

Kirsten Stoffregen PEDERSEN

Jerusalem

## IS THE CHURCH OF ETHIOPIA A JUDAIC CHURCH ?

The question whether the Ethiopian *täwahedo* Orthodox Church is or is not particularly Judaic of character is by no means a new one.

Already the Jesuits who were trying in the 16th and part of the 17th century to bring Ethiopian christendom into full union with Rome were attentive to the matter. And unfortunately they were not always as broadminded as the "first Christian missionaries" in the way James Bruce of Kinnaird describes these in the late 18th century, namely as choosing to respect rather than to refute the Jewish customs they found well confirmed in Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>. This is how the Portuguese Jesuit Jerome Lobo expresses his feelings concerning the judaic customs of Ethiopian christians: "their present religion is nothing but a kind of confused miscellany of Jewish and Mahometan superstitions, with which they have corrupted those remnants of Christianity which they still retain"<sup>2</sup>.

Even in our days and quite recently the question has been treated by a number of scholars, such as Edward Ullendorff<sup>3</sup>, Maxime Rodinson<sup>4</sup>, John T. Pawlikowski<sup>5</sup> and Getatchew Haile<sup>6</sup>. Why should we then take it up again? Has it not already been sufficiently clarified by those rightly famous men of research?

Their work is without any doubt impressive, but the author of these lines enjoys a double privilege, which none of the others has had, namely the situation of living inside the Ethiopian Church and in a Jewish state, having furthermore been educated in a Jewish university and standing in a constant and lively contact with a number of

---

<sup>1</sup> J. BRUCE, *Travels to discover the Sources of the Nile*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1813, III, 13.

<sup>2</sup> J. LOBO, *A Voyage to Abyssinia*, tr. S. Johnson, (1735), 59.

<sup>3</sup> E. ULLENDORFF, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian (Monophysite) Christianity", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1(1956), 216-256; *Ethiopia and the Bible*, London 1968.

<sup>4</sup> M. RODINSON, "Sur la question des "Influences Juives" en Éthiopie", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9(1964), 11-19.

<sup>5</sup> J.T. PAWLIKOWSKI, "The Judaic Spirit of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church", *Journal of Religion in Africa* 4 (1971-72), 178-99.

<sup>6</sup> G. HAILE, "The 49 Hour Sabbath of the Ethiopian Church", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23(1988) nr 2, 233-54.

other Churches, eastern as well as western. It is this background which might give us the hope that she might be able to cast a new ray of light upon that ancient problem.

In order to get a better view of the matter, we shall consider it from four points of view, namely the ones of customs, of liturgy, of dogma and of historical tradition.

## JUDAIC CUSTOMS IN ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIANITY

### 1. Circumcision/excision

One of the most conspicuous and well-known judaic customs observed among Ethiopian christians is the practice of circumcision. About this C.H.Walker tells us, "For a boy the circumcision will be on the seventh day, unless it is a Wednesday or a Friday or a day of fast; yet during the Lenten fast, which is of fifty-five days, it is ordained that the ceremony need not wait. If the babe is a female, it should be on the fifth day, but many will wait twenty days or more till a female circumciser be found. But if the mother is diseased, the babe must wait one year or two years, lest the disease come forth and settle upon the body.

When a man or a woman of mature age is raised up in Christianity, there need be no circumcision, nor is there shame"<sup>7</sup>.

There can be no doubt that the Ethiopian christians see their circumcision as a sign of "the covenant of Abraham". That became quite clear to me, when in 1971 one of my students - an Eritrean monk from the monastery of Däbrä Damo - in class asked me, if it were true that European christians were not in general circumcised. When I answered that so indeed is the case, he expressed his worry about their eternal salvation. "How can they be saved, when they are not in the covenant of Abraham?" Bishop Josef, however, who was also present in the class room, set our minds at peace by pointing to St. Paul's teaching concerning the circumcision:

"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God" (1 Cor 7,19);

"For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love"(Ga 5,6)<sup>8</sup>.

That circumcision (and excision) is carried out by Ethiopian christians at such an early time in life really points to an Old Testament origin of the custom. But on the other hand the practice of excision rather suggests a non-Jewish, possibly Cushitic, origin. The date might have been changed when the Bible became known to the Ethiopians, at whichever period that has taken place.

It is well known that both circumcision and excision are common in a great number of tribes and ethnic groups in Africa, but in general they are connected with pu-

<sup>7</sup> C.H. WALKER, *The Abyssinian at Home*, London 1933, 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> See also Phil 3,3; Col 3,11.

berty rites and carried out on adolescents, not - as the case is among Ethiopian christians as well as in Judaism - on newly born children.

It should furthermore be remarked, that circumcision is not carried out in church or by church officials and is not a sacrament.

## 2. Timing of infant baptism

One of the seven sacraments is instead, of course, baptism. But - quite apart from the fact that Christian baptism in general has its root in Jewish ritual ablutions - the Ethiopian timing of that important act must again remind us of an Old Testament law.

It is said that "If a woman have conceived seed, and born a man child; then she shall be unclean seven days; according to the days of the separation for her infirmity shall she be unclean. And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. And she shall then continue in the blood of her purifying three and thirty days; she shall touch no hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying be fulfilled. But if she bear a maid child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation; and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying three score and six days." (Lv 12,2-5). After this the woman shall bring her offerings prescribed for the occasion to the Tabernacle, and the priest shall offer them before the Lord and make an atonement, whereafter "she shall be cleansed from the issue of her blood" (Lv 12,6-7).

In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church a male child is therefore baptized 40 days after its birth, and a female child 80 days after birth. This allows the mother to be present in church for that solemn occasion. And it is pointed out, that Jesus Himself observed that law by being presented in the Temple in Jerusalem in accordance with that law of Moses.

Ethiopian Orthodox catechisms indicate another reason, this time apocryphic in character, for the usage of baptizing a boy on the 40th, a girl on the 80th day after their birth. That reason is, that Adam, the father of all mankind, was created in a place in Asia called Elda, and there he spent the first 40 days of his life. Thereafter he was "born in grace", and angels brought him into paradise. Eve had to wait 80 days for that favour, and the reason why they were not simply created in paradise was that God wanted them to desire and ask for the gift of grace themselves<sup>9</sup>.

## 3. Other ritual purity/impurity

The understanding of ritual purity and impurity in other sexual matters is among Ethiopian christians based on Leviticus 15. People who are ritually unclean according to those laws may well approach the church building while they are still in their

---

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Amest A'emedä Mestir, Addis Ababa 1952 E.C. (=1960 A.D.) or Serwä Haymanot, Addis Ababa 1968.

uncleanness, but they must not enter. They can be seen standing in prayer outside the church door during the services.

The Ethiopian Church is, however, not alone among the christians in observing those laws. That is common in all the ancient oriental Churches, although in the others people rather tend to stay home during such periods of ritual uncleanness.

The laws concerning ritual uncleanness of a woman who has given birth are also still observed by other oriental christians, and they were so even in the Latin Church until the middle of this century. There existed a special prayer to welcome back to the parish church a mother at the end of her period of uncleanness when she was received at the church door by the priest.

#### 4. Dietary laws

It is true that *grosso modo* the Ethiopian Orthodox christians observe the Old Testament dietary laws, and it is not easy to accept emperor Gelawdewos' assurance in his famous confession, that their absolute abstinence from eating pork is just a matter of taste. On the other hand that abstinence is a general Semitic and not just Judaic custom.

That the Ethiopian christians do not keep meat and milk apart, a law which is so prominent in a Jewish household of our days, is due to the fact that they - quite like the Qaraïtes - interpret Ex 23,19 (and 34,26; Deut14,21) quite literally: "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk". To cook it in milk from another animal is not seen as being an infringement upon that commandment.

But, as we shall soon be seeing, the Ethiopian and other eastern christians have added numerous other dietary taboos to those we know from the Old Testament.

Absolutely un-kosher from a biblical point of view is of course the ancient Ethiopian custom of honouring guests by cutting a piece of meat from a live animal and serving it to them. The Jewish lawyer Nathan Marein, who for 25 years lived in Addis Ababa and served there as a juridical adviser to emperor Haylä Sellassie I (1930-74) told with horror that well-meaning Ethiopians tried to honour him in that way at his arrival in the country. He avoided it by telling his hosts that as a Jew he was strictly forbidden to eat such meat.

#### 5. Fasting

The non-biblical dietary taboos are connected with the observance of fasting, which is very common in the life of Ethiopian orthodox christians. On such days these christians do not eat or drink anything from the evening meal until the following early afternoon, and when they eat, no food is allowed which is derived from animals, with the exception of honey.

Ullendorff points to Hiob Ludolf as having suggested that the two weekly days of fasting observed in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church should be a remnant of the two

days of fasting each week observed by Jews<sup>10</sup>. That may well be. But two things should be considered in that connection, namely: 1) that this custom is observed not only by Ethiopian Christians, but also by all the other Eastern Churches, Byzantines as well as non-Byzantines; and 2) that Ullendorff is not very likely to be right in his belief that "the change from Monday and Thursday to Wednesday and Friday was no doubt meant to invalidate accusations of imitating the Jews"<sup>11</sup>. Friday being the day of the passion and death of Jesus, it seems natural that His disciples should choose that day for fasting rather than Thursday, on which the Last Supper took place according to tradition.

Apart from that, Ethiopians as well as all other Oriental Christians observe far more days of fasting than what has ever been known in Judaism - in the case of the Ethiopians as many as some 200 days annually.

## 6. The Sabbath

On two days during the week during a period of fasting, the abstinence from food is somewhat mitigated, and those days are Sunday and Saturday. The mitigation consists only in the custom of taking a light breakfast already well before noon on those days. Also in that the Ethiopian Church follows the custom of the other Oriental Churches.

Special for the Ethiopian Christians is the custom of celebrating the Eucharist - always on Sundays, of course, and on Saturdays, if for some reason the Eucharist is celebrated on that particular Saturday - in the morning. On all other days of fasting the Eucharist is celebrated only at noon, and the first meal of the day is taken after the celebration.

Another feature which is special to the Ethiopian Church is that some of its members celebrate "the two Sabbaths", i.e. both the Old Testament Sabbath on Saturday, and what the Ethiopians call *Sänbätä Krestiyān*, the Sabbath of the Christians, i.e. Sunday.

When exactly that custom came up is still uncertain. Getatchew Haile has expressed the opinion that the question whether or not the Old Testament Sabbath should be observed "was a very serious problem, probably throughout the history of the local church, but definitely during the time from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century"<sup>12</sup>.

The latter is a well-known fact: the 14th-15th-century in particular was a period of strong religious fermentation in Ethiopia, and several sects came up with opinions which were deviating from those of the official national Church. One of these, which

---

<sup>10</sup> E. ULLENDORFF, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements", *op. cit.*, 247; HIOB LUDOLF, *Historia Aethiopia* (1681), III, 6,90 ff.

<sup>11</sup> ULLENDORFF, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> See G. HAILE, *op. cit.* 233-234.

however did not entirely leave the Church and was reconciled with the rest of the orthodox believers already in the 15th century, were the followers of a monastic leader from the north of the country, Abba Ewostatewos. They insisted on observing the two Sabbaths, and since the See of Alexandria would only allow the observance of Sunday as the weekly day of feast and rest, Abba Ewostatewos was expelled from Ethiopia and died in exile in Armenia in 1352.

His movement, however, is still persisting today, although its teachings concerning the “49 hour Sabbath” is not binding for all Ethiopian orthodox christians.

## 7. Personal names

Old Testament names like Abreham (sic), Yeshaq, Yaëqob, Sara, David, Solomon, Isayas, Ermeyas are fairly common among Ethiopian orthodox christians, but hardly more so than in other Churches. As baptismal names combinations like Haylä Iyäsus (Power of Jesus), Gäbrä Maryam (Servant of Mary), Wäldä Sellassie (Son of the Trinity), Bekurä Seyon (the Firstborn of Sion) etc. are far more usual, and as secular names such ones as Dässeta (joy), Täsfaye (my hope), Bälaynäh (fem. -näsh, you are superior) etc. serve more than do the biblical ones.

## LITURGY

### 1. The New Year feast

Ullendorff and others have pointed to the Jewish origin of the Ethiopian New Year feast, *Enqwetatash*, however without mentioning it by this name. It is celebrated on *Mäskäräm* 1st, which corresponds to September 11th in the Gregorian calendar, and in a leap year to September 12th. As is well known, the Jewish *Rosh ha-Shana* is also celebrated in the early autumn, although it is not -as the case is in Christian Ethiopia - fixed to a date which will always be the same in e.g. the Gregorian or the Julian calendar.

The custom of taking a bath of purification on the morning of New Year's day in the nearest river as Ullendorff describes it is also common in rural Christian Ethiopia, as is the slaughtering of a bullock or a goat, quite as a sheep is slaughtered for the festive meal of Easter. If this should be connected with the Old Testament Jewish atonement sacrifice (*Yoma* IV 2,3) as Ullendorf does it, is not quite clear. That the time around New Year should be given to expiation and atonement is rather rooted in general human religious feeling - the desire of leaving all that was wrong and bad and begin again afresh with the new year. Together with thanksgiving these are the thoughts which are also being expressed in Christian religious services in mainly Lutheran countries in connection with January 1st, though such celebrations are of a very new date only. In fact the ecclesiastical New Year nowhere takes its beginning on January 1st, a date on which until the 2nd Vatican Council in the early 1960's the

Roman Catholics of Latin rite were by the way used to celebrating the circumcision of Jesus Christ.

What Ullendorff forgets to mention is the fact that not only the Ethiopian Church but also other eastern Churches, Byzantine and non-Byzantine, begin the new Church year in September. Surely, this custom has Jewish origin, but it should be pointed out that it is not limited to Ethiopia. What is special to the Ethiopians is the custom of celebrating the coming of the new year with a eucharistic service in church, and that the ecclesiastical and the secular new year begins on the same date.

## 2. *Mäsqäl* - feast of the Cross

About the feasts of *Enqwetatash* and *Mäsqäl* Ullendorff says, "The New Year feast (1st *Mäskäräm* = 11th September) is undoubtedly of Jewish origin, and its date, as well as that of *Mäsk'äl*, corresponds closely to the Hebrew season of the *Yamim nora'im*. There is, of course, no clear consciousness in Ethiopia of the original respective functions of each of these days, but the idea of purification and atonement is prominently present"<sup>13</sup>.

The latter is without any doubt true. But if the feast of *Mäsqäl* is not understood as a kind of Christian *Yom Kippurim* (Day of the Atonement), this is not necessarily due to a lack of clear consciousness. The feasts of the finding and the exaltation of the Holy Cross are by no means limited to Ethiopia. In the Latin Church, these two events were even until the early 1960's celebrated on two different days. On May 3rd, the Latin Christians were commemorating St. Helena's finding of the Holy Cross of Christ near Golgotha in Jerusalem around the year 330. And on September 14th was and still is celebrated the exaltation of the Cross which took place when the Byzantine emperor Heraklios in the year 629 brought the Cross back after the Persians had removed it from the basilica of the Holy Sepulchre during their invasion of Jerusalem in 614. The Byzantines celebrate the feast with great solemnity on September 14th according to the Julian calendar, and that corresponds to the 17th of *Mäskäräm* in the Ethiopian calendar. There is thus a period of 17 days between the Ethiopian New Year and *Mäsqäl* - not ten days like there is between the Jewish New Year *Rosh ha-Shana* and *Yom ha-Kippurim*.

The *Mäsqäl* feast is not a day of fasting in Ethiopia, which it would undoubtedly have been, had it been seen as a day of atonement. It is rather a feast of the triumph of the Cross, and the dominating hymns in the liturgical prayer services speak of that typically Christian paradox and put forth prayers that God may protect the believers through the Holy Cross.

Ullendorff mentions the well-known story of emperor David I of Ethiopia (1380-1409) receiving the right arm of the Cross of Christ from Jerusalem. But the feast of the exaltation of the Holy Cross goes much further back in history than that, as we have just been seeing.

---

<sup>13</sup> E. ULLENDORFF, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements", *op. cit.* 245-246.

The custom of kindling a bonfire - the *damera* - on the *Mäsqäl* feast is very likely to be of pre-Christian and non-Jewish origin. But even that popular custom is not limited to Ethiopia. When I was staying in Nazareth in the Galilee for a few weeks during the summer of 1967, the Greek catholic nuns there told me, how on the feast of the Holy Cross the Christian families in that mainly Christian town lit bonfires on the flat roofs of their houses in joyful celebration.

### 3. The Bible

The study and the daily use of biblical texts is very eminent in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is a well-known fact, that what is studied and learned in the traditional Ethiopian Church school, the *nebab bet* (house of reading) is above all biblical texts, and that the reading - for many students the recital by heart - of the Psalms of David marks the completion of that school. The Psalms are used very much in liturgical as well as in private prayer, which is often referred to as *Dawit lä-mädgäm* (to repeat or recite David). The Ethiopian way of dividing the Psalter into seven portions, one for each day of the week, comes very close to the Jewish way of doing that.

	Traditional Jewish	Ethiopian Christian Distribution
Sunday	Ps 1-29	OT and NT cantica
Monday	Ps 30-50	Ps 1-30
Tuesday	Ps 51-72	Ps 31-60
Wednesday	Ps 73-89	Ps 61-80
Thursday	Ps 90-106	Ps 81-110
Friday	Ps 107-119	Ps 111-130
Shabbath	Ps 120-150	Ps 131-150 (151)

But again, the recital of the Psalms is of course not limited to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The usage of singing or reciting all the 150 Psalms is common to all the ancient Churches, western as well as eastern.

Ethiopian christendom has never known Marcionism – Marcion's heresy with its hatred of the Old Testament and of Judaism had already been condemned before the national Church of Ethiopia became officially organized around the year 325. Its Bible exegesis shows great understanding for the importance of the Old Testament and a tendency in the direction of the rather rationalistic, Antiochene exegesis, which avoids exaggerated typological interpretations<sup>14</sup>.

---

<sup>14</sup> Concerning this matter, see K. STOFFREGEN PEDERSEN, *Traditional Ethiopian Exegesis of the Book of Psalms*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994.



So much more must it astonish us, that - apart from the Psalms - relatively few texts from the Old Testament are used in the liturgical prayer services. In the *Qed-dase* - the Eucharistic service, which is central in all Christian prayer - none at all.

Only New Testament readings are heard there, where instead the Latin rite after the liturgical reforms of the early 1960's has taken up a considerable number of Old Testament readings.

The liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is a purely Semitic language, Ge'ez, which is closely related to Hebrew and Aramaic. This is of course a great advantage for the understanding of texts, which are originally of Semitic expression. But on the other hand, nations who are linguistically much further away from the original language may earlier have come to feel a greater need of learning Hebrew and Aramaic than what has until now been common in Ethiopia. That can certainly be said of the Lutheran Church with its Germanic background, where the theologians are demanded to learn the biblical languages.

#### 4. The megillah of Pesah

One very curious and interesting feature of the Ethiopian orthodox liturgical prayer is the custom of reciting, early in the morning of Holy Saturday<sup>15</sup>, the *Song of Songs*. This is the one of the five *megilloth* which in the synagogue is read on the feast of *Pesah* (*Easter*).

The custom of reading the five megilloth aloud in the synagogue on five feasts of the year did not come up at one and the same time. It seems to have begun with the scroll of *Esther* already during the second Temple period, while instead the reading of the *Song of Songs* at *Pesah* is mentioned only as late as in the post-talmudic tractate *Soferim* which is believed to have been composed in the middle of the 8th century A.D. (*Soferim* 14,18).

In the Holy Land, the recital of the *Song of Songs* at the spring festival is quite logical: the rains are about to stop, and the land is arrayed in an abundance of greenery and flowers - quite as the season described in the *Song of Songs*.

But in Ethiopia the text is - from the point of view of the season - quite out of its place. There the heavy rains are just about to begin in April-May. It is autumn - not spring!

The recitation of the *Song of Songs* on the feast of *Fasika* seems to be a clearly Judaic influence upon or heritage in the Ethiopian Church, but it is not yet known how and when that usage was taken up by the Ethiopian Christians.

---

<sup>15</sup> The Saturday before Easter Sunday.

## DOGMA

### 1. The creed

The easiest way to come to know the dogmatic teachings of the Ethiopian Church must be to study its official creed.

Like the case is in most of the Churches, also the Ethiopians have various creed texts, which however differ only slightly from each other. Let us have a look at the so-called “*Amakniyou* of the Apostles”, which is recited towards the end of the preparatory service, just before the Eucharistic anaphora.

“We believe in one God, maker of all creation. Father of our Lord and our God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, because his nature is unsearchable.

As we have before declared<sup>16</sup>, he is without beginning and without end, but he is ever living, and he has light which is never extinguished, and he can never be approached.

He is not two or three, and no addition can be made to him; but he is only one, living forever, because he is not hidden that he cannot be known, but we know him perfectly through the law and the prophets, that he is almighty and has authority over all the creation.

One God, Father of our Lord and our Saviour Jesus Christ, who was begotten before the creation of the world, the only-begotten Son, co-equal with him, creator of all the hosts, the principalities and the dominions.

Who in the last days was pleased to become man, and took flesh from our Lady Mary, the holy Virgin, without the seed of man, and grew like men, yet without sin or evil. Neither was guile found in his mouth<sup>17</sup>.

Then he suffered, died in the flesh, rose from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven to the Father who sent him, sat down at the right hand of Power, sent to us the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, who proceedeth from the Father, and saved all the world, and who is co-eternal with the Father and the Son.

We say further that all the creatures of God are good and there is nothing to be rejected, and the spirit, the life of the body, is pure and holy in all.

And we say that marriage is pure, and childbirth is undefiled, because God created Adam and Eve to multiply. We understand further that there is in our body a soul, which is immortal and does not perish with the body.

We repudiate all the works of heretics and all schisms and transgression of the law, because they are for us impure.

We also believe in the resurrection of the dead, the righteous and sinner; and in the day of judgement, when everyone will be recompensed according to his deeds.

---

<sup>16</sup> In the *Didaskalia*

<sup>17</sup> 1Pe 2,22

We also believe that Christ is not in the least degree inferior because of his incarnation, but he is God, the Word who truly became man, and reconciled mankind to God being the High Priest of the Father.

Henceforth let us not be circumcised like the Jews. We know that he who had to fulfil the law and the prophets has already come.

To him, for whose coming all people looked forward, Jesus Christ, who is descended from Judah, from the root of Jesse, whose government is upon his shoulder<sup>18</sup>: to him be glory, thanksgiving, greatness, blessing, praise, song, both now and ever and world without end. Amen”<sup>19</sup>.

The creed is obviously orthodox christian. Nothing in it is deviating from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan text used in the Latin and the Byzantine rites, but Ethiopian theologians have found it necessary to stress four things: the goodness of all God's creatures, the holiness of marriage, the belief that circumcision is no more necessary, and Christ's descent from Judah and Jesse. The other orthodox Churches share these beliefs, as do indeed the christians in general. But they have not taken an articulation of them into their creed.

How shall we understand the exhortation “Henceforth let us not be circumcised like the Jews” in a society, where it is in actual fact a common practice and is being seen as “the sign of the covenant of Abraham”? It may be, that the stress should be on the phrase “like the Jews”, and that it should be seen as a warning against the dry legalism of which rabbinical Judaism has been accused by the christians ever since the days of the compilation of the New Testament. As we have already seen, the injunction has by no means led to an abolition of circumcision in practice.

## 2. The catechisms

An examination of the Ethiopian orthodox catechisms like e.g. the classical *Amestu A'emadä Mestir* (The Five Pillars of Mystery) or the more modern *Serwä Haymanot* (Order of the Faith) leaves us with the same impression of clearly orthodox christian teaching. What is called “The Five Pillars of Mystery” are five of the well-known christian principles of faith: The Trinity, the Incarnation, Baptism, the Sacrifice (i.e. the Eucharist), and the Resurrection of the dead, the latter of course having been taken over from Pharisaic Judaism. And the subjects of the *Serwä Haymanot* are practically the same: The Creation, the Trinity, the Incarnation, Baptism and Eucharist, the Resurrection of the dead. Usages like circumcision or the observance of the 49 hour Sabbath -which as we have seen is not generally observed by all orthodox christian Ethiopians - are not at all treated. The authors of the catechisms can not possibly have been ignorant of the fact that they are practiced. They just are not part of the doctrine of the Church.

<sup>18</sup> Is 9,6

<sup>19</sup> The translation is taken from Marcus Daoud's English edition *The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, Addis Ababa, February 27th, 1954, 51-52.

## HISTORICAL TRADITIONS

That there has been a very strong Semitic influence in Ethiopia already in pre-Christian times is quite clear. Not only is its classical language, Ge'ez, purely Semitic, and its alphabet taken over from Sabeian letters, which the Ethiopians have developed further. And there is an abundance of archeological and historical evidence of close ties between the Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum and Southern Arabia. But "the Land of Kush" which in the Septuagint text is translated with the name Ethiopia is mentioned no less than 48 times in one form or other in the Old Testament.

One very popular tale in Ethiopia has grown out of the biblical story about the meeting of King Solomon of Judah and the Queen of Sheba. It has been written down in the royal chronicle which goes under the name of *Kebrä Nägäst* (Glory of the Kings), and according to which the imperial dynasty that has reigned longest in the country, the so-called Solomonic dynasty, should be descended from King Solomon through the Queen of Sheba, who is seen as Queen of Ethiopia. Also in Jewish tradition legends have grown out of the same biblical text (1 Kgs 10,1-13; 2 Chr 9,1-12), although they are not identical with the story told in the *Kebrä Nägäst*. According to the Ethiopian version, the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Menilek, visited his father in Jerusalem and brought with him home to Aksum not only all the first-born of Israel and among them many young priests from the Jewish temple, but also the Ark of the Covenant. This is believed to be kept still in our time in the Church of St. Mary in Aksum. And the *tabot*, the wooden tablet which - like in the Syrian and the Coptic churches - is found on the altar of all Ethiopian churches, is seen as a replica of the Ark of the Covenant.

Pawlikowski dwells upon the Jewish midrashic material which can be found in the *Kebrä Nägäst* (and it is good to see that he also mentions the presence of such material in the *Qur'an!*)<sup>20</sup>. What he forgets to mention is that Mary is seen as the Ark of the New Covenant not only in Ethiopia, but also in ancient Christian poetry and theology in general. That is the reason why the Ark is kept in the church of St. Mary, and the very popular Ethiopian feast of *Seyon* (Sion) is a feast of Mary, celebrating the Arks of the Old and the New Testament simultaneously.

Another thing, which Pawlikowski does not deal with, is the thought that the story of the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia from the Temple in Jerusalem unfortunately can be seen as a case of heavy replacement theology. The chosen people of Israel is replaced by the Ethiopian people even prior to the birth of Christianity, the sign of which is exactly that transfer of the Ark of the Covenant!

Such a teaching is fortunately not being expressed in the Ethiopian Church. Instead it was of course politically very convenient for the Solomonic dynasty to stress the importance of the *Kebrä Nägäst* which "proved" its descent from David and its close relationship to Jesus Christ, himself a son of David! And it was far easier for

---

<sup>20</sup> See PAWLIKOWSKI, *op. cit.*

that dynasty with its Semitic roots to claim such a relationship than it was for the royal dynasty of Georgia which has the same tradition about itself<sup>21</sup>.

The famous motto of the Solomonic dynasty with which the reigning monarch begins every letter he or she issues, is a quotation from the Bible: *Mo'a ambässa zä emnäädä Yehuda* (The Lion of the Tribe of Judah hath prevailed). Its origin is of course Gn 49,9: "Judah is a lion's whelp. From the prey, my son, thou art gone up. He stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion. Who shall rouse him up?"

It is interesting to see that, basing themselves on that verse, Hebrew speaking, non-Christian Jews invariably speak of the Ethiopian emperor as *gur aryeh Yehuda* (the whelp of the lion (of) Judah), probably because the direct quotation is unknown to them. This is taken from Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, where we read: "And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon. And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book and to loose the seven seals thereof." (Re 5,4-5). The Lion of Juda is here obviously Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

From what we have seen in our present deliberation, Ethiopian Christians truly are clinging to some Jewish observances. But on the other hand, so do all other Christian Churches. And this can hardly astonish anybody. The Church in its entirety is and remains a messianic Jewish sect, firmly built on the Bible which - in the Christian view - comprises the Old as well as the New Testament.

Why, then, does the Ethiopian Church appear to be "Judaic" more than any other Christian group?

This probably has to do with the kind of Jewish customs being observed by the Ethiopian Christian people in addition to teachings of the Church. These are almost all outward signs which can easily be observed. And while such outward signs have not been accepted in Europe where there was no cultural antecedent for them, they have been eagerly grasped upon and retained by the Semitic-African people which form the core of Ethiopian Christendom. Everywhere in the world Christian missionaries are confronted by the problem of inculturation. In most cases they have been quite clever in overcoming the difficulties and utilizing the existing cultural possibilities. One example is the importance Christmas has acquired and kept in Scandinavia. The ancient Germanic *Juleblot* was a sacrificial feast, which took place in mid-winter to celebrate the turning of the sun in the depth of the Nordic winter night. It

---

<sup>21</sup> Pawlikowski's description of the *Kebrä Nägäst* as being "the principal work of Ethiopian literature" (*op. cit.* 187) must be said to be exaggerated. He is here following Ullendorff. Aläqa Tayyā is by no means, as Pawlikowski has it "the sole native Ethiopian historian"! (*op. cit.*, 180). And as for the tripartite division of the Ethiopian church building (*ibid.* 189), that reminds me of any Danish village church quite as much as of the Temple in Jerusalem.

received a new Christian interpretation: Jesus Christ is the true light of the world, the *sol iustitiae*. His birth can very conveniently be celebrated instead of the ancient sun feast.

In Ethiopia outward signs like the circumcision were already existing before the Bible or biblical ideas reached the country. The Semitic-African inhabitants felt very well at home with such usages and have been clinging on to them even when they are passed by in silence by the official Church or -like in the case of the observance of the Old Testament Sabbath - being openly forbidden by the then highest Church authority for the Ethiopian christians, the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

If the Judaic elements in Ethiopian Christianity are truly a sign of Jewish presence in the region prior to the arrival of Christianity is still not clear. But it would without any doubt be prudent to follow the example of the Ethiopian Church in other African Churches, because those Judaic elements seem to meet so naturally also with the feelings of other Africans, even of those who have no direct Semitic heritage in their culture.