

The Invention of Ethiopian Jews : Three Models.

Monsieur Steven Kaplan

Résumé

S. Kaplan — Trois approches de l'« invention » des Juifs éthiopiens.

Dans la première partie de cet article, on distingue trois approches de l'identité des Beta Israël (Falasha). L'auteur procède tout d'abord à une synthèse des analyses historiques et anthropologiques récentes concernant les Beta Israël, analyses qui ont été fortement influencées par les études éthiopiennes et, de façon générale, par les études africanistes. Ensuite est abordée la manière dont les Beta Israël sont décrits dans les sources juives et israéliennes. Enfin, en examinant leurs mythes d'origine et les noms qu'ils utilisent, l'auteur analyse la façon dont les Beta Israël eux-mêmes tentent de redéfinir leur propre image. Dans la deuxième partie, on aborde le problème de la dynamique interne de ces différents modèles et le rapport qu'ils entretiennent. On essaie, en particulier, d'évaluer l'impact des changements récents subis par les Beta Israël, par exemple la transformation de la perception que les autres ont de cette population mais aussi l'émergence de nouveaux rapports entre les différents modèles.

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The Invention of Ethiopian Jews: Three Models*

In an era of dramatic changes for ethnic groups and nations, few peoples have been as completely transformed as the Beta Israel (Falasha).¹ Prior to 1977 all but a handful of Beta Israel lived in Ethiopia. During the 1980s almost half of them came on *aliyah* (immigration to Israel), and the center of Beta Israel life shifted from Ethiopia to Israel. In 1991 "Operation Solomon" put an end to the Beta Israel as an active and living Ethiopian community, and by the end of 1992 virtually all Beta Israel were in Israel.

The changes undergone by the Beta Israel have not been limited, however, to their physical relocation. The past decade and a half has also seen a radical redefinition of both their self-identity and the way in which they are depicted by outsiders.

The purpose of the first part of this paper is to consider three perspectives on Beta Israel identity. It begins with a summary of recent historical-anthropological opinions on the Beta Israel that are heavily influenced by African and, in particular, Ethiopian studies. It then considers the manner in which the Beta Israel are portrayed in Jewish and Israeli sources. Finally, through an examination of their stories of origin and the names they use, it explores the way in which the Beta Israel themselves are redefining their self-image.

In the second part of this paper, the dynamics of and the relationships be-

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1. As we shall discuss in some detail, each of the names used to designate the Beta Israel has its own history. In Ethiopia, the members of the group usually referred to themselves as Beta Israel ("The House of Israel") or simply Israel. They were more widely known as Falasha. Today, they prefer to be called Ethiopian Jews. Ethiopian names and words have been transcribed as in KAPLAN 1992. For simplicity sake, however, Falasha has been rendered as Falasha, and Beta Esra'el as Beta Israel.

tween the different models² will be considered. In particular, an attempt will be made to understand the manner in which recent events are reflected not only in a transformation of the way in which they are perceived, but also in the development of new linkages between the different models.

The Beta Israel in their Ethiopian Context

We begin our examination of Beta Israel identity with the consideration of recent scholarly views of their history and culture. We take these as our starting point not because of their inherent superiority as a description of the group, but because they are little known outside academic circles and form an interesting contrast to both other viewpoints. This examination serves, therefore, as a useful foil to what follows.

Until quite recently, virtually all attempts to explain the origins of the Beta Israel have had a number of characteristics in common. First, they have been essentially diffusionist in character. In other words, the presence in Ethiopia of a seemingly recognizable Jewish ethnic group has been explained primarily as the result of contact with members of one or another ancient Jewish community. The Beta Israel, it has been claimed, are the descendants either directly or indirectly of Jews from Solomonic Israel, the lost tribe of Dan, a Jewish military colony in Upper Egypt, or missionaries from Yemen.³ Second (and here the voices of the scholars prior to the 1970s would appear to have been even closer to unanimity), the history of Judaism and Christianity in Ethiopia has been portrayed as the recapitulation in miniature of the history of these two faiths in the world at large: a small early Jewish population is said to have been superseded by a later Christian community with only a tiny remnant of Jews surviving. The Beta Israel, it has been claimed, are essentially a fossilized survival from pre-Christian Aksum.⁴

Recent research carried out by scholars with an African-Ethiopianist background has painted a radically different and far more complex picture of the two faiths in Ethiopia.⁵ Indeed, it bears little resemblance to that of the two religions elsewhere in the world.

While there is clear evidence of Jewish influences on Ethiopian culture during the first centuries of the Common Era, these were not so much supplanted

2. I have used the term model rather than theory in this paper in order to do justice to the diversity of views contained within a single category. Holders of shared model frequently differ among themselves with regard to details of Ethiopian Jewish history and identity. As we shall demonstrate below, however, they share common assumptions and guiding principles.

3. For a useful recent survey of the vast literature on this subject, see TREVISAN SEMI 1987: 25-40. I have considered these theories in some detail in KAPLAN 1992: chap. 1, 13-32.

4. For a survey of scholars offering this view, see KAPLAN 1988: 53-55. Professor E. Ullendorff has recently informed me that he has abandoned this view (Personal communication, July 1991).

5. On the relationship between Semitic studies scholars and Africanists in Ethiopian studies, and for an invaluable survey of recent research in the field, see CRUMMEY 1990.

by Christianity as absorbed into it. Thus an Israelite self-identity, the Saturday Sabbath, circumcision, Biblical dietary laws, and a three-fold division of houses of worship in imitation of the Temple in Jerusalem all became core elements of the dominant Christian culture (Ullendorff 1956, Hammerschmidt 1965, Getatchew Haile 1988).

Moreover, while there was almost certainly a portion of the population that remained faithful to a more Judaized form of religion following the arrival of Christianity, it would be a tremendous simplification to identify the Beta Israel as their descendants or to depict Beta Israel religion as merely an archaic reminder of this early period. Assimilation, intermarriage, acculturation, and major religious upheavals all played a part in the emergence of the Beta Israel.

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.⁶ During this period a number of inchoate groups of *ayhud*⁷ 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. The rise of the so-called Solomonic dynasty in the last decades of the thirteenth century and its subsequent expansion throughout the Ethiopian highlands placed the *ayhud* of the Lake Tana region (as well as many other hitherto autonomous groups) under unprecedented pressure.⁸ 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. While some doubtless identified themselves with the dominant Christian landholders, others either departed for peripheral areas where competition for land was limited, or accepted the reduced status of tenant farmers. In both the latter cases, 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 (Quirin 1992: 40-88).

At the same time, revolutionary changes in their religious ideology, practice and institutions resulted in the development of a far more clearly defined and articulated religious system. Both the Beta Israel's oral traditions and the testimony of their literature offer strong evidence that crucial components in their religious system developed no earlier than the fourteenth or fifteenth century. Beta Israel accounts of their history trace virtually all major elements of their religion to the influence of the originally Christian monks, Abba Sabra and Šagga Amlak. Monasticism, purity laws, holidays, literary works, and the prayer liturgy are just a few of the features credited to these culture

6. KAPLAN 1992, ABBINK 1984: 69-71, 1990, 1991; KREMPPEL 1972, SHELEMAY 1986, TADDESSE TAMRAT 1991, QUIRIN 1992.

7. *Ayhud* literally means "Jews", but is generally used to refer to Christian heretics and other political or religious deviants. See the discussion in this term below.

8. For a masterful survey of this period, see TADDESSE TAMRAT 1972.

heroes.⁹ While doubtless a somewhat idealized and condensed view of their role, it finds support in other sources (Kaplan 1990a: 53-78).

With regard to the Beta Israel's *corpus* of sacred books, the majority can be shown to have reached them through the Ethiopian Church and to have been translated into Ge'ez from Arabic (Kaplan 1990a). Since translation from Arabic only became common in Ethiopia from the fourteenth century onward, none of these books can have reached the Beta Israel earlier than this period. At least one, *Naggara Musē* ("The Conversation of Moses"), was translated as late as the eighteenth century.¹⁰

Moreover, given the liturgical use of a number of these books including the *Arde'et* ("The Book of the Disciples"), *Mota Musē* ("The Death of Moses"), and the *Testaments* of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, several important rituals can be demonstrated to have acquired their current form only after these books came into the possession of the Beta Israel. Although their religious system and communal identity continued to change and adapt throughout their history, it is to this crucial period in the fourteenth and fifteenth century (and not to an alleged ancient link with an external Jewish group) that we must look if we are to begin to solve the riddle of the identity and origins of the Beta Israel. Indeed, as we shall discuss in some detail below, it is only toward the end of this period that they acquire the distinctive name *Falasha*, which they were to carry with them during so much of their subsequent history.

For many readers the preceding section's description of the Beta Israel may come as a surprise. Outside of Ethiopianist circles, such opinions have had surprisingly little impact. Within academic circles, however, this view of the Beta Israel is gradually assuming a dominant position.¹¹ Indeed, it is difficult to think of any field in which the gap separating scholarly and popular views is greater or has grown more so over the past two decades.

The Beta Israel in Jewish-Israeli Discourse

Unlike the scholarly opinions summarized above, the popular Jewish-Israeli view of the Beta Israel is not of recent origin. Some of its elements can be traced back as early as the Middle Ages and the first Hebrew reports about Jews "beyond the rivers of Kush".¹² However, it is only with the arrival in Ethiopia of Jacques Faitlovitch in 1904 that the Jewish (and later Israeli) view of the Beta Israel can be said to have crystallized.

9. QUIRIN 1992: 65-72; SHELEMAY 1986: 79-86; LESIAU 1975; BEN-DOR 1985.

10. KAPLAN 1990a: 101; 1988: 63-64. For partial translation of this text, see KAPLAN 1990b: 97-105.

11. Thus in his review of Kaplan, *The Beta Israel*, L. D. Loeb writes of "... the major theses of recent scholarship questioning the direct link between Beta Israel and ancient Jewish settlement of the Upper Nile or South Arabia" (*Choice*, April 1993: 513).

12. At least four Hebrew books have been published concerning the subject of Jewish attitudes to Ethiopian Jewry (CORINALDI 1988, CHELOUCHE 1988, WALDMAN 1989, 1992). Although all of these books offer valuable collections of sources, none of the authors offer any reflections of the concerns that lay behind the images portrayed in their sources.

Faitlovitch, who dedicated his life to the cause of Ethiopian Jewry, was responsible more than any other single person for their entry into Jewish history and consciousness.¹³ The processes which he set in motion beginning with his first visit to Ethiopia can be said only now, almost ninety years later, to have reached their logical conclusion with the *aliyah* of the Beta Israel community to Israel. The common thread which ran through all aspects of Faitlovitch's multi-pronged program on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry was the attempt to bring them closer to other Jewish communities. In part he sought to reform their Judaism; in part to raise their standards of education. He also attempted to create a Western educated elite capable of interacting on a more or less equal basis with their foreign Jewish counterparts. However, he also in no small part tried to project an image of Ethiopian Jewry which would be both familiar and attractive to European and American Jewish audiences. Thus he portrayed the Beta Israel as a foreign Jewish element grossly out of place in their strange African environment. In his report to Baron Edmond de Rothschild following his first visit to Ethiopia he wrote:

“ Lorsque je me suis trouvé en Afrique parmi ces Falachas entourés de peuplades à demi-sauvages, j'ai ressenti une joie indicible en constatant leur énergie, leur intelligence, les hautes qualités morales qui les distinguent. Nous pouvons être fiers de compter parmi les nôtres ces nobles enfants de l'Éthiopie, qui, avec un non moins légitime orgueil, se glorifient de remonter à nos origines, adorent notre Dieu, pratiquent notre culte. L'ardeur avec laquelle ils cherchent à se régénérer, à sortir de cette barbarie africaine qui les enveloppe et les étouffe, prouve qu'en eux persiste le caractère instinctif de la race [...] Combien différents en cela des autres Abyssins, si refractaires aux études, au progrès et à la civilisation des Européens auxquels ils se croient naïvement supérieurs!¹⁴

Faitlovitch was, as we have indicated, certainly not the first author to carefully shape the image of the Beta Israel. Medieval Hebrew authors, European travellers (most notably James Bruce), and Joseph Halévy had preceded him in this respect. He was, however, undoubtedly the most persistent and influential shaper of their image. In his lifetime and particularly on the popular level no other aspect of Faitlovitch's activities appear to have been as successful. The mythic image of the Falasha as a pre-Talmudic lost tribe which migrated to Ethiopia was accepted with remarkable readiness throughout the world and has dominated discussions of their religion, literature, culture and history.

In fact, this image of the Beta Israel as descendants of an ancient Jewish community permeates most of what is written about them today both in Israel and the Jewish press. Thus, for example, it has been quite common to analyze

13. Unfortunately we still lack both a comprehensive biography of Faitlovitch and a detailed analysis of his impact on the Beta Israel. See, however, GRINFELD 1986.

14. FAITLOVITCH 1905: 26-27. For a similar quote from Faitlovitch, see SHELEMAY 1986: 26. This image of Ethiopian Jews as a “foreign” element in Ethiopia was recently echoed by the Deputy Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Health. Discussing health problems of Beta Israel immigrants, he reassured members of the Israeli Parliament that: “The rate of illness among Ethiopian immigrants is far lower than that found among the *African* [i.e. non-Jewish] population of Ethiopia” (*Ha-arets*, June 15, 1993 [emphasis is mine, S. K.]).

the Beta Israel's religious system in terms of its links with "other" archaic forms of Judaism and to consider the many elements it shares with Ethiopian Christianity as foreign accretions (Aešcoly 1943: 24-83, Waldman 1985: 25-50, Chelouche 1988: 49-82).

In a widely circulated handbook available in both Hebrew and English, Rabbi Menachem Waldman writes (1985: 25)

"The religious customs of the [Beta Israel] community distinguish them from the other tribes in Ethiopia. They live in accordance with the Law of Moses, while at the same time carry out Jewish tradition in their own unique way.

Their special customs, in many ways different from those practiced elsewhere in the Jewish world are the result of the community's total isolation from the rest of the world Jewry and centers of learning with the fact that they have had to survive in a hostile and primitive environment [...]

The years of isolation and hardship led to a blurring of the commandments, even though they are explicit in the *Tora*. Thus *mitzvot* such as *tzitzit*, *tefillin*, *mezuzza*, sounding of the *shofar* on *Rosh Hoshana*, the Four Species on *Succot* and others have disappeared. Hebrew print and language, too, are totally absent today in both the writing of the community and its speech. Numerous commandments have survived in their basic form but are vastly different in Rabbinical tradition. Similarly, a number of customs, foreign to the spirit of Judaism, such as tattooing and Nazirite seclusion, have penetrated under the influence of time and the Gentile environment".

Despite the eighty years separating Waldman's handbook from Faitlovitch's report, the basic categories that guide the two are essentially the same. In both cases, the Beta Israel are viewed as an alien Jewish group out of place in their Ethiopian surroundings. Their history, culture, and religion, are depicted as one more fragment in the mosaic that constitutes the universal Jewish experience. Elements or historical episodes that do not form part of this more general experience are either distorted or dismissed as aberrations.

Waldman's presentation is of interest not only for the components it shares with Faitlovitch's account, but also as an example of survival of this perspective despite (or, as we shall argue, because of) the Beta Israel's arrival in Israel. Although the massive *aliyah* of the Beta Israel created an immediate need for accurate information upon which to base absorption policies, it also produced a no less pressing need for familiar images through which to ease their acceptance by the Israeli public. Thus at the same time as officials were struggling to understand the unique challenges posed by Ethiopian immigrants, the general public were frequently presented with an image of life in Ethiopia that resonated with familiar themes. Although the Beta Israel had had little contact with outside Jews and had not participated in the great events of Jewish history, they could, through subtle manipulation, be shown to have had a similar if not identical experience.¹⁵

15. Such a "parallelomania" is often characterized by an aggressive willingness to disregard or invent history. A recent catalogue of "traditional artistic Ethiopian ceramics ignores the fact that this tradition dates only to the 1960s in order to point out similarities to and suggest historic connections with "parallel objects found in archaeological digs in Israel" (MUSEUM OF THE NIGEL 1993).

In the main, the popular image of the Beta Israel can be seen to depict their story as a microcosm of World Jewish history. Having left the Land of Israel, the Jews of Israel wandered in the *galut* ("exile"), until they settled in Ethiopia. There they rose to prominent positions but only to be supplanted by Christians and Christianity. After centuries of persecution and suffering, during which they clung tenaciously to their ancestral faith, they were finally able to return to the Promised Land; spared from a Holocaust by the initiative and daring of the Jewish state.¹⁶ Viewed in this manner, their story validates the central teachings of both Judaism and Zionism. Key words such as "exile", "pogrom", "persecution" and "anti-semitism" served to invent a link between Beta Israel history and that of other Jewish communities. Various Ethiopian rulers became "Hitlers" and Nazis, while almost any significant loss of life was labelled an Ethiopian "Shoah". Finally, the various airlifts (or, as they were usually called, "Rescue operations"), came to appear as a vindication of the State of Israel and the entire Zionist enterprise.¹⁷ As one official remarked¹⁸ following the airlift of over 14,000 Ethiopians in less than 36 hours: "If the State of Israel had existed in the 30s and 40s, we could have brought all six million [who perished in the Holocaust] in six months!"

Changes in Self-Definition

Despite the vast differences that exist between the scholarly and popular views of the Beta Israel, they are similar in being essentially emic in character. While drawing on elements from the Beta Israel's own traditions, both present an image that is largely the creation of outsiders. In this final section, therefore, we shall consider the Beta Israel's own views of their identity and how it has changed in recent years.

It is impossible, of course, to discuss all aspects of this fascinating subject in a single essay (Kaplan & Rosen 1993). We shall limit ourselves, therefore, to two topics: myths of origins and names. As we shall demonstrate below, both are crucial indicators of group identity and its transformation.

As has often been noted, myths of origin usually tell us more about how a people view themselves and would like to be seen by others, than they do about any "historical" reality. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of a group

16. The literature containing these themes is so vast as to defy any bibliography. It includes leaflets, pamphlets, films, slide shows, newspaper articles, etc. Cf. for example the *Information Paper*, No 6, Feb. 1979, of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews: "In a tragedy reminiscent of Europe during the Nazi occupation, a community of 28,000 Jews is silently facing extinction [...] The holocaust analogy does not lie in the method, nor in the recurrence of Jewish suffering. Rather it is in the reality that just as the extermination of Jews by the Nazis proceeded in secrecy, very few know of the continuing decimation of the Falashas. If their plight worsens, then a second holocaust will wax unknown until it surfaces to once again shame the Jewish conscience".

17. In light of the above, it is ironic to note that the greatest single cause of Beta Israel deaths in the twentieth century was their immigration to Israel through the Sudan. In a period of less than a year two to four thousand people died.

18. Air force officer speaking on Israeli radio, May 25, 1991.

like the Beta Israel, who are in the midst of a dramatic process of redefinition. This process is, as we shall see, mirrored in their stories of origin (Abbink 1990: 404-408, 410-423).

Although the Beta Israel did not have a single "official" account of their origins in Ethiopia, throughout most of their known history the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba appears to have dominated their traditions (*ibid.*; Kaplan 1992: 21-24, Shelemay 1986: 17, Krempel 1972: 29).

According to this legend, the Queen of Sheba travelled from the ancient Ethiopian capital of Aksum to visit King Solomon in Jerusalem. During her stay, Solomon not only dazzled her with his wisdom, but also tricked her by a clever ruse into having sexual relations with him. The Queen conceived a son, whom she bore upon her return to Aksum. When he reached maturity, this son, Menelik, journeyed to Jerusalem to meet his father. At the completion of Menelik's visit, Solomon commanded that the first-born sons of the priests and elders of Israel accompany him to Aksum. However, before setting out Menelik and his companions, led by Azariah, the son of the High Priest, stole the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple. Thus the glory of Zion passed from Jerusalem and the Children of Israel, to the new Zion, Aksum, and the new Israel, the Ethiopian people.¹⁹

The story is engaging, at points even amusing. Yet its occasional lightness of tone should not lead one to underestimate its centrality for an understanding of the thought-world of traditional Ethiopia. In its classical Ethiopian formulation, a book known as the *Kebra Nagast* ("The glory of kings"), the Solomon-Sheba legend became the basic metaphor for legitimacy and authority within Ethiopian culture, and a crucial element in the genealogies of numerous regional and ethnic groups, including the Beta Israel.²⁰

By associating themselves with the Solomon-Sheba legend, the Beta Israel were claiming to be part of Ethiopia's cultural elite. They were defining themselves in the most positive terms possible within the realm of that country's traditional religio-political categories. It is therefore of tremendous significance that today Ethiopian Jews in Israel almost unanimously reject any connection to this tradition. Rather, they present themselves as descendants of Jews who followed the Biblical prophet Jeremiah to Egypt or, in keeping with rabbinic opinion, descendants of the lost tribe of Dan (Abbink 1990: 415-416).

While both these later traditions can be said to have existed prior to the 1980s, their increasing prominence coupled with the outright rejection of the Solomon-Sheba story is a vivid testimony to the changes having taken place in the Beta Israel's self-image. While that story placed the Beta Israel in the mainstream of Ethiopian history and culture, in Israel there is little benefit to be gained from claiming to be of the same origin as tens of millions of other Ethio-

19. For the story itself, see C. BEZOLD 1905, or BUDGE 1932. For important discussions of its significance in Ethiopia, see ULLENDORFF (1968: 74-79) and LEVIN (1974: 92-112).

20. TADDESSE TAMRAI 1972: 250, esp. fn 2. In their versions the Beta Israel usually stressed their separation from other Ethiopians either during the journey to Aksum over the issue of travel on the Sabbath, or at a later stage when many of their compatriots accepted Christianity.

pians. However, both the Egyptian and the Danite traditions separate the Beta Israel from Christian Ethiopians, while emphasizing their links to other Jews.

A similar change of focus can be seen in the names that the Beta Israel use to refer to themselves. In Ethiopia, they most commonly used a name (Beta Israel) that linked them to the country's Israelite (Solomonic) heritage.²¹ They were also widely known by the name Falasha, a term that developed in the Middle Ages and denoted either their status as landless people (*falasawi*) or their association with monks (*falasyan*) (Kaplan 1990b: 151-152; 1992: 65-73). Today, the term Beta Israel is used almost exclusively by scholars, while Falasha is strongly rejected as pejorative and insulting. The Beta Israel of Ethiopia have become the Ethiopian Jews (in Hebrew: Yehuday Etiopiya) of Israel. In Israel today and in the popular Jewish press, they are rarely if ever designated by any other term.²²

This shift of nomenclature carries with it a significance far beyond that of the names themselves. In the Ethiopian historical context, *ayhudawi* ("Jew") was a pejorative term applied to someone one wished to label as a heretic or apostate. While "Israelites" were good, "Jews" were, without exception, bad (*ibid.*: 38, 47, 60-65). Even more than the frequently cited Falasha, *ayhud* ("Jews") was a highly negative label that no group would apply to itself. Moreover, prior to the second half of the nineteenth century the Beta Israel did not speak of themselves as Jews.

Joseph Halévy was not aware of this when he went to Ethiopia in 1867 as the emissary of the Alliance israélite universelle. His initial encounter with the Beta Israel is instructive:

"The crowd that surrounded me prevented me from entering into conversation with them, but 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".²³

In the century and a quarter since Halévy, the Beta Israel's image of themselves and their place in the world has been totally revolutionized. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the manner they refer to themselves. Their choice of "Ethiopian Jews" as their preferred name marks their entry into not only a new home, but also into a new world of categories. Far more significant than their abandonment of the (in Ethiopian terms) positive appellation of "Beta Israel" is their willingness to embrace the hitherto negative label of "Jew". In

21. For useful discussions of these names, see ROSEN 1985, KAPLAN 1990b: 151-159.

22. *The Jerusalem Post* in an unusual move has rejected the expression "Ethiopian Jews" and refers to the members of the community as Ethiopian immigrants or former(?) Ethiopians!

23. HALÉVY 1877: 37. To the best of my knowledge, no commentator has considered the significance of the fact that World Jewry's first encounter with the Beta Israel resulted in a misunderstanding. It was, as we have seen, not to be the last.

this choice of names, as in their selection of origin stories we find a vivid testimony to the new identity they have begun to assume.²⁴

Discussion

Given the limits of this paper, it has been impossible to treat any of the models discussed in full. Each is deserving a fuller exposition not only with regards to its contents, but also concerning its functions and dynamics. We shall close, therefore, with a few words about the changes taking place in each of the separate models and in the relationships between them.

Recent Ethiopianist research has produced a portrait of the Beta Israel sharply at odds with that which existed only two decades ago. Working from a variety of sources both oral and written, scholars have developed a model of the Beta Israel which denies their direct links to any ancient Jewish groups, dates their emergence as a separate people to the last five hundred years, and places them firmly in the context of Ethiopian history and society. Ironically, the Ethio-centric view has been articulated precisely at the time when the Beta Israel were leaving Ethiopia and being settled in Israel. This unanticipated coincidence has not only produced a growing dissonance between the scholarly and indigenous models, but has also given the contrast between the two a political content it might not normally have held.²⁵ Thus in less than a quarter century, Ethiopian perspectives on the Falasha and even the views they once held of themselves have acquired an anachronistic flavor and more than a tinge of political incorrectness.

The same period has, in contrast, witnessed a growing closeness and even overlap between the Beta Israel's image of themselves and that of their new Israeli neighbors. It would be simplistic, however, to view this trend as merely one of closer proximity. The two models have also grown increasingly dependent on each other for acceptance, legitimacy, and sustenance. Thus, the self-image presented by Ethiopian Jews in Israel is frequently tailored to meet the needs and expectations of Jewish and Israeli audiences.²⁶ The material provided in such encounters serves in turn to bolster claims to authenticity, accuracy, and (political) correctness by proponents of the Judaeo-centric model. The

24. See KAPLAN & ROSEN (1993) where it is suggested that "Beta Israel/Falasha" culture should be analytically distinguished from "Ethiopian Jewish" culture.

25. Earlier scholars questioning or denying the Jewishness of the Falasha were often criticized but were not usually subjected to the sustained political attacks aimed at recent authors.

26. Interesting and amusing examples of this phenomenon are found in two calendars recently produced in Israel. The first entitled *Ethiopian Bible Drawings* contains eleven drawings based on stories from the Old Testament and one New Testament drawing, Jesus feeding the multitudes (Matthew 14: 17 sq.). The last is designated in both Hebrew and English as "Eating the Manna"! (cf. Ullendorff 1988: 269-270). A calendar prepared by the Israel Joint Distribution Committee identifies the first page of a Beta Israel *Orit* (Pentateuch) by inscribing the first words of *Genesis* in Hebrew on the page. The Ge'ez text is in fact from the book *Enoch*. The significant point concerning both these misrepresentations is that they were not invented by those who prepared the calendars, but provided to them by Ethiopian Jews living in Israel.

support offered by Ethiopian Jews therefore masks the essential "cultural imperialism" of the Jewish-Israeli model, which values elements of Beta Israel history on the basis of their meaningfulness for other (mainly Western) Jews. Indeed, so successful has this process of masking been that many secular Israelis who decry attempts by rabbinic groups to "normalize" Beta Israel religious life, find no difficulty in supporting views that "normalize" their history.²⁷

Finally, we turn to the interaction between the Ethiopianist and Jewish-Zionist models. Despite sporadic attempts, supporters of the Jewish-Zionist model have not succeeded in presenting a detailed academic critique of recent Ethiopianist research. As was noted above, they have frequently attacked the alleged political implications of such research. This charge of political incorrectness is particularly levelled, as one might expect, against scholars who are Jewish and/or Israeli. One reviewer commenting on my own book and stressing the implications that such a work should be written by an Israeli Jew noted:

"Jews content with conventional wisdom are bound to be uncomfortable with Kaplan's conclusions. This volume appears at a particularly sensitive time for the Ethiopian community in Israel [...] Kaplan's opponents rightly feel that his research may weaken the standing of the Ethiopian Jewish community in its various political battles in Israel" (Orenstein 1993: 48).

At least one attempt was made by an American pro-Ethiopian group to have American Jewish scholar Kay Kaufman Shelemay's award winning book, *Music, Ritual and Falasha History* removed from a major Jewish bookstore.²⁸

Challenged, moreover, about the antiquity of the Ethiopian Jews, supporters of the Jewish-Zionist model have responded by reiterating all the more strongly the claim that a common experience of suffering links the Beta Israel to other Jews. In the opinion of one critic of the Ethiopianist model, for example, the claim that the Beta Israel are an Ethiopian ethnic group of recent origin, "... will not be welcomed to a branch of the Jewish people who have maintained their loyalty to the Torah in the face of hardships every whit as severe as those encountered by Jews in other parts of the world, excluding the Holocaust".²⁹

Thus the suffering endured by the Beta Israel (itself a major pillar of the Jewish-Zionist model) is invoked to give added weight to their disapproval of scholarly theories which challenge their antiquity.

27. In contrast to Israeli religious groups which are consistent in their use of Jewish-Zionist model to understand the Beta Israel, many secular Israelis appear to use this model to argue for *aliyah* from Ethiopia, but balk at applying it to those Ethiopian Jews already in Israel.

28. SHELEMAY 1991: 150-151. "By 1986, the tension that had increasingly permeated my personal relationships with the leaders of one [pro-Falasha] activist organization became public when I was invited to guest curate an exhibition on the Ethiopian Jews at the Jewish Museum in New York City [...] Several individuals protested the representation of the Beta Israel as part of Ethiopian culture, laying the blame at my feet. They demanded that my recently published book, copies of which were on sale in the Museum gift shop along with other writings about the Beta Israel, be removed from the shelves".

29. D. Kessler "New Theories on Origins of Ethiopians Jews", *The Jewish Chronicle* (London), Feb. 4, 1993.

Given the changes the Beta Israel have undergone and are undergoing only a prophet could predict their future or the changes that will take place in the depiction of their past. While the Ethiopianist model appears to have largely stabilized, the Jewish Zionist one and the Ethiopian Jews own views of themselves continue to evolve and interact. Future scholars would do well to focus much of their attention on the changes that take place within and between each of these models.

Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Oriental Jewish Communities, Jerusalem, 1993.

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