



Universität
Basel

Research Project

Basel und die Beta Israel 1830-1865. Protestantische Mission und jüdische Identität in Äthiopien

Third-party funded project

Project title Basel und die Beta Israel 1830-1865. Protestantische Mission und jüdische Identität in Äthiopien

Principal Investigator(s) [Bodenheimer, Alfred](#) ;

Project Members [Lis, Daniel](#) ;

Organisation / Research unit

Zentrum für Jüdische Studien / Religionsgeschichte und Literatur des Judentums (Bodenheimer)

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This research project looks at the connection between Basel Missionary Institutions and the history of the Beta Israel. Furthermore the project examines the theological place of the Beta Israel within the Protestant missionary institutions in Basel.

Research about the entry of the Beta Israel into Western Jewish consciousness usually starts with the appearance of the German-Jewish convert to Protestantism and Missionary, Henry Aaron Stern, in 1860, who arrived in Ethiopia as a Missionary for the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews (LJS). Stern can indeed be viewed as a personality at the crossroads of the Beta Israel history. The appearance of Stern amongst the Beta Israel might be described as a tipping point that provoked the involvement of Western Jewry in their support of their Beta Israel brethren to withstand the missionary efforts of the missionaries from the LJS and hence to bring them closer to Rabbinical Judaism. Stern's appearance in Ethiopia, and the conceptualisation of the Beta Israel as a lost group of Jews or Israelites in the consciousness of Western Jewry must however be seen as the continuation of a process that was developed to a significant extend out of the Protestant Missionary Institutions in the City of Basel, Switzerland.

Many of the early missionaries that came in touch with the Beta Israel from the 1830s onwards (Samuel Gobat, Christian Kugler, Carl Wilhelm Isenberg, Johann Ludwig Krapf belonged to a generation of missionaries that had been educated in the 1815 established Protestant Basel Mission. These missionaries, together with a number of other important personalities involved in the establishment of the institution (i.e. Christian Friedrich Spittler) stayed involved with the Protestant Christian Mission to Ethiopia and the Beta Israel as the education of missionaries to Ethiopia was taken over by the 1840 founded Chrischona Pilgrim Mission in Basel. It is from the Chrischona Pilgrim Mission that most of the first generation of missionaries that specifically targeted the Beta Israel were educated (Johann Martin Flad, Christian Friedrich Bender, Gottlieb Kienzlen, Johannes Mayer, Friedrich Brandeis, Wilhelm Staiger, Theophil Waldmeier and Carl Saalmueller).

The role of Basel and its missionary institutions in the conceptual conversion of the Beta Israel towards Rabbinical Judaism (by bringing the Beta Israel to the attention of Western Jewry) becomes even more apparent when one considers that later generations of missionaries like Friedrich Flad, Mikael Aragawi and a number of converted Beta Israel missionaries were educated in Basel as well.

Keywords African Jews, Basel, Beta Israel, Ethiopia, Mission, Jewish History, Jewish Identity

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