Between 1984 and 1985, a covert series of airlifts known as “Operation Moses” transported more than 12,000 Ethiopian Jews from neighboring Sudan to the State of Israel. In 1989, diplomatic relations were restored between Jerusalem and Addis Ababa and, “At the heart of this agreement was a commitment on Ethiopia’s part to allow the Falashas—all the Falashas—to emigrate to Israel.”

To date, an estimated 64,000 Ethiopian Jews have emigrated to Israel. Some have bright prospects for the future there; many others have met with tremendous difficulties. Meanwhile, thousands of Jews remain on Ethiopian soil, pinning all their hopes on the Promised Land.

I traveled to Ethiopia in October 1999 to learn about the Jewish community in this oldest independent African nation. Having lived in rural parts of my native South Africa, I imagined that I had experienced something of the third-world. But Ethiopia is a third-world country on a vastly different scale, and I found the story of her Jewish people both surprising and shocking.

I had to have six vaccinations and a heavy dose of malaria tablets before I could even board the airplane to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’s capital. Upon arrival, I stepped into a different world. Disease and poverty were everywhere. Many legitimate beggars suffering from leprosy or polio lined the red-dirt streets. Despite the destitution, the people of Ethiopia have dignity, even happiness, and they are quite patriotic. I quickly discovered that few people there speak English and that foreigners like myself are looked upon as aliens and referred to as “forenjis”—outsiders.

The Jewish people of Addis Ababa are not native to the town; they were attracted to a compound in the city a decade ago by the Israeli offer of a new life in a new world. The traditional homelands of the Beta Israel (as the Ethiopian Jews refer to themselves) lie far to the north of this compound in the northern provinces of Gonder, Welo and Gojam. Thousands of families have

Continued on page 2
Continued from page 1

left their rural communities to move into the compounds (there is one in Gonder as well as Addis) and apply personally for acceptance into Israel at the nearby embassy. The process involves proof of an authentic Jewish identity. Once the embassy has been satisfied, Ethiopian Jews are introduced to Israeli culture in the compounds. I saw crowds of Ethiopian Jewish children returning home from school, each holding old, worn Hebrew textbooks. Some proudly showed me their initial attempts to form the Hebrew letters. The compounds also house a synagogue complex where Orthodox Judaism and contemporary forms of the Orthodox Jewish festivals are imparted to Ethiopian Jews (whose Jewish customs and culture are far different and, in fact, far more ancient).4

Those who have qualified for the next wave of emigration sport temporary Israeli identification cards marked with the flag of Israel. These cards are cherished above all else and those holding them would not do anything to jeopardize their hope of some day reaching Israel. The mentality truly seems to be that all will be well if they can but reach the Land. It is looked upon as a kind of salvation. And the hope of that salvation has cost many of the people dearly.

Because the Beta Israel of Ethiopia have historically lived by subsistence farming, the move to the city means the loss of their homes and livelihood. They find themselves in an African-urban context and try to ply rural-type trades (like metal-working, sewing or clay-production) in order to continue making a living. They don’t always succeed. Hunger and poverty loom larger in the cities than they did back on the farms. Alcoholism has become a major menace.

Not all Beta Israel who come to the compounds fly out of Ethiopia on jets. Thousands of individuals have been waiting for their “exodus” voyage for up to nine years! There are some 12,000 in Addis, another 5,000 in the compound in Gonder and another 6,000 in the vicinity of Gonder. Hundreds of families have been torn apart when husbands are granted permission to move to Israel ahead of wives and children, “to establish the home.” Some never return and their wives and children have not been granted passage in order to follow them. Where once mountains rolled and children played and community thrived, now single people and disconnected segments of families try to make do in a place far less beautiful.

Yeshi Emabet is one example of a woman who became a single parent through this process. Her husband was taken to Israel while she was denied passage because the Israeli authorities had judged that she was too assimilated (influenced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church). Yeshi proudly showed me her Amharic/Hebrew siddur, which she kept next to her bed. She also showed me her Ethiopian Orthodox stylized picture of Jesus. She had no Bible and has never read one. Yeshi expressed her pain about being rejected for immigration. Her four children have remained with her and she bears the burden for their upbringing. None of them carry Israeli ID cards since their mother’s Jewish identity is in question. I met...
other adults whose children had been given their tickets but where the parents themselves had been denied airpassage. Now these aged parents live in the compound, waiting and waiting to be reunited with their families. For many like Yeshi, that day may never come.

I sensed, from within the compounds of Addis and Gonder, a quiet disillusionment in those who are slowly beginning to realize they have been left behind. It seems as if Israeli officials are convinced that most of the undoubtedly “Jewish” people have already been removed. Those who remain may not be as easy to qualify. I have heard that, oftentimes, Ethiopians who arrive in Israel do not feel warmly welcomed because of the difference in their culture and skin color. Some believe that pressure is being exerted from Israel to prevent further Ethiopian immigration.

There are Ethiopian Jews outside the compounds. An estimated 15,000 Beta Israel remain in their traditional dwellings, scattered in and around approximately thirty-five different villages in the northern parts of the country. I took a four hour walk from a main road into one of these highland villages. There, an old Jewish man informed me (through an interpreter) that some Beta Israel will not go to the compound because they regard Ethiopia as their country, and the mountains as their home. We spoke about the day when all the Jewish people would be gathered back to the Holy Land. He smiled and said, “In that day, God will gather us. We won’t have to choose.”

I wish that all the Jews of Ethiopia had this confidence in God, because it provides a freedom of thought that is missing for so many who have put their trust in “the system.” In what amounts to a form of religious bribery, Ethiopian Jews must embrace modern Orthodox Judaism if they hope to move to Israel as Jews. Some Christians have tried to tell people in the compounds about Jesus, but the powers that be have threatened to revoke the Israeli temporary ID cards of anyone who listens. People are afraid to consider the gospel because, as many told me, it is imperative that they die and are buried in Israel. “It doesn’t matter where you die or where you are buried,” I replied. “What matters is whether you are at peace with God when you die, and in His Kingdom when you are buried.” Still, I watched them cling to those Israeli ID cards as though they were the keys to the Kingdom.

I remember Yeshi Emabet, who was so emphatic in her desire to go to Israel despite the fact that she could not prove her Jewishness to the rabbis’ satisfaction. I challenged her (through my interpreter) saying, “Yeshi, God will bring our people to His Land one day. You may or may not see it. But for now, He is far more concerned to bring His people, like you and me, to Himself, through Jesus the Messiah who died for our sins and rose again to prove it, no matter where we live or what we’ve done or who we might be.”

I left Ethiopia saddened that thousands of people’s lives are, in a sense, suspended as they await passports to a new home that may never materialize. If they only knew that their salvation is not in a place, but in a person. If they only knew that He will meet them wherever they are.

---

2. “Falasha” is the term used in Hancock’s text. The term means, “those who flee” and is a derogatory reference to the Jewish people of Ethiopia who have “fled” from persecution in Ethiopia since the 4th century, c.e. The Jewish People refer to themselves as, “Beta Yisrael” which is literally rendered, “the House of Israel.”
4. Modern Jewish religious observance extends from the Talmudic era, circa 100-600 c.e. History demonstrates that the Ethiopian Jews probably left Israel in various waves, some as early as 1000-900 B.C.E., others around 687 (during the wicked reign of Manasseh) and yet others during the Babylonian persecution around 586 B.C.E. In any event, Jewish scholars are aware that the religious customs of the Ethiopian Jews predate the reforms of King Josiah which were effected in the land of Israel circa 640 B.C.E. Therefore, Jews must have left Israel for Ethiopia before that date. There is no reference at all to the oral law within Ethiopian Jewish tradition or religion.
“From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, the daughter of My dispersed ones, shall bring My offering” (Zephaniah 3:10).

It is best to have no expectations when visiting Ethiopia and it is vital to arrive there with a very open mind. Ethiopia is a mono-cultural, third-world nation. There are few conveniences and almost no toilets! Disease and poverty loom large everywhere. The standard of living is very low. Very few people speak English. Suffice it to say, Ethiopia is not a popular tourist destination and foreigners stick out like sore thumbs.

Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, is neither new nor pretty. She rests at 8,000 feet above sea level, the third highest city in the world. Addis is dirty and seemingly disorganized, although the busses do run and people do eventually arrive at their destinations! Many beggars, suffering from leprosy or polio, line the streets. Schools are run down, with outdated and worn textbooks.

There is, however, another side to the city. The people somehow embody a dignity and happiness that is enviable. There is a warm, patriotic spirit that characterizes this oldest independent nation in Africa. One senses that the Ethiopian has a clear sense of his own place in the world.

Ethiopia has a proud and long history. In the Bible, it is known as, “the land of Cush,” named after Noah’s grandson. Semitic people-groups have populated Ethiopia for quite some time. Semites from Saba (modern-day Yemen on the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula) were the descendants of Joktan (Genesis 10:26). They made their way across the narrow Red Sea and settled in the northern highlands of Ethiopia. Today, the majority of northern Ethiopians descend from these Joktan-clan Semites and are known as the Amhara. Their Hebrew-sounding language, Amharic, has become the dominant language in all of Ethiopia.

The Queen of Sheba is often depicted in Ethiopian art and folklore. According to Ethiopian history, she was a Sabean queen. She visited Solomon to hear his wisdom and, upon her return to Ethiopia, she gave birth to a son, Menelik (meaning from the king). At twenty years of age, Menelik traveled from Ethiopia to his father’s courts in Israel. There, he was recognized by Solomon and was directed to return to his own land to establish a Solomonic Dynasty. There are many Ethiopians today whose last name is Solomon.

History records that Solomon sent a clan of priests with Menelik and an entourage of 12,000 men, the sons of the rulers of the 12 tribes of Israel. Some speculate as to whether the Ark of the Covenant came to Ethiopia at this time. Some suggest that the priestly clan that accompanied Menelik took the Ark with them, fearing the civil catastrophe that was soon to befall Israel. Others say that the Ark came later, during the wicked reign of Manasseh. Ethiopia is the only country in the world that claims to have the Ark of the Covenant.

So begins the history of the Jewish people in Ethiopia. A Solomonic Jewish dynasty ruled the nation from the capital city of Axum in the north of Ethiopia all the way through to the Modern Period. The initial arrival of Jews in Ethiopia, with Menelik, was followed by a new wave during the time of Jeremiah. It is believed that some Jews who fled Israel fearing the Babylonians went to Egypt. From Egypt, it is believed that some migrated south looking for refuge with their fellow Jews whom they knew to be residents of Ethiopia.

A third wave of Jewish people came after the time of Jesus. It is thought that with the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, certain Jewish people fled to Saba. As the Roman Empire marched on, these Jews made the same Red Sea crossing as their predecessors.
THE FALASHA JEWS

The history of the Beta Israel, or Falasha Jews, begins with the grassroots Jewish reaction to the conversion of the Solomonic Dynasty. Many of the Jewish people resisted the new religion and would not follow their political and spiritual leaders in conversion. Persecution broke out among these renegade Jews and so the name, “Falasha” was born. The term means, “those who flee” and the Falasha had to start fleeing rapidly.

Denounced by the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox (ex-Jewish) Monarchy, the Beta Israel were no longer allowed to own land and were pushed to the rim of society. They became social outcasts and were reduced to peasants. There were numerous wars between the Falasha and the Monarchy. The greatest defender of the Jewish people was a woman named Judit, who succeeded in overpowering the Monarchy for a season. But after her days, the Monarchy was restored and the Jewish people were crushed further. The Ethiopian resistance was pushed into the rural areas of the Ethiopian highlands in the North, around the city of Gonder, as far north as the Simien Mountains. These were the traditional homelands of the Beta Israel until the Modern Period.

Of late, the Jewish people have largely left their ancient homelands and have either been airlifted to Israel in Operation Solomon or have moved to compounds in Addis Ababa or Gonder to await Israeli extraction. However, a significant smattering of Jewish people still remains in the original homeland areas.

Continued on page 6
THE GOSPEL

FOR THOSE WHO WOULD REACH OUT TO ETHIOPIA WITH THE GOSPEL

There may well be an opportunity to bring the gospel to our Jewish people in Ethiopia. It’s true that many, for historical reasons, have been indoctrinated into the Orthodox Church and religion. They have a nominal faith and those who would endeavor to reach these people need to learn well the doctrines of the Church, and work and pray to bring about revival. The Ethiopians need to see Y’shua, not a religion.

Foreigners recognize their limitations and inadequacies in reaching out to this vastly different culture, therefore it is most advantageous for the work in Ethiopia to be spearheaded by Ethiopian believers. The Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa was begun by the Sudan Interior Mission and exists for the sole purpose of raising up Ethiopians to reach their own people.

The Israeli Embassy holds a certain intimidation for those Ethiopian Jews who would boldly share their faith. They would most likely threaten to confiscate the Israeli preliminary identity documents which the Ethiopians so proudly hold. The Orthodox Jews have a far-reaching infrastructure in the Jewish community. Therefore, less overt types of evangelism may be advisable.

However, this is not to discourage those who would seek to do evangelism in Ethiopia. In fact, as time marches on, the need to do so will increase as the number of Jewish people in this country dwindles and the community becomes more and more fragmented. Politically speaking, now might be the best time ever to do evangelism. Twenty years ago, Communist rule prevented evangelicals from doing anything in Ethiopia. Presently, there is in place the most liberal Ethiopian government yet in existence, and the most tolerant of religious freedom. And spiritually speaking, we know that “now is the time of salvation.”

I AM A JEWISH BELIEVER, FROM ETHIOPIA –

THE TESTIMONY OF SAMUEL LEGESSE

SAMUEL [AT LEFT] DURING HIS 1999 FACT-FINDING MISSION ENGAGED AN ETHIOPIAN JEWISH MAN, RECENTLY RETURNED FROM ISRAEL, IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT MESSIAH Y’SHUA

“Ob, you really are Jewish! But you are a little dark,” the young woman said. I was wearing a Jews for Jesus T-shirt and distributing broadsides while speaking to a woman on the streets of New York. I answered, “I’m from Ethiopia.” And she replied, “Now I understand, yes, I know there are Jews in Ethiopia.” I smiled at her and said, “All Ethiopian Jews are dark.”

Both my parents are Ethiopian Jews. Most Jewish people in Ethiopia live in the rural area, not in the cities, because they are considered outcasts. Most of them have jobs making pots and crafts. But my father was a policeman and my mother was a policewoman. They met at work, married and began raising their five children in the Jewish faith. But six years later, my mother committed her life to Jesus.

Continued from page 5

“I AM A JEWISH BELIEVER, FROM ETHIOPIA –

THE TESTIMONY OF SAMUEL LEGESSE

SAMUEL [AT LEFT] DURING HIS 1999 FACT-FINDING MISSION ENGAGED AN ETHIOPIAN JEWISH MAN, RECENTLY RETURNED FROM ISRAEL, IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT MESSIAH Y’SHUA

“Oh, you really are Jewish! But you are a little dark,” the young woman said. I was wearing a Jews for Jesus T-shirt and distributing broadsides while speaking to a woman on the streets of New York. I answered, “I’m from Ethiopia.” And she replied, “Now I understand, yes, I know there are Jews in Ethiopia.” I smiled at her and said, “All Ethiopian Jews are dark.”

Both my parents are Ethiopian Jews. Most Jewish people in Ethiopia live in the rural area, not in the cities, because they are considered outcasts. Most of them have jobs making pots and crafts. But my father was a policeman and my mother was a policewoman. They met at work, married and began raising their five children in the Jewish faith. But six years later, my mother committed her life to Jesus.

Continued from page 5

“I AM A JEWISH BELIEVER, FROM ETHIOPIA –

THE TESTIMONY OF SAMUEL LEGESSE

SAMUEL [AT LEFT] DURING HIS 1999 FACT-FINDING MISSION ENGAGED AN ETHIOPIAN JEWISH MAN, RECENTLY RETURNED FROM ISRAEL, IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT MESSIAH Y’SHUA

“Oh, you really are Jewish! But you are a little dark,” the young woman said. I was wearing a Jews for Jesus T-shirt and distributing broadsides while speaking to a woman on the streets of New York. I answered, “I’m from Ethiopia.” And she replied, “Now I understand, yes, I know there are Jews in Ethiopia.” I smiled at her and said, “All Ethiopian Jews are dark.”

Both my parents are Ethiopian Jews. Most Jewish people in Ethiopia live in the rural area, not in the cities, because they are considered outcasts. Most of them have jobs making pots and crafts. But my father was a policeman and my mother was a policewoman. They met at work, married and began raising their five children in the Jewish faith. But six years later, my mother committed her life to Jesus.

Continued from page 5

“I AM A JEWISH BELIEVER, FROM ETHIOPIA –

THE TESTIMONY OF SAMUEL LEGESSE

SAMUEL [AT LEFT] DURING HIS 1999 FACT-FINDING MISSION ENGAGED AN ETHIOPIAN JEWISH MAN, RECENTLY RETURNED FROM ISRAEL, IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT MESSIAH Y’SHUA

“Oh, you really are Jewish! But you are a little dark,” the young woman said. I was wearing a Jews for Jesus T-shirt and distributing broadsides while speaking to a woman on the streets of New York. I answered, “I’m from Ethiopia.” And she replied, “Now I understand, yes, I know there are Jews in Ethiopia.” I smiled at her and said, “All Ethiopian Jews are dark.”

Both my parents are Ethiopian Jews. Most Jewish people in Ethiopia live in the rural area, not in the cities, because they are considered outcasts. Most of them have jobs making pots and crafts. But my father was a policeman and my mother was a policewoman. They met at work, married and began raising their five children in the Jewish faith. But six years later, my mother committed her life to Jesus.
She began to teach our family about the Messiah. My father was very opposed to Christianity. When my father received a job transfer to Gonder, a part of Ethiopia heavily populated with Jewish people, we moved. However, after we arrived, I joined a group of teenagers in an Orthodox Church. I was attending Sunday School classes at my mother’s church every Sunday, but I didn’t understand much of what I was taught. The kids in my youth group weren’t committed believers like my mother, and I was having difficulty deciding what I really believed.

In April 1986, three friends and I went to a local evangelical church. At that time, the government was Communist, so the worship was “underground.” There, I received Jesus as my personal Savior and Lord, realizing that although I had heard the Bible and gone to church for many years, I didn’t know Jesus for myself. That day, the Holy Spirit confirmed in my heart that I was born again.

I was 13 years old at the time. A year after my commitment, I started to serve the Lord by leading the teen Sunday School class at my church. I then served as our youth Bible study leader and eventually became the regional youth director for our denomination’s youth ministry. My mother, my three brothers and my sister participated in the church too. For the past 14 years, I have seen the great power of the Lord helping me to grow in His grace.

When I gave my life to Jesus, my father still would not believe in Him. While I was praying for my father’s salvation, the Lord put this word in my heart: “I am calling you to be my witness to a people who have hardened their hearts to my Word.” I understood that God was calling me to witness to my father’s nation, to my Jewish people. I couldn’t resist the call on my life. I studied and obtained a Bachelor’s Degree in Theology from the Evangelical Theological Bible College in Addis Ababa. I graduated in June 1998 with a major in Evangelism and Church Planting.

My local church gave me my first full-time assignment. I was deployed to the southwest part of Ethiopia as a Bible School teacher. After five months in full-time service, I sensed the Lord telling me to go out of the country for a short time. I felt that the Lord would do something very special for me during this brief time of travel. I had received an invitation from Campus Crusade for Christ International to attend a youth outreach in South Africa. I saw a door opening and I’m glad I walked through it!

While I was in Johannesburg, I met Jews for Jesus missionaries handing out broadsides on the street where I happened to be walking. I could not believe my eyes! A divine encounter! I volunteered to help them with their January outreach in Johannesburg and spent the next two weeks serving the Lord with them. It was amazing!

After returning to Ethiopia, Jews for Jesus in South Africa sent me an application for the New York Summer Witnessing Campaign. I prayed and fasted about my application for eight days before sending it in. I was accepted! It was a great experience and blessing to be part of the summer ‘99 Campaign. I saw many Jewish people come to the Lord. This Campaign was a prerequisite for full-time missionary work with Jews for Jesus, which I then knew I wanted to do.

I filled out an application to come on staff. Again, I prayed and fasted. The next training class didn’t begin until January. But I stayed busy. First, I went to work in South Africa as a volunteer with Jews for Jesus. After two months, I went with one of the staff on a fact-finding mission in Ethiopia.

In all these experiences, I was blessed to see Jewish people coming to know Messiah Jesus. Now, by God’s grace, I am part of the new training group in New York City. When I look back, I see clearly how God has worked in my life. I feel that I know why the Lord led me to South Africa. Since I have been in contact with Jews for Jesus, I can now begin to heed the Lord’s call on my life to witness to my Jewish people.

And my father, who was the last holdout in my family and remained a very observant Jew, after many years of resisting the gospel, received Y’shua into his life just five days before he died. God is faithful to His promises!
The Ethiopian messianic community in Israel developed as a result of Operation Solomon, beginning in 1990. Included in the earliest immigrations to Israel were some of the Jewish believers, pastors and elders from Ethiopia. Once settled in the Land, they organized home fellowships which grew and matured into congregations. Today, there is a network of Ethiopian congregations throughout Israel, bound together by a commitment to Y’shua and a desire to worship in Israel as Ethiopian believers.

During the past year, the leaders of the Ethiopian messianic congregations in Israel have reported accounts of persecution from the Orthodox Jewish community. This persecution has taken various forms. People have been threatened with loss of jobs, housing and with having their citizenship revoked. Religious leaders within the Ethiopian community have been urged to speak out publicly against the messianic believers. There are threats and accusations on daily radio shows in the Amharic language.

The visas and immigrant status of Ethiopian believers have undergone unusual scrutiny from the Ministry of Interior. An article in the Hebrew newspaper, Ha’aretz Daily, reported that the Ministry of Interior was considering stripping three Ethiopian sisters of their citizenship and deporting them to their homeland. The Ministry of Interior had viewed videotape footage of a messianic Jewish event. The tape showed a choir comprised of young Ethiopians and resulted in a campaign to compile incriminating evidence against the three sisters. They had come to Israel in 1991 as part of Operation Solomon, accompanied by a man they called “father.” He was an Ethiopian Jew who had adopted them years before and presented them to Israeli authorities as his own daughters. The three young women had never tried to conceal their own, non-Jewish identities from Israeli officials.

The unique aspect of their case is that they have all been in Israel for over nine years. They studied at boarding schools and became integrated into the society. They view themselves as Jews and also as messianic believers.

This case has far-reaching implications for the Israeli government’s right to go back into the files of Jewish believers. The sisters’ lawyer, Nadav Haber, had this to say: “Such meddling in the women’s past . . . encourages highly worrisome social phenomena . . .” Will there be a witch-hunt to find those olim who profess faith in Messiah and were granted citizenship years ago? As a messianic community, we need to pray, not only for the situation confronting these Ethiopian sisters, but that those who would look to dismantle the non-sabra messianic community in Israel would be stopped from pursuing such actions.

The Ethiopian messianic community in Israel developed as a result of Operation Solomon, beginning in 1990. Included in the earliest immigrations to Israel were some of the Jewish believers, pastors and elders from Ethiopia. Once settled in the Land, they organized home fellowships which grew and matured into congregations. Today, there is a network of Ethiopian congregations throughout Israel, bound together by a commitment to Y’shua and a desire to worship in Israel as Ethiopian believers.