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### A Tale of Two Zionisms: Messianic Judaism and Ethiopian Jewry

In late 2013, I was interviewing an American Rabbi in Gondar, Ethiopia. Gondar is the historical home of a concentration of the famed Ethiopian Jews, also known as Falasha or the Beta Israel. The Rabbi, a large-framed, gregarious white man with curly brown hair, was explaining the purpose of his organization, *Jewish Voice*, when we were interrupted. A white American woman, pointing to an Ethiopian woman nearby, said to the Rabbi "This lady has an amulet from a witch doctor around her neck. She is willing to cast off all of that." Without missing a beat, he responded, "Let's snip it off. Let me get my scissors. Where are those?" He looked around and quickly gave up. Our interview continued.

He explained that *Jewish Voice* sets up temporary clinics around the world, offering free medical services, such as dental and eye work, in locations with a sizable Jewish population. He stated that their activities not only bless the Jews in the area with much needed medical care but also demonstrate that Jewish minorities bring value to their communities. It was not hard to notice that local Orthodox Christians and Muslims also receive medical care from the organization, but the Rabbi emphasized that they receive this care in the name of the Jewish people, and hopefully, local Jews will receive some of the credit.



The Center of Gondar, known as "Piassa". Photo by Ignacio Gallego is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.



Gondar - 17th century capital of Ethiopia. Photo by A. Davey is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

There was a second interruption. A middle-aged white man introduced the Rabbi to an elderly Ethiopian man, who stood next to him, in well-worn clothes, with a solemn expression. "This man is Jewish", the American man said, "and he has accepted Jesus." The Rabbi directed him to an Ethiopian young man with fashionable, less worn clothes, "Abebe will take care of him." A third interruption: another white woman approached and gleefully proclaimed, "That's four Jews today!" pumping her fist into the air. To her delight, this American woman helped convince four Ethiopian Jews to recognize Jesus as their Messiah, though this is a complicated claim, as I explain below.

It's obvious by now that this Rabbi is not a typical Rabbi, and *Jewish Voice* is not a typical Jewish organization. *Jewish Voice* is part of the Messianic Jewish movement. The Rabbi and I were, in fact, sitting in a tent dedicated to "counseling and prayer." The tent fell in the path between the exit and the medical stations so that all who received care could have the option to pray before they leave (the Rabbi emphasized that it was optional). Inside the tent were several clusters of chairs, manned by a foreign evangelist and a young Ethiopian translator. They engaged in boisterous prayers and exhortations aimed at a rotation of Gondarè care recipients. I recognized many of the young Amharic translators as members of local Charismatic Christian congregations.

Messianic Jews claim Jewish identity and hold an [evangelical Christian theology](#). Messianic Judaism is one example of how evangelical Christians and Jews have overlapping, but conflicting fields of interest. Another overlapping field is Christian Zionism, which, though influenced by [dispensationalist eschatology](#), holds key features in common with right-wing Jewish Zionism. Many Evangelical Christian Zionists I worked with in California see the establishment of a Jewish state in ancient Israelite territory, and the migration of Jews to that territory, as God's plan. Like many right-wing Jewish Zionists, my evangelical interlocutors in California support the expansion of Israeli settlements, however, unlike Jewish Zionists, evangelical Christian Zionists believe that Jewish Israelis will come to accept Jesus as the Messiah en masse. This conversion will play a key role in major [end-time events](#).



To put it in the simplest of terms: Jewish Zionists want Jews to migrate to Israel, Evangelical Christian Zionists want Jews to migrate to Israel and accept Jesus. Ethiopians in historically Jewish regions now find themselves at the intersection of competing global actors influenced by these distinct Zionisms. In this piece, I provide a window into how these projects hatched by foreigners interact with cultural patterns in Ethiopia. I argue there is a tug-a-war between the actors that exploit ambiguities, and the push among more powerful actors for clarity. This is an area where the religious and nationalistic imperatives intersect. First, a short primer on Ethiopian Jews, or, as they call themselves, the Beta Israel (house of Israel).

## The Jews of Ethiopia

There is evidence of Jewish influence in the Ethiopian capital of Axum prior to the adoption of Christianity in the 4th century. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is famous for its Judaic elements, and we have evidence of medieval Jewish communities in Ethiopia up to the 7th century A.D. The Ayhud (Jews) receive mention again in 14th century war chronicles that tell of Jewish rebellions against Christian emperors. After decades of fighting to subjugate these recalcitrant non-believers, emperor Yeshaq waged a personal military campaign against the Ayhud. According to one apocryphal source, he is said to have declared "He who is baptized into the Christian religion, may inherit the land of his father: otherwise, let him be a Falasi" (Kaplán 1992, 58).

The alleged decree, whether it actually happened or not, reflects the Christian kingdom's policy towards Ethiopia's Jewish minority in the centuries that followed. Though these Jews called themselves "Beta Israel", Ethiopian Orthodox Christians knew them as "Falasha," meaning "stranger." The prohibition on owning land reinforced their status as outsiders and ensured they would be social pariahs. The Beta Israel were confined to stigmatized trades like blacksmithing and leatherworking. If that wasn't enough, Amhara Christians feared contact with Jews because they were alleged carriers of malicious magic, such as buda (the evil eye). Rumors abounded of how Falasha would transform into hyenas at night and consume human flesh.

After a series of famines in the 19th century, some Beta Israel moved out of their villages. In their new homes, they converted to Christianity, but that did not erase their Jewish identity. According to oral histories collected by Hagar Salamon, these converts ended up marginalized by both Christian and Jewish communities. Caught in a liminal state, they formed a distinct intermarrying class, separate from Jews and Amhara Christians, known as the Feres Mura.

In the 20th century, the plight of the Beta Israel came to the attention of the larger Jewish world. In 1974, the Israel's Rabbinic authority of Israel decided that they should be granted aliyah. Some American Jewish organizations offered aid to Beta Israel who had migrated from their villages and populated refugee camps in hopes that Israel would rescue them. Noting the bleak conditions in these camps, these American organizations became fierce advocates of Ethiopian Jewish migration. An Israeli state effort known as Operation Moses in 1984 began a series of airlifts that moved over 100,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel in the decades that followed.



A sign directing tourists to the historical Jewish Village of Wolleka. Photo by Adam Jones from Kelowna, BC, Canada is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



Synagogues in the Jewish Village in Wolleka, just outside of Gondar, currently serves as a tourist attraction. Its former residents have migrated to Israel. When I visited in 2010, Orthodox Christians greeted tourists and sold Beta Israel themed handicrafts. Photo by Adam Jones licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

Most of the Jewish villages in Ethiopia have been emptied out, yet there seems to be no end to people claiming Jewish identity and right of return. How? The Ethiopian highlands is a place where Christian conversion was not enough to erase Jewish status. This is a place with a [cognatic system](#) of inheritance that makes it possible to appeal to any genealogical link to help you get on in life, insofar as you have the necessary networks and rhetorical skills to make the appeal convincing. It is also a place known to [cultivate ambiguity](#) as a means to both protection and prosperity, so many see it as sensible to avoid establishing a stable, inflexible identity as either Jew or a Christian. When seen through the lens of these cultural patterns, it makes sense to say Jews are still a part of the Ethiopian social world. There is little mystery about it. Yet, from the outside, Jewish presence seems obscured in an opaque, shifting haze.



Some have sifted through this haze, to find, even create, a more legible Jewish identity in Ethiopia. The [North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry \(NACOEJ\)](#) provides aid to the Feres Mura and administers a “return to Judaism program” to facilitate their conversion to Rabbinic Judaism. Israeli authorities saw conversion as necessary for Feres Mura because many see their Jewish genealogy as suspect. [Don Seeman](#) writes about the NACOEJ compound in Addis, where they supplied Feres Mura refugees with standard Jewish prayer books and taught them to observe halacha. There is a NACOEJ synagogue in Gondar that provides similar services.



Security Guards protecting the NACOEJ Synagogue in Gondar. They forbade any photos of the building until I received permission from synagogue leaders. Photo by John Dulin, Gondar Ethiopia, 2010

NACOEJ's efforts at reconversion appeal to Israeli immigration authorities, who, as representatives of a nation state, tend to impose identitarian dichotomies, like Jew versus non-Jew, so they can draw hard lines between potential immigrants who qualify for “[law of return](#)” as Jews and those who do not. The efforts of NACOEJ have been [successful](#) in facilitating several waves of Feres Mura migration to Israel.

This is an example of how religious nationalism, in particular, Jewish nationalism, resonates with a nation-state's immigration process. In this case, Jewish organizations help aspiring migrants in Ethiopia meet the religious entry requirements of a nation state. By contrast, the work of Messianic Jews threatens to undo the work of organizations like NACOEJ by persuading Ethiopian Jews to adopt or retain religious commitments that disqualify them from aliyah.

I know from my work with Messianic Jewish congregations in San Diego, California between 2008 and 2010 that American Messianics are aware of Ethiopian Jews. I sat next to an evangelical Christian woman at Messianic Passover seder who expressed her concern for Ethiopian Messianic Jews. She disclosed that she donated to the [Messianic Jewish Alliance of America \(MJAA\)](#) efforts, then labeled, Operation Tikva, after watching a promotional video. It is a shame, she said, that many people are persecuted as Jews in Ethiopia, but denied aliyah because of their faith in Yeshua. It is a story that pulls on [Messianic heart strings](#), because it mirrors their own rejection by most Jewish people.

American Messianics are not the only foreigners aware of MJAA activities in Ethiopia. In 2008, the [Jerusalem Post](#) reported that Israeli officials expressed “alarm” about MJAA activities. It refers to [videos](#) posted by the MJAA in which they appeared to be promoting aliyah in “far flung villages” among people whose “ancestral link to Judaism is tenuous at best.” From the perspective of state bureaucrats, the (mainly American) MJAA representatives are deceptively promoting their own message through the promise of citizenship in another state—Israel. To make matters worse, their message encourages the very Jewish-Christian blurring that NACOEJ and Israeli authorities work to overcome. However, my work with MJAA aid recipients suggests that promoting the Messianic Jewish message had not been the priority of MJAA interventions, at least not prior to 2010. Rather, it suggests that, at the time the Post article was written, the MJAA had taken a hands-off approach to the beliefs and practices of the people claiming to be Jews in Gondar.

In the first section of this piece, I described a tug-of-war between some actors that exploit ambiguities and powerful actors that seek for clarity. While NACOEJ and Israeli authorities work to achieve clarity, Messianic Jewish organizations seem quite comfortable with the ambiguity of Ethiopian cultural environment. This mutual Messianic/ Ethiopian comfort with ambiguity became evident when I set out to conduct research with Ethiopian Messianic Jews in 2010.

### [The Search for Ethiopian Messianic Jews](#)

Soon after my arrival in Gondar, a young tour guide approached me with a firm handshake and “Shabbat Shalom.” He heard I was asking about the Beta Israel so he introduced himself as a Jew. I later found out that he was an Orthodox Christian with perhaps a bit of Jewish ancestry. On another occasion, a Charismatic Christian man told me he was Beta Israel, but later clarified that, because he was born again, he had been adopted to the house of Israel.

For my first several days in the field, finding any local Jews had proved elusive. Then I had a chance encounter. While walking through a peripheral Gondarè neighborhood, I came across a building of corrugated tin sheets, with a star of David

mounted on the top. I had found the Beta Israeli Synagogue of Gondar. The synagogue's guard was stationed nearby, making knives with a hammer, bellows, and red-hot flame—which I recognized as a historical Jewish trade. He greeted me and invited me to come back on Saturday to observe a service.

I returned on Saturday, but there was no service. Instead, I was met with about six men, who called themselves "the board." They led me to an office and sat me down. Isaac, a heavy-set man with a modest mustache, began telling me of their financial woes: they needed food, money to pay for electricity and new chairs for synagogue. At the end, they asked for a donation. I assumed these were non-Christian Jews because that is how they presented themselves. This assumption was soon challenged.



The Beta Israeli Synagogue in Gondar Ethiopia. Photo by John Dulin, 2010



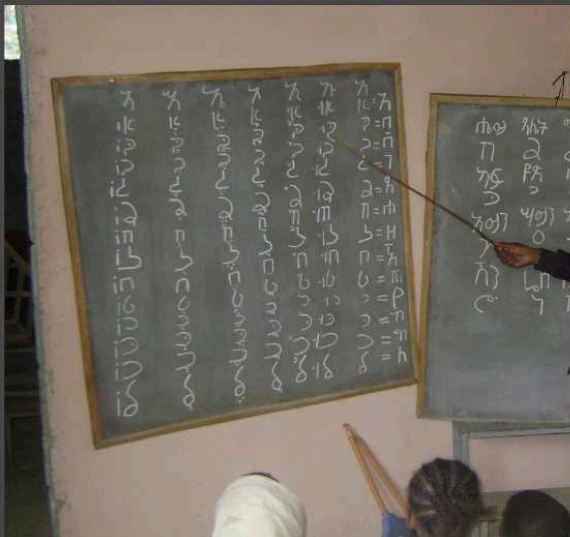
A sign on the interior of the Beta Israeli Synagogue in Gondar, Ethiopia. Photo by John Dulin, 2010

Soon after I met with the board, I had dinner with Zewditu, one of many local Ethiopian liaisons for the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America. When I told her of my experience at the Beta Israeli Synagogue, she smiled and declared "That's one of ours." Zewditu is a wealthy Charismatic Christian woman who attends the local Kale Heywet church. She is known as the owner of a successful hotel and restaurant in Gondar. During our dinner, she suggested we visit the Beta Israeli Synagogue on the coming Saturday to observe the service.

The next Saturday we arrived to a full synagogue. The liturgical chants appeared more or less identical to the service I later observed at the nearby NACOEC synagogue. When the prayers were over, Zewditu walked forward without invitation and gave a short speech in English:

*Look at them. All of them are very poor, but look how healthy they look. They look like they are rich. It's because they are Jewish and God blesses them. God gives his people strength, even though they have no food. Since 1998 many people came here from all over to register to go to Israel. They pray and hope to go to Israel, but they are not allowed because they are believers.*

Zewditu's statement reproduced stories I heard about Ethiopian Jews in the California Messianic synagogues. What puzzled me was that most of these alleged Messianic Jews did not give signs of absorbing that narrative. For example, even after seeing me with Zewditu, the board did not open up about any Messianic beliefs. Isaac said some members of the synagogue assumed I was there to preach a religious message. He was pleased when I assured him I was not a missionary. One member of the board stated directly "I don't believe like the Christians in Jesus." Of course, they are aware of how professing Christianity would hurt their chances of migrating to Israel, so these statements could be calculated. For example, when I took a picture of Isaac with his extended family, an elderly family member took off her cross necklace (worn by Orthodox Christians), and turned around her fabric cap that had a cross sewn on the front.



Hebrew classes in the Beta Israeli Synagogue in Gondar, Ethiopia. Zewditu explained that they teach Hebrew classes in the synagogue so the children will be prepared to function in Israeli society. Photo by John Dulin, 2010

That said, the relationship between MIAA and synagogue seemed limited to material aid. The MIAA provided rice to



That said, the relationship between MJAA and synagogue seemed limited to material aid. The MJAA provided rice to synagogue members and paid the synagogue's expenses. As I got to know him, Isaac disclosed that the board used to belong to the NACOEJ Synagogue but they broke away to form their own association, not because they were Messianic, but because they suspected leaders were pocketing funds. I was at one point permitted to enter the NACOEJ synagogue. There I engaged in a group conversation with a few guards and a young man, a member of the synagogue, who took it upon himself to be my guide. In this conversation, one guard declared that the NACOEJ synagogue was the only "real synagogue" in Gondar. He said the other two are "Pente," or Pentecostal. The young man interjected that, indeed there was another synagogue that is "Pente"; but the Beta Israeli Synagogue was only sponsored by Pentes (i.e. the MJAA).

The young man's statement is consistent with Isaac's claim about the members of his MJAA sponsored synagogue : "Before we were afraid to be Jews, so we converted to Orthodox. Now that the constitution says that religion is a private matter, we all returned again to being Jewish." When I returned to Gondar to conduct fieldwork between 2013 and 2015, there was no longer a Beta Israeli Synagogue of Gondar. Funds had dried up. I ran into a few members of the board during the course of my stay. One was celebrating Epiphany as an Orthodox Christian. The talkative, assertive Isaac was attending the NACOEJ synagogue, which suggests that he adheres to Rabbinic Judaism. Perhaps he always did.



Gondar is an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian majority place. Most Christians of Jewish heritage in Ethiopia grew up practicing Orthodoxy, a form of Christianity that Evangelicals often denounce because it teaches that saints are divine intermediaries. This is a photo of the St. Michael procession for the Orthodox Epiphany celebration of 2014. Photo by John Dulin, 2014

### Final Thoughts

Now, there are Messianic Jewish activities in Gondar that I did not personally observe when I was there. I told the above story as one of confused discovery to show that merely identifying Ethiopian Messianic Jews can be tricky. There is [more to the story](#) of Messianic Jews in Gondar, but the three times I personally managed to follow the money that flows from Messianic Jewish organizations to Ethiopia, I failed to find a community resembling Messianic Jewish congregations in the United States. Hence, my ethnographic data suggests that some international Messianic Jewish actors distribute aid to "Ethiopian Messianic Jews" without an urgent effort to subjectivize recipients into the narrative that motivates donors and volunteers.

Yet even if Messianic or evangelical Christian donors knew about the diversity and ambiguity of MJAA aid recipients, it would be unlikely to threaten the legitimacy of the work. The North American movement has had to sustain an elastic, big tent to cater to a diverse following of Jewish Christians, philosemitic gentiles, regular ol' Evangelicals, and Christians who make controversial claims to [Jewish ancestry](#). Apparent incoherence has not stopped Messianic Jews from acting in terms of their narrative at home, and it will not stop them [abroad](#). This distinctive feature of Messianic Judaism shapes how their Christian Zionism articulates with the policies and programs of nation-states.

Nation-states are often pulled by opposing national [imaginaries](#), some seeking to narrow, others to [widen](#), boundaries of inclusion. Christian theologies can shape these imaginaries. An influential Evangelical Christian theology in United States (Dispensationalism), has created a site of elastic, boundary expansion in how Christians imagine Judaism and Jewish people. Messianic Judaism is one expression of that [elasticity](#), which has been extended to how Evangelicals and Messianic Jews view Ethiopian migration to Israel. Politically conservative evangelicals and Messianic Jews from the United States—people likely to advocate tightening immigration standards in their own country—advocate the opposite in Ethiopia for Israel, because of where they locate the Ethiopian Jews within their eschatological topography.

Finally, in the relationship between the North American and Ethiopian actors, we see dynamics that are similar to the dynamics of nation-states. Religious and national identity categories are often imagined at a remove from human lives as lived, and, hence, are of course at best partial or inadequate. However, people on the margins, migrants in particular, have incentive to fit themselves into the stories of power holders who know little about them. They perform certain roles in hopes of avoiding state aggression, receiving rights of citizenship, and accessing goods and services. It should be clear from this piece that both Messianic identity and Jewish identity in Ethiopia are sometimes situational, performed for powerful audiences. The efforts of Ethiopian Jews/Ethiopian Messianic Jews/ Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Jews\* are not unlike the efforts of countless peoples who creatively perform their place in [imagined communities](#)—lest they fall out of grace with the states, and powerful organizations, that treat the imagined as real.

\* These identities are sometimes held separately in Ethiopia, but are also held in tandem.