

Five Jews in search of 'Christmas' at Lalibela, Ethiopia's Jerusalem

Who are the five of us? First, locals Alison and Jack Friend; then me, (Geoffrey Ben-Nathan), local to Wembley Sephardi shul; then my good friend of 50+ years, Johnny Gumb; and Johnny's Jerusalem-based cousin Peter Nathan.

Why Ethiopia? I had studied the culture and language (Amharic) of Ethiopia as part of my university course way back in the 1960s. Friends sometimes prevail upon me to take them to visit the country, thus from 28 December 2011 to 11 January 2012 we made a whistle-stop tour to many of the country's main sites.

My special interest in Ethiopia lies in its strong connection to the Hebrew Bible. What possible connection, you may well ask, has Ethiopia, of all places, got with the Hebrew Bible? The answer is that the Ethiopians regard themselves as having had star roles in the Bible story. Moshe Rabbenu, for a start, had the good taste to marry an Ethiopian (Num 12:1). And Solomon (circa 930 BCE) entertained the Queen of Sheba (in those days Sheba, modern Yemen, on the east side of the Red Sea and Ethiopia on the west side were thought to be one polity).

According to Ethiopian tradition, Solomon and Sheba had a son. He was given the name Menelik (Whom shall God send?). Menelik became the first of what the Ethiopians refer to as the Solomonic line of Ethiopian kings which lasted, with one break, down to Emperor Haile Selassie (d. 1976).

The 14th century Ethiopian epic, the *kebre negest* (The Book of the Glory of the Kings), tells us that although Menelik was brought up by his mother, the Queen of Sheba, he nevertheless returned as a young man together with friends to visit his father, Solomon. The book explicitly states that Menelik and his group spirited the Ark of the Covenant away from the Temple in Jerusalem in a midnight flit



by Geoffrey Ben-Nathan

back to Sheba. So, possession of the Ark of the Covenant is another strong link with the Bible.

The Ark is believed to reside at Axum (which we visited), Ethiopia's holiest city, located in the north of the country. It is housed in its own special shrine guarded by a priest appointed for life. He, and he alone, is the only human being allowed to enter the shrine.

How much of this history really happened is completely by the by. More to the point is that Ethiopian Christianity, because of its own perceived association with Judaism, feels itself bound to observe laws in the Torah – yes, the Torah.

For example: 40 million Ethiopian Christians circumcise their male children on the eighth day; Ethiopian Christians eat chicken but regard duck and goose as totally *traif* (yes, they have their own *halacha*); special attention is given, more so than in Judaism, to the laws of personal purity (Lev: 15 and in particular v. 31-33). These are but a few examples.

Ethiopia was converted to Christianity in the fourth century CE. But it is a Christianity that is "wrapped into Judaism". Let me explain: only in Ethiopia can you (very easily) buy a star of David with a cross in its centre. This is sold as a ... cross! (*mesquel*). This perhaps sums up Ethiopian Christianity - Christianity encapsulated in Judaism.

The Jewish nature of Ethiopian Christianity was not lost on the western church. Catholics in particular, in

the 17th century, sought to bring the Ethiopians back to the straight and narrow. They succeeded in converting one Ethiopian emperor, Susenyos, to Catholicism. But the Ethiopian people were having none of it. In 1632 Susenyos was forced by the people to abdicate. His successor, Fasilidas, who reigned from 1632 to 1667, expelled the Jesuits, lock, stock and barrel.

Just as Ethiopian Christianity maintains laws from the Torah, it also preserves rituals which are thought to go back to Bible times. Preserved too are artefacts associated with these rituals lost to the memory of the Jewish people.

How can this be? Perhaps an answer is this: in the move from independence to exile (70 CE), the nature of Judaism inevitably changed. Rituals carried out in Temple times fell into desuetude. But Ethiopia has never lost its independence (except for the few short years 1936-1941). Thus Ethiopians, with ownership of the holy Ark and a strong desire to express their link with Judaism, are today carrying out rituals perhaps first inaugurated in Temple times. There is every reason to believe they are completely authentic.

As one admirer of Ethiopia has put it so eloquently: "The scene of David and all the house of Israel playing before the Lord on harps and lyres, drums and sistra, dancing with all their might, and bringing up the ark with shouting and the sound of the trumpet is a spectacle that is eminently alive in Ethiopia ... " (1)

Above - 'The debteras shook their ts'nats'l in their right hand in slow perfectly co-ordinated movements' - photo Friend

And it was the desire to see just this that brought us to Lalibela, Ethiopia's Jerusalem, to witness the Christmas celebration. What we particularly wished to observe was the ceremonial dance (*shibsheba*) of the debteras.

But before we come to the role of the debteras, there are two, and possibly three, further questions to be answered.

Firstly, you must be asking yourselves, how can we witness the celebration of Christmas when we started our journey (on 28 December) three days after Christmas had already taken place on 25 December? The answer is that the Ethiopians use a different calendar. They operate the Julian calendar. This runs seven years before the western Gregorian calendar (so the Ethiopians are in the year 2005) but 12 days after the Gregorian calendar (so Ethiopian Christmas is celebrated on 6 January).

Secondly, where is Lalibela? What is so special about it? Lalibela is a small town in northern Ethiopia. It is, after Axum, Ethiopia's second holiest location. It is also the location of what has been described as the eighth wonder of the world!

Located at Lalibela, a most unlikely spot, are a dozen rock-hewn monolithic churches. Some, like the ancient city of Petra in Jordan, are carved into the rock. Others, incredibly, are excavated downwards out of the rock. The roofs of the churches of Quedus Giorgis (St. George) and Quedus Mariam (St. Mary), for example, are flush with the ground. There is no fencing. The churches are in different locations. You are in danger, if you don't watch out, of falling into a moat 60-70 feet deep and perhaps 40 or so feet wide. The solid rock monoliths at the centre of the moats have then been internally excavated to make churches – and very fine ones too.

The complex of churches is believed to be of the 12th and 13th centuries. The first European to come across them, Francisco Alvarez (1465-1540), wrote (circa 1520): "I weary about writing more about these buildings, because it seems to me I shall not be believed if I write more ..." (2)

Thirdly, what is the connection between Lalibela and Jerusalem? The answer is none and everything! The Ethiopians really wanted to make pilgrimage to the tabernacle, latterly

Jerusalem (Deut 16:16). But Jerusalem was too far to walk to. So Lalibela is a substitute Jerusalem – the centre of pilgrimage at l'dyet (the Birth, Christmas) for all Ethiopians.

And, indeed, we witnessed a biblical scene: tens of thousands of people walking to Lalibela from all parts of the Ethiopian compass – some walking because they were too poor to afford any other means of transport than shank's pony; others, because a pilgrimage is not a pilgrimage unless you walk. (It occurred to me at the time what a good idea it would be if the rabbis, in these days of EasyJet, could reinstitute the mitzvah of pilgrimage to Jerusalem for all Jews all over the world. What a grand annual spectacle it would turn out to be.)

At last to the debteras: who are the debteras? They are the Ethiopian Church's Levites. As the late Prof Ullendorff, a noted scholar of Ethiopian studies wrote (3): "The twofold division of the Israelite priesthood is paralleled in Ethiopia by the categories of kah'n and debtera. The office of the latter is in most respects comparable to the tasks entrusted to the Levites, particularly in their role as cantors and choristers."

It was precisely these roles of cantors and choristers that we came to witness. There is no better place than Lalibela at Ethiopian Christmas to witness the performance. We were not disappointed. The spectacle was awesome.

We were led by our guide through the throng – ever so slowly as the crowd was thick and the passage thin – down to the lower level of the church. Suddenly, we were in the forecourt. We looked up. On one side of the unfenced perimeter were the priests in all their finery, honoured by rich brocaded umbrellas held over them like individual chuppas by their deacons; on the other the debteras swaying rhythmically in their chant. It was utterly mesmerising.

Like the Levites in the ancient temple, they were in groups of 24, sometimes two lines of 12 opposing each other. White-turbaned, they were dressed in white robes with a resplendent bright red band about 12 inches wide about knee level.

They moved slowly and gracefully. In their left hand their m'quamiya – a shoulder-high staff made of cypress wood

with a chin-rest at the top; in their right, their ts'nats'l. Both words have Hebrew connections: m'quamiya (means of standing) from Hebrew *la-kum* (get up stand); and ts'nats'l, Hebrew *tsil-tse-leem*, (sistra, also cymbals).

Psalm 150:5 Praise Him with the loud-sounding cymbals

halelluhu be-tsil-tsel-ei shama

Praise Him with the clanging cymbals

halelluhu be-tsil-tsel-ei t'rua

The debteras shook their ts'nats'l in their right hand in slow perfectly co-ordinated movements. Debteras are trained in special schools called aquaquam (the manner of standing) bet (house or school). Christine Chaillot⁽⁴⁾ lists the range of aquaquam styles. Recounting these would need to be the subject of another special article.

Chaillot claims the word debtera means tent: "it might also be a reference to the time of David when Levites performed their prayer service in tents"⁽⁴⁾. My Amharic dictionary simply translates debtera as 'unordained but highly trained clergyman'. In addition to their choral role, debteras, like the Levites of old, perform a multiplicity of mundane tasks. They are modern-day church wardens or synagogue committee members.

We beheld the spectacle of the swaying debteras for a good hour or so. When we talked about it afterwards, we all agreed we had seen something extra special which would remain in our memories for a long time to come.

Finally, Ethiopian debteras not only take us back to psalm 150; but as I approach Shabbat in finishing this article, I am led also to Psalm 92, '*mizmor shir le-yom ha-shabbat.*'
92:4 alei asor va-alei navel alei higayon b'chinor
With an instrument of ten strings ...
The instrument of 10 strings is the Ethiopian baganna – possibly the same instrument that David played in front of King Saul.

To sum up: for the student of the Bible and what happened in Bible times, Ethiopia has to be the first port of call.

References

1. Donald L. Levine, Wax and Gold, University of Chicago Press, 1965, p. vii.
2. Francisco Alvarez, The Prester John of the Indies, p.226.
3. E. Ullendorff, Ethiopia and the Bible, Oxford University Press 1968, p.91
4. Christine Chaillot, The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition, Inter-Orthodox Dialogue, Paris, 2002, p.111.