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German Mission in Abyssinia: Wilhelm Staiger from Baden, 1835–1904*

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I. The Mission

By the beginning of the 19th century, Catholic missionary activity had declined to an unprecedented low level, a process that had already begun during the 18th century with the decreased power of Spain and Portugal, the kingdoms that had traditionally led the armies of Catholic Christendom. At the end of that century, during the course of the French Revolution and the accompanying anti-clerical activities, first in France and later in other European countries, a significant blow was struck at Catholicism. The void left by the absence of Catholic missionaries was quickly filled by Protestant missionary societies.

A major component of Protestant belief, already arisen among Protestants in the 16th century, and which reached its peak in the 19th century, is the conviction that the return of the Christian Messiah to earth is close at hand, and that upon his return, after a mighty storm, a new utopian era of a thousand years would begin. The upheaval caused by the French Revolution was viewed by the eschatologists of those days, based upon biblical prophecies, as the first link in a chain of events that confirmed their beliefs, and as the first testimony among many that would herald the imminent approach of the apocalyptic End of Days. The turbulence of the French Revolution, seen as the forerunner of the second coming of Jesus, inspired anew the hope and longing of millions of Protestants. The conversion of the Jews or, alternatively, drawing them closer to belief in the Christian Messiah, was a crucial element and even a necessary condition, for the realization of this apocalyptic vision. Against this background, many missionary societies were set up throughout the Protestant world, with the declared aim of disseminating the gospel and propagating Christianity among the Jews.

The missionaries employed a variety of methods in their attempts to bring Jews in Europe, and later on, Jews in the Holy Land, closer to Christianity. Mostly by exposing them to the Christian scriptures; by setting up a secular educational system, with the aim of influencing the children of the communi-

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ty first. But the institutions that proved to be the most successful as vehicles for conversion were the mission hospitals, using the deep gratitude felt by the Jewish patients towards medical treatment. In Africa, however, missionary activities began with attempts to teach the native Pagans some Western handicrafts and trades, in order to enable them first to improve their living conditions. Christian missionary activity in most of Africa sought to convert pagans or other natives. In Ethiopia the process was different, since it was already a distinct political and Christian entity. It also had the only Jewish minority in sub-Saharan Africa, whose members could be potential targets for European missionary efforts. Therefore, the missionaries did try to apply their vocational education strategy of teaching handicrafts and trades in Ethiopia, with the specific aim of educating and then converting the Ethiopian Jews.

Within the framework of their goals, scores of missionaries began to arrive in Ethiopia during the mid-1850s and the early 1860s, in order to draw the local Jews towards Christianity. The missionaries in Ethiopia were mainly English and German, and were mostly members either of the “London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews” or of the “Basler Pilgermission”.¹ The London Jews Society, founded in the British capital in 1809, was active in the first decades after its establishment in Western and then in Eastern Europe, in the Middle East and in North Africa. Beginning in 1855, it sent missionaries to Ethiopia as well, where it established several mission stations. However, the initiative for the activities of the Protestant mission in Ethiopia should probably be credited to two persons: the German missionary, Christian Friedrich Spittler (1782–1867), who, in 1840, founded the Basler Pilgermission at St. Chrischona near Basel, and the Swiss missionary, Samuel Gobat (1799–1879), the Second Bishop of the joint English-Prussian bishopric in Jerusalem.² Gobat had been a trainee at the Basel Mission (also founded by Spittler even earlier), and in 1825 he joined the ranks of the Church Missionary Society, although he retained close links with Basel.³ Because Gobat had spent more time than any other Swiss national in Egypt,

¹ On the London Society, see: YARON PERRY, *British Mission to the Jews in Nineteenth-Century Palestine* (London 2003). On the Basler Pilgermission, see: ALEX CARMEL, *Christen als Pioniere im Heiligen Land* (Basel 1981) (hereafter, CARMEL 1981).

² On Spittler, see mainly: JOHANNES KOBER, *Christian Friedrich Spittler's Leben* (Basel 1887). On Gobat, see: H.W.J. THIERSCH and S. GOBAT, *Samuel Gobat, Evangelischer Bischof in Jerusalem: Sein Leben und Wirken* (Basel 1884); YARON PERRY, *Gobat, Samuel (1799–1879), Bishop in Jerusalem* = *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 22 (Oxford 2004) 537.

³ On that Society, see: EUGENE STOCK, *The History of the Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, its Men and its Work* (3 vols) (London 1899).

Ethiopia and Malta as an emissary of the English mission, he was considered by Spittler as an outstanding authority on Eastern affairs.

Towards the end of 1826, after having mastered the Amharic language, Gobat was sent to Ethiopia as a missionary in the services of the Church Missionary Society. On the way, he had to spend a long time in Egypt, because of the precarious security situation, and it was only in October 1829 that he set out on a torturous journey through Ethiopia that lasted for over three years. His diaries of that voyage, published in London after his return, are a valuable contribution to the history and geography of Ethiopia. As a result of this journey, Gobat persuaded his colleagues in the Church Missionary Society of the necessity to continue their missionary activities in Ethiopia, and in the summer of 1834 he set out on a second journey. A cholera attack that he suffered, and which became more severe during this trip, forced him to return to Cairo in September of 1836, but Gobat did not abandon the idea of setting up a permanent Christian mission in Ethiopia, and for this project he enlisted the support of his friend Spittler in Basel.

Later on, the two men exchanged letters that dealt with, among other things, the question of who had first thought of the idea. According to Gobat, it was Spittler who had paved the way. In Gobat's letter to Spittler of June 9, 1854, he says: "You will remember surely that you had questioned me first as to my opinion about carrying out such an idea, and that I replied that under certain conditions it seemed to me to be feasible. I was glad to know that there was someone else who was thinking about Ethiopia which is so dear to me; but it was you who had given me the initial-original idea".⁴ Spittler found a solution to the dispute by replying to Gobat as follows: "The question as to who was the first to have the idea of an Ethiopian Mission – will remain unsolved. To me it was clear that you were the originator, and you are convinced that I was the one. We would apparently do best if we transferred [responsibility for] the idea to God himself [...] and resolve the dispute in this way".⁵ Perhaps this seemingly polite "dispute" between the head of the Basel Mission and the Bishop of Jerusalem reflects some economic or financial implications that should not be ignored, for it was the originator of the plan who would also be the one responsible for the means to carry it out.

In any case, both of them were partners in the realization of this project. Spittler provided the human resources from the members of the missionary societies he headed, mainly from the Basler Pilgermission. Gobat, as the Protestant Bishop of Jerusalem, who considered Ethiopia to be within the

⁴ ERNST STAEHELIN, *Die Christentumsgesellschaft in der Zeit von der Erweckung bis zur Gegenwart*, 2 (Basel 1974), 598–599; CARMEL 1981, 96.

⁵ STAEHELIN, *ibid.*, 599; CARMEL, *ibid.*, 96–97.

area under his authority, took upon himself, with the help of his friends in England, to host the newly assigned emissaries in Jerusalem and to prepare them for their complex task before they set out for Ethiopia. The two men wished to set up 12 stations between Jerusalem and Ethiopia to be manned by missionaries, in order to make the long journey easier and to allow for relatively safe passage. Moreover, the intention was to strengthen the link with Jerusalem, where the Basler Pilgermission possessed its own missionary establishments. The extensive plan for setting up mission stations carrying the names of the twelve disciples of Jesus mentioned in the New Testament, among others in Alexandria, Cairo, Khartoum and in Ethiopia itself – did not succeed. Only a few of the stations were built. In 1855, the first four missionaries were sent out, to Ethiopia and towards the end of the decade a few more joined them; they worked there until the final years of the 1860s. Later on, the few remaining Basel missionaries continued their missionary work in Ethiopia until the second half of the 1880s.

II. Wilhelm Staiger

Among the missionaries who arrived in Ethiopia during those years there were also some adventurers, explorers, and a few craftsmen. In time, because of the hardships they encountered – which will be discussed later – the sectarian distinctions between the members of this Christian community became blurred, and they became known as a “band of Europeans”.⁶ One of the colorful characters in this group was the German missionary Wilhelm Staiger (1835–1904). Years later, on April 10, 1877, he gave a lecture to the “Deutschen Verein zu Beirut” in hotel Blaich in that city, in which he re-

⁶ After leaving Ethiopia, a significant number of the missionaries who had been held in captive by King Teodoros wrote accounts of their experiences. See, for example: HENRY AARON STERN, *The Captive Missionary, being an account of the Country and People of Abyssinia* (London 1868); JOHANN MARTIN FLAD, *Zwölf Jahre in Abessinien oder Geschichte des Königs Theodoros II. und der Mission unter seiner Regierung* (Basel 1869); HENRY BLANC, *A Narrative of Captivity in Abyssinia* (London 1868) (hereafter: Blanc 1868); THEOPHIL WALDMEIER, *Erlebnisse in Abessinien in den Jahren 1858–1868* (Basel 1869).

Among various studies of this affair, and on the Jews of Ethiopia in general, see for example: AVRAHAM HOLTZ and TOBY BERGER HOLTZ, *Moritz Hall: The Old Man of Jaffa*, III (Haifa 2003); DANIEL P. SUMMERFIELD, *From Falashas to Ethiopian Jews: The External Influences for Change c. 1860–1960* (London and New York 2003); RICHARD PANKHURST, *The Ethiopians: A History* (Oxford and Malden, Mass. 2001); DAVID KESSLER, *The Falashas: A Short History of the Ethiopian Jews* (London 1996); STEVEN KAPLAN, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York 1992) (hereafter: KAPLAN 1992).

counted the story of his missionary undertaking among the Jews of Ethiopia during the 1860s. Staiger gave a similar lecture twice more at the same hotel, in February 1900 and again in May 1904, shortly before his death. Staiger, who lived in Beirut for about three decades, wrote about all that had happened to him in Ethiopia and sent these recorded accounts to his brother-in-law, the German orientalist painter Gustav Bauernfeind (1848–1904), the brother of his wife, Emilie. These documents, still unpublished, were later discovered when Bauernfeind's literary estate, now in the hands of a great-grandchild of Wilhelm and Emilie Staiger in Germany, came to light.⁷

Staiger was born on January 16, 1835 in Langenwinkel near Lahr, in Baden. When he grew up, he joined the Basler Pilgermission, and in 1859 he was "lent" to the Scottish Mission that had begun to work among the Jews in Ethiopia.⁸ He was first sent to Jerusalem in 1860, in order to acquire a knowledge of the Amharic language within the framework of the initiative of Bishop Gobat, and in 1862 he went on to Ethiopia. The following account is based upon his description of the events that occurred to him in this country, as he recorded them in his own narrative style. In 1869, after he had returned from Ethiopia and was living in Alexandria, Staiger married Emilie Bauernfeind, the sister of the painter. The couple had three children: Wilhelm (1870–1943), Emil (1871–1940) and Dora (1872–1940).⁹ In 1871, Staiger was asked by the Scottish Mission to settle permanently in Beirut, where he was active in missionary work for another 33 years until his death on October 1, 1904.¹⁰

Wilhelm Staiger begins his memoirs in the following manner: "In the autumn of 1859 I received a proposal to serve at the Scottish Mission in Ethiopia and to work there among the local Jews [called] Falashas. I accepted the task and after the New Year of 1860 I arrived in Jerusalem where I began to study the Amharic language".¹¹ A year later, Staiger left for Alexandria, to wait there for another missionary. They set out together and finally

⁷This material was discovered by the late Prof. Alex Carmel in the course of his research on the German painter Bauernfeind. See: ALEX CARMEL, *Gustav Bauernfeind: Orientalist Painter (1848–1904)* (Stuttgart 1990).

⁸Staiger, as did a significant number of missionaries from German-speaking countries, found wide-ranging opportunities for his activities in the framework of the British missionary associations, which in those days were more affluent than the German ones.

⁹Wilhelm (Willy), was born in Alexandria on September 29, 1870; Emil was born in Beirut on September 15, 1871; Dora, also born in Beirut, arrived on November 11, 1872.

¹⁰For a detailed account of his life, see his obituary in: *Neueste Nachrichten aus dem Morgenlande*, 49, 1 (Berlin 1905), 9–16.

¹¹From the lecture given by Staiger in Beirut on February 29, 1900, p. 1 (hereafter: STAIGER 1900). Most of the quotations are from the lecture he gave in Beirut in 1877 (hereafter: STAIGER 1877).

arrived in Ethiopia in 1862, after many trials and tribulations during their journey. The two missionaries set up a mission station, one of many that would be established by the missionaries belonging to the various associations, then active in the region.

Staiger noted the main characteristics of the Ethiopian Jews and described them with great precision: “The Falasha Jews today number a hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand.¹² They live in a closed community and gain their livelihood through agriculture and handicrafts. The meaning of the word ‘Falasha’ is ‘migrant’ in Amharic [...]. The Falasha, unlike other Jews [in other places] still offer sacrifices. They keep the Sabbath, forbid polygamy, and are of a high moral standard, similar to the Christian Ethiopians. Their outward appearance is impressive – they are tall and strong, the color of their skin is brown [not black] and the women are even more lighter-skinned. Their hair is frizzled, which proves that they have assimilated a little with the local population, but they are nevertheless Semitic. In comparison with the other inhabitants, the Jews are very industrious, and among them there are woodcarvers, metal engravers, weavers, farmers and very few tradesmen. Their wives are trained in pottery work. They are not very rich, but their economic situation is certainly quite reasonable.”¹³

It was unfortunate that Staiger and the other European missionaries arrived in Ethiopia during the turbulent period that characterized the reign of Teodoros II (1818–1868).¹⁴ This king had seized the throne in 1854 after usurping the throne from the reigning emperor of Ethiopia and deposing the rulers of some bordering districts. Teodoros was forced to struggle throughout his reign against rebels, as well as against neighboring countries, which resulted in the weakening of his authority. Teodoros found a willing ear and good advice from Walter Chichele Plowden (1820–1860), the British Consul in the port city of Massawa (today in the state of Eritrea).¹⁵ But

¹² Some sources give different numbers for the Jews of Ethiopia that vary between a 150,000 to 200,000. See, for example: WILLIAM THOMAS GIDNEY, *Sites and Scenes*, I. (London 1899), 10; Jewish Year Book, 5659 (London 1898–9), 252.

¹³ STAIGER 1900, 4–7.

¹⁴ There are various ways to pronounce the name of the king, and we have chosen this manner.

¹⁵ In 1843 Plowden, who was on his way from India to England, traveled to Ethiopia in a quest to trace the sources of the White Nile. He remained there until 1847, when he left Ethiopia for England. In 1848, he returned to Ethiopia, this time as Her Majesty’s Consul. In February 1860, while travelling in Ethiopia he was attacked on the road by a group of rebels struggling against Teodoros, was wounded and taken into captivity. Plowden was liberated by the governing authorities, but died of his wounds after a month. Teodoros later avenged his death by killing the rebels who had killed Plowden.

after the murder of Plowden by a band of rebels, and also following the death of Teodoros's wife, the Queen Tāwabäčč, the King became addicted to strong drink, his mind became unsettled, and he turned into a cruel and despotic ruler.

The transformation of the personality and behavior of Teodoros was described by Staiger: "We dined at the table of the king. He conducted the conversation and glorified his recent conquests. Music was not played, but the king provided entertainment of a different sort – during the meal he whispered something in the ear of one of the officers. The king nodded his head, and a man was brought to the tent opening, who to the horror of all, was shot instantly. When it transpired that the man was only injured, the king left his food and thrust his personal revolver into the hand of one of his officers so that he could complete the job. Then another man was brought who was [first] pierced by the spears of the soldiers and then shot as well – the king all the while continuing to eat. This was the first time that I was witness to his cruelty. We were unable to eat any more and the king was very interested to know the reason for this [...]"¹⁶

At the beginning of 1862, diplomatic contacts made between Great Britain and the Ethiopian king, led to a change in the character of the Christian mission in Ethiopia and influenced the fate of the missionaries there. In January of that year, the new British Consul, Charles Duncan Cameron (d. 1870) arrived in the capital port city of Massawa, to replace Plowden, his murdered predecessor. Cameron immediately began to formulate an agreement for the establishment of an official Ethiopian embassy in London. During these discussions, the king brought up demands for assistance in obtaining arms and for the establishment of a military alliance against Egypt, then under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. In November, Teodoros entrusted a letter addressed to Queen Victoria to Cameron,¹⁷ but the British representative, who did not see any urgency in delivering it, delayed in doing so. When the letter arrived at the Foreign Office in London a few months later, the letter seems to have been laid aside and ignored; no reply was sent because those in power in London were afraid of antagonizing the Ottoman Empire, the enemy of Teodoros.

¹⁶ STAIGER 1877, p. 5.

¹⁷ J.R. HOOKER, *The Foreign Office and the Abyssinian Captives* = *The Journal of African History*, II, 1, 2 (1961), 246–258. The letter, preserved in the archives of the British Foreign Office, F.O. 1/13, 31.10.1863, was translated and has been quoted in a number of sources. See, for example: MOSES MARGOLIOUTH, *Abyssinia: Its Past, Present, and Probable Future* (London 1866), 42–43; CLEMENTS R. MARKHAM, *A History of the Abyssinian Expedition* (London 1869), 76–77, n. 1 (hereafter: MARKHAM 1869).

III. Tortures

Teodoros became angry at the delay in receiving a reply to his letter to the British monarch. Even before a response arrived from London, he had already begun to use the European missionaries as a bargaining chip in his conflicts with the British Foreign Office. Staiger writes that: “The King was waiting for a reply from England, and began to realize that he would not get it, so he turned his anger, naturally, to the Europeans, especially those in the service of England. The first person chosen was Henry Aaron Stern (1820–1885) who was then conducting his second visit to Abyssinia and in his knapsack he held the notes from his first visit, which he had published in a book.¹⁸ Stern wrote that Teodoros was a descendant of a poor family, and that his mother gained her living from the gathering and selling of flowers in the marketplace – work that was typical among poor people. The king did not deny this, but he was not prepared to forgive Stern for publishing these matters in Europe [...] and in his anger he killed the two servants of the missionary and had him beaten until he nearly expired.¹⁹ After this, Teodoros gave orders to bind Stern’s arms and legs in chains and threw him into prison [...]. The evil deeds of the king can even be found in the writings of the missionary Henry Rosenthal – a fact that caused the king to suspect us all. On Friday in the morning, I visited [Paulina] the wife of Flad.²⁰ Suddenly, 400 soldiers surrounded the courtyard, and there was silence for a few minutes. We feared that they were going to execute us then and there – I shall never forget those moments. Finally we were told that the king wished to see us, and one of the soldiers immediately

¹⁸ Stern, the son of German Jewish parents, arrived in London at the age of 20, was baptized and joined the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. He served the society in Baghdad and Constantinople, and in 1860 was sent to Ethiopia. At first Teodoros allowed Stern to act freely among the Jews in his country, but when relations between the Ethiopian ruler and the British Foreign Office began to deteriorate, Stern was imprisoned in October 1863. As recounted in some of the narratives, Stern seems to have been particularly antagonistic towards Teodoros and, in his written accounts, described Teodoros and his actions in uncomplimentary terms, which angered the king and led him to single Stern out for punishment. See the account of the documents found in Stern’s knapsack, mentioned above. After his release from captivity in 1868, Stern returned to England and continued to serve the mission society until his death in May 1885.

¹⁹ STERN’s book is: *Wandering among the Falashas in Abyssinia* (London 1862).

²⁰ Johann Martin Flad (1831–1915), native of Württemberg, a missionary of the Basler Pilgermission who was sent, first, to Palestine in 1855 and then to Ethiopia. On him see: FLAD 1869; JOHANN MARTIN FLAD, *60 Jahre in der Mission unter den Falaschas in Abessinien (Selbstbiographie des Missionars Johann Martin Flad)*, (Giessen and Basel 1922), (hereafter, FLAD 1922).

bound me with an iron rod [...] that was closed over my hands after having been bent by the hammerings of a stone. On the way to Teodoros' camp, the Ethiopians dragged us so hastily that we could not stand the pace and lost our breath. When we reached the king, he was sitting on a mound of earth playing with his revolver, and looked at us for a while, trying to penetrate us with his gaze [...] then [to our surprise] the king called us 'my children who need not be afraid at all' and released us from our chains. A few days later, the king gathered all the Europeans together and pronounced death sentences against Stern and Rosenthal [which eventually were not carried out].²¹

For a few months after this, the group of Europeans experienced dread and heavy forebodings, and, at the same time, hopeful expectation of the arrival of the British Foreign Office reply to Teodoros' letter. When the letter from London finally arrived, it was a disappointment for Consul Cameron because it was not intended for the king, but instead contained guidelines for the Consul himself, instructing him to return at once to the capital Massawa and to cease engaging in matters that were not his concern. The consul transmitted the contents of the letter to the king, who in return imprisoned him in January 1864.²² At this time, Teodoros summoned the Europeans. "We were placed before the gaping mouths of two cannons" writes Staiger, "and one of the ministers explained to us how insulted the king was that Cameron's government did not trouble to reply to him. The Consul was seized by two burly soldiers who tore his uniform. The king announced that 'Cameron has been humiliated and chained because I did not receive a reply from the queen [Victoria], I chained Stern and Rosenthal because they spoke badly of me, and the other Europeans [suffered the same treatment] because I found that all white people are wicked. [...] Each one of us was chained to a soldier day and night. We remained in captivity for six weeks during which we knew only fear and afflictions; we suffered especially from the soldiers who had fleas and lice. At night, our tent was guarded by fifty to a hundred soldiers, and the Ethiopian cold drove them inside. We overcame this discomfort only after we realized

²¹ STAIGER 1877, 6–8.

²² Moreover, Teodoros accused Cameron of holding talks with Sudanese rebels during his tours of Ethiopia, and thus he was guilty of meddling in the internal affairs of the kingdom. Cameron was released in March 1866 through the intervention of Hormuzd Rassam, a member of the British delegate in Aden, who was sent for this purpose by the Foreign Office. A month later, Teodoros imprisoned Cameron once again together with Rassam and other persons. Cameron was liberated in April 1868 by the British rescue expedition and returned to England. In July of that year, he retired from the diplomatic service and died in Geneva in 1870.

that the soldiers could not bear tobacco smoke, so that even those among us who were not accustomed to smoke, joined in this work”.²³

In February 1866, Staiger and five other Germans were separated from the group of Europeans and were transferred to Gafat, east of Lake Ṭana in the Amhara district of north-western Ethiopia. The rest of the prisoners were transferred to a prison in the Mäqdäla fortress in the mountainous region of Ethiopia, south-east of Gafat, where they remained for about two more years. During that period, and until they were also sent to join their colleagues imprisoned in Mäqdäla in January 1868, the king forced the Germans to make molds and cast cannons to be used in his struggles against the rebels in his kingdom and for future wars of conquest. The missionaries, including Staiger, tried in vain to explain to him that they had no experience or training for this task, but the king refused to believe them, asserting that: “every European is capable of doing this”. Not long afterwards the missionaries were again imprisoned. Staiger writes: “In prison we met people who were condemned to die of hunger, most of them holding out for eight or nine days [...] I was chained to a sick Ethiopian captive who lay close to me and died after six unbearable weeks [...]. After his death I was still chained to him for another fourteen hours. We lived in a little hut that was gradually filled up with eighty-two prisoners; we lay side by side with no chance of moving at all. [However] in a short while the place emptied after the king ordered the execution of prisoners in order to accommodate additional ones [...]. For weeks we ate nothing except barley, which cost us a lot of money. The barley was fried on strips of tin and we ate the grains without anything added; even the little that we had, we shared with the other captives”.²⁴

IV. The Expedition

During all this time, the British Foreign Office conducted an intensive diplomatic campaign for the release of the captives. On August 19, 1867, the British Cabinet came to a decision to use force, and began preparations to dispatch a military expedition from India.²⁵ Robert Cornelis Napier (1810–

²³ STAIGER 1877, 9–10.

²⁴ STAIGER 1877, 13–15. After he was released, Staiger reported the events to the committee of the Church of Scotland in Dundee. See: *The Church of Scotland Home and Foreign Missionary Record* (November 2, 1868), 203–206.

²⁵ On the military expedition to release the Europeans, see the official report by the two British officers: TREVENEN J. HOLLAND and HENRY HOZIER, *Records of the Expedition to Abyssinia* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1870). See also: *Report from the Select Committee on the Abyssinian Expedition; with the Proceedings of the Committee. Ordered by The House of Commons, to be Printed, 29 July 1870* (Shannon, Ireland –The Irish University Press – 1968) (hereafter: British Parliamentary Pa-

1890), a British officer who had done most of his service in the East, was appointed as the general commander of the expedition.²⁶ The first units of the expedition, eventually numbering 32,062 men, landed on the African coast at the selected site at Annseley Bay near Massawa, in October 1867.²⁷ Teodoros was informed of the initial landing of British soldiers in his country and left his stronghold at Däbrä Tabor, near Gafat and went to Mäqdäla, where the prisoners were being held.

On April 10, 1868, the British forces reached the foot of the Mäqdäla fortress after a long march of 400 miles, and had exchanged heavy fire with the Ethiopian soldiers. On the following morning, Teodoros sent a letter to Napier, in which he proposed to negotiate a truce between the warring forces. In reply, Napier sent Teodoros a laconic letter demanding the immediate release of the prisoners and, in exchange, guaranteeing fair treatment for the king and the members of his family.²⁸ Accordingly the first group of prisoners was released on April 11. The king continued to negotiate with the British forces under the impression, though unjustified, that Napier was prepared to accept his truce proposals between the armies. Teodoros, therefore, released the rest of the prisoners, including Staiger, on the following day.²⁹ “We, the captives, knew that on this day our fates would be sealed for freedom or death”, wrote Staiger, “knowing the character of the king and his attitude towards human life, we were afraid that the second possibility was the more probable one [...] but [to our surprise] Theodoros admitted his defeat and wanted to reach an agreement. Napier [aware of the unstable nature of the king] refused, and demanded unconditional surren-

pers); MARKHAM 1869 (Sir Clements R. Markham (1830–1916), the British traveler and geographer, described in detail the preparations for the military expedition to free the prisoners, very soon after the events).

²⁶ On Napier in detail, see: T.R. MOREMAN, *Napier, Robert Cornelis, first Baron Napier of Magdala* (1810–1890) = Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford 2004). See also his biography (written by his son): H.D. NAPIER, *Field Marshal Lord Napier of Magdala* (London 1927).

²⁷ For precise details about the number of soldiers and the names of the units that participated in the expeditionary force see: MARKHAM 1869, 204–205. On the complex logistical needs of the expedition and the purchase and transportation of thousands of animals from Egypt, Syria and even Spain for the journey, see *ibid.*, 142–150. Details of the construction of the special port facilities at Annsley Bay, including a short railway line and a seawater desalination plant, is given in: WALTER JERROLD, *Field-Marshal Earl Roberts, v.c* (London 1914).

²⁸ For the translation of the letter, see: MARKHAM 1869, 327. For a detailed account of the siege, see *ibid.*, 314–354.

²⁹ On the final hours before liberation and the nerve-racking negotiation process, see for example: BLANC 1868, 392–404.

der. At the end, on the second Passover the king's army numbered only 15 soldiers, and after all his soldiers declared that they would not fight the English [...] the king released the men".³⁰

From the very start, Napier had demanded the capitulation of the king, in addition to the release of all the Europeans. The fortress of Mäqdäla fell to Napier's forces on April 13, and a few hours later Teodoros shot himself in the head. The imprisoned Europeans, except for two who chose to stay in Ethiopia, returned to Europe. Napier's forces were demobilized within two months after the end of the expedition.

Conclusion

A handful of Europeans who tried to bring Christianity to the Jews of Ethiopia, were drawn against their will into the storm that swept through Ethiopia under the control of a mentally unstable monarch. After much suffering, they were rescued by a British expeditionary force of more than thirty thousand soldiers, at a cost of close to nine million pounds sterling.³¹ The direct outcome of all this turmoil was summed up by Staiger as follows: "Our hope was that the tortures we suffered for four and a half years would lead to having [the inhabitants of] Ethiopia and East Africa adopt for themselves the principles of Christianity and civilization. We prayed that the region would remain under English rule, which would provide for security and fair trade, and thus they [the English] would prove to all the tribes in this country that barbarity cannot reign for long. To our disappointment, the English left Ethiopia and closed the gates behind them".³²

The European missionaries who left Ethiopia with the British forces never returned. The London Jews Society continued its activities in Ethiopia, but only by means of converted Ethiopian Jews who were trained to serve as missionaries among their own people. During the rest of the 19th century and until the First World War, European missionaries paid occasional visits to Ethiopia to supervise the work of these convert missionaries. During those sixty years of European missionary activity in Ethiopia (1855–1914), about 2000 Ethiopian Jews were baptized, about three dozen a year.³³ It

³⁰ STAIGER 1877, 16–18.

³¹ British Parliamentary Papers, p. v.

³² STAIGER 1877, 18.

³³ Taking into account the problem of the lack of reliable demographic data for Africa in those years, this number should be viewed with caution. For a discussion on this subject and additional factors concerning the difficulty of estimating the exact number of converts, see: KAPLAN 1992, 127–129. Most of the sources cite a similar estimate of the number of converted Jews. See, for example: STEPHEN HOBHOUSE (ed.), *The Autobi-*

appears that the work of the missions was not an outstanding success, but the Jews of Ethiopia regarded the number of converts in their community with great concern. In 1905 a letter giving evidence of this was published on their behalf in a German Jewish journal: “Theodoros and Johannes [successor of Teodoros as king of Ethiopia] wanted to deprive us of our spiritual faith and demanded that we become Christians, we preferred to choose death [...] God listened to our prayers [...] but in spite of this] few of us remained and only 30 prayer houses were left out of 200 [that had been ours] before”.³⁴

Wilhelm Staiger, returned safe and sound from captivity in Ethiopia, built his home in Beirut and lived there with his family for many years. Staiger, who had married the sister of the German orientalist painter Gustav Bauernfeind, used to visit him frequently at his place of residence in Palestine, until they both died in 1904, Staiger in Beirut and Bauernfeind in Jerusalem.

The Jews of Ethiopia returned to the State of Israel in the last two decades of the 20th century. The fate of Teodoros II, King of Ethiopia, was also linked to the Land of Israel. He wished to conduct a military campaign to the Holy Land to liberate Jerusalem from the infidel occupation. In a letter that he wrote to Robert Napier two days before his death, Teodoros wrote: “I had intended, if God had so decreed, to conquer the whole world; and it was my desire to die if my purpose could not be fulfilled. [...] I had hoped, after subduing all my enemies in Abyssinia, to lead my army against Jerusalem, and expel from it the Turks”.³⁵ But this task was evidently not to be fulfilled by him.

Summary

This article deals with the story of the Christian mission among the Jews of Ethiopia during the 1860s as related in the memoirs of the German missionary, Wilhelm Staiger, publicised here for the first time. Staiger who had, together with scores of other European missionaries, become caught up in the political turmoil between Great Britain and Teodoros, King of Ethiopia, describes the affair in the first person.

ography of Theophilus Waldmeier Comprising Ten Years in Abyssinia and Forty-Six Years in Syria (London 1925), 126; *Jewish Missionary Intelligence: The Monthly Record of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews*, 10 (June 1894), 85; WILLIAM THOMAS GIDNEY, *History of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews* (London 1908) 616.

³⁴ *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (1905) in: FLAD 1922, 426–427.

³⁵ MARKHAM 1869, 330–331, the letter of Teodoros in reply to the letter of Napier (p. 327) calling upon the king to surrender unconditionally and to hand over his European prisoners immediately.