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Jewish–Christian Interaction in Ethiopia as Reflected in Sacred Geography: Expressing Affinity with Jerusalem and the Holy Land and Comemorating the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic Wars

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Abstract: Affinity with the Holy Land, and especially with Jerusalem, is a common theme in the sacred geography of Abrahamic religions, expressed in prayer houses and holy sites. This theme was especially prominent in Solomonic Ethiopia, both among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and among the Betä Ǝsraʾel (Ethiopian Jews). This article will examine expressions of affinity with Jerusalem and the Holy Land in Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites and religious architecture, and shed light on the interreligious discourse related to such expressions, as well as other forms of interreligious discourse expressed by these two communities in sacred geography. This will demonstrate that in Solomonic Ethiopia, affinity with the Holy Land was a core element in expressing an Israelite identity. Both the Betä Ǝsraʾel and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians saw themselves as the biological and spiritual heirs of the biblical Israelites, and this concept played a key role in shaping their sacred geography to allude to biblical sites and events. This will also demonstrate that, building upon a vocabulary with common features, the sacred geography and religious architecture of each community was a means to express its unique identity. As such, it provides insight regarding differences in religious concepts.

Keywords: Betä Ǝsraʾel (Beta Israel; Ethiopian Jews); Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity; Jewish–Christian relations; sacred geography; synagogues; churches; holy sites; religious architecture; Jerusalem; Jerusalem Temple

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1. Introduction: Sacred Geography and Religious Architecture as a Realm of Interreligious Discourse in Ethiopia

The concepts of Israelite heritage and affinity with the Holy Land, and especially with Jerusalem, have played a role of paramount importance in identity discourse, sacred geography, and religious architecture in Solomonic Ethiopia, most notably among the Ethiopian Orthodox[1] and the Betä Ǝsraʾel.[2] While the identity discourse of these two religious groups, as well as Ethiopian Orthodox sacred geography and religious architecture, have received considerable scholarly attention,[3] Betä Ǝsraʾel sacred geography and religious architecture have been the subject of very little research.[4] Subsequently, Betä Ǝsraʾel manifestations of and perspectives on themes expressed in Ethiopian sacred geography and religious architecture more broadly have not yet been examined in detail.[5]

This study will examine the interreligious discourse embodied in the holy sites of these two communities, with a focus on Betä Ǝsraʾel sites (due to the relative lack of research on these sites) and on the theme of affinity with the Holy Land, and especially with Jerusalem. It will also briefly refer to a second theme exemplifying interreligious discourse—the commemoration of aspects of the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars (fifteenth–seventeenth centuries) in religious sites. It will argue that while both communities built upon a common vocabulary of concepts, architecture, and sacred geography, these communities utilized this vocabulary to express a unique identity and define themselves vis-à-vis the other.

2. Israelite Heritage in Solomonic Ethiopia

Concepts associated with Judaism, Christianity, and Jewish–Christian relations in Solomonic Ethiopia are significantly different from their Western and Middle Eastern counterparts. A concept which plays a key role in Jewish–Christian dynamics in Ethiopia is that of Israelite heritage and ancestry: According to a tradition shared by the Ethiopian Orthodox and the Betä Ǝsraʾel, the Israelite religion was established in Ethiopia in the days of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. In its Ethiopian Orthodox form, this tradition is expressed in a literary work known as the *KəbräNägäśt* (Glory of Kings), considered the national epic of Christian, Solomonic Ethiopia, and compiled in the fourteenth century based on earlier material.[6]

According to the *Kəbrä Nägäśt* narrative, the Queen of Sheba was the queen of Ethiopia. She conceived during her visit to King Solomon, and upon her return bore him his firstborn son. This son, referred to in the *Kəbrä Nägäśt* as BäynäLəḥkəm[7] and known in the Ethiopian tradition as Mənilək, later visited his father in Jerusalem, where Solomon offered to name him his successor to the throne. BäynäLəḥkəm preferred to return to Ethiopia, and thus, saddened by his son's departure, Solomon sent with him the firstborn of his advisors and ministers, and of the elders of the kingdom, including Azaryas, the son of the High Priest.

Before their departure, Azaryas was instructed by an angel of God to remove the Ark of the Covenant from the Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple, and secretly take it with him on the journey to Ethiopia. The removal of the Ark to Ethiopia is depicted in the *Kəbrä Nägäśt* as a physical manifestation of the transfer of God's favor from the Kingdom of Israel to the Kingdom of Ethiopia, which became, by virtue of the Israelite faith, of its rulers' descent from the House of David, and of the Israelites accompanying BäynäLəḥkəm, a second Israel, and its people—Israelites.

Davidic descent was thus considered a main source of legitimacy for the Solomonic dynasty, which rose to power in 1270 and reigned until its last monarch, Haile Selassie (Ḥaylä Śəllase) I, was overthrown in 1974 (Kaplan 2011). Linked to this concept, and to the concept of the Israelite ancestry of the Ethiopian People, in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, is the concept of Ethiopia as a second Promised Land. This latter concept was expressed in medieval and modern times through localities, holy sites and prayer houses which derived their names from or were considered affiliated with sites (mainly holy sites) in biblical Israel and its surroundings.

3. The Holy Land and Second Jerusalems in Ethiopia

The clearest manifestations of affinity with the Holy Land in Ethiopian Orthodox sacred geography are two towns, both considered a second Jerusalem. The first is Aksum, in Late Antiquity—the capital of the Kingdom of Aksum, the predecessor of medieval, Christian Ethiopia.[8] Though it ceased to serve as the capital of Christian Ethiopia with gradual decline of this kingdom, it retained its status as Christian Ethiopia's most prestigious religious center, and, in Solomonic times, served as a place where Solomonic monarchs were crowned (Munro-Hay 2005, pp. 89–95). Its status as a second Jerusalem is linked to it being considered, in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, the place where the Davidic monarchy was established in Ethiopia, and the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant (Heldman 1992), as exemplified by the *Kəbrä Nägäśt*:

> And Azaryas said: 'bring forth the Jubilee, and we shall go to Zion [the Ark of the Covenant] and there we shall renew the reign of our lord David.' And he took a horn full of royal anointment oil, and anointed him [. . .] And so the reign of David, son of Solomon, king of Israel was renewed, in the city of government, on Mount Makəda,[9] in the House of Zion.[10]

The main church in Aksum, built on the ruins of the Aksumite cathedral of Late Antiquity,[11] is dedicated to Maryam Ṣəyon (Mary of Zion).[12] A chapel in its compound is considered the place where the Ark of the Covenant is kept to this day (Figure 1).[13]

Figure 1. The Chapel of the Ark of the Covenant, Aksum. In the background, on the left, the Church of Maryam Ṣəyon, built on the podium of the former Aksumite Cathedral.

A second Ethiopian Orthodox religious center considered a second Jerusalem is the ecclesiastical center of Roḥa, commonly known as Lalibäla (Figures 2 and 3), the name of the late twelfth/early thirteenth century monarch who, according to Ethiopian tradition, established its churches. Lalibäla was one of the monarchs of the Zag^{w}e dynasty, a dynasty whose reign ended with the rise of the Solomonic Dynasty in 1270.[14] According to tradition, King Lalibäla was taken to the heavens, where he was instructed by God to construct the churches from one rock, and where their forms were revealed to him. This tradition also relates that the construction was carried out with the help of angels (Perruchon 1892, pp. 121–27).

The equation of the ecclesiastical complex with Jerusalem is apparent in the dedications and names of several churches and features within it, most notably the stream crossing the compound, bearing the name of Yordanos (Jordan), the hill of Däbrä Zäyt (Mt. of Olives), the churches of Golgota (Golgotha) and Däbrä Sina (Mt. Sinai), and a feature known as the Tomb of Adam (Heldman 1992, pp. 230–31; Finneran 2007, pp. 217–26; Phillipson 2012, pp. 237–38). An additional church in Lalibäla, Mädḫane ʿAläm (Savior of the World), seems to be modeled after the Aksumite cathedral and hence, may have been comparable in symbolism (Buxton and Matthews 1971–1972). The church of Gännätä Maryam (Paradise of Mary), east of Lalibäla, which was founded during the reign of the first Solomonic monarch, Yəkunno Amlak (1270–1285), was modeled after the two former churches, thus continuing the tradition of expressing affinity with the Aksumite past (Heldman 2005).

This equation, of Lalibäla with Jerusalem, is also alluded to in a passage from an abbreviated version of the Gädlä Lalibäla (Acts of Lalibäla), known as the Zena Lalibäla (Account of Lalibäla):

> I blessed this place and from now onwards let it be a holy place as Mount Tabor, the place of my transfiguration, as Golgotha, the place of my crucifixion, and as Jerusalem the land of my mother [. . .] If a man abides in it, or undertakes pilgrimage to it, it is as if he went to my Sepulcher in Jerusalem.[15]

It should be noted that the existence, in Ethiopia, of two towns considered second Jerusalems, did not diminish the importance of Jerusalem itself as a holy city or pilgrimage destination. In medieval and modern times, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church maintained a monastic presence in Jerusalem, and Ethiopian Orthodox pilgrims visited the

cityn(Kelly 2020; Pedersen 2007). A few attestations, in written accounts, of Betä Ǝsraʾel visiting Jerusalem in Early Modern and modern times are also known (see, for example, Waldman 1989, pp. 54–56, 125–28).

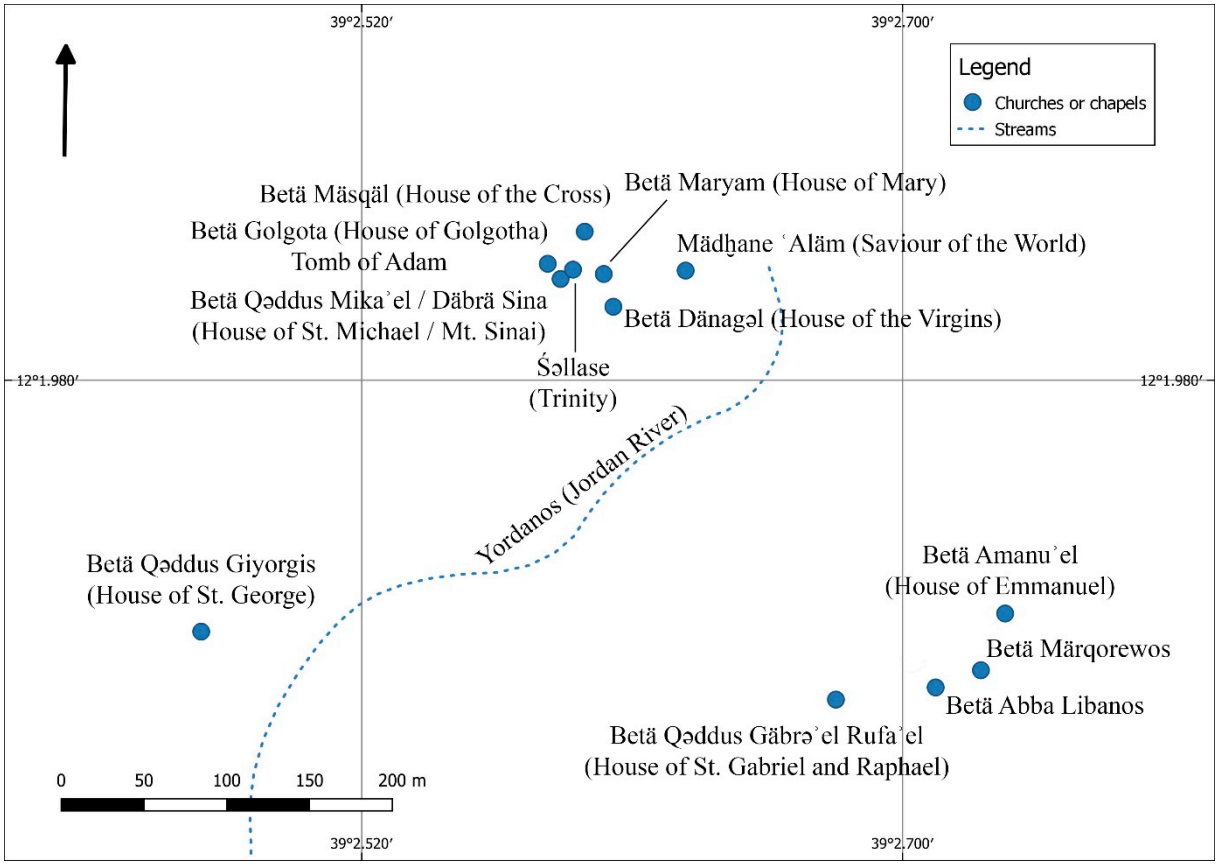

Figure 2. The church compound at Lalibäla.

Not only Jerusalem, but also many other localities in the sacred geography of the Holy Land and its surroundings were commemorated in Solomonic Ethiopia (Figure 4). Examples include the towns of Däbrä Tabor (Mt. Tabor),[16] Däbrä Sina (Mt. Sinai)[17], and Däbrä Zäyt (Mt. of Olives),[18] a locality by the name of Nazret (Nazareth),[19] the monastery of Däbrä Ṣəyon (Mt. Zion),[20] the monastery of Däbrä Gälila (Mt. Galilee),[21] two monasteries by the name of Däbrä Sina[22], and two islands on Lake Zʷay—Däbrä Sina[23] and Gälila (Galilee).[24] During the second half of the twentieth century, the town of Adama, to the southeast of Däbrä Zäyt, also bore the name Nazret. These examples are physical manifestations of the view of Ethiopia as a second Zion, and the will to express this affinity not only as an abstract concept, but as a geographical reality, linked with specific localities.

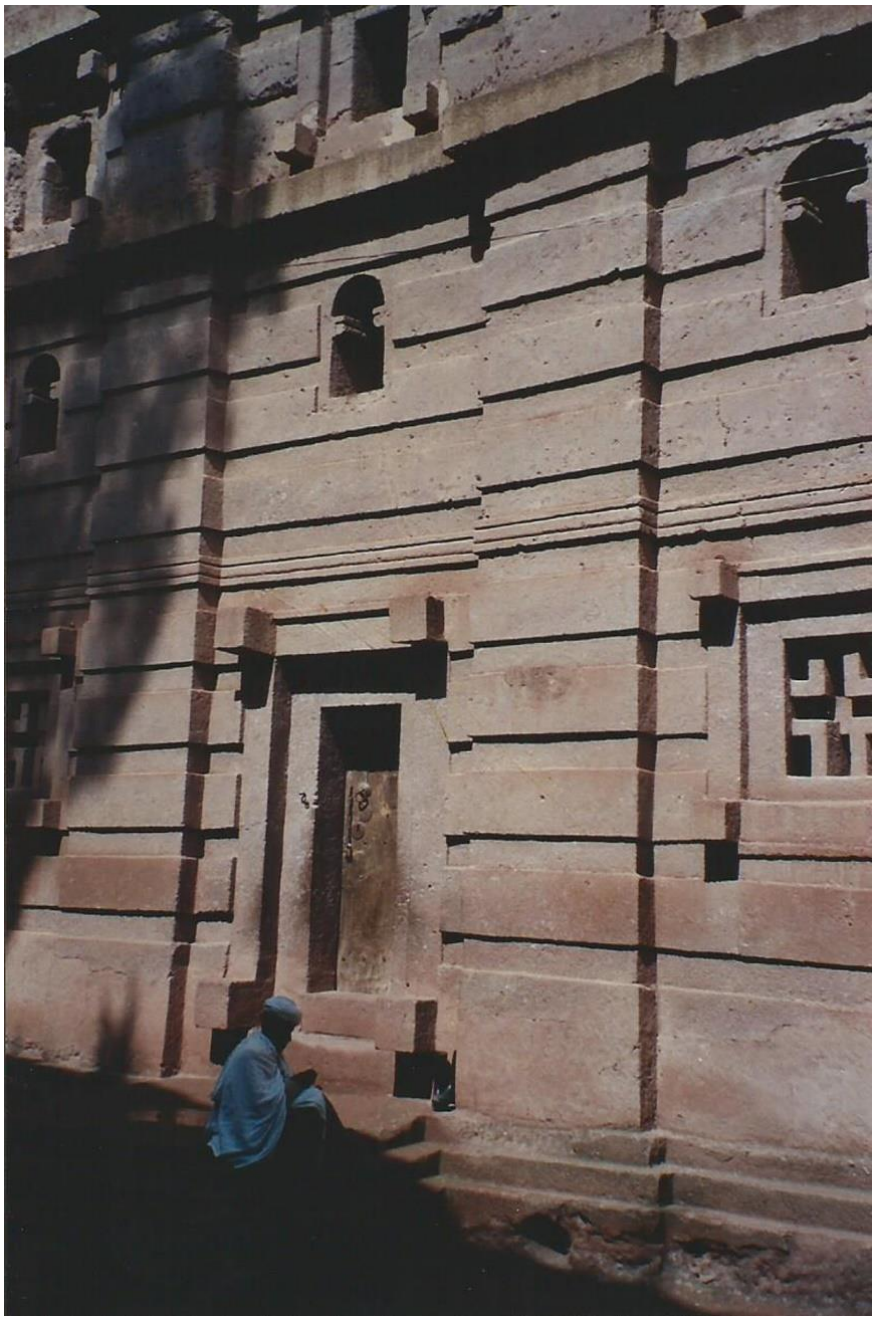

Figure 3. Betä Amanuʾel (House of Emmanuel) Church, Lalibäla.

It is against this backdrop that a remarkable comment made by the author of the chronicle of the Solomonic monarch Śärṣä Dəngəl (1563–1597) can be best understood: In a description of one of this monarch's campaigns against the autonomous Betä Ǝsraʾel of the Səmen Mountains,[25] it is written:

> Here we shall write the account of the insolence of Rädaʾi [the Betä Ǝsraʾel leader] [. . .] He called the mountains of his towns by the names of the mountains of Israel. One he called Mount Sinai and a second Mount Tabor and there are others, the names of which we have not mentioned. How evil is the pride of that Jew who likened his mountains to the mountains of the Land of Israel, on which God descended and revealed upon them the mysteries of his kingdom.[26]

What is striking about this account is not only that the Betä Ǝsraʾel leader chose to associate his domain with biblical Israel, but also that this was viewed as an affront by the

Solomonic chronicler. This demonstrates the symbolic role of expressing affinity with the Holy Land—it is not merely a matter of commemorating holy, biblical sites. Rather, it is a statement of Israelite identity, an expression of being the true successor of the biblical Israelites. Steven Kaplan (1992, p. 87) suggests that this act was viewed both as asserting Räda'i's sovereignty over the Səmen, and as a challenge to Śärṣä Dəngəl's claim to be a successor of the biblical King Solomon.

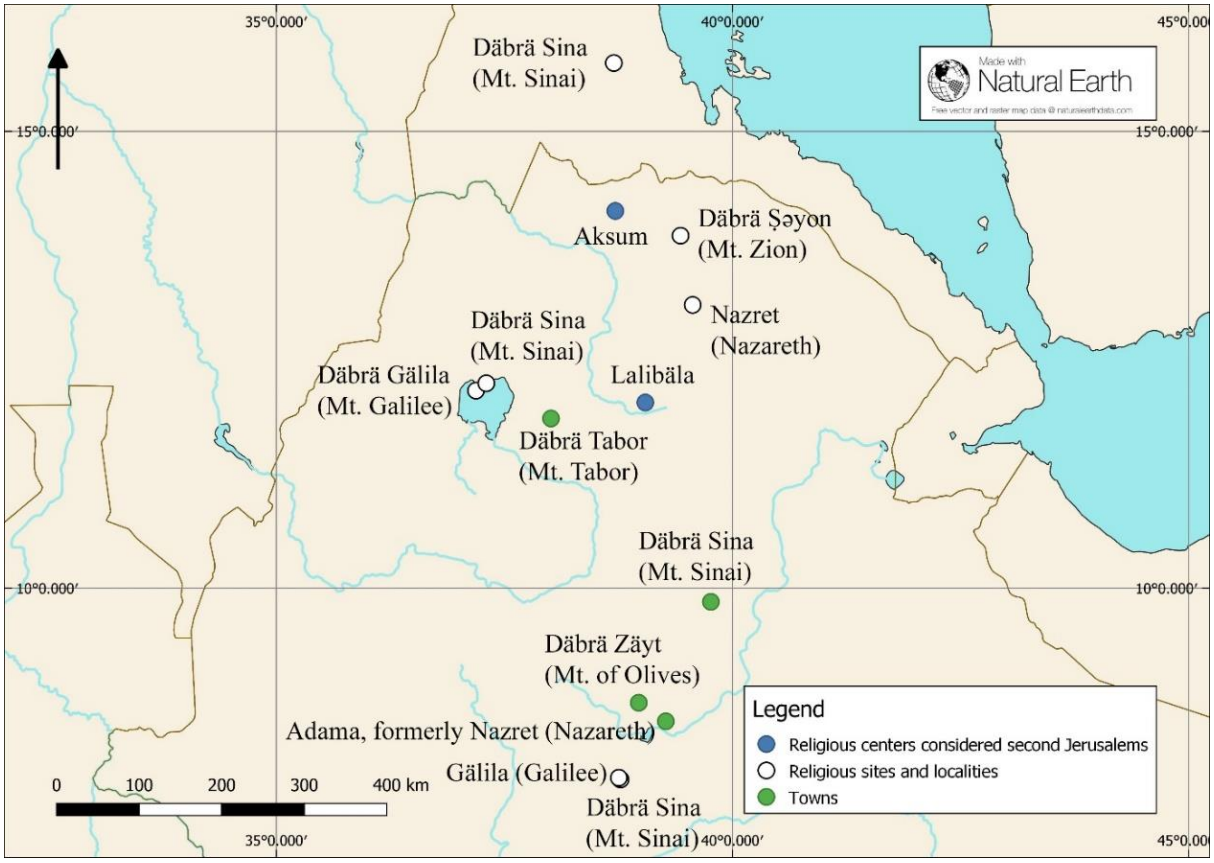

Figure 4. Localities in Ethiopia and Eritrea named after or considered affiliated with localities in the Holy Land and its surroundings.

Tantalizing as it may be, this description is the only one known to the present author mentioning localities in Ethiopia named after sites in the Holy Land by a member of the Betä Ǝsra'el community, or, for that matter, Betä Ǝsra'el sites bearing such names. Thus, it seems to be an isolated incident, which did not set a long-term precedent. The Betä Ǝsra'el recognized several sites as holy sites (Figure 5), but none of these bore names affiliated with biblical Israel. Nevertheless, the affinity of specific Betä Ǝsra'el holy sites with Jerusalem, and specifically, with the Jerusalem Temple, is expressed in several traditions and concepts associated with them. It is to this topic that we turn to next.

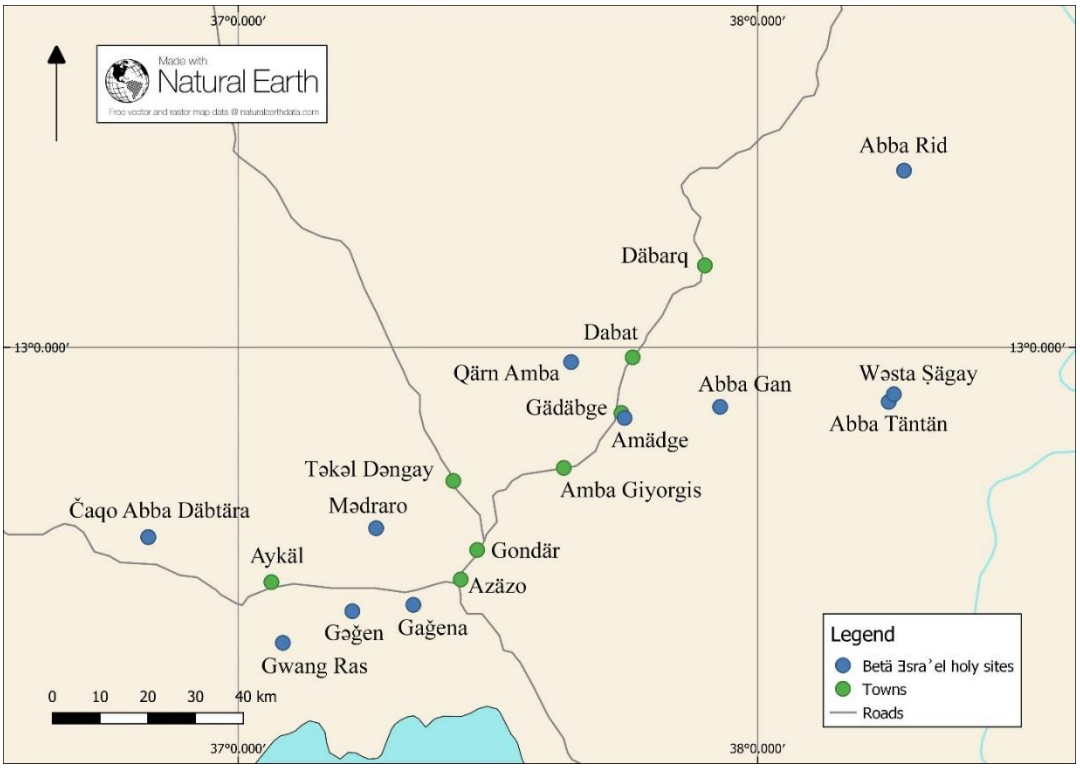

Figure 5. Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites visited or pinpointed with accuracy in the course of the survey of the dwelling places of the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč* (Kribus 2022).

4. Affinity with Jerusalem in Betä Ǝsraʾel Holy Sites

The absence of a Betä Ǝsraʾel wide-scale effort, comparable to the Ethiopian Orthodox one, to recreate the Holy Land in Ethiopia, may be due to a difference in theological concepts: In Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, divine favor is believed to have been transferred from the biblical Israelites to the Ethiopian People, as exemplified by the Kəbrä Nägäśt narrative. By extension, Ethiopia assumed, to some extent, the role of the biblical Promised Land. While some Betä Ǝsraʾel traditions regarding their distant past are significantly in dialogue with the Kəbrä Nägäśt narrative (Abbink 1990, pp. 412–20), they differ in terms of their theological message: rather than claiming a transfer of God's favor (a concept that entails removal of favor from the "old" Israel), the Betä Ǝsraʾel traditions emphasize continuity—that they are those who remained true to the Israelite religion of their ancestors. The absence of a transfer of God's favor from Israel to Ethiopia entails an absence of a definition of Ethiopia as the new Holy Land—and hence, the absence of motivation to recreate the Holy Land in its sacred geography.

It should be noted, however, that the Betä Ǝsraʾel traditions in dialogue with the Kəbrä Nägäśt narrative that have been documented are mainly brief outlines. In recent decades, the need of the community to defend its legitimacy vis-à-vis arguments put forth by Christian missionaries, Rabbinical (Jewish Orthodox) emissaries, and officials of the State of Israel have had an impact on the discourse related to its oral traditions.[27] Hence, there is no certainty that the full extent of theological motifs originally present in the community's traditions regarding its distant past is, at present, known.

Jerusalem, as a concept embodying both the Holy City and the Holy Land, is a central theme in Betä Ǝsraʾel religious life and culture and an object of longing for the community.[28] It is therefore not surprising that, despite the lack of Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites officially commemorating localities in the Holy Land, affinity with the Holy City is either explicitly or subtly expressed in concepts and accounts related to many of these holy sites. Following a brief overview of the nature of Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites, a few examples will be provided.

4.1. Betä Ǝsraʾel Holy Sites

Shoshana Ben-Dor (1985a, p. 39), in her study of Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites, recalls two reasons for places to have been considered holy by the Betä Ǝsraʾel: That they were associated with one of the community's holy men, or that they were the scene of acts of bravery committed by the community. In a series of interviews conducted with members of the community, including several members of the religious leadership, by the present author together with Wovite Worku Mengisto (Wovite Worku Mengisto and Kribus forthcoming), it was repeatedly stated that the community's holy places are those where miraculous events took place.

The community's holy places served as sites of pilgrimage. Purity was a central aspects in these pilgrimages: Gentiles were not allowed access to these sites. Members of the community could only enter in a state of purity—women during their menses, for instance, were prohibited from entering. It was believed that wild animals guarded the holy sites and would attack those who had transgressed the purity laws observed in them.

When at the sites, members of the community would spend several days praying and purifying themselves through immersion in water and consuming only uncooked chickpeas soaked in water. It was believed that when one reached a sufficient state of purity and spirituality, a message from the divine could be revealed in one's dreams, and those in need of healing might be healed. Some Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites were the site of sacred springs, which were believed to have medicinal qualities, and pilgrimages often entailed immersion in their water or its application to ailing body parts.

The Betä Ǝsraʾel observed an annual pilgrimage during the *Səgd* holiday—in each given region, a locality (often a mountaintop) was chosen as the site where the holiday would be celebrated. The "*Səgd* Mountain" was not, by definition, a holy site, but in regions where holy sites were located, these holy sites were often the site of *Səgd* celebration.[29]

Since this article deals with Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites, I feel that it is my responsibility to stress here that these sites are of utmost importance to the community, and to relay a request from the community's religious leadership that the community's rules of conduct in these sites by anyone wishing to visit them be observed: Only Jews, and only after purification and prayer, may access the sanctified sections of these sites. From our experience, the sites can easily be viewed from the outside, without violating their sanctity. It should be noted that in the holy sites of other religions, rules of conduct are routinely observed by visitors and scholars alike out of respect. The same respect should be given to the Betä Ǝsraʾel and the rules of conduct required by their religious tradition.

4.2. Səmen Mənaṭa

Səmen Mənaṭa (Figure 6) was, in recent generations, the community's most important religious site, and the last seat of the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč*,[30] who served as the community's supreme religious leadership. Novices studying to become priests would travel to Səmen Mənaṭa to receive their religious instruction and/or their consecration to the priesthood from the *mäloksewočč*. The village of Səmen Mənaṭa itself was not a holy site per se, but in its vicinity were two prestigious holy sites—Wəsta Ṣägay and Abba Täntän. Wəsta Ṣägay is a site of holy springs where, according to tradition, seventy-five members of the community who were under attack by the Solomonic army chose to commit suicide rather than be captured and forced to convert to Christianity (see below). Abba Täntän is traditionally the dwelling place of one of the community's holy men.[31]

Figure 6. The valley of Səmen Mənaṭa, viewed from the west.

Since the village's name is in some cases pronounced Səmen Mənaṭa, and in others—Səmen Mälaṭa (see, for example, Ben-Dor 1985a, pp. 33, 47, 50) (the latter being the pronunciation prevalent among the village's present-day Christian inhabitants),[32] I enquired with a Betä Ǝsraʾel priest, originally from this village, regarding how the name should be pronounced.[33] The priest laughed, and related that Səmen Mənaṭa is the correct name. "Mälaṭa" means "bald" in Amharic, and Səmen Mənaṭa is not a bald (barren) place. On the contrary, it is fertile like Jerusalem.

4.3. Abba Gan (Gäntaba)

The holy site of Abba Gan, also known as Gäntaba, the name of the locality in which it is located, is traditionally the dwelling place of a one of the community's holy men, and named after him (Kribus 2022, pp. 135–42). The apex of the holy site is located on a hilltop (Figure 7), which lay pilgrims would not approach. Rather, they would gather on the spur below and the surrounding slopes. The site is renowned as a place of healing, and one member of the community, who went on pilgrimage there in the hopes of being healed, related: "Abba Gan—they say it is a place only for old and righteous people. This place is like the Temple that was once in Jerusalem".[34]

Figure 7. Abba Gan, view from the west.

4.4. Gʷang Ras

The holy springs of Gʷang Ras were traditionally one of the stations in the journey of *Abba* Ṣəbra, the community's most renowned religious leader and its first *mälokse*, and his disciple Ṣägga Amlak, as they were fleeing from the Solomonic monarch Zärʾa Yaʿəqob (1434–1468).[35] The springs (Figure 8) are located near the source of the Gʷang River, which flows into the Nile (in Sudan, this river is known as the Atbara). The Nile Valley had long served Ethiopians as a pilgrimage route to Jerusalem (Pedersen 2007), and the proximity of the Nile's mouth to the Holy Land was well-known in Ethiopia.

According to a Betä Ǝsraʾel tradition related by Dubalä Wärqu and recorded by *Rabbi* Menachem Waldman (2015, p. 120), the waters of the Gʷang were considered by the community to be flowing towards Jerusalem. A woman prepared a special dish and wanted to send it as an offering to the Holy City. She placed the vessel with the dish in it in the Gʷang River at Gʷang Ras. Eventually, her offering reached Jerusalem.

Figure 8. The springs of G^{w}ang Ras, view from the southeast.

4.5. Č̣aqo Abba Däbtära

The holy site of Č̣aqo Abba Däbtära was traditionally founded by a Betä Ǝsraʾel holy man by the name of *Abba* Däbtära, or, according to different versions of the oral tradition, by the Betä Ǝsraʾel holy man *Šum Abba* Baḥtawi Bäsämay Märḥawi (Ben-Dor 1985a, pp. 45–47; *Qes* Ḥädanä Təkuyä 2011, pp. 5–158; Kribus 2022, pp. 178–84). The site served, in the past, as a central seat of the community's *mäloksewočč*, contained a natural, raised stone platform which served as an altar, and a prayer house built in a natural depression.

Qes Ḥädanä Təkuyä (2011, pp. 53–55), one of the most prestigious Betä Ǝsraʾel priests, with familial links to the Betä Ǝsraʾel leadership in Č̣aqo Abba Däbtära, wrote an extensive description of the site and associated traditions. He relates that its holiness was like that of the Jerusalem Temple, and that when *Šum Abba* Baḥtawi would offer sacrifices there,[36] fire would descend from the heavens and consume them.[37] He adds that when he had grown old, *Abba* Baḥtawi sent his aide to burn incense at the holy site in his stead. *Abba* Baḥtawi warned his aide that when he would do so, the Ministering Angels would be revealed to him, and he must not be frightened. The Ministering Angels were indeed revealed to the aide, who was frightened, and subsequently fell ill and passed away.

A similar account was related to Ben-Dor (1985a, pp. 45–46) by *Qes* Wəbšet Ayṭägäb. According to this account (which also refers to fire descending from the heaven and consuming the sacrifices), in the days of the priest *Abba* Däbtära, an angel walked among the priests as they were offering incense. Only they could see him. Once, a layman disguised himself as a priest and offered incense together with the other priests. He saw the angel and was afflicted. After a week, he passed away.

These accounts allude to several biblical narratives, most of them linked with Jerusalem and the Temple: The fire descending from the heavens and consuming the sacrifices recalls the fire which consumed the sacrifice offered by the prophet Elijah on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18: 30–39). The descriptions of priests offering sacrifices and incense (Exodus 30: 1–10),

while referring to typical elements of Betä Ǝsraʾel liturgy,[38] place and emphasis on those elements which were also central in the liturgy which took place in the Jerusalem Temple. The appearance of angels within the holy site while incense was being offered is comparable to the divine presence in the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kings 8: 10), and the death of people who had transgressed the holy site or acted improperly within it is comparable to the death of Aaron's two sons, when they entered the sanctuary of the Tabernacle in an improper manner (Leviticus 16: 1–16).

As we have seen, allusions to the Holy Land, and specifically to Jerusalem and the Temple, are, on the one hand, not part of the official *raison d'être* of Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites, but on the other hand, they abound on an unofficial, conceptual level. Jerusalem thus serves as the symbol and prototype of sanctity, and as such, it was natural for the sanctity of the community's holy sites to be inspired by it.

The inspiration of Jerusalem and the Temple was not limited, in Ethiopia, to sacred geography. It also had a lasting impact on prayer house architecture and terminology. It is to this theme that we turn to next.

5. The Temple as Inspiration in Prayer Houses

As in the case of holy sites and sacred geography, in our treatment of religious architecture, we will begin with Ethiopian Orthodox churches, and continue to address Betä Ǝsraʾel synagogues. A detailed examination of the architectural and religious symbolism of the latter is provided elsewhere (Kribus forthcoming a). Here, we will briefly examine those aspects which reflect affinity with Jerusalem and the Temple. We will focus, in our discussion, on the concentric, circular prayer house plan which was utilized as a basis in both synagogue and church architecture in the northwestern Ethiopian Highlands.

The concentric, circular prayer house plan comprises a square central sanctuary, oriented according to the four cardinal points, enclosed within a circular structure, which in turn features an entrance in each of the cardinal points.[39] In the ambulatory surrounding the sanctuary are sections for men (in the north), women (in the south), and clergymen. The sanctuary itself is accessed only by priests. The structure is covered with a conical roof.

Ethiopian Orthodox church architecture is considerably more varied than Betä Ǝsraʾel synagogue architecture, and has been subject of considerable documentation and research. During the Aksumite period, Ethiopian churches were based on the basilica plan prevalent in the Mediterranean, while incorporating Aksumite constructional techniques and architectural ornamentation. In the Middle Ages, an array of church plans were developed in the Ethiopian Highlands, but they were all based, to some extent, on concepts derived from the basilica plan. Concentric, circular Ethiopian Orthodox churches (Figure 9) are first attested in the late fifteenth or sixteenth century.[40] They are considered a local innovation and a significant break with pre-existing church architecture.[41]

Conceptually, Ethiopian Orthodox churches (including concentric, circular churches) are divided into three sections: the sanctuary (*mäqdäs*, a term referring to a temple, sanctuary, or holy place), the *qəddəst* (literally "the Holy"), the section outside the entrance to the sanctuary, where various aspects of the liturgy are performed by the priests and the laity receive communion, and the *qəne maḫlet* (*qənə* is a type of poetry recited as part of the liturgy, and *maḫlet*—a type of hymn), beyond the *qəddəst*, where church music is performed and to which the laity has regular access (Ezra Gebremedhin 2007; Habtemichael Kidane 2011). The term *mäqdäs* could also be used to refer to a church.[42]

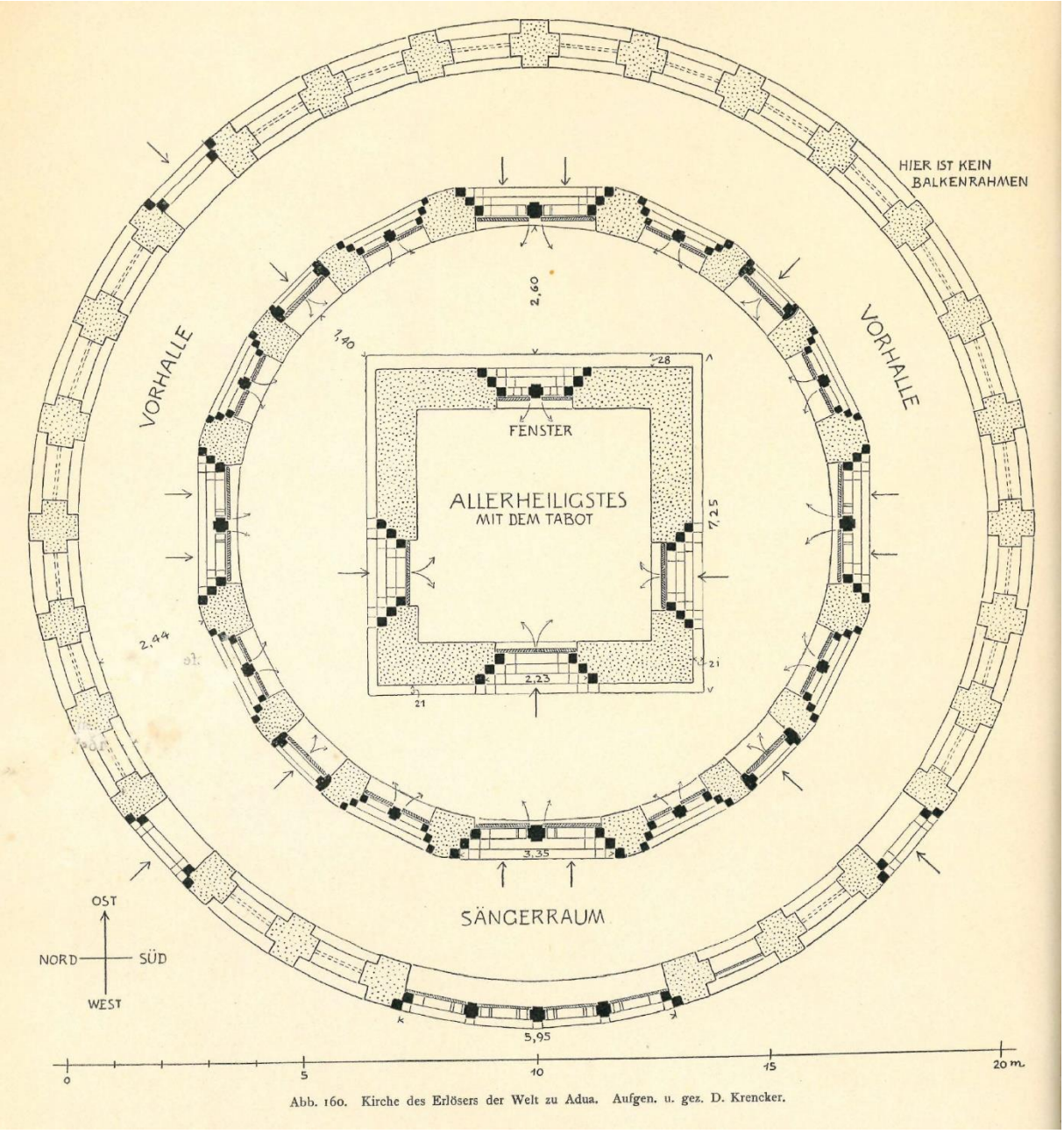

Figure 9. The church of Mädḫane ʿAläm, ʿAdwa (von Lüpke 1913, Figure 160).

This terminology bears a striking resemblance to the terminology associated with the Jerusalem Temple. The Temple, *betä mäqdäs* in Geʿez, *beit ha-miqdaš* in Hebrew (compare with *mäqdäs*), contained a "Holy", in Hebrew—*qodeš* (compare with *qəddəst*), and a "Holy of Holies", in Hebrew—*qodeš ha-qodašim*). This similarity, as well as a threefold division in both the Temple and concentric, circular churches, have led scholars to suggest that this church type was designed to emulate the Jerusalem Temple (Ullendorff 1968, pp. 87–89). A further element seen as affiliated with the Temple is the *tabot* (literally "ark", compare with the Hebrew *teiḇah*), the Ethiopian Orthodox altar slab, which is kept in the *mäqdäs*, and upon which the Eucharist is performed. The *tabot* is considered the most sanctified object in a church. It is sanctified by a bishop, cannot be viewed by laymen and symbolizes both the Tablets of Law and the Ark of the Covenant.

In recent years, it has been argued that both the *tabot* and the concentric, circular church plan were not designed in emulation of the Temple, but rather developed based

on ecclesiastical precedents in Egypt and Nubia, respectively.[43] Tracing the architectural origin of the Ethiopian concentric, circular prayer house is beyond the scope of the present article. We are instead concerned with the symbolism attributed to it. I would argue that the aforementioned terminology expresses a conceptual affinity with the Jerusalem Temple, and this is not surprising, given the concept of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians as Israelites, and the high regard in which the Old Testament is held in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

It should be noted that to an extent, affinity with the Jerusalem Temple is a trait that synagogues and churches throughout the world have in common: In Christian liturgy, the Eucharist, as a (symbolic) sacrifice conducted by the priesthood on an altar, is likened to the sacrifices offered by the priesthood in the Jerusalem Temple (Cooke 1960). In Rabbinical Judaism, there is a concept of the synagogue as "Minor Sanctuary", symbolically acquiring some of the Temple's features and roles (Safrai 1989). I would argue, however, that in Ethiopia, affinity was expressed to a greater extent and more literally than in other regions, as exemplified by Betä Ǝsraʾel synagogues.

Betä Ǝsraʾel synagogues are known as *mäsgid* or *mək^{w}rab*.[44] Their characteristics and chronology are known to a much lesser extent than Ethiopian Orthodox churches, due to lack of research: While a few general descriptions of Betä Ǝsraʾel synagogues appear in the literature (Flad 1869, pp. 42–44; Leslau 1951, pp. xxi–xxiii; Shelemay 1989, pp. 71–78), Betä Ǝsraʾel religious architecture and synagogues were never been studied in detail. Following the twentieth-century immigration of the Betä Ǝsraʾel to Israel, all Betä Ǝsraʾel synagogues were abandoned. A few, most notably the synagogues at Wäläqa and Ambobär, have been preserved as tourist attractions, but in most cases known to the present author, only foundations remain. Our survey of the dwelling places of the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč* was the first study to document and examine the remains of such prayer houses in detail.

The concentric, circular synagogue plan, though not the only plan utilized by the Betä Ǝsraʾel, seems to have been the most widespread prior to the late nineteenth century.[45] Synagogues clearly identifiable as the concentric, circular type were first mentioned in the writings of Protestant missionaries active among the Betä Ǝsraʾel in the 1860s (Flad 1869, pp. 42–44; Stern 1862, p. 188). One of the missionaries, Johann Martin Flad, included the plan of such a synagogue in a book he wrote on the Betä Ǝsraʾel (Figure 10). This plan is the earliest plan of a Betä Ǝsraʾel synagogue produced, and the only one to depict the concentric, circular type.

Both Flad's account and plan and the account written by Leslau (1951) following his research among the Betä Ǝsraʾel in 1947 refer to the terminology used to refer to the different components of this prayer house type: The term *mäqdäs* (sanctuary, temple, holy place) was used to refer to the interior of the structure (rather than to the sanctuary, as in Ethiopian Orthodox churches), and the term *qəddusä qəddusan* or *qəddəstä qəddusan* (literally "Holy of Holies")—to the sanctuary within. While concentric, circular churches, and synagogues are based on the same general plan, two main architectural features set the synagogues apart: a sacrificial altar, located in the structure's courtyard, in Flad's plan to the east—though Leslau (1951, p. xxii), relates that it is located north of the structure, and that the main entrance into the structure and sanctuary are located in the east rather than the west.

In Ethiopian Orthodox churches, the entrance from the west towards the east is based on the ecclesiastical forerunners of this church type—in basilica churches, as well as other types of non-centralized churches prevalent in Ethiopia and elsewhere, the structure is entered in the western end, and the sanctuary located in the eastern end. In the synagogue, the location of the altar east of the structure (if indeed this was its prevalent location) and of the main entrance from east westwards seems to recall the layout of the Jerusalem Temple, which was also entered from the east westwards, with the altar located east of the Temple structure.

Thus, it also seems that in the realm of religious architecture and related terminology, both communities conveyed their Israelite identity by expressing affinity with the Jerusalem Temple. In the Ethiopian Orthodox case, commitment to ecclesiastical precedents dictated features of the prayer house layout, and hence limited the degree of emulation of the Temple.

The Betä Ǝsraʾel, on the other hand, basing themselves conceptually on Old Testament precedents, could express affinity with the Temple to a greater degree.

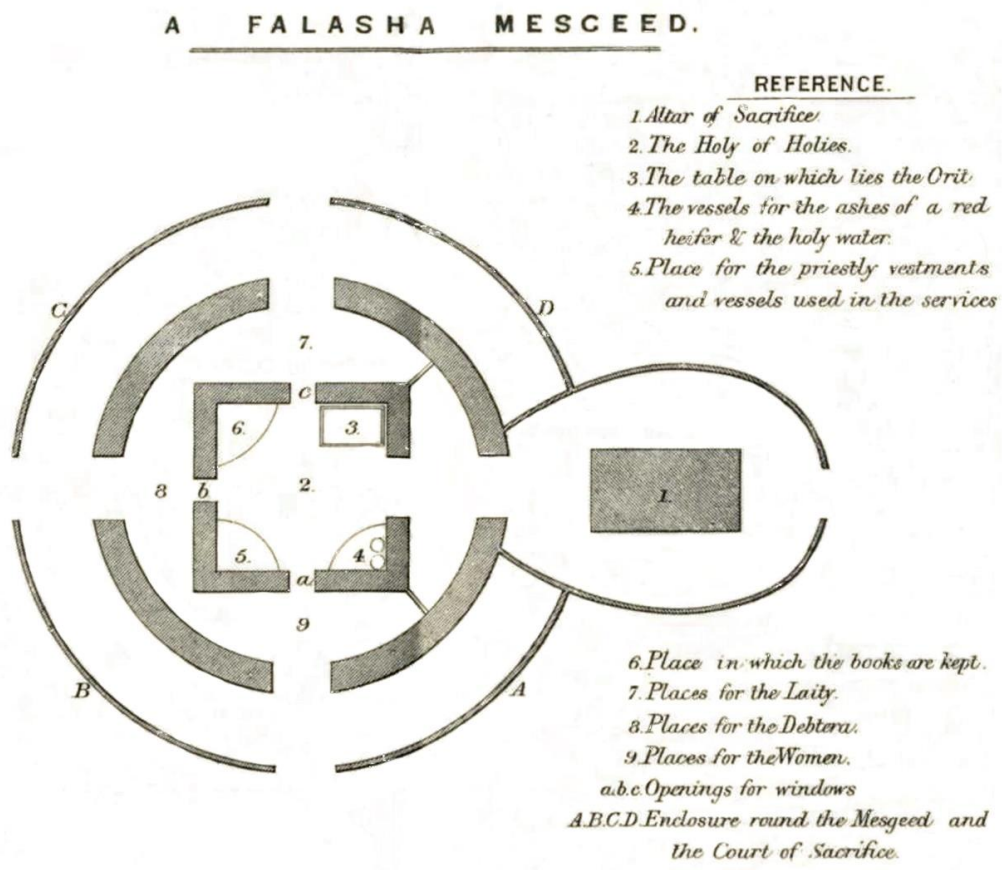

Figure 10. Plan of a Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäsgid* (Flad 1869, Figure 1).

6. Commemoration of the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic Wars in Sacred Geography

Interreligious discourse between the Betä Ǝsraʾel and Ethiopian Orthodox society in sacred geography is not limited to affinity with biblical Israel and the Holy Land. A second, fascinating aspect of this discourse has to do with the commemoration of events relating to the military conflict between the autonomous Betä Ǝsraʾel of the Səmen Mountains and their vicinity and the Christian, Solomonic Kingdom. These conflicts, here termed the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic Wars, are attested in several written sources, including Solomonic royal chronicles, Ethiopian Orthodox hagiographies, accounts written by Portuguese and Jesuits active in Ethiopia and letters written by Jews in Egypt and Jerusalem who came into contact with members of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community.[46]

The commemoration of these wars in later, sacred geography has never before been addressed in research. A detailed examination of this phenomenon is currently being carried out (Kribus forthcoming b). Here, we will provide two examples:

6.1. The Holy Springs of Wəsta Ṣägay

The holy springs of Wəsta Ṣägay are located within the gorge of the Gərzəman River, the river which traverses the valley of Səmen Mənaṭa (Figure 11). The springs are situated upstream of the village. Several versions of the account, in Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition, of the act of heroism which members of the community conducted there, have been documented, and some of the details vary. Here, a brief overview of the main features is provided:[47]

Figure 11. The Ṣəbra synagogue at Səmen Mənaṭa. In the background: the ravine in which the springs of Wəsta Ṣägay are located.

According to most narrations, the events in question took place at the time of the war between the Betä Ǝsraʾel and the Solomonic monarch Yəsḥaq (1414–1429/30).[48] Aṣe (King) Yəsḥaq ordered a forced conversion of the Betä Ǝsraʾel to Christianity; and declared that they would have to demonstrate their conversion by eating the meat of cats and dogs (something prohibited by the Betä Ǝsraʾel religious tradition); otherwise they would be killed. Many of the Betä Ǝsraʾel fled to the wilderness so as not to be forced to convert. Two groups of seventy-five people gathered on the mountaintops above the Gərzəman River, one on either side. It was decided that if one group were to see the Solomonic army approaching; it would warn the other on the opposite peak.

The Solomonic army arrived and charged towards one of the groups. The other group cried out a warning, but it was too late. The Betä Ǝsraʾel on the peak that the army was charging towards could not escape. They decided to die rather than transgress their religion, and gathered in a large crate which hung by a rope above the cliff face, cut the cord, and fell to their deaths. One woman, who was pregnant, landed on a rock shelf in the cliff face and survived. While she was there, she gave birth to a son. According to different versions, she named him Ṭägay or Ṣägay (or his father's name was Ṣägay), hence the name of the holy site.[49]

Afterwards, the members of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community on the opposite peak climbed down into the valley to search for those who had fallen. They discovered the bodies of the deceased, counted, and marked them, and found and rescued the woman and her son. The bodies of the deceased later disappeared, and springs flowed in their stead. These springs were believed to have medicinal qualities, and Betä Ǝsraʾel pilgrims to the site would immerse themselves in the water or apply it to ailing body parts.

The account of the act of heroism at Wəsta Ṣägay serves, among the Betä Ǝsraʾel, as a symbol for the community's bravery and devotion to its religion. In some accounts, a connection is made between the sanctification of Wəsta Ṣägay due to this act, and the

location, later, of the religious center there, at Səmen Mənaṭa. One example appears in the journal of the Israeli doctor Dan Har'el, who visited Səmen Mənaṭa in 1963, and met with the last *mälokse* living there—*Abba* Robel (Robel is the Amharic version of the name Reuben). Har'el (1963) writes: "Reuben [*Abba* Robel] tells us about Gideon [Gedewon, the regnal name of Betä Ǝsraʾel monarchs]. He says that there is a reason why they [the Betä Ǝsraʾel] live in this place [Səmen Mənaṭa]. I ask why. He answers that across from it is a place where Gideon's warriors threw themselves off the rocks [cliff] to their deaths. The rocks in this place are still red with their blood".

Wəsta Ṣägay is but one of several sites which the Betä Ǝsraʾel oral tradition associates with acts of bravery in the context of the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars. A second site, also in the vicinity of Səmen Mənaṭa, is the Spring of Abisäw; in this place, according to Betä Ǝsraʾel tradition, a Betä Ǝsraʾel leader by the name of Abisäw was captured by the Solomonic army, and told that if he did not convert to Christianity, he would be killed. When he refused, he was executed, and where his blood was spilled, a spring began to flow (Mengisto and Kribus forthcoming).

6.2. The Church of Yəsḥaq Däbr

An example of Solomonic commemoration of the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars is the construction of churches in areas previously governed by the Betä Ǝsraʾel, following successful Solomonic campaigns against them. The most renowned example of this is the church of Yəsḥaq Däbr in the region of Wägära. Two brief accounts of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign against the Betä Ǝsraʾel appear in compilations dedicated to the history of Ethiopian kings, and subsequently known under the collective name Tarikä Nägäśt (History of Kings).[50] According to one account, following the campaign, "the king [*Aṣe* Yəsḥaq] built many churches in the land of Dänbəya and Wägära [which had previously been governed by a Betä Ǝsraʾel leader]".[51] The second account relates that "[following the campaign] many churches were built in the land of Dämbəya and Wägära. In Kossoge, there is the one called Yəsḥaq Däbr".[52] James Bruce, the famous Scottish traveler who traveled to Ethiopia in the years 1769–1771 and wrote extensively about the country's history, based on texts and traditions he encountered, mentions *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign. Bruce (1790, vol. 2, pp. 65–66) adds: "The king, coming upon the army of the Falasha [Betä Ǝsraʾel] in Woggora [Wägära], entirely defeated them at Kossogué, and, in memory thereof, built a church on the place, and called it Debra Isaac, which remains there to this day".

It is fascinating to note that an account of *Aṣe* Yəsḥaq's campaign written by a member of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community, the high priest of the Betä Ǝsraʾel in the region of Təgray, *Abba* Yəsḥaq Iyasu, also refers to Yəsḥaq Däbr in association with this war: "The emperor Yəsḥaq took control of the places where King Gideon [the Betä Ǝsraʾel king] had ruled, and from there began to spread Christianity, up to the place which is called Yəsḥaq Däbr" (Waldman 2018, p. 289). This probably indicates that the role of this church in commemorating Solomonic victory was known to the Betä Ǝsraʾel, and constitutes a reference to this role.

We can thus speak of a dialogue of sorts, made manifest in the sacred geography of Səmen and Wägära, with the Betä Ǝsraʾel expressing their bravery and religious devotion, and Christian, Solomonic society expressing its victory and dominant status in the region.

7. Conclusions

In Ethiopia, affinity with Jerusalem and the Holy Land in sacred geography, toponyms, and religious architecture was a means of expressing Israelite identity and affinity with the biblical past. Past research has examined such expressions solely within the confines of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. As demonstrated here, expressing affinity with Jerusalem and the Holy Land was no less central to the Betä Ǝsraʾel. While both communities utilized elements of a shared vocabulary, the theological and conceptual differences between them impacted the way each community expressed its affinity.

Numerous Ethiopian Orthodox localities and religious sites were named after localities in the Holy Land and its vicinity, a phenomenon linked with the concept of Ethiopia as a new Chosen Land. The comment in Śärṣä Dəngəl's chronicle, expressing anger at the Betä Ǝsraʾel leader Rädaʾi for having given such names to localities in his realm, demonstrates that such names were considered in Solomonic Ethiopia, at least in some cases, a theological and political statement. The Betä Ǝsraʾel, whose theology stressed continuity rather than transference of divine favor, did not seek to re-create a holy land in Ethiopia, as reflected by the lack of present-day localities associated with the community named after biblical sites. However, Jerusalem, as an embodiment of the sacred, was in the consciousness of members of the community when they approached the sacred—in their holy sites, and at least some of these sites were viewed as affiliated with the Holy City.

In the realm of religious architecture, both communities utilized a shared architectural vocabulary, and expressed, in their prayer houses, an affinity with the Jerusalem Temple. In Ethiopian Orthodox churches, this affinity was symbolic and expressed within the confines permitted by ecclesiastical precedents and heritage. Among the Betä Ǝsraʾel, this affinity was expressed more extensively and literally.

Finally, the dialogue between the two communities in the realm of sacred geography and religious sites is demonstrated in the case of commemoration of the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars. The Betä Ǝsraʾel commemorated acts of bravery and religious devotion in associated with these wars in holy sites, while Solomonic authorities, following successful campaigns, expressed their victory and dominance by founding churches in localities previously governed by the Betä Ǝsraʾel. These features and the meanings attributed to them would have been known to the inhabitants of these regions, regardless of their religious affinity, thus making the ideological discourse of each respective community manifest in the landscape.

As this study demonstrates, an understanding of the symbolic aspects, of the meaning attributed to different elements of Ethiopian cultural expression (and indeed, of cultural expression in general) cannot be fully grasped when one studies a given group in isolation, or when one only focuses on the dominant religious group. By examining the interplay of cultural elements between different groups, and how each group utilized them to express its ideology and identity, their meaning in each given group, and their role in interreligious dialogue, can be grasped more fully. The northern Ethiopian Highlands are extremely rich in cultures and religious traditions, past and present, many of which have not been sufficiently documented or researched. It is hoped that future research will address this lacuna and enable a deeper understanding of Ethiopian cultural and religious expression.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved inthe study.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 In this study, the national church of Ethiopia, which at present is commonly referred to as the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church, will be referred to as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

2 The transcription system of the Encyclopedia Aethiopica will be used here for terms in Ethiopic languages: Geʿez, Amharic, and Təgrəññа. For Ethiopian names, the English spelling preferred by the individual in question will be used. In cases where this spelling is not known, the transcription of the name's spelling in Amharic or Təgrəññа will appear.

3 Notable among the works examining Betä Ǝsraʾel identity discourse and its interplay with Ethiopian Orthodox identity discourse are the works of Shelemay (1989); Kaplan (1992); Quirin (1992); Abbink (1990); and Salamon (1999). Scholarship on Ethiopian Orthodox religious architecture and sacred geography is extensive. Key works include the studies of Phillipson (2009); Heldman (1992); Lepage and Mercier (2005); and Fritsch and Gervers (2007).

4 At present, no comprehensive study of Betä Ǝsraʾel prayer house structures exist, though the liturgy conducted within them has been studied extensively (Shelemay 1989; Ziv 2017), and a general overview of such structures appears in a few studies (Flad 1869, pp. 42–44; Leslau 1951, pp. xxi–xxiii; Shelemay 1989, pp. 71–78). As part of the present author's research on Betä Ǝsraʾel monastic material culture (a central element of which was an archaeological survey in Ethiopia), a preliminary typology of Betä Ǝsraʾel prayer houses was defined, and the remains of several prayer houses were surveyed (Kribus 2022).Prior to the present author's research, only two articles examining Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites in detail had been published: Ben-Dor's (1985a) study of Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites, and Leslau's (1974) publication of Taamrat Emmanuel's notes on Betä Ǝsraʾel monastic holy men and holy places, both primarily based on interviews with members of the Betä Ǝsraʾel community. The survey of the dwelling places of the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč* (monastic high priests) was the first to pinpoint the location of Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites with precision and document their remains in situ. Four Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites were visited in its course, and five additional holy sites viewed from a distance.The archaeological survey of the dwelling places of the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč* was led by the present author, together with Sophia Dege-Müller and Verena Krebs, and carried out under the auspices of the ERC project "Jews and Christians in the East: Strategies of Interaction between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean" (JewsEast) at the Center for Religious Studies of the Ruhr University, Bochum, and the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

5 For a study on the interreligious dialogue embodied in Betä Ǝsraʾel, Ethiopian Orthodox, and Kəmant sites dedicated to a holy man by the name of Yared in the Səmen Mountains, see Dege-Müller and Kribus (2021).The present author has recently submitted an article comparing general features of Betä Ǝsraʾel and Ethiopian Orthodox prayer house architecture and concepts associated with these features (Kribus forthcoming a). This article, while dealing with the concept of the prayer house's affiliation with the Jerusalem Temple (a concept discussed in the present article as well), does not examine the sacred geography of the two communities and the affiliation between their holy sites, Jerusalem and the Holy Land—issues that are at the heart of the present article.

6 See HaCohen (2009) and Marrassini (2007). For an examination of the Betä Ǝsraʾel versions of this tradition and the ways in which they are in dialogue with the Ethiopian Orthodox version, see Abbink (1990).

7 This is a rendering of the Arabic "Ibn al-Ḥakīm," "son of the wise man" (Fiaccadori 2007).

8 The Kingdom of Aksum emerged circa the first century BCE/first century CE and gradually expanded to encompass the present-day region of Təgray, the highlands of Eritrea, and the adjacent Red Sea coast. It was involved in the international Red Sea trade and extended its influence into the Nile Valley and South Arabia. In the fourth century, the king and elite converted to Christianity. By the sixth century, Christianity had become established as the dominant religion in the kingdom. The kingdom's decline was a gradual process, which took place during the seventh/eighth century CE (Munro-Hay 1991; Phillipson 2012).

9 The hill towering above the town of Aksum to the west is known today as Betä Giyorgis (House of St. George), named after a church located upon it. Local tradition identifies it as Däbrä Makəda, the Mountain of the Queen of Sheba, though the chronology of this tradition is unknown. This raises the question of whether this is the locality referred to in this passage of the *Kəbrä Nägäśt*.

10 *Kəbrä Nägäśt* 92, see HaCohen (2009, p. 223).

11 The main church in the town of Aksum was destroyed or damaged, and subsequently rebuilt or renovated, several times in its history. A large church (perhaps the original, Aksumite-period structure) is attested to have existed in the 1520s and was destroyed during the temporary Islamic conquest of the northern Ethiopian highlands (1529–1543). A church was then built on the site by the Solomonic monarch Śärṣä Dəngəl (r. 1563–1597), burnt in a raid in 1611, and then renovated by the Solomonic monarch Fasilädäs (r. 1632–1667). Additional renovations were carried out by the Solomonic monarch Iyasu II (r. 1730–1755). A modern church structure, adjacent to the previous one, as well as the Chapel of Ark of the Covenant, were built during the reign of Haile Selassie I (r. 1930–1974). For an overview of the history of Maryam Ṣəyon Church with references to relevant sources, see Munro-Hay (2003).

12 The precise chronology of this dedication is unknown. It is first attested in its complete form in a later copy of a fifteenth-century document. Based on a *hadith* attributed to the ninth century and mentioning the dedication of an Aksumite church to Mary, and the similarity between the Aksumite Cathedral's plan to that of the Byzantine Church of Holy Zion on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, it has been suggested that both the dedication to Mary and an association with Zion may date back to Aksumite times (Heldman 1992, pp. 227–28; Munro-Hay 2003, 2005, pp. 165–70). It should be noted that an association of Mary with the Ark of the Covenant is a common one in the Christian tradition, since the Ark, as a container for the tablets embodying the Old Testament, is equated with Mary, whose pregnancy with Jesus is understood as her carrying within her the New Testament (see, for example, Munro-Hay 2005, pp. 29–31, 36).

13 For a detailed examination of the motif of the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and its expression in connection with the church of Maryam Ṣəyon, see Munro-Hay (2005).

14 Suggested datings of this dynasty's rise to power range from the tenth to the twelfth century. For an overview on this issue, see Phillipson (2012, p. 228).

15 This section of the text and the translation is provided by Sergew Hable Sellassie (1972, p. 276). The Gädlä Lalibäla (on which the Zena Lalibäla is based) is dated to the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth century (Derat 2007).

16 This town, east of Lake Ṭana, was founded in the first decade of the nineteenth century and served as the capital of the Solomonic emperor Tewodros II (1855–1868) (Pankhurst 2005).

17 This town, in the province of Šäwa, was founded in 1936, however, the place-name, in the general area, predates its foundation (Omer 2005).

18 This town, south-east of Addis Abäba, was established in the late nineteenth century (Belachew and Gascon 2005).

19 Nazret is the name of a locality featuring an archaeological site in eastern Təgray, in which are the remains of a structure with Aksumite features, used, in later times, as a church (Henze 2007).

20 This monastery, in the Gärʿalta region of Təgray, seems to have been established at the end of the fourteenth century (Lusini 2005a).

21 This monastery, on an island bearing this name in Lake Ṭana, was founded in the fourteenth century (Bosc-Tiessé 2005).

22 The monastery of Däbrä Sina in the Sänḥit region of present-day Eritrea traditionally dates back to Aksumite times and played a role in Ethiopian Orthodox theological discourse in the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries (Lusini 2005b). The monastery of Däbrä Sina on the northern shore of Lake Ṭana, near Gorgora, traditionally dates to the reign of the Solomonic monarch ʿAmdä Ṣəyon (1314–1344). Its present-day church is dated to the seventeenth century (Balicka-Witakowska 2005).

23 This island is home to an Ethiopian Orthodox community which predated the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries that remains to this day (Henze 2005a).

24 This island was inhabited until the 1970s. Its church was traditionally founded in the thirteenth century (Henze 2005b).

25 Following its foundation in 1270, the Solomonic kingdom, originally centered in the northeastern Ethiopian Highlands, gradually expanded into the northwestern Ethiopian Highlands and consolidated its rule there, a process that was occasionally accompanied by military campaigns. Several campaigns against autonomous factions of the Betä Ǝsraʾel took place between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries (Kaplan 1992, pp. 79–96; Quirin 1992, pp. 40–88). The chronical of Śärṣä Dəngəl contains some of the most detailed descriptions of such campaigns.

26 Conti Rossini (1907, p. 99). My translation.

27 Both Christian missionaries and Rabbinical Jewish emissaries attempted to bring about changes in Betä Ǝsraʾel religious practices. One method used was to argue that specific Betä Ǝsraʾel practices were not in accordance with (the missionaries' or emissaries' interpretation of) biblical decree. It was common for individuals with a Rabbinical background to be critical of Betä Ǝsraʾel religious practices differing from Rabbinical ones. This, as well as the decades of struggle the community had to undergo in order to be recognized as Jews by the State of Israel and thus, to be able to make *Aliyah* (immigrate) there, has often placed the community in the position of needing to respond to criticism. Accordingly, some modern narrations of oral traditions regarding the community's past incorporate within them such responses, or employ concepts derived from Rabbinical discourse. For instance, in response to a question, often posed, regarding why Hebrew was not used by the Betä Ǝsraʾel, a common response is

that the community had Hebrew texts in the past, but these were lost or taken by the Christians in the course of the wars with the Solomonic Kingdom (for specific examples of such responses, see Mengisto and Kribus forthcoming).

28 Longing for Jerusalem is, for example, a central theme in numerous accounts provided and literary works written by members of the community (*Qes* Ḥädanä Təkuyä 2011, p. 122; Waldman 2018, pp. 290, 292, 295–96).

29 For a detailed discussion on this holiday, see Ben-Dor (1985b).

30 The *mäloksewočč* (singular: *mälokse*) served as the community's high priesthood. They, unlike the lay priesthood (the *qesočč*), observed severe purity laws that necessitated physical separation not only from Gentiles, but also from the lay community. In scholarly and popular literature, the *mäloksewočč* are often referred to as monks. However, since, in this case, we are dealing with a Betä Ǝsraʾel institution with unique features, which played a key role in safeguarding the Betä Ǝsraʾel religious tradition and combating Christian missionary efforts, the Betä Ǝsraʾel community prefers the usage of its own terminology when referring to this institution.

31 Səmen Mənaṭa, as well as the holy sites of Abba Gan and G^{w}ang Ras which will be described below, were visited in the course of the present author's survey of the dwelling places of the Betä Ǝsraʾel *mäloksewočč*. For a description of this site and the holy sites in its vicinity, see Kribus (2022, pp. 93–116).

32 The letters "n" and "l" are often interchangeable in colloquial Amharic.

33 In accordance with the norms of ethnographic research, I have decided to maintain the anonymity of informants in this publication. When referring to publications in which the names of informants are provided, the name of the respective informant will also be provided here.

34 Interview transcript, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, project no. 182, folder no. 28.

35 For an overview of this holy man and the sites associated with him, see (Ben-Dor 1985a, pp. 41–45; Kribus 2022, pp. 12–18, 87–90, 167–77).

36 The offering of sacrifices by the priesthood in accordance to biblical decree was an integral part of Betä Ǝsraʾel religious practices until the twentieth century. See, for example, (Flad 1869, pp. 52–54; Leslau 1951, pp. xxvi–xxvii; Lifchitz 1939).

37 Fire descending from the heavens and consuming the sacrifices offered by the community is a common motif in traditions relating to Betä Ǝsraʾel holy sites and holy men. See (Ben-Dor 1985a, pp. 44–46; Kribus 2022, pp. 146, 175, 179–81, 215).

38 For a reference to the offering of incense in Betä Ǝsraʾel liturgy, see (Flad 1869, pp. 6, 44).

39 Concentric churches of this type sometimes feature an octagonal rather than circular exterior.

40 For a detailed overview of Ethiopian Orthodox church architecture and its development over time, see (Heldman 1992; Lepage and Mercier 2005; Phillipson 2009).

41 For a detailed examination of this prayer house type and suggestions regarding its development, see (Fritsch 2018; di Salvo 1999). It should be noted that a second Ethiopian church type with an enclosed quadrangular sanctuary also exists (Heldman 2003, pp. 738–39; di Salvo 1999, pp. 73–76). This second type is rectangular and oriented east–west.

42 See, for example, Perruchon (1893, pp. 126–27). Churches are commonly referred to as *Betä Kərstiyan*, i.e., House of Christian (worship).

43 Munro-Hay (2005, pp. 27–51) argues that the Ethiopian *tabot* is based on the Coptic altar slab, known as *maqṭaʾ*, which serves the same purpose as a *tabot* but did not acquire the *tabot*'s symbolism or sanctity. Fritsch (2018) argues that the concentric, circular church plan in Ethiopia is based, in part, on precedents in Nubian church architecture.

44 For a discussion of the meaning of these terms and possible sources of origin, see (Kribus forthcoming a).

45 For a preliminary typology of Betä Ǝsraʾel prayer houses and a discussion regarding their chronology, see (Kribus 2022, pp. 77–86).

46 For an overview on the Betä Ǝsraʾel–Solomonic wars with references to relevant sources, see (Kaplan 1992, pp. 79–96; Quirin 1992, pp. 40–88).

47 For a detailed account of the different versions documented to date, see (Kribus 2022, pp. 95–99; Mengisto and Kribus forthcoming) It should be noted that the Betä Ǝsraʾel relayed their historiography orally, and accounts of their past were not committed to writing by the community until recent generations.

48 For an overview of this conflict, see (Kaplan 1992, pp. 56–58; Quirin 1992, pp. 52–57). A few accounts situated the events at the time of the wars between the Betä Ǝsraʾel and the Solomonic monarch Śärṣä Dəngəl (1563–1597, Kahana 1977, p. 164), or in the context of a raid of Sudanese Mahdists (such raids took place in the northern Ethiopian Highlands from 1885 to 1889). According to the latter version, the religion which was being forcefully imposed was Islam rather than Christianity (Rosen 2018).

49 While accounts of this event do not appear in Christian Solomonic sources describing the campaigns against the Betä Ǝsraʾel, there are comparable accounts of members of the community committing suicide rather than be taken captive. Notable among them is a description appearing in the chronicle of the Solomonic monarch Śärṣä Dəngəl, of a captive Betä Ǝsraʾel woman who threw herself and her captor off a cliff. The chronicle's author adds that several other Betä Ǝsraʾel women did the same (Conti Rossini 1907, pp. 88–89).

50 The composition and chronology of Tarikä Nägäśt compilations vary considerably, and often, local and regional considerations had an impact on their content. The eclectic nature of such works, and the uncertain provenance of much of their source material

has posed a challenge to scholarship, and while individual works have been published, a comprehensive study of this genre has yet to be undertaken.

51 My translation. This account appears in a yet-unpublished paper manuscript, originally from Däbrä Ṣəge Maryam monastery in Šäwa. A digital version (EMML 7334) is available at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. The date of the production of the manuscript has not yet been determined, but it is clear that it significantly post-dates the events described.

52 My translation. The content of the manuscript containing this account, of suggested eighteenth-century provenance, was published by Basset (1882, pp. 11–12).

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