

# An early letter from Emperor Haile Sellassie to the Christian missionaries to the Jews

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The Amharic letter published and translated here was sent to me by the learned Brad Sabin Hill, formerly of the Centre for Hebrew Studies at Yarnton, Oxford, and currently at New York. I am not clear how this document reached him, but he possessed remarkable gifts of discovering out-of-the-way texts; and I am much beholden to him for sending me other Ethiopian records in the past. The present letter from the last Emperor of Ethiopia is perhaps the earliest letter written by him within two months of his coronation in November 1930—at any rate among those which have come either into my possession or of which I have knowledge.

As is usual, the text of the letter was penned by his principal scribe, while the signature is that of Haile Sellassie himself. Until he became Emperor he was known by his original name Tafari Makonnen, and it is remarkable that his new regnal name Haile Sellassie was written from the beginning to the very end of his life in a wholly identical manner. It would be impossible to produce even approximate chronological datings on the basis of the intricate and unvarying style of his signature.

As to the substance of the letter, it is impossible to imagine that that early missive could have been written thirty or forty years later, for the conversion of the Falashas to Christianity had long ceased to be a political or religious aim. In post-Second World War years Jewish efforts to transplant them to Israel had become increasingly clamorous, and Haile Sellassie greatly resented the planned removal of a sector of his population. All references to the persecution of the Falashas in Ethiopia and claims that their relations to their Christian neighbours resembled the current situation between Arabs and Jews in Israel are wide of the mark (see *Journal of Jewish Studies*, autumn 2001, p. 402).

The Ethiopian stamp, at the top of the document, reads in translation from Ge'ez (classical Ethiopic): 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed (cf. Revelation, 5: 5) Haile Sellassie the First, King of Kings of Ethiopia'. The same formula is repeated in the three opening lines of the text itself—with the addition of 'Elect of God, King of Kings of Ethiopia'. This version is, contrary to what has at times been alleged, not an invention of Emperor Haile Sellassie but is the motto of the Ethiopian Royal House.

The Amharic text of this missive reads in English translation as follows:

To the Christian missions sent to the Jews.  
Let there be peace unto you.

We thank you for the letter which We have received and which you sent to Us to participate in Our joy on the occasion of Our assuming the Imperial Crown.

We are not forgetting the good work which the Christian missionaries have been doing to teach the Jews and to convert them to believe in Christ as well as to return to Christianity Our citizens who are the Falashas of Ethiopia.

Therefore We renew to them the desire which has already been initiated by them to teach the Falashas; and We shall assist them in everything possible for Us also in the future.

Addis Ababa, 9th Ter 1923 (=17th January 1931).  
(signed) Haile Sellassie I, King of Kings.

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ጥፋ: ከንበሳ: ዘእምነገሳ: ይህ ዲ።  
ቀዳማዊ. ኃይለ: ሥላሴ ።

ሥፍራ: እገዢ ክብሩ: ንጉሠ: ነገሥት: ዘኢትዮጵያ።  
ይድረሱ: ወዲ: ከይሁዲት: ስሚኅኑ: የቤተ: ክርስቲያን: ሚሲዮኖች።  
ሰካም: ሰናገተ: ይሁን።

የንጉሠ: ነገሥትን: ዘውድ: በመሚናችን: ምክንያት: የደሰተችን: ተካ  
ፋይ: ስመሆን: የሳገችሁልን: ደብዳቤ: ስከ: ለረሰን: እናመሰግናችኋለን።  
ከይሁዲትን: ለማስተማርና: በክርስቲስ: ለማሳመን: የሚኅኑት: የቤተ:  
ክርስቲያን: ሚሲዮኖች: በኢትዮጵያ: ፈሳሾች: የሆኑትን: ጤንኞችን: ወዲ:  
ክርስቲያንነት: ለመመስሰ: የሚሠሩትን: መልካም: ሥራ: ከንዘነጋውም።-  
ስከ: ጤህም: ፈሳሾችን: ለማስተማር: የተጀመረሳቸውን: ፈቃድ: እኛም:  
ከድሰገናቸዋልና፤ ወዲ: ፊት: በሚቻለን: ሁሉ: እንረዳቸዋለን። ጥር: ፀቀ  
ን: ስጦታ: ማመተ: ምሕረት: ከዲሱ: ክበግ።

ፋ. ኃይለ: ሥላሴ. ንጉ.

The expression ‘to return the Falashas to Christianity’ is historically not justified, but the Emperor was aware that quite a number of Falashas had Christian parents or grandparents, either by conversion or by voluntary action. Even the most prominent Falasha, Tamrat Emanuel, was the son of Protestant parents, and he himself was a pupil at one of the excellent Swedish Mission schools in Eritrea. Even Faitlovitch, the most important Jewish influence on the Falashas, did not claim that the adherence of Tamrat and his family to the Protestant faith was in any way the result of missionary pressure. In any event, the Swedish mission never exerted either pressure or persuasion (see *JRAS*, 1986/2, p. 198).