Taking back the message

by Geoffrey Clarfield

Ethiopians on pilgrimage

Had we been there to see it, the young man would have inspected his father's many camels. He would have made sure their feet were unblemished, that they had had enough fodder, that their packs were properly balanced and that they had drunk deeply from the wells near Jerusalem, as they were about to embark on a return voyage of more than 2,500 kilometers (some 1,550 miles) to the land of the south in Arabia and the eastern and western Red Sea, what the Greeks later named Ethiopia.

Their caravan would have been carrying the luxury items of the Mediterranean and the Near East, for after 1177, a kind of dark age had descended over the Middle East as the Egyptian, Hittite, Mycenean and Mesopotamian empires of the time had suddenly and inexplicably declined, opening up the ancient world to people like the Israelites, plucky little Semites

with their own way of doing things, and the Philistines who may have been Greek-speaking Mycenaeans whose wanderings reflect in some way the chaos of the Trojan war.

These traders would have carefully wrapped the exquisite pottery of the Mediterranean, they would have carried priceless jewelry, gold, silver, and olive oil, herbs, local medicinal plants, as well as the elaborate textiles and robes of royal purple from Tyre, home of Phoenician traders, mentioned in the Book of Kings as the kingdom of Hiram, builder of Solomon's Temple and most likely his palace.

The journey would have lasted for more than a year and they would have been bringing to the Near East one of the spiritual engines of the time, the frankincense that provided the temples of Egypt and the Temple of Solomon with the incense that was central to all royal ritual during the Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

These men, and they may have included women traders, were most likely speakers of an archaic Semitic language, spoken on both sides of the Red Sea in Yemen and Ethiopia, which would have been similar to the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Mediterranean.

They may have practised a religion like the Canaanites, traces of which we find in the archaeological sites of Ethiopia and southern Arabia, or more probably, they may have practised one of the indigenous monotheistic faiths that have stunned the ethnographers of Ethiopia and the Kenyan borderlands during the last century, and that have yet to inform the mindset of students of the ancient Near East, who believe that monotheism arose only once.

Having delivered their cargo to the king's men, princes and princesses of the court, having been wined and dined, shown the sites of the new Jerusalem, they set off on their return trek home.

Perhaps during their time in Solomon's capital, they were

exposed in a gentle and subtle way to the concept of the one invisible God that Solomon and his people worshipped, a God who not only protected the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the kings that claimed them as ancestors, but who was also the protector and guardian of all humankind, even these Semitic speaking traders from both sides of the Red Sea, what we now call the Yemen and Northern Ethiopia, with its mysterious city of Aksum that by the 8th century BCE we knew was a royal kingdom and a major player in the Red Sea trade with the Mediterranean.

I am flying Air Ethiopia from Tel Aviv to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. The plane is packed, largely with old and young Beta Israel, Ethiopian Jews who have returned from their exile in the green mountains of Ethiopia near the Red Sea to the land of Israel. I hear the sounds of Hebrew and Amharic fill the plane as friends and family greet each other.

It is winter in Israel, cold, rainy and cloudy, and it is "summer" in Ethiopia, blue skies, balmy weather and warm temperatures. It is the perfect time for a holiday. I ask some of the people beside me who they are and where they are from.

Girma is a young man in his 30s. He is articulate and well dressed. He came to Israel 10 years ago. He is married and has two children. He works for the Egged bus company. He used to be a teacher in Ethiopia, but his move to Israel gave him the opportunity to join a dynamic company. He asks me, "Did you order a kosher meal?" I say I did not. "Ah so you are a secularist?" I said I was not, and that I follow all the rituals of the Jewish life cycle, something that his ancestors have done with greater consistency than I for perhaps more than 2,500 years, since a Jewish presence first came to Ethiopia from Jerusalem.

Then there are a young brother and sister, in their 20s, dressed in the latest Italian fashions. They look like supermodels. They are soft-spoken and respectful in a way that

is typical of the old world charm of Semitic-speaking Ethiopians. The girl works for a clothing company. She likes her home city of Haifa, and in a beautiful Hebrew with just a trace of the sing-song cadences of Amharic, looks me in the eye and says, “I like the State of Israel. I would not live anywhere else. My brother and I are going to Bahar Dar on Lake Tana. We never visited there when we were little. This is our holiday this year.”

I realized that this flight was a four-hour recapitulation of the ancient incense trade that linked Israel with Ethiopia and Yemen, and whose results have been far-reaching. Yet it is one thing to contemplate this ancient trade and the cultural exchanges it has generated, and it is yet another to fly over it, on a clear day, imagining what it must have been like to negotiate this journey and its phenomenal landscape, which is as visually dramatic as the history it has given birth to. This is a little of what I saw and how I felt about it.

You can still walk south from Jerusalem. I have done it a number of times. You drive to a road, you have your map, some idea of your destination and then fields, stone walls, olive groves, biblical ruins, Roman ruins, Islamic ruins and the burnt-out vehicles that Israelis have left on the side of the highway to remind their children how tenuous was their War of Independence, when, in 1948, not only did every army in the Arab Middle East descend upon them, but so did the Arab Legion and its 50 crack British officers, who decided to go to war against the Jews after they had just won theirs against Hitler.

On these hikes, you can see the cars winding up and down the hilly roads, but you cannot hear them. They appear in the distance as slow-moving objects, more like children’s toys. On one occasion, my guide took me to an old Roman cistern. He undid the metal cover, which exposed a metal ladder and we climbed down. We could hear and see the fresh clear water at the bottom.

My heart leapt and I wondered if any of those who escaped the Roman wrath during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE had made it to this well to quench their thirst before they travelled south in search of safety in Ethiopia or Yemen. Did any of them finally make it to the land of the Queen of the South, in Arabia? Scholars debate this idea passionately.

This is the place near Jerusalem where our Ethiopian incense traders would have quenched their thirst as they journeyed south. Then one last stop to water their camels as they approached the Judean desert and the Dead Sea.

As our jet turned south, the Dead Sea appeared like a blinding shimmering mirror between the stark desert hills of the Judean desert and the red mountains of Jordan to the East. Our traders would have walked down to the Dead Sea, making sure they had water and food. They would have had local guides as far down the rift valley as the northern tip of the Red Sea. That was the limit of Solomon's authority. The Dead Sea is no different than it was 2,000 years ago, except there are villages and towns, health spas and a cosmetics industry based on the healing salt of the Dead Sea. The wilderness remains.

According to scholars, the incense route was a series of treks from Yemen to Jerusalem. As we flew down the gulf of Suez, Arabia was on our left and who knows how many of the ancestors of the men and women on that plane had made that trek? At what is now Eilat, our traders would have taken the Arabian coastal trail back to their home in Yemen, one of the two possible origins of the Queen of Sheba. They could have taken boats in the treacherous Red Sea waters or walked through the coastal regions of the mountains of the Hejaz that lead to the well-watered highlands of ancient Yemen, what was once called the Happy Arabia and which harbored a rich and thriving Jewish culture until 1948.

The Blue Nile. (Courtesy)

But there were other routes southbound, for in the fifth century there were a group of Jewish mercenaries on the Nile at the island of Elephantine with their own version of the Jerusalem Temple where they sacrificed to the one God. Some scholars believe that they were driven out and made their way to Ethiopia where they settled in the Simien Mountains and around Lake Gondar. They knew nothing of the Talmud, which suggests they were there already before the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Until the 1700s, they populated independent Jewish kingdoms that warred with the other Ethiopian tribes who had by then converted to Christianity.

As our plane approached the highlands of Eritrea, we flew past its desert coast, beige, black, purple, past a desert and mountain landscape that was as dramatic – if not more so – than the Sinai-unusual black rock formations that starkly rose up from the ground, almost alive, defiant, imposing stone monsters, as if to say “just try and survive in my desert abode,” long dried out river valleys that can erupt into flood

when the rare rains come.

This is now the land of Arab nomads and Berber nomads who no doubt traded with the Ethiopian and Jewish highlanders for the last 2,000years, both before and after the rise of Islam.

I imagined myself, 30 years younger, joining a tribe, hiring a bunch of camels, walking through the land, with camera, with tape recorder, with notebook, learning the language and culture, recording the songs of these now sons of Ishmael and adding them to the world's archive. I once did something like that among the Sinai Bedouin and I remember the hardship involved, not washing for days at a time and, once, when the tent was full of guests, I slept on a rug beside a camel to keep warm. I could not do that now. Perhaps it is a task for a younger man.

You could hear the excitement on the plane. These are people who were rooted in traditional rural Ethiopian Jewish culture, who had lived for millennia in a symbiotic relation with their Ethiopian neighbours and whose ancestors it is thought may have brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia.

Many of them still have relatives and friends in Ethiopia. So many of them lost close family members during the wars of Ethiopia. Now they are bilingual. They speak fluent Hebrew and Amharic. Now they have salaries. Now their children are officers in the IDF. Now their children go to university. Now as Israelis they are respected by the rest of Ethiopia as Ethiopians in Israel. And when in Israel they sing at Passover, "Once we were slaves in Egypt but now we are free."

Their forefathers had left Jerusalem, probably in the fifth century BCE. They had survived in Ethiopia. They had suffered their isolation and persecution as subjects of the Ethiopian Emperors who had possessed the minds of European geographers as the mysterious Prester John, ruler of the Indies in a land described by the 18th century British historian Edward Gibbon

(1737-1794):

“Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten.”

But the Beta Israel had never slept. They had never forgotten Jerusalem and Jerusalem final woke up from its own historical amnesia, for they had somehow forgotten this quote from Isaiah and so after much hardship, welcomed the Beta Israel back to their homeland.

Beyond the rivers of Ethiopia there is a land where the sound of wings is heard. From that land ambassadors come down the Nile in boats made of reeds. Go back home, swift messengers! Take a message back to your land divided by rivers, to your strong and powerful nation, to your tall and smooth-skinned people, who are feared all over the world.

As we landed on the tarmac of Addis Abba, four short hours from Tel Aviv, the passengers broke out into a round of applause for the pilot. I could hear some of the women softly ululating. They were taking back the message.

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In memory of Baruch Tegene, a son of the Beta Israel, a friend who suffered and sacrificed much to bring his people home.

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