

Ethiopian Jews

Recognition & Relocation

There have been many speculations about the fate of the 10 Tribes of Israel after they were exiled by the Assyrians over 2,700 years ago. Could they have simply vanished or been exterminated, or are there anthropological, historical and geographical evidence that they still exist? Biblical history traces the Jewish patriarchy to Abraham, whose grandson Jacob produces the 12 sons that represent the 12 tribes of Israel. Following the death of David's son, Solomon, the tribes were split along territorial and political lines, with Judah and Benjamin making up what would be described as the southern tribes, which represent the forebears of most modern Jews. It is with the 10 tribes of the northern region that a lot of controversy has brewed.

Another legend insists that during the rift between Rehoboam, son of Solomon, and Jeroboam, son of Nebat, the tribe of Dan chose not to be drawn into tribal disputes and, to avoid the impending civil war, resettled in Egypt. Eventually they would continue to travel southwards up the Nile to the historic Land of Cush in modern Sudan and Ethiopia, which was rich in resources. These Danites are therefore cited by some historians as the ancestors of modern Ethiopian Jews.

The great medieval Jewish traveler, Benjamin, claims to have come across Jewish Tribesmen when, in 1165, he set out from his native Tudela in Spain on a voyage that would cover vast areas of Persia and the Arabian Peninsula, among others. Benjamin greatly influenced subsequent research and quest for the Lost Tribes, which eventually led a number of explorers and researchers to the Beta Israel (House of Israel), an Ethiopian Jewish group believed to have descended from the Lost Tribes.

Researchers conclude that Jews of Ethiopia (also known as Falashas¹) originally had their own independent kingdom through the Middle Ages, existed in large numbers, established themselves as skilled farmers and producers of exquisite crafts and jewelry, and coexisted with people of other religions, some of whom they converted.

¹ Falashas is the Amharic word for landless, wandering Jews.

But Christians who arrived in Ethiopia in the 4th century clashed with the Jews and this resulted in a decline of the fortunes and authority of the Jews. Considered a threat to other religions, the Ethiopian Jews, like Jews elsewhere, would be embroiled in numerous conflicts in an effort to assert their identity and resist conversion. This resulted in persecutions as well as clashes with other ethnicities and religious groups. By the 7th century their autonomy was again threatened by invading Muslims and, later, in the 13th century CE by the Solomonic Empire (1270–1527).² For the next three centuries the Ethiopian Jews would do battle and face persecution from notable rulers like Negus Claudius (1540-1559), Negus Minas (1559-1563) and Negus Sarsa-Dengel (1563-1597). By the early 17th century they eventually lost their independence in their last battle for autonomy against Ethiopian Christians backed by Portuguese missionaries. At this time many of the Jews in Ethiopia, who numbered as many as half a million, were sold into slavery, forcibly baptized and expelled from their lands.

From the 1970s to the 80s, the Israeli Government, in recognition of their authenticity, began airlifting thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, rescuing them from political oppression and economic exploitation.³ Today, most members of the Beta Israel, which mostly come from Gondar State in the north west of Ethiopia, have relocated to the State of Israel. This was predominantly the result of two massive airlifts. The first, Operation Moses, began on November 1984 and ended in January 1985 when about 8,000 Ethiopian Jews were secretly flown from refugee camps on the Sudanese border to Israel.⁴ Also in 1985, about 1,200 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted in Operation Sheba, while another 800 were flown to Israel in Operation Joshua, all with the help of the US Government. The second massive airlift, Operation Solomon, took place in 1991. With the impending collapse of the Mengistu regime, Ethiopian officials, with the promise of monetary rewards and asylum, permitted Ethiopian Jews to be airlifted to Israel. It is estimated that within 36 hours 14,325 Beta Israel men, women and children were flown to Israel in 34

² The Solomonic dynasty is the traditional Imperial House of Ethiopia, claiming descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, who is said to have given birth to king Menelik I.

³ This effort began with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who took office in 1977, and involved the sale of arms to then Ethiopian Government under the leadership Mengistu Haile Mariam.

⁴ With the severe Ethiopian famine of the 1980s, thousand of these refugees had been forced to trek to the Sudan where they sought relief in refugee camps.

aircrafts, including Air Force C-130s and El Al cargo planes. A world record was set on May 24 of that year when an El Al 747—emptied of its seats—carried 1,122 passengers to Israel. The immigration continued through the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21st century with about 3,000-5,000 Ethiopian Jews relocating to Israel each year. It is estimated that about 80-120,000 Ethiopian Jews currently reside in Israel.

The Israelis believed that virtually all Beta Israel had been evacuated from Ethiopia until two groups—the Quarans and the Falash Mura (or Falas Mora)—began to assert their rights to emigrate. While the Quarans were quite easily recognized as Jewish and subsequent plans were made to relocate them, the case of the Falash Mura has created much controversy and largely remains unresolved.

Falash Mura

Falash Mura claim to be descendants of Ethiopian Jews who converted either willingly or under pressure to Christianity. They became a major source of controversy during airlifts of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, as many Israelis and Ethiopian Jews questioned the legitimacy of their Jewish heritage, claiming that they didn't practice Judaism. Some of them have been accused of practicing Christianity even after their relocation to Israel. Other arguments allege that they are Christians or non-Jews who are merely seeking a channel of escape from poverty and economic instability, and that they had never identified themselves with Judaism until the Operation Solomon airlift. Prior to that time, they were virtually unknown. While it has been impossible to ascertain the number of Falash Mura that are authentic Jews or converts to Judaism, and the number that are simply looking for a better life in Israel, the Israeli Government has successfully facilitated the relocation of thousands to Israel.

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