INDIGENOUS CATEGORIES AND THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS IN ETHIOPIA: THE CASE OF THE BETA ISRAEL (FALASHA)

BY

STEVEN KAPLAN
(The Hebrew University, Jerusalem)

Scholars of African traditional religions have, for many years, been aware of the problems inherent in the use of Western analytical and phenomenological categories for the study of local religious beliefs and symbols. Any attempt to describe and understand the rituals and conceptual system of one people in terms of those of another involves the scholar in a process of translation of considerable complexity. While most have seen little alternative to the use of Western classificatory frameworks in their description of African religions, some have argued that an irreparable distortion of the African reality has often resulted. This second group of scholars, in tones sometimes acid, sometimes measured, have raised serious doubts as to the applicability of concepts derived primarily from a Western Christian tradition for the analysis of African beliefs and practices. On the whole, such scholars have confined their comments to the study of African traditional religions. Considerably less attention has been given to the problem of utilizing foreign terms and methods of taxonomy for the study of world religions such as Christianity and Islam in Africa. In these cases, the (generally unspoken) assumption, appears to be that the study of such universal faiths demands or at least permits the use of externally derived categories. The complexity of the translation process is presumed, it would appear, to be considerably diminished.

In this article I shall attempt to demonstrate that, at least in some cases, the study of world religions in Africa poses a challenge to the scholar quite similar to that encountered in the analysis of traditional systems. In particular, I shall focus upon a number of key terms and categories used in the study of the Beta Israel (Falasha),
commonly referred to as 'Ethiopian Jews'. As I shall demonstrate below the scholarly study of this group has been seriously hindered by the assumption that terms, categories and historical patterns used in the analysis of Christianity and Judaism outside Ethiopia can be easily applied to their case. In the first section of this article I shall briefly trace the origins of the Beta Israel in order to establish that their history is not simply a small scale recapitulation of that of other Jewish groups. In the second section I shall consider the problems posed by using Judaism and Christianity as categories in opposition to each other for an understanding of the religious milieu of traditional Ethiopia. With this material as background, I shall then demonstrate that the most basic of terms including 'Falasha', and 'Jews' have been repeatedly misrepresented by writers who have attempted to equate them with both external concepts and with each other.

The Origins of the Beta Israel

Until quite recently, virtually all attempts to explain the origins of the Beta Israel have had a number of characteristics in common. Firstly, they have been essentially diffusionist in character. In other words, the presence in Ethiopia of a seemingly recognizable Jewish ethnic group has been explained primarily as the result of contact with members of one or another ancient Jewish community. The Beta Israel, it has been claimed, are the descendants either directly or indirectly of Jews from Solomonic Israel, the lost tribe of Dan, a Jewish military colony in upper Egypt, or missionaries from Yemen. Secondly (and here the voices of the scholars prior to the 1970s would appear to have been even closer to unanimity), the history of Judaism and Christianity in Ethiopia has been portrayed as the recapitulation in miniature of the history of these two faiths in the world at large: a small early Jewish population is said to have been superseded by a later Christian community with only a tiny remnant of Jews surviving. The Beta Israel, it has been claimed, are essentially a fossilized survival from pre-Christian Aksum. In fact, as recent research has clearly demonstrated, the true story of the two faiths in Ethiopia is considerably different and far more complex. Indeed, it bears little resemblance to that of the two religions elsewhere in the world.

While there is clear evidence of Jewish influences on Ethiopian