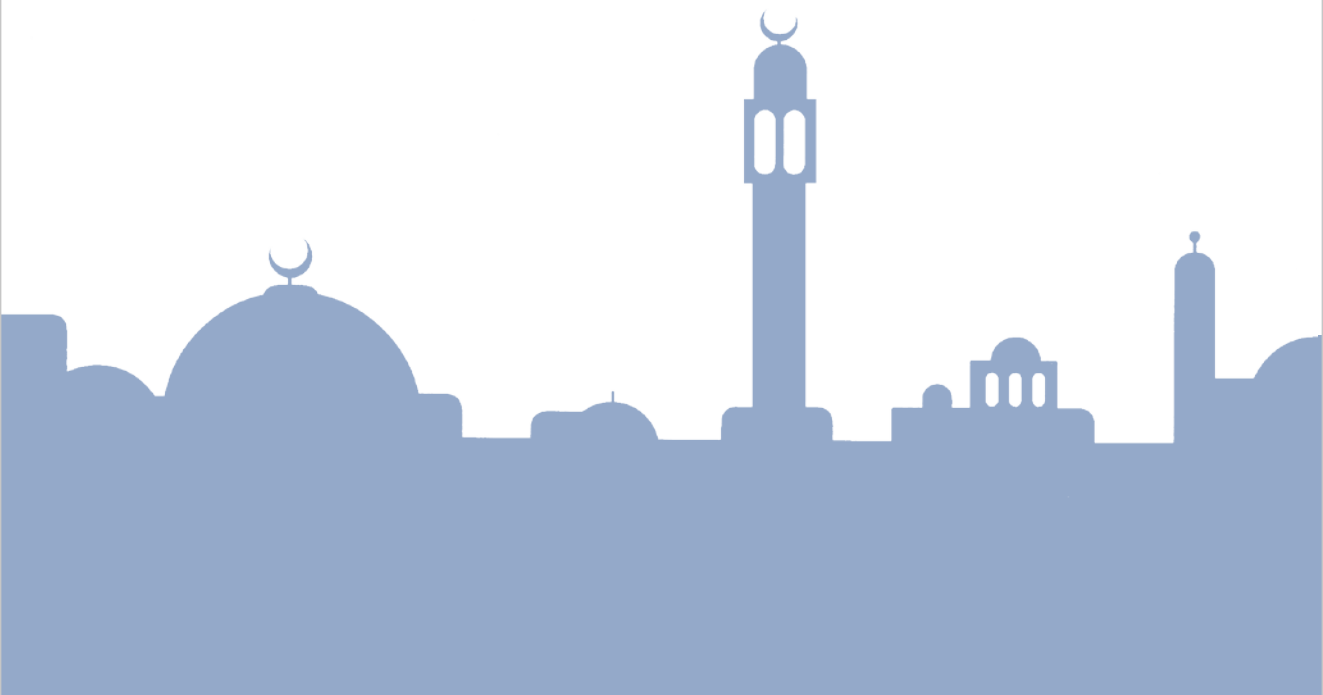




Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Ethiopia: The Messages of Religions

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Abstract

This paper provides a succinct overview of the relationships between Ethiopia – a land in which Christianity first encountered Islam, and where Judaism was already present – and the Middle East, the cradle of these religions. The paper focuses on the dialectic between historic political and strategic needs, interests and concrete options on one hand, and the reservoir of abstract notions bequeathed by these ancient religions, on the other. The main thesis is that Islam, Christianity and Judaism, far from providing monolithic messages, harbored a wide range of prescriptions for moderates and fanatics alike. Analyzing the multifaceted legacies by which Ethiopians and their Middle Eastern neighbors conceptualized each other, the paper discusses several modern political developments and demonstrates how they were inspired by these religious interpretations and proclivities.

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Introduction

Nehemia Levtzion dedicated his scholarly work to both the Middle East and Africa, and especially to the role of Islam in shaping their histories. Though Ethiopia has an image of uniqueness and isolation, of being "a Christian island encircled by Islam," she has remained throughout history connected closely to these two worlds around her. Ethiopia symbolized Africa's pride and with the establishment of the Organization of African Union in 1963, became the continent's modern capital. Major aspects of her culture have been also been connected, from her very ancient origins, to the Middle East. Her relations with most "others," with Islamic and European entities, have developed along the Nile River and across the Red Sea.¹

I shall just briefly mention some concrete cases in point. A long history of mutual dependency with Egypt: Ethiopia the source of the Blue Nile (the supplier of four fifths of the waters reaching Egypt); Egypt the source of Christian patriarchal authority. This was a complicated story, which culminated during the days of the Mamluks and the Solomonic dynasties, as well as in the Ethiopo-Egyptian confrontations of 1875-1884. Another case was the conflict with the Sudan during the period of the Mahdiyya (1884-1898), which ended disastrously for both sides (especially as a result of war in 1889). Integrated with these histories was also a long multi-dimensional dialogue with the Ottomans, revolving around control of the Red Sea as well as around the ownership and management of the Ethiopian Christian institutions in Jerusalem.

The Ottomans' involvement in Ethiopia's history culminated with their backing of a local African Islamic conquest of Ethiopia, during 1529-1543, known as the Ahmad Gagn War, and soon after an effort to establish a province in what is today the Eritrean coast. Closer to our days, Mussolini's 1936-1941 conquest of Ethiopia was conducted as if it were also in the name of Islam, and had far reaching consequences for both Ethiopian and Arab nationalisms. Post-WWII examples are the challenge of modern Nasserism in the 1950s and 1960s, which aimed to turn local Muslims in the Horn of Africa into revolutionary Arabs; the struggle over Eritrea lasting from the mid-1950s and ending with the independence of Eritrea in 1991; the relentless Somali national and Islamic effort to regain the Ogaden area from Ethiopia began in 1960 and culminated in a war in 1977-1978, and then in an Ethiopian invasion and occupation of Mogadishu during 2006-2008, etc.

Not only confrontations marked the relations of Ethiopia with the Middle East, but also fruitful intra-regional cultural dialogues. Islam came to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa directly from Arabia, and from the very dawn of Islam. Christianity had come to Ethiopia in the fourth century, first from Syria and then was further institutionalized through the Coptic Church of Egypt. Ethiopia's Eastern Christianity has remained intensively inspired by the Hebrew Bible and the concept of ancient Israel. Ethiopia's Christianity remained anchored in Jerusalem, while Judaism came to Ethiopia even before Islam and Christianity. Ethiopia's main languages – Ge'ez, Amharic and Tigrinya – are Semitic, and they developed through the uninterrupted connection with Arabia and the core countries of the Middle East.

The fundamentals of Ethiopia's political, religious, artistic, and general culture stemmed directly from her close connection to the Judaic, Christian and Islamic Middle East. Moreover, Ethiopia's modern relations with the Islamic and the Arab worlds also revolved around the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Between the late 1950s and 1973, Haile Selassie's Ethiopia was practically allied with Israel. The Jewish state, working to find allies and

friends in what was defined as the "periphery" of the Middle East and the Arab world, invested in Ethiopia's development more than in any other country. The Ethiopians, for their part, trusted the Israelis and asked them to help and guide in nearly everything. These special relations ended due to Arab pressure on Ethiopia which proved more effective around the 1973 war in the Middle East. Emperor Haile Selassie's expelling of the Israelis had quite disastrous ramifications for his regime and was one of the causes of its demise in 1974. Right now, the Ethiopian-Middle Eastern connection is seemingly approaching a very serious moment of truth. In 2007, Ethiopia began planning a dam on the Blue Nile, which is approaching completion in 2013. After millennia of anxieties, suspicions, and mutual threats, a new concrete reality along the river is in the making. Ethiopia is about to be in control of Egypt's very existence. With good mutual trust, both sides are to gain more waters and more electricity. With mistrust – God forbid – the whole region may suffer from a new chain of hostilities. The issue is too complicated to be analyzed seriously here. However, it is certain that legacies of the past are sure to have their say on the shaping of the future of all involved.

History has many facets and each observer is inclined to emphasize one aspect or another. No historian is capable of including and presenting the full complexity, especially when it comes to relations between different peoples with vastly different characteristics. I tend to understand developments also as the product of dialectics between needs, interests, and concrete options on one hand, and the reservoir of abstract notions bequeathed by the historical past on the other. For the last twenty-five years, I have explored Ethiopian relations with Islamic peoples, Middle Eastern countries, the Nile Valley, and the Horn of Africa. Each time, my research has reaffirmed that the everyday political and strategic act was and remains part of an active dialogue between the fundamental concepts of Muslims and Christians. I have also come to appreciate the fact that these concepts and images are hardly monolithic.

Historically, Muslims have regarded the Christians of Ethiopia in both positive and negative lights and the same holds true for Ethiopian Christian views of Muslims. Just as the concrete reality has always

created a variety of alternatives and courses of action, the world of fundamental religious and historical abstractions is abundant with various legacies from which to choose. I have just completed a new study: *Alliance and Alienation – Ethiopia and Israel in the Days of Haile Selassie* (Tel-Aviv, 2013), and so I can safely state that the same is true of Christians and Jews. Relations between Israel and Ethiopia are difficult to grasp in the absence of familiarity with some foundational Jewish and Christian notions, their nuances and their complexities. Furthermore, since the histories of Israel and Ethiopia are inextricably linked to relations between the Christian Ethiopian state and Middle Eastern Islamic and Arab states, it is instructive to summarize the relevant array of religious legacies and conceptual dichotomies that were always directly in the background of actual developments.

Muslims and Christians: Dichotomous Conceptualization

Islamic Conceptualizations of Ethiopia

Ethiopia was Islam's first experience of foreign relations, first meeting point with Christianity. "The first hegira," *al-hijra al-'ula*, was to Christian Ethiopia. The Prophet's initial followers, the *sahaba*, persecuted in Mecca in 615-616, were ordered by Muhammad to seek asylum with the Christian king, *al-najashi* Ashama, of *al-habasha*. The episode, a story of generous hospitality, survival, redemption, and success is in itself outside our scope. It left a double message for Muslims.

The Ethiopian Christian *najashi*'s generosity, his refusal to betray the first small community of Muslims to their Meccan persecutors, his befriending of and correspondence with the Prophet, and his contribution to the latter's victory, left a special message of gratitude for Islam. The Prophet was said to have dictated to "leave the Ethiopians alone as long as they leave you alone," which for many ever since has been a legacy of

flexibility and tolerance. For the moderates, Ethiopian benevolence and the Prophet's attitude and sayings meant that Islam does accept non-Muslims and particularly Ethiopians as legitimate neighbors, provided they do not attack Islam and do not rob Muslims, and that living under non-Islamic yet righteous governments is legal, for the Prophet himself ordered the early Muslims to find shelter under the Christian *najashi* whom he described as a just king "who oppresses no-one." Indeed, the message of Ethiopia's saving of the *sahaba* gave her a special place in Islam, but it was also a message of universal significance, often still applicable to other cases of Islamic-Christian dialogues.

The reservoir of Islamic concepts legitimizing Ethiopia, even as a Christian – dominated state, is rich and unique. The legacy of the Christian *najashi* saving the *sahaba* has been canonized and recycled. A vast literature has been produced presenting and re-interpreting Ethiopia as a model of universal humanity and grace. In the eyes of many, the precedent of the Prophet's ordering the first believers to live under the benevolent Christian king of Ethiopia today legitimizes living in Europe, the US, and even in Jewish Israel, provided, of course, that they are progressive and permissive towards Islam. It surely legitimizes living in Ethiopia proper, on condition that religious equality is implemented. For the sake of brevity, I shall refrain from dwelling here on this pragmatic, moderate interpretation of Islam and of Ethiopia. It should be emphasized, however, that the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Ethiopia apparently view the dialogue between their religion and their Ethiopian-ness in these flexible terms.

However, the hegira to Ethiopia and the Prophet's relations with her king also had a significant turning point. Later in the story, in the year 628, so argue the Islamic sources, after Muhammad emerged victorious, the *najashi* answered his call and himself adopted Islam. But the Ethiopian king was soon betrayed by his Christian subjects and died in 630 as an isolated Muslim.

This second part of the episode left a different, contradictory message that has been recycled throughout history by the less tolerant. Namely,

that since the Ethiopian king accepted the Prophet's mission, Ethiopia was already a part of the "land of Islam." That the first hegira and the *najashi's* demise thus ended as the first defeat and humiliation of Islam, and that Ethiopia's betrayal was the ultimate sin of *irtad*, of becoming a Muslim and then returning to heresy. Ethiopia, it followed, must be redeemed under a Muslim king. "*Islam al-najashi*" was, and still is, the goal and the slogan of a radical wing, ever in dispute with those preaching tolerance and acceptance.

The literature de-legitimizing Ethiopia produced over the years by Islamic radicals is as diverse as the moderate publications. Christian Ethiopians were depicted as barbarous infidels, as enemies and oppressors of Islam and Muslims, and as "the worst of human beings in the eyes of God on the day of insurrection." However, the most extreme demonization of Ethiopia was the story of Abraha and the Ka'aba.

Christian Ethiopia occupied Yemen between 524 and 590.² Its Ethiopian ruler, Abraha al-Ashram (Abraha, the "scar-face"), was said to have raided Mecca in 570 (the year the Prophet was born) in order to destroy the Ka'aba and to divert all attention to a church he had built in San'a. The Ka'aba, as attested by the "Sura of the Elephant" in the Qur'an, was miraculously saved from the Ethiopians as Allah "sent against them birds in flocks (*abablis*)...who hurled clay stones upon them."³

The image of the Ethiopians as the ultimate enemies of Islam was consequently preserved in a *hadith*, a saying attributed to the Prophet: "the lean-legged from among the Ethiopians [*dhu al-suwayqatayn*] will eventually destroy the Ka'aba."⁴ This saying (though based on a historical twist, for the Ka'aba was a polytheistic shrine at that time) can be found in all six traditional compilations of *hadith*, and, most importantly, in the earliest and the most revered ones, those of al-Bukhari and Muslim. It was therefore embedded in Islamic consciousness and widely accepted as absolutely authentic. However, probably because of its extreme message, the saying has mainly been quoted by the utmost radicals. The concept, it can be argued, reflected a hidden fear of

mysterious black Africans, as well as of the Day of Judgment that the Ethiopians' disastrous destructiveness would herald.

In many of my studies, I followed the history of the multifaceted relations between core countries of Middle Eastern Islam and Ethiopia. I tried to study the dialectical dynamisms between the initial conceptual Islamic dichotomy and the unfolding reality of concrete issues. *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Boulder, 1994) presented the story of the first hegira and then surveyed internal Islamic arguments along various major junctures, from the Mamluks in Egypt to medieval Yemen, from the Ottomans to the years of Mussolini's imperialist ambitions in Ethiopia and the Middle East. The same study went on to analyze how the initial Islamic conceptual dichotomy was transmitted and re-interpreted by modern pan-Arabists as well as by nationalists in different states in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century. In *The Cross and the River – Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Nile* (Boulder, 2002), I had the chance to examine those aspects over Egypt's long history, and against the changes in her people's self-identification.

The set of attitudes toward Ethiopia was further enriched in this case by a vivid Christian dimension, for the Ethiopian Church – not her Christianity – was a branch of the Egyptian Coptic Church from 333/334 to 1959. Here again, the main theme in analyzing the Egyptian side was reconstruction of the internal arguments about the Ethiopian "other," as reflecting the dialogue between dimensions of the Islamic, Arab, and Egyptian "self." *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia – Islam, Christianity and Politics Entwined* (Boulder, 2007) dealt with a country of less diversity. The Saudi state is said to be founded on strict Wahhabi fundamentalism, anchored in the doctrines of medieval radicals, who, from our perspective, conceived of Christian Ethiopia in most negative terms. Our study revealed that indeed the Saudis, in general, worked in many ways to Islamize Ethiopia, but also that they had their own nuances and diverse approaches, and were able to be pragmatic and to ignore the principle of *Islam al-najashi*, and even to adopt and rely on the old Ethiopian model of seeking salvation from Christians when circumstances so dictated, for example from the US in 1991. In *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of*

Africa – Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, (Boulder, 2010), I closed the circle from the Islamic, Middle Eastern side. Sudan and Somalia are Ethiopia's immediate neighbors. Their histories were inseparably connected to the history of the Christian state and to that of Ethiopia's Muslims. For both Sudanese and Somalis, historical relations with Ethiopia were of formative importance, and the relevant histories revolved, and continue to revolve, around the initial Islamic dichotomous conceptualization of Ethiopia.

These studies also enabled me to work on the role of Ethiopia's Muslims in her modern history. Muslims constitute half of Ethiopia's population. Fragmented and marginalized at the beginning of the twentieth century, they are active partners in today's Ethiopia, clearly redefining her political culture, society and economy, and continuously strengthening their ties with fellow Middle Easterners. In so doing they continue to be inspired by that ancient dichotomy. Indeed, accepting and rebuilding Ethiopia on the basis of historical continuity, or striving to win her for Islam, is the major dilemma facing Ethiopian Muslims at the beginning of the twentieth-first century.

Ethiopian-Christian Conceptualizations of Islam

The history of Ethiopia as a state and the histories of Ethiopian Christianity and of the Ethiopian Church are inseparable. Ethiopian Christianity, like Islam, developed as "religion and state." From the fourth century Christianization of the country's elite to the medieval thriving of the Solomonic dynasty, 1270-1529, the spiritual legacies of local Christianity were closely integrated with the political ethos of the kingdom. The Cross and the Crown would remain united, officially to depart only in the 1974 revolution. Throughout, the Ethiopian Christians' conceptualization of Islam and of Muslims was similarly dichotomous, somewhat parallel to and dialectically interconnected with Islamic concepts of them.

On one hand, there was the ancient notion that the country's politics and culture were anchored in the Middle East, in Egypt, in Jerusalem, and in Eastern Christianity. This basic connection was perhaps best manifested in the tradition of the head of Ethiopia's church, the *Abuna*, being an Egyptian monk (from the fourth century to 1950) and a bishop of the Coptic Church. It was further cemented by the medieval ethos that Ethiopia's emperors were descendants of King Solomon of Jerusalem. This essential linkage to the East, going to the very identity and legitimizing the very political order of Ethiopia, implied cultivating workable relations with its Islamic rulers. I preferred to dub this concept of proximity to Islam's core countries, "the Egyptian Abuna," for the rulers of Ethiopia, over sixteen centuries and more, repeatedly had to approach the Islamic rulers in Cairo to enable the sending of a new bishop to Ethiopia. Without such a bishop they could hardly exercise authority or build new churches and monasteries. Making pilgrimage to Jerusalem also necessitated polite diplomacy towards Islamic rulers. Appeasing Islam, and later modern Arabism, was an inseparable part of Ethiopia's neighborliness with Middle Eastern countries. Haile Selassie breaking with Israel in 1973 is a clear case in point.

In polar opposition there existed a persistent and mixed legacy of suspicion, superiority, fear, hatred and even demonization of Islam. It could be dubbed the "Ahmad Gagn syndrome," deriving from the vivid, ever-recycled memory of the sixteenth-century destruction of the Christian kingdom by Muslims. Ahmad Gagn was a holy warrior from the local town of Harar who was inspired and helped by Arab scholars and Ottoman commanders in Arabia and the Middle East and managed to unite the Muslims of the Horn of Africa. The fear of such an Islamic reunification that would lead to the end of their hegemony in their country, and perhaps to their destruction, has remained engraved in many Christians' minds. It has also remained combined with some contempt and a sense of moral superiority. Expressions of such an image of Islam and Muslims are numerous, and in this short lecture I shall quote just one. In May 1888 the Ethiopian emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889) convened a council to discuss their options in facing the Mahdiyya of the

Sudan. "And the king of kings," wrote the biographer of Yohannes' general Ras Alula, "revealed their impure religion and hateful works. Their religion says as follows – say No to God and Yes to the demon which is Muhammad. Ras Alula opened his mouth and said: What really are those pagans, who do not know God? Let us go and do battle with them, on behalf of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁵

Christian-Islamic dialogues or confrontations throughout Ethiopian history always developed against the background of an interplay between these dichotomous concepts – "leave the Ethiopians alone" and "*Islam al-Najashi*" on one side, and the "Egyptian *Abuna*" and the "Gagn syndrome" on the other. Naturally, an emphasis on the negative by one side would have dialectically encouraged the militancy of the other and vice versa.

Christians and Jews: Dichotomous Conceptualization

Ethiopian Perceptions: Between "Israel" and "Jews"

Among the reservoir of fundamental Ethiopian Christian concepts, Israel was and remains a source of diverse and even dichotomous attitudes.

A major aspect of Ethiopian Christianity is a sense of closeness and full identification with "Israel" as a religious and historical notion. One of the cardinal pillars of Ethiopian Christianity and of the imperial state is the book, *Kebra Negast* or *The Glory of Kings*, which is thought to have been written around the year 1320. While several aspects regarding the book's authorship remain a subject of debate for historians of medieval Ethiopia, there is no dispute that the book, written in Ge'ez, the ancient language of the Ethiopian bible and local church, was central to the national ethos of Ethiopia. *The Glory of Kings* granted Ethiopian Christians the authority to unify the crown and the cross. During periods in which there was separation between religion and state in Europe, and generations

after Eastern Christianity became a string of minority groups under Muslim rule, Ethiopians wrote *The Glory of Kings* in order to emphasize that Christianity is the distinct political religion of their sovereign country. The book united religion and state while connecting Ethiopia's national narrative to early periods of history going back to biblical times. Through its seal of divine legacy, *The Glory of Kings* bestowed legitimacy upon the Ethiopian kings, nobility, culture, and Christianity. (*The Glory of Kings* has been translated into many languages, including a recent Hebrew edition).⁶

With a view to consecrating the leaders of Ethiopia, *The Glory of Kings* emphasized the direct affinity and identification between the Ethiopian people and the ancient people of Israel. The plot is based on the biblical account of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Jerusalem and her meeting with King Solomon, but the Ethiopian version added much more to this encounter. According to *The Glory of Kings*, King Solomon tricked Makeda, Queen of Ethiopia, better known as the Queen of Sheba, and won her heart in a night of passion. Back in Ethiopia she gave birth to Menelik, the son of the King of Israel. When he grew up, he traveled to Jerusalem to meet his father, the wisest of all beings, who then recognized Menelik as his favorite son. Menelik returned to Ethiopia accompanied by the finest of the Israelites, representing all the tribes of Israel, including the Levites.

Henceforth, *The Glory of Kings* determined that Ethiopia was the chosen country; its kings were the descendants of Solomon, and its nobility "the best of Israel." Some of the Hebrew priesthood that accompanied Menelik to Ethiopia secretly brought with them the Ark of the Covenant from Solomon's temple. Ethiopian Christian tradition holds that the Ark, which lies in the Cathedral of St. Mary of Zion in the ancient capital of Aksum to this day, embodies the alliance between the God of Israel and his Ethiopian people. According to the laws of the Church, no one may see the Ark, but symbolic replicas are found in every church throughout the country. Each Ethiopian church is said to be constructed as a model of Solomon's temple and at its center in the Holy of Holies lies the *tabot*, a model of the Ark. A discernible part of Ethiopian Christianity's

commemorations and holidays remain replete with traditions of a distinctly Hebrew biblical aura. Ethiopia cannot be understood without reference to its affinity to the Old Testament. The Old Testament continues to hold a central place in the consciousness and traditions of Ethiopian Christians, more than in any other branch of Christianity. It is based on the claim that Ethiopia embraced the New Testament after having lived in antiquity according to the Old Testament.⁷

Ethiopian Christian culture includes keeping the Sabbath no less than resting on Sunday, circumcising males on the eighth day of life, and practicing laws and customs that are similar to those of Judaism – dietary laws, laws of purity and impurity, and mourning customs. The clothing of Ethiopian priests (*kahanat*) resembles the dress of the Hebrew priestly class (*kohanim*) from the biblical era, and ecclesiastical instruments and procedures for major holidays are identical.

Alongside these similarities, numerous fundamental religious terms such as commandment, faith, etc. are borrowed from biblical Hebrew.⁸ The aristocracy of Ethiopia, the priests and nuns, regarded themselves as the finest descendants of the Israelites. The kings and emperors of Ethiopia saw themselves as "Kings of Zion," the successors of King Solomon. The great king of the Aksum Dynasty (which ruled from the first century B.C.E. to the tenth century CE) was named Kaleb. The greatest emperors of the "Solomonic Dynasty" (thirteen-sixteenth centuries) were called 'Amda-Zion, the pillar of Zion; Yitzhak; Dawit; Zar'a-Yakob, the seed of Jacob. Haile Selassie, the last emperor of Ethiopia (1930-1974), was referred to as King of Zion and Lion of Judah.⁹ The constitution that he bestowed upon his people in 1931, after his religious Christian coronation, established that emperors of Ethiopia would henceforth hail from the "line [that] descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of King Solomon of Jerusalem and the Queen of Ethiopia, known as the Queen of Sheba."¹⁰

Throughout the long years of Ethiopian independence under Christian hegemony, the entire political system and its echelons were accompanied by religious ceremonies replete with the trappings of Hebrew biblical

symbolism. The masses of Christian believers still lived their daily lives according to these beliefs. The God of Christian Ethiopia was called *ya-esrael amlak*, God of Israel, and He was frequently invoked in prayers and in oaths. Christian Ethiopians maintained a special connection with Jerusalem; not only with "Zion," which was located in Aksum, but with Jerusalem, the City of David in the Land of Israel.¹¹ Thus, inherent to Ethiopian Christianity is the recognition that Christian Ethiopians are not merely the successors of biblical Israel that have followed the correct path, as all Christians since the coming of Jesus see themselves – they are also the direct flesh and blood descendants of the Israelites .

This aspect of the direct familial bond with Israel as a religious and historical concept remains an active dimension in the consciousness of many Ethiopian Christians to this day. It manifests itself almost every time that the relationship between Ethiopia and modern Israel comes to the fore of the national agenda. For example, the Ethiopian poet, playwright, publicist, and educator, Dr. Fikre Tolossa, who lives and works in flourishing Ethiopian diaspora communities in the United States, presented this sentiment in his book, *The Hidden and Untold History of the Jewish People and Ethiopians* (2011). The book consists of a variety of interpretations of the Bible (some of which are quite flexible) as a precursor to the eternal connection between the two peoples. This connection was summarized by the author as follows:

It is important to assert the truth that the relationship between the peoples of Israel and Ethiopia is very old and distinct. There are no people as closely related to the Jews as are Ethiopians. In fact, their relationship is bonded by blood, religion, culture and history... As I said before, Emperor Haile Selassie I, Elect of God, the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, was the 225th and the last emperor of that Dynasty. The Solomonic Dynasty ceased to exist in 1974.¹²

What motivated Christian Ethiopia and its leaders to embrace this association with Israel and adhere to it for generations? We have no time to dwell here on this intriguing question. In any case, whatever the

explanation, Christian Ethiopians view their connection to Israel as a central pillar of their very identity.

The other element in Christian Ethiopians' view of Israel stands in extreme contrast to the intimate genealogical bond. *The Glory of Kings* also includes expressions of denunciation and distinct hatred for Israel. These expressions can be explained by the fact that after Ethiopian Christians associated themselves with Israel and benefited from the advantages that accompanied this notion of the self, there was a compelling need to differentiate and separate themselves from the religion and the people who did not accept the Gospel of Jesus. This need to dissociate themselves from Judaism remains a general Christian matter and has manifested itself in diverse ways throughout the history of Christianity. Ethiopians' identification with Israel – not only in the historical and spiritual sense, but as family – perhaps created an even stronger impetus to demarcate boundaries.

The Ethiopians were compelled to explain to themselves and others that despite all the distinct Biblical and Israelite dimensions of their religion and culture, they were not Jews, as was sometimes suspected. The authors of *The Glory of Kings* accomplished this by strongly condemning the Jews and Israel. The main argument against Israel was the refusal to accept Jesus as the Son of God and as the messenger of redemption. According to the text, "the foolish Jews, who are blind of heart and enemies of righteousness,"¹³ did not comprehend the Gospel of Jesus and in their evilness they murdered him. Chapter 106 describes how "Israel made itself blind, and crucified Him, and refused to walk in His righteousness... Christ shall come, and the Jews shall reject Him, but the heathen shall believe."¹⁴ Chapter 102 explains that Jesus "died that He might destroy death; ... He feared not and was not ashamed of the contumely and hatred and spitting of the polluted Jews."¹⁵ Chapter 112 concludes: "And similarly our Lord was cast into the grave, and the Jews sealed it with their seals, imagining that they were sealing up the rising of the sun so that it should not shine. O ye foolish, wicked, blasphemous, blind, and weak-minded men, would ye assert that the Spirit of Life

should not appear and come forth? And the Jews were put to shame, and He went forth to illumine us who have believed upon Him."¹⁶

Ostensibly, *The Glory of Kings* established a distinction between a familial lineage to biblical Israel and a separation from and condemnation of the Jews. However, the text itself blurs this distinction and deems all Israelites disgraceful because of their Judaism. From the perspective of the holy Ethiopian book, the people of Israel are also deserving of God's wrath. Because of their betrayal of the Son of God, God's grace was taken from them and transferred to Ethiopia. Chapter 95 states:

And when the wicked children of Israel saw all this they thought that He was a man, and they were envious of Him because of what they saw and heard, and they crucified Him upon the wood of the Cross, and they killed Him. And He rose from the dead on the third day, and went up into heaven in glory, [and sat] on the throne of the Godhead... So therefore when the Jews shall see Him they shall be put to shame, and shall be condemned to the fire which is everlasting. But we who believe in the Orthodox Faith shall be upon our throne, and we shall rejoice with our teachers the Apostles, provided that we have walked in the way of Christ and in His commandments. And after the Jews crucified the Saviour of the world, they were scattered abroad, and their kingdom was destroyed, and they were made an end of and rooted out for ever and ever.¹⁷

Judaism and Ethiopia: Between *Cushim* and Brothers

Judaism also possessed a reservoir of complex notions concerning Ethiopia. Until the twentieth century, this conceptual system – like its Ethiopian counterpart – was abstract and detached from physical contact with Ethiopia and Ethiopians. In the Hebrew Bible, the terms *cushi* (in

plural, *cushim*) and the land of *Cush* appear dozens of times in diverse contexts. In the Greek translation of the Bible, the *cushi* was rendered "Ethiopian" and the land of *Cush* – Ethiopia.¹⁸ The biblical Hebrew and ancient Greek concepts did not relate to the Christian Ethiopian state (which did not yet exist) but rather to black people in general, and primarily those inhabitants of the regions south of Egypt and in proximity to the Red Sea. The image of the *cushi*, the black Ethiopian of the Bible, was sometimes a symbol of beauty and sometimes used to describe something less positive. In the Hebrew Bible, one rarely finds expressions that can be interpreted in modern terms as reflecting racism toward *cushim*, black people.

While references to black people in the Hebrew Bible were rather matter of fact, some Jewish interpretations given in later periods assumed negative connotations. In his comprehensive book, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other*, Abraham Melamed provides a detailed analysis of the development of the imagery of the *cushi* throughout the history of Jewish culture, beginning with the Biblical period. Melamed observed that the image of the black man as an inferior "other" did appear in rabbinical literature, the corpus of texts that were written from the Second Temple period until the sixth century C.E. Melamed found that in this literature, the *cushi* was occasionally portrayed as bestial and ugly, violent and prone to sexual outbursts. "The image of the black as an inferior other," he wrote, "took shape in the writings of the Sages.... The image was an authentic product of rabbinical culture and as such it had far-reaching influence, notably on the image of the black as inferior and other, and on the image of skin color in general in Jewish cultural history, down to our own day."¹⁹

Not every scholar of Jewish attitudes toward blacks agrees with Melamed's harsh conclusions regarding relations between Jews and the descendants of Ham. Equally important scholars such as David Goldenberg and Yaacov Shavit do not deny that embarrassing aspects such as this are embedded in the history of Jewish culture. However, they explain that this was primarily a reflection of the influence of notions that were assimilated from Islamic and Christian cultures. These cultures,

which in practice enslaved blacks for centuries, needed to de-humanize them. The Jews in the diaspora did not come into contact with blacks and certainly did not enslave them. Expressions of the relationship to the *cushim* in Jewish medieval literature derived from abstract arguments and philosophical interpretations devoid of any real contact with African peoples or any relation to reality.²⁰

On the other side of the Jewish conceptual equation concerning the *cushim* stands the relationship with the Jews of Ethiopia. Jews of Ethiopia are “blacks” like all other natives of this country.²¹ Had Jewish culture been bound to notions of skin color, this racism would also have driven the attitude toward Beta Israel, the Falasha. However, historically, the attitude toward the Jews of Ethiopia operated on another axis, that of fundamental questions of Jewish law. Ethiopian Jewry – for generations cut off from the rest of the Jewish world – was based on ancient biblical values and commandments. It did not absorb what developed in Judaism with the transition from the world of the Temple in Jerusalem to the world of the Talmud that was created after the destruction of the Temple.

The first connection between Ethiopian Jewry and general Judaism occurred in the middle of the sixteenth century with the arrival of a black-skinned Ethiopian in Egypt who claimed that he was Jewish. The leading jurist of the Jewish community of Cairo, Rabbi David Ben Zimra, the Radbaz, determined that he was indeed a Jew. The Radbaz ruled that Ethiopian Jews hailed from the lost tribe of Dan and despite the ancient disconnection, the Jews of Ethiopia should be recognized as brothers and be taught rabbinic law.²² This ruling and its related arguments concerning legal issues – not color or race – was the point of departure that guided Israel’s rabbis and world Jewry on the Falasha question.

Yaacov Noah Faitlovitch, a Polish Jewish academic and student at the Sorbonne, was responsible for the first modern contact with Ethiopian Jewry. From his first visit to Ethiopia in 1904-1905 and until his death in Tel Aviv in 1955, Faitlovitch dedicated his life to advancing Jewish and Hebrew education for the youth of Beta Israel and spreading awareness of their existence in the diaspora. To this end, he mobilized the active

support of the Jewish rabbinical establishments in the West and in the Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine, and among general Jewish leaderships, including that of the United States. Overall, we can say that the question of the Falasha's "blackness" never explicitly arose in discussions with these agents; their "Judaism" was the issue. For example, in the fall of 1934, Faitlovitch approached the administration of the Jewish Agency with a request to approve the immigration of ten Jewish Ethiopian students to Palestine. During the meeting of the administration, a debate arose concerning the Judaism of the Falasha and the parameters used to define Jewish nationalism. In response to Arthur Rupin's argument that the Falasha did not have any blood relation to the Jews, Moshe Shertok asserted that "the determining factor of nationalism is consciousness. The question is do the Falasha recognize themselves as Jews. If so – they cannot be rejected due to their foreign race." Ultimately, a compromise was reached and the administration approved the immigration of five students.²³

Yitzhak Grinfeld summarized Faitlovitch's activity in his book, *Studies in the History of Jews of Ethiopia*, which includes a chapter entitled "The Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Jews of Ethiopia during the British Mandate (1921-1948)."²⁴ In his perusal of the Rabbinate's documents, Grinfeld reconstructed the generous aid that the rabbis proffered Faitlovitch for both his educational enterprise and for correspondence with Christian Ethiopian leaders. Grinfeld concluded that the rabbis of the *Yishuv* were enthusiastic about embracing their Jewish Ethiopian brothers. Indeed, throughout the course of the matter, the nature of the Falasha's Judaism arose as an area of concern. The rabbis presented a solution that entailed furthering their religious education. Questions related to race, color, ethnicity or anything else did not arise.

Later chapters in the history of Israel and Ethiopians went on to reflect a dichotomous conceptualization. On one hand, the legacy of condescension toward blacks that had been embedded in Jewish thought since medieval times did surface occasionally. Yet on the other hand, contemporary Judaism regarded its "black brothers" of Ethiopia as an

integral part of itself. Israel would indeed eventually work together with American Jewry to bring the Jews of Ethiopia to the state of Israel.

Conclusion

In my various studies on the relations between Ethiopia and the countries of the Middle East I tried to understand the dialectics between the political and the traditional, between daily dilemmas and the legacies of the historical past. Time and again it became apparent that Christian, Islamic, and Judaic messages actively influenced the concrete aspects. Moreover, the ancient messages of religions were never monolithic. That the old Hebrew saying about the Torah: "Turn to it, and turn to it again, for everything is in it" is applicable to all religions. One really can choose by which message to be inspired, which legacy to follow. Today, this is even truer than in previous decades. We live now in a period in which the ancient dialogue between religion and politics is becoming stronger. Pessimists may foresee a vicious circle of intra-religious fanaticism, even of endless violence between various sections of the same religion. It is not really difficult to be a pessimist in our region. Yet optimists should not be afraid to follow their minds and hearts. Many aspects of modernization do work for better communication, spread of knowledge, emancipation of women, and other processes leading to a better tomorrow. And, it is not only the pace of modern change which gives some hope. Optimists may also derive comfort from the fact that all three relevant religions do contain also strong messages of moderation, tolerance, and respect for good neighbors.

Notes

- ¹ This lecture is based on my effort to study the long history of Ethiopian–Middle Eastern connections. All cases and dimensions mentioned here are based on the following studies: Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and Eritrea, Ras Alula, 1875-1897* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1982); *The Struggle Over Eritrea, 1962-1978* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1983); *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Press, 1986); *Ethiopia and the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Press, 1994); *Ethiopia: An Empire and a Revolution* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: The Open University Press, 1997); Haggai Erlich and Israel Gershoni (eds.), *The Nile – Histories, Cultures, Myths* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000); *The Cross and the River – Ethiopia, Egypt and the Nile* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002); Haggai Erlich, Steven Kaplan and Hagar Salamon, *Ethiopia – Christianity, Islam, Judaism* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: The Open University Press, 2003); *Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia – Christianity, Islam, and Politics Entwined* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007); *Ethiopia – History of a Siege Culture* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Press, 2008); *Islam and Christianity in the Horn of Africa: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010); *Alliance and Alienation – Ethiopia and Israel During Haile Selassie's Time* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center, 2013).
- ² For a succinct summary of relations between Aksumite Ethiopia and the Arab Peninsula, see Stuart Munro-Hay, "Arabia – Relations in ancient times," in Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), vol. 1, pp. 294-300 [hereafter: *EAE*]. See also the bibliography at the end of the item.
- ³ The Sura of the Elephant: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful / Hast thou not seen how Lord dealt with the army of the Elephant? / Did he not cause their stratagem to miscarry? / And he sent against them birds in flocks (*abablis*) / Clay stones did not hurl down upon them, / And he made them like stubble eaten down."
- ⁴ See al-Bukhari, *Sahih* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1997), vol. 2, pp. 577-599; Muslim, *Sahih* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1983), vol. 4, p. 2232.
- ⁵ Erlich, "A Contemporary Biography of Ras Alula," in idem, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence*, pp. 81-128.
- ⁶ Ran HaCohen, *Kebra Nagast: The Ethiopian National Epic* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2009). See also P. Marrasini, "Kebra nagast," in *EAE* (Hamburg: Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), vol. 3, pp. 364-368. All the entries in this new encyclopedia contain rich, up-to-date bibliographical references.
- ⁷ See Stuart Munro-Hay, "Christianity," *EAE*, vol. I, pp. 717-723.

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- ⁸ Steven Kaplan, "Christianity: The Religion of the Realm between Control and Diversity," in Erlich, Kaplan and Salamon (eds.), *Ethiopia: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism*, pp. 17-138.
- ⁹ On the "Lion of Judah" as a symbol of Kings of Ethiopia, see R. Pankhurst, "Lion(s)," *EAE*, vol. 3, pp. 571-575.
- ¹⁰ English translation of the 1931 Constitution, http://www.worldstatesmen.org/Ethiopia_1931.txt (accessed 10 November 2012).
- ¹¹ See Kirsten Pedersen, "Jerusalem," in *EAE*, vol. 2, pp. 273-277.
- ¹² Fikre Tolossa, *The Hidden and Untold History of the Jewish People and Ethiopians* (n.p.: Lulu Enterprises, Inc., 2011), p. 51.
- ¹³ E.A.W. Budge [trans.], *The Kebra Nagast* (London: The Medici Society Limited, 1922), pp. 106-107.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 201-202.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. p. 191.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. p. 219.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. p. 168.
- ¹⁸ F. Breyer, "Kush," *EAE*, vol. 3, pp. 458-460.
- ¹⁹ Abraham Melamed, *The Image of the Black in Jewish Culture: A History of the Other* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 2-3.
- ²⁰ David Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jacob Shavit, *History in Black: African Americans in Search of an Ancient Past* (London: Frank Cass, 2001).
- ²¹ For the history of Ethiopian Jewry see the studies (and the bibliographies) in Michael Corinaldi, *Jewish Identity: The Case of Ethiopian Jewry* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998); Steven Kaplan, *Beta Israel*, and Hagar Salamon, "Jews of Ethiopia: A Historical and Cultural Study," in Erlich, Kaplan and Salamon (eds.), *Ethiopia: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism*, pp. 263-356. Additional debates and more bibliographical information can be found in Kaplan, "Ayhud," *EAE*, vol. 2, pp. 408-410; "Beta Israel," *EAE*, vol. 1, pp. 552-559; Gamst, "Judaism," *EAE*, vol. 2, pp. 303-308.
- ²² See Kaplan, *Beta Israel*, p. 25.
- ²³ Isaac Grinfeld, *Studies in the History of Jews of Ethiopia* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Habermann Institute for Literary Research, 2011), p. 186; Aviva Halamish, *A Dual Race against Time: Zionist Immigration Policy in the 1930s* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2006), pp. 311-312.
- ²⁴ Grinfeld, *Studies*, pp. 181-207; See also additional chapters there: "Jews of Ethiopia: Roots, Ethnic Origin, and Identity"; "Episodes from the Struggle of Beta Israel for their Survival"; "Yakov Faitlovitch: Father of the Falasha."

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The Nehemia Levtzion Center for Islamic Studies was established at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2004. It aims to encourage and initiate research relating to Islam as a religion and a civilization from its advent in the seventh century C.E. until today, in the Arab world, elsewhere in the Middle East, in Asia and Africa, and in the West. To fulfill this goal, the Center organizes research groups, conferences, seminars and lectures; supports individual and collaborative research; grants scholarships; and encourages dialogue between scholars of Islamic studies and related fields. Islam is approached not only as a religion, but, more broadly, as a culture and a civilization. As such, the Center deals with a range of subjects that include religious thought and practice, material and intellectual culture, politics, society, economics, and interfaith relations.

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The Center is named in memory of the late Professor Nehemia Levtzion, a noted scholar of the history of Islam in Africa and the social history of Islamic religion and culture, who passed away in August 2003. He was also known for his public activities in the sphere of academic administration and related issues, both within the Hebrew University and on a national level.

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