

Haile Selassie in Jerusalem

Sanctuary for the Lion of Judah in the Holy City

Vicken V. Kalbian

A weighty, gold-plated dinner knife and fork set emblazoned with a lion – the Lion of Judah¹ – was a constant presence in a locked vitrine in my parents’ pre-1948 home in the Talbiyya neighborhood of Jerusalem. The valuable Ethiopian memento disappeared, along with the rest of my family’s treasured belongings, after the Israeli occupiers ransacked our house in 1948. How did my father come to possess these Ethiopian objects?

The Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie travelled twice to Jerusalem in the twentieth century. This article describes how the long history of the besieged Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem contextualizes the meaning of his visits. My personal connections to these historic events include the role that my father, Dr. Vahan Kalbian, played in Selassie’s 1936 visit, when my father was presented with this impressive royal gift. This essay focuses especially on the Armenian community’s connection to Ethiopia, of which my father’s experience is an important episode.

The Ethiopians and Jerusalem

Modern day Ethiopia, formerly known as Abyssinia (*al-Habasha* in Arabic), is often described as the “cradle of humankind.” In addition to a long and rich history, the modern Ethiopians have a long-standing connection to Jerusalem.² According to the Bible,³ the legendary Queen Makada of Sheba (assumed to be an Abyssinian), visited Jerusalem in the tenth century BCE, a tale also recorded in the Abyssinian myth *Kebra Negast* (“Glory to the Kings”). The purpose of her visit, as described in the Abyssinian legend, was to learn governing skills from the renowned King Solomon. They became intimate friends

and she converted to Judaism.⁴ They had a son, Menilek, who Solomon dreamt was to be the leader of a new order in Israel. After the dream, Solomon sent Queen Makada home and told her to send their son back to Jerusalem when he came of age. When Menilek later returned to Jerusalem as a young man to be taught governance by his father, Solomon offered to make him the prince of Jerusalem. Menilek declined and returned home to become the first ruler of Abyssinia; he was later claimed by the last reigning Ethiopian royal family to be their direct ancestor.⁵ One of the revered titles of the emperors of Abyssinia, “The Conquering Lion of Judah,” was an emblem ever-present on their national flag.⁶

According to legend, the Queen of Sheba pilfered the Ark of the Covenant from Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem on her way out of Judah, although many Ethiopians now believe that it was Menilek who brought the Ark to Ethiopia on his return to Axum after visiting his father in Jerusalem.⁷ The remains of the Ark are now said to be in a small chapel in the monastic complex of Saint Mary of Zion Church in Axum, Ethiopia.

The early influences of Judaism that were brought back by the Queen of Sheba were never abandoned over the centuries. Traditional sources claim that Judaism was practiced side by side with the animism that existed in Abyssinia before the introduction of Christianity.⁸ Ethiopia’s language is Amharic, the second most commonly spoken Semitic language in the world after Arabic, manifesting the country’s close affinity to Judaism. This relationship might lead one to ponder if the current Ethiopian national flag, with its five-pointed star centerpiece replacing the earlier “Lion of Judah,” is a tribute to Ethiopia’s Solomonic connections. Also Abyssinian churches are typically built in a circular shape over a replica of the Ark of the Covenant in the central altar, similar to the Jewish temple.

In the 1980s and 1990s, over 100,000 Ethiopians who claimed Jewish lineage – referred to as the Falash Mura – were airlifted from Ethiopia and relocated to Israel. Several thousand more remained in Ethiopia and engaged in a decades-long battle with Israel for permission to immigrate there. Finally, in 2015, the Israeli government granted permission to the remaining Falash Mura, but their acceptance, according to the Israeli Interior Ministry, was “conditioned on a successful Jewish conversion process.”⁹

Christianity reached Abyssinia as early as the first century ce, as mentioned in the New Testament.¹⁰ However, it was not officially declared the state religion until 330 ce, and only then as an integral part of the Apostolic Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, established by St. Mark. The Armenians, the Syrian Jacobites, the Copts, and the Ethiopians make up the Eastern Orthodox churches, designated as the monophysites after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 ce.¹¹ The Abyssinian Church was led by a bishop (*abuna*) appointed by the Coptic bishopric of Alexandria.¹² It remained part of the Coptic Church until 1959 when the churches separated due to deteriorating relationships between Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and the emperor of Ethiopia. Since the Ethiopian church had gained autonomy, the Coptic Orthodox pope of Alexandria granted the church its own patriarch. Numerically it still remains the largest of all the Eastern Orthodox churches, and continues to exert considerable influence in modern Ethiopia.

The Ethiopians and the Holy Sepulcher

In common with the other Christian apostolic churches, the Ethiopian church has had a continuous presence in Jerusalem since the mid-thirteenth century until the present, with a special bond to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The Ethiopians had minor holdings inside the church, but lost them in the nineteenth century. Historically, what were considered the three “minor” churches – the Abyssinian, the Coptic, and the Syriac – had their properties and privileges under the aegis of the Armenian Church, which shares “ownership” of the Holy Sepulcher equally with the Latin and Greek Orthodox churches. The Ethiopians had possession of St. Helena’s Chapel,¹³ but they lost it to the Armenians in 1838 when an epidemic wiped out the Abyssinian clergy. The Egyptian Copts, who had a stronger presence in the Holy Sepulcher, moved in and mistreated the surviving Ethiopian monks, seizing their assets so that currently the Ethiopians have no holdings inside the church.¹⁴ Their sole possession is what remains of a medieval Crusader cloister, now a courtyard, on the roof of the Armenian St. Helena’s Chapel. They also hold two adjoining chapels, strategically situated on the sole access leading down to the main entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The roof/courtyard can also be reached from the major thoroughfare of the Old City, Suq Khan al-Zayt, after Zalatimo’s sweets shop.¹⁵

The Ethiopians named their rooftop area Dayr al-Sultan (Monastery of Solomon). A *Washington Post* article in 1993 described the living situation of the monks and nuns as several primitive, unsanitary, residential cabins. The article elaborates:

The Ethiopians have tried for years to get the Israeli minister of religious affairs to assist them in doing desperately needed repairs on the roofs of the single-level mud huts. Two months ago, the government rebuilt a wall that collapsed during a snow storm last year. Some of the hovels are in such disrepair they have to be cordoned off.¹⁶

Unsuspecting tourists enter the compound unaware of the monks worsening conditions. They are greeted by a foul smell that is masked with strong disinfectant emanating from the broken-down toilets. The tiny courtyard is surrounded by nearly forty makeshift, dingy gray structures. An online petition circulated in 2011 urging Israel’s prime minister to repair the monastery suggests that the poor conditions have persisted.¹⁷ More recently, St. Michael Church closed due to a roof collapse caused by repair work on the Holy Sepulcher.¹⁸

On the other hand, the convent which houses the Coptic patriarchate is an elaborate structure built on an old cistern located on the north side of the rooftop courtyard. Two Ethiopian chapels on the south end of the courtyard, the Chapel of the Angels and the adjoining Chapel of Saint Michael, provide the only access from the rooftop down to the Holy Sepulcher (figures 1 and 2). This posed a predicament for the Coptic clergy who had to cross the Ethiopian courtyard and go through the locked Ethiopian chapels in order to gain access to the stairs leading down to the Holy Sepulcher (figure 3).



Figure 1. Ethiopian property on the roof of the Holy Sepulcher.



Figure 2. Ethiopian monks' rooms on the roof of the Holy Sepulcher.

Another contested issue has been the possession of the keys to these chapels, which most recently ended up in Ethiopian hands. This situation has angered and humiliated the Copts for over a century and has culminated in several bloody confrontations between the two rival clergy, despite the close alignment of their religious beliefs. Their most violent disagreement erupted on Easter Sunday in 1970: while the Coptic clergy were praying in the Holy Sepulcher celebrating Easter mass, the Ethiopians “changed the locks at the ends of the disputed passageway which runs through Ethiopian property.”¹⁹ The dispute was resolved through the Israeli courts in favor of the Ethiopians who now have the keys. The political expediency may have stemmed from concern at the time that “angering Ethiopia could hamper the emigration of the country’s Jewish community.”²⁰

“Ownership in the Holy Sepulcher is not absolute,” according to Raymond Cohen, a professor of international relations at Hebrew University. “Those who reside in it have the right of possession, in the sense that they can hold and use it, but do not have title and cannot dispose of the property, either by sale or gift.”²¹ The overpowering authority of ownership lies in the Status Quo agreement that “all will remain forever in their present state.” The Status Quo arrangement was agreed to as early as 1757, confirmed by the Ottoman sultan in 1852, and by the European powers in 1856 at the Treaty of Paris.²² Since then, whenever an occupying power in Jerusalem would pass legal resolutions, they would be rescinded by the overruling Status Quo. Historically the holdings and privileges of the Abyssinian Church, as well as those of the Coptic and Syriac Churches, have been under the aegis of the Armenian Church. The Armenian Church granted the Ethiopians – who had no preexisting rights inside the Church – certain liturgical privileges based on the Status Quo protocol.²³ The Armenian Church is the only Eastern Orthodox church recognized to have actual rights under the protocol of the Status Quo in the Holy Sepulcher, a concession that is shared equally by the Greek Orthodox and the Catholic churches.

Regardless of the Status Quo, the courts of whatever power was occupying Jerusalem have issued legal decisions in the past. In the second half of the twentieth century, both the Ethiopian and Egyptian governments intervened in affairs, and as a result of their intervention, the Status Quo was bypassed for political convenience. For example, in



Figure 3. Stairs from roof to portico.

1961 the Jordanians formally recognized Ethiopian ownership of the two chapels and the passageway and transferred to the Ethiopians the keys for the passage to the Holy Sepulcher. After official Egyptian intervention, the decision was suspended and the previous situation was restored. As mentioned earlier the most violent disagreement between the Copts and the Ethiopians erupted on Easter in 1970 when the Ethiopians changed the locks to the access route. A fistfight between the two protagonists in June 2002 resulted in the hospitalization of eleven monks: “. . . chairs, iron bars, and fists flew on the roof of one of the most revered sites

in Christianity, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. When the dust cleared, seven Ethiopian monks and four Coptic monks had been injured. The fight started when an Egyptian monk decided to move his chair into the shade – technically, argued the Ethiopians, encroaching on the latter’s jurisdiction.”²⁴

The Ethiopian liturgical ceremonies are especially lively with colorful vestments and some basic African rituals like clapping hands, dancing to drumbeats, and burning incense. As in other Orthodox churches, there is no seating, and shoes must be removed during services. Perhaps the most memorable ceremony is on the eve of Easter, under a bright moonlight, when they celebrate the Resurrection on the roof of the Holy Sepulcher, dancing three times around the chapel under ceremonial umbrellas, searching for the body of Christ. It is a dramatic reminder of their African roots and remains a highly popular ceremony for the intrepid tourists and religious pilgrims in Jerusalem.

The Ethiopian Community Outside of the Old City

In addition to the lanky, austere-looking monks living on the rooftop of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem has also been home to a small community of lay Ethiopians, mostly tradesmen engaged in supporting the monks by taking on odd jobs. I remember from the summer evenings of my childhood, the *habashi* peanut vendors peddling the fresh, aromatic, roasted peanuts on Jaffa Road and in the Old City near the Lutheran church. They carried small portable ovens to roast the peanuts and would dispense them in cones made of old newspapers. We called the tasty peanuts *fustuq abid*, which translates literally as the peanut of slaves.

The main street facing north from Damascus Gate and curving to the west towards Jaffa Road was built in the Ottoman era to accommodate Jerusalem’s expanding population. Several hospitals and foreign consulates were erected on what became known in mandate days as *shari’ al-nabi*, Prophets’ Street.²⁵ It was along this street that the Ethiopian community, urged and supported by the imperial family, settled in the 1880s. A side street, leading north, became known as Abyssinian Street. The land had been purchased

in 1910 and construction begun after Ethiopian empress Taytu Betul had pressured her adviser Katarina Hall, to persuade her son-in-law – Baron Plato von Ustinov, who owned the Hôtel du Parc in Jaffa (figure 4) – to acquire property in Jerusalem.²⁶

After von Ustinov died in 1917 his widow Magdalena sold the inherited property to Ethiopian nobility, encouraged by the empress who was instrumental in completing the buildings. The circular domed Mount of Paradise Church and the convent, which currently houses Ethiopian Orthodox nuns, were built according to plans of the renowned German architect Conrad Schick.²⁷ In 1924, Empress Zawditu of Ethiopia, while on a pilgrimage to the Holy City, expanded the construction. Near the church, a building was erected to house the community of lay Ethiopians. Another elaborate building was built in 1928 and designated as a palace (figure 5). Some of the buildings in the compound are currently rented out and provide much needed income for the maintenance of the monks in the Old City.

Haile Selassie`s First Visit to Jerusalem

Haile Selassie (1892–1975), whose name literally means Power of the Trinity, was born Tafari Makonnen Walda Mikael, from imperial lineage through his paternal grandmother, Princess Tenagnework Sahle Selassie, who was an aunt of an earlier ruler, the Emperor Menelik II. In 1916 at the age of twenty-four years she was chosen to become the regent of Abyssinia, nominally becoming head of state (*ras*) and heir to the throne, which was then occupied by Empress Zawditu who had no offspring.²⁸ Haile Selassie`s education from private European tutors inspired him to modernize Ethiopia and abolish slavery, and allowed him to be fluent in French, which remained his preferred language of communication with foreigners. He was instrumental in having Ethiopia admitted to the League of Nations in 1923, thus acquiring a seat in the highest global forum. In response to invitations from European monarchs and heads of states, the Ethiopian government approved his request to make official visits to Western capitals.²⁹ Previous monarchs had travelled abroad but this was the first time that a regent was requesting to travel as the representative of the state.³⁰



Figure 4. Modern view of von Ustinov`s Hôtel du Parc in Jaffa.



Figure 5. Palace built in 1928 with the Lion of Judah inlay. Photo taken by Carol Khoury in 2017.

In April of 1924 he made his international debut by taking an extensive trip to Europe and the Middle East to establish diplomatic relationships. He travelled by rail to the port city of Djibouti, a French colony in French Eritrea and sailed to Egypt on the SS Porthos of the French Messageries Maritimes shipping line. He then boarded the train at Qantara for Jerusalem. The Abyssinian royalty traditionally has had a strong affection for Jerusalem and members of the royal family had visited the Holy City in the past. He was welcomed at the Jerusalem train station by the British high commissioner Sir Herbert Samuel and reigning religious dignitaries. His first stop was the Holy Sepulcher for which he had a particular attachment. His trip coincided with Easter week so he was able to take part in all of the traditional ceremonies, culminating in the ceremony of the Holy Fire in the Holy Sepulcher on Easter Saturday. He then spent ten days visiting significant holy and historic sites in Jerusalem and the rest of the country.³¹

Haile Selassie had come to Jerusalem with very clear objectives. As a devout Christian he was making a solemn pilgrimage following in the footsteps of his father. He visited all of the venerated sites, genuflected and “kissed every sacred stone.”³² He also wanted to affirm his allegiance to the Abyssinian faith and clear his reputation from allegations in Addis Ababa that he had converted to Catholicism while being tutored by a French Catholic monsignor. Additionally he referred to his visit as a “business trip” specifically to help out the destitute and disenfranchised Abyssinian community, who at the time numbered in the hundreds living in primitive accommodations on the roof of the Holy Sepulcher. He wrote to the Coptic bishop Abuna Timotewos to suggest that on his return from Europe, he would meet with him to discuss Ethiopian–Coptic grievances.

He also negotiated with the Greek patriarch to acquire as outright patrimony a room in the Monastery of Abraham, situated in the courtyard of the Holy Sepulcher, to be converted into a chapel for the use of the Ethiopians to celebrate mass. In return he donated to the Greek patriarch 375 acres of land near Addis Ababa where the Greeks would be allowed to build a monastery.³³ Finally he oversaw the Ethiopian properties on Ethiopia Street outside the Old City, which were generating much needed income to support the monks.

Among the many personalities he called on, one visit led to remarkable consequences. He went to the Armenian convent to pay his respects to the Armenian patriarch Yeghishe Tourian, again as a demonstration of his solidarity with monophysitism, and visited the magnificent St. James Cathedral in the Old City (*Soorp Hagop*). Fully aware of the historic association between the Ethiopian and Armenian faiths and the similarity of their written script, he was impressed by the Armenian community’s achievements and their extended presence in Jerusalem.³⁴

He especially appreciated the music provided for the occasion of his visit by a brass band made up of children aged 15 to 18 years old, from the three Armenian orphanages in the city, who survived the Armenian genocide of 1915.³⁵ They had been brought to Jerusalem in 1922 from the wilderness of Dayr al-Zur province in Syria, via Mosul, Basra, Alexandria, and Jaffa by the U.S.-based Near East Foundation.³⁶ Armenian Patriarch Tourian informed him that the care of these forty talented young musicians posed a large financial burden on the Armenian patriarchate. In response, Haile Selassie, as Ras Tafari, offered

them a permanent home in Addis Ababa as a compassionate gesture. After securing the signed endorsement and blessing of the Armenian patriarch, he invited the whole band of young musicians and their teacher and conductor to move to Addis Ababa and become the resident royal musicians as Ethiopian citizens. A formal five-year contract granting them full residency was signed with the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the agency that had been charged with the welfare of the orphans. The Jerusalem Armenian community enthusiastically acknowledged Haile Selassie's action. On 1 May he took the train back to Egypt and sailed on to Europe where he met with political leaders, including the newly elected prime minister of Italy, Benito Mussolini, with whom he discussed possible use of the port of Assab in Italian Eritrea as an outlet for his landlocked country.³⁷ On his return from the successful European tour, the Jerusalem orphans who waited in Port Said joined him and travelled on to Addis Ababa.

Haile Selassie does not mention the incident of the orphan band in his memoirs but he makes subtle references to their contributions for the betterment of the imperial image in Addis Ababa. Such brass bands, usually supplied by the military, were common in Europe where each country had its own patriotic national anthem. They played a useful role in the protocol of receiving foreign dignitaries as they played the visitor's national anthem on their arrival. Ethiopia had neither a band nor a national anthem. One can assume that his motives were self-serving in view of his need for an official band of musicians at his court to receive and entertain visiting foreign dignitaries. More importantly, Abyssinia did not have a national anthem, an all-important symbol to play for trips to foreign countries. He felt that a national anthem would promote national pride and a greater semblance of modernity.



Figure 6. Armenian Patriarch Tourian and the musicians in front of St. James Cathedral. Haile Selassie is fourth from the right.

Ani Aslanian describes the orphans' reception in Addis Ababa:

The 40 Armenian orphans arrived in the capital on September 6, 1924, accompanied by Father Hovhannes Simonian, and officially became known

as the Arba Lijoch (Forty Children, in Amharic). The Arba Lijoch formed the royal imperial brass band of Ethiopia and the boys were allocated a monthly stipend, provided with housing and trained by their musical director, Kevork Nalbandian, an Armenian orphan himself. Haile Selassie was so impressed with the band's collection, that in 1926 he asked Nalbandian to compose Ethiopia's national anthem. Nalbandian composed the National Anthem, "Teferi Marsh, Ethiopia Hoy," which translates to "Ethiopia, be happy" and it was performed by the forty orphans for the first time in public during Haile Selassie's official crowning as Emperor on November 2, 1930 in Addis Ababa.³⁸



Figure 7. Band in Addis Ababa with their master, Haigaz Boyajian, royal photographer of Ethiopia.

After the emperor's coronation the band disbanded and many of its members remained in Ethiopia. In 1915 there had been only 200 Armenians in Addis Ababa but the community expanded significantly and flourished under Haile Selassie's rule, bolstered by the arrival of the orphans and many more gifted Armenians. He had opened the door for Armenian

survivors of the genocide to settle in Addis Ababa. Their energetic entrepreneurship would contribute to transform and modernize the city into a thriving capital of culture and commerce. There was a steady flow of Armenian engineers, photographers, pharmacists, doctors, accountants, and entrepreneurs. They were well received and were not treated as *franjis* (foreigners). My brother Adom Kalbian, a certified accountant, moved to Addis Ababa in 1954, and soon married an Armenian woman born in Ethiopia. At its peak there were over two thousand Armenians living and working in Addis Ababa with a vigorous church, a high school and a club, but after the Marxist revolution only fifty Armenians remained.

Haile Selassie in Exile

Haile Selassie visited Jerusalem again twelve years later in 1936, but unfortunately the second visit was less auspicious. In 1930 he had been crowned emperor, ascending to the throne as the supreme leader of Ethiopia. The events of the ensuing decade dramatically altered his supremacy as East Africa went through a period of turmoil as a consequence of European colonial expansion. Between 1881 and 1914 the European powers scrambled to seize as much of Africa as they could. Whereas in 1870 only 10 percent of Africa was under European control, by 1914 Europeans controlled 90 percent of the continent, with only Abyssinia and Liberia remaining independent.³⁹

In the 1880s Italy had already occupied Somalia and Eritrea in line with the wave of colonialist expansionism, but it coveted neighboring Christian Ethiopia, with its precious mineral resources. The first encounter between the Italians and the Ethiopians took place in January 1887 when a force of 500 Italians met an army of 20,000 Ethiopians at Dogali in northwest Ethiopia. The Ethiopians wiped out the Italian intruders thus persuading Italy to delay its territorial aspirations for another forty years.⁴⁰ A peace treaty was signed in the ensuing years but skirmishes continued for decades with the Italians unable to gain any foothold in Ethiopia. The Italians vowed to return and incursions persisted until 1934 when the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini used a border incident between Ethiopia and Italian Somalia as an excuse to march into Ethiopia. All arbitrations to settle the dispute failed, and the Italians invaded Ethiopia on 3 October 1935. The ill-equipped Ethiopians were no match for the modernized Italian army, led by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, and its unchallenged airpower. The Italians used mustard gas against the Ethiopian army and the civilian population, including the royal family. The Ethiopians were defeated and suffered heavy losses, and the fall of Addis Ababa was imminent. On 2 May 1936, the Emperor and his family decided to leave, not only to avoid capture, but also to seek a sanctuary for his family and then proceed to Geneva to personally appeal to the League of Nations. However, in the few days before the Italians occupied the capital Addis Ababa on 5 May 1936, the city was ransacked by its citizenry. On 9 May Mussolini declared King Victor Emanuel III as the new Emperor of Ethiopia and proclaimed Ethiopia as a province of the Italian empire. In celebration, Badoglio returned to Rome and took with him Haile

Selassie's throne as a war trophy; he later converted it reportedly into a bed for his dog.⁴¹

The Ethiopian appeal to the League of Nations amounted simply to a condemnation of the Italian invasion. The League voted to impose economic sanctions on the aggressor but the sanctions were never implemented, and by the end of July were withdrawn. The British, who had the largest stake in East Africa, viewed Mussolini's aggression with a mixed response of consent and disfavor, but they took no action and the sanctions became meaningless because of lack of broad international support from the colonialist-minded Europeans. However, the British remained supporters of the emperor and were instrumental in ousting the Italians in 1941.

The invasion of Ethiopia had significant political consequences. The awkward and indifferent reaction from Western powers to the overt aggression encouraged German dictator Adolf Hitler to plan similar expansionist adventures in Europe. The invasion also became a significant factor in the collapse of the League of Nations, the failure of the concept of collective security against aggression,⁴² and contributed to tensions between the Axis and the Western democracies that would eventually cascade into World War II. In Africa, it served to energize the developing African nationalist movements in the second half of the twentieth century.⁴³

The Departure from Addis Ababa

On 12 May 1936, physically exhausted and disheartened, the emperor finally abandoned Addis Ababa and boarded the train to French Djibouti with his family and entourage carrying all his movable assets.⁴⁴ In his autobiography, Haile Selassie explained that he left his homeland in order to personally present his case in front of the League of Nations and also, with the approval of the British government, find a safe haven for his family in Jerusalem. He knew that they would be welcomed in Palestine as the British had been sympathetic and supportive of his cause, although they had stayed out of the military conflict. Additionally, as Thomas Coffey writes, "he had also escaped the indignity of being captured by the Italians." Coffey portrays the Haile Selassie's final day in Addis Ababa as follows:

With the advice of his beleaguered councilors, the Emperor decided that he should leave with his family and go to Geneva to appeal to the League members for their help and support. So at two pm on May 2nd he and the empress got into their car accompanied by their sons and daughters followed by thirty court dignitaries and started his long exile. They were driven to the train station and boarded the train to Djibouti in French Somalia. After a thirty-hour journey through the hot desert of eastern Ethiopia and Somalia the train reached Djibouti on May 3rd. They were accorded full military honors as three ranks of French soldiers fired a royal salute as he emerged on the station platform. An eyewitness described him as "travel strained,

wearily, haggard and dejected.” The Empress wore a heavy veil and appeared to be “overcome by emotion.” The French governor general, who was at the station to meet the party, drove with them to his executive mansion where a luncheon had been prepared.⁴⁵

The next day, 4 May, they boarded the British cruiser HMS *Enterprise* in Djibouti harbor. The French bid a royal farewell by firing gun salutes as their planes flew over the cruiser as it departed heading north to Egypt. After passing through the Suez Canal, the imperial entourage stopped in Port Said where they were cheered by some of their countrymen living there. They sailed on to Haifa.

Emperor’s Arrival in Haifa

On the morning of 8 May, the HMS *Enterprise* quietly entered the port of Haifa.

It must have been an intimidating moment for the hapless emperor when, at the entrance to the harbor, the Italian passenger liner *Carnaro* suddenly began to blare the Italian national anthem, “Giovanezza,” to celebrate the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.⁴⁶ There was no military salute or fanfare in Haifa to mark the emperor’s arrival, as he was not on an official visit, nor was he a guest of the British administration, although a military band did play the Ethiopian national anthem.⁴⁷ Only the minimal honors were rendered: the British acting district commissioner of Haifa, C. Pirie Gordon, welcomed Haile Selassie and his consort as they disembarked. Hasan Bey Shukri, the Arab mayor of Haifa, also greeted the emperor (figure 8).⁴⁸ They walked to the nearby train station and boarded the train to Jerusalem through an honor guard of the Royal Marines. Only a small crowd of curious onlookers was at hand. In the

meantime cheery British marines were unloading the emperor’s luggage, including one hundred steel cases containing gold and fifteen cases of treasury valuables as well as ten tons



Figure 8. Arrival in Haifa, 8 May 1936. From the Matson Collection, Library of Congress.



Figure 9. Luggage being unloaded, Library of Congress.

of his personal belongings, as the diminutive emperor walked to the nearby train station heading for Jerusalem (figures 9).

The royal entourage of forty-six people travelled with British guards in the private coach of the general manager of the Palestine Railways. At four-thirty on a calm sunny afternoon, they reached their final destination, Jerusalem, a city that from biblical times has welcomed exiles.



Figure 10. Arrival of the emperor in Jerusalem railway station, 8 May 1936.

Emperor's Arrival in Jerusalem

The arrival of the emperor coincided with the Arab Revolt, which had started in mid-April of 1936. The whole of Arab Palestine, under the leadership of the mufti Haj Amin al-Husayni at the head of the newly formed Arab Higher Committee, was engulfed in a general strike and episodic rioting amid heightened tensions. The greeting party (figures 10 and 11) at the station was led by the district commissioner, J. E. F. Campbell, representing the high commissioner who was on a trip to the Sinai,⁴⁹ and by the Arab mayor of Jerusalem, Husayn al-Khalidi (wearing a *tarbush*). The Ethiopian consul in Port Said came down and led the district commissioner onto the train to discuss the details of his lodging with the court advisers. The emperor decided that his family would stay at the King David Hotel while his 30-member entourage would be housed at the Citadel Hotel in the Old City inside Jaffa Gate.

Despite the general strike and risk of sporadic shooting, a festive crowd, estimated at 5,000 people, gathered to watch this historic event. They broke into loud applause as the royal family disembarked from the train. The representative of the high commissioner formally greeted the imperial family (figure 11). The empress, wearing a topee and a long white robe, was the first to emerge, followed by the diminutive emperor, who appeared gaunt and tired. He wore a white robe, white trousers, and white shoes, and was accompanied by his constant companion, an unleashed pet dog, a white and tan Pomeranian. Next came the princes and the rest of the family. They all rode in three Arab taxicabs through the deserted street leading to the King David Hotel about a mile away. The Arab Motor Strike Committee granted a special exemption for the three Arab taxi drivers to break the strike for this special occasion. The head of the committee, the well-respected Arab nationalist, Hassan Sidqi Dajani, "personally supervised the transport arrangements and opened the doors of the motor cars for the guests."⁵¹

At the King David Hotel, the general manager welcomed them and led them to the royal suite on the first floor facing the Old City. They were accompanied by the emperor's English-speaking private secretary and spokesperson, Walda Giyorgis. The rooms were constantly guarded by British soldiers. According to George Ward Price, the London



Figure 11. J. Campbell, facing camera, greeting the emperor, with Jerusalem's mayor Husayn al-Khalidi at left.⁵⁰

Daily Mail correspondent, their suite consisted of a drawing room, dining room, three double bedrooms and two servant's rooms. Reporters tried in vain to access the emperor but they were told that "His majesty is desperately tired." However the correspondent went on to write: "the first act was to send for the hotel hairdresser and get the Emperor's hair cut. Then they sat down to a dinner consisting of vegetable soup, filet of sole, roast chicken, asparagus, ices, and fruit."⁵²

Early next morning, 9 May, he was driven to Jaffa Gate with a small entourage under police escort on motorcycles. His car was surrounded by a curious, but friendly, crowd of men, most of whom were wearing a *tarbush* or *kufiya*.⁵³ He walked down David's Street and on to Christian Street towards the Holy Sepulcher. He took off his shoes as he entered the Holy Sepulcher, and stopped at the Stone of Unction, where Christians believe the body of Christ was laid after the crucifixion. He fell on his knees and kissed the stone repeatedly as he prayed. Then he approached the tomb but had to wait until the Roman Catholics had finished their service before he could enter it for prayer and meditation. After this he was led to the Ethiopian convent of Dayr al-Sultan where he was joined by his extended family and celebrated mass. He returned on Sunday morning where the leading members of the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem joined the imperial family in prayers for the loss of their homeland.

One of his priorities during his time in Jerusalem was the disposition of his treasures.⁵⁴

He consulted the esteemed general manager of the Barclays Bank, A. P. S. Clarke.⁵⁵ The emperor's secretary confirmed the report that the emperor had already deposited from £4 million to £5 million in London banks. He inquired about the Jerusalem bank's ability to store his treasures, and also about the state of the exchange market. It was agreed that the treasures would be kept in the bank's strong room for safekeeping. The empress's own fortune had been transferred to banks in Paris, Cairo, and Jerusalem. The emperor also had with him £1.5 million in gold.

Haile Selassie took walks in the hotel flower garden, and he apparently enjoyed the views of the Old City. He also liked watching cars go by on Julian Way, the street between the hotel and the YMCA.⁵⁶ There were sometimes small, annoying demonstrations outside the hotel, with members of the Italian community chanting "Viva Mussolini." Eyewitnesses described him as feeble, weak, and depressed.

The emperor visited the British high commissioner, Sir Arthur Wauchope, at Government House on Jabal Mukabir to express his gratitude to the British government for their attention. The next day my father, Dr. Vahan Kalbian, the official physician assigned to Government House during the British Mandate, was asked by Sir Arthur to perform a thorough medical examination at the request of the British Foreign office in London and the League of Nations in Geneva, specifically to determine whether the emperor had been exposed to poison gas in Ethiopia as he had claimed.⁵⁷ The London papers, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*, as well as the *New York Times* and the local *Palestine Post*, all reported the event on that date.⁵⁸ They confirmed that Dr. Kalbian had been officially asked by the Foreign Office in London to visit the emperor at the King David Hotel on 10 May. The following is my recollection of my father's account of the encounter with the emperor:

I was received by the emperor's ADC [aide-de-camp] and his private physician and led to the drawing room of the suite where the royal family was relaxing. The emperor was expecting me and we were able to converse



Figure 12. Excerpt of May 11, 1936 London Daily Mail article "My Death Would Not Have Helped: Negus Explains Why He Fleed," by G. Ward Price. Paragraph about my father is circled.

freely in French. The emperor described his symptoms, consisting of fatigue, a dry cough, anxiety, and the fact that he had not had one good night's sleep for weeks which he blamed on the "poison gas" used by the Italians. Then we went into the bedroom where I was able to conduct a detailed examination, looking in particular for evidence of gas exposure. I did not find the emperor's eyes to be congested, nor was his throat irritated or inflamed, and his lungs were clear. I also examined the empress and found her in good health as well. I told the emperor that I found no evidence of gas exposure but that he was evidently suffering from physical and mental exhaustion brought on by lack of sleep, anxiety, and depression as a result of the catastrophic events that overwhelmed his country. I felt that the emperor needed a good night's sleep for which I prescribed a sleeping pill. As at that hour there were no open pharmacies, I left a vial containing nine capsules of Veronal from my medical bag with the emperor. [This was the first commercially available barbiturate used as a hypnotic and sleep aid in the first half of the twentieth century – ed.] I instructed the emperor and the empress to each take one pill for sleep. I hurried home to write my formal report to submit to the High Commissioner. This report was to be cabled to London and across the world to give me my "fifteen minutes of fame."

I returned to the hotel the next morning for a follow-up and found that the emperor was up and having a hearty breakfast. He was feeling much better, more energetic, and he reported that he had slept through the night. I was asked to join him for breakfast, which I did. After breakfast we went back to the bedroom for another check-up. I reassured the emperor that there was no evidence of gas exposure. He then asked [me] to return for further visits, as it was clear that the emperor wanted to socialize. As I was leaving, I asked the emperor's physician about the fate of the sleeping pills. I had noticed that of the nine pills I had left at the bedside, there were only three remaining in the vial. The emperor's physician was quick to answer with a chuckle that apparently after my visit, the emperor was distrustful of his hosts and their designated physician, and he thought that those pills might be a plot to poison him. He therefore sent for a stray dog. One of his aides went with the hotel driver to the animal shelter near Birkat Sultan and brought back a stray dog. The emperor saw to it that the dog swallowed four of the pills that my father had left. The emperor waited several hours to make sure that the dog was alive and asleep. It was only then that he and the empress each took a Veronal and went to sleep.

On a subsequent visit with the emperor, he confided to me his apprehensions of the first night and was grateful for having been prescribed the right medicine. He trusted me and invited me to visit him again during his two-week sojourn in Jerusalem. Before his departure he presented me with the "gilded fork and knife." From 1941–1948, every Christmas I would

receive a gift of Ethiopian coffee from the imperial palace in Addis Ababa personally delivered by the Ethiopian Consul in Jerusalem.⁵⁹

Epilogue

Twenty-five years later, during Easter week in 1961, I was working at Augusta Victoria Hospital in Jerusalem when I received a call from a member of the Ethiopian royal family staying at the National Hotel on al-Zahra Street, asking my father to come to the hotel to treat the visiting empress of Ethiopia who was spending the Holy Week in Jerusalem. All of Jerusalem was aware of the imperial visit as a large Ethiopian Airlines jet was parked at Qalandiya airport in full view from the road to Ramallah. The empress had specifically asked for my father. I explained that my father had retired and that I would gladly substitute. The empress agreed reluctantly, and I presented myself at the hotel. She was disappointed that father had retired and was obviously not too comfortable with a “young doctor.” After taking care of her medical problem, we had a short chat and she recalled her visit to Jerusalem with the emperor in 1936, and the encounter with my father. She expressed her gratitude with kind words of appreciation. I did not tell her of the sad fate of the gilded fork and knife which the emperor had given to my father in 1936!

Dr. Vicken V. Kalbian, a retired physician living in Winchester, Virginia, in the US, was born in Jerusalem. He has published several articles about the history of Jerusalem. The author thanks Professor Peter Garretson for his comments on an early draft of this article, and Professor Aline Kalbian for her editorial assistance.

Endnotes

- 1 The subtitle is from H.V. Morton's account of Selassie's 1936 visit to Jerusalem. See H.V. Morton, "The Defeated Emperor of Abyssinia Seeking a Temporary Refuge among the Abyssinian Community in Jerusalem," *Daily Herald*, 9 May 1936. Morton was a British journalist who wrote extensively about the Holy Land. See, for example, two volumes first published in 1934: *In the Steps of St. Paul* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002) and *In the Steps of the Master* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002).
- 2 The name of the country was changed to Ethiopia in the 1920s. The terms Ethiopian and Abyssinian are used here interchangeably.
- 3 1 Kings 10:2.
- 4 1 Kings 10:13.
- 5 See "Christianity in Ethiopia," *Wikipedia*, online at [wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity in Ethiopia](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Ethiopia) (accessed 30 March 2018).
- 6 His other titles are King of Kings, Elect of God.
- 7 Bernard Leeman, "The Ark of the Covenant: Evidence Supporting the Ethiopian Traditions," online at www.ethiopianorthodox.org/amharic/holybooks/arkofthecovenant.pdf (accessed 11 February 2018).
- 8 "The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: Ethiopian Church History," online at www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/history.html (accessed 11 February 2018).
- 9 "Israel Okays Immigration for Last Group of Ethiopian Falash Mura," *Reuters*, 15 November 2015, online at www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-ethiopia-idUSKCN0T411Q20151115 (accessed 12 August 2017).
- 10 Acts 8:26–38.
- 11 The Christological position called monophysitism asserted that in the person of Jesus Christ there was only one divine nature

- rather than two natures, divine and human, as asserted at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. F.L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 916.
- 12 Raymond Cohen, *Saving the Holy Sepulcher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 193.
 - 13 The chapel marks the site where the abandoned cross was found by the Byzantines under Queen Helena.
 - 14 The Coptic Church could count on the support of the Egyptian authorities for protection, especially after the Camp David accords.
 - 15 Jerome Murphy O'Connor, *The Holy Land* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57.
 - 16 "It is winter here and very, very cold," said Tesfaye Selassie, secretary and spokesperson for the Dayr al-Sultan monastery. "When it rains, the water pours into the rooms." Len Cooper, "Sacred Site Still Grounds for Dispute," *Washington Post*, 13 February 1993, online at www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1993/02/13/sacred-site-still-grounds-for-dispute/6f2d8a29-d797-441d-b97c-a9e317766e4b/?utm_term=.2859281771fa (accessed 4 July 2018).
 - 17 It is not clear whether or not the petition led to any improvements to the monastery. See petition online at www.gopetition.com/petitions/deir-el-sultan-ethiopian-monastery-in-jerusalem.html (accessed on 12 August 2017).
 - 18 See Engidu Wolde, "Structural Collapse Shuts Down Ethiopian Church at Deir al-Sultan Monastery," Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT), online at ethsat.com/2017/10/structural-collapse-shuts-ethiopian-church-deir-al-sultan-monastery/ (accessed 11 February 2018).
 - 19 Cohen, *Holy Sepulcher*, 194.
 - 20 "Jerusalem: Rival Monks Keep Constant Watch over Monastery," *Associated Press*, 26 October 2008, online at www.ethiomeia.com/adroit/deir_sultan.html (accessed 30 March 2018).
 - 21 Cohen, *Holy Sepulcher*, 7.
 - 22 "Cust Report ('The Status Quo of Holy Places, 1929')," online at ecf.org.il/issues/issue/1413 (accessed 30 March 2018).
 - 23 If a visiting ecclesiastic of note of the Coptic, Jacobite, or Abyssinian rites desires to visit the Holy Sepulcher, notification is made to the Armenian authorities, who arrange for the opening of the door, after informing the Orthodox and Roman Catholics, and receive him at the entrance, placing a carpet for him before the Stone of Unction. Two Armenian clergy also accompany the visitor to the Tomb. See "Cust Report, 'The Status Quo in the Holy Places.'"
 - 24 Chris Armstrong, "Divvyng Up the Most Sacred Place," *Christianity Today*, 1 July 2002, online at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/julyweb-only/7-29-52.0.html (accessed on 31 January 2018). See also Alan Philps, "Monks Fight on Roof of Holiest Place," *Telegraph*, 30 July 2002, online at www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/ethiopia/1403067/Monks-fight-on-roof-of-holiest-place.html (accessed 11 February 2018).
 - 25 The street name was chosen by Sir Ronald Storrs, the first British governor of Jerusalem.
 - 26 Von Ustinov was a Russian aristocrat who came to Jaffa in 1861 for one year to convalesce in a warmer weather from a lung disease. There he stayed with the Metzlers, Protestant missionaries. In 1876, he married their daughter in Germany and then settled in Jaffa where he opened Hôtel du Parc. In 1889, the couple divorced and he married Magdalena Hall (daughter of Katarina Hall, companion of the Ethiopian empress) and had four children. Their eldest son, Jona von Ustinov, was the father of British Russian actor Peter Ustinov. Jonavon Ustinov's sister, Tabitha, married Anis Jamal, a well-known Arab Jerusalem merchant family who were our neighbors in Talbiyya. His daughter Alexandra and son Alex were good friends with the author.
 - 27 Conrad Schick (1822–1901) was a German architect, archaeologist, and Protestant missionary who settled in Jerusalem in the mid-nineteenth century.
 - 28 In the Rastafari movement, he is considered a messianic and holy figure, and the sect adopted his name.
 - 29 Haile Selassie, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress, Vol. 1* (Chicago: Research Associates School Times Publications, 1999), 82.
 - 30 Selassie, *My Life*, 82.
 - 31 Selassie, *My Life*, 85.
 - 32 Selassie, *My Life*, 85.
 - 33 Selassie, *My Life*, 85.
 - 34 Ethiopian links to Armenia go back a very long way. One tradition says that the messenger Sheba sent to Solomon was an Armenian. Many of the diplomats Ethiopia sent to the East and the West beginning in the fifteenth century were Armenians. Also Armenians were the jewelers who made many of the emperors'

- crowns. A number of the translators for and to the Ethiopian court were Armenians. (Personal correspondence with Dr. Peter Garretson.)
- 35 One of the orphanages was in the Greek Monastery of the Cross in the western part of the city (now near the Israeli Knesset) and the others were inside the Armenian convent.
 - 36 The Near East Foundation was then headed by Edward Blatchford, who later became the longest serving U.S. consul in Jerusalem.
 - 37 Selassie, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress*, 294.
 - 38 Ani Aslanian, "In the Company of Emperors: The Story of Ethiopian Armenians," Story of the Ethiopian Armenians, "Armenite, 6 October 2014, online at thearmenite.com.
 - 39 See "Scramble for Africa," *Wikipedia*, online at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scramble_for_Africa (accessed on 30 March 2018): "The Scramble for Africa was the invasion, occupation, division, colonization and annexation of African territory by European powers between 1881 and 1914. It is also called the Partition of Africa and the Conquest of Africa." Consequent to the political and economic rivalries among the European empires in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the partitioning of Africa was how the Europeans maintained friendliness with their neighbors and avoided fighting over Africa.
 - 40 Thomas M. Coffey, *Lion by the Tail* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), ix.
 - 41 Haile Selassie, *New World Encyclopedia*, online at www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Haile_Selassie (accessed 31 January 2018).
 - 42 Coffey, *Lion by the Tail*, xi.
 - 43 Addis Ababa eventually became the headquarters of the African Union.
 - 44 He brought with him more than 100 cases reported to contain gold and fifteen cases of treasury valuables as well as ten tons of other cargo. *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 10 May 1936. Some have contested these figures.
 - 45 Coffey, *Lion by the Tail*, 339.
 - 46 *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 10 May 1936.
 - 47 Selassie, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress*, 295.
 - 48 For a short newsreel video see: "Empire in Exile: Haile Selassie Arrives in Palestine," *Grumont British News*, online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0vbVAQxnnk (accessed 5 July 2018).
 - 49 Sir Arthur and my father had a good rapport above and beyond the professional relationship. The high commissioner's absence was significant as it indicated that the emperor was not on an official visit.
 - 50 The emperor did not speak English. A translator (possibly the Ethiopian consul in Port Said who had joined the group) who spoke French is seen in photo.
 - 51 *Palestine Post*, 10 May 1936.
 - 52 The emperor apparently liked champagne, which was offered to him on board the British cruiser.
 - 53 During the strike all Arabs were asked to wear a *tarbush* or *kuftiya* to be distinguished from hat-wearing Jews. I remember I had to carry a small tarbush and a cap to don depending on which street I was walking. The absence of Jews is explained by the fact that during the strike the Jews stayed away from the Old City.
 - 54 "Haile Selassie's Vast Personal Fortune," *Singleton Argus* (New South Wales), 11 May 1936, online at trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/81889286 (accessed 31 January 2018).
 - 55 A longtime Jerusalem resident and a friend of my father's, Clarke was a distant neighbor who lived just south of Talbiyya across from the leprosy asylum in a walled estate that had a tennis court where I often played with my brothers.
 - 56 After the first day he was moved to a suite on the main road, Julian Way, as he was fond of watching motorcars. He would watch the traffic with field glasses.
 - 57 My father served as the primary physician to all of the British high commissioners in Palestine. See David Reifler, *Days of Ticho: Empire, Mandate, Medicine and Art in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2015), 211.
 - 58 Archives of the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *Palestine Post*, 8–12 May 1936, and *New York Times*, 10 May 1936.
 - 59 As my father was fleeing war-torn Jerusalem, the Ethiopian consul asked to rent our house to use as the Ethiopian consulate to prevent it from being taken over by Israeli forces.