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Narrative Discourse, Social Crisis and the Construction of the Beta Israel Identity.

Introduction

This article deals with the problem of constructing and representing the Beta Israel identity in Ethiopia. The question of Beta Israel identity and how it has been spoken about in written records and given form in oral narratives is an issue of contestation because it involves who 'speaks for the Beta Israel past.' It also involves identifying and critiquing the ideological motives of those historians whose version/imagery of the Beta Israel identity gets produced, legitimized or delegitimized and circulated for public consumption. In a world where the accuracy of facts are fought for, modern historians of the Beta Israel identity in Ethiopia are faced with the task of validating the identity of the Beta Israel identity as knowable reality in a context where the Beta Israel are spoken of as the Negative Other, conceived of as a social group without traceable cultural roots, viable history and an identity to be proud of. The problem of constructing and representing the Beta Israel identity goes beyond the notion of translating "knowing into telling"(White, 1987, p.1). Identity exists and takes place within representation, and this means that in telling the history of the Beta Israel, historians are in fact selecting, re-arranging and ordering facts that come to pass as valid but not incontestable sources of identity. This instability inherent in both written records and the oral legends suggest in fact that there could be as many valid versions of the identity of the Beta Israel people that can be authorized from different locations than has presently been proffered as the most genuine. This article will therefore argue for a 'holistic' approach to an understanding of the Beta Israel identity within a perspective that aims to synthesize elements from the written records and the oral legends without necessarily privileging one over the other.

The Lost Tribe of Dan

One of the most immediate difficulty in reconstructing and representing the Beta Israel Identity has been the overbearing influence of written records in shaping our understanding of the history of the Beta Israel of Ethiopia. For example, documentary and archaeological evidence suggests that before the Aksumite Kingdom accepted Christianity as the religion of Ethiopia in the fourth century CE, Judaism and heathenism (worship of the serpent) existed together (Wagaw, 1993: 7). Heathenism appeared to be rampant among the upper classes, while Judaism had strong support among the Agau (indigenous people) and the lower classes. One fact is clear from all sources: the Beta Israel have always considered themselves to be Jews, believers in the Faith of Moses, exiled from Eretz Israel and quite distinct from the native Gentiles. They were also regarded as such by the Christian, Moslem and idol-worshipping Ethiopian communities around them, who traditionally refer to them as Falashas, meaning exiles or strangers (Kessler, 1982: 4). But exiles from where? Possibly no other aspect of the study of the Beta Israel has over the years been more controversial than that of whether their identity is that of authentic Jews or not (Corinaldi, 1998: 13). Views on this have varied from one extreme to the other. On the one hand, the Beta Israel or "Jews of Cush", which is in and near the present-day Ethiopia, are described by the noted sixteenth century halakhic authority, Rabbi David Ben Abi Zimra (Radbaz) as "without doubt from the tribe of Dan" (cited in Corinaldi, 1998: 13). On the other hand, Edward Ullendorf, seen by some as the doyen of modern Ethiopianists, claims that

> Their (the Falashas') Judaism is merely the reflexion of those Hebraic and Judaic practices and beliefs which were implanted on parts of south-west Arabia … and subsequently brought into Abyssinia (cited in Corinaldi, 1998: 13).

However, a written response from Rabbi Ben-Zimra directly contradicts this account and supports the view that the Ethiopian Jews are descendants of the tribe of Dan.

But those Jews who come from the land of Cush are without doubt from the tribe of Dan, and since they did not have in their midst sages who were masters of the tradition, they clung to the simple meaning of the Scriptures. If they had been taught, however, they would not be irreverent towards the words of our sages, so their status is comparable to a Jewish infant taken captive by non-Jews … And even if you say that the matter is in doubt, it is a commandment to redeem them (Responsum of the Radbaz on the Falasha Slave, Part 7. No. 5, cited in Corinaldi, 1998: 196).

Between these two extremes lie a multitude of views expressed by historians, anthropologists, rabbis and others (Corinaldi, 1998: 13). While the development of the Falasha tradition differs from the rabbinic tradition, the differing tradition cannot be used to derogate the Falashas' Jewishness (Corinaldi, 1998: 14). The halakhic truth, based on rabbinic sources, noted the rabbinic literature, Jewish travellers' reports and the Beta Israel's own traditions and beliefs regarding their origins, their devotion to the Torah, to the God of Israel and to the land of Israel. As such, the halakhic truth may or may not coincide with the scientific view in this matter. Corinaldi suggests that, in deciding on the issue, one should therefore try to establish a proper methodology by relying on Jewish sources. What exactly is meant by Corinaldi's notion of 'proper methodology' is ironically ideologically suspect, because it is motivated by a desire to police the borders of probable and potentially multiple Beta Israel identities through a process of containment. The view that the Beta Israel are descended from the tribe of Dan is the official version of the origins of the Beta Israel, as accepted by the Israeli Rabbinate, who relied among others on the authority of the Radbaz (Decision of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel on the Matter of the Jews of Israel, 1985, as cited in Corinaldi, 1998: 211). Although official account or version of the identity of the Beta Israel appear seemingly to be 'full' and complete, it is, as argued by White in a context similar to the Beta Israel, constructed on the basis of facts and events that might have been included but were left out.

That the tradition of the Beta Israel descent from the 'lost' tribe of Dan, recurs throughout their written history. At the end of the 9th century CE, the story was spread in various Jewish communities by a traveller named Eldad ha-Dani (the Danite). Eldad described the whereabouts of various Jewish tribes in Africa, Arabia and Central Asia and claimed to be able to trace his genealogy down a long line back to Dan, son of Jacob (Corinaldi, 1998: 88). Eldad ha-Dani was almost certainly not an Ethiopian himself, but probably came from either the Yemen or eastern Africa on the Aden Sea (Corinaldi, 1998: 93). The language of Eldad's tales reveal an Arabic influence because Hebrew was also known in those parts, although it was not known among the Ethiopian Jews. Eldad's story told that the tribe of Dan was relocated to the land of Cush during the rule of Jeroboam, in an effort to avoid being drawn into tribal disputes. Eldad also carried with him a halakhic treatise concerning kosher slaughter practices which contains a number of differences to Rabbinical tradition and bears a certain resemblance to the methods of slaughter used by Ethiopian Jews at present.

The account of Eldad ha-Dani appears to have some special significance. Long before there was any detailed knowledge of the presence of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia, Talmudic and Midrashic sources speculated on the eventual fate and halakhic status of the Ten Tribes that were exiled by the Assyrians during the last decades of the eighth century BCE (Corinaldi, 1998: 88). The authorities had almost unanimously agreed that the members of those tribes that were not assimilated would be considered to be Jews when they returned to Judaism. During the Middle Ages these speculations gained momentum through a series of reports on the existence of an independent Jewish kingdom in Ethiopia. Eldad ha-Dani's work *Sefer Eldad ha-Dani* was the first post-Talmudic book in Hebrew which related to the tribes living "beyond the rivers of Cush". His book therefore represents an early testimony of Jewish existence in Africa.

Judaism in Ethiopia

One difficulty with reconstructing the past of Judaism in Ethiopia and the main reason for the controversies which surround the issue is that written records are so scarce that history is forced to be constructed by outside sources. In fact, there is almost nothing available from before the 4th century (Kessler, 1982: 77). Yet, according to Ethiopian tradition, up to half of Ethiopia was Jewish at the time of the conversion to Christianity in the 4th century CE (Kessler, 1982: 3; Isaac, 1968: 20). The crucial issue at stake in such debates is the issue of 'real' Jewishness, as this has relevance for the right of the Beta Israel to return to live in Israel – a religious ideal and an automatic right for all Jews. The Law of Return grants any Jew the privileges of domicile and citizenship as vested, inalienable rights. (It should be stressed that this is not a problem of ethnicity, as the Jewish people are marked by religion, not racial purity). For example, if the Beta Israel can be connected with the lost tribe of Dan, as some theories maintain – the Sephardi Chief Rabbi (Rabbi Ovadia Yosef) in 1973 indicated them to be descended from the lost tribe of Dan (Kessler, 1982: 67) – then there should be little problem with their re-integration and acceptance into the Jewish mainstream. However, this has not been the case.

A central problem is that the religious texts of the Ethiopian Jews are not written in Hebrew, but rather Ge'ez - an ancient Ethiopian language - and careful analysis of the texts shows that they were more likely to have been translated from the Greek Septuagint than from Hebrew. This suggests that Judaism was brought to Ethiopia through a Greek influence and not an originally Jewish one and that the Beta Israel have come to Judaism via the route of conversion. This has implications to the present day in terms of the necessity for re-conversion in Israel. The Beta Israel nowadays use the Agau or Amharic language. Moreover, their festival of Sigd, the renewal of the covenant between the people and its God (as related in Nehemiah 8), falls at the end of the month of Heshaven. It is unknown in other Jewish traditions.

Ethiopia has long been viewed as somewhat of an anomaly among nations (Wagaw, 1993:8). With Japan and Iran, its nationhood is one of the oldest in the world, probably having endured since more than a millennium BCE. However, it is marked by isolation, both self-imposed and enforced. It lies very close to Middle Eastern nations that have contributed to its culture, but in recent centuries have become hostile to it because of its Christian religion and links with Christian powers. During the scramble for colonies in Africa, Ethiopia also became the subject of European nations' intrigues. Moreover, it suffered many long years of internal conflict, which consumed much of its energy and added to its isolation. The result of all this was that Ethiopian religious and political institutions became ossified, conservative, defensive and unresponsive to emerging realities around them. Ethiopia's three great world religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam – should be viewed against this background. Kaplan (1987) also argues compellingly that historians should not focus exclusively on conflict and isolation when discussing relations between the Beta Israel and the dominant Christian culture in Ethiopia. Kaplan, making use of Beta Israel literature detailing close cultural links between Christian and Beta Israel culture, claims that in some cases Beta Israel contact with their neighbours has attained an intimacy unknown in Jewish history.

Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the history of Ethiopia is largely one of isolation and religious conflict of both greater and lesser intensity. From the earliest times, the Ethiopian Jews or Beta Israel were intimately involved in this conflict, but so have many other groups across Ethiopia. The question is whether the struggles between Ethiopian Christians and Jews in Ethiopia were based on their religious differences (which clearly played a part in the history of Europe's treatment of the Jews among them) or were just another form of struggle within a feudal society in which internal upheavals and realignments were assumed to be religious, but were not exclusively so. It is arguable that the usual concept of anti-Semitism does not apply in Ethiopia. First, the Beta Israel are similar in physical characteristics to any other Ethiopians. Second, the Ethiopian Christian tradition

passionately follows the dictates of the Old Testament (Orit) and is proud of this connection. Politically, most of Ethiopia's emperors and kings have traced their lineage to their Solomonic roots. Even recent kings such as Tewodros, who who rose to power during the first half of the nineteenth century, was intolerant of the idea that they were not connected to the Solomonic line. Menelik and Haile Selassie included in their royal appellations *The Lion of the Tribe of Judah.*

However, the anti-Semitism of Europe may have crept into the thinking of some rulers of Ethiopia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Jesuits, for example, ridiculed the practices of Ethiopian Christianity for being closer to Judaism than to Christianity as Christianity was practised by the Roman Catholic Church in Southern Europe. Emperor Susneyos may have been acting under the influence of these Jesuits when he persistently campaigned to "exterminate" the Beta Israel. Wagaw concludes that the Beta Israel suffered severe persecution because they were stubborn, happened to practise a religion different to that of the other people among whom they lived and because they followed an exclusionary lifestyle (*atinkugn)* guided by a "do not touch me" mentality. This led to suspicion, mistrust and hatred towards them. Other religious, ethnic and linguistic communities in Ethiopia, including Muslim, Kimant (similar to the Beta Israel), Protestant, Catholic and other small Christian denominations who practised exclusion from others were from time to time persecuted by the dominant group. Possibly because the Beta Israel had lived for longer in Ethiopia, were smaller in number and more strictly exclusionist observances, they suffered greater animosity and persecution.

As was stated above, the Beta Israel are, except for their religion, indistinguishable from other Ethiopians. The military and political battles they fought to preserve their identity are described, although not comprehensively, in Ethiopian documents. In fact, Ethiopian chronicles largely record the existence of the Beta Israel in the context of many skirmishes and battles they engaged in with the rulers of the day (Wagaw, 1993: 8). Ethiopian calendars are often composed in terms of victories and defeats in war and battles, usually associated with the reigning monarchies. Seldom have the Beta Israel been investigated by Ethiopians themselves, although this applies also to many of the other ethnic and language groups in the country, including much larger ones. Thus during the reign of Queen Judit (or Gudit, "the monstrous one") in the tenth century, the Beta Israel destroyed the ancient and powerful kingdom of Aksum and plundered many Christian institutions in other parts of highland Ethiopia (Wagaw, 1993:10). During the reign of Amede Tsion (1344-1344) the kingdom fought a war against a group of Muslim principalities on its eastern and southern boundaries. A group of Beta Israel who had been forced to become Christians rebelled against the king, but he responded with force and more forced conversions. Other Beta Israel groups continued to resist the king and provided refuge to dissidents. During the reign of King Dawit 1 (1382-1411) the Beta Israel accepted a dissenting monk, Qozmos, into their ranks. He had forsaken Christianity and adopted the Jewish faith. Eventually, the renegade monk introduced the Beta Israel to monasticism, an honoured institution among Ethiopian Christians but unfamiliar to the Jews. Conflict between the emperors and the Beta Israel continued throughout the next two centuries.

During the reign of Yeshak (1412-1429) the Beta Israel gained control over much of Begemedir and Semien (present-day Gondar). Thereafter, during the reign of Zara Yakov (1412-1429), who was said to be one of the most learned and cruellest of kings, conflict continued as the Jews gave sanctuary to one of Zara Yacov's rebellious sons, Abba Tsegga, apparently a monk. Zara Yakov, a fanatically religious man, did not hesitate to have his own children executed on suspicion they worshipped idols. During his reign, many pagans and Jews alike were forced to convert to Christianity. Many of these "converts" apparently returned to their original religions, forcing the king to engage the Beta Israel in battle in Tselemit, Gondar and Semien. During the following years, the king fought wars against the lowland Muslims. Eventually, he invited the Portuguese to help him as a Christian. The Beta Israel played an ambiguous role during the wars, at one time opposing the Muslims, at another joining them against the king. This period appears to have

introduced a new element into the conflict. In 1615 the emperor Susneyos (1607-1632), like his predecessor Sarsa Dengel, was suspected of having accepted the Roman Catholic faith under the guidance of Portuguese Jesuits. Susneyos was attacked from various quarters and had trouble holding the empire together and decided to deliver a decisive blow to the Beta Israel (Wagaw, 1993:11). Since they were conquered in battle, the Beta Israel were denied land, which is vital in a peasant society. This caused them to turn to occupations that, although they were despised, were necessary in the communities where they lived. This will be discussed fully later during the present chapter. As time passed, the Beta Israel, because of their landlessness and economic circumstances, became an occupational caste and outcasts in their own community.

The thirteenth to the seventeenth century CE were characterised by violent conflict between the Beta Israel and the armies of the Christian kingdom. However, experts agree that the major theme of this period is that of a struggle by both state and church authorities to limit local autonomy (Kaplan, 1987). While the kings and bishops attempted to centralise the administration of the Ethiopian empire, local chiefs and religious leaders fought to retain as much of their independence as they could. Accordingly, it is difficult to single out the Beta Israel as having been consistently singled out for special persecution although, as will become evident in this chapter, they did at times suffer horrendous discrimination, not only of a religious nature. Ethiopia's religious and political history shows signs of a strong influence of Biblical-Hebraic and even Jewish elements in its theology, political theory and the liturgical calendar of the Ethiopian church. The roots of Ethiopian Judaism go back to the ancient beginnings of the country, probably antedating Christianity. The faith has retained some of the original forms of the ancient Biblical religion of Israel as well as taking on many indigenous peculiarities.

A study of the extent to which the Biblical Hebraic influence has affected Ethiopian culture leads to the conclusion that if there is any country today where Biblical life is evident in the way of the people, it is Ethiopia. The Ethiopian church is considered very close to ancient Judaism, with ancient practices such as circumcision, observance of the Sabbath and strict dietary laws preserved in its doctrine. Many Ethiopian customs reflect Biblical ones that are still common among Jews. Probably the most universal of these is circumcision. This practice is general in many parts of the world but in Ethiopia it has an explicitly Biblical character. When in the sixteenth century Jesuit missionaries denounced the Jewish customs of the Ethiopians, the emperor Claudius (1540-1559) wrote in reply that circumcision 'is practised as a respectful remembrance of a ceremony appointed by the God of Abraham.' It is significant that of all the people who circumcise their males only Jews and Ethiopians limit the rite to the eighth day after birth as decreed in Genesis 17.

Another important set of customs consists of food regulations and dietary laws. Ethiopians recognise that the crucial distinction they make between 'clean' and 'unclean' foods is Biblically inspired. They obey the food laws of the Pentateuch, strictly following the prescriptions of Leviticus regarding mammals and birds and even the statement in Gen. 32:33 concerning 'the forbidden sinew'. The sanction for these food regulations is explicitly Hebraic. The dietary laws are attended by the following order: remember what God has commanded by the mouth of Moses. Ethiopia alone among the Christian nations has rejected the traditional doctrine of Christianity according to St. Paul that Biblical law lost its force with the coming of Christ. The Hebraic influence on holiday celebrations is perhaps less obvious but equally important. It is not known exactly when the observance of the Sabbath on a Saturday was introduced into Ethiopia but the strictness with which many Ethiopians keep it indicates a Jewish tie. More significant is the celebration of the Ethiopian New Year, Maskerem 1 (September 11). In Biblical times the high priest prepared for Rosh Hashanah (New Year) by performing a ritual immersion in water, then laid his hands on and slaughtered a bullock. These rituals are reflected in the general Ethiopian customs associated with the New Year's celebration: a purification bath takes place in homes early in the morning, and there is later a communal animal sacrifice and the sharing of a bull or cow. Finally, the holiday of Fassika

(Easter) has definite overtones of the Jewish Pesach in both its name and the nature of its observance.

Moreover, Ethiopian Christians build their churches with the threefold division which characterised the temple of Solomon (1 Kings 6). The innermost of the three concentric circles is referred to as the *Kedusta Kedussan* (the Holy of Holies). It contains the altar and the Ark and none but priests and kings are allowed to enter it. The Ark – also called the *tabot* – is the most sacred object in the Ethiopian house of worship. Without it, no religious service can be conducted. According to sacred tradition the original tablets of Moses on which God wrote the Ten Commandments at Sinai were stolen with the Ark of the Covenant by Eleazer, eldest son of the Jewish High Priest at the time and Menelik, son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Tradition holds that they remain today in the chapel of St. Mary's cathedral in Aksum, the holiest of all Ethiopian sanctuaries – only one monk is allowed to enter this. The tabots in other churches are replicas of this original Ark of the Covenant. The first such replica, according to tradition, was left as a substitute of the original in the temple before Menelik and his company departed from Jerusalem.

On various holidays, including the feast of immersion on 18 January, the tabot is taken down from its normal place and carried by the priests amid a great procession of marching, singing and dancing in colourful ceremonial dress. The musical instruments accompanying the parade are counterparts of the instruments mentioned in 11 Samuel 6:5 – harps, psalteries, timbels, sistra and cymbals. The ceremony bears a striking resemblance to the scene described in 11 Samuel 6: 14-15: 'And David danced before the Lord. David and all the House of Israel brought up the Ark of the Lord with shouting and with the sound of the Horn.' There is also a parallel with the still current Jewish custom of the Hakafot of procession with the scrolls of the law on Simchat Torah.The liturgy of the Ethiopian service is largely Biblical: the reading of sacred texts as in the synagogue plays a central role. The basic text of the Ethiopian morning service is the Book of Psalms, supplemented by a collection of nine odes, all but one of which are from the Hebrew Bible. They include the Red Sea Song (9 Exodus 15), the song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32), the prayer of Hannah (1 Samuel 2) and the prayer of Jonah (Jonah 2).

In contrast to the church and its liturgy, Ethiopian society and law reflect a Biblical influence not so much in the formal aspects as in the traditional stories and folkways of the people. The most outstanding example of this is the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. According to the *Kebra Nagast,* Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, visited Solomon in Jerusalem and was converted to Judaism (1 Kings 10: 1-13). She returned to her country and bore Solomon a son who was named Menelik, a form derived from the Hebrew term Ben-Melek – son of the king. Grown to manhood, Menelik visited Solomon and returned to Ethiopia with the true Ark of the Covenant and the sons of Israel's highest officials established the Solomonic dynasty which was supposedly restored in the year 1268. According to tradition, from then until Haile Selassie there was an unbroken line of emperors claiming descent from Solomon and calling themselves 'Conquering lion of the tribe of Judah, Elect of God, King of Kings of Ethiopia and Successor to the House of David'.

Ethiopian justice contains many fine examples of Biblical customs preserved in the folkways of the people. The administration of local justice is the most important part of the legal system. The impromptu court which meets in the marketplace or some other outdoor centre carries the same weight among the people as it did in Israel during the period of the judges. Two men who have a dispute find a third party to act as judge between them. No man may refuse to perform this duty. The judge or *danai* (related to the Hebrew *davyar*) gathers witnesses, hears the case and gives his judgement. There are also permanent local danais, usually learned elders in the community. They act as judges and advisors, giving interpretations of the law in difficult cases. In this way a body of interpretations accumulates with local variations expounded by learned elders of different regions. These become custom in a manner similar to that of the old Hebraic Oral Law. The voluntary and

spontaneous forms of administering justice have become daily practice and law is an integral part of the lives of the masses as in Biblical times.

Virtually every phase of Ethiopian life has thus been affected by the Biblical Hebraic tradition. The practices of the church are remarkably close to those of early Jewish Christians. However, the channels through which the Biblical Hebraic culture entered Ethiopia are subject to much controversy. These debates have a special resonance today, as they impact on the last surviving Ethiopian Jews – the Beta Israel – and their right to return to Israel.Kaplan (1987) indicates that a rich body of literature points to the shared cultural heritage of the Beta Israel and their Ethiopian neighbours. The Beta Israel, like Jews throughout the world, took part in the national culture and life of the countries they lived in. However, there has been a tendency for analysts to minimise the Beta Israel's use of Pan-Ethiopian symbols and themes to express their faith, probably largely because they saw it as a threat to the Beta Israel's claims to Jewishness. Yet, it should not detract from those claims.

Back to Jerusalem

To return to Jerusalem has always been a cherished tradition in the Ethiopian Jewish Community, although it has only taken place during the last century. There are many instances in Beta Israel history when religious leaders announced that 'the time has arrived' to go to the Promised Land. This is transmitted from generation to generation, and described in the vividness of the dream to go to Jerusalem. Israel is described among the Beta Israel as the most beautiful country in the world. According to folk legend, they will walk to Israel like Moses did from Egypt, during the Exodus. They have thus never seen the land they work as their own, as their (home)land is in Zion – the land of milk and honey. According to the Bible story, there will be a time of terrible war, civil war and chaos and at this moment, 'the Jews will leave Ethiopia to the land of Zion'. To many, this justified the need and desire for migration, a desire that has largely come to fruition only in recent times.

However, even by 1848, Abba Yitzhak had issued an appeal to the Jews of Europe to take heed of the invidious position of the Falash Mura (Ethiopian Jews who had converted to Christianity, often under pressure from Christian missionaries and authorities in Ethiopia). Abba Yitzhak described the dire economic situation of the community from their own viewpoint

> *We are poor, our master is a Christian, and we have no rist (land exempt from fiefdom charges that could be acquired by right of heritage)* (cited in Corinaldi, 1998: 122).

By the middle of the nineteenth century a small number of European missionaries had visited the Beta Israel and had reported on them in Europe (Corinaldi, 1998: 174). Only in 1859 did organised Western missionary activity begin. Unlike most missions to Africa during the time, the mission to Ethiopia did not take place in a colonial situation, but with the permission of the sovereign state under Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868). The missionaries were forbidden to proselytise among the local Orthodox Christians and could operate in Ethiopia only if its activities were seen to serve broader national interests. The Beta Israel who did convert were considered officially to be not Protestants, but members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Significantly therefore, before 1860 the Beta Israel had captured the interest of both Jewish and Christian missionary workers. At the time, the Protestant mission led by Martin Flad worked in Jenda (Dambeya) and was zealously pursuing its efforts to convert the Falasha and to isolate them from other Jewish centres (Corinaldi, 1998: 122). These missionaries claimed that the Messiah had arrived already, that many Jews all over the world had recognised him and that the Falashas' faith was outdated. As the Falashas were hungry for education, the missionaries opened missionary schools and distributed copies of both the Old and the New Testaments to the masses. From the

middle of the nineteenth century the missionaries had succeeded in attracting small groups of Falasha to Christianity. These people were the first wave of Falasha converts.

Beta Israel reactions to the missionary challenge varied and were complex (Corinaldi, 1998: 175). Although initially welcoming gifts of religious texts, they generally opposed attempts at conversion. Both the Ethiopian legal system and the Beta Israel's own laws of ritual purity were used to resist the missionaries. In fact, in one dramatic incident, Tewodros II held the missionaries hostage (Corinaldi, 1998: 74).

Then, in 1862

> *… urged by unrelenting missionary pressure and urged by a new surge of Messianic fervor, many Falasha left their villages and started a long journey to Jerusalem, heading first in the direction of the Red Sea. The journey came to an early end, because of starvation and sickness that left many behind* (Corinaldi, 1998: 123).

In fact, this was only the first ill-begotten attempt by the Beta Israel to reach Jerusalem to be recorded in the second half of the nineteenth century. This disastrous attempt was, however, the first of at least three and was the best-known (Corinaldi, 1998: 175). Most of the participants died in the attempt to reach Israel. No clear results of the attempts in 1874 and 1879 are known. All three attempts indicate the long-standing desire of the Beta Israel to emigrate from Ethiopia to Israel. The attempts to reach Israel were also probably fuelled by the prevailing, centuries old attitude of discrimination by Christian Ethiopia against the Beta Israel.

Myth, Legend and the Construction of the Beta Israel Identities in Ethiopia

But the question that arise in all these written accounts of the identity and origin of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia is the extent to which the written records can be critical of their ways of describing their object of study[Beta Israel] and also explain the structures and processes that contribute to the naming and marking of the Beta Israel identity as narrative discourse. The contradictions within written accounts that conceives the Beta Israel identity as being made up of a regime of signifiers that consciously or unconsciously participates in fixing an identity for the Beta Israel is raised by David Palumbo-Liu who, in a context similar to that of the Beta Israel, observes that ethnic narratives can present an occasion for a subversive revision of the dominant version of history since the ethnic narrative can give voice to a text muted by dominant historical consciousness. And yet, the dilemma of a subaltern narrative discourse that aspires to assign meanings to things is whether or not it is possible to displace history and destabilize the dominant modes of creating identities for others without necessitating a preliminary critique of its own epistemological claim to a higher truth? In other words, there are problems in reconstructing and representing the Beta Israel identity through written records which initially start off as a contestive counterhistory but ironically fails to wad off the lure of the dominant sensibility's affinity to objectify, and stabilize its narrative of the Beta Israel identity by projecting it as the inferior Other of the so-called 'real' Jews.

To view narrative discourse as a social construct draws our attention to the arbitrariness of the process of meaning-making through symbolic significance. It, according to Hayden White (1987,p.5) makes us begin to understand the appeal of narrative as an instrument through which the 'real' is mediated, arbitrated and resolved as well as providing the grounds for interrogating that narrative, refusing to take it for granted, as the only potentially credible version of the story in that context. In the case of the Beta Israel identity in question, historians have had to revisit the Beta Israel's oral traditions in order to decipher how their identity is produced, constructed and represented to them by others, and to themselves by themselves. For instance, biblical legend in the Ethiopian national mythology overlaps to a degree with the legend that the Beta Israel are the

descendants of the tribe of Dan. According to this legend, the Beta Israel are the descendants of the Queen of Sheba's entourage. The legend is that the royal dynasty, whose last monarch was Haile Selassie, can be traced back to the union between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. The *Kebra Nagast* (*The Glory of Kings)* Ethiopia's National Epic, stresses the facts that the queen was convinced of the validity of Judaism and that Menelik, her son by Solomon, brought back the Ark of the Covenant and the law, as Ethiopia had been chosen by God to be the new home of the spiritual and heavenly Zion. When Menelik returned to Ethiopia, Solomon sent the first-born sons of his counsellors to accompany him – and the Beta Israel are said to have been descended from these counsellors. A 14th century monk, Zena Marqos, tells of the *ayud* as arriving with Solomon's son, Menelik I, but notes that they later converted to Christianity (Quirin, 1992: 48). A historically documented conversion account tells of 'children of Jews' converting to Christianity in 1344 (Quirin, 1992: 50). The Agau tribe, in turn, are said by some to have been descended from Menelik I's Hebrew bodyguard (Kessler, 1982: 61).

The oral narrative [ie, story, tale]of Solomon and Sheba remains problematical even today as scholars debate her origins and identity. Sheba is identified in Jewish tradition with Lilith, the queen of demons and great temptress; Joseph calls her queen of Egypt and Ethiopia; the New Testament refers to her as the queen of the south; the Bible considers her realm to have been an area of Cush, stretching from both sides of the Red Sea and southern Egypt, which was later renamed Meroe (Kessler, 1982: 27). There is also some question as to whether Sheba was an Arabian from south Arabia, known to have been Sabaean country, in the area bounded by Yemen today, rather than Ethiopian. However, most Beta Israel recount an oral tradition tracing their origin to Menelik, fabled son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Kay Kaufman Shelemay, 1989:17-18). This tradition derives from the *Kebra Nagast.* The story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, the subsequent birth of their son and the establishment of the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia is a central part of the narrative of the *Kebra Nagast.* The *Kebra Nagast,* often termed the foremost creation of Ethiopian literature, consequently provided an origin myth for the Ethiopian nation as a whole. This myth is widely circulated in Ethiopian oral tradition and art.

Contact between the ancient Aksumites of Ethiopia and the Sabaeans is well known. *The Periplous* (first century AD) records that the Sabaean King Kharabit, in AD 35 was in possession of the eastern coast of Africa >to an indefinite extent= (Le Roux, 2003). On the other hand, it is also known that Aksum at one time possessed parts of southern Arabia. According to the *Periplous* Sabaean colonies were established very established early (at the beginning of the seventh century BCE) in Ethiopia, as is proved by the characteristics of the Ethiopian language and writing, as well as by the oral traditions of the Lemba in southern Africa. According to the first written source on how and where the Beta Israel reached Ethiopia, the Responses of Abba Yitzhak, refers to "Sena" as the place the Beta Israel first came from. In this regard, the Responses of Yizhak, the High Priest of Hohuara, read

> *We came (during the time of) Solomon … after Jeremiah the prophet. We arrived by way of Sennar, whence we crossed over to Aksum … Clearly we came in the time of Solomon* (cited in Corinaldi, 1998: 46).

The possible significance of this quotation is that it links the origin of the Beta Israel to Solomonic times and especially that it points to a possible link between the origins of the Beta Israel and those of the Lemba. This opens up the possibility that the Beta Israel may have be linked to the Lemba, who are were mistakenly thought to have been the possible builders of Great Zimbabwe and the Yemenite Jews who are thought to have crossed the Red Sea from Sena to Aksum. Recent research in Zimbabwe's oral traditions has contested this view and depicted the above as speculation and ideologically suspect, since new oral evidence unearthed suggests that it is the Shona people of Zimbabwe who build the Great Zimbabwe stone walls(Mudenge,1987). The Beta Israel were also

great builders, having built great castles and other structures in Gondar and elsewhere in Ethiopia. During the Gondar Period (1632-1769) the Beta Israel became renowned for a number of specialised crafts and occupations, including smithing, weaving, pottery, building and soldiering (Kaplan, 1992). The Beta Israel quickly acquired a reputation as skilled masons and carpenters and according to tradition they played an important role in almost all the major building projects in the Gondar period. In his book *Ngoma Lungundu* ("The drum of the ancestors") Von Sicard examines the parallels between the *ngoma lungundu* story and the Old Testament story on the Israelite Ark of the Covenant and also those between the *ngoma lungundu* and the Ethiopian *Kebra Nagast* (Le Roux, 2003). The 13th century *Kebra Nagast* relates how Prince Menelik, son of King Solomon and Queen Makeda of Sheba, visited Jerusalem and returned to the South with an escort of Israelite priests, who stole the sacred Ark out of the Temple of Jerusalem, left a replica in its place and took the real Ark to Aksum. In the same manner, the Lemba, in the *ngoma lungundu* story, carried with them the sacred drum downwards to Southern Africa.

Moses' sojourn in Ethiopia

In addition to the accounts of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon and the descent of the Beta Israel from the tribe of Dan, another legend describes early times in Ethiopia in terms of Moses' sojourn in Ethiopia. This legend links to both the previous accounts, although names, places and dates sometimes conflict, as tends to happen in accounts based in part on myths and legends. Although the biblical connection between Moses and Ethiopia was limited to a vague reference to "Moses' Ethiopian wife", the Jewish legend fills in some detail (Segal, 1991: 1). According to this tradition, Moses in fact reigned as King of Ethiopia for forty years. In the tradition Moses, having fled from Egypt after having killed the Egyptian taskmaster, went first to Ethiopia, where he found himself in the midst of a civil war (Segal, 1991: 1).While the legitimate King, Kikanos was away on a foreign campaign, he had entrusted state affairs to Balaam. Balaam fortified the country against the King and used the King's absence to execute a coup d'étât. Moses met King Kikanos as he was trying to recapture the capital city. Kikanos appointed Moses as commander-in-chief of the royal forces. The most daunting of the enemy fortifications was a barrier of venomous snakes and scorpions. Moses' strategy was to set loose a volley of hungry storks who devoured the "minefield". This allowed Moses' forces to recapture the capital city.

Kikanos died soon afterwards and Moses was declared King (Segal, 1991: 1). Moses continued to liberate Ethiopia, a task that had already dragged on for nine years. As was the custom in antiquity, Moses was expected to enter into a diplomatic marriage with Adoniah, the King's widow. Awed by the prospect of intermarriage, Moses was said never to have consummated the marriage. Nevertheless, Moses ruled Ethiopia for forty years until the embittered queen aroused the population to remove him. Moses then went to Midian, at which point the biblical narrative resumes. This story is based on a work called the *Sefer Hayashar*, composed in Spain during the late middle ages (Segal, 1991: 1). Versions of the same story are found in Greek sources that date back to antiquity, except that in the Greek version, the birds mentioned to have devoured the snakes and scorpions was the ibis, the sacred bird of the Egyptians. These versions relate the reverence felt by the Egyptians for the ibis to the story as recounted. Conflicting with the account above is one referred to by Kessler (1982: 28). In terms of this account, Moses led an expedition to Ethiopia, where Tharvis, the queen of Saba, fell in love with him and promised to surrender if he married her.

The Ethiopian Jews are mentioned in several places in the Bible as well. There are many references in the book of Isaiah to Jews being in Assyria and the land of Cush, the area of the tributaries of the Upper Nile in today's Sudan and Ethiopia.

And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord will set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people, that shall remain from Assyria and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea. And He will set up an ensign for the nations, and will assemble the dispersed of Israel, and gather the scattered of Judah from the four corners of the earth. (Isaiah 11:11-12).

As with the written records, there is also hardly any conclusive evidence from the oral sources cited above as to the actual origin of the Beta Israel of Ethiopia. What the oral narratives cited above suggested is that there are equally many versions and paradoxes in attempting to construct and represent the identities of the Beta Israel. These versions are captured in the instability of the oral sources and projected as colliding, colluding and even contradicting each other in the process of narrating the identity and origin of the Beta Israel Jews of Ethiopia. This quality of constantly re-evaluating memory *which the oral* constructs and reconstructs is what lends the oral sources their credibility. The refusal to fix the identity-in-formation of the Beta Israel Jews of Ethiopia also renders the oral narratives open-ended historical accounts and this quality of oral sources or orality anticipates future reinterpretation of the fate and history of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia. It subverts the written records' tendency to seal off historical processes with the seal of closure that can only be animated through a celebral process of interpretation. Oral sources cited above eschewed to profer rigid and certain conclusions. Oral tradition is aware of the temporariness of the meanings it authorizes through telling a story that it interprets in the process of telling. The oral-ness of the oral sources repudiate the claims of written sources, while self-reflexively modifying its own claims by providing a variety of versions of the Beta Israel identities. In short, it is on the cusp of the claims of the written and oral modes of constructing and representing the identities of the Beta Israel that the truth of the origin of the Beta Israel, how they migrate into Ethiopia and were later to be discriminated against, can be located.

The Nature of Discrimination Against the Beta Israel in Ethiopia

Linguistic disparagement as stereotyping

Initial conflict between the Beta Israel and the dominant Christians in Ethiopia was gradually – over several centuries – supplanted by a particularly virulent form of religious and political discrimination against the former. This history of the Beta Israel cannot be understood outside the political and cultural context provided by the rich and ancient history of Ethiopia in general (Kaplan, 1992: 7-18). The term *Beta Israel* denotes the familiar Falasha or Ethiopian Jews, although according to Kaplan, to this day, the Ethiopian Jews are best known to the reading public under the name Falasha. Indeed, before the 1980s it was difficult to find any work of substance that did not use that name. In recent years, members of the Beta Israel community have themselves objected to the term Falasha. According to them, since most of them have immigrated to Israel, it is inappropriate to identify them by what they understand to be a derogatory Ethiopian name. "Beta Israel" was rarely used by Christians in daily interactions. One of the reasons why the name "Beta Israel" may have been preferred by the Beta Israel themselves is that it parallels "Beta Christian" the name for the Christian house of prayer in Ethiopia. Consequently, the name Beta Israel symbolically and phonetically assigns equal weight to each. At the same time, the Beta Israel's use of the word "Israel" evoked the view that the Ethiopian Jews were the direct descendants of an ancient people. This, in turn, linked them to the mythological bond between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, the progenitors of the Amhara, who have dominated Ethiopia since the beginning of the previous century. Indeed the ruling dynasty of the time described itself as being led by the king of kings, lion of Judah and elect of God. The preference of the term, "Beta Israel," in spite of the fact that the term *Ethiopian Jews,* (Yehudç Etiopiya in Hebrew) is because today the term is universally accepted by the members of the community as one of their

designations. In Israel and in the Jewish press, they are seldom referred to by any term other than "Ethiopian Jews". However, historically, the expression *Ethiopian Jews* is problematical. In mediaeval Ethiopia, the term *ayhud* (Jews) was a derogatory term used by authors to describe those they viewed as Christian heretics. Seldom if ever can it be shown to refer in those writings to Jews in the more conventional sense of the word.

Investigations of historical discrimination against the Beta Israel require the analyst to begin by searching for clues in the early (pre-Christian) history of the Ethiopian state. Quirin amply illustrates that there was discrimination against the Beta Israel in Ethiopia in the earliest times (Quirin, 1992: 7-39). For Quirin, neither the "persecuted Jews" perspective emphasising an external Jewish connection nor the "assimilationist" perspective, which sees the Beta Israel as just another of Ethiopia's "museum of peoples" is an adequate framework for understanding the Beta Israel, although the expression "persecuted Jews" focuses the attention on discrimination. The historical record indicates that the name of the Beta Israel changed at different times, while sometimes different names were used interchangeably. *Beta Israel* (House of Israel) has become the name preferred by the people themselves, while the main alternatives Falasha and Kayla have both become derogatory over the past 150 years.

The Scottish traveller James Bruce stated that the use of the term Beta Israel was used by Christians in the fourth century CE to refer to those who refused to convert to Christianity. One problem in the use of this name or *Israel* is that at the time the ruling Christian dynasty also used the term *Israelites* in referring to themselves. Because of their reputed origin in Solomon and Sheba, Christian society drew a clear distinction between *Israelite* and *Jew (ayhud).* The term *ayhud* was used to refer to those who had specifically rejected Christ. By the early nineteenth Beta Israel, Israel, Falasha, Kayla and some less common terms used in specific regions were used derogatively to refer to the Ethiopian Jews described as Beta Israel. *Falasha* had become the most common term used by Ethiopian Christians and foreign observers and until recently was the primary term used in the outside world to refer to the group. The traditional etymology of the word is said to be from the Ge'ez *falasa,* meaning "to separate", "emigrate" or "exile" or from *falasyan* (foreigner). Accordingly, both terms implied separation from ancient Israel and migration to Ethiopia.

In the early nineteenth century, some travellers were told that the term *Kayla* was preferred to *Falasha. Kayla* was preferred because it meant "those who did not come across the sea", referring to crossing the sea with Menelik I, whereas *Falasha* was considered an insult (another early indication of the historically derogatory and therefore discriminatory connotation of the term *Falasha).* According to this tradition, *Kayla* meant those who did not cross water and therefore did not travel on Saturday, which was forbidden by their religion in the early nineteenth century. The implication was that the term *Kayla* was the more orthodox term, at least in the Gondar region, although in the Kwara region, people accepted *Falasha* as the correct term. More recently Salamon (1999) claims that the term "Agau" stood in binary opposition to the name "Beta Israel". It was often used by Christians, especially in the Tigre and Wolqait areas. Agau is both the Cushitic language perceived to have pre-dated the Ethio-Semitic languages and also a common name used in general for the pagan groups that inhabited pre-Christian Ethiopia and for those still present in Ethiopia. Calling Ethiopians Jews Agau deligitimised their claim to having originated in Israel, devaluing them in Ethiopian cosmology to mere pagans. At the same time, the otherwise derogatory name recalled the Agau-Zagwe dynasty, which seized power from the Solomonic dynasty and ruled Ethiopia for between 150 and 200 years starting in the thirteenth century. In spite of this, Salamon found in 1999 that "Agau" was much preferred in Tigre and Wolqait to the names called the Jews in other regions. Most of the groups interviewed by Salamon saw the term *Kayla* as derogatory, because it had been used by Christians to denote minority groups who were thought to possess supernatural powers. The term came to be used against the Beta Israel because it had acquired

supernatural implications. However, its very lack of substantial meaning and clarity indicated to the Jews in Ethiopia that it had neither logic nor foundation.

Another common suggestion linked the term to a simple agricultural implement: two sticks tied to a wooden pole forming a V at one of its ends. The implement is used to separate wheat from chaff and to uproot thorn bushes in the field. These thorns are sometimes called *Kayla*. The Jews themselves suggested a term entirely unrelated to magic, deriving it from the Beta Israel's original links with Israel, their religious faith and agricultural pursuits and as such having no derogatory implication. The gap between the insulting daily use and the original meaning of the word as explained by the Beta Israel according to Salamon furnishes proof of the vicious and false nature of the accusations made against the Beta Israel.

Cultural Persecution of the Beta Israel

More of the ancient roots of discrimination against the Beta Israel are revealed in Kaplan's (1992: 51-103) analysis of the Jewish elements of Aksumite culture. Kaplan notes that the decline of Aksum and the movements of some of its Judaic elements to peripheral areas have left the analyst with a complete dearth of historical sources on Ethiopian Judaism for the period from the sixth to the thirteenth centuries. However, evidence from both the earlier and the later periods indicates that the Hebraic elements that entered pre-Christian Aksumite culture survived not only in the Ethiopian church, but also in other groups. Some sources support the suggestion that Judaised groups left Aksum in the sixth century and settled in the area around the Semien mountains and Lake Tana. Whatever the conclusion one may come to on this hypothesis, a new period, not only in the history of the Beta Israel, but that of Ethiopia as a whole, is entered beginning in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century. The hitherto obscure references and legendary sources are gradually replaced by a collection of historical documents that enable the analyst to both locate the Beta Israel and trace their development.

According to Kaplan, the most significant indication of major changes among the *ayhud* of the Lake Tana region in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was that their name changed to Falasha. With the change in name came also a new dimension in the history of discrimination against the Beta Israel. Until recently, scholars were almost unanimous in translating the term Falasha as "exiles", while many cited it in support of claims that the Falasha were not indigenous to Ethiopia. In the past two or three decades, new evidence and a more careful reading of existing sources have placed the term in its proper historical context. Despite attempts to depict the name "Falasha" as an ancient term referring to the Beta Israel, there is no evidence for its existence before the fifteenth century. Only from the sixteenth century was it widely used in reference to the Beta Israel.

Discrimination against the Beta Israel, took cultural/spiritual and social dimensions in Ethiopia during the thirteenth century. The Zagwe dynasty ruled Ethiopia for nearly 150 years from approximately 1137 to 1270. Their rule was troubled. Although apparently devout Christians who presided over a major revival in the church, the Zagwe rulers' enemies, including the nobility of Tigre province and the clergy of the Aksum region, dismissed them as usurpers who seized the throne of the legitimate Aksumite "Solomonic" rulers. The Zagwe sought to counter these claims by wooing the clergy of other regions and building churches on a massive scale in their home province of Lasta. Their efforts were severely curtailed by internal dissension that plagued them throughout their history. Rarely did the Zagwe achieve bloodless succession. The death of a monarch was usually the signal for violent clashes between rival claimants to the throne.

This infighting undermined the rulers' ability to guarantee the security and loyalty of more southerly regions such as Shawa and Amhara. When Shawa and Amhara grew in economic

importance through their proximity to the southern trade routes and came under the influence of dissident Tigre-trained clergy, the Zagwe position became completely untenable. An Amharan warlord, Yekunno Amlak, benefited most from these unstable conditions. Backed by troops from Amhara and Shawa and with the support of an important local monastic leader, he first established an independent kingdom and later, in 1270, deposed the last Zagwe ruler. However, the nobility from Tigre were not impressed by the new Amharan dynasty and also the early Amharan rulers suffered the same succession problems that had weakened the Zagwe. The first decades of Amharan rule were characterised by intense conflict. As a result, while Yekunno is remembered as the founder of a new dynasty, Amda ªeyon, who reigned from 1314 to 1344, is recognised as the founder of the Solomonic state. Only during his rule did the Amharan kings make their presence felt in the whole Ethiopian plateau, including the Judaised groups around Lake Tana.

A more serious level of conflict between the *Ayhud* and the Christians commenced when Yeshak ascended the throne in 1413. Until the reign of Yeshaq, the *ayhud* of the Lake Tana region appear to have been of only peripheral concern to the Solomonic kings. Neither Amda ªeyon nor the Emperor Dawit (1380-1412) intervened personally to quash rebellions in Tigre against their rule, nor was the defeated population treated with special severity. Amda ªeyon, for example, dealt far more harshly with the challenges to his authority in Tigray province and appeared to be more concerned with dissident Christians than with the *ayhud*. Neither Tigrayan defeat resulted in either confiscation of land or a widespread dispersal of the people.

By contrast, Yeshaq ruthlessly quelled the rebel *ayhud,* personally leading the expedition against them and after his victory imposing Christianity on them. In analysing the factors that brought about this change in policy, Kaplan refers to the rich economic resources in Wagara and Dambeya that had probably been coveted by the Christian kings for some time. Only at the beginning of the fifteenth century, following Dawit's successes against the Muslim kingdom of Ifat, do the kings appear to have been able to pay full attention to these lucrative areas. Moreover, Dawit's temporary settlement of the Ewostatian controversy, which had troubled the Ethiopian church for almost a century, made the *ayhud* threat to religious unity all the more prominent. Finally, Yeshaq's generally harsh treatment of all religious dissent should be considered.

The emperor considered by many to be the greatest of the Solomonic rulers, Zara Yakov (1434-1468), was also compelled to do battle with rebels in ªallamt and Semien, people "who became Jews, abandoning their Christianity". The rebellion, apparently linked to political unrest arising from questions relating to the Emperor's own daughters, was not easily quashed. Zara Yakov's son and successor, Ba'eda Maryam, was also obliged to send troops against the same rebels and initially enjoyed little success. Only after a protracted struggle was Marqos, the *azmach* (commander) of Bagemder, able to subdue them. The defeated rebels were brutally massacred, churches in the region were rebuilt and new troops moved in to maintain order.

Marqos's victory was a major blow to the *ayhud* and could well have resulted in their final demise had not other, more serious problems demanded the attention of the Solomonic rulers. After Ba'eda Maryam's death in 1478, the problem of royal succession resurfaced, weakening the dynasty and opening the way for a reassertion of local autonomy. For half a century, the Solomonic kings were occupied by conflicts in the court and provinces. In 1484, less than a decade after their defeat by Marqos, the *ayhud* were once again able to go to war.

The *ayhud* probably had considerable autonomy during the troubled reigns of the emperors Eskender (1478-1494), Amda ªeyon II (1494) and Na'od (1494-1506). By the time Lebna Dengel came to the throne in 1508, the frontier defences of the Solomonic kingdom were in tatters. The main threat did not come from the *ayhud* around Lake Tana though, but from the Muslims in the southeast. In 1527, the Muslim warrior Ahmad Gragn led his troops into Ethiopia.

In asking where the claims of discrimination and prejudice against the Beta Israel originated, one must accordingly investigate further the question of who the *ayhud* were and what connection they have with the Falasha of later texts. In this respect, it should be noted that the literature on the subject before 1527 almost completely omitted any use of the term "Falasha". By contrast, the term *ayhud* is found in almost all the texts from that time onward. Probably the most common use of the term *ayhud* in mediaeval Ethiopia was in referring to Christian groups viewed by authors as heretical. This usage was especially popular in the time of Zara Yakov, who attempted to purge the Church of many of its dissident elements as part of his programme of religious nationalism. In one text, he describes the punishments meted out to those who consult magicians before going into battle: "If you are a priest, your priesthood shall be stripped of you; and if you are (just) a Christian, you shall be called a Jew." Furthermore, because political and religious rebellions were often synonymous in mediaeval Ethiopia, the term was frequently applied to the king's political enemies.

It was sometimes difficult to determine whether it was the "religious deviation" that resulted in the charge of treason or the reverse. In the case of the emperor Zara Yakov's son Galawdeyos, who took part in failed coup against his father, the latter appears to apply. Galawdeyos and his fellow plotters consulted pagan magicians and sorcerers "and later betrayed the king, breaking their oath which they swore to (him) that they would never revolt against him…Galawdeyos became a Jew, abandoning his Christianity and denying Christ."

Interpreted literally, the claim that Galawdeyos became both a pagan and a Jew appears to be a contradiction. It could possibly be explained by accepting the term "pagan" as indicating "non-Christian". However, when it is recalled that Galawdeyos was previously aligned to the Christian Saint Abuna Takla Hawaryat, there appears to be no alternative but to see his alleged "Jewishness" as political.This extremely broad usage of the term *ayhud* in fact begs the question of why it can be assumed that any of the usages of the term can be associated with the Beta Israel. In this regard, it is first almost certain that none of the groups called *ayhud* used the term to refer to themselves. *Ayhud* was in practical terms invariably a pejorative term applied by a Christian author to a feared or despised "other". The "bad Jews" (*ayhud)* were often contrasted with their good "Israelite" opponents. This approach to the "other" or "bad" Jews illustrated one facet of discrimination against the Beta Israel at the time.

The vagueness of the term *Ayhud* as described here, led to inconsistent forms of discrimination against the Beta Israel. For example, the enemies of the Stephanite monastic order referred to them as *ayhud.* In turn, the Stephanites joined other Christians in referring to the Beta Israel as *ayhud.* In spite of this, the Stephanites clearly did not did not consider themselves as either *ayhud* or as members of the same group as the Beta Israel. The existence of a large number of widely divergent groups all identified by the contemptuous designation *ayhud* is therefore a creation of their opponents and appears to reflect irrational prejudice.

Second, there are various reasons to specifically associate at least one of the groups labelled as *ayhud* with the Beta Israel. There is clear evidence for instance of a certain geographic continuity. The *ayhud* under discussion are associated with the area surrounding Lake Tana, particularly Semien, ªallamt, Dambeya and Wagara. In later years the Falasha are located exactly here. Simple logic appears to indicate that some historical relation may have existed between the two groups that occupied the same region a few generations apart, especially since both appear to have been characterised by both rejection of Christian doctrine and royal rule. The recognition of such a link is in fact also implied by the manner in which several later sources treat the topic. For example, the chronicler of Sarªa Dengel (1563-1597) refers to the *ayhud* in Semien and ªallamt who confronted Ba'eda Maryam (and before him Zar'a Ya'eqob) as "Falasha", consequently positing a link between these *ayhud* and the Falasha of his day.

Third, at least in the hagiographic texts the *ayhud* of Lake Tana are credited with distinct ethnic or religious characteristics. The *Gadla Gabra Iyasus* states that "the children of the Jews" confronted at Enfraz had migrated from Jerusalem to Ethiopia after the destruction of the Second Temple. Moreover, the people of Semien and ªallamt who welcomed the renegade monk Qozmos[1] are said to have observed the "religion of the Jews" and to have welcomed the receipt of the *Orit* (Pentateuch) that he translated for them. When Abuna Takla Hawaryat baptised those people in ªallamt who had previously only superficially been converted, he made them promise that they would not return to their old religion, making them "swear by the *Orit* of Moses because they feared the *Orit* as in Judaism". These quotations, apart from indicating that the Beta Israel were at the time considered to be a distinguishable ethnic or religious group of some influence, also indicate a solidifying discriminatory attitude towards them.

Overt Discrimination: *Economic dislodgement*

The transition from the earlier term *ayhud* to the later Falasha is aptly viewed by Kaplan (1992) as probably the most significant change that occurred among the *ayhud* of the Lake Tana region in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This appears to be closely associated with a more overtly discriminatory and less tolerant view of the Beta Israel. The reign of Yeshak was indicated above to be particularly significant in the history of the *Ayhud*. His rule also marked the beginning of the Beta Israel's dislocation and their loss of rights to the land. Following his victory over the governors of Dambeya and Semien, Yeshak was said to have decreed: "He who is baptized in the Christian religion may inherit the land of his father, otherwise let him be a *falasi*." (a landless person or wanderer). A later scribe added a comment to this decree: "Since then, the House of Israel (Beta Israel) have been called *Falashoch*" (exiles). Although Kaplan claims he is tempted to join the anonymous scribe in attributing the designation "Falasha" for the Beta Israel to the time of Yeshak, the evidence from various texts tends to contradict this.

None of the sources for the rest of the fifteenth century use the term "Falasha". In the early sixteenth century however, it appears almost simultaneously in Ge'ez, Hebrew, Arabic and Portuguese sources. For instance, the *Gadla Gabra Masih,* written in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, recalls its hero's encounter with a *Falasa*, but also calls the *Falasa* an *Ayhudawi,* appears to be the first Ge'ez source explicitly linking the two terms. A letter written in Jerusalem in 1528 by the Kabbalist Abraham Ben Eliezer Halevi is the first known Hebrew text to use the term, referring to the Falasa as "a strong kingdom of Jews who are valiant", situated on "high mountains and peaks and no one can ascend there to make war". Only slightly later the Arab chronicler of Ahmad Gragn's conquest of Ethiopia noted that "The Semien province was ruled by the Jews of Abyssinia who are called Falashas in their own language…".

In view of such references, it cannot be accepted that the terms *Ayhud* and "Falasha" were established in the time of Yeshak. More than a hundred years later the terms were connected, but the link was not completely established. Yeshak's decree appears in view of this to be significant mainly as a reminder of one of the primary meanings of the term "Falasha", namely "landless people" rather than being an allusion to a foreign Israelite origin. This reference of the term "Falasha" to "landless people" is also significant because it appears to coincide with a more overt, irrational prejudice against the Beta Israel.

In support of this statement, one might refer to Kaplan's view that one of the major sources of the Ethiopian emperor's power was his right to distribute fiefs (*gult)* to loyal subjects. The owner of a *gult (the bala-gult)* acquired the right to tax peasants who lived on the land so that his own maintenance and that of his dependents was provided for. Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth

centuries enormous tracts of land were conquered and placed under imperial rule, providing incomes for a growing number of royal retainers from the army, the court and the church. Yeshaq's victory was, for example followed by the distribution of *gult* to a number of his allies, although the *bala-gult* had no actual rights to the land itself in terms of the Ethiopian system of land tenure. These rights remained the hereditary property (*rist)* of the peasants from whom the *bala-gult* collected his taxes.

In contrast to the rights of a *bala-gult,* which were by definition dependent on the quality of their relationship with the emperor or some other powerful person, the rights to *rist* were far more stable. *Rist*-holders only rarely experienced alienation and redistribution of their land. However, this is precisely what happened to a portion of the *Ayhud.* While those Beta Israel who were willing to be converted to Christianity retained their *rist* the others became *Falasi* and colonists were brought in to take their places. One can only imagine the suffering of a people in Ethiopia whose land was alienated – they also lost their livelihood and were doomed to be wanderers in their own country. Accordingly, the alienation of Beta Israel land, the removal of their *rist,* appears to be properly interpreted as an extreme form of religious and political discrimination against them, coinciding with the alienation of their very livelihood.

Demonisation: *Violation of Communal Political rights to Land*

This severe discrimination appears eventually to have led to an almost complete demonisation of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia. According to Kaplan (1992), the fifteenth century marked the beginning of a series of changes that transformed the *Ayhud* at many levels. Singled out and deprived of their *rist,* they responded by both concentrating in peripheral areas and assuming a special identity as landless tenants or craftsmen. This added new depth to their previously vague group identity and began to distinguish them from the various other groups called *Ayhud.* Although there appears to be no detailed information on the subject, the Beta Israel may have adopted a number of strategies in response to the decline in their access to land. A significant number were, at least superficially, converted to Christianity in an attempt to retain their economic position. Others probably continued to work their traditional lands, no longer as independent agriculturalists, but as tenant farmers for the recently arrived colonists. A third group seem to have migrated to areas which had not been affected by Yeshak's decree or places where the quality of the farmland was so low that it discourages the arrival of covetous settlers. While the inhospitably cold Semien mountains spring to mind, the lowland regions, traditionally despised by highland Ethiopians, were probably also included.

Significantly, whether as a result of tenancy, the low productivity of their lands or migration-induced population pressures, the Beta Israel began to seek ways to augment their income from agriculture. Although it cannot be determined precisely when they began to engage commercially in handicrafts such as pottery, weaving, building and most importantly, smithing. Accordingly, a number of social, political, economic and religious circumstances arising between the four teenth and sixteenth centuries helped transform various vaguely defined and politically disparate groups of *Ayhud* into a far more centralised and distinctive group known as the Falasha. During the period from 1468 to 1632 the Beta Israel displayed their most sophisticated political and military organisation, were involved in some of their most dramatic conflicts with the Ethiopian emperors and suffered some of their most serious defeats. For most of the period from the mid-1400s to 1543, when they finally achieved victory with the help of the Portuguese, the Christian emperors of Ethiopia were pre-occupied with a major Muslim threat to the Ethiopian highlands. Both Ba'eda Maryam and Eskender suffered major defeats in their campaigns of the southeastern region of Adal and probably had only limited resources to devote to the Beta Israel. The emperor Lebna Dengel at the age of 20 however managed to achieve a devastating victory over the Muslims of Adal in 1516.

This was not the end of the Muslim onslaught, though. Following a period of internal struggle, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, a resourceful military commander known as Gragn ("the left handed"), emerged as the ruler of Adal. In 1529 Gragn's seasoned and well – armed troops met and defeated Lebna Dengel's numerically superior forces at Shembra Koure. The *futuh* (conquest) of Ethiopia had begun. During the next twelve years highland Ethiopia was devastated on an unprecedented scale: churches were burnt, monasteries were destroyed and numerous Christians were forcefully converted to Islam.

Initially the Beta Israel appear to have welcomed the Muslim threat to imperial rule and saw it as an opportunity to reassert their independence. According to Gragn's chronicler, they served as guides to the Muslim troops who invaded Semien and fought against the troops of Lebna Dengel. However, by 1542 they had perceived clear disadvantages in Muslim rule. As a result, when the Portuguese, led by Dom Christovao (Christopher) da Gama, began to move inland to join with Lebna Dengel's troops, the Beta Israel took the side of the European Christian forces.

In return for their support, the Beta Israel had many of their traditional rights in Semien restored. Indeed, the reign of the emperor Galawdeyos (1540-1559) was marked by his valiant efforts to reconstruct the institutions of imperial government. This offered the Beta Israel a welcome respite from the earlier years of war and conflict. The Falasha described in the royal chronicles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries differ significantly from the *Ayhud* previously discussed. The area controlled by them had considerably shrunk. Whereas Semien, ªallamt, Dambeya, ªagade, Waldebba, Walqayit and Wagara all included sizeable Beta Israel populations, by the middle of the sixteenth century only Semien and to a lesser extent Dambeya and Wagara still contained an organised Jewish presence. In the 1620s the emperor Susneyos achieved final victory over the Beta Israel of Semien. This appears to be one of the major landmarks in the history of the Beta Israel.

From the middle of the sixteenth century onwards there was a tendency to establish a greater imperial presence in northwest Ethiopia around Lake Tana. This presence was probably one of the primary reasons for the increasingly frequent clashes with the Beta Israel. The tendency towards a more permanent type of settlement and the erection of palaces and churches of stone accelerated during the reign of Susneyos and culminated in the reign of his son and successor Fasiladas with the establishment of the city of Gondar, the country's first permanent capital since the Zagwe had reigned from Lalibela in the thirteenth century. By the time the Yemenite ambassador Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Haymi visited Ethiopia in 1648, Gondar was well established and Fasiladas' castle was its most impressive feature. Over the next twenty years, a number of castles and seven churches were constructed in the city.

The most striking aspect of Beta Israel life in the Gondar period (1632-1769) is their identification with a number of specialised crafts and occupations, including smithing, weaving, pottery, building and soldiering. The Beta Israel quickly acquired a reputation as skilled masons and carpenters and according to tradition they played an important role in almost all the major building projects in the Gondar period. In return for the services rendered the Gondari kings, they were rewarded in the usual manner with titles and land. They were often designated as either *azmach* (general) or *ajaz* (commander), a title that included administrative and military links. They were also made *bajerond* (treasurer) which referred to a chief of the workers.Beta Israel craftsmen were just one of a large number of people drawn to the city of Gondar. Economic specialisation, density of population and ethnic diversity were all part of the new Ethiopian capital. Foreigners, Muslims, Beta Israel and representatives of numerous regional groups were all found in the city. It was impossible for the population to observe ideal standards of social purity. Repeated contact with outsiders was required as the population flowed freely in and out of the sections of the city and people of different faiths often lived side-by-side, although geographic separation of the people of Gondar into separate

quarters on the basis of social status, religion and economic function was maintained to some degree.

Emperor Yohannes I decreed in 1668 that the Beta Israel had to live apart from the Christians and form villages of their own, while Muslims were forced to live apart and Christians in their own villages and were forbidden to enter the service of Muslims. In spite of the decree, the separation of the groups was only partially put into practice and a similar decree followed in 1678. Regarding the Beta Israel, the popular beliefs that identified Beta Israel smiths and potters as dangerous beings to be feared and avoided probably came to play as important a role as barriers to social contact. At the time, centrifugal forces loosened the grip of the emperors over the provinces accelerated alarmingly. The ruling "King of Kings" eventually became little more than a figurehead as the emperors were forced to make more and more concessions to the governors of the different provinces. Kings were enthroned and dethroned at the whim of the governors. The Zamane Masafent (The Era of the Judges) began in 1769 when the Oromo emperor Iyo'as, a minor, was enthroned. Iyo'as was assassinated in that year on the order of Ras Mika'el of Tigre.

The *Zamane Masafent* was a period of severe hardship for the peasants in general and the tenant farmers in particular. The soldiers of different regional armies lived off the land, ravaging both enemy territories and that of their masters. Insecurity, poverty and depopulation were particularly rife in Gondar, which was repeatedly conquered and pillaged. The condition and status of the Beta Israel, who depended on royal patronage, protection, political recognition, political security and employment, almost inevitably deteriorated. This became one of the bleakest periods in the history of the Beta Israel. The position of the Beta Israel as potential agriculturalists suffered setbacks. Disproportionate burdens came to be their lot. The frequent depredations of roving armies affected the area around Gondar particularly adversely. However, it retained important symbolic significance. Various *rases* and warlords regularly clashed over rights to the city. Despite the limited success of the Beta Israel of the Gondar period, the vast majority of Beta Israel did not possess *rist,* but worked the land of others as tenant farmers and were particularly vulnerable to economic exploitation and dislocation. From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, the Beta Israel there are indications that even their existing land was encroached upon.

The Beta Israel's services as builders and soldiers were increasingly paid for not by grants of land, but through monetary compensation and slaves. At the same time, deprived of protection of a strong central government interested in protecting the services of valuable artisans, the Beta Israel became defenceless and their lands and goods were liable to be seized and redistributed. In the wake of the reduction of their income from both construction and agriculture, the Beta Israel had little choice but to increase their involvement in what to the dominant society were the despised professions and stigma of weaving, pottery and in particular smithing. Although in some cases the designation of the Beta Israel as *buda* (possessors of the "evil eye") was applied to those who worked as smiths and potters and was more closely associated with some professions, the term eventually came to apply to all Falasha. This led to the Beta Israel by the mid-nineteenth century being seen as a despised and cast-like group or as Quirin (1992: 30) puts it, an occupational caste within the larger Abyssinian society when ranked according to the following criteria: birth-ascribed occupational specialisation within a ranked social hierarchy, fixed rules of social separation and interaction between the castes and the dominant society and an ideological justification (expressed in moral or religious terms) of the rigid separation. According to Quirin, these criteria combine the "attributional" and the "interactional" aspects of caste relations. Moral attributes concerning the degree to which various occupations and ways of life are judged to be pure or polluted lie at the heart of caste systems viewed in this manner. It should be noted that Quirin does not view castes as unchanging. Instead, like ethnic groups, they emerge during a dialectical and diachronic process.

The designation *buda* requires further explanation. It was applied together with the terms *tahib* or *tayh* to particularly blacksmiths and potters (Quirin, 1992: 13). The terms *tahib* or *tayh* derive from the Ge'ez *tabba* ("to be wise"). This suggests an ambivalent position for the Beta Israel in the nineteenth century. Though the Beta Israel interpreted the term in its positive meaning as one who has the skill and expertise to forge iron and make pots, to the dominant society it was a term of scorn and also carried the connotation of fearing someone with special powers. This marked a further stage in the demonisation of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia.

"Hyena People"

Magic occupies a central place in Ethiopian cosmology (Salamon, 1999: 35-39). Together with simple mortals there are supernatural entities, often combining human and animal characteristics in unpredictable ways . All supernatural entities have magical powers. The Beta Israel's neighbours came to view them as part of the latter group. The boundaries between the animal, the human and the divine were vague and indistinct and could be crossed with fatal results. The "magical cunning" of the Beta Israel came to be associated with the *buda,* the mythical hyena that was a central feature of Ethiopian cosmology. The cannibalistic *buda* is associated with artisans and blacksmiths in particular. The hyena-man and other animal and human-animal transformations are not exclusive to the Beta Israel. Similar associations are applied to other groups throughout Ethiopia and in other areas of Africa. However, the concrete accusations linking the *buda* to the Beta Israel take on a unique dimension not found in any other part of the continent. These accusations integrate accusations against the Beta Israel not only through their professions but also through the Beta Israel's religious tradition and the conceptual differences between Judaism and Christianity in Ethiopia.

One widely held view is that the *buda* disguises itself as a human during the day but reverts to its original form during the night. In the Christians' eyes, the natural state of the *buda* is that of a hyena and not of a man. The appellation *jib,* meaning "hyena" and *jiratam,* meaning "tail", refer directly to this image. These were considered by the Beta Israel to be the most offensive appellations, because the image of the hyena and in particular its tail, the most extraneous and "ridiculous" part of the hyena's body, dehumanise and ridicule the Jews. Being "hyena -people", the Jews were feared for their "eating", namely sucking the blood of living victims and buried cadavers, which they were said to disinter and use to satisfy their nutritional and ritual needs. The "eating" was performed by casting an evil eye on the victim, who felt as though his blood was being sucked. The entire group was seen in this manner, but certain individuals and families were especially singled out as possessing far greater powers. People working with fire were considered to be more dangerous. Their power could be passed on "genetically" to their children.

Defences against the *buda* required primarily physical separation and distancing. It was necessary to avoid eye contact – a master of the evil eye could "eat" you. Christians covered their faces with kerchiefs when they approached the *buda* and hid their children behind their backs as children were thought to be the *buda's* victims of choice. Other defences included lighting a fire and producing smoke (*goma)* as a means of stopping and even chasing away the *buda*. Smoke was sometimes used on a victim whose spirit had become one with the *buda's* spirit to reveal who had "eaten" him. Burning tyres or chicken droppings mixed with an assortment of woods could generate smoke. The Christians knew that on market days Beta Israel and in particular the artisans passed through their villages and lit *goma* in front of their houses.The diagnosis and care of victims of the evil eye required determining the perpetrator's identity. While applying "smoke therapy" the victim was asked "Who ate you?" The victim would usually name one of the smiths and potters who lived nearby. The "guilty party" would then be summoned to face the victim, apologise and retract the injury. Sometimes an article of the *buda's* clothing was taken and thrown into a fire. The victim was then expected to inhale the smoke from the burnt cloth. The smoke was said to aid in his recovery.

These were common occurrences and many times Beta Israel were expected to beg forgiveness from ill Christians. The consequences of dismissing the accusations could be severe and were said even to include death.

It could be expected that the accusation that the Jews possessed magical powers had a powerful influence on relations between Jews and Christians in Ethiopia. Their fear of the Beta Israel's "supernatural powers" moved the Christians to maintain their distance. The specific content of the accusations against the Beta Israel combined their hated occupations and their status as landless people with their religious belief. The Jewish smith was regarded as a descendant of the Jew who forged the nails for Jesus' crucifixion. Because it was included in Holy Writ, the accusation was interpreted to be incontrovertible. As the progeny of the Jews who crucified Christ, the Beta Israel were accused of a continuing malevolent intent which passed from generation to generation. It was "in their blood" without their even knowing about it. Christians interpreted the sacrifice of sheep - a rite central to the Beta Israel celebration of Passover – as the annual re-enactment of the crucifixion. Anti-Jewish accusations familiar in other cultures, particularly the killing of Jesus on Passover and the ritual murder of Christian children by Jews, linked with magical conceptions that flourished in Ethiopia to create a multi-levelled system of confirmation.

Moreover, the pan-Ethiopian myth regarding the *buda* is tied to creation itself. The *buda* was one of Eve of the bible's thirty children. According to this widespread story, deeply rooted in Ethiopian folklore, Eve hid her fifteen most beautiful children from God. Because of this they received no divine inheritance and God cursed them by turning them into animals, leaving their fifteen siblings in human form. This reveals that at the psychoanalytic level in Ethiopia it was thought to be God who originally divided the *buda* from the Amhara. Like Abel, the Amhara were blessed. Like Cain, the *buda* were rejected and cursed. The relations between the Amhara and the *buda* also reflected fear and instability between rival groups that are mutually interdependent and doomed to live in close proximity to each other. The landless *buda* exemplified a people deprived of human identity as well as land. All this was deemed to be the result of the will of a stronger brother and an unforgiving father who preferred one son above another.

Adding colour to Salamon's analysis is the knowledge that in a typical hyena litter of two, the stronger cub often fatally attacks and eats the weaker while the mother either does nothing or actually aids the attacker. This cannibalistic sibling behaviour is unusual among mammals. This may have a bearing on the complicated conceptual framework involved in the accusations of magical powers among the Beta Israel in Ethiopia. In projecting this image onto the Jewish group, this psychoanalytical reading takes on a more profound meaning. The Oedipal competition and sibling rivalry become superimposed on a more fundamental struggle for religious legitimacy. It should therefore be noted here that it is our view that the more generalised struggle for religious legitimacy in the earlier days of the Beta Israel had now become more particularised, thus losing some legitimacy at the more general level and resulting in a particularly pernicious form of discrimination against the Beta Israel.

Nevertheless, elements of the older and more legitimate religious conflict remain. Both religions in question were fathered by the same God. The rivalry was further embittered by the fact that the Beta Israel have no land in terms of the legal precepts of Ethiopia. For the Beta Israel it was as if they had been disinherited by the curse of a God who preferred the Christians above them. The *buda* and the Jews, both of whom are described in Ethiopian myths as the crucifiers of Jesus, are viewed as a single entity. In another version of the events surrounding the crucifixion, it was the *buda* who drove Jesus out of his hiding place with two attached sticks while the smiths provided the nails with which he was fastened to the cross. For this and for their original rejection of Jesus, the Jews merited punishment. Tried and convicted by God, they were punished by history.

As was argued earlier, this "punishment" did not come to an end with the Beta Israel emigrating to Israel. When they reached Israel, they came into contact with a different form of discrimination: that against Oriental Jews which, although it was practised against all Oriental Jews, made it no easier to bear. In fact, it may even have been a more difficult burden. It had no original elements of a legitimised conflict as did that in Ethiopia and it thwarted a centuries-old religious dream: that of returning to Yerusalem, aside from being a denial of the very identity of the Beta Israel. Moreover, the new form of discrimination against the Beta Israel in Israel creates the risk of making of the Beta Israel a homeless, stateless people, true wanderers of the earth with nowhere to go.

Conclusion

Competing narrative discourses continue to mark and define the early origins of the Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews or black Jews of Ethiopia). One difficulty with reconstructing the past of Judaism in Ethiopia and the main reason for the controversies which surround the issue, is that written records though scarce, claim for themselves the 'unquestioned' role to narrate, control, contain and police what can be said about the identities of the Beta Israel. This arrogance of written records is however constantly subverted by the oral sources of the history of the origin of the Beta Israel. The Oral sources imply a multiplicity of versions of the same story, and its use in this article suggest that the question of the use of narrative discourse in attempting to name the identities of Beta Israel in a context of social crisis is a process potentially subject to different interpretations in different historical periods. What the 'zone of occult instability'(Fanon, 1963) that is the intertextual liminal space of the written and the oral sources of the Beta Israel identities produce is a sense of identities as social realities caught up in a situation of flux. The evidence of the origin and changing identities of the Beta Israel explored in this article reject the notion of the Beta Israel as a distinct, pure and authentic social group untouched by political, economic and cultural influences from the Jews in Israel and the Africans in Ethiopia. The Beta Israel have been acted upon by historical forces and in turn, they have also on numerous occasions taken control of their lives and gave themselves a new identity. The legitimacy of Beta Israel claims to be authentic Jews can be deduced from their association since the earliest times with the Biblical-Hebraic religious tradition and persecution over many centuries because of those beliefs. And yet there was discrimination against the Beta Israel in Ethiopia in the earliest times. This severe discrimination appears eventually to have led to an almost complete demonisation of the Beta Israel in Ethiopia. Discrimination against the Beta Israel in Ethiopia is rooted in their origins, isolation and identity. Relations between the Beta Israel and central authorities in Ethiopia have retained their conflictual nature over several centuries. However, exclusive concentration on this conflict has sometimes concealed close relations between the Beta Israel and fellow Ethiopians and growing harmonious relations between the Beta Israel and the religious authorities of Israel. In other words, in analysing the changing identities of the Beta Israel across centuries marked by social crises, the article emphasised a holistic perspective on the origins of the Beta Israel. This holistic perspective based on evidence both from the written and oral sources has the potential to eliminate the issue of "either this account or that", which appears to have dominated thinking on the matter in the past. Common, synthesising elements in the accounts are emphasised rather than clashing fundamentals leading to irresolvable differences between the accounts.

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