

**NACOEJ CURRICULUM
ETHIOPIAN JEWS ARE PART OF THE WORLDWIDE
JEWISH COMMUNITY**

**TOPIC 2: WHY JEWS MIGRATED TO ETHIOPIA:
MYTHS, LEGENDS AND HISTORY**

-INFORMATIONAL CHRONOLOGY-

1200 BCE

There are myths, legends and historical information about the Jews of Ethiopia and how and why this one group of Jews, settled there during different periods of Jewish history starting thousands of years ago. Some scholars claim that in about 1,200 BCE some Hebrews who left Egypt with Moses during the time of the Exodus, never made it across the Red Sea. Instead, they traveled out of Egypt into Ethiopia.

900 BCE

The story of King Solomon and Queen Makeda of Sheba is a well-known legend told by people over the centuries. The story takes place about 900 BCE when King Solomon of Israel invited the Queen of Sheba to visit him. She came to Israel and stayed a long time. Her country, Sheba, is believed by scholars to have been in northern Ethiopia or southern Yemen. She was pregnant when she left Israel accompanied by 18,000 Israelites who settled in Sheba. She gave birth to a son who became King Menelik I of Ethiopia. When the child reached manhood, he traveled back to Israel to visit his father, King Solomon. He stayed in Israel for a long time. When he left, he took a large group of Israelites with him. Some believe he also took the Ark of the Covenant from Israel. To this day, Ethiopians claim the Ark of the Covenant is in St. Mary's Church in their holy city of Axum.

Another version of the same story has a different ending. In that story, the elders of Jerusalem were jealous of Menelik because King Solomon seemed to favor him. They pressured King Solomon to send him back to his country. The king agreed to send Menelik back to Sheba, but only if he was accompanied by the first-born of each of the Elders. These stories seem unlikely, because the kingdom that Queen Makeda would have ruled did not exist until several hundreds of years later.

8TH CENTURY BCE

In the 8th century BCE, Israel consisted of twelve tribes. Ten of them lived in territory in the north. Also, in the 8th century BCE, the powerful Assyrians invaded the north and conquered the Israelites. The ten tribes were scattered into many different regions. One of those tribes was the tribe of Dan. Scholars claim that they are the “lost tribe” of Israel that migrated into Ethiopia at that time to escape from the Assyrians.

6TH CENTURY BCE

In the 6th century BCE, the Babylonians conquered the two remaining Israelite tribes, the Judeans in the south, and exiled many people to Babylonia (present day Iraq). Subsequently, the great dispersion of many of the Jews started in 586 BCE, after the fall of the first temple—known as the Diaspora. Jews may have emigrated from the area of Jerusalem to Yemen and from there at some later time to Ethiopia.

There were Jews who lived in Egypt in the 6th century BCE on the island of Elephantine. There was a large, impressive Jewish temple there. Many Jews were soldiers and served as mercenaries in the Persian army.

4TH CENTURY BCE

In the 4th century, BCE, the Egyptians began to persecute the Jews. Their army destroyed the beautiful Jewish temple in Elephantine. Scholars speculate that the Jews could have escaped from the Egyptians by going up the Nile River to smaller tributaries and finally, into Lake Tana, the source of the Nile, in Ethiopia. They may have joined Jews who had already settled there.

1st CENTURY BCE-1st CENTURY CE

Some scholars theorize that the Beta Israel are descended from a group of black Cushites, the Agaw, who were converted to Judaism 2,000 years ago by Jewish merchants from Yemen.

4th CENTURY CE

For hundreds of years, the Jews in Ethiopia commanded a powerful kingdom of hundreds of thousands of people. During that time they defeated powerful armies. In the 4th century CE, however, Christian missionaries entered the country and Ethiopians began to convert to Christianity. This began the decline of Jewish dominance in the country. There were also times of peace and interchange of language, culture and religious practices between Jews and Christians, some of which exist even today.

13TH CENTURY CE

The 13th century was a time of turbulence in Ethiopia. A new dynasty replaced the old one. In order to establish their legitimacy, the new rulers claimed their right to rule as a “Solomonic” dynasty. They claimed they were descended from Solomon and Sheba. (Haile Selassie, in the 20th century was the last of Ethiopia’s Solomonic rulers. He was overthrown in 1974 by Colonel Haile Mariam Mengistu, a communist dictator.)

17TH CENTURY CE

In the 17th century, after 300 years of war, the Christians finally conquered the Jewish kingdom. The Jews were pushed from their land into less desirable territory in small villages in the northern high mountains where they lived for the next three centuries. They lived apart from other Ethiopians and in isolation from the outside world. They believed they were the only Jews who survived the ancient Diaspora.

19TH CENTURY CE

For almost two millennia, the Jews of Ethiopia did not know that a worldwide Jewish community existed. They continued to practice the ancient Mosaic Law of 2,000 years ago--the time of the dispersion of the Jews from Israel. In the late 19th century, European Jews who traveled to Africa discovered these Jews in Ethiopia. Finally, Ethiopian Jews, the “lost tribe”, were found and recognized as members of the worldwide Jewish community.

*Essential vocabulary words are underlined in the Informational Chronology and in the lesson. A vocabulary list is provided in the lesson for students’ use. Students should review the vocabulary prior to the lesson.