

Evidence mounts of ancient Jewish roots of Beta Israel Ethiopian Jewry

A Genetic Perspective on the Beta Israel, Ethiopian Jews

While Ethiopian Jews, historically known as the Beta Israel (or derogatorily as Falashas), constitute an inseparable component of today's Israeli society, the question as to how and what makes them different from non-Jewish Ethiopians remains a prominent subject of discussion. As I discuss in a [prior article](#) (Omer, 2013), scholarly circles today remain overwhelmingly attracted to the hypothesis—also known as *the traditional theory*—that attributes the origins of the Beta Israel to medieval theological transformations within Christianity (e.g. Quirin, 2010; Kaplan, 1995), rather than to Jewish origins. By this theory, the relationship between the Beta Israel and the native populations is defined as socially constructed, with no ancestral or genetic connection to the ancient Hebrews.

My argument draws on evidence that the group is of ancient Jewish descent. Beside the abundant historical evidence, I base my argument on the recent genetic research—summarized by Jon Entine in [Abraham's Children: Race, Identity and the DNA of the Chosen People](#)—which shows that the Beta Israel were established since the mid-first millennium CE period. Genetic research suggests that some shared ancestry from the latter time period is preserved within the group (p. 149; 2007; Saey, 2010, p. 13; Ostrer, 2012); that is through maintaining kinship ties and obviously through restricting intermarriages with outsiders. I also argue that the intermixture of the Beta Israel with neighboring populations was an inconsistent process that occurred gradually over extended periods of time. Outsiders were integrated into the group through spontaneous interaction and assimilation. One point I emphasize is that the historical, geographical and probably genealogical connections between the Beta Israel and Northern Sudan, which no scholar has practically examined in depth, is essential to understanding the group's origins.



Benjamin Netanyahu (Prime Minister) with various leaders of the Ethiopian community celebrating Jerusalem Day. Click image for larger version.

Background

Although the majority of the Beta Israel, known in the local Ge'ez-Semitic as *Falasha*, which translates to mean "strangers," were settled in Israel since the 1980s, they have historically inhabited the northwestern areas of the Ethiopian highlands. Their settlements were distributed around Lake Tana, the Semien mountains, as well as western areas in what is today Northern Sudan (Tegegne & Pinchuk, 2008, p. 43-4; Jacobovici, 2004). Historically prohibited by the Abyssinian law from owning land, the Beta Israel primarily worked as tenant farmers and artisans.

Traditionally, they also practiced blacksmithery and pottery. Back in time, they spoke a range of Ge'ez dialects, though in the twentieth century Tigrinya and Amharic were already the dominant languages of the group. Accordingly, they have been generally viewed as part of the Amhara and Tigray-Tigrinya people, also known as *Habash*—or Abyssinians. While preserving a restricted level of interaction with outsiders—with intermarriage strongly prohibited—the Beta Israel remained an isolated and a distinct ethno-religious entity.

Methodology

Non science scholars today excessively rely on the existing religious texts of the Beta Israel to analyze their Jewish heritage and distinctive traits that are not shared with the Abyssinian Christian society. Researches, however, suggest that the sum of authentic Jewish material within the religious texts of the group is small (Devens, 1995, p. ix). Rather, the texts are shown to contain significant borrowings from Christian sources. These conclusions are widely accepted by scholars as supporting evidence to the

argument of the traditional theory that the Beta Israel people were originally non-Jewish (Quirin, 2010, p. 5-6).



show the various human and environmental calamities

experienced by the Beta Israel could have contributed to the

loss of significant religious texts. Moreover, the group's long history of isolation in the remote Semien and Tana regions would have resulted in total, or almost total, illiteracy. Hence, it is viable to speculate whether the group's textual heritage was much expanded at some point in time; that is when illiteracy was not as prevalent as it has been in recent times. On this, Leslau (1951, p. xlii) elaborates:

First of all, the isolation from the Jewish world on one hand and the more or less close contact with the Ethiopian population on the other led to the abandonment of many traditional customs and the introduction of religious elements of non-Jewish origin. Secondly, we must not forget that the observance of some Jewish religious customs requires a more or less high economic standard among the people and that consequently the lack of material resources in the Falasha communities might have led them to give up some of these practices.

The role of militant invasions and famines in causing the losses of textual material is well exemplified in the testimony by a Beta Israelite during the 1890s ("A Letter" as cited in Quirin, 2010, p. 169):

Formerly we were very numerous; formerly there were 200 synagogues, now only 30 remain. In the time of the Dervishes [Sudanese-Mahadist invaders] a frightful number of people died from famine.... We are in great misery. Our books have been destroyed; the Dervishes burnt them by fire. We have no longer any schools; they are destroyed.

Hence, the surviving religious texts of the Beta Israel do not form reliable sources when it comes to understanding their Jewish heritage; they offer only partial and limited indications. Rather historical evidence, genetic research and archeological data must be examined to provide the most ideal material for analysis.

Scholarly discussion

The traditional theory, as advocated by Quirin (2010) and Kaplan (1995), identify the Beta Israel as the

product of a fourteenth-to-sixteenth century separatist movement within Christianity. A problematic trend, expressed by proponents of this theory, involves suppressing the distinctions between the Beta Israel and the non-Jewish Abyssinians. They argue that the distinctive traits of the group were socially invented by and within the Abyssinian society and, therefore, the group had no ancient Jewish roots. Hence, they cite “the absence of any Jewish religious traditions and normative Judaism as supporting evidence.



Id (2003, p. 133) when he argues that “the

concept of an ‘*Ethiopian Jew*’ is an *invented* twentieth

century phenomenon”. Accordingly, he seems to claim that Judaism was adopted by the Beta Israel for the purpose of relating to the world Jewry. As evidence for his argument, Summerfield cites examples of religious elements recently adopted by the group from normative Judaism; that is during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—such as the Jewish star, prayer shawls, and use of Hebrew in services (p. 131-2).

There are four major problems come with this view. First, Summerfield, like other proponents of the traditional theory, ignores the larger picture; that is the religion of the Beta Israel “seemed to have broad equivalences with practices of the wider Jewish world, except they did not know Hebrew or the Talmud or follow post biblical practices such as the Chanukah” as Quirin (2010, p. 5) admits.

Second, the adoption of some normative Jewish practices does not contradict the evidence for the ancient Jewish origins of the group; nor does it support the idea that the “concept of an ‘*Ethiopian Jew*’” (Summerfield, 2003, p. 133) is “*invented*.” As Teferi (2005, p. 176) states “Indeed, one can write a lot on the differences of practice with normative Judaism but that, by no means, implies that the Ethiopian Jews have a different religion” Summerfield seems to ignore that the essential Jewish beliefs of the Beta Israel in the *Orit* (Torah), the coming of the Messiah (Kessler, 2012), and the pre-rabbinical principles, all pre-date the group’s introduction to normative Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Third, his argument begs two basic questions: First, *why would the Beta Israel adopt normative Jewish traits if they were not Jewish in the first place?* And second, *why did they identify themselves, and were identified by others, in the Israelite-Jewish context prior to their exposure to normative Judaism?* While references to Israelite presence in Kush are well founded in Biblical literature (e.g. Psalm 87:4, Isaiah 11:11, and Zephaniah 3:10), a wide spectrum of medieval and contemporary sources refers to Jews in the areas of the Semien and Tana (Ashkenazi, 1987, p. 10). And if Summerfield’s hypothesis is based on the

assumption that normative Judaism was adopted by the Beta Israel as a more civilized and foreign—perhaps European—influence, then his argument also fails. For such an assumption would contradict the Beta Israel's overwhelming rejection of Europe's Christian missionaries. According to one statistic, missionaries converted only about 1% of the poor Beta Israel population within a fifty year period (Hamilton, 2007, p. 143). And even those who converted during this period have predominantly returned to Judaism (Seeman, 2010, p. 63).

Fourth, Summerfield fails to consider the gap between the religious material of the Beta Israel and normative Judaism as a natural outcome of the group's geographical isolation, social marginalization and various levels of deprivations.

Identity

The Beta Israel have traditionally attributed their descent to the Israelite tribe of Dan. On the other hand, they were commonly identified by the Abyssinians with prejudice, as strangers (*Falasha*) and as being inferior. The Israelite Jewish identity of the group is historically well established across a vast spectrum of sources. Notable of these was the ninth-century Jewish scholar Eldad Ha-Dani, whose very name translates to *Eldad the Danite*, and who identifies himself as the citizen of a Jewish state “beyond the rivers of Cush [Kush]” (Halper, 2009, p. 49). Eldad was precise about the unique Israelite identity of his people from the tribe of Dan. Others include the twelfth century traveler Benjamin of Tudela (as cited in Kaplan, 1995, p. 50) who refers to “Israelites” in the mountains proximate to *Nubia*— i.e. the medieval name of the Nile Valley area of Kush in Northern Sudan. Also worth mentioning is the Chief Rabbi of Egypt who wrote in the sixteenth century confirming the origin of the Beta Israel as Jews from “the tribe of Dan” (as cited in Bleich, 1977, p. 302).

However, the perception of the traditional theory, given its trend in suppressing the distinctions of the Beta Israel from the Christian society, has distorted the historical reality of the group's identity. Kaplan, for example, identifies *ayhud*, which is the Agaw word for *Jews*, as a vague term that includes vilified Christians. He cites cases in which medieval authors, starting from the fourteenth century, pejoratively referred to antagonized Christian groups as *ayhud*.

The word *Falasha*, on the other hand, was not used in pre-sixteenth century sources (Kaplan, 1995, p. 60). Hence, Kaplan seems to conclude that the *ayhud* were somehow different from the *Falasha*. He identifies the *ayhud* as the product of influences “from groups both within and outside the Ethiopian Orthodox Church”(p. 77). I argue to the contrary; the pejorative use of *ayhud*—to label Christian adversaries—is best explained within the context of a pre-existing Jewish community of which the Abyssinians are socially aware.

Additionally, *ayhud* was not the only term that was historically used to refer to the Beta Israel. In fact, the group was dubbed with different terms at different times and with varying degrees of regional interchangeability (Quirin, 2010, p.13). A term that was viewed as pejorative by some Beta-Israel in one area was accepted by members of the same group in another area (Ezer, 2002; Aescoly, 1943). *Kayla*, *Tabib*, and *Bejrond*, are examples of other names used to dub the group. (For more on *Bejrond* see Quirin, 2010, p. 137-8). (The origin of the term *Kayla* is unknown; *Tabib* seems to translate to *healer*

possibly due to a perception that associated the group with superstition; and *Bejrond* developed as the result of nineteenth century stereotypes associated with artisan and labor occupations.)

Hence, the term *ayhud* was not an exclusive reference to the Beta Israel, beside *Falasha*. And although the term was at times derogatorily manipulated to refer to ostracized Christians, it was fundamentally conceived in context of its literal translation, simply meaning *Jews*—and has accordingly referred to the Beta Israel. Even Kaplan acknowledges, in contradiction to his own line of argument, that “geography, historiography, and religion all seem to link the two groups [the *ayhud* and *Falasha* of later periods]” (Kaplan, 1995, p. 63).

Early Jews of Aksum

ethiopians-chained

Aksum was established as a recognizable civilization no earlier than the first century CE. Situated

Image not found or type unknown

between the Kushite kingdom along Sudan’s Nile Valley to the

west and the Arabian Peninsula across the Red Sea to the east, Aksum was a crossroad of major trade routes. Local Agaw, Northern Sudanese-Kushite, and South Arabian elements blended together in Aksum (Dumper & Stanley, 2007, p.17). Studies have already established that Judaism had entered Aksum prior to the establishment of Church; that is sometime between the first and fourth centuries CE (Kaplan, 1995, p. 19). There is no doubt that Jews participated in the establishment of Christianity in Aksum, as well known through the Hebraic influences found in the early Christian texts of the Ethiopian Church.

A popular misconception among scholars today is that a Jewish migration from the Mediterranean through Northern Sudan would have been “nebulous” (Quirin, 2010, p. 10). Thus, a majority of scholars suggest South Arabia as the likeliest source of Aksum’s Jewish influence. Yet, the wide range of historical, archeological, and linguistic evidence—including the institutionalization of Greek during the fourth century CE—signify that contacts between Aksum and the Mediterranean were strong and direct. In fact, Aksum’s economic prosperity is inseparable from its reputation as a “master of the Indian Ocean-Mediterranean trade routes” (Adler & Pouwels, 2014, p. 229). Ceramics and funerary evidence from what is today northern Ethiopia, show Kushite cultural influences all through the second half of the first millennium BCE (see: Hatke, 2013, p. 32; Fattovich, 1994, p. 14-8; Lobban, 2004, p. 58).

Besides being an important trade partner, Kush, which predates Aksum by more than fifteen hundred years (Omer, 2013), offered the direct and relatively easy land routes through which Aksum accessed the Mediterranean world (Phillipson, 1998, p. 24). In fact, in the second century CE, Greco-Egyptian geographer Claudius Ptolemy wrote about the Aksumites as a nation of “Ethiopia” (Mokhtar, 1990, p. 381).

Here, it should be noted that the name *Ethiopia* in ancient times referred to the civilization of Kush in northern Sudan, not to Aksum in today’s Ethiopia. (This complexity in usage led to great confusion among scholars in the past [i.e. Omer, 2013].) Hence, Claudius’ reference to the Aksumites, in the context of *Ethiopia*, may indicate that the Aksum area was in a subsidiary relationship to Kush. And although Claudius refers to the cities of Meroe and Adulis, he makes no mention of Aksum—neither as a city nor a kingdom.

Thus, in context of the historical, archeological, and geographical indications, it is reasonable to suggest that the first Jewish elements within Aksum trace to Kush. A number of accounts, including those provided in Beta Israel traditions suggest that the ancestors of the group arrived through the Nile Valley (Quirin, 2010, p. 23). As mentioned, Biblical passages, in addition to a number of extra-Biblical traditions, suggest an Israelite presence in Kush, particularly in Zephaniah 3:10 “From beyond the rivers of Cush [Kush] my worshipers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings” (New International Version). In addition to Eldad Ha-Dani, Obadiah of Bertinoro during the fifteenth century suggests that the spices sold by the Kushites “come from” (Abrahams & Montefiore, 1889) the Beta Israel, and Chief Rabbi David ibn Zimra of Egypt in the sixteenth century identifies the Beta Israel as the Jews from “the Land of Cush” (as cited in Bleich, 1977, p. 302).

After tedious research, Kessler (2012, p. 60) analyzes:

Scholars agree that the Jewish religion had a considerable following in the Axumite state before the time of King Ezana and as it is probable that there was a Jewish presence in the neighboring kingdom of Meroë with which Axum was in communication Jewish influences could have followed the well-worn routes across the border by way of the Blue Nile and Atbara rivers, while similar, though somewhat different, influences could also have penetrated from south Arabia and subsequently disappeared.

Thus, Jewish presence in Kush appears to predate the entry of the Jews in Aksum. By the time of their migration to Aksum, these Jews would have already exhibited the phenotypes of Northern Sudanese populations. This would explain the physical affinity between the Beta Israel today and the people of Northern Sudan, which will be discussed below.

Contacts with surrounding populations

The date for the departure of Jews from the Aksum area and their subsequent clustering in the Semien region is widely estimated to the early sixth century (Kaplan, 1995, p. 39). This date correlates with the reign of the fervent Christian king of Aksum Kaleb. Known for conducting wide scale conversions, church building, and anti-pagan campaigns, Kaleb’s relationship with Aksum’s Jewish population was probably

restless. In 520, he waged a war against a Jewish king in South Arabia and overthrew him in favor of a Christian one. Dating to his reign, Cosmas writes (as cited in McCrindle, 1897, Book II): “As for the Semenai, where he says there are snows and ice, it is to that country the King of the Axômites expatriates any one whom he has sentenced to be banished.”

Kaplan (p. 39) speculates whether those “sentenced to be banished” were the Jews of Aksum. As mentioned, genetic research points to the establishment of the group in the mid-first millennium CE (Entine, 2013, p. 149; 2007; Saey, 2010, p. 13; Ostrer, 2012). Hence, at this point we have enough historical evidence, and correlative genetic indications, to suggest that the ancestral establishment of the contemporary Beta Israel goes back to the amalgamation of Jewish communities in the Semien and Tana regions sometime between fourth and sixth centuries CE (Omer, 2013). Thus, starting from the latter period, the banished Jews were transformed from scattered and fragmented Aksumite Jews into an ethnically, socially, and culturally integrated, yet fairly isolated, Beta Israel population.

The Semien areas of the Beta Israel may have been autonomous since the late sixth century; that is when the Aksumite kingdom lost its grip over its northern and western territories (see: Kobishchanov & Michels, 1979). Despite the attempts of the Beta Israel at restricting contacts with outsiders, intermarriage with surrounding pagan populations, in the western highlands, have probably occurred. According to some reports, the majority of western Agaw populations remained pagan until the sixteenth century (Abir, 1980, p. 161). Underdeveloped and decentralized, the pagans would have rarely intimidated the Beta Israel. Unlike the Christians who commonly perceived the Beta Israel as the *crucifiers of Christ* (“Journal,” 1994), pagan societies probably held no relevant perspective. In fact, there appear to have been a tendency among the church and royal authorities, during medieval times, to view the Beta Israel and pagans under one umbrella of *heresy* (Quirin, 1988; Kaplan, 1995, p. 61).

The pagan Agaw, in particular, appear to have shared a close historical relationship with the Beta Israel. This relationship is best exemplified in the Zagwe dynasty who replaced the Aksumite kingdom at an unknown date. While the Zagwe were prosperous in the early twelfth century, they were absorbed by the Abyssinian dynasty in about 1270. Nonetheless, the history of the Zagwe is hard to construct for it is plagued by political instability and internal strife. Although the Zagwe were Christians for most of their known history, traditions suggest that the dynasty was initiated by Beta Israel—Jews.

In fact, the Zagwe rulers not only claimed Hebraic roots, but alleged to have descended from Moses and Zipporah (Burton, 2007, p. 188). The infamous Jewish Queen Judith (Jeffrey, 2007, p. 155), who was documented as invading the Aksum area from the “west” (Trimingham, 1952, p. 52) in the late ninth or tenth century, is suggested to have been an early ruler of the Zagwe (Burton, 2007, p. 187-8). In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, rulers of the dynasty controlled important Beta Israel regions, with Lasta being a core area. It was this historical relationship, between the Beta Israel and the Agaw, that inspired scholars to exaggerate and argue that the Beta Israel have descended from Agaw converts to Judaism (Ezer, 2003, p. 27; Ullendorff, 1968). The problem with this argument, however, is that there is neither evidence, nor tangible justification, for the happening of such an Agaw conversion to Judaism.

The Qemant were another small native population who might have partially integrated with the Beta Israel. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both the Beta Israel and the Qemant in Gondar were

popularly identified with labor occupations (Quirin, 2010, p. 89-101). In fact, some identified the Qemant as a Hebraic group (Blady & Kaplan, 2000, p. 355). A cooperative relationship between the two groups may have, thus, developed as some Qemant are said to have viewed the Beta Israel as a “natural barrier against the Amhara” (Semi, 2005, p. 42).

That said, we ought to take great caution not to exaggerate the level of integration between the Beta Israel and such pagan populations. Religious beliefs and ethnic affiliations would have formed a wide social gap between the groups so that intermarriage would not have commonly occurred. Not to mention, there are no notable evidence that suggests the occurrence of a significant intermixture.

Conversions to Christianity

In the fifteenth century, the Abyssinian monarchs sought to expand their territories to the western area of the highlands so as to exploit the economic resources of the regions inhabited by the Beta Israel (Ashkenazi, 1987, p. 11), particularly those of northern Tana. Correlating with these royal infiltrations was the growth of missionary activities and monastic movements in the regions.

One of the early documented missionaries was that of Gabra-Iyyasus, during the second half of the fourteenth century, who converted a leading figure amongst the Beta Israel, Zana Gabo (Quirin, 2010, p. 50; Ramos & Gamada, 2000, p. 176). His conversion was followed by the baptism of his fellow relatives. The king himself is said to have fallen in love and married Zana Gabo's daughter. Their children later formed the clergy of the monastery of *Debra San* whose prestigious Beta Israel background was well recognized (Rossini, 1938, p. 409-52; Quirin, 2010, p. 50). Through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries missionary activities impacted the different settlements of the Beta Israel. Regional Christian communities of Beta Israel descent were developed in different areas. In the fifteenth century churches sprang in Shawa for the Beta Israel converts. At one point a Beta Israel convert was awarded the priestly authority over four churches (Quirin, 2010, p. 48; Tamrat, 1972).

Evidence suggests that the Christians held prejudiced feelings even towards the Beta Israel who converted to Christianity, which accords with the group's separate ethnic status within the Abyssinian society. This is evident through the account surrounding the conversion of a Beta Israel once messianic figure Yessahalo (Kaplan, 1995, p. 59; Rossini, 1910, p. 103-9). Even though Yessahalo became a Christian, he experienced prejudice first hand when he was prevented from entering the church by the clergy who claimed to have doubted his faith.

Another illustrative account involves the succession to the throne of Sarsa Dangal (1563-97) by his son Yaqob from a Beta Israel mistress. Being a Christian like his deceased father, Yaqob was crowned as the new heir to the throne in 1597. His mother, due to her Beta Israel ethnicity, was distanced from the royal body. Due to being half Beta Israel, Yaqob was so alienated from the nobility and military leadership that he was easily overthrown by a contestant a few years later. Fearing for his own safety, Yaqob attempted to escape to his uncle in the Semien who happened to be the infamous Beta Israel leader Gedewon. He was, however, caught and convicted by the court for encroachment of power, paganism and sexual perversion (Kaplan, 1995, p. 89). Further, it was claimed that he was not the son of Sarsa Dangal (Quirin, 2010, p. 82).

As one author puts it, Yaqob was evidently “guilty of nothing other than of having tried to be king” (Berry, 1976). After a period of exile, Yaqob was persuaded by dishonest military leaders to attempt to reclaim the throne. Lacking in support, Yaqob was killed by another claimant in 1607 (Kaplan, 1995, p. 90; Perruchon, 1896). Such and other historical circumstances elucidate the prejudiced perspective that the Abyssinian Christians held towards the Beta Israel as an ethnic group regardless of religious affiliation.

The Beta Israel were exposed to Christian missionaries during the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century. Since the dire defeat of the Beta Israel militant movement by the royal armies in 1626, their overall condition was in a downward spiral. Widespread social tension and political instability, caused in part by the increased sovereignty of the nobility in the Gondar area and accompanied by plundering activities and raids by the royal troops ravaged the country side. Sudanese-Mahadist invasions from the west devastated the region, notably in 1885 and 1888. The Great Famine (1888-92) is claimed by some to have killed one-third of the country’s population (Gilbert, 2005, p. 89).

Missionaries of the *London Society* claimed to have converted 1,470 Beta Israel, between 1868 and 1894, out of a total of 10,000 to 50,000 (Seeman, 2010, p. 63). The percentage is evidently small when viewed in context of the great efforts of the missionaries. The result was an unassimilated Beta Israel/Falasha Christians, or *Falash-Mura*, a majority of whom have returned to Judaism.

Just as in medieval times, testimonies suggest that the Beta Israel converts were not readily accepted by the Christians and experienced prejudices. Until the 1960s, there was a popular belief that the Beta Israel converted to Christianity just to own land (Messing, 1982, p. 97). (i.e. King Yeshaq [1413–30] issued the first known decree that prohibited the Jews from owning land when he declared: “He who is baptized in the Christian religion may inherit the land of his father. *Otherwise let him be a Falasha!*” [Parfitt, 1987, p. 125])

The fact that leaders of the Beta Israel were rarely interested in pursuing theological discussions with the Christian missionaries, further affirms that the group was established on an ethnic rather than a religious foundation. Historically, arguments raised by the Beta Israel, in response to the preaching of missionaries, typically emphasized the sacredness of preserving the unity of the group.

In the late nineteenth century, one Beta Israel priest expressed (Quirin, 2010, p. 189) in protest of the missionaries, “We are, and remain, and will die Falashas, with the words on our lips: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord’.” When challenged about their practice of sacrifice, another Beta Israel Priest is

documented stating (p. 189): “My children, our faith is the true faith, and our bloody sacrifices have been ordered to us by Moses. We will remain what we are.”

Returning to Judaism

The return of a Beta Israel population to Judaism following a forced—usually superficial—conversion to Christianity, is a pattern that variably reoccurs through the history of the group. King Amda Seyon (1314-44) is documented to have sent military campaigns to subdue insubordinate Beta Israel who were formerly defeated in the Semien and other neighboring sites. According to the report (p. 49) “Formerly, these people were Christians, but now they have denied Christ like the Jews, [...]”

Of great importance here is the indication that they “were Christians,” which as Quirin (p. 49-50) admits, “may reflect earlier evangelization efforts, as far back as Aksumite and Zagwe times, when some *ayhud* underwent nominal conversion and had since lapsed as royal authority in the area waned.” During the fifteenth century a Beta Israel is documented (as cited in Kaplan, 1995, p. 59) as telling a Christian missionary: “We are Christians [but] not from our hearts but [because] we feared the command of the king and governors. Baptize us.” Hence, there is no reason to interpret such a situation as a “phenomenon of Christians joining an *ayhud* community” as Quirin (2010, p. 67), later concludes.

Such a phenomenon may also be detected through the tale of the monk Abba Sabra. According to the story, the monk was converted by the Beta Israel to Judaism while he was trying to convert them to Christianity. The monk ended up writing, or rewriting, religious books for the Beta Israel and taught the *Orit*. If we assume that Abba Sabra was not fictional, then we may speculate on whether he was of a Beta Israel descent—as in the case of the aforementioned Debra San clergy. In any case, such a monk would have mostly likely gained his importance amongst the Beta Israel out of his literacy skills.

As discussed earlier, the geographical isolation of the Beta Israel would have contributed to the prevalence of illiteracy. Thus, the Beta Israel would have welcomed the coming of such a compliant and literate monk with great delight. This is also well exemplified through the account of a monk named Qozmos who joined the Beta Israel after he abandoned his monastery due to theological disagreements with the clergy (Ashkenazi, 1987, p. 13). Qozmos’s union with Beta Israel began after an accidental encounter when he met some Beta Israel while wandering in hunger. When he asked them for food, they accepted but with the implied condition that he write the *Orit* for them.

The proposal raised by Quirin (2010, p. 66) and proponents of the traditional theory that Abba Sabra has instituted “the Beta Israel-Falasha religion” is, hence, an exaggeration to say the least. In addition, Quirin’s skepticism that the monk might have introduced monasticism is unlikely. Monastic practices, as suggested in the writings of Abu’l-Mocali, most likely predate the time of Abba Sabra (see: Teferi, 2005, p. 185; Shelemay, 1994, p. 145). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this phenomenon is no less notable. In addition to the mentioned 1,470 Beta Israel who were claimed to have converted to Christianity between 1868 and 1894, but who have mostly returned to Judaism, studies identified 50,000 Beta Israel in the 1960s who identified as Christians, but who continued to practice Jewish traditions (Messing, 1982, p. 93-9; Quirin, 2010, p. 188).

Genetics

As mentioned, genetic evidence—as best introduced by Entine in *Abraham's Children* (2007)—has already demonstrated that the group maintains an ancient descent that traces all the way back to the mid-first millennium CE (Entine, 2013; Saey, 2010; Ostrer, 2012). As someone who is of East African descent, I argue that the African ethnicity of the Beta Israel appears to be more complex than *just Ethiopian*.

The observed phenotypes of the Beta Israel-Ethiopian Jews today strongly reflect the features of the riverine Northern Sudanese populations. To a lesser proportion, they reflect the phenotypes commonly found among the mainstream Habash-Abyssinian populations of what is today northern Ethiopia. Contrary to the argument that propose the Beta Israel to have originated from Agaw converts (Ezer, 2003, p. 27; Ullendorff, 1968), only a minority of the population today displays distinguishable Agaw features—i.e. large and deep-set eyes, notably thin eye-brows, and the usual dark complexion but with a unique smooth-yellowish tone. This may indicate that intermarriage with the Agaw was limited.

A small minority displays clear Somali features with longer faces and darker than average complexion. A much smaller minority of the group shows clear West/Central African features attributed to the Barya populations who were noted in the fourth century CE inscription of Ezana (Zarroug, 1991, p. 8). The Barya were historically subjugated by the Abyssinians and forced into farm work as late as the mid-twentieth century.

Hence, phenotypes indicate a fair degree of African diversity with the Beta Israel. That being said, understanding the potential contributions of Northern Sudan is significantly important to better understand the development of the Beta Israel, particularly as it pertains to their historical and ethnic roots.

Conclusion

In conclusion, historical indications overwhelmingly suggest that the intermixture of the Beta Israel with surrounding populations was spontaneous, inconsistent and infrequent. Evidence suggests that the traditional theory, which attributes the origin of the Beta Israel to Abyssinia's Christian society, is unreliable. Evidence also suggests that the Beta Israel originated from Jews who migrated from Kush to Aksum sometime between the first and fourth century CE. It was this Jewish community that was exiled from Aksum to the Semien and Tana areas in the sixth century by King Kaleb that ultimately produced the Beta Israel society. Accordingly, the group's identity has historically conformed to an ethno-religious Israelite-Jewish-*ayhud* context in the simplest and most direct manner.

The prejudices that the Beta Israel Christian converts have experienced within the Abyssinian Christian society, as well as the tendency of the converts to return to Judaism, further points to the ethnic character of the group. And as elaborated, a Northern Sudanese element is evident through the current phenotypes of the Beta Israel, which may suggest that the ancestors of the group arrived from Kush. On the other hand, the peripheral nature of the group's traditional regions, which marginally stretched into Northern Sudan, may also be considered as a factor in an intermixture with Northern Sudanese populations.

More genetic research on the Beta Israel is needed in order to free the course of exploration, on their

origins and development, from the biases of the traditional theory. Such research may introduce us to new approaches that may help expand our perception on the formation and influence of Jewish cultures in Africa. It may also shed light on the reliability of the Biblical narrative, particularly with regards to the existence of an Israelite community in the land of Kush as represented by the Beta Israel.

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