Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson

ETHIOPIAN THOUGHT IN THE MAKING OF AN ENGLISH AUTHOR

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Three Thousand Years of Habesha History and Discourse

An Ethiopian friend once joked that no matter what question you ask an Ethiopian, the answer always begins, "Well, three thousand years ago . . . " When I repeat this witticism to other Ethiopians, however, I rarely get a smile. History is a serious matter in the highlands of East Africa.

Most Habesha (the name of a particular group of peoples of the Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands) have a highly elaborated discourse about their centrality to global history. Some Habesha articulate this centrality in sacred terms: insisting that their homeland is the location of the Garden of Eden or that the last Habesha emperor was descended from King Solomon of the Bible. Other Habesha point to archaeological and genetic evidence suggesting that all modern human beings originated in the Ethiopian highlands. Still others note literary evidence: the Habesha's long written tradition, dating back to at least 700 B.C.E., and their production of one of the earliest extant gospels. Yet most are keenly aware that foreigners do not see the Habesha as they see themselves. Ethiopia has been relegated to the footnotes of world history in the last fifty years, perceived as little more than a remote, impoverished locale of catastrophic famine and war, a television channel of dying children clicked through on the way to more pleasant sights.

The Habesha are reasonable to insist on their centrality, however. Not only have they been central to world history, as they declare, but for a long time European scholars were among the first to say so. Indeed, a scholar like myself must soon realize her lack of singularity. Discovering and then announcing the Habesha's historical centrality has been the repeated, if obscure, project of individual European scholars for at least four hundred years. Unfortunately, forgetfulness has been a vital part of the mechanism of the modern subjugation of Africa. The case of Ethiopia is only an extraordinary example of this disavowal.

My argument in this chapter is a double one: the historical record indicates not only that the Habesha have been central to world history but also that they have been engaged for millennia in convincing powerful outsiders to recognize and respect them. Dwelling at the intersection of immense religious and technological differences and surrounded by powerful empires—Egyptian, Roman, and Byzantine, to name just a few—the Habesha responded to this liminality by making

costly investments in broadcasting their own achievements and singularity, as I will show. The Habesha have consistently made vivid claims for their own exceptionality based on a hybrid ethnic origin, an exemplary religion, a faithful people, an ancient written culture, and control over their natural resources. Thus, when modern Ethiopians begin a sentence with the words "three thousand years ago," this rhetorical move claiming the antiquity of Ethiopia is itself ancient.

The corollary is that scholars know about the importance of the Habesha because the Habesha have discursively announced that centrality repeatedly over time. The Habesha were not "discovered." News of their existence did not arrive in Europe due to intrepid European explorers. The Habesha announced themselves. Medieval and early modern Europeans knew about them because of texts that the Habesha wrote, embassies they sent to Europe, and extracontinental settlements they established. Although Europe has frequently forgotten its long-term interaction with the Habesha—witness the Scottish explorer James Bruce's mistaken declaration that he was the first European to uncover the source of the Nile—that contact has been persistent. In other words, the history of globalization is not merely the story of European expansion. Speaking too easily of the very late European conquest of African peoples erases the centuries of discursive efforts that have directed and sometimes even prevented the European appropriation of African cultures. So powerful have Habesha self-representations been that they have disseminated far beyond its shores and animated others' representations of them.

This chapter lays out the claims to exceptionality in ancient and medieval Habesha history and some of its circulation.[1]

The First People

In insisting that they are exceptional, the peoples of the Ethiopian highlands have significant historical evidence at their disposal. Before the 1960s, scientists assumed that prehuman beings left Africa to evolve into human beings in Europe or Asia; since the 1980s, geneticists have uncovered massive evidence that Homo sapiens evolved fully in Africa and specifically in the Ethiopian highlands.[2] Dating has

[1] Kathleen Davis has argued against using the term "medieval" for places outside Europe, stating that such periodization reifies European history as the norm and homogenizes cultural forms; Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, The Middle Ages series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). While recognizing the importance of her intervention, I have continued to use this term in this book because my argument is about the connection, rather than the difference, between Europe and Ethiopia and to suggest that Ethiopia is coeval with Europe as the result of global processes. Regarding coeval status, see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[2] Jun Z. Li et al., "Worldwide Human Relationships Inferred from Genome-Wide Patterns of Variation," *Science* 319 (February 22, 2008): 1100–1104; Richard Monastersky, "Scientists Say They Have Found Remains of Humanity's Closest Ancestors," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 41 (June 20, 2003): A14; Ann Gibbons, "Y Chromosome Shows That Adam Was an African,"

repeatedly revealed the Ethiopian highlands as the site of the oldest human fossils,[3] the oldest human tools,[4] and the oldest advanced human behavior.[5] The Habesha have not been slow to broadcast this evidence of their originality. Any modern tour of Ethiopia used to contain a stop at the National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa, where the bones of one of the earliest human skeletons found (Dinqineš, or Lucy [*Australopithecus afarensis*]) were proudly displayed. She is no longer there only because, since 2007, she has been abroad touring as part of the exhibit Lucy's Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of Ethiopia.

Other prehistorical evidence is compelling as well. Although it was long thought that the Middle East was unique in embarking on agriculture around ten thousand years ago, scholarship has demonstrated that such innovations occurred independently in at least seven places around the globe, including the Ethiopian highlands.[6] Between 8000 and 5000 B.C.E., the peoples of the highlands were among the first to domesticate plants and animals for food. Protected by natural barriers, blessed by plentiful rainfall and fertile soil, and fortunate to be the habitat of several plants capable of being domesticated, the Ethiopian highlands were home to peoples who invented an agricultural system based on ensete (a root vegetable). Over millennia, these peoples continued to domesticate other important crops native to their highlands: khat (a stimulant and appetite suppressant), teff (a gray cereal still used in the Ethiopian bread ənǧära), finger millet (used in making beer), and, in an innovation

Science 278, no. 5339 (October 31, 1997): 804–805; Tim D. White et al., "Pleistocene Homo Sapiens from Middle Awash, Ethiopia," *Nature* 423 (2003): 423.

[3] Brooks Hanson, "Light on the Origin of Man," *Science* 326, no. 5949 (October 2, 2009): 60–61; Jamie Shreeve, "Oldest Skeleton of Human Ancestor Found," *National Geographic News* (October 1, 2009); Ian McDougall, Francis H. Brown, and John G. Fleagle, "Letters to Nature: Stratigraphic Placement and Age of Modern Humans from Kibish, Ethiopia," *Nature* 433 (February 17, 2005): 733–736.

[4] Sileshi Semaw, "The World's Oldest Stone Artefacts from Gona, Ethiopia: Their Implications for Understanding Stone Technology and Patterns of Human Evolution between 2.6–1.5 Million Years Ago," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 27, no. 12 (2000): 1197–1214; Dietrich Stout et al., "Technological Variation in the Earliest Oldowan from Gona, Afar, Ethiopia," *Journal of Human Evolution* 58, no. 6 (2010): 474–491.

[5] "A profound Eurocentric bias" has led to arguments that humans advanced off the African continent, but a review of the findings in more than nine hundred articles confirms that modern human behaviors emerged in the African Middle Stone Age, long before elsewhere, including such behaviors as "blade and microlithic technology, bone tools, increased geographic range, specialized hunting, the use of aquatic resources, long distance trade, systematic processing and use of pigment, and art and decoration"; Sally McBrearty and Alison S. Brooks, "The Revolution That Wasn't: A New Interpretation of the Origin of Modern Human Behavior," *Journal of Human Evolution* 39, no. 5 (2000): 453–563. The earliest instances of some of these behaviors have been found along the Awash River in Ethiopia's Afar Depression.

[6] For summaries of the research, see Denis J. Murphy, *People, Plants, and Genes: The Story of Crops and Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 4; Elisabeth Anne Hildebrand, "Comment: Rethinking the Origins of Agriculture: The Utility of Ethnobiology in Agricultural Origins Research: Examples from Southwest Ethiopia," *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 5 (October 2009): 693–697; Marijke van der Veen, *The Exploitation of Plant Resources in Ancient Africa* (New York: Springer, 1999).

that has shaped world history, coffee. The peoples of the Ethiopian highlands can claim to be not just humanity's cradle but among its first agriculturalists.

Over the same period, from the eighth to the sixth millennium B.C.E., the ancient language of the peoples of East Africa began to differentiate, evolving into the Afroasiatic family of languages spoken across Africa and the Middle East. This family includes Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, and Akkadian, as well as such modern African languages as Egyptian, Berber, Hausa, Oromo, and Somali. Although earlier scholars thought this language family originated in the Middle East, three decades of research confirm that the protolanguage of this family originated in East Africa, probably in the Ethiopian highlands.[7] As Jared Diamond once articulated, "Africa gave birth to the languages spoken by the authors of the Old and New Testament and the Koran, the moral pillars of Western civilization."[8]

One of the important early languages of this family was Gəʿəz, spoken by the peoples who came to dominate the Ethiopian highlands. Gəʿəz died out as a spoken language around 1000 C.E., but it was the highlands' written scholarly and liturgical language from the 300s through the 1800s and is still in use in the indigenous Eritrean and Ethiopian Orthodox Täwahədo Churches today.[9] Gəʿəz was unusual among the early Afro-Asiatic languages in being written from left to right and marking vowels, the later innovation perhaps imported from India.[10] A large indigenous literature exists in this language: the Habesha wrote many original books of poetry, theology, history, and biography. While few ancient texts in Gəʿəz have survived, thousands from the fourteenth century on are still extant.[11] The Habesha claim to originality, then, is also supported linguistically.

It seems impossible that any people could have remembered these ancient human origins and agricultural innovations. Yet, some of the earliest extant texts about the

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[7] Lionel Bender, Gabor Takacs, and David L. Appleyard, eds., *Selected Comparative-Historical Afro-Asiatic Studies in Memory of Igor M. Diakonoff* (Munich: Lincom, 2003); Christopher Ehret et al., "Letters: The Origins of Afroasiatic," *Science* 306, no. 5702 (December 3, 2004): 1680–1681; Daniel F. Mc Call, "The Afroasiatic Language Phylum: African in Origin, or Asian?" *Current Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (February 1998): 139–144.

[8] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fate of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1999), 383.

[9] In Gəʾəz, ተዋሕዶ (Täwahədo, most frequently transliterated "Tewahedo") means "being made one" or "unified."

[10] For a review of the history of the Gəʿəz writing system, see Azeb Amha, "On Loans and Additions to the Fidal (Ethiopic) Writing System," in *The Idea of Writing: Play and Complexity*, ed. Alex De Voogt and Irving Finkel (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 179–196: "Technically, it is impressively advanced when compared to related ancient writing systems such as the Sabaean script" (194). See also Gene Gragg, "Ge'ez (Aksum)," in *The Ancient Languages of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Aksum*, ed. Roger D. Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 215; Stefan Weninger, "Gəʿəz," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, *D–Ha*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 732–735.

[11] Jerome Taylor, Unearthed, the Ancient Texts That Tell Story of Christianity," *Independent*, July 6, 2010. The Abba Gärima gospels have been radiocarbon dated to between the fourth and seventh centuries C.E.; Jacques Mercier, "La peinture éthiopienne à l'époque axoumite et au XVIII siècle," *Comptes-Rendus des Séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres* 144, no. 1 (2000): 40.

peoples of the Ethiopian highlands witness them asserting that they were the first human beings. Diodorus Siculus, a first-century B.C.E. Greek historian, wrote that the "Ethiopians" claimed not only to be unique but also to be widely acknowledged as such. Everyone knew, the "Ethiopians" insisted, that they were the only true natives, the first of all peoples and the most pious, so righteous that the gods had never allowed them to suffer the rule of a foreigner. Diodorus records the main claim as follows:

> Now the Ethiopians, as historians relate, were the *first* of all men and the proofs of this statement, they say, are manifest. For that they did not come into their land as immigrants from abroad but were *natives* of it and so justly bear the name of "autochthones" [from the earth] is, they maintain, *conceded by practically all men*. . . . They say also that the Egyptians are colonists sent out by the Ethiopians. . . . And the larger part of the customs of the Egyptians are, they hold, Ethiopian, the colonists still *preserving their ancient manners*. . . . Many other things are also *told by them concerning their own antiquity* and the colony which they sent out that became the Egyptians. (italics mine)[12]

He articulates the garland of associated claims about their sanctity as well:

> And they say that they were the *first* to be taught to honour the gods and to hold sacrifices and processions and festivals and the other rites by which men honour the deity; and that in consequence their piety has been *published abroad among all men*, and it is generally held that the sacrifices practised among the Ethiopians are those which are the *most pleasing* to heaven. As witness to this they call upon the poet who is perhaps the oldest and certainly the most venerated among the Greeks; for in the *Iliad* he represents both Zeus and the rest of the gods with him as absent on a visit to Ethiopia to share in the sacrifices and the banquet which were given annually by the Ethiopians for all the gods together. . . . And they state that, by reason of their piety towards the deity, they manifestly *enjoy the favour* of the gods, inasmuch as they have never experienced the rule of an invader from abroad. (italics mine)[13]

As noted, archaeological evidence gives northeast Africans strong grounds for claiming that they are the only true natives in the world. The Habesha still claim that they have the purest religion and have never been colonized.

What makes this Greek report so interesting, however, is what it records about "Ethiopian" success in broadcasting discourse, in convincing others of their exceptionality. While the Egyptians also claimed to be the first people,[14] they did not

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[12] Diodorus Siculus, *Diodorus of Sicily*, trans. C. H. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 3:89, 93, 93, 95.

[13] Ibid., 91.

[14] Diodorus Siculus, *Diodorus the Sicilian, in Fifteen Books, to Which Are Added, the Fragments of Diodorus*, trans. George Booth (London: Printed by W. McDowell for J. Davis, Military Chronicle Office, 1814), 1:18.

announce that they had "published abroad among all men" their self-representations nor that they had been persuasively successful. In Diodorus Siculus, then, can be seen early evidence of the peoples of the Ethiopian highlands engaged in proselytizing on their own behalf and traveling long distances to do so, to Egypt.

Although it is quite possible that by "Ethiopia" here Diodorus Siculus meant regions north of the Ethiopian highlands, such as Nubia or Meroe, he regularly referred to "Ethiopia" as the place where the Nile begins, as very mountainous, as having a distinctive rainy season, and as containing a wonderful lake.[15] These are characteristics of the Ethiopian highlands alone. If his is not a description of only them, but also their Nubian or Meroitic neighbors, then it shows that such claims were made widely in northeast Africa and various peoples may not have been shy about appropriating such ancient comments about "Ethiopians" to forward their own case. Each empire builds on the ruins of previous ones.

On the basis of these early human, agricultural, and linguistic innovations, the peoples of the Ethiopian highlands built several important kingdoms and an ancient empire, which I will now describe. They were aided in this by the highlands themselves—a vast plateau thousands of meters above sea level whose unusual geography isolated and protected highland peoples.

Punt Kingdom

The earliest Ethiopian kingdom known to modern scholars, starting in approximately 2500 B.C.E., was in a land that the Egyptians first called Ta-neter (God's Land) and later Punt (or Pwene).[16] The Puntites supplied the Egyptian court with such luxury goods as incense, gold, and animal goods. Interestingly, for my argument, the historical evidence for this kingdom lies in Egypt, where Pharaohs dedicated carved reliefs and inscriptions to documenting the beauty and richness of the "Divine Land." The reliefs represent the Puntites as recognizably African; as possessing the types of boats, houses, stone sculptures, and trade items still found in Ethiopia; and as owning the source of the Nile's water.[17] Even this long ago, the peoples of this region seem to have been successful in convincing outsiders (in this case, their Egyptian visitors) that they were unusually blessed, and inspiring representations of their spiritual and material wealth. While this knowledge of Punt did not persist over the centuries—the fifth-century B.C.E. Greek writer Herodotus

[15] Ibid., 43, 45, 47, 99.

[16] Catherine Lucy Glenister, "Profiling Punt: Using Trade Relations to Locate 'God's Land'" (master's thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2008).

[17] Stuart Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the Unknown Land: A Cultural and Historical Guide* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 18; Jon Kalb, "Awsa and Punt: Into the Mix," *Nyamae Akuma: Bulletin of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists*, no. 71 (June 2009): 31–34. For a contrary view, of Punt as being farther north, see David O'Connor, *Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa* (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1993).

was among those reducing Punt to a legendary place—the pharaonic stone temples demonstrate that this foreign knowledge once existed.

D'MT Kingdom

After Punt, about three thousand years ago, a kingdom rose in the Ethiopian highlands called D'MT or Da'amat, not long after long-distance trade in the Middle East and Africa began to swing from that dominated by rulers and large expeditions to that led by merchants.[18] Trading connections began along the Mediterranean in North Africa and spread to the lands down the eastern coast of the Red Sea into South Arabia. South Arabian (Yemeni) traders (at least some from the Sabaean kingdom) were soon drawn to the western coast of the Red Sea, in Africa, where grew two of the most valuable ancient commodities: frankincense and myrrh. Despite being separated by deserts, mountains, and a dozen miles of the Red Sea, the first-millennium capitals of their respective kingdoms (Marib and later Aksum) were only three hundred miles apart, about the distance between London, England, and Belfast, Ireland. This proximity would have encouraged exchange between the two places

Around the time when the Celts moved into Britain (800 B.C.E.) and long before the Romans did (43 C.E.), a few of these Arabian traders set up small settlements in the far northern Ethiopian highlands and intermarried with the local population.[19] Archaeology suggests that the relationship of these settlements to Arabia was weak and that their foreign identity "quite rapidly broken down, implying a steady process of assimilation" with the local population.[20] The peoples of these settlements and the contemporaneous indigenous towns became an active part of the eastern Mediterranean–Red Sea regional economy through trading animal goods, valuable metals, and slaves. Although the peoples of this region adapted the script and language of the immigrants, which became Gəʿəz, they largely retained their East African culture and religion.[21] Genetic research shows that the Habesha today are most closely related to other sub-Saharan African groups but also owe some of their gene pool to Middle Easterners.[22] That is, analysis of this period

[18] Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002), 162–164. For spelling of the name, see Alexander Sima, "D'mt," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, *D–Ha*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 185.

[19] Joseph W. Michels, *Changing Settlement Patterns in the Aksum-Yeha Region of Ethiopia: 700 B.C.–A.D. 850* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2005). For a recent review of the research, see David W. Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia: Fourth-Fourteenth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 9–12.

[20] Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, 11.

[21] Ehret, *Civilizations of Africa*, 213.

[22] Giuseppe Passarino et al., "Different Genetic Components in the Ethiopian Population, Identified by mtDNA and Y-Chromosome Polymorphisms," *American Journal of Human Genetics* 62, no. 2 (1998): 420–434.

reveals a linguistic rather than genetic shift, with the Sabaic language diffusing "through existing African populations" but without much human "gene flow from the Arabian Peninsula."[23] These Semitic-speaking African populations became the Habesha.

Due to misunderstandings of the extent of South Arabian influence, some earlier scholars insisted that Ethiopian highland innovations and mercantile achievements were owed to the "vastly superior civilization" of Arabia, which pushed aside the inferior "Negroid races."[24] It was typical to assume, as George Hatke demonstrates, a "South Arabian *mission civilisatrice* in the Horn of Africa" because of racist attitudes that Africans were "incapable of higher culture." It is now known that South Arabian inscriptions were "in fact a foreign mode of expression that had been adopted by the local elite even as the cultural substratum remained purely African":

> The most significant and lasting impact of these [South Arabian] colonists was the establishment of a writing system and the introduction of Semitic speech—both of which the Ethiopians modified considerably. . . . South Arabian culture [was] a foreign commodity from which the Ethiopians were able to freely pick and chose when they saw fit, rather than an entire civilization imposed by foreign rulers. [25]

Further, black and white racializing can never capture the deep ties of the peoples on both sides of the Red Sea who have had thousands of years of exchange flowing in both directions. Anatomically modern humans first moved from Africa to the Middle East about ninety thousand years ago and have been moving in both directions over the past fourteen thousand years.[26] The Arabians may have been drawn to the Ethiopian highlands about three thousand years ago because they met a language and culture there whose roots were their own.[27] Thus, it is foolish to claim that the Habesha are not African because three millennia ago their African ancestors adopted a foreign language and intermingled with Middle Easterners who were

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[23] Andrew Kitchen et al., "Bayesian Phylogenetic Analysis of Semitic Languages Identifies an Early Bronze Age Origin of Semitic in the Near East," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 276, no. 1665 (June 22, 2009): 2710.

[24] Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People*, 2nd ed. (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 47, 45.

[25] George Hatke, "Africans in Arabia Felix: Aksumite Relations with Himyar in the Sixth Century" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011), 1. See also Peter Ridgway Schmidt, "Foreigners or Endogenous Development in the Horn of Africa?" in *Historical Archaeology in Africa: Representation, Social Memory, and Oral Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira, 2006), 259–284.

[26] Laura B. Scheinfeldt, Sameer Soi, and Sarah A. Tishkoff, "Working toward a Synthesis of Archaeological, Linguistic, and Genetic Data for Inferring African Population History," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107, supplement 2 (May 11, 2010): 8931–8938.

[27] Harold G Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 3.

themselves descended from the Habesha. It would be similar to claiming that the British are Italians because of the Roman invasion two thousand years ago, or German because of the Anglo-Saxon influx, or French because of the Norman conquest. Three thousand years on the African continent have made the Habesha an indubitably African people.

Fascinatingly, however, the scholarly search for the origins of the Habesha in southern Arabia was driven in part by the self-representations of the Habesha. The Habesha have long claimed the Middle East and Africa as an origin, valorizing their difference from both Africans and Arabians, as made most clear in the Habesha originary myth *Kəbrä Nägäśt* (ክብረ ነገሥት; Glory of the Kings), which claims as progenitors a Habesha Queen of Sheba and a Middle Eastern King Solomon.[28] Thus, even as progressive European scholars attempted to disprove the problematic claim that the Habesha are special because they are not entirely African, the Habesha continued to circulate this very claim.

This is why some modern-day Ethiopians and Eritreans, especially those who are not Habesha, reject any focus on the so-called Semitic past, seeing it as part of promoting a racist and arrogant culture that oppressed other African peoples. Many do not forget that the Habesha have been invested in asserting that their sometimes lighter complexion and more "European" features are the mark of superior ancestry. Nor that the Habesha relegated the Jewish Beta-Israel people to the role of artisans, the foreign Muslims to the role of merchants, and the southern (and often darker) peoples to the role of slaves. Those who are not Habesha are right to be condemnatory: the Habesha's success in projecting themselves as exceptional has come at the tremendous cost of others. Like any civilization, the Habesha have had magnificent achievements and appalling failings.

At the same time, however, the ethnic identity "Habesha" is itself a claim and, like all ethnicities, is constructed, hybrid, and impermanent. Outsiders can become part of the dominant Habesha culture by adopting its language, dress, and religion, and numerous individuals who did not see themselves as born Habesha became Habesha. Indeed, non-Habesha cultures have regularly ruled the Ethiopian highlands using the Habesha language, court culture, and discursive claims (for instance, as the non-Semitic-speaking Zagʷe did in the thirteenth century and the Oromo in the seventeenth century). Emperor Haile Selassie I considered himself fully Habesha even though his mother's side of the family was Oromo. Indeed, it is very common for the Habesha and the Oromo to intermarry. Like "whiteness" in

[28] E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek: Being the History of the Departure of God and His Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, and the Establishment of the Religion of the Hebrews and the Solomonic Line of Kings in That Country* (London: Medici Society, 1922). Paolo Marrassini prefers to translate this as "Nobility of the Kings," and Getatchew Haile as "The Honor of the Kings"; Paolo Marrassini, "Kəbrä Nägäśt," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3, *He–N*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 364–368.

the United States, then, the Habesha identity was both oppressive and assimilative. This does not make its enormous discursive influence any less worthy of study.

Aksumite Empire

Further evidence for the Habesha's claims to exceptionality lies in their first empire, ʾAksum (አክሱም, sometimes incorrectly spelled "Axum"). One of the most important civilizations of Africa, this trade-based empire rose in the Ethiopian highlands between 150 B.C.E. and 50 C.E.[29] From the third through the seventh century C.E., Aksum dominated trade on the African side of the Red Sea, particularly the lucrative trade in ivory and other animal goods.[30] The Aksumites (or Habesha) controlled one of the most vital trade routes in the ancient world, dwelling as they did at the nexus of commerce among Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Aksum was so significant an economic power that it was coining its own money at a time when very few were doing so.[31] Aksum had a fleet of seaworthy vessels that sailed from its busy commercial port of Adulis on the Red Sea to Arabia and Asia. It even imported wine from Italy.[32] Chinese and Indian documents from this period record these peoples' high level of human and economic interaction with the Habesha.[33]

Aksum expanded throughout the Ethiopian highlands and into some of the coastal lowlands. Its capital, Aksum, in the Ethiopian highlands about a five-day walk from the Red Sea coast, was the site of enormous granite buildings, including a multistory royal palace, as well as gold statues and engraved stelae that towered more than a hundred feet tall. One of these is "probably the largest single block of stone that people anywhere, at any time, have attempted to stand on end."[34] Aksumite mansions included brick ovens, glassware, and drainage systems. Their cities—in

[29] Aksum came after the D'mt kingdom of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. (sometimes also called the Pre-Aksumite period) and the Proto-Aksumite period of the fifth through first century B.C.E.; David W. Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia: Aksum; Its Antecedents and Successors*, 2nd ed. (London: British Museum Press, 2002); Stanley Mayer Burstein, *Ancient African Civilizations: Kush and Axum* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1998); Stuart Munro-Hay, "Aksum," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, *A–C*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 173–183.

[30] "Aksum may have supplied a significant proportion of the elephant ivory used in medieval Europe"; Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, 20.

[31] Wolfgang Hahn, "Coinage," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, *A–C*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 766–789.

[32] Lionel Casson, ed., *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[33] See, for one example, extracts from an eighth-century travel report by a Chinese military officer, Du Huan, of the T'ang dynasty, who visited the Laobosa (al-Habesha); Wolbert Smidt, "A Chinese in the Nubian and Abyssinian Kingdoms (8th Century): The Visit of Du Huan to Molin-guo and Laobosa," *Chroniques Yéménites* 9 (September 22, 2001): 17–28; E. Bretschneider, *On the Knowledge Possessed by the Ancient Chinese of the Arabs and Arabian Colonies, and Other Western Countries, Mentioned in Chinese Books* (London: Trübner, 1871).

[34] Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, 13.

particular Aksum and Adulis—were cosmopolitan centers accommodating an array of cultures and religions. These cities slowly crumbled but never disappeared. Parts of them are clearly visible today, particularly in Aksum, where some of the impressive stelae still stand, an important destination for tourists and pilgrims. In other words, the Aksumites were active, not passive, in engaging the world. From their innovative roped-plank ships to their impressive stone monuments, the Aksumites labored to command the awe (and goods) of their others. Despite the usual accusations that Aksumite innovations owed everything to outsiders, nothing could be further from the truth.

As an integral part of the African-Arabian-Asian trade, by the end of the third century Aksum's elites were considering the political and economic benefits of converting to Christianity, which had become the established religion of the eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium) and therefore the Red Sea.[35] In the fourth century, the Aksumite emperor ʿEzana and his court converted within a decade of the religion being tolerated in the Roman Empire, around 339 C.E.[36] Although Christianity was not initially welcomed by the nonelites, by the sixth century it had made significant inroads outside of the court and into the countryside.[37] This conversion placed Aksum (and the Habesha) among the earliest Christian kingdoms in the world, certainly long before most of Europe.

About a hundred years later, in 451, the conclusions about Christ's nature at the Council of Chalcedon caused a number of church splits, including one in the African church (based in Alexandria but including what are now the countries of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia). Afterward, the dominant Coptic, Nubian, and Aksumite churches together embarked on a form of Christianity that would become increasingly marginalized: Oriental Orthodoxy. Their church remained based in Alexandria, not Rome, and, due to their rejection of the dogma that Christ had two natures, one human and one divine, they are often labeled monophysite Christians, although they prefer the term "non-Chalcedonian Christians" or "anti-Chalcedonian Christians." They are sometimes called Alexandrine Christians, Coptic Christians, or African Christians, but this is not correct as Oriental Orthodoxy includes the Syrian, Armenian, and Indian Orthodox churches as well. Matters became even more complicated when, in the eleventh century, the western Roman church split from the eastern Byzantine church, resulting in Roman Catholicism and Eastern (or Greek) Orthodoxy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Reformation resulted in another split, with Protestants forming another branch. Thus, in the twenty-first century, there are four main branches of Christianity: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Oriental Orthodoxy, and Protestantism.

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[35] Marcus, *History*, 7.

[36] The conversion possibly occurred as early as 328 C.E. or as late as 365, but probably in 339; Wolfgang Hahn, "ʿEzana," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 2, *D–Ha*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 478–480. The Roman emperor Constantine I converted in 324 C.E.

[37] Marcus, *History*, 7–8.

The differences among these branches are not always recognized by European scholars. Due to the common term "Orthodox," scholars often assume that all churches called orthodox are the same and thus that "Greek Orthodox Church" or "Syrian Orthodox Church" only indicates regional, not doctrinal, differences. In fact, Eastern Orthodoxy (European churches, the largest of which are the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches) and Oriental Orthodoxy (the non-European churches, the largest of which are the Habesha and Coptic churches) have different beliefs. Finally, even within Oriental Orthodoxy, the Habesha retained their own distinctive practices despite its base in Alexandria. This difference was formalized in 1959 when the Habesha church separated from the Coptic church in Egypt, becoming the Orthodox Täwahədo Church in Ethiopia and Eritrea. This history of church splits might seem an aside, but it is vital to understanding the Habesha interaction with Europe. As a result, the Habesha often had a stronger tie to the western Roman church than the eastern Byzantine church and were quite present in early modern Rome.

By the mid-sixth century, this Christian African empire of Aksum had become so powerful that it invaded and colonized a Jewish kingdom on the east side of the Red Sea in 525 C.E. The consequences of this conquest were far-reaching, geographically, historically, and discursively. Emperor Kaleb ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa (r. 500–534),[38] the messianic Habesha ruler who succeeded in subduing the Jewish kingdom, became a hero throughout Christendom, as glowing contemporary accounts written as far away as Persia and Greece attest—the Syriac *Book of the Himyarites* and the Greek *Martyrium Arethae*.[39] ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa was glorified as the ideal Christian king, the new King David, and the true emperor of the Byzantine empire. This conquest places the Habesha—along with the Nubians who invaded Palestine in the eighth century B.C.E. and the Almoravides who invaded Spain in the eleventh century C.E.—among the African powers to colonize off the continent. Allied with Byzantium and Arabia, Aksum arrived at the pinnacle of its influence.[40] Individual Aksumites were in positions of power throughout the Middle East; its lands were vast, its cities envied.

Importantly, Emperor ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa's conquest was not just a military achievement but a discursive one, an international event that both satisfied and broadcast Habesha claims to exceptionalism. ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa appears to have deliberately cast the invasion as part of a larger rhetorical case for a salvific Habesha identity. First,

[38] Variants of his name are Hellesthaeus, Ellestheaeus, Eleshaah, Ella Atsbeha, Ellesboas, and Elesboam, all from the Greek Ελεσβόάς, for "The one who brought about the morning" or "The one who collected tribute." At Aksum, in inscription RIE 191, his name is rendered in unvocalized Gə'əz as KLB ʾL ʾṢBḤ WLD TZN (Kaleb ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa son of Tazena). In vocalized Gə'əz, it is ካሌብ አለ አጽብሐ (Kaleb ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa). Kaleb is his given Christian name; ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa is his throne name.; Gianfranco Fiaccadori, "Kaleb," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 3, *He–N*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 329–332.

[39] Irfan Shahid, "The Kebra Nagast in the Light of Recent Research," *Le Museon* 89 (1976): 136.

[40] Marcus, *History*, 9–10.

he turned to historical precedent, copying the claims of previous kings. As ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa was planning his invasion of South Arabia, he sent a request to the governor of his port in Adulis to record a stone inscription found there. That Habesha inscription announced in Greek the conquests of an Aksumite king two hundred years earlier who claimed to have conquered the people "on the other side of the Red Sea" and to have reduced their sovereigns to tributaries: "I thus subdued the whole coast from Leuce Come [modern Saudi Arabia] to the country of the Sabaeans [modern Yemen]. I first and alone of the kings of my race made these conquests."[41] Other stone inscriptions in the area make similar declarations in Greek, Sabaic, and Gəʿəz (a tripling that itself reveals a desire to speak to foreigners and history) about the kings of D'mt and Aksum ruling over vast areas on both sides of the Red Sea.[42] Harking back to the message of these ancient stone inscriptions was part of ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa's case for the Habesha's rightful sovereignty over South Arabia.[43] His military actions were enabled by and situated amid a chain of Habesha claims that created their world.

Second, ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa did more than call attention to existing textual evidence; he produced his own. He took the significant biblical name of Kaleb, who was the progenitor of King David in the Bible and a warrior who crossed from Africa into the Middle East to conquer Canaan.[44] The implication of the biblical name was that ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa was an Israelite and the rightful inheritor of the Promised Land, Israel. Further, once in South Arabia at Marib, ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa left stone inscriptions in Gəʿəz boasting of his victory. In these he called the South Arabians አሕዛብ (ʾahəzab, gentiles). While this term was often used broadly for any "peoples" or "nations," it might mean that ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa saw himself as descended from Jews. He also performed actions as if he were a biblical king, building churches in South Arabia and taking fifty South Arabian princes back to the highlands as captives, as if imitating the biblical Nebuchadnezzar's actions after the fall of Jerusalem.[45]

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[41] Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk*, trans. John Watson McCrindle (1897; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 64. Alternately translated as "I waged war from Leuke Come to the land of the Sabeans. I am the first and the only one of my line to have rendered subject all these peoples"; L. P. Kirwan, "The Christian Topography and the Kingdom of Axum," *Geographical Journal* 138, no. 2 (June 1972): 172. Also see translations in Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the Unknown Land*, 234; Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Cosmas Indicopleustès, Topographie chrétienne*, trans. Wanda Wolska-Conus, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1968).

[42] Edward Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian (Monophysite) Christianity," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, no. 3 (1956): 224–225; Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia*; Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the Unknown Land*, 234.

[43] Shahid, "Kebra Nagast," 148.

[44] Ibid., 152.

[45] See Daniel 1:1–3: "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it.…And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god.…And the king spake unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes."

Some years after his return, according to Habesha tradition, he took monastic vows, renounced the world, and sent his crown to Jerusalem to be hung at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which has been run by the Habesha for centuries. These all were the actions of a man writing himself and his people into history through the most important text of his time, the Bible.

Contemporary documents written about this victory indicate that ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa's efforts at broadcasting Habesha exceptionalism were successful. ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa was canonized as a Christian saint within decades of his death and is still revered around the world, as a recent exhibit about his depiction in Brazil as a black saint indicates.[46] Like his unknown Aksumite predecessor, ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa produced deliberately calculated discourse about the Habesha, representations that then circulated throughout much of the old world and shaped outsiders' representations of the Habesha. This African king inspired respect through language, which continued to ripple out over time, through legend and literature.

ʾƎllä ʾAṣbəḥa's worldly victory in 525 C.E. marked the highest tide of the Aksumites' geopolitical power. By the death of Muhammad in 632 C.E., the Aksumites had been violently pushed out of South Arabia. With the rise of Islam and its conquest of Egypt in 640, Roman and Byzantine merchants no longer sailed to the Red Sea ports. Without its trading connections, Aksum lost its dominance of trade, thus losing the earnings to finance an imperial army, administration, and towns. By the eighth century, when Islam had become the primary religion of the Middle East, the Christian Aksum empire was in decline, as was its international reputation. This decline may have been propelled by environmental causes as well.[47] To address the loss of taxation and thus revenue, the ninth-century Aksumite emperor Dəgnağan-Jan innovated a feudal system, just as his counterparts in Europe were doing at the time.[48] The Aksumite imperial city dwindled, as did the Roman imperial cities of western Europe, while the monasteries in both the Ethiopian highlands and Europe, upon whom their kings had bestowed lands and revenues, became the archives of history for a thousand years. Books from these Habesha monasteries have sometimes proved to be the only extant copies today of famous ancient texts written in Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew or Greek—such as the biblical book of Enoch, translated into Gəʿəz in the first millennium.[49]

Although the Aksum empire faded, the Habesha ever after saw Aksum, and its visible remnants, as evidence of their own exceptionality and originality. This

[46] Edward J. Sullivan, "Black Hand: Notes on the African Presence in the Visual Arts of Brazil and the Caribbean," in *The Arts in Latin America, 1492–1820*, ed. Joseph J. Rishel and Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; Mexico City: Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso; Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 39–55.

[47] Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the Unknown Land*, 242.

[48] Ehret, *Civilizations of Africa*, 292.

[49] Getatchew Haile, "Highlighting Ethiopian Traditional Literature," in *Silence Is Not Golden: A Critical Anthology of Ethiopian Literature*, ed. Taddesse Adera and Ali Jimale Ahmed (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1995), 41; Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, 136, 139.

empire, holding fast to a world religion and maintaining an ancient written culture, became yet another basis for the Habesha's production of a distinctive discursive system.

Zagʷe Dynasty

In the tenth century, a new Ethiopian highlands dynasty took over from the faded Aksumites. This new dynasty was of the Agaw cultural group, not the Habesha. They were Cushitic rather than Semitic speakers, and the Habesha derided them as southern usurpers. Nevertheless, the Zagʷe dynasty thrived by identifying with Habesha culture, taking over their feudal system and embracing Christianity. They continued with active international trade, not just sending goods to Persia, China, and the rest of Africa but actually traveling to bring goods back.[50] The rise of the Zagʷe marks the beginning of the third empire—no longer D'mt, nor Aksum, but Abyssinia. The Zagʷe ruled for several centuries, from 940 to 1270.[51]

As part of legitimating themselves as the proper heirs of Aksum, and fully assimilated Habesha, the Zagʷe forwarded the rhetoric of exceptionalism by performing an architectural feat at their capital, Lalibäla. They constructed eleven full-scale churches by chiseling them down into the bedrock. The historian Marcus describes them in typically glowing terms as follows:

> The monarch intended a stupendous monument to faith, and certainly the idea of hewing churches from the Lastan mountains was inspired. Although there are other monolithic structures in Ethiopia, the edifices at Roha are amazing, especially the chiseled-out access, courtyards, and interiors and the rich, mostly geometric and linear decorations. The churches' conception and style are very much Ethiopian, and possibly each one is an example of a particular kind of Axumite church, or even of some of Tigray's rock-hewn edifices, altogether forming a museum of sacred architecture. As a technically difficult achievement, it is in many ways unrivaled.[52]

These "hypogean" churches combined Aksumite design elements with principles from first millennium B.C.E. Ethiopian highlands architecture.[53] The Habesha boldly

[50] Stuart Munro-Hay, "Ancient Relations between China and the Horn," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, vol. 1, *A–C*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 714–715.

[51] Although the beginnings of the Zagʷe dynasty were traditionally dated to the twelfth century, 1137, and its length said to be little more than 130 years, scholars are now beginning to argue that it arose in the tenth century; Knud Tage Andersen, "The Queen of the Habasha in Ethiopian History, Tradition and Chronology," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 63, no. 1 (2000): 31–63; Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, 197.

[52] Marcus, *History*, 12.

[53] Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, chapter 7. He points out that many churches are made of stone; what makes these churches distinctive is being carved down into stone, therefore, his term "hypogean."

asserted that the group of buildings was the new Jerusalem. From the twelfth century on, Middle Eastern and European travelers have exhausted the language of awestruck praise in describing these structures. Within two centuries of their construction, Habesha scribes wrote a text to celebrate these marvels, incorporating them into the royal chronicles.[54] Eight centuries later, the churches have been declared UNESCO world heritage sites and are a popular tourist destination.

These hypogean churches, like the stone inscriptions, represent successful attempts to communicate the exceptionalism of Habesha culture. Although this church architecture does not have textual inscriptions boasting of the glory and power of any earthly empire, dedicated as the buildings were to God, they nevertheless are texts intended to be read in a particular way—as signs of the technological and artistic endowments of the culture that created it. The foreign audiences that the churches were built to impress did not have to read any language but that of beauty: doing the difficult splendidly inspires wonder. Over the centuries—viewed by erstwhile conquerors and admiring visitors—the churches have stood not only as extravagant monuments to a certain self-conception but also as persuasive rhetorical arguments about a people's value.

No greater proof of the instrumentalization of the hypogean churches of Lalibäla as rhetoric can be this: they are not unique. Although they are splendid examples, the Habesha have carved hundreds of hypogean churches across hundreds of miles of Ethiopia and not just in the twelfth century but across fifteen centuries, even into today. The Lalibäla churches came three hundred years after the earliest hypogean churches.[55] Almost anywhere there is suitable rock, the Habesha have carved such buildings. But the Zagʷe dynasty announced its churches at Lalibäla as the unique signs of its power, and this rhetoric of exceptionalism settled in the Western imagination so strongly that it was not until the twentieth century that archaeologists began to set the record straight. The triumph of Habesha rhetoric over reality regarding the stone churches at Lalibäla is an example of how African self-representations animate European texts. Often, European travelers saw what they were told to see and wrote down what they were told to think. European representations are not always of the real, therefore, but of others' representations about the real.

Solomonic Dynasty

The Habesha dynasty that replaced the Zagʷe dynasty in 1270 also sought to build a monument that would legitimate and extend its power. In a culminating move, it settled on a testimonial that proved stronger than any stone obelisk or church—one of ink and parchment. The new rulers developed a dazzling national narrative that

[54] Richard Pankhurst, ed., *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles* (Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1967), xii, 8–12.

[55] Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, 188.

Habesha rulers, intellectuals, and commoners have elaborated for centuries.[56] This discourse exists in its highest form in a medieval text that trumpets the Habesha's centrality to secular and sacred global history, the *Kəbrä Nägäśt*.[57] This thick volume articulates Habesha myths of origin, parts of which were told for many centuries before the text's redaction in 1321.[58]

Expanding on an anecdote found in the Old Testament about the Queen of Sheba's visit to the tenth-century B.C.E. king Solomon, the *Kəbrä Nägäśt* envisions Solomon seducing the Queen of Sheba, who happens to be a Habesha queen called Makədda. She conceives a son who eventually takes the ark of the covenant from the Israelites and starts a new Zion in the Ethiopian highlands, which continues through the descent of Habesha emperors from Solomon and this Queen of the South, only interrupted by the Zagʷe dynasty. In a direct strike at the heart of three world religions, the Habesha replace the Israelites with themselves as the chosen people of God, recasting their people at the center of the tale.

The remarkable Habesha narrative about Solomon and Makədda "must be one of the most powerful and influential national sagas anywhere in the world," writes the historian Edward Ullendorff.[59] It enabled a seven-hundred-year Solomonic dynasty of 111 emperors in the Ethiopian highlands and continues to spread discursively despite the dynasty's fall from power in 1974. The narrative has been retold continuously for at least a thousand years, is still believed by millions of modern Ethiopians and Eritreans, and was written into the Ethiopian constitution of 1955 as historical truth.[60]

Tens of thousands in the African diaspora also believe in it, through the diasporic religion of the Rastafari. When Haile Selassie I (Ḫayəla śəlase) was crowned emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, Marcus Garvey prophesied that this black monarch would save Africans around the world.[61] Later, followers saw *Ras* Tafari (Haile Selassie's name before being crowned) as god incarnate, in large part because of the Habesha claim that he was Solomon's lineal descendant, just like Jesus,

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[56] Parts of this paragraph and the three following paragraphs were previously published in Wendy Laura Belcher, "African Rewritings of the Jewish and Islamic Solomonic Tradition: The Triumph of the Queen of Sheba in the Ethiopian Fourteenth-Century Text Kəbrä Nägäst," in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literature and Culture*, ed. Roberta Sterman Sabbath (Boston: E. J. Brill, 2009), 441–459.

[57] The authoritative edited version is in German: Carl Bezold, *Kebra Nagast, die Kerrlichkeit der Könige: Nach den Handschriften in Berlin, London, Oxford und Paris* (Munich: K. B. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1905).

[58] For a brief summary of some of the dating issues, see Marrassini, "Kəbrä Nägäśt."

[59] Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians*, 64.

[60] *Revised Constitution of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1953), Article 2, p. 3: "The Imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line…[which] descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen of Sheba, and King Solomon of Jerusalem." Cited in Marcus, *History*, 17.

[61] Marcus Garvey, "Coronation of Emperor Ras Tafari," *Black Man* (November 8, 1930). Rpt. in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, ed. Robert A. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 7:440–441.

and that Ethiopia was the new Zion. The narrative of the *Kəbrä Nägäśt* is thus a foundational text for the Rastafari, enabling their beliefs in a redemptive Jewish-African messiah of biblical descent. Main elements of the story have become parts of twentieth-century popular culture as well. Wild speculation continues in books, films, and websites about the location of the ark of the covenant, most of which mention the Habesha claim to possess it.

In other words, this narrative of the Habesha triumph over a more powerful nation—tricking a trickster who just happens to be the wisest king in history and escaping with the world's most powerful object—has persisted for centuries among the Habesha and has circulated to great effect far beyond the Ethiopian highlands. The Habesha version of the narrative shows no signs of waning in power despite four centuries of European scholarship repeatedly "disproving" it. Indeed, it persists in part because of these efforts. The *Kəbrä Nägäśt* forces Western scholars to wrestle on its terrain, to repeatedly insist that the ark of the covenant is not in Ethiopia, that the Queen of Sheba is not from Africa, that its kings are not descended from Solomon, and so on and so forth, thereby further circulating these very claims and reproducing textually the instruments of Habesha power. The *Kəbrä Nägäśt* subsists as a strand, not despite hegemony but through it, accruing to the Habesha the authority, legitimacy, and power of its ostensible others. Through the *Kəbrä Nägäśt*, the Habesha portray themselves as forgotten, not marginal.

Documenting the full impact of the *Kəbrä Nägäśt* must await another book.[62] So must documenting the intellectual work of Habesha monks who went to Europe in the 1300s through the 1600s, spreading ideas about Habesha ethnic exceptionalism, literate antiquity, and religious originality, especially through Habesha institutions in Rome, Jerusalem, and Alexandria.[63] For instance, in the fifteenth century, Habesha travelers to Europe provided information about Abyssinia that served as the source of the best European maps[64] and books.[65] Some of this was transmitted by the Habesha monks Abbot Nicodemus and Deacon Petros, who participated in the ill-fated Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1445). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Habesha monks in Rome were creating texts that had lasting consequences for European religious debates. *Abba* Thomas Walda Samuel started publishing books in Gəʿəz in Rome in 1513; Täsfa Səyon followed by publishing the entire New Testament in Gəʿəz as well as a Gəʿəz grammar and dictionary in Rome

[62] Wendy Laura Belcher, "The Black Queen of Sheba: A Global History of an African Idea" (manuscript).

[63] Although, see the excellent work on this exchange in Matteo Salvadore, "Faith over Color: Ethio-European Encounters and Discourses in the Early-Modern Era" (PhD diss., Temple University, 2010).

[64] As a result, the famous Florentine Egyptus Novelo map of 1454 properly situates the Habesha monastery Däbrä Damo, for instance, Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, 52–53.

[65] For instance, Poggio Bracciolini's *De Varietate* (1431). For a discussion, see Salvátore Tedeschi, "La première description de l'Ethiopie imprimée en Occident," *Etudes Ethiopiennes* 1 (1994): 155–164.

in the 1540s; and *Abba* Gorgoryos helped establish Ethiopian studies in Europe in the 1650s. The emphasis in postcolonial studies on the European representation of Africans tends to erase Africans' historical presence in Europe and the power of their self-representations there.

Conclusion

In looking back over three thousand years of Habesha history—from Punt's sculptures to D'MT's inscriptions to Aksum's obelisks to the Zagʷe's hypogean churches to the *Kəbrä Nägäśt*—a pattern becomes clear. The Habesha have consistently represented themselves as exceptional for their cultural qualities of antiquity, originality, and purity and have had considerable success in disseminating this view. Their discursive representations have dispersed along trade routes, through pilgrims, and by texts to shape others' representations of the Habesha. Many non-Habesha texts have been "wrought upon" by this discourse and have become energumens animated by Habesha self-representations: the Greeks disseminated the Habesha's claims to being the first and purest of people; the Egyptians named their land "God's land" for its bounty; the Syrians proclaimed that Habesha kings would save the world, and some Brazilians still venerate one of those kings, Kaleb; Europeans repeated that the Habesha Zagʷe dynasty had carved unique churches down into the ground; and some Caribbeans worshiped Haile Selassie as related to Jesus through Solomon and in possession of the most powerful object in the world, the ark of the covenant. Even scientists are now part of this dissemination, providing evidence for the Habesha's claim to be the first people, to have some of the oldest texts, and to have preserved important aspects of the early church.[66] Some of these claims are true, some not—but all circulate in part because of the compelling nature of Habesha discourse. Among those wrought upon by this discourse was Samuel Johnson.

[66] Science is not immune to discursive claims. Archaeologists first went to Ethiopia because of Habesha inscriptions and claims about being the first people and early Christians. "Mystery has surrounded Ethiopia ever since the days of Herodotus; yet in almost every mysterious legend there is generally some foundation of truth"; James Theodore Bent, David Heinrich Müller, and John George Garson, *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians: Being a Record of Travel and Research in Abyssinia in 1893* (London: Longmans, Green, 1898), 84.