

THE SOLOMON AND SHEBA STORY IN ETHIOPIA

JACK FELLMAN

The Solomon and Sheba story has great mythopoeic power, and over the centuries has stirred the imagination of millions. The courtly tale of the meeting in ancient Jerusalem of the two famous monarchs (I Kg. 1-10) has cast a long shadow, and has reverberated through the ages and across the world. In Ethiopia, it is not merely a literary masterpiece, it is a master text and a foundation document. Indeed, it is a holy document, much like the Hebrew Bible to the Jews and the Koran to the Moslems. Indeed, it forms the most illustrious expression of traditional Abyssinia's religious cultures.

The story derived from the Bible was early known in Ethiopia, and the Queen of Sheba was venerated as the national ancestress of the Ethiopian people. The story had a long period of gestation and growth there, and the concise, even terse, biblical account inspired centuries of popular imaginative additions. Ultimately, it came to include a great and tangled skein and conflation of cycles of tales and legends before it was finally committed to writing in the 14th century C.E. As the centerpiece and *pièce de résistance* of Ethiopia's national saga and epic the *Kebra Nagast* [The Glory of Kings] the tale takes up at least half of this epic. Compiled, redacted, co-coordinated and edited by the *neburā ed* [prior and governor] Yeshaq of Axun, the epic legitimized for eternity the Solomonic dynasty of Ethiopian Kings. (The late Haile Sellassie I, called the Lion of Judah, was the 225th ruler of this dynasty.)

The *Kebra Nagast* was first brought to Europe from Ethiopia by the intrepid mid-18th century Scottish explorer James Bruce of Kinnaird in two copies, which were catalogued by August Dillmann in 1848. The Solomon and Sheba centerpiece was translated into Latin by Franz Praetorius in 1870, and full translations of the 117-chapter work were done in German by Carl Bezold in 1905, and in English by Sir Wallace Budge in 1922. There are now "popular" translations in several European and other languages.

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The Solomon and Sheba story is an engaging, even charming tale. While the King is well-known, the Queen still remains to this day elusive and enigmatic, residing perpetually in the twilight zone of (sacred) mystery. According to the *Kebra Nagast*, the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon, and was so infatuated with him, his wisdom and his court, that she converted to Judaism and married him. After her return to Ethiopia she bore his son named Menelik.

The boy on reaching manhood visited his father and brought the Ark of the Covenant from Israel to Ethiopia, which became the New Zion, and enshrined it in Axum, which became the New Jerusalem. His mother abdicated in his favor and he became King Menelik I, the new David, reigning over the Ethiopian people who became the new Children of Israel. Menelik established a messianic succession and dynasty of Ethiopian Kings of the David-Solomonic line for eternity.



RESPONSES FROM RABBI HAYYIM HALPERN'S BOOK TORAH DIALOGUES

1. Because before this plague, he was warned to shelter the livestock and the people (Ex. 9:19-21).
2. *So that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary* (Ex. 28:35). The sound alerted the people to the High Priest's entry and exit. Rambam explains that before one enters the royal presence one must be announced (cf. Est. 4:11). So too, the sound of the bells precede the High Priest's entry before God.