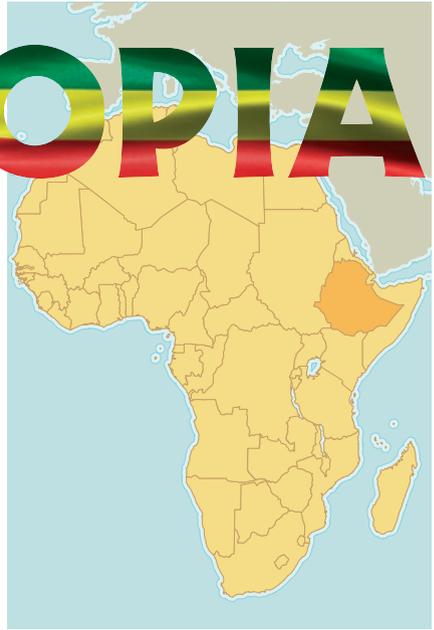


# ETHIOPIA

Part 2

by C. P. Hallihan



The first part of this article promised that part 2 would ‘...continue under the Religious heading to look at the Falashas—Ethiopian Jews calling themselves “Beta Israel” (House of Israel)—Islam, Protestant mission, Rastafarianism, and then the language and the Bible in Ethiopia.’

## **RELIGION – continued**

### **• Falashas**

The meaning of this Amharic word is in the range of ‘separated, exile, emigrant’, and these people are certainly distinct within Ethiopia. Given the Solomonic tradition in Ethiopia, it is not surprising that the same subtext appears as the source of the Falashas—but it is as recently as 1975 that Israel accepted their ‘Jewishness’ (the tribe of Dan offered as their provenance by some), and that not without dissent within Israel and worldwide Jewry.

Falasha religion is basically, but by no means exclusively, Mosaic, derived from an Ethiopic version of the Pentateuch.

There is no Hebrew tradition at all, in language or literature, and by no means are all ordinances and rites observed. Their liturgical language is Ge‘ez, the same as that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Sabbath is rigorously kept, though in unusual ways, deemed to have been created before the heavens and the earth, and under the dominion of a distinct angelic being. Both male and female circumcision are performed.

Historians say that this people, though distinct and separate, never presented themselves as ‘Jewish’ much before the 19th century. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is so much fixated in the Old Testament and Apocryphal books that it has often been labelled as ‘Judaising’ and perhaps this itself, with innate pagan admixture plus isolation, is the rootstock of the Falashas. There are many conflict-

ing strands in the history of these people; Yodit, for example, the Zagwe Queen who brought Axum to ruin at the end of the 10th century, is identified in some accounts as of the Falasha. That could explain the hostility and exclusion that came their way. However, they are now gathered under the umbrella of Israel's 'Law of Return' and acknowledged as Jewish. During Ethiopia's civil wars of the late 20th century, the Falashas suffered much, and in three distinct waves over 70,000 were airlifted to Israel.<sup>1</sup>

### • Islam

We have seen the trading and political impact of Islam in Ethiopia in Part I of this article, and readers will have a general awareness of the history of Islam. The *CIA World Factbook* now puts Islam as the second most widely practised religion in Ethiopia, with some 33% of the population as adherents.<sup>2</sup> It is the majority (60%) religion of the Somali, Afar and Oromo peoples in Ethiopia. There were Muslims in Ethiopia during Mohammed's lifetime, fleeing from persecution in Arabia; and its first mosque was built in the 8th century. This rise of Islam was a large factor in the isolation of Ethiopia for almost a millennium.

Ethiopia, then, has an extensive and very active Muslim population, playing a very significant role in the life of the country. The majority of Muslims inhabit the eastern, southern and western lowlands, but there are also many followers of Islam in Addis Ababa and in all Ethiopian towns—even in the so-called Christian highlands. Mosques, however, were for the most part constructed only within the last century or so, but they are now found throughout the length and breadth of the country. Official sources, both Christian and Mus-

lim, speak of cooperation between the two, but many other sources, from both sides, say 'don't believe it'.

### • Protestant Mission

Protestant missions entered the country in the 19th century, with the intention of contributing to the renewal of the Orthodox church and the spread of the Gospel within the non-Christian population. Their witness resulted in the



'Swedish Lutheran missions  
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formation of Protestant churches. Swedish Lutheran missions were the earliest, later joined by missionaries from Denmark, Norway, Germany, and the United States. The Sudan Interior Mission began work in the south of Ethiopia in the 1920s. Progress was certainly unremarkable: four converts recognised by 1932, and perhaps as many as a hundred by the time the invading Italians drove them out of Ethiopia in 1938. When SIM returned five years later, they discovered a flourishing church of a hundred congregations and 20,000 members! Numbers grew steadily and sometimes spectacularly. The Kale Heywat (Word of Life) church, which grew out of the SIM churches, has continued to flourish and grow since the restoration of religious freedom in 1991.

A Reformed presence in Ethiopia arose from a decision in 1869 by the United Presbyterian Church of North America<sup>3</sup>

to send missionaries. This did not happen until 1919 when a deadly epidemic, the Spanish flu, swept across the country. Thomas Alexander Lambie, who was a medical missionary of the UPCNA stationed in Sudan, received an urgent invitation to provide medical services. The work began within the framework of the Sudan Mission, but the UPCNA decided in 1922 to establish a separate mission. In 1924 the Ethiopia Missionary Association was formed with a mission statement to revive the Orthodox Church and not to set up a separate church.<sup>4</sup> Missionaries in the field more realistically (faithfully?) decided that they should establish a church anyway. While the issue was debated, Italy invaded Ethiopia and the missionaries were forced to leave.

Subsequent liberation from Italian occupation brought surprises to the

returning missionaries and attempts were made to bring together evangelical groups in the country. Beginning in 1944, Conferences of Ethiopian Evangelical Churches were held. Agreement was reached and, on 21 January 1959, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus was inaugurated. Emmanuel Gebre Selassie was elected as the first president. At its foundation the church consisted of four synods, all of Lutheran background. Fifteen years later (1974), one year after the adoption of the Leuenberg Agreement, the churches which had resulted from Presbyterian missions decided to join this church. The Reformed congregations maintained their identity within the EECMY using the name Bethel. Mekane Yesus exerted great influence through 'Radio Voice of the Gospel'. This Lutheran Church international radio

### Landscape in Ethiopia



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station was based in Addis Ababa, and began in 1963, the brainchild of Norwegian missionary Dr. Sig Aske. Two 100kw shortwave transmitters reached much of Africa and Asia, and a medium-wave transmitter served Addis Ababa. In those days of Haile Selassie freedom of speech was frowned on, and the local Amharic Service was subject to censorship and many other limitations. After the political changes of the 1970s, the radio station was sequestered without compensation and used for internal propoganda. The radio ministry continues from the Seychelles.

Mennonite mission came to Ethiopia after World War II for relief work, but received permission to evangelise soon after. Two distinct churches grew out of

#### Old fresco of Christian 'saints', in Ethiopian church



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this influence. Meserete Kristos (Christ is the Foundation) Church has remained integrated with the worldwide Mennonite fellowship, while the Mulu Wengel (Full Gospel) Church has insisted on maintaining its independence from Western ties. It was decisively influenced by the teachings of the Finnish Pentecostal Mission, and has become far more charismatic and Pentecostal than most Mennonite churches. Orthodox Christians refer to all Protestants as 'Pentes' (Pentecostal), a testimony to the influence of the Pentecostal movement on Ethiopian Protestantism. In 1982 the 5,000 strong Meserete Kristos was outlawed by the Marxist government and suffered intense persecution for nine years. When religious freedom was restored in 1991 and the believers were free to gather, Meserete Kristos discovered that they then numbered 50,000, a tenfold increase—a number which is still growing at a rate of approximately 20% per year.<sup>5</sup>

#### • **Rastafarians**

This section is included only to head off complaints if it wasn't! Rastafari is a recent Africa-centred religion developed in Jamaica in the 1930s, following the coronation of Haile Selassie I (Ras Tafari) as King of Ethiopia in 1930. Rastafarians believe Haile Selassie is god and that he will restore Africa to members of the black community who are living in exile as the result of colonisation and the slave trade. Their theology is from the ideas of Marcus Garvey, a political activist who wanted to improve the status of fellow blacks; and there are approximately one million worldwide adherents of Rastafari as a 'faith'. The 2001 census found 5,000 Rastafarians living in England and Wales. It spread globally following the success

of Bob Marley and his music in the 1970s. Rastafarians believe that black people are the chosen of God, but that through colonisation and the slave trade their role and rights have been suppressed. The movement's greatest concerns are the repatriation of black people to their homeland, Africa, and the reinstatement of their position in society. Haile Selassie is outside the religion, having died in 1975 (although most Rastafarians believe he is still alive); the Lion, which represents him, is the symbol of Rastafari. Rastafarian dreadlocks represent the lion's mane.

## LANGUAGE

The national language of Ethiopia is Amharic, a Semitic language also spoken in a number of other countries, particularly Eritrea, Egypt, Israel (and Sweden). There are over twenty-seven million speakers of Amharic, mainly in north-central Ethiopia. It is written with a version of the Ge'ez script known as 'Fidel' and there is no standard way of transliterating Amharic into the Latin alphabet. Amharic is named after the district of Amhara, which is thought to be the historic centre of the language. The greater number of Amharic speakers in Ethiopia are monoglots, and the literacy rate is 29%.

The Ge'ez or Ethiopic script is possibly developed from the Sabaeen/ Minean script, and the earliest known inscriptions in the Ge'ez script date to the 5th century BC. At first the script, written right to left, represented only consonants. Vowel indication started to appear in the 4th century AD during the reign of King Ezana, though it might have developed at an earlier date. Each

symbol represents a syllable consisting of a consonant plus a vowel. The basic signs are modified in a number of different ways to indicate the various vowels.



'Inscriptions in the Ge'ez script  
date to the 5th century BC'

The script is still in use for Ge'ez, the classical language of Ethiopia and a liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and for the Beta Israel Jewish community of Ethiopia.

## ETHIOPIAN BIBLE

### • Ge'ez

With the progression of Christianity from Syria through Egypt into Ethiopia, a need arose for another<sup>6</sup> translation of the Bible reflecting this tradition and the injection of direct Syrian influence. Accurate tracing of the transmission is not possible, but the Old Testament appears to have been translated from Greek into Ge'ez beginning in the 4th century, with some revision made in light of the Hebrew text. This translation seems to have been completed by the 7th century, at which time the New Testament was translated. This 'gap' between Old Testament and New Testament availability has left an ineradicable mark in Ethiopian Church life and teaching, especially as it is all derived from the labours of the Monophysite<sup>7</sup> Syrian monks. Their influence was great and enduring.

Earliest available texts of this Bible date from the 13th century, and from that time it has only been in use as a liturgical text. The current Amharic version was translated from the classical Ge'ez language, commissioned by Haile Selas-



'Earliest available texts of this Bible date from the 13th century'

sie in 1966. The ancient Ge'ez version of the Bible serves as an independent reference ('witness' is, I think, too strong) to other ancient sources, Samaritan, Septuagint, Dead Sea, Vulgate, etc. It reflects readings of the Septuagint in some respects, Samaritan Pentateuch in others. The Ethiopian Canon contains, at present count, fifty-two Old Testament and thirty-eight New Testament books. It is a little (!?) confusing, as there is a 'wider' and a 'narrower' Canon, and somewhere in there is the figure eighty-one, exactly the same number as the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Israel in the 1940s. One of the many books long unknown to the West is Jubilees, known as Kufale in Ethiopia, one of the holiest books in their canon and accepted as by the hand of Moses on Mt. Sinai. In their thirty-eight New Testament books The Shepherd of Hermas, 1 and 2 Clement, and the Apostolic Constitutions are included. Printed editions began in 1513: the Psalms and Song of Solomon in 1513, New Testament in 1549, all at Rome. This New Testament was edited by Ethiopian monks: it was the African language New Testament, and became

the basis of the Ethiopic text of *Walton's Polyglot*, 1657. The British and Foreign Bible Society issued a critical edition between 1826–30.

#### • **Amharic**

When did Ge'ez become Amharic? Not easy to say. The BFBS catalogues list the above 1826 publication as Ethiopic (which I take to be Ge'ez); in the same source an 1824 'Gospels' is listed as Amharic.<sup>8</sup> The Bible published in 1840, revised between 1860–73 and again in 1886, became the standard Amharic text for over fifty years. Who better as a guide than Haile Selassie, who had this to say about the Revised Amharic of 1952:

In former ages Ge'ez was the language of the country and so, even without an interpreter, the people had no dif-

#### A lone acacia tree on a plain in Ethiopia



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faculty in examining and understanding the books; but just as one age succeeds another, so Amharic, which sprang from Ge'ez, gradually grew until it became the Common speech of the people, taking the place of Ge'ez. At that time Ge'ez was understood by the learned People of the Church but was not readily understood by the ordinary people. Arising from this, the scholars in their preaching and work have for centuries been forced in their teaching to interpret from Ge'ez into Amharic. And these conditions prevailed until Our own times...realizing that the first necessity was to have the Scriptures translated into Amharic and printed in bulk, in 1918 when We were still Heir to the Throne and Regent, We chose from amongst the scholars some to translate the Scriptures and to produce the translation alongside the Ge'ez...noting that the mind of the people con-



'The first necessity was to have the Scriptures translated into Amharic'

tinued to grow in understanding, We arranged for a word-for-word translation into Amharic of the books of the Old and New Testaments. Our scholars completed the translation and presented it to Us in 1931 and We ordered its printing. While the book was still in the Press, however, enemy aggression in 1935 halted the work... When, all honour and praise be to God, We had brought about the liberation of Ethiopia and had entered Our Empire, realizing that there ought to be a revision



Old banknote of Ethiopia, 1 birr

from the original Hebrew and Greek of the existing translation of the Bible, We chose scholars qualified for the work of Biblical training and on March 6th, 1947, set up a Bible Committee in Our Palace. The Committee worked with diligence for some five years, and on April 19th, 1952, presented the translation to Us.<sup>9</sup>

There are later revisions: the BFBS lists an Amharic Revised Version (1962) and an Amharic Common Language Bible (1980), and features Ethiopia prominently in current fund raising and project information.<sup>10</sup> The provenance of these Amharic Scriptures would not commend these publications to those who hold to the traditional canon and text of the Reformation Scriptures.

**TBS**

The Society receives and responds to requests for English Scriptures from Ethiopia and from Ethiopians in other countries. We currently have the Words of Life Calendar in Amharic for 2008 and are working on the edition for 2009, and

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work is being done on an Amharic Gospel of John. Ethiopia has been described to me as a nation ‘marinated in various kinds of religion and Scripture, but very little of it healthy’. There are in this ancient land believers and congregations of our persuasion and principles, and it would be a blessing indeed if under the Sovereign power of God a Bible were to be produced which would not only dispel the confusions of ancient Monophysitism and modern Pentecostalism and give surer sound against the teachings of Islam but, most to be desired, make men wise unto salvation. ●

### Endnotes

1. I have avoided the term ‘black Jews’ even though it appears in some sources. It seems to have much wider political and ethnic implications.
2. ‘Ethiopia’, *The World Factbook*, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html), 15 May 2008.
3. At that time a thoroughly conservative, Scottish Covenanter derived, exclusive Psalmody, church.
4. One cannot help but wonder how they thought that such a policy might work, and what had happened to the spirit of 1869!
5. It does seem that there are questions to be asked and answered, and lessons to be learned from the remarkable growth of churches when ‘mission help’ was removed or structured help suppressed.
6. Sahidic, Bohairic (papyrus Bodmer iii) and other Middle Egyptian texts were already extant, not surprisingly revealing an Alexandrian text-type. The Ge‘ez, if anything, reflects the Byzantine type. See Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago, IL, USA: Moody Press, 1968), p. 323.
7. See *Quarterly Record* 583, April to June 2008, page 20, for a brief discussion of Monophysitism.
8. T. H. Darlow and H. F. Moule, *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture*, 3 vols. (London, England: The Bible House, 1911), 2.355.
9. Selected from [en.wikisource.org/wiki/Statement\\_on\\_the\\_Revised\\_Amharic\\_Bible](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Statement_on_the_Revised_Amharic_Bible).
10. As a search of the BFBS’s Web site, [www.biblesociety.org.uk](http://www.biblesociety.org.uk), for Ethiopia will show.