

African Judaism

In this Section we begin with the early roots of Judaism in Egypt, in the Nile Valley and in Ethiopia. The Hebrew Bible records many contacts between the Chosen People in the land we now call Palestine and the people of Africa. Most of those who survived the Babylonian conquest of Judah were deported by Nebuchadnezzar between 598 and 582 BCE, but other Hebrew communities settled on the banks of the Nile. There were in fact more Jews in the Diaspora than in their 'homeland'. Only after Cyrus permitted exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem in 539 BCE and to begin the rebuilding of the Temple, was there a slow growth in the number of Jews in Palestine.¹

Hebrew communities in the Diaspora developed their own traditions, some of which are recorded in surviving ancient scriptures in Africa and nowhere else. They also preserved oral traditions forgotten or neglected in other parts of the world. Many of these myths and legends concern the creation of animals, as well as angels and human beings, and record the way in which each species was given its own kind of wisdom. African traditions, both oral and written, reveal more about life in the Garden of Eden and events leading up to Noah's Flood than can be found in the Hebrew Bible.

There are Judaic communities in Africa which developed with little or no contact with Palestine. The Falasha people of Ethiopia, known as *Beta Israel*, date back at least to the Babylonian Captivity if not before, while a totally different community in Uganda, known as the Abuyudaya, was founded less than a hundred years ago by people possessing only the (Christian) Old Testament, without having met Jews from any other part of the world.² These communities have almost no knowledge of the Hebrew language or of the Talmud.

Popular Jewish stories, known as Midrashim, were transmitted orally in the Diaspora long before some of them were codified in the Talmud. In these stories King Solomon is portrayed not only as understanding the language of animals, but as gaining some of his renowned wisdom from them. In the Book of Proverbs the lazy person is advised, 'Go to

the ant; ponder her ways and grow wise'. One Midrash recorded by an English Rabbi, Schlomo Pesach Toperoff, concludes: 'It was a sufficient humiliation for man that he had to learn from the ant; had he learnt and acted accordingly he would have been sufficiently humbled but he did not learn from the wise ant.'³ Toperoff maintains that animal welfare finds its roots in Jewish tradition.

The Ant is Wiser than Solomon

*In the course of his wanderings Solomon heard an ant issuing orders to others to withdraw and so avoid being crushed by the armies of the king. Thereupon Solomon summoned the ant who informed him that she was the queen of the ants and offered reasons for her orders. Solomon wished to question her but she defiantly refused to answer unless the king took her and placed her on the palm of his hand. He acquiesced and repeated his question, 'Is there anyone greater than I am in the world?' asked Solomon. The ant promptly retorted, 'Yes, I am.' Solomon was taken aback, saying, 'How is that possible?' The ant, unperturbed, replied, 'Were I not greater than you, God would not have led you here to place me in your hand.' Exasperated, Solomon threw her to the ground and exclaimed, 'I am Solomon, the son of David.' Not to be intimidated, the ant reminded the king of his earthly origin and admonished him to be humble. The king went his way, feeling abashed. In this manner, the wise Solomon was outwitted by the unpretentious ant.'*⁴

King Solomon was able to communicate not only with insects, but also with birds. There is a popular legend that the lapwing or hoopoe delivered a letter from Solomon to the Queen of Sheba.⁵ Solomon also called on these birds for help in his travels.

King Solomon flies South and rewards the Birds

Solomon thought he would make for himself a magic carpet that was invisible and yet would be able to move in any direction at word of command. One day he told Genu, who attended him, that he would fly southward. He commanded: 'Carpet, become small enough to hold me in comfort and fly with me southward. Do that I may see manifold variations of life that God has made.'

Immediately Genu took up the carpet and the king was wafted southward. As he travelled, the sun became hotter and hotter. When the sun was directly overhead, the king tried to shelter himself from its rays. He saw some vultures flying near him.

He called, 'Come spread your wings, fly over my head and shelter me from the sun.' But the vultures refused – the sun helps us to find decaying food on which we live; we will not offend the sun. The sun grew hotter and hotter and a small cloud appeared and the king could see presently a flock of birds flying toward him. He called out to them to shelter him from the sun's rays and they answered, 'Willingly, O king – we are very small but we are numerous, if we spread our wings, they may be a protection to your head.' In gratitude King Solomon promised them a reward.

He said, 'Come and tell me in three days' time what you would like.' For three days the birds set up a council but could not come to an agreement until the king of hoopoes suggested that their queen should choose a suitable reward, and they flew to King Solomon and asked for the golden crown. Solomon was shocked and exclaimed, 'Vanity of vanities – I warn you that admiration often creates jealousy, but if that is your wish, you shall have it.'

Trouble first came with the fowler and his gun, as he killed many of them for their beauty. Then the hunters set traps of cages with looking glasses inside. The foolish hoopoes came to see how beautiful they had become, but they found they had been made prisoners. Then they were sold for their plumage. In great alarm the king of the hoopoes went to Solomon: 'What have you done to us; you have returned evil for good. Before we helped you, none sought our lives, now we are in danger of being utterly destroyed.' King Solomon replied: 'I now see that some creatures are incapable of choosing best for themselves and it is necessary for the wiser men rulers to help them choose. I warned you that vanity would be your downfall. Now let me choose. I suggest that all golden crowns be changed to feathers.' And turning the magic ring the king pronounced the necessary words and it was done. The hoopoes said, 'Wise and great is Solomon the king – he has given us warmth and security.'⁶

This Midrash illustrates not only Solomon's legendary relationship with animals, but also his interest in African lands to the South, particularly Ethiopia, where gold was to be found. A mutual exchange of goods and ideas developed between the two countries, and by the fourth century CE Hebrew scriptures were translated into *Ge'ez* (Ethiopic).

The Ethiopian epic, *Kebrā Nagast*, refers to the Ark of the Covenant as the first of all things in creation, which came to earth containing the

Mosaic Law. It relates how, after visiting Jerusalem, Queen Makeda returned to Ethiopia bearing King Solomon's son, Menelik. This young prince later visited his father and was educated in Jerusalem. When he returned home to his mother some 'first-born of the leaders of Israel' accompanied him, carrying the Ark of the Covenant with them.

The Falasha Jews claim to be the descendants of the bodyguard provided by King Solomon for his son on this journey.⁷

When Islam became dominant in North Africa and Arabs controlled the trade route along the Red Sea, Ethiopian Jews became isolated from their co-religionists. As a result the Falasha are unfamiliar with the Talmud, which was only codified around 500 CE. The Torah they use is written not in Hebrew but in *Ge'ez*, and although they retain only a few Hebrew words in their prayers, they strictly observe the Sabbath, adhere to the dietary commandments in the Book of Leviticus, and celebrate the new moons and festivals as prescribed in the Pentateuch. Ethiopia's Jews regard the weekly Sabbath not simply as a day of rest, but more importantly, as a *holy person*. This metaphysical being is female and is seen as the manifestation on earth of the heavenly world – to which end she is given names: 'Luminous', 'Vivifying', 'Rejoicing' and 'Beloved'. She constantly intercedes with God on behalf of both the righteous and sinners, reminding the Almighty that she is a 'sign' and a witness to the people.⁸

According to Edward Ullendorff, 'A dispassionate appraisal of the ethnic and religious position of the Falashas places them squarely into the mainstream of Ethiopian life, yet outside the doctrinal tradition of monophysitism'. He regards them as descendents of those elements of the Axumite kingdom who resisted conversion to Christianity, but 'Ethiopians in general are the heirs of a civilization in which the veneration and imitation of the Old Testament occupy a central and enduring position'.⁹

The Falasha Jews have much in common with their Christian neighbours: the language of their prayers is the same, both groups carry out circumcision on boys and excision on girls, and, surprisingly, monasticism plays an important part in both religions. J.M. Flad, a missionary of the London Jews' Society stationed in a Falasha village not far from Gondar, in the middle of the nineteenth century, wrote about the Hoharewa cave, a place of pilgrimage, guarded by a community of about two hundred *Jewish* monks:

The founder of their order of monks, Aba Zebra, lived in the fourth century after Christ, in the province Armatshoho, in a cavern called Hoharewa. There he spent his whole time in the study of the law, and it is related that he healed the sick through prayer, and the laying-on of hands. Great crowds followed him,

to whom he preached the word of God, exhorting them to fear God and to lead a holy life. The gifts brought to him by those who sought his aid he distributed among the poor and needy. He himself lived on herbs and roots. His self-denying life, and the respect paid him by the Falashas, excited in other minds a desire to follow his example.¹⁰

According to Flad, the Falasha not only observe the feasts and sacrifices laid down in the Pentateuch in a way no longer practised by Rabbinical Judaism, they add some practices which probably derive more from African traditional religion than from Christianity.

Blood Sacrifice

*One peculiar custom common to Falashas and Christians is that they never reside in a newly-built house until, as they say, blood has flowed in it. This is a special sacrifice, usually of a sheep, or amongst the poorer classes, of a hen. . . . If this sacrifice is not observed, which is often the case with Europeans, and a death occurs in the house shortly after, the natives consider it a clear proof that the house, or rather the spirits presiding in it, have required their offering. Also in the granary a white hen is sacrificed.*¹¹

Besides their Old Testament, which includes the Apocrypha, Flad found that the Falasha possessed other sacred books written in Ge'ez on parchment, including the *Gedala Adam* (History of Adam), and *Siena Aihud* (History of the Jews, a translation of Josephus). Since 1856 the Falasha have also been in possession of the Christian Amharic Bible.¹²

The Bible of the Ethiopian Church has always included various scriptures not found in either the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint, notably the *First Book of Enoch* (known as *Ethiopian Enoch* because it has been preserved in its entirety only in Ethiopia) and *The Book of Jubilees*. These pseudepigrapha describe the creation of the universe in greater detail than the Book of Genesis does, explaining how first angels, then human beings and other animals fell into sin, and why the Creator had to send the Flood to cleanse the earth. Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus and Tertullian all regarded the *Book of Enoch* as 'canonical' and, although it was later rejected by Jerome and Augustine, in the Eastern church it continued to be treated with great respect.¹³ The epistle of St Jude in the New Testament quotes *Enoch*,¹⁴ but for centuries non-Ethiopian biblical scholars were unable to identify the source of Jude's quotation, because the *Book of Enoch* was not in their Bible of sixty-six books. For Ethiopian scholars, whose Bible contains

eighty-one books, locating the passage in *Enoch* 1:9 was not a problem. It is only since fragments of *Enoch* were found in Aramaic at Qumran among the Dead Sea Scrolls that Western scholars have begun to appreciate the value of the Ethiopian manuscripts and to make translations from the *Ge'ez*.¹⁵

The Book of *Jubilees* (also known as *The Little Genesis*)¹⁶ is thought to have been originally composed in Hebrew or Aramaic some time between ca.175 and 140 BCE. In this book the weekly Sabbath is viewed as especially sacred, and time is measured in weeks, jubilees (forty-nine years) and weeks of jubilees (seven times forty-nine).¹⁷ According to the Book of *Jubilees*, the Mosaic Law requires even the angels to observe the Sabbath according to a solar calendar of 364 days. Both *Jubilees* and *Enoch* claim that the Jews went astray during the Babylonian exile in adopting a lunar calendar, which gave a 354-day year plus an intercalated month every three years. According to *Enoch*, the sun alone dictates the proper days for Sabbaths and feasts, and *Jubilees* states that at Creation, 'God appointed the sun to be a great sign on the earth for days and for Sabbaths and for months and for feasts and for years'. The angel Uriel foretells the dire consequences of confounding holidays with 'unclean' days, thereby disturbing the divinely appointed order of the cosmos.¹⁸

From *Jubilees* we learn that Adam spent six days naming the animals 'and everything that moves on the earth' before God decided to create a 'helper' for him. The woman (created from Adam's rib) did not enter the Garden of Eden until the eighth day. Adam and Eve then lived naked in the garden for seven years before the serpent approached Eve, and during that time angels taught Adam 'all the details of the gardener's craft'. As will be seen from this excerpt, prior to their expulsion from the Garden, animals were able to communicate with one another in a common language. Adam made a daily offering at sunrise, which did not involve animal sacrifice, although garments were made of their skins.

The Garden of Eden

And He [the Creator] made for them garments of skin and he dressed them and sent them from the Garden of Eden. And on that day when Adam went out from the garden of Eden, he offered a sweet-smelling sacrifice – frankincense, galbanum, stacte, and spices, in the morning with the rise of the sun from the day he covered his shame. On that day the mouth of all the beasts and cattle and birds and whatever walked or moved was stopped from speaking because all of them used to speak with

one another with one speech and one language. And he sent from the garden of Eden all of the flesh which was in the garden of Eden and all of the flesh was scattered, each one according to its kind and each one according to its family, into the place which was created for them. But from all the beasts and all the cattle he granted to Adam alone that he might cover his shame. Therefore it is commanded in the heavenly tablets to all who will know the judgment of the Law that they should cover their shame and they should not be uncovered as the gentiles are uncovered.

And on the first of the fourth month Adam and his wife went out from the garden of Eden and dwelt in the land of 'Elda, in the land of their creation. And Adam named his wife Eve. They had no son until the first jubilee but after this he knew her. And he tilled the land as he had been taught in the garden of Eden.

And in the third week in the second jubilee, she bore Cain. And in the fourth she bore Abel. And in the fifth she bore 'Awan, his daughter. . . . And Cain took his sister, 'Awan, as his wife, and she bore for him Enoch at the end of the fourth jubilee.¹⁹

The Book of *Jubilees* adds a good deal to the story of Creation, found in the canonical Book of *Genesis*. Moreover, Norman Cohn regards it as a true apocalypse, in that the story is presented as a secret revelation originally transmitted by angels to Moses on Mount Sinai. The narrative is interspersed with prophecies of the great consummation and foreshadowings of the final cataclysm.²⁰ In *Jubilees* angels are referred to as *Watchers*, because they came down to earth to teach men and women what to do. It relates how some of the *Watchers* fell into sin themselves, fornicating with 'the daughters of men', and 'sinning against beasts, and birds and everything which moves or walks upon the earth.' They caused such havoc that the Creator had to send a Flood to destroy their tyranny. Although the book of *Genesis* mentions wicked angels, the *Nephilim*, corrupting womankind and begetting giants, it says nothing about the corruption of animals which, according to *Jubilees*, produced terrifying monsters. It simply records that among mankind, only Noah was found worthy to be saved along with his immediate family, and that he was commanded to build an ark to rescue the innocent animals. Thereafter God established a Covenant with every living creature that came out of the ark, and the rainbow became a sign of this Covenant.²¹

To what is recorded in *Genesis*, *Jubilees* adds that Noah was given

seven commandments, which had originally been delivered to Adam for all mankind. These prohibit the worship of other gods, blasphemy, murder, incest, adultery, and theft. In addition, Noah was commanded to eat only permitted foods and to establish courts of law.²² These Noachide laws were important for the later development of Judaism in Africa, because Hellenized Jews, preaching to gentiles who were not descended from Abraham or Moses, could thereby claim Noah's more universal and prior authority. Noah was the saviour not only of all mankind but of all God's Creation. His universal message, as recorded in *Jubilees*, focuses on the serious consequences of the shedding of blood, and on the virtue of honest husbandry.

Cover the Shed Blood

*For whoever sheds man's blood, and whoever eats the blood of any living creature shall be destroyed altogether from the earth. And no man that eats blood shall be left on earth, or that sheds the blood of man, nor shall there be left to him any offspring or descendants under heaven; for to Sheol shall they go, and into the place of punishment shall they go down, and to the darkness of the deep shall they all be removed by a violent death. There shall be no blood seen on you of any of the blood shed when you kill any animals or cattle or birds on the earth; and do then what is right and cover what has been shed on the earth. And you shall not be like the man that eats meat with the blood still in it, and take care that no one eats blood in your company: cover the blood, for so I have been commanded to instruct you and your children and all mankind.*²³

The First Fruits

And now, my children, listen: act justly and do what is right, so that you may be planted in righteousness over the whole earth and your glory exalted before my God, who saved me from the waters of the flood. And behold, you will go and build yourselves cities and you will plant in them all the plants that there are upon the earth, and also all trees that bear fruit. For three years the fruit of everything that can be eaten must not be gathered; and in the fourth year its fruit shall be reckoned holy, and they shall offer the first fruits, acceptable before the Most High God, who created heaven and earth and all things. Let them offer it sprinkled with the first of the wine and the oil as first-fruits on the altar of the Lord, who receives it; and

*what is left let the servants of the Lord's house eat before the altar which receives it. And in the fifth year let the land lie fallow, so that you let it lie fallow in righteousness and honestly; and you will be righteous, and all your orchards will be ritually pure. For so your great-grandfather, Enoch, commanded his son Methuselah, and Methuselah his son Lamech, and Lamech commanded me to observe everything his fathers had commanded him.*²⁴

Muslims believe that Adam was the first of the prophets. From a manuscript recently discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, the *Book of the Apocalypse of Adam*, we learn that Adam had foretold the Flood and prophesied to Seth that Noah and his sons would rule the earth 'in kingly fashion', but that subsequently a wicked generation not descended from Noah would arise. This indicates that Noah's family were not to be the only ones to survive the flood.²⁵

Another scripture, known as *The Penitence of Adam*, like the Book of *Jubilees*, describes how God sent an angel to teach Adam and Eve to make clothing out of animal skins, using 'spines from the thorn-bush.' It also records how wicked angels appeared as mermaids to tempt them with sins of the flesh, but after much prayer and fasting, God allowed Adam and Eve to enter chastely into the sacrament of matrimony, which suggests that their 'original sin' had been forgiven. This lends little support to the Christian doctrine of Original Sin but reflects a view found in the Talmud. Although the Rabbis agreed that the sin in the Garden of Eden had repercussions on all subsequent generations, that did not mean that sin is inherited. According to Cohen: 'He may be burdened by the consequences of the wrongdoings of his forefathers; but no Rabbi of the Talmudic age would admit that any human being committed a wrong for which he or she was not personally responsible'.²⁶

Mermaids tempt Adam and Eve

Satan was filled with envy against them, and he and ten of his company took the form of maidens of incomparable beauty, and coming out of the waters of the river they came before Adam and Eve. And they said: 'We desire to look upon the faces of Adam and Eve who are on the earth, and to see whether they are beautiful and whether they are different from our own.' And they came upon the bank near to Adam and Eve; they saluted them and stood before them amazed, and Adam and Eve looked upon them and were astonished by their beauty, and said to them: 'Is there then another world where there

exist such beautiful creatures?’ And the maidens answered and said to Adam and Eve: ‘There is, and we are but a part of a great number.’ And Adam said to them: ‘And what is it that has caused you thus to multiply?’ And they answered: ‘We have men who marry us and we conceive and bear children, and our children grow and so our race is multiplied. And if you do not believe us, we can bring it about that you shall see our husbands and our children.’ And they called their husbands and their children, and men and children came up out of the water, and began each to go to his wife and to take his own children. And when Adam and Eve saw these things they were filled with amazement. And the maidens said to Adam and Eve: ‘You have seen our husbands and our children; and now Adam, you must do as we shall tell you so that you also shall have children and shall perpetuate your race.’ For Satan thought in his heart: ‘God forbade Adam to eat of the tree and Adam disobeyed his command and has suffered great punishment; and now I shall bring him to go in unto Eve without the command of God, and God will be wrath with him and will destroy him.’

But Adam thought he should offend God, and he fell to praying, as did Eve also, and Satan and his company plunged again into the waters, and Adam and Eve returned to their cave as was their wont, and the hour of evening was come. And in the night they rose to pray, and Adam said: ‘Lord, thou knowest that we disobeyed thee, and through our fault our bodies have become as those of the brutes. Show us what is thy will, O Lord, and let not Satan come to trouble us with deceiving visions, lest we are led again to do that which will offend thee, so that thou art wrath with us and destroy us utterly.’ And God heard the words of Adam, and saw that they were true and that he was not able to resist the attacks of Satan; and the word of God came to Adam and said: ‘The pains thou now sufferest would never have come upon thee hadst thou not provoked my wrath, so that I drove thee from the garden.’

And to Adam he sent the angel who had brought to him gold, and the angel who had brought to him incense, and him who had brought to him myrrh; and the angels said to Adam: ‘Take the gold and give it to Eve as a marriage gift, and make a covenant with her, and give her the incense as a pledge that thou and she shall be one flesh.’ And Adam heard the voice of the angel and took the gold and put it in the skirt of Eve’s garment, and they made a covenant together, joining their

hands. And the angels commanded Adam and Eve to pass forty days and forty nights in prayer, and then Adam might go in unto his wife, for then it would be in purity and not in impurity; and she should bear him children and they would fill and people the earth. And Adam and Eve heard the voice of the two angels, and the angels left them. And Adam and Eve fasted and prayed until the forty days were accomplished, and then they lay together as the angels had told them. And from the expulsion of Adam to the day when he wed Eve there were 223 days, that is, seven months and three days.²⁷

The Penitence of Adam indicates that angels were very busy in the Garden of Eden. Whereas in the Hebrew Bible, angels are primarily seen as messengers, in the Pseudepigrapha they have more varied and extensive roles. They control natural phenomena; there is an angel of peace and an angel of death; and, as we have already noted, there were the Watchers. There is, as Porter observes, ‘a whole range of celestial beings whose primary function is to guard God’s heavenly throne; these are not really distinguishable from angels except that they have distinctive names, such as seraphim, cherubim, and ophanim’.²⁸

The Ethiopian *Book of the Conflict of Adam* describes the various orders of angels and the tasks that God assigns to each of them. From this it is worth noting that, while mankind is watched over by the lowest order, other species are entrusted to a higher order of Archangels, perhaps because they are more precious to God or more in need of care and attention.

Angelic hierarchy

The lowest order is that of the Angels, and the task which has been entrusted to them by God is to watch over each man. To every man living in this world is allotted as his guardian an angel of this lowest order, and this is his office.

The second order is that of the Archangels, and their task is to make all things to live according to the order of God’s ordering. All that exists in creation, animals of the earth, or winged animals, or reptiles, or fishes of the sea, all creatures that are in the world save man alone are entrusted to their care and government.

The third order is that of the Principalities, and their task is to hie themselves to the places where the clouds rise from the ends of the earth, according to the word of David, and to cause the rain to descend from thence upon the earth. All the changes

in the air, rain and hail and snow and dust-storms and showers of blood are all produced by them, and to them also belong the storm-clouds and the lightening.

The fourth order is that of the Powers, and their task is the government of all light-giving bodies, such as the sun and the moon and the stars.

The fifth order is that of the Virtues, and their task is to prevent the demons from destroying the creation of God for envy of man. For if it were allowed to the accursed race of demons to do their own will for one hour, then on an instant they would overturn the whole of creation. . . .

The sixth order is that of the Dominations, and their task is to have the oversight of all kingdoms. In their hands are victory and defeat. . . . All victories and all defeats, these are they who decide them according to the sign of God who has entrusted to them the overseeing of war.

The other orders are those of the Thrones, the Seraphim and the Cherubim. These are they who stand before the greatness of the Lord and serve his throne and continually at all times make him offerings and worship him. The Cherubim with all reverence hold up the throne and the seal of God is in their hands. The Seraphim wait upon our Lord. The Thrones stand at the door of the Holy of Holies. Such are in truth the divisions of the tasks entrusted to the angels who have the government of this world.²⁹

The continuing importance of angels in Ethiopian culture today may be due to the sacred status the Ethiopian Church accords to the *Book of Enoch*. Enoch is believed to have been ‘the first among men born on earth to learn to write’,³⁰ and *Ethiopian Enoch* has been described as the ‘richest of the surviving apocrypha of the Old Testament’.³¹ It is made up of five originally independent texts: the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Parables*, the *Astronomical Treatise*, the *Dream Visions*, and the *Letter to his children*. In addition *Ethiopian Enoch* includes fragments of an earlier *Book of Noah*, enlarging, like *Jubilees* and other pseudepigraphica, upon the brief passage in Genesis concerning sons of God (angels) who literally fell for daughters of man (womankind) and, after seducing them, begot giants who terrorized and corrupted not only mankind but other animals and all creation.³²

Angels Fall for Daughters of Man

In those days, when the children of man had multiplied, it happened that there were born unto them handsome and beautiful daughters.

And the angels, the children of heaven, saw them and desired them; and they said to one another, 'Come, let us choose wives for ourselves from among the daughters of man and beget us children. And Semyaz, being their leader, said unto them, 'I fear that perhaps you will not consent that this deed should be done, and I alone will become responsible for this great sin.' But they all responded to him, 'Let us all swear an oath and bind everyone among us by a curse not to abandon this suggestion but to do the deed. . . .' And they were altogether two hundred. . . .

And they took wives unto themselves, and everyone (respectively) chose one woman for himself, and they began to go unto them. And they taught them magical medicine, incantations, the cutting of roots, and taught them about plants. And the women became pregnant and gave birth to great giants whose heights were three hundred cubits. These (giants) consumed the produce of all the people until the people detested feeding them. So the giants turned against (the people) in order to eat them. And they began to sin against birds, wild beasts, reptiles, and fish. And their flesh was devoured the one by the other, and they drank blood. And the earth brought an accusation against the oppressors.³³

Ethiopian Enoch records that Noah, the son of Lamech, was an unusual baby – his hair was ‘white as wool’ and his body white as snow and red as a rose – causing his parents some apprehension. When he opened his eyes, he lit up the whole house like the sun. His parents feared he might be a giant begotten ‘from the angels’, so Lamech consults first his father, Methuselah, and then his grandfather, Enoch, who by this time was living somewhere at the ends of the earth ‘with the angels’. Lamech is reassured to learn from him that Noah is destined to ‘comfort the earth after all the destruction’.³⁴

From these scriptures we see that the original sin of the angels proved to be much more serious in its consequences than the temptation of Adam and Eve. While our human ancestors repented, the wicked angels did not. Angels, who later came to be identified with gods of the ancient world, taught mankind innumerable skills, which could be used for evil or benign purposes. These skills included astronomy, botany, biology, medicine, metallurgy, mathematics, physics and engineering, in which the Egyptians and the Greeks later became proficient. Greek philosophy encompassed all these disciplines and was able to provide a view of the world more complex than that found in the Hebrew Bible.³⁵ Under the influence of Hellenism, Jewish communities in Africa

gradually adapted their Judaism to Greek philosophy.³⁶ The Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (20BCE – 50CE) taught that when the first man, *Adam*, named the animals, he both defined their natures and established his authority over them.

Wisdom of the first Man

*Moses does well to ascribe the giving of names to the first man, for that is the function of wisdom and royalty, and the first man was wise with a wisdom taught by Wisdom's own lips; he was also a king, and it belongs to a king to bestow titles on each of his subjects. It was a most high sovereignty that invested that first man, since God had formed him with such care to be worthy of the second place, making him his own viceroy and governor of all others.*³⁷

Philo thus brings Greek philosophy and Hebrew theology together. Taking the Greek legend of Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, Philo offers a midrashic reinterpretation, in which he sees Virgin Memory giving birth to the Muses who sing the praises of the Creator God.³⁸

Virgin Memory

*There is an old story on men's lips. . . . When they say, the Creator had finished the whole cosmos, He inquired of one of His subordinates whether he missed anything that had failed to be created, aught of created things beneath the earth or beneath the water, aught found in air's high realm of heaven's, furthest of all realms that are. He, it is said, made answer that all were perfect and complete in all their parts, and that he was looking for one thing only, namely the word to sound their praises. . . . The story runs that the Author of the universe on hearing this commended what had been said, and that it was not long before there appeared the new birth, family of the Muses and hymnody, sprung from the womb of one of His powers, even virgin Memory, whose name most people slightly change and call 'Mnemosyne.'*³⁹

When asked whether the Serpent in the Garden of Eden spoke 'in the manner of men', Philo reflects on the understanding and speech of animals at the time of Creation. He believes that being without sin, they were endowed with 'philosophical sight and hearing'.⁴⁰

Animals share in Speech

First, it is likely that not even in the beginning of the world's creation were the other animals without a share in speech,

but that man excelled in voice (or utterance), being more clear and distinct. Second, when some miraculous deed is prepared, God changes the inner nature. Third, because our souls are filled with many sins and deaf to all utterances except one or another tongue to which they are accustomed; but the souls of the first creatures, as being pure of evil and unmixed, were particularly keen in becoming familiar with every sound. And since they were not provided only with defective senses, such as belong to a miserable bodily frame, but were provided with a very great body and the magnitude of a giant, it was necessary that they should also have more accurate sense, and what is more, philosophical sight and hearing. For not inaptly do some conjecture that they were provided with eyes with which they could see those natures and beings and actions which were in heaven, and with ears to perceive sounds of every kind.⁴¹

Philo was wrestling with questions about the language of animals that have baffled generations of zoologists since Darwin. Only recently have scientists been able to appreciate the extent to which other species communicate with each other, as has been beautifully illustrated by Charlotte Uhlenbroek.⁴² Philo was succeeded by other distinguished African scholars in what became known as the Alexandrian School, to which further reference will be made in Section Four.

One of the greatest of the African-Jewish scholars, Moses Maimonides, lived long after Egypt had come under both Christian and Muslim influence. He is revered by Jews all over the world in the saying: 'From Moses to Moses there was none like Moses'. Born at Cordoba (ca. 1135), but driven into exile, he spent most of his life in Africa. His family settled at Fostat, where Moses practiced medicine and became a leader of the Jewish community in Old Cairo. His Commentary on the Mishnah was written in Arabic and subsequently translated into Hebrew and other languages. Maimonides' death in 1204 'was the cause of great mourning to all Jews'.⁴³ Excerpts from his *Guide for the Perplexed*, concerning the imagination of animals and the prohibition of cruelty, exemplify the contribution of African Judaism to Animal Theology.

The Imagination of Animals

Mark, O reader, that if you know the nature of the soul and its properties, and if you have a correct notion of everything which

concerns the soul, you will observe that most animals possess imagination. As to the higher class of animals, that is, those which have a heart, it is obvious that they have imagination. Man's distinction does not consist in the possession of imagination, and the action of imagination is not the same as the action of the intellect, but the reverse of it. For the intellect analyses and divides the component parts of things, it forms abstract ideas of them, represents them in their true form as well as in their causal relations, derives from one object a great many facts, which – for the intellect – totally differ from each other, just as two human individuals appear different to the imagination it distinguishes that which is the property of the genus from that which is peculiar to the individual, – and no proof is correct, unless founded on the former; the intellect further determines whether certain qualities of a thing are essential or non-essential. Imagination has none of these functions. It only perceives the individual, the compound in that aggregate condition in which it presents itself to the senses; or it combines things which exist separately, joins some of them together, and represents them all as one body or as a force of the body. Hence it is that some imagine a man with a horse's head, with wings, etc. This is called a fiction, a phantasm; it is a thing to which nothing in the actual world corresponds. Nor can imagination in any way obtain a purely immaterial image of an object, however abstract the form of the image may be. Imagination yields therefore no test for the reality of a thing.

Cruelty to Animals

The commandment concerning the killing of animals is necessary, because the natural food of man consists of vegetables and of the flesh of animals; the best meat is that of animals permitted to be used as food. No doctor has any doubts about this. Since, therefore, the desire of procuring good food necessitates the slaying of animals, the Law enjoins that the death of the animal should be the easiest. It is not allowed to torment the animal by cutting the throat in a clumsy manner, by poleaxing, or by cutting off a limb whilst the animal is alive.

It is also prohibited to kill an animal with its young on the same day (Lev. xxii. 28), in order that people should be restrained and prevented from killing the two together in such

a manner that the young is slain in the sight of the mother; for the pain of the animals under such circumstances is very great. There is no difference in this case between the pain of a man and the pain of other living beings, since the love and tenderness of the mother for her young ones is not produced by reasoning, but by imagination, and this faculty exists not only in man but in most living beings. This law applies only to ox and lamb, because of the domestic animals used as food these alone are permitted to us, and in these cases the mother recognizes her young.

The same reason applies to the law which enjoins that we should let the mother fly away when we take the young. The eggs over which the bird sits, and the young that are in need of their mother, are generally unfit for food, and the mother is sent away she does not see the taking of her young ones, and does not feel any pain. In most cases, however, this commandment will cause man to leave the whole nest untouched, because [the young or the eggs], which he is allowed to take, are, as a rule, unfit for food. If the Law provides that such grief should not be caused to cattle or birds, how much more careful must we be that we should not cause grief to our fellow-men.⁴⁴

Since the time of Maimonides, Judaism has no doubt continued to develop in different parts of Africa, drawing on ancient traditions and adapting them to modern conditions. Further study is required to discover in what ways such developments may be able to contribute to current ecological concerns.