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# THE DAGGATOUNS:

A TRIBE OF JEWISH ORIGIN IN THE DESERT  
OF SAHARA.

A REVIEW.

BY

HENRY SAMUEL MORAIS,

Author of "Eminent Israelites of the Nineteenth Century."



PHILADELPHIA:

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## PREFATORY NOTE.

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THE following paper is reprinted from *The Jewish Messenger*, of March 11th, 1881. If it be deemed worthy of acceptance as a modest contribution to the growing literature of the “dark continent,” it will have fully served the purpose for which it was written.



## THE DAGGATOUNS.

THE period of ethnological discovery is not over. The darkness which overspread the East for so many centuries is fast being dispelled by the prodigious efforts of modern research. Every day, new facts are brought to light about countries and peoples long unknown to the civilized world. Africa has been the central point of recent investigations. The manifold labors of Bruce, Livingstone, Baker and Stanley have aroused a deep interest in the state of far-distant regions. And, as may be readily surmised, Hebrews have not failed to contribute their share to this object. The writings of such as Philoxene Luzzatto and Joseph Halévy more particularly, bear witness to the fact. Many doubts have been cleared up, as, for example, in the case of the Falashas,—a tribe of Jews inhabiting Abyssinia.\* Now another great feat has been achieved. Rabbi Mordecai Aby Serour, a native of Akka, in Morocco, has given us a remarkable account of the Daggatouns,—a people whom he has very recently discovered. The narrative of Rabbi Serour might not have been circulated but for the untiring energy of M. Isidore Loeb, the learned Secretary of the *Alliance*

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\* See James Bruce's *Travels*; also "The Falashas," by the Rev. S. Morais, in *The Fenn Monthly*, of April, 1880.

*Israélite Universelle*, who has offered a French translation from the original Hebrew, adding thereto valuable notes.\*

We are told that the attempt of Rabbi Serour was perilous in the extreme, and that, chiefly through the active assistance of M. Auguste Beaumier, French Consul at Mogador, the traveler and his family succeeded in reaching Timbuctoo. When there, the French Geographical Society entrusted him with the mission of exploring African countries. To that organization, and to kindred ones, he has been the means of imparting useful information. In his journey through the great desert of Sahara, Rabbi Serour encountered a Jewish tribe of nomads. The results of a careful study of their history and social condition were set down, and forwarded to the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* at Paris. Thus was M. Loeb enabled to favor the public with his version.

The translator, in his preface, wisely observes that, as the narrative emanates from an African Israelite, whose historical and scientific knowledge is exceedingly limited, we must not wonder if exaggerations, as well as chronological inaccuracies, are discernible. But that the recital in the main is true there can be no doubt, as it is fully attested by authority.

A few words before we approach the direct topic. In the desert of Sahara there are many fertile spots, or oases. Some of these, as modern travelers assert, are thickly peopled. Rabbi Serour's discovery seems to have extended to the southern portion of the desert,

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\* *Les Daggatoun, Tribu D'Origine Juive, Demeurant Dans Le Desert Du Sahara, par le rabbin Mardochée Aby Serour, Traduit de L'Hebreu, et Annoté, par Isidore Loeb : Paris, 1880.*

and even into Soudan, beyond Timbuctoo, as far as the River Niger. The principal inhabitants of the regions are designated Touaregs or Touariks. From these have branched out the Aouelamiden or orthodox Touaregs, dwelling in the great desert of Adgag. The Rabbi informs us that the Aouelamiden are a very numerous sect, amounting to about 300,000. But he is not borne out by other accounts, which reckon the entire body of Touaregs at only 200,000. Be that as it may, the Aouelamiden possess the greatest power, which they exercise over all the Touaregs. About the real history of this people little is known. They claim to be the descendants of the ancient Philistines, as do the Berbers and other tribes.

But to the subject proper. *Daggatoun* is the appellation by which the Touaregs designate *Jews who have changed their belief*, though the literal definition of the word in Arabic is, according to M. Loeb, *merchants; traders*. The Daggatouns are scattered all over the desert. But the greater number live among the orthodox Touaregs in Adgag, where Rabbi Serour's most important labors have been directed. The country is not destitute of flocks and herds, and the necessary means to sustain life are within reach. Nor are we led to suppose that the Daggatouns, though subjects of the Touaregs, fare worse than the rest. They have at hand what is needed, notwithstanding that they live, as do all the other inhabitants, in tents. Both peoples have the same language, which we may merely conjecture is Arabic, for the Rabbi has not indicated it. The Touaregs regard the Daggatouns as an inferior race, because of their affinity with the Jews; hence,

they do not permit intermarriages. But a most striking circumstance concerning those who confess themselves of Hebrew stock is their complexion and features. Strange as it may appear in such a clime, Rabbi Serour asserts that "these converted Jews have skin perfectly white. They are very handsome; much handsomer than the finest looking Jews of Africa. Not one is black." How this may be accounted for, the sequel will tell.

The Touaregs, as a body, do not show much consideration in their treatment of these Jews. As a means of protection, therefore, every Daggatoun secures the services of a person from among the Touaregs themselves, who acts as a defender in case of need, and for which he is paid a stipulated sum annually. Again, when the Touaregs are at war, the Daggatouns must lead the vanguard. They do not, however, deem this a hardship, as many of them are especially trained for the fight.

We omit, for the sake of brevity, several minor matters, but must not pass by an important statement: None of the inhabitants of the country, Touaregs or Daggatouns, have any system of writing or instruction, nor have they any books. Still, certain notions of the art of writing do exist, possibly by figures or by some other method, which Rabbi Serour terms the well-known writing of the Touaregs. Unfortunately, he does not explain what this actually is, hence nothing definite can be understood. The people, or, at all events, the Daggatouns, are not wholly ignorant. They should not be classed with most of the natives of Africa; for tradition has kept them up to a comparatively high

standard; it has, indeed, worked wonders among them. As an evidence that the bulk of the population is thoroughly acquainted with the origin of the Daggatouns, the Rabbi relates that he and his brother were conversing and trading with the aforesigned, when some of the Touaregs passed by, and jestingly said: "Ho! there are your brothers, the Jews, who come to see you, and you receive them with much tenderness!" "Yes," answered the Daggatouns, "these are men of our nation, and our brothers!"

The historical account is as follows: There are in Morocco four cities, which, it is stated, were known prior to the destruction of the First Temple at Jerusalem. Their names are Tafilelt, Tebelbelt, El Hamméda, and Tementit. A description of these places is thus given:

Tafilelt lies near the desert. Across this desert, from one side, the traveler can reach by direct route the Holy Land, and from other sides Timbuctoo, Touat, El Hamméda, and Tebelbelt.

Tebelbelt is in the desert itself, between Tafilelt and Taouadni. Formerly this city was in a flourishing condition, but since the foundation of Taouadni, about a century ago, it has been almost ruined, and the Jews have been driven away by the Philistines, who, as before stated, are the Touaregs. In Tebelbelt may be seen vaults or caverns, where are the tombs of numerous Rabbis, the inscriptions on some dating as far back as two thousand years, and even farther.

El Hamméda, the exact position of which is not recorded, is also full of vaults and caves, inscriptions found there being as ancient as the period of the Second

Temple. "Here," remarks Rabbi Serour, "my father and his ancestors were born." To this day, says our informant, the Jews of that city have sacred poems and prayers, (*pizmonim*, *piyutim*, *bakkaschot* and *kinot*), which were in use at the time of the Second Temple, and they claim to possess some known as early as the First Temple.

In by-gone ages, the Jews in El Hamméda were most cruelly persecuted, being exiled, burnt alive, and otherwise barbarously treated by the ruling inhabitants, the Philistines. As already mentioned, from these enemies of Judaism have sprung the Berbers, the Touaregs, the Aouelamiden, and other distinct tribes and races, all being of the same family, as shown by the similarity of language, laws, religious belief and customs. Something very remarkable has been noticed respecting the exercise of their religion. They never utter a prayer, nor have they any regular form of public worship. They simply invoke the name of Mahomet. It is a natural suggestion of our own mind that they know of the existence of God; for, in referring to their belief, the name of the Almighty does not once occur in Rabbi Serour's narrative. It would be inexplicably singular if they had heard of Mahomet, and not of the Everlasting Creator! We do not charge the Rabbi with a misstatement, but there must clearly be a gap somewhere in the tale.

Each of the tribes alluded to dwells in its own portion of the desert. As to dress and manners, a strong resemblance is perceived, save among the Berbers. All, however, cover the face with a black veil, which they may not remove, nor even lift up, on pain of death.

Tementit, the fourth city named, is the largest. It is situated on the border of the desert. It abounds in beautiful fountains and valleys; also, palm trees. To the East, by the desert, one can reach Egypt, and Palestine, and by other roads, Timbuctoo, Houca, and Akka, across mountains and hills. From Tementit to cities before mentioned, there is a journey on foot, of, in some cases, as many as thirteen days.

This part of the recital concerns us most. Rabbi Serour speaks of Tementit as having been one of the capitals of the Jews, where many learned Israelites lived. Possibly that city may be identified with one of a different name in ancient times, but no explanation to this effect is offered. Old inscriptions on tombs are also found there. The story runs thus: Jews and Mahometans agree that Mahomet, after conquering Arabia, came to Jerusalem, besieged it, and made war against all who declined accepting his doctrines; that the Hebrews, in order to practise their faith and enjoy freedom, engaged to pay him an annual tax of one shekel *per capita*; that this tax was called *Djezia*; that when Mahomet's power increased, and his throne became hereditary, in after years one Abdel Malik, who pretended to be a descendant of the prophet's family, came across the desert with a numerous army, and proclaimed himself king, instituting at the same time laws obnoxious to the Jews, and maltreating them; that Abdel Malik, desiring to still further extend his dominion, came unto Tementit, which was filled with Philistines and Jews; that he durst not attack them, by reason of their great bodily strength; that he asked to live in peace among them, which request

was granted. Not a long time elapsed ere he succeeded, by his cunning, in bringing to his standard all the Philistines. He then wished to convert the Jews; but these, ever true to their faith, peremptorily refused. Frustrated in his schemes, he attempted, what many others have tried, but unsuccessfully, to exterminate them. But, strange as it may seem, the Philistines protected their neighbors; for long years of intercourse had put an end to the bitter feelings early entertained. Besides, the Jews had become familiarized with the habits and customs of the Philistines. Unable to accomplish his evil purpose, Abdel Malik exiled all the Hebrews, who departed with a portion of their goods, and came to the desert of Adgag, where they pitched their tents, and still live to this day. Abdel Malik did not entirely bring about the change he sought for. The Philistines would not adopt Mahometanism as it is; they set aside the forms, observances, and injunctions of that religion. Therefore, in course of time, he drove them out of their country, and they came and lived with the Jews at Adgag. Still, the ideas imbibed from Abdel Malik were not altogether erased, but the Philistines can be considered Mahometans only in an outward sense. In the lapse of ages, by constant association with their neighbors, the Jews forgot their religion, and were called *Daggatoun*, or, as already told us, *converted*.

The foregoing, Rabbi Serour relates as actual facts. When penning his narrative, he was evidently prepared for contradictions and exceptions, as he observes: "If I am asked, how I know all these things, I reply: Between Tementit and El Hamméda is a six days'

journey, and at El Hamméda are yet to be found descendants of the Israelites expelled from Tementit ; they are called *Tementetines*. They and the inhabitants of El Hamméda have preserved the tradition of these events. My father and his brother and their father were born at El Hamméda, and my father was in the habit of continually rehearsing these events to us. When my brother and myself traversed the desert to go to Timbuctoo, we saw these Daggatouns. Their figure, their character, their beauty, the whiteness of their skin, their grace and their goodness, could not fail to excite our attention. We asked ourselves how could all such qualities and noble characteristics meet in the midst of these tribes, until we understood by their own testimony, and that of the Mohometans, that these men were descendants of the Jews. Many times the elders of their nation have come to us (Rabbi Serour and his brother) to sell the goods of their country. When we questioned them about their race, they always said : 'We are originally from Tementit, and our ancestors were Jews.' We once said to them, 'By your life, tell us the truth ! This Mahomet, whose name you have constantly on your lips, and whose remembrance you bless, is he the father of your sacred writings ? and are there persons among you who can read the Koran, or who can recite portions of it from memory ?' They emphatically answered that they did not know the Koran, and that, having descended from the Jews, and not resembling in any manner the other tribes (Philistines or Touaregs), they could not have exactly the same religion. 'Notwithstanding this,' they continued, 'even if we accepted their practices, they

would not cease calling us converted. In short, our ancestors have lived with the Touaregs, in the desert, and even among these (Touaregs) you will not find a single man who will prostrate himself on the ground to pray, nor one who is able to read a word. All their worship reduces itself to pronouncing the name of Mahomet, as we ourselves do.' Such has been the constant reply they have given us."

In following the recital of Rabbi Serour, we have ventured but few comments. But having now presented his account in full, as well as his opinion, we may be permitted a remark. The reader has, of course, noticed the sad lack of continuity of thought and expression which characterizes the Rabbi's production. It has been considered unadvisable to adopt any special mode of setting forth events, inasmuch as the narrative speaks for itself, despite the want of system in its composition. There are statements which we, in accord with sentiments of M. Isidore Loeb, cannot reconcile, but they do not affect the general credibility of the sketch.

Rabbi Mordecai Aby Serour is entitled to our respect and gratitude for having, with commendable zeal, braved dangers to serve the cause of science. The fragments which he has collected about a sect whose origin and preservation are truly astonishing, will, it is hoped, awaken a desire to proceed further on in the path which our traveler has opened; and, moreover, incite a keen wish to afford those who are clearly in need of education and extensive culture, the facilities to rise to a higher plane, through the refining influences of modern civilization.

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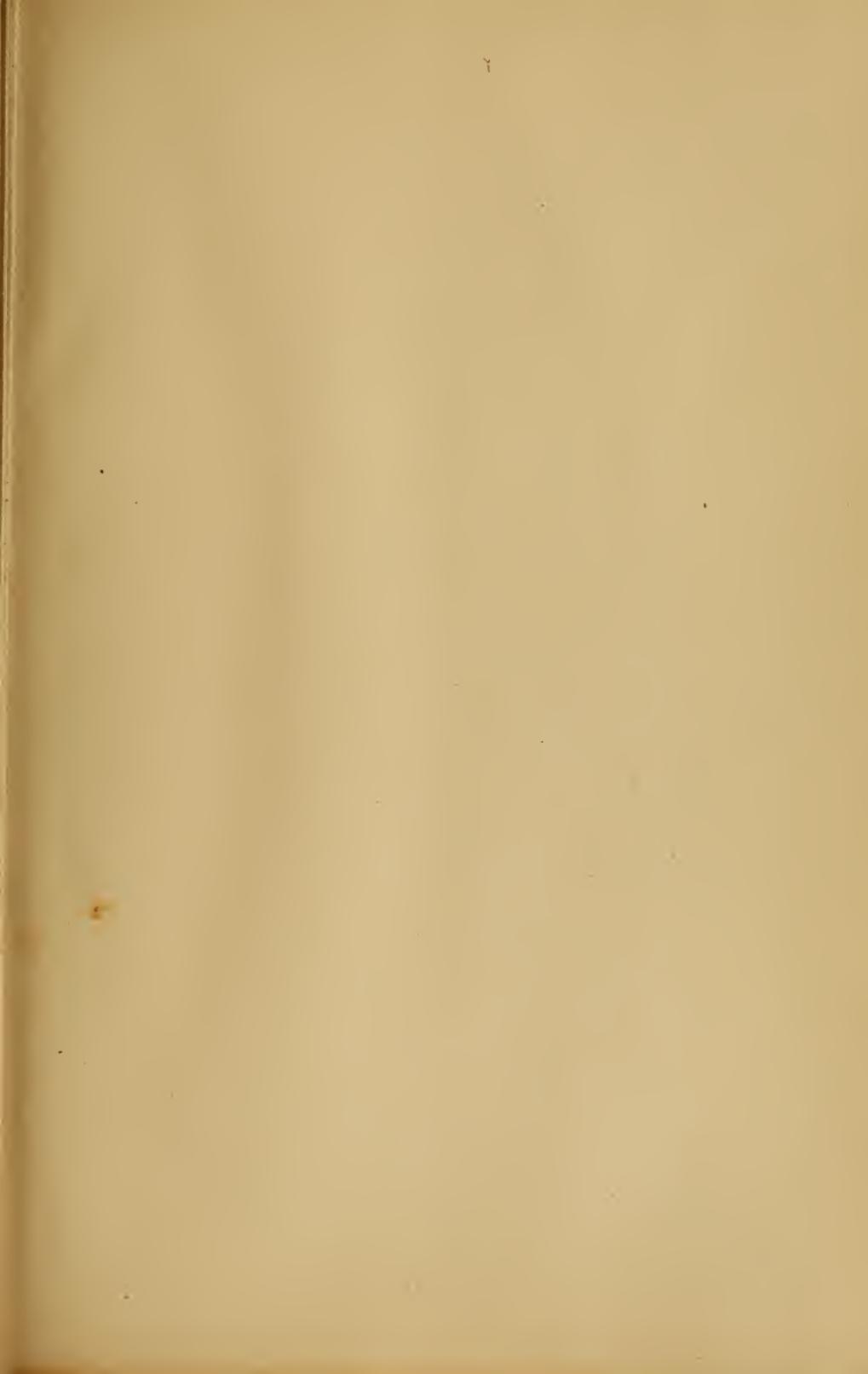
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