



The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Cathedral

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ETHIOPIAN CHURCH

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I. PRE-CHRISTIAN TIMES

Traditional Sources

According to traditional sources, paganism as well as Judaism were practiced side by side in Ethiopia before the introduction of Christianity. Both were the result of contact with Middle Eastern countries through commercial channels. It is believed that at an early stage of Ethiopian history, the worship of the serpent was widespread and the Ethiopian offered sacrifices to it. This is confirmed to some extent by archaeological evidence found at Axum: on one of the stelae at Axum an engraving of a serpent is still visible today. Though the worship of a serpent was spread through almost all the countries of the Middle East, we have reason to believe that this cult was introduced directly to Ethiopia from Persia. The description in the Avesta, the sacred book of Persia, concerning the worship of a serpent, is identical with the tradition found in Ethiopia.

Archaeological Sources

The Sabaeen migrants who crossed the Red Sea in the first millennium B.C. and settled in Ethiopia brought with them their own religion. They were polytheists, and worshipped different gods of heaven, the earth and the sea. Almouqah (Elmouqah), for example, was the principal god of the south Arabian pantheon, and was retained as such in Ethiopia. Other Sabaeen gods, like Astar (Astarte), corresponding to Aphrodite and Venus of the Greek and Roman world, and the moon god Shams, the sun god, were widely worshipped in Ethiopia. Later, with the introduction of Greek culture into Ethiopia, worship of the Greek pantheon became widespread. In the well-known Greek inscription, left at Adulis by an anonymous Ethiopian Emperor, mention is made of Zeus, Poseidon and Ares. On the reverse of the monument appear engravings of another Greek god and demi-god, Hermes and Hercules. Ares was in fact the personal god of the Ethiopian Emperors of the pre-Christian era, as shown in the frequent references made to him in epigraphic inscriptions.

After the third century, with the development of more purely Ethiopian civilization, Ethiopic names evolved for the gods then worshipped. This can be observed in the pre-Christian Ge'ez inscriptions of Emperor Ezana, where Ethiopic names replace the Sabaeen or Greek names. Mahrem corresponds to Ares, Baher to Poseidon, and Seamy to the Sabaeen god Almouqah.

Temples, altars and statues were dedicated to gods. In Yeha there is a well-preserved temple dedicated to Almouqah. This temple was created before the fifth century; it is rectangular in form with a double wall and single door. A similar temple to the same god existed at Hawliti-Melazo, near Axum, but it is now in ruins. A temple dedicated to Ares is found in Axum itself. Altars to the gods were also erected in various places. For example, at Kaskasse about eight kilometers northeast of Matara, there is an altar with a Sabaeen dedicatory inscription to the god Shams, engraved with the symbols of the crescent and disc. There are also many altars bearing dedications in Sabaeen to Almouqah. After his victory over the Beja people on the northern frontier of his domain, the Emperor Ezana erected statues in gold, silver and bronze to the god Ares.

Monotheism

Information about the introduction of Judaism into Ethiopia is found in the *kebre Negest*, (The Glory of the King). The visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon in Jerusalem is recounted there. On her return to Ethiopia she had borne him a son, whom she named Menelik. When Menelik grew up he visited his father in Jerusalem, and came home accompanied by many Israelites, the sons of Levites and bringing with him the Ark of the Covenant, which he had obtained by subterfuge. From then on, Judaism was practiced in Ethiopia. It is held by some authorities that the Falasha tribes of northern Ethiopia, who practice a form of Judaism to this day, are descendants of the Israelites. The form of Judaism professed in apparently a development of a pre-Talmudic type of worship.

2. THE INTRODUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY

St. Frumentius and the Conversion of Ezana c. 330 A.D

Although Christianity became the official religion of the Aksumite kingdom in the fourth century, the religion had been known in Ethiopia since a much earlier time. In the Acts of the Apostles, VIII: 26-40, we are told of a certain Eunuch, the treasurer of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, who went to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. There he met Philip the Deacon and was baptized by him. Ethiopian tradition asserts that he returned home and evangelized the people. In his Homily on Pentecost, St. John Chrysostom mentions that the Ethiopians were present in the Holy City on the day of Pentecost. Later, when the Apostles went out to preach the Gospel, Matthew was allotted the task of carrying the good news to Ethiopia, where he suffered martyrdom. Ethiopian sources, such as the Synaxarium, make no mention of this however; on the contrary, Ethiopians believe that received Christianity without shedding apostolic blood. Nevertheless, Christianity was certainly known in Ethiopia before the time of Frumentius, being the faith practiced by many of the merchants from the Roman Empire Settled in the Aksumite region. In important cities, such as Axum and Adulis, these Christian merchants had their prayer houses and openly practiced their religion.

The introduction of Christianity as the state religion of Ethiopia came about not as the result of organized evangelical activity from outside the country, but because it was the desire of the king. The story of the conversion of the Aksumites has come down to us in the work of the contemporary Church historian, Rufinus (d 410 A.D). Meropius, a philosopher from Tyre, set out to visit India accompanied by two young relatives, Frumentius and Aedesius, Apparently they followed the usual itinerary of the time along the Africa coast of the Red Sea. In the course of their journey they ran short of provisions and put in at a port of the African coast. The local inhabitants, however, were hostile to Roman citizens, as they massacred Meropius and all aboard the ship, sparing only the two boys, who were taken to the king. They soon gained his interest and won his confidence. The younger, Aedesius, he made his cup-bearer, while the elder, Frumentius, Who showed signs of wisdom and maturity, became his treasurer and secretary. The king died early, leaving his wife with an infant son as heir to the throne. Now the dying king had given Frumentius and Aedesius leave to return to their own country if they so wished, but the Queen-Mother who was left as Regent, begged them to remain to help her administer; the kingdom until her son should grow up. The young men agreed, and stayed to carry out the task faithfully.

The thought of Frumentius then began to turn towards matters of faith. He sought out Christians among the Roman merchants settled at Axum, and encouraged them to establish meeting-places for prayer, helping them in every way he could, according them favours and benefits, and gradually spreading the seed of Christianity among the people. The young king himself became a convert. When he was old enough to rule the country alone, Frumentius and Aedesius asked him for permission to leave Axum. Aedesius returned home to Tyre, but Frumentius went to Alexandria and laid the whole affair before the newly- appointed patriarch, Athanasius, begging him to appoint a bishop to minister to the needs of the growing Christian community at Axum. The patriarch summoned a council of priests to consider the matter. It was agreed that Frumentius himself should be consecrated as the first Bishop of Axum. Thus he returned to propagate the faith in the land he knew so well so well. Although Rufinus does not specify the name of the country to which Frumentius went, other sources are more specific in this respect. A letter from the Emperor Constantius, written in 356 A.D to his "precious brothers", Aezana and Saezana, rulers of Axum, concerns the Bishop Frumentius. Furthermore, the inscriptions and coins of the Emperor Ezana testify to his adoption of Christianity. In his earlier inscriptions he styles himself "Son of unconquered Mahrem", but in the inscription after his victory over Nubia he employed anew terminology, speaking of "the Lord of heaven and earth", and describing how he had destroyed the "images in their temples", thus affirming his dissociation from paganism. A recently discovered Greek inscription belonging to Ezana leaves no doubt on this matter It begins: "in the faith of God and the power of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost". Likewise, the coins minted in the early part of Ezana's reign bear the pagan symbol of the crescent and disc, while those minted in the later part of his reign bear the sign of the cross.

The introduction of Christianity as the state religion marked a turning point in Ethiopia history. Christianity does not constitute a purely religious phenomenon on the country, but plays an integral role in all aspects of national life. The Church is not only a religious institution, but has for many centuries been the repository of the cultural, political and social life of the people. The true feeling of the people who first received Christianity seems to have been expressed in the names they bestowed upon Frumentius, which are Abba Salama. Kassate Berhan, "Father of peace and Revealer of light". It is interesting to note that Ezana and Saezana appear to have baptized with names also signifying illumination - Abreha (He illuminated) and Atsbeha (He brought the dawn).

In Ethiopia, the diffusion of Christianity did not follow the same pattern as in the Graeco-Roman world, where

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Christianity was confined to the lower levels of society for three centuries, and utterly rejected by the ruling classes. Only at the beginning of the fourth century did it begin to gain a few converts among members of the imperial family. In Ethiopia the converse was true. Christianity was introduced first in to the royal court, and from there gradually penetrated among the common people. Likewise, in the Roman Empire, the Apostles and later the Church fathers were actively engaged in the evangelization of the people; in Ethiopia, Christianity was voluntarily adopted.

The birth of Ethiopian Church took place at a time when the Arian heresy was at its peak. When Frumentius was consecrated, the Patriarchate of Alexandria, under the leadership of Athanasius, "the Column of Orthodoxy", was the stronghold of the Nicene faith against Arianism. Constantius expelled Athanasius, however and installed an Arian, George of Cappadocia, in his place. The first ecumenical Council, where Arius was condemned as a heretic, took place in 325, Shortly before the establishment of the Ethiopian church, but the decision of the Council was nevertheless regarded as binding, and Ethiopia stood by Athanasius, and the Nicene Faith. In vain, Constantius, the son of Constantino the Great, tried to bring Ethiopia onto the heresy of Arius. It was for this reason that he addressed the orthodox group of any support, and ensures international recognition of Arianism. A certain Theophilus, a priest from Socotra, highly respected for his impeccable moral character, was entrusted with this mission to Axum, but he was apparently not even allowed to enter Aksumite territory His mission failed, and Frumentius remained in Axum, to continue the teaching which he had learnt from Athanasius. The Ethiopian church holds Athanasius in special veneration. He was canonized as a saint, and his work, *The Life of Saint Anthony*, was translated into Ethiopic. One of the fourteen Anaphora's of the Ethiopian Church is attributed to Athanasius. The 318 Father who participated in the First Ecumenical Council are also specially venerated, and another Anaphora of the Liturgy bears their name, as the Anaphora of the Three Hundred Fathers.

THE EXPANSION AND CONSOLIDATION OF CHRISTIANITY C. 350 TO 650 A.D.

Evangelistic Activities

According to the chronological lists of the Ethiopian bishops, Frumentius was succeeded by the Bishop Minas. He was apparently of Egyptian origin. From this time onward began the peculiar Alexandrian jurisdiction over Ethiopian Church, which was to last for sixteen hundred years. Throughout this period Ethiopians were not considered to be eligible for consecration as bishops. Minas left certain literary works concerning his missionary activities but the major contribution in the missionary field was that of the nine Saints. They came to Axum about 480, and well received by the emperor Ella Amida and by the inhabitants of the city. The most outstanding figures among the Nine Saints were Za-Mikael Aregawi, Pantalewon, Afse, and Garima or Isaac (Yeshaq). As their names indicate, they came from different parts of the Eastern Roman Empire, such as Constantinople and Syria. They were all adherents of the same doctrine, however it seems that they left the countries of their origin because of religious differences; they were anti-Chalcedonian, and thus were persecuted by the roman emperor, who was an ardent supporter of the Chalcedonian doctrines. They went first to Egypt and lived some years at the monastery founded by Pachomius, before proceeding to Ethiopia. In Axum they studied the language and became familiar with the people and customs. After this preparation they set out in different directions to proselytize and to introduce monastic institutions. Only two of them, Abba Libanos and Abba Pantalewon, remained near Axum itself, the others went further east of the capital and founded hermitages in the old pagan centres. Za-Mikael went to Debra Damo where the worship of the serpent had long flourished. He succeeded in eradicating the cult, and founded a monastery there. Abba Pantalewon transformed a pagan temple into a church. Abba Afse went to Yeha, the renowned Sabaeen center, and likewise transformed the famous temple there into a church. The Afse went to Yeha, the renowned Sabaeen center, and likewise transformed the famous temple there into church. The efforts of the Nine Saints to wipe out paganism did not result in their persecution, as had happened in the Roman Empire, since in Axum they had the protection and support of the sovereign.

The Nine Saints also contributed greatly to the development of the Ge'ez liturgy and literature. They introduced terms and vocabulary into Ge'ez, such as Haymanote, Religion, qasis, priest, and ta'ot, idols. But their major contribution was undoubtedly their great work of Biblical translation into Ge'ez. The work of translation had begun in part during the time of Frumentius, at that time only a few of the basic Books for worship, such as passages of the psalms, had been translated as revealed in contemporary inscriptions. The Nine Saints undertook the massive task of translating the whole Bible. Since they were familiar with both Syriac and Greek, they used a Syrio-Greek text for this purpose. Most probably each of the Nine Saints translated one portion of the Bible. This is why the Ethiopic version reveals considerable differences in Style from one Book to another. The Ethiopic version is one of the earliest Bible translations, and as such it is great importance in textual criticism and in establishing the original text.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

The Nine Saints also translated a number of basic religious works into Ge'ez. These are of both doctrinal and literary content. Under the title of Qerllos (Cyril) were translated dogmatical treatises and homilies of the Church Fathers, in particular the work known as de Recta Fide by St. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria. On this book which was translated from the Greek text, is based the teaching of the Ethiopian Church. Other works translated at this period include The Ascetic Rules of Pachomius, which still today regulate the monastic life of Ethiopia, and the Life of Saint Anthony by St Athanasius, which is still widely read in Ethiopian Church circles.

Music and Art

The coming of the Nine Saints inaugurated a new era in the liturgical life of the Ethiopian Church and in cultural development in general. Music and art flourished. To Yared, an Aksumite scholar of the tune, is attributed the creation of Ethiopian church music. He was a disciple of the nine saints, probably of Aregawi, and composed music in three modes, which is still used in the Ethiopian church. The hymnary attributed to him is rich in inspiration and expression: perhaps it is one of the best of its kind in the orient. The influence of the nine saints extended also to art and architecture. The ruins of basilicas found in the ancient cities of Axum, Adulis and Hawlti may show a resemblance to Syriac churches. Of Aregawi at Debra Damo is the oldest existing example of Christian architecture in Ethiopia, and traces of this influence can be seen in it.

Church Organization

After the expansion of Christianity there was at least four dioceses in Ethiopia, each headed by a bishop. The chief of these was obviously the metropolitan of Axum. The second most important diocese was Adulis; it was through this ancient port that Christianity was first introduced to Ethiopia. As we have already mentioned, all the bishops were of Egyptian origin. They were closely associated both dogmatically and judicially with the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria. The latter sent Egyptian bishops to Ethiopia whenever necessary until the rise of Islam. To perpetuate his Egyptian suzerainty over the Ethiopian church, it became necessary to adduce legal justification. The Egyptians therefore inserted the forty-second Pseudo-Canon of the Council of Nicea, prohibiting the Ethiopians from occupying hierarchical positions. The authenticity of this Article was highly suspect to the Ethiopian clergy, but was nevertheless respected until the thirteenth century, when a new wave of independence arose. Once again it became necessary for the Egyptians, who did not wish to relinquish their prerogative, to renew the prohibition, and the same Article was inserted in the Fetha Negest, the politico-religious code under which the country was governed for more than six hundred years. Thus, an Egyptian bishop always remained at the head of the Ethiopian Church from its foundation up to the second half of the present century. This is a unique phenomenon in the history of the Christian Church.

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