda : VILLAGE
WÄGÄRA : DISTRICT
100 Km

THE BETA ISRAEL (FALASHA) IN THE ETHIOPIAN CONTEXT[1] *

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The Ethiopian Jews who call themselves "Beta Israel" must be considered in terms of their Ethiopian background. This paper deals with the relationships between the Ethiopian Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors. The history of cultural contacts and their effects are discussed in some detail. It is concluded that the mutual influence of Jewish and non-Jewish Ethiopian culture has not been given sufficient weight in most writing about the Beta Israel's history.

INTRODUCTION

More than twenty years ago, in his article "Newer Emphases in Jewish History", Salo Baron noted the growing recognition by scholars of Jewish history that their subject could be treated adequately only in the broader context of the countries and nations within which the Jewish communities resided. "Because of their minority status, the fate of the dispersed Jewish communities depended to an even larger extent on the propelling historic forces within the neighboring civilizations or even on some developments within each region or locality" (Baron, 1964:100). Under such circumstances, it is difficult to believe that in the mid 1980's any attempt would be made to describe the life of a Jewish community without placing it in the context of the broader background of local history and culture. Yet, this is certainly the case with the vast majority of recent writings on the Beta Israel of Ethiopia (Kessler, 1982; Rapoport, 1980; Messing, 1982; Kaplan, 1984). To be sure, the reluctance of some authors to examine the Ethiopian features of Beta Israel culture is understandable; for many of them, the prospect of acquiring even a minimal knowledge of Ethiopian history and society must seem overwhelming. Moreover, given the questions that have been and continue to be raised about the Jewishness of the Beta Israel, many writers doubtless feel that the interests of the community are best served by books and articles which focus on their Jewish identity rather than their Ethiopian heritage. Whatever the political or social astuteness of such an evaluation, from a scholarly point of view it foments confusion and misunderstanding.

The purpose of this article is to attempt to clarify some Ethiopian aspects of Beta Israel history and culture. In the first section I attempt to illustrate the manner in which an understanding of Ethiopian history and literature is essential to the proper evaluation of Beta Israel history. In the second section, I have attempted to assemble a variety of comparatively neglected sources in an attempt to demonstrate that descriptions of Ethiopian Jewish history which focus exclusively on the Beta Israel's conflict with and isolation from the dominant Christian culture seriously distort the complexity of their history. In fact, I shall argue that in some cases Beta Israel contacts with their neighbors attained an intimacy unparalleled in Jewish history. Finally, in the third section of this paper I shall attempt to survey the manner in which Beta Israel literature bears witness to their deep ties with Ethiopian Christian culture.

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ETHIOPIAN HISTORY AND LITERATURE

We begin our discussion with a few comments concerning the Biblical-Hebraic characteristics of Ethiopian Christian culture. From earliest times until the modern period, visitors have commented on the strongly Old Testament flavor of Ethiopian society. Job Ludolf, the founder of Ethiopian studies in Europe, was only the first of a long line of Ethiopicists to consider the phenomenon and its implications. It is certainly not our intention to embark on a detailed discussion of this issue in this article. Nevertheless, at least one feature of the Ethiopian *imitatio Judaerum et Veteris Testamenti* must be considered by anyone interested in studying and writing the history of the Beta Israel (Ullendorff, 1968), namely, the Ethiopian usage of the terms *'ayhud* (Jews) and *isra'elawi* (Israelite).

The Beta Israel are popularly referred to as "Ethiopian Jews". In fact, the Hebrew translation of this term – *yehudé itiyopya* – has in recent years become the form of address most preferred by the community. This phraseology notwithstanding, it must be noted that the usage of the term *'ayhud* in Ge'ez (Ethiopic) sources is far more ambiguous than one might initially suspect. In *Gadla Gabra Masih*, a 16th century hagiographic work, one of the protagonists is referred to as both an *'ayhud* and a *falasi*, and accordingly his religious-ethnic identity is not in doubt (Kaplan, 1985). In a number of other texts, however, we find references to people "like Jews" (Perruchon, 1899:293) or "sons of Jews" (Conti Rossini, 1938:446) or who observe the religion (Conti Rossini, 1930:571) or law of the Jews (Conti Rossini, 1910:105). In these instances, it is only additional details from the episode in question, and in particular the geographic setting of the events, which enable us to identify these Jews as "Beta Israel" with reasonable certainty. We must exercise caution in such identifications because, in the Ethiopian context, the term *'ayhud* possesses a wide range of meanings. It refers not only to the Beta Israel, but also to foreign Jews of various times and locales and, perhaps most commonly, to Christian heretics and rebels. The writings of the 15th century emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob are, for example, replete with references to and especially denunciations of such "Jews." In the *Tomara Tasba't*, the King threatens a man who consults magicians: "If you are a priest, your priesthood shall be stripped of you; and if you are a [lay] Christian, you shall be called a Jew..." (Getatchew, 1980: 217). The *Mshafa Berhan* writes concerning the monastic movement founded by Abba Estifanos: "These children of Estifanos are actually Jews, they refuse to bow to the twice Virgin Mary and to the cross of her only Son" (Conti Rossini, 1964/5:48). Numerous other examples could be given, and accordingly extreme caution must be exercised in identifying any group of "Jews" with the Beta Israel.

A similar situation exists with regard to the term *isra'elawi* (Israelite). Given the present state of our knowledge, it is impossible to state with any certainty when Ethiopian Jewry first began to refer to themselves as "Beta Israel".[2] What is abundantly clear is that the Beta Israel were only one of several groups on the Ethiopian plateau to claim Israelite descent. According to the Ethiopian national legend, *Kebra Nagast*, the royal "Solomonic" family, the priests, and the nobles were all descendants of and heirs to the children of Israel (Bezold, 1905). Accordingly, it is not surprising to find that the term *isra'elawi* appears in Christian texts not as a description of the Beta Israel, but rather as a designation for the Solomonic Kings.

"And on the seventh day of the month Hamle, God brought back the kingdom from the tribe of Hepese to Yakunno Amlak, the Israelite" (Budge, 1905:29).

Yakunno Amlak was, in fact, the first king of the "restored" Solomonic dynasty.

We therefore conclude that even the most elementary of the historian's tasks – determining which documents are relevant to his research – can only be done properly if the complexity and ambiguity of the Ethiopian terms *'ayhud* and *Isra'elawi* are recognized.

The violent conflicts between the Beta Israel and the armies of the Christian Kingdom which characterized much of the period from the 13th to the 17th century are another aspect of Beta Israel history which can only be properly understood against the general background of Ethiopian history. Experts are generally agreed that the major theme in Ethiopian history is the struggle by the central authorities of both Church and State to limit local autonomy (Abir, 1980:43). While the kings and bishops sought to centralize the administration of the empire, local chiefs and religious leaders fought to retain as much independence as possible. Modern day "liberation movements" in Eritrea, Tigrai, and the Ogaden are only the most recent manifestations of this age-old struggle between center and periphery (Sherman, 1979:37-48). Under these circumstances, it is certainly an error to view the Beta Israel as having been consistently singled out for special persecution. For example, during the reign of Amda Seyon, the king was far more concerned with subduing rebel Christians and defeating neighboring Muslim states than with the subjugation of the Beta Israel (Perruchon, 1899; Taddesse, 1972). Even if we accept Bruce's supplement to the contemporary Ge'ez Chronicles, the conflicts with the Beta Israel appear as relatively minor episodes from the perspective of this Christian king (Bruce, 1805(3):56). In a similar fashion, however important the uprising of the Beta Israel in the late 14th century may have been from the perspective of the community and the region around Lake Tana, the reigning monarch, Dawit, did not even feel that the situation demanded his personal attention. Rather than taking the battlefield himself, he sent troops from Tigrai to defeat the rebels (Conti Rossini, 20:567-572).

Even later rulers such as Yeshaq, Sarsa Dengel and Susenyos, who personally devoted considerable time and energy to the defeat of the Beta Israel, appear to have been motivated as much by political and economic considerations as by any specific religious-based animosity towards the community. According to the Ethiopian sources, Yeshaq's ruthless campaign against the Beta Israel in the early 15th century began not as a religious crusade, but rather as an expedition designed to punish a recalcitrant vassal (Taddesse, 1972:200). Following his victory, a large part of the local Beta Israel community were apparently denied the right to own land unless they accepted Christianity.[3] Yet at the same time, loyal Beta Israel leaders who had aided the king were rewarded with grants of land and excluded from any attempt at religious coercion (Taddesse, 1972:200). Like most of his predecessors and descendants, Yeshaq valued political loyalty far more than religious conformity.

Similar considerations appear to have been behind the sixteenth century ruler Sarsa Dengel's famous war against the Beta Israel. According to the Ge'ez Chronicle, the king's initial plans to make war against the Galla (Oromo) were deferred when the Beta Israel leader Radai refused to submit tribute (Conti Rossini, 1907:84). There appears to be no reason to doubt this testimony. Moreover, when the lengthy and detailed account of the war is read in the context of Sarsa Dengel's entire career, and not on the basis of Halévy's *extract* alone, the king no longer appears as an anti-semitic fanatic who devoted his life to the extermination of the Jews.[4]

The history of the Beta Israel, with its periodic defeats and rebellions, is one example of a pattern which occurred throughout the Ethiopian highlands. As the Solomonic kings expanded the area under their control, they confronted and defeated previously independent Christians, Muslims, pagans and Beta Israel. Even when the forces that met on the battlefield professed different faiths, religion played only a relatively minor role in provoking the clashes. Sporadic attempts were made to convert the defeated Beta Israel (or Muslims and pagans) to Christianity (Kaplan, 1984:ch.5; Baratti, 1670:108-109; Peiser, 1898:34). Various signs of political subservience, most notably the obligation to pay tribute, were imposed upon the subject peoples. The strongest Christian rulers had little trouble maintaining control of their vassals. However, the moment the conquered people sensed a weakening of royal power, they were ready to rise in rebellion.

RELATIONS BETWEEN BETA ISRAEL AND THEIR NEIGHBORS

Despite the importance of wars and rebellions in the history of Ethiopian Jewry, it would be a significant error to ignore other aspects of their history. Modern scholars of Beta Israel history have, in fact, almost always focused exclusively upon the themes of military conflict and systematic oppression. The Jews of Ethiopia are, on the one hand, celebrated as the last remaining independent Jewish kingdom and glorified for their courage in battle, and on the other hand they are mourned for their centuries of isolation and suffering at the hands of their dominant Christian neighbors. Both emphases tend to oversimplify a complex problem and confuse our understanding of the Beta Israel and their history. As we shall demonstrate below, wars and oppression represent only one aspect of the Beta Israel's complicated relationship with Christian Ethiopia. In fact, a careful examination of the sources reveals a long history of symbioses and mutual influences which had a crucial effect on the evolution of Beta Israel culture.

One reason for the tendency to accentuate only the "negative side" of Ethiopian Jewish history would appear to be the emphasis given to the royal chronicles as sources and the virtual neglect of other sources. The chronicles which document the military and administrative achievements of successive rulers naturally tend to highlight the battles with and exploitation of subject peoples, including the Beta Israel. The *gadlat* (sing. *gadli*), hagiographic accounts of Ethiopia's monastic holy men, offer a valuable supplement and corrective to this exclusively conflict-oriented model of their history (Kaplan, 1981:107-123; Baron, 1983:596 n.8).

Perhaps the best known hagiographic account relevant to Beta Israel history appears in the *Life* of the 14th century Ethiopian saint, Abba Yafqarana Egzi (Conti Rossini, 1920:567-572). According to this text, during the period between 1380 and 1388 the Jews of Samen and Salamt came under the influence of a Christian monk and ascetic named Qozmos, who eventually led them in battle against the Christians of Enfraz. The Christian clergy appear to have been the particular victims of this attack, which was finally suppressed by troops under the leadership of the governor of Tigre province. While it must be acknowledged that this episode gives further support to the view of Beta Israel history as a succession of military conflicts, several points indicate that the situation is more complex than one might initially expect. First, the Beta Israel's acceptance of a Christian monk's leadership is certainly startling in light of the

prevailing view of the Christian clergy as the mortal enemies of Ethiopian Jews. While the text's claim that the Beta Israel viewed Qozmos as a messianic figure must be treated with some caution, the statement that both his literacy and his alleged capacity to heal drew them to him is eminently plausible.

> "And they said to him, 'Are you able to write?' And he said to them, 'Yes'. And they brought him honey and milk and he wrote the *Orit* for them. And they gave him water over which he prayed a prayer and they sprinkled it and their sick were healed. And these treacherous people spoke to each other saying 'Is it possibly the one about whom the prophets spoke: "A man from the east will come, the Son of God?" ' And they all said, 'Truly this is he...' " (Conti Rossini, 1920:571).

A similarly complex picture emerged from the examination of an episode in the life of the 15th century saint Abba Takla Hawaryat (Conti Rossini, 1910:103-109). According to this text, Takla Hawaryat's first meeting with the Beta Israel occurred when he encountered an army led by the governor of Salamt. At first glance the episode appears to be totally in keeping with prevailing concepts of Ethiopian Jewish history. However, when one discovers that the troops led by the Beta Israel leader included both Jews and Christians it becomes clear that a significant re-evaluation of Christian/Beta Israel interaction is demanded.

The *Acta Sancti Takla Hawaryat* also serves as a warning against the temptation to assume that the Beta Israel were always united in their attitude towards Christians and Christianity. Although the Beta Israel religious leadership appears to have been united in its initial hostility to the Chistian holy man Takla Hawaryat, the local aristocracy presented no such united front. While the governor of the region is claimed to have welcomed the monk's advent, one of his relatives is depicted as aggressively hostile: "And one day Walda Qabantay, an insolent man of the family of the ruler of Salamt, came and entered by force the house of a priest... And Takla Hawaryat sent to him saying 'Don't do this and don't harm the priests'. But when the messengers arrived he did not let them in" (Conti Rossini, 1910:105).

A similar picture of Beta Israel disunity also emerges in an as yet unpublished manuscript of the *Tarika Nagast* (History of Kings) (Taddesse, 1972:200). According to this text, during the reign of Yeshaq (1413-40) the Beta Israel of Semen and part of Dambya were ruled by a leader named Bet-Ajer. When he refused to pay tribute to the king a number of Beta Israel chiefs, including his own nephew, united with Yeshaq to quash his rebellion. For their loyalty they were rewarded with grants of land. If Beta Israel leaders were willing to join with the Ethiopian Christian king against one of their own people, it is scarcely surprising that at least some Beta Israel were such loyal subjects that they initially resisted the Muslim invasion of Ethiopia and fought in support of the Christian kingdom (Bassett, 1897/1901:456-9). Even if we remain skeptical with regard to the report of a Portuguese traveller that the Ethiopian king eventually sought sanctuary among the Beta Israel (Kammerer, 1937:319), there appears to be ample evidence that the relationship between the Beta Israel and the Christian kingdom was far less one-sided than has previously been acknowledged.

Before leaving the hagiographic sources for other fields, one additional text must be examined. According to the *Life* of the 16th century saint Abba Gabra Masih, this holy man was rescued from starvation by a friendly Beta Israel (Kaplan, 1985). Having fled into the desert to escape Christian persecutors who viewed him as a heretic, Gabra

Masih had almost perished when a "Falasha" or "'ayhud" found him and nursed him back to health. The saint recovered, and he departed to rejoin his Christian brethren. Once again, the willingness of the Beta Israel to assist or form alliances with dissident Christians asserts itself.

One criticism which can be raised with regard to most of the sources we have cited up to this point is that they are the product of Ethiopian Christian, especially monastic, authors. To what extent do they reflect a uniquely monastic view of the Beta Israel and of their Christian contacts?[5] While it must be admitted that there may be some truth to this claim, it cannot be taken as a sufficient explanation of the picture which emerges from the text. Moreover, the theme of Beta Israel-Christian Ethiopian interaction appears in a number of other sources which did not originate in monastic circles and are therefore a valuable supplement to them.

Giacomo Baratti was an Italian traveller who visited Ethiopia around the year 1655. His vivid narrative describing the government, languages, religion, and customs of the country is especially valuable, since it represents our only external source for the period immediately following the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1634. His description of the Beta Israel of Tigre Province is decidedly pessimistic (from a Jewish perspective) since he attributes their decline to peaceful assimilation rather than to violent persecution:

> "In this Kingdom of the governor of Tegre that is the largest and the best belonging to the Neguz (King), great numbers of Jews are dispersed. The Christians treat them with much civility, they suffer them to trade amongst them, to reap the fruit of the earth, to enjoy the liberty of their Religion, by that means great numbers have embraced that profession that did teach love and kindness to strangers, hoping to meet with greater advantages when they should become brothers, for there is no invitation more powerful upon the spirits of a man to oblige him to imitate himself in Religion than a sincere affection expressed by the expressors of it." (Baratti, 1670:108-109)

Slightly more than a century later, James Bruce reported: "The only copy of the Old Testament, which they (the Beta Israel) have, is the translation in Geez, the same made use of by the Abyssinian Christians, who are the only scribes, and *they sell these copies to the Falasha Jews; and no controversy, or dispute about the text, has ever yet arisen between the professors of the two religions.*" (Bruce, 1805(2):409; emphasis added). In fact, the 19th century French explorer Antoine d'Abbadie noted that Christian scholars of Biblical commentary received instruction concerning the traditional interpretation of the book of Ezekiel from a Beta Israel teacher named Yeshaq, because the Christian commentary on this book had been lost (Aescoly, 1961:101). Later in the same century the missionary James Flad (1869:32) observed that Beta Israel *dabtara* (non-ordained clergy) studied in Christian religious schools. Even the Beta Israel themselves acknowledge that peaceful interaction with Christians did take place at some points in their history, through the traditions which connect the development of Beta Israel monasticism with the figures of Abba Sabra and the Christian Prince Tsega Amlak (Qirin, 1977:62-63).

We therefore conclude that the hitherto dominant conflict image of Ethiopian Jewish history – whether emphasizing the courageous warrior or the beleagured martyr – has failed to do justice to the complex history of Beta Israel-Christian interaction in

Ethiopia. In making this statement it is certainly not our intention to either deny or belittle the suffering endured by this community throughout its long history. The struggles and travails of Ethiopian Jewry have been richly documented and have had a crucial influence on determining the community's self image. Nevertheless, it is our contention that any work which focuses exclusively on this aspect of Beta Israel history distorts the historical facts and engages in a denial of the important cultural exchange which took place between the Beta Israel and the peoples among whom they lived. While the Beta Israel may have been isolated from their Jewish co-religionists throughout the world they were separated by neither great distances nor dramatic cultural differences from their Ethiopian neighbors. Indeed, Beta Israel culture, as it has reached us today, can only be understood adequately if it is evaluated in the context of the general Ethiopian milieu.

BETA ISRAEL AND THE ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIAN CULTURE

In the previous section we examined sources which testify to the interaction of Beta Israel and Christians in situations other than those of war or oppression. We now turn our attention to one product of this interaction: the rich body of literature, which represents the common cultural heritage of Ethiopian Jews and Christians. Historians bound to the conflict model of Beta Israel history have, for obvious reasons, generally ignored this topic which is at odds with their preoccupations. In fact, as we shall demonstrate below, the evidence of cultural interchange which emerges from the examination of these elements is so abundant as to lead us to believe that Beta Israel-Christian contacts were far more common than even the sources cited above would seem to indicate.

The examination of this evidence must be prefaced by a number of comments. First, the fact that the Beta Israel share a common literary heritage with their neighbors should in no way be understood as a contradiction of their claim to Jewish identity. Ethiopian Jews, like Jews throughout the world, participated in the wider national culture in which they lived. The Beta Israel's utilization of pan-Ethiopian symbols and themes to express their particular faith is comparable to the behavior of other communities in other parts of the world. Attempts to minimize or deny this feature of Beta Israel history, which have almost always stemmed from the fear that a balanced presentation might create doubts about the Beta Israel's Jewishness, have served primarily to create confusion and have served neither the community nor scholarship. Secondly, in considering the common elements of Ethiopian Jewish and Christian culture, no attempt has been made to rehash the complex problem of the Hebraic-Biblical molding of Ethiopian culture. While this theme is, as we have noted earlier, of considerable importance for a proper understanding of the cultural context in which the Beta Israel lived (and would on the whole tend to confirm our general thesis), it would be methodologically unsound to base our case on works which merely prove a knowledge of Biblical and post-Biblical sources. In the evidence presented below we rely exclusively on those cases in which a link between Ethiopian Christianity and Judaism can be established, and the possibility of an ancient source independently influencing both groups can be reasonably eliminated. Finally, it should be noted that no *systematic* attempt will be made to determine in which sector a particular literary work originated. While in some cases, especially those indicating Christian influence on the Beta Israel, the answer to this issue is clearcut, in others the issue of provenance is

clouded and open to controversy. What must be stressed is that, *for the purposes of our argument*, the direction in which cultural influences flowed is only of minor consequence. Whether a given prayer originated in the Beta Israel community or the Christian community, its existence in both would seem to indicate that the Beta Israel were less isolated from their neighbors than is commonly recognized. Whether the Christians borrowed from the Beta Israel or the Beta Israel borrowed from the Christians, the two groups forged links which gained expression through a wide range of shared cultural elements.

In his introduction to the *Falasha Anthology*, Professor Wolf Leslau wrote: "Judging from the texts here the influence of Christianity upon Abyssinian Judaism was considerable. But it is also apparent that this Judaism had considerable influence on Abyssinian Christianity as well. It will be one of the tasks of the future in this hitherto neglected field of study to trace and evaluate these relationships" (Leslau, 1951: xxxvii).

Unfortunately, despite the groundwork of Halévy, Conti Rossini, Aešcoly, and in more recent years Leslau and Wurmbrand, the challenge set forth by Leslau over thirty years ago has yet to be taken up in a systematic fashion. Several Beta Israel literary sources remain unpublished, while only a few have been the subject of comprehensive, in-depth study. However, even on the basis of this incomplete evidence there appears to be no reason to dissent from Ullendorff's statement that "Falasha literature forms an integral part of the literary tradition of Ethiopia, both in its themes and in the manner of their treatment" (Ullendorff, 1968:118).

We begin our examination of Beta Israel literature with the consideration of a few relatively straightforward examples. In his famous article, "Appunti de Storia e Letteratura Falascia", Conti Rossini (1920) published a magical prayer found in the *Carnet de Voyage* of Antoine d'Abbandie. Conti Rossini, who had a generally low opinion of the originality of Beta Israel literature, nevertheless had no doubts regarding the Beta Israel origins of this particular prayer, and this despite a mention of the Holy Spirit in Verse 2 of the prayer and of Galawdewos (Claudius) in Verse 9. In fact, as Stefan Strelcyn later demonstrated, this is not an example of a Jewish prayer "mais d'un texte chrétien emprunté par les falachas" (1949:69). A similarly unambiguous picture emerges from an examination of the "Falasha" magic texts in the various collections of the Bibliotheque Nationale. Ms. 107 of the *Fonds* d'Abbadie, large parts of which were published in Aešcoly's important *Recueil de textes falachas* (1951), contains a prayer against sicknesses of eye and head which refers to Saint Cyprien. Éth, 183, a brief magical scroll, contains a prayer which begins with the Beta Israel formula "Blessed be God, the Lord of Israel", but concludes with the Christian formula, "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost".[6] Éth 418 (Gr. 418) is made up primarily of prayers preceded by the Beta Israel formula, but also includes the Christian prayer *Hasura Masqal* ("Rampart of the Cross"). In Éth 420 (Gr. 112), the Christian formula predominates, but the Beta Israel heading appears in two places. Éth 479 (Gr. 171) contains the legend of St. Susneyos and *Hasura Masqal* with the latter preceded by a Beta Israel preface. In Éth 504 (Gr. 196), the Legend of Susneyos is introduced with a Beta Israel formula. Éth 544 (Gr. 236) includes passages from the Gospel of St. John.

Turning to a few of the more substantial pieces of Beta Israel literature, we begin our survey with a consideration of the *Book of Baruch. Baruch* is one of the few works

for which we have both a Beta Israel and a Christian Ethiopian version, and we are therefore able to make a direct comparison between the two versions. All authorities are in agreement that the Beta Israel text is dependent upon an earlier Christian version and that despite an attempt to expurgate specifically Christian references, the text retains certain Christian elements (Leslau, 1951:62; Aeščoly, 1943:113). Thus, for example, the Emperors Constantine and Theodosius are recalled, the veneration of Sunday and the Cross are mentioned, and the Holy Spirit appears at several points (Leslau, 1951:67,73,75).

Although no Christian text of "The Death of Aaron" has yet been discovered, there can be no doubt that the Beta Israel version was adapted from a Christian composition (Wurmbrand, 1963b:13). Syriac and Arabic Christian versions of the work are extant, and the Beta Israel scribes have only partially succeeded in suppressing material of a Christian character. One manuscript, for example, still attributes the work to "the Blessed and Holy Father Jacob of Serugh" and includes oblique references to Jesus (Wurmbrand, 1963b:14-15,29). (A later manuscript reveals a far more sophisticated and comprehensive revision.) According to Wurmbrand, the Syriac original was probably translated into Arabic, and the Arabic into Ethiopic (1963b:15). The absence of a Christian version may be merely accidental or may indicate that the work was eventually abandoned by the Church.

The determination of the provenance of the work known as *Abba Elijah* is a far more complex problem. Although no Christian version of the text has been found, the Beta Israel version contains a number of citations from the New Testament, as well as a mention of the spirit Lagewon (Legion) (Leslau, 1951:43,47-48,157 n.23 and 24, 158 n. 81 and 84). On the basis of this evidence, Halévy (1902) concluded that the Beta Israel text represented an edited version of an originally Christian work. Aeščoly disagreed and suggested that *Abba Elijah* is a Jewish midrash which reached the Beta Israel through the Christians (1943:106). Leslau offered a third perspective stating that "*Abba Elijah* is an original Falasha writing in which some Christian elements were introduced *due to the intimate relationship between the Falasha and Christian literatures* (1951:42; emphasis added). From the point of view of this paper, the vital point would appear to be not which of the three suggestions is correct, but rather that all three presume a cultural interchange between the Beta Israel and their neighbors at some stage.

The situation with regard to the origin of the Ethiopic *Testament of Abraham* is, if anything, more complex than that with regards to *Abba Elijah*. Although both Christian Ethiopic and Beta Israel versions of the work exist and are read by the respective communities to commemorate the death of Abraham, the two differ to such an extent that it is difficult to believe that one is a direct translation of the other. The Beta Israel version is certainly based upon an Arabic Christian text, for it even preserves an introduction which attributes the book to "the holy Atenewas the patriarch of Alexandria, the servant of the only God" (Leslau, 1951:96). Whether it was translated directly from the Arabic, as is claimed by Aeščoly (1943:98; 1951:27,50-77), or through the mediation of a Christian Ethiopic text, as suggested by Leslau, is difficult to determine (1951:95-96). In either case, "cet ouvrage nous confirme une fois deplus l'interpénétration assez prouvée du judaisme et du christianisme en Abyssine" (Aeščoly, 1951:27).

No discussion of Beta Israel literature or its place in the general corpus of Ethiopian literature would be complete without a discussion of the best known of Beta Israel

literary works, *Te'ezaza Sanbat* (The Commandments of the Sabbath). As the title indicates, the book is a collection of laws on the Sabbath, which is also depicted as a heavenly queen and mediator. Legends on Creation, the Garden of Eden, Abraham, Noah, Moses and others are also included. To the best of our knowledge, no scholar has ever challenged the Beta Israel origins of this work (Halévy, 1902:1-40, 133-164; Leslau, 1951:3-39; Aescoly, 1943:92-97, 1940). Wurmbrand, however, appears to have been the first to attempt to place the work in its wider Ethiopian context. In a lengthy article published in 1963, he offered a detailed comparison between *Te'ezaza Sanbat* and the Christian *Dersana Sanbat* (Sermon on the Sabbath), which is attributed to Jacob of Sarugh. In this case, and despite his verdict with regard to the *Death of Aaron*, which is also attributed to the Syrian saint, Wurmbrand argues that the Christian work has made use of the Beta Israel composition (1963a).

Although further examples of Christian Ethiopian Beta Israel symbioses in the literary sphere could be presented, the examples we have discussed are sufficient to demonstrate the intimate connections between the two bodies of literature. In fact, little doubt can remain that Beta Israel literature, as well as many other aspects of Ethiopian Jewish culture (Shelemay, 1978; 1980a, 1980b; 1982), can only be properly evaluated by scholars familiar with the general background of Ethiopian history, literature and religion. The study of Ethiopian Jewry in the Ethiopian context is, as we have already noted, in no way a denial of their place within world Jewry or Jewish history. Rather, it represents an attempt to reach an accurate understanding of their history and heritage by applying the principles which are relevant to the study of Jewish history elsewhere in the world.

FOOTNOTES

[1] I have throughout the paper used the terms Ethiopian Jewry and Beta Israel interchangeably. As I have noted elsewhere (Kaplan, 1985b), and discuss *infra*, the terms themselves, including the term Falasha, present certain historical problems.

[2] The 6th century emperor Kaleb had a son named Beta Israel. The term first appears with reference to the "Falasha" no earlier than the 15th century.

[3] "He who is baptized in the Christian religion may inherit the land of his father; otherwise let him be a Falasi". The Ge'ez manuscript of this important source which is found in Ethiopia is unfortunately unpublished.

[4] Neither Kessler nor Rapoport appear to have made use of the full chronicle. For a balanced treatment of Sarsa Dengel and an invaluable discussion of Beta Israel history which avoids most of the errors of emphasis noted here see Quirin (1977).

[5] It should, of course, also be noted that most of the episodes cited above concern alliances between Ethiopian Jews and rebel Christians.

[6] On this and the other manuscripts listed below see Strelcyn (1955:xiii, n.2).

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