



Éloi Ficquet, Ahmed Hassen Omer and Thomas Osmond (dir.)

**Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Volume 1**  
**Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies**

Centre français des études éthiopiennes

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Publisher: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, Tsehai Publishers, Addis Ababa University  
Place of publication: Addis Ababa, Los Angeles  
Year of publication: 2016  
Published on OpenEdition Books: 22 June 2023  
Series: Corne de l'Afrique contemporaine / Contemporary Horn of Africa  
Electronic EAN: 9782111723139



<http://books.openedition.org>

### Electronic reference

LIS, Daniel. *Basel and Abyssinia, 1830-1855. Protestant Mission and Jewish identity in Abyssinia* In: *Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Volume 1: Proceedings of the 18th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* [online]. Addis Ababa, Los Angeles: Centre français des études éthiopiennes, 2016 (generated 23 juin 2023). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/cfee/1165>>. ISBN: 9782111723139.

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*Basel and Abyssinia, 1830-1855. Protestant Mission and Jewish identity in Abyssinia*

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Daniel Lis\*

The notion of the possible existence of Black African Jews intrigued Rabbinical Jewry in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, fed by reports and rumours such as the travel descriptions of the 9th Century Jewish traveller Eldad Ha-Dani. Knowledge of the geography of the African continent however remained very scant, not allowing any precise identification of who or where these Jews (sometimes termed „Israelites“) were; before the modern period no permanent channels of communication existed that would have integrated such a group in a web of interconnected Jewish communities.

A significant eyewitness report by a European came in 1790, when the Scottish traveller James Bruce published an account of his encounters in the 1770s with the Beta Israel, in the Highlands of Ethiopia (BRUCE 1790). Corroborated by Henry Salt, who travelled to the area more than two decades later, Bruce's account gave substance to the earlier accounts and rumours about the Beta Israel (VALENTIA and SALT 1811). From the first decade of the 19th century the pace of visitors arriving in Ethiopia picked up and with it the flow of information spreading in Europe about the peoples of Ethiopia, including the Beta Israel. Given the comparative lack of contemporary publications, the interest of the Jewish public is difficult to gauge; the record does however indicate that by 1812 they had begun to express some, admittedly marginal, interest.<sup>1</sup>

Research usually identifies the starting point of the entry of the Beta Israel into Western Jewish consciousness, with the appearance of the German-Jewish missionary and convert to Protestantism, Henry Aaron Stern. In 1860 Stern arrived in Ethiopia as a missionary for the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews (LJS).<sup>2</sup> The presence of Stern amongst the Beta Israel might indeed be described as the tipping point occasioning Western Jewry to support their Beta Israel brethren to withstand the missionary efforts of the the LJS, hence bringing them closer to

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<sup>1</sup> An anonymous author noted in *Sulamit* — the only Jewish periodical of the time — that according to Salt the Jews of Abyssinia, who were called *Falassa*, were no longer ruled by their own king, and almost exclusively occupied the craft of masonry. *Sulamit* 1812.

<sup>2</sup> Stern published his account *Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia* in 1862.

Rabbinical Judaism.<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer, of Eisenstadt, Germany and one of the leading Ashkenazi rabbis of the period, was vocal in his support of those he deemed his co-religionists. In 1864 he declared that the Beta Israel were fully Jewish and called for their rescue from the threat of Christian missions. Hildesheimer based his argument *inter alia* on missionary reports. His manifesto was published in many leading Jewish newspapers around the world.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish orientalist, Joseph Halévy, responded to Hildesheimer's call, travelling to Ethiopia in 1867-1868 in partnership with the French Jewish Philanthropic Society, the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Contrary to an apparent earlier Jewish visitor to Ethiopia in the first half of the 1850s, who had come to the conclusion that the Beta Israel were not Jewish, Halévy proclaimed the Beta Israel to be a true Jewish community and advocated their cause amongst Western Jewry.<sup>5</sup>

Stern's appearance in Ethiopia, and the consequent perception of the Beta Israel as a lost group of Jews or Israelites in the consciousness of Rabbinical Jewry must however be seen as the continuation of an ongoing process, one which had evolved most significantly in the city of Basel in Switzerland.<sup>6</sup> The construction of a Beta Israel identity meeting Jewish and non-Jewish European definitions of Jewishness, was influenced to a considerable degree by the Evangelical Missionary Society in Basel which was founded in 1815, and from the 1850s onwards by the St. Chrischona Pilgrim Mission institution. The present article tries to show the role, which has been widely neglected, of Basel, in the shaping of a Jewish identity of the Beta Israel.

### **Basel - A city of no Jews in the early Modern period**

Jews were largely absent from the city of Basel after part of the community was burnt alive on an island in the River Rhine by an enraged Christian mob during anti Jewish disturbances in 1349 and the dissolution of the second community in 1389. In 1501 Basel became part of the Swiss confederation and in 1529 opted for the Reformation. As the 16th century progressed the city of Basel attracted renown for its Hebrew Printing Press; and with the presence of Sebastian Münster, Johannes Buxtorf and other Christian Hebraists became recognised as an important centre to learn about Judaism and Jews.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to postulate whether any of these gentlemen realised the

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<sup>3</sup> ELIAV 1965; KAPLAN 1987; CORINALDI 1998; SEEMAN 2000; SUMMERFIELD 2003; PARFITT and TREVISAN SEMI (eds.) 2005; LIPMAN 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Der Israelit* in Germany, the *Jewish Chronicle* in England, *HaLevanon* in France, *HaMaggid* in Prussia, and *HaMevasser* in Galicia.

<sup>5</sup> MINIATI 2007; BIANCHI 2007.

<sup>6</sup> This process has since led to the migration of almost the complete Beta Israel community to Israel, where today around 135,000 citizens are estimated to be of Ethiopian Jewish origin.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Münster, who was also an influential cartographer of his time, seems to have studied the travel accounts of Eldad Ha-Dani most intensely for the compilation of a map of the African continent on which he placed Prester John's kingdom in the area of Ethiopia. Münster's annotations can be found all over the 1519 Constantinople edition of the *Sefer Eldad Ha-Dani* in the University Library of Basel.

irony that by now hardly any Jews were living there.<sup>8</sup> This situation began to change slowly after the French revolution as the old Swiss Federation of loosely connected small states was reshaped into the Helvetic Republic. The French Revolution not only improved the situation for the Jews in France and many other European countries, it also improved their situation in Switzerland; from 1800 onwards a small number of Jews with French citizenship who had been living in the city's environs settled in Basel. They were however not naturalised and would remain French citizens for several generations. Their numbers were insignificant; in the period between 1800 and 1860 the number of Jewish residents never exceeded two hundred individuals, and only towards 1870 did they constitute around one percent of Basel's population. The presence of Jews in Basel was fragile; when France retracted some of the civil rights of Jews in 1808, the city of Basel eagerly followed suit.<sup>9</sup> The period following the French Revolution was one of considerable political uncertainty; the grip of the old political order was loosened but not wholly destroyed and the political system veered back and forth between the influences of Revolution and Restoration. In such times of general anxiety biblical prophecies and visions of the world at the End of Days gained prominence inside the biblical message. In these visions, Jews naturally had a place, and their conversion to Christianity at some stage a necessity. While discriminatory legislation remained in Basel until 1874, strong religious currents present amongst Protestant Christianity in the city started to target Jews as objects of their mission – including the small number of French Jews in the city. Even if Jews had rejected Jesus, it was argued, they were still witnesses to the Christian Bible and therefore also to the prophecies therein. The mission amongst the Jews was hardly successful; only five conversions of Jews between 1782 and 1842 resulted in Basel out of the efforts of the Christian mission. Regardless of the tiny number of Jews living in the city, occasionally diminished by a conversion, Basel became a global centre for the mission amongst the Jews, providing the institutional framework and theology standing behind it (JANNER 2004, 2012).

Basel likewise became significant in the missionary effort to Africa, gathering pace at the same time. As had their counterparts in other cities engaged in global trade, many of Basel's leading aristocratic families had profited from the slave trade in Black Africans (FÄSSLER 2006). In Basel the discussion on the abolition of the slave trade coincided with a religious evangelical revivalist movement. In a mission to the Black Africans this saw a solution to their misery and a form of compensation set within a broader agenda to stop the growth of Islam and bring about the return of Jesus Christ (HUPPENBAUER 2010). The Basel missionaries later frequently expressed the idea that return of Jesus Christ could be accelerated through a Protestant mission in Africa by quoting Psalm 68:31 from the Bible (LIS 2009).

As in many other centres from where the Christian Mission would set out, those in Basel calling for a mission to the “heathen of Africa” were often also vocal in their efforts

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<sup>8</sup> This was also true for later Jewish scholars of Jewish Studies (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) as has been exemplified with Moritz Steinschneider who drew on Buxdorf. BURNETT 2002.

<sup>9</sup> The peak was reached in 1815/1816 at the end of the Mediation period and a low was reached in 1847. In 1870 Jews constituted one percent of Basel's population (BENNEWITZ 2008).

to proselytise the Jews. As we will see in Basel they would bring both discourses together in a call for a mission to the Beta Israel.

### **The founding of the Evangelical Missionary Society in Basel**

Adolf Steinkopf (1773-1859) was one such person in favour of missions to both Jews and Black Africans. Coming from Germany to Basel in 1793 he took the position as a pastor of the German Lutheran community in London in 1801; there he became linked to the Religious Tract Society, the Missionary Society and British and Foreign Bible Society. Steinkopf was also instrumental in the establishment of the London Society for the Propagation of Christianity amongst Jews (LJS thereafter) in 1808. Meanwhile back in Basel two of Steinkopf's friends, Christian Friedrich Spittler (1782-1867) and Christian Gottlieb Blumhardt (1779-1838), continued Steinkopf's projects. Spittler in 1812 founded his first missionary institution - a school for Jewish children in Basel. Three years later, in 1815 Spittler, together with others founded the Evangelical Missionary Society in Basel (EMS hereafter). Blumhardt, Steinkopf's other collaborator, was elected inspector of the 1816 opened Basel Seminary of the EMS. Steinkopf role in setting this organisation was pivotal, providing the necessary international contacts and funds. Steinkopf facilitated co-operation between the British Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the EMS, the latter providing missionaries to several CMS missionary projects in Africa and other places. The Basel missionaries had however to further their education, especially their language skills in Islington, London. The Basel Seminary was not explicitly directed towards Jews, but soon became recognised for its work in this field. 1819 the Scottish Mission amongst the Jews requested the admission of new missionaries to the Basel seminary and took two Basel missionaries into their services in 1820. Spittler and Blumhardt were both active members of the committee and both favoured missions to the Jews. The majority of the committee was however less enthusiastic and opined that the heathen had to be converted before the Jews. The committee's reluctance to engage in an area so dear to Spittler may have been the deciding factor in his founding of the Gesellschaft zur Verbreitung des Christentums unter den Juden (Society for the Propagation of Christianity amongst Jews) in 1820 independently of the EMS (JANNER 2004). The personal links to the EMS remained however strong with Pastor Niklaus von Brunn as the president of the new society while being at the same time a long time board member of the EMS. Pastor von Brunn conducted one of the highlights in the history of the society: the 1823 baptism of the Jew, Ferdinand Ewald (1800-1873) in the Basel cathedral. Now belonging to the Christian faith, Ewald fruitlessly applied for residency in Basel and had to leave the city. He would become one of the most famous missionaries of the LJS of his time, missionizing for many years amongst Jewish communities along the Northern Coast of Africa (JANNER 2004). In addition to theological concerns, the difficulty in obtaining residency for Jews in Basel, even if it be for the sake of a (Christian) missionary education at the Basel seminary, dissuaded the committee admitting further Jews to its institution. Blumhardt was disappointed; he was much in favour of a mission to the Jews and had also noticed that this rejection came at a time when the majority of the missionaries at

the institution had not yet a secured space in a missionary field for their missionary endeavours. Two of the early generation of students at the Basel Seminary, Christian Kugler (1800-1830) and Theodore Müller (born in 1799), expressed their desire in 1823 to be sent on a mission to Africa. To the same generation belonged also Samuel Gobat (1799-1897). Hailing from the French speaking part of the Jura, he had taken a lively interest in the conversion of Jews since his youth (ROLLIER 1885). He arrived in Basel in 1820 and entered the Basel Missionary institution in 1821 together with twelve others from Switzerland, Württemberg and other German states. He regularly attended the Sunday sermons of Pastor von Brunn (*Ibid.*). From late 1823 until October 1824 Gobat was in Paris, where he became involved with missionary activity amongst Jews. Back in Basel, Gobat together with Müller and Kugler were selected for London (Islington) to improve their language skills. Before leaving for London in the spring of 1825, Gobat mentioned to von Brunn his wish to go to Ethiopia. While in London he was much surprised to learn that he had already been selected for a CMS Mission to Ethiopia together with Christian Kugler, yet another fellow colleague from Basel. In London Gobat was in close touch with Edward Bickersteth (1786-1850), from Norwich, England, secretary of the CMS from 1824 until 1830. Bickersteth had been pivotal to both building up the CMS' missionary efforts in Black Africa (especially in Sierra Leone) and in the organisation's relationship with the LJS, of which he had himself been a member since 1814.<sup>10</sup> The relationship between the LJS and the CMS were very close at the time. Although Gobat's mission was intended to concentrate on encouraging a revival of the old Ethiopian Christian Church, the idea for a Protestant mission to the Beta Israel was slowly gaining ground. Joseph Wolf(f) (1795-1862) a German Jewish convert to Christianity, and member of the LJS, might have thought about a mission to the Beta Israel already in 1822 after having met a Jew in Alexandria, Egypt, who told him about earlier visits to the city by Jews from Ethiopia (WOLF 1824).

### **Zunz's circle of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and the Beta Israel**

Increased interest in the Beta Israel seems to have been aroused amongst German-speaking Jews. Some eight years after the first publication of a short note about the Beta Israel in *Sulamit*, a more wide ranging article, drawing on the accounts of Bruce and Salt was published in the same journal in 1820. Somehow misinterpreting Salt, *Sulamit* reported that the Beta Israel had their own king and were to a large extent autonomous (*Sulamit* 1820). It was most probably this article that inspired Eliezer Sinai Kirschbaum (1798-1870), at the time a Jewish Medical student in Berlin, to apply to the *Verein für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Judentums* for the funding of an expedition to the Beta Israel, who (as he believed) still had their own king. Providing the Beta Israel with a European Culture would bring about a revival of the whole Jewish Nation. The proposed expedition held the promise of other benefits; travelling through Palestine and visiting

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance BICKERSTETH 1841.

other Jewish communities, would raise awareness amongst the different sects in Judaism about their common identity. In a final stage this would lead to the unity of all Jews.<sup>11</sup>

The Society to which the request was addressed to in Berlin in 1821 had been founded two years earlier by Eduard Gans; Leopold Zunz; Moses Moser; Isaac Markus Jost; Imanuel Wohlwill (Wolff) and Solomon Judah Loeb Rapoport. Other personalities that engaged in this small circle of German speaking Jewish intellectuals were Ludwig Markus (or Louis Markus) (1798- 1843) and Heinrich Heine. The establishment of the society might have been a response to the anti-Semitic Hep-Hep riots of 1819 in Germany, which presented a backlash for German Jewry at the time emerging from the Ghettos and towards emancipation. The society represented an attempt to provide a construct of the Jews as a people in their own right, with valid cultural traditions, equal to those of the German people (ELON 2002). Although Kirschbaum's project was rejected, the society gave it some consideration with Moses Moser and Immanuel Wolff's reviewing it.<sup>12</sup> Even as Kirschbaum's proposal was rejected, it seems to have inspired some of the members of the society to make their own inquiries. In 1823 Solomon Judah Cohen Rapaport (1790–1867), later Chief Rabbi of Prague and also one of the societies' earliest members published an essay on the Beta Israel (RAPAPORT 1823). In 1828 Isaac Markus Jost, the first modern day Jewish historian published one of the several volumes of his long work *Geschichte der Israeliten* (History of the Israelites), in which he covered the Beta Israel at length (JOST 1828). For Ludwig Markus (1798-1843) the Jews of Abyssinia became his lifelong object of inquiry. Although his manuscript was never published as a book, parts of it appeared in the *Journal Asiatique* in 1829. Upon meeting Markus again in Paris around ten years later, Heinrich Heine, called him "King of Abyssinia" referring to their earlier times in Berlin when they were members of the society (ELBOGEN 1937).

None of these people had ever travelled to Ethiopia, they all must have been aware that such an endeavour was desirable in order to gather first hand information. Had Kirschbaum proposed his travel to Jews some three years earlier his proposal would have been met with greater support. The Beta Israel were integral part of an awakening Jewish Nationalism, a living proof that Jews, regardless of location were a nation, and enquiry about them part of the Jewish auto-emancipatory process. This position was contrary to views of certain other Jews who perceived reports of non-European Jewish communities as a threat to their quest for acceptance and assimilation into the emerging European Nations.<sup>13</sup>

### **New missionary efforts**

In this period the status of the Jews in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East remained sensitive to the major political changes occurring in Europe. Basel was no

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<sup>11</sup> Reprinted in UCKO 1935. Alfred Bodenheimer has drawn my attention on Ucko's essay.

<sup>12</sup> See UCKO 1935.

<sup>13</sup> BAR-CHEN 2003, quoted in JANKOWSKI 2007.

exception; following the July revolution in 1830, France pressed the Swiss cantons to introduce legislation that would be less hostile to Jews. The situation for the few French Jews in Basel remained however volatile.<sup>14</sup> In 1831 the city of Basel witnessed the establishment of the Society of the Friends of Israel. The society's aims were however less concerned with the civil rights of the city's Jews than with their conversion to Protestant Christianity. The links between the new society and the LJS were strong (SMITH 1981). In 1834 the society began to publish its own journal *Der Freund Israels* (Friend of Israel), which regularly featured reports from missionaries in the service of the LJS. Ewald's reports from his North African mission were frequently quoted at length. This journal together with the journal of the EMS, *Magazin für die neueste Geschichte der evangelischen Missions und Bibelgesellschaften*, would certainly have found a receptive readership amongst the students of the Basel Seminary who could read the exploits of the earlier generation of Basel missionaries.

Gobat and Kugler were forced to wait until 1830 to enter their missionary field, when a measure of political stability returned to Ethiopia. While waiting in Egypt, Kugler took the opportunity to visit Henry Salt, now the British Consul-General for Egypt, who was on his death-bed (ROLLIER 1885). Salt at the time was one of the few living Europeans who had personally encountered Beta Israel. Gobat and Kugler finally began their missionary work in Ethiopia; Gobat travelled to the Gondar area, where he had several encounters with Beta Israel.<sup>15</sup> Gobat was active as a missionary in Ethiopia for some three years and published part of his account in the 1834 issue of the EMS journal.<sup>16</sup> In the same year Gobat tried to re-establish the mission in Ethiopia together with another missionary Carl Wilhelm Isenberg (1806-1864). Isenberg yet one more alumna of the Basel Seminary, was close associate of Spittler and had been strongly associated with the latter's missionary efforts amongst the Jews in Basel. The mission in Ethiopia was hampered by Gobat's poor health, which forced him to leave Isenberg alone in the field. In 1836 Gobat's condition prevented the LJS missionary Wolff from reaching the Beta Israel in Gondar. Instead of the mission that he had considered for more than a decade Wolff was compelled to manage Gobat's safe return (WOLFF 1839).

Soon more missionaries from the Basel Mission in the service of the CMS began to arrive in Ethiopia. Karl Heinrich Blumhardt (1805-1880), a nephew of the Basel Seminary's inspector Blumhardt arrived in Ethiopia in 1837 as Gobat's replacement. Heinrich Knoth, set out from Basel around the same time for Ethiopia only to die en route in Cairo. Knoth's place was then taken over by Johann Ludwig Krapf (1810-1881), who joined Isenberg in 1837. Isenberg and Krapf would remain active in this missionary field in the years to come.

Meanwhile back in Europe Gobat called for a mission to the Jews in Ethiopia at a gathering of the LJS in London, in 1838. This appeal drew considerable attention, and was considered worthy enough to be reported in the journal of the Friends of Israel in

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<sup>14</sup> New legislation was introduced in 1849 that enabled the Jewish community in Basel finally to grow. A synagogue was inaugurated in 1850.

<sup>15</sup> Kugler however died early on due to an accident.

<sup>16</sup> It appeared in the same year as a book in French (GOBAT 1834).



Basel (GOBAT 1839). Undaunted by his failure to reach Gondar, Wolff had lost none of his interest in the subject. In the French issue of the same journal, *L'amie d'Israel*, it is reported that at this gathering in London, Wolff outlined his plan for a mission in Ethiopia that would open up the possibility to penetrate into the interior of Africa in search of other lost Israelites (*L'Amie d'Israel* 1838).

Thus far none of these Basel missionaries had been sent on a mission to the Beta Israel, but Black African Jews were of great interest to all of them. It is also noteworthy that Krapf and his colleagues interacted with both the Ethiopian authorities and the increasing number of travellers who were now visiting Ethiopia such as the British geographer Charles Beke in 1840 and in the following year another Briton William Coffin, a member of the 1810 Salt expedition. In 1838 Krapf and Isenberg were forced to leave Northern Ethiopia. They suspected the machinations of their rival Catholic missionaries. The mission then moved to the southern province of Shwa. In late 1839 Isenberg returned to Europe to organise further support for their mission, returning to Ethiopia with the intention to prepare the ground for two new missionaries from Basel in Ethiopia: Johannes Mühleisen and Johann Christian Müller. The mission however failed again and in 1843 the CMS finally gave up on a mission in Ethiopia in favour of other missionary fields that were opening up.

However, one by-product of the failed CMS mission had been to raise awareness of the Beta Israel amongst Jews and non-Jews in Europe. An increasing output of literature on the Beta Israel not only by the Basel Missionaries but also by other travellers started to create a web of information and narratives about the Beta Israel, that integrated them into existing Jewish and Christian historiographical narratives.<sup>17</sup> Zunz, the influential figure of Jewish Studies, by 1841 was firmly convinced that the Beta Israel were Jews and contributed with an *Essay on the geographical literature of the Jews*, from the remotest times, to the year 1841, to Adolf Ascher's *Book The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela*. While Zunz was careful to note only Jewish sources in connection with Ethiopia, the writings of the Basel educated missionaries about the Beta Israel certainly did not escape the attention of European Jewry as Jewish journals frequently printed or reprinted non-Jewish contemporary sources about the Beta Israel.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> VON KATTE 1838; RÜPPELL 1840. ISENBERG and KRAPF 1843; D'ABBADIE 1851.

<sup>18</sup> The Damascus affair of 1840, in which the accusation of ritual murder was brought against members of the Jewish community in that city, resulted in the creation of an international Jewish solidarity network for the accused and stimulated public Jewish debate. Not a few Jewish newspapers such as Britain's *Jewish Chronicle* were founded in this period. These new organs proved an effective forum for the discussion of many issues, including the Jewish identity of the Beta Israel and the activities of Protestant Missionaries. Charles Beke, the English geographer and bible critic, was another heavyweight contributor. Drawing on his experiences in Ethiopia during his three years sojourn (1840-1843), he started to write about the Beta Israel for the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1847.

## From Basel via Jerusalem to Ethiopia

Lately, millenarian views were enforced by the establishment of an Anglican Bishopric in Jerusalem in 1841 (Matar 1990). Lord Ashley, Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the most prominent British politicians of the time, a Member of Parliament and president of the LJS, convinced the British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston to clear the way for the restoration of the Jews to the Holy Land. In return for Britain's support of the Ottoman Empire, Britain demanded that an Anglican bishop in Jerusalem would act as the head of the Protestant community, a community that was ought to be made up of Jewish converts to Protestantism. When Shaftesbury obtained the appointment of a Jewish convert, the Rev. Michael Solomon Alexander to the Jerusalem Bishopric in 1841, the joy of men like Bickersteth and others from the LJS knew no bounds.<sup>19</sup>

The Basel connection was not lost either and Christian Friedrich Ewald, the former Jew baptised in Basel by Spittler's associate von Brunn, became a close associate of Alexander in Jerusalem. Ewald witnesses when Alexander in Jerusalem ordained Johannes Mühleisen in 1842, who was thought for the mission in Abyssinia together with Johann Christian Müller. This was the first ordination in Jerusalem under the new Bishop, who was also responsible for Ethiopia (EWALD 1846). Alexander in 1844 also ordained Henry Aaron Stern, the later famous missionary of the Beta Israel mission. Alexander's tenure was however cut short by his death in 1845. In the ensuing search for Alexander's successor, both Wolff and Gobat were considered. Apparently Gobat's missionary reports about Ethiopia gave him the edge over Wolff. It is likely that the Archbishop Canterbury, in his function as president of the LJS had been present at that 1838 LJS meeting at which both Gobat and Wolff had presented. It seems that the archbishop was particularly fond of Gobat's account of Ethiopia (LÜCKHOFF 1998; VAN DER LEEST 2008). Wolff, not unreasonably, felt cheated when Gobat was elected as the new Protestant Bishop of Jerusalem in 1846. Only ten years earlier Wolff had sacrificed his own plans for Ethiopia in order to save Gobat's life. Wolff was said to have been responsible for some of the criticism that was later directed against Gobat. Gobat, in opposition to Alexander was less concentrating on the mission to the Jews but sought also to win over Muslims as well as Christians from other churches. By travelling to Basel in 1852, Gobat might have hoped to receive some moral support from a city that now had a presence in Jerusalem in the form of the graduates of Spittler's new project, the St. Chrischona Pilgrim Mission. Founded in 1840 by Spittler in Basel, this Mission House soon attracted a number of former missionaries of the EMS Mission Seminary. Isenberg had started to work at St. Chrischona as a teacher soon after his return from Ethiopia as had other former students of the Basel Seminary. Spittler in 1846 dispatched the first missionaries from this institution to Jerusalem. He certainly greeted Gobat's appointment to the city's Bishopric as a positive development. At their meeting in Basel, Gobat and Spittler discussed plans for the mission in Ethiopia and the so-called

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<sup>19</sup> STOCK 1899. Bickersteth also published that very same year a book dedicated to the event (BICKERSTETH 1841).

Apostelstrasse project, — a line of twelve missionary stations from Jerusalem to Gondar. These stations would open up the continent for the Protestant Mission. The idea of Ethiopia as a highway for the Christian message in Africa, had already been proposed by Krapf to the CMS in London in 1850.<sup>20</sup> Missionaries educated at the St. Chrischona Pilgrim Mission, by teachers such as Isenberg (in Amharic) would then be sent first to Jerusalem, and from there to Ethiopia.<sup>21</sup> Krapf was won over for the idea and it was decided by Gobat and Spittler to send him, together with Johann Martin Flad — alumnus of both the Basel seminary and St. Chrischona institution — to Ethiopia to lay the ground in advance of the arrival of more missionaries. There is yet no evidence to suggest that the Gobat / Spittler discussions focused on the Beta Israel, yet the later long-time engagement of Flad for the LJS amongst the Beta Israel and Krapf's theological elaborations about the theological importance of a mission to the Beta Israel is however intriguing. In his foreword to the German edition of Johann Martin Flad's *Abessinische Juden (Falascha)*, published in 1869, Krapf outlines a pronounced theology containing as it does a clearly formulated role for Black Jews in the "Days to Come". Krapf, respected as a geographer and Mission strategist, was integrating the Jews in the East of Africa in his divine plan for the worldwide dispersion of the Jews. To this plan the Jews represented mines, whence the fire of the pentecostal spirit would in the "Coming Days" spread for the mission to the peoples. The plan envisaged a final stage, during which a state would be established for the Jews according to biblical outline.<sup>22</sup> It becomes clear then that the mission to the Beta Israel was more than a by-product of the Protestant Mission to Ethiopia.

Krapf and Flad arrived in Ethiopia in 1855. After their return from Ethiopia four alumni of the Chrischona institution were sent to Ethiopia. Under the guidance of Flad, Christian Bender, Johannes Kienzle and Johannes Maier (Mayer) began their missionary work in 1856, which already reached many Beta Israel. Flad had to leave the missionary field for Jerusalem because of his health and only returned in 1859 together with Theophil Waldmeier and Carl Saalmüller to new alumni of St. Chrischona. Meanwhile Krapf taught at St. Chrischona in 1859 until 1860. While in Jerusalem, Flad spoke to Gobat favourably about a mission to the Beta Israel. This woke the interest of the LJS, which decided in 1859 to send its own missionary to the Beta Israel. The man chosen for the task was none other than Henry Aaron Stern. Stern finally arrived in Ethiopia in 1860. He soon convinced Flad to work for him. The appearance of Stern has somehow diverted attention away from the role the Basel educated missionaries played among the early missions to the Beta Israel and led to the presentation of their encounter with the

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<sup>20</sup> It might be that Spittler had corresponded about this idea with Krapf, who travelled through Basel in 1850 and had originally intended to visit Spittler while in the city (EBER 2006).

<sup>21</sup> For instance STREBEL 1999; 2001.

<sup>22</sup> FLAD 1866; 1869a; 1869b; 1922.

Beta Israel as merely incidental aspect of their mission to Ethiopia.<sup>23</sup> In 1862 a third missionary enterprise was started amongst the Beta Israel on behalf of the Scottish Mission amongst the Jews. Again two alumni of the St. Chrischona institution were engaged for the project: Willhelm Staiger and Eleazar Friedrich Wilhelm Brandeis (1835-1920); the latter a Jewish convert to Protestantism and most probably also a student of Krapf at the Chrischona Pilgrim Mission.<sup>24</sup> Together with the original missionary group that was much in favour of working amongst the Beta Israel three groups of missionaries that were all – in part at least – constituted out of Chrischona alumni.

## Conclusion

It is astonishing that past scholarship has overlooked the role that “Basel Missionaries” played in the conceptual conversion of the Beta Israel. This becomes even more apparent when one considers that later generations of missionaries like Friedrich Flad, Mikael Aragawi and a number of converted Beta Israel missionaries were educated in Basel as well,<sup>25</sup> – a process that continued until the 1970s.<sup>26</sup> The missionary institutions of the EMS and St. Chrischona then present themselves as a significant node in the web of knowledge and ideas about Jews and Judaism that provided an educational framework for the conceptual conversion of the Beta Israel into mainstream Jewry.

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<sup>23</sup> The Activities of the Basel educated missionaries has recently attracted some interest by Alex Carmel and Yaron Perry. Both of them have focused on the activities of the LJS in the Holy Land (CARMEL 1981; PERRY 2003).

<sup>24</sup> GREMINGER, 1929; PERRY 2008.

<sup>25</sup> SMIDT 2007; WEIL 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Sources from the *Staatsarchiv Basel* indicate that the Mission continued until the year 1977. BaStabs PA 946a K7-6-1, Äthiopien: Falaschamission, 1974-1977.

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