

Bekele Heye

Foreword by Charles E. Bradford



THE SABBATH IN ETHIOPIA

An Exploration of
Christian Roots

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Author's Biography

Bekele Heye was born in Bole, just south of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. He was the nephew of a local chief who sent him to a school operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He went on to complete his undergraduate education at Ethiopian Adventist College. In the late 1960s, he pursued graduate studies at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. The research for this book began during his graduate school days. Employed as a teacher and later ordained as a pastor in the Adventist Church, Heye served the denomination as a department head and in a number of administrative posts at both the local and regional levels. In the 1970s, he joined the staff of the Afro-Mid East Division of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Beirut, Lebanon. This was the regional headquarters of the Church for the Middle East and much of eastern Africa. In 1980, Pastor Heye was the first African elected president of the Eastern African Division, a role in which the incumbent is also a vice president of the General Conference of the Adventist Church. He served in this high office for twelve years, retiring in 1992. He was known as an innovative leader who "knew the times" in which he led the Church through many difficult challenges. In his retirement, he again returned to his writing and historical research until he died December 31, 1998.

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Center for Creative Ministry
P.O. Box 23200
Lincoln NE 68542-3200
www.creativeministry.org
800.272.4664

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Cover & Content Design:
Ane Edwards, Grafix

Editor:
Norma Sahlin

Heye, Bekele

TITLE: The Sabbath in Ethiopia: An Exploration of Christian Roots

The Sabbath in Ethiopia: an exploration of Christian roots/Bekele Heye p. cm.

ISBN 0-9710264-4-0

1. Sabbath. 2. Ethiopian Sabbath keepers. 3. Religious History. I. Title

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Foreword

"Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." (Psalm 68:31 KJV) The Psalmist puts the people of earth on notice, "Watch Ethiopia." Ellen White, the Adventist prophet, says, "The history of the churches of Ethiopia and Abyssinia is especially significant." (*The Great Controversy*, p. 577)

In its mission statement, *The Sabbath in Africa Project* has stated its task, "to investigate and document historical and contemporary expressions of Sabbath consciousness on the African continent." If we are going to talk about the Sabbath in Africa, Ethiopia is key. This nation for many centuries stood firmly and successfully for religious and national freedom against European domination. When the Ethiopian armies in battle drove the Italian invaders into the sea at Adwa in 1896, all Africa rejoiced and vicariously made this great victory its own. The Ethiopian mystique transcended national boundaries; and a new word was coined—*Ethiopianism*—code for independence, freedom from foreign domination or rule in the political realm, and also for self-determination in matters of religion.

At one point in time it seemed that Ethiopia would succumb to the religious and political forces of Europe, but as Ellen White remarks, "Papal tyranny soon became a yoke so galling that the Abyssinians determined to break it from their necks. After a terrible struggle, the Romanists were banished from their dominions, and the ancient faith was restored. The churches rejoiced in their freedom." (*The Great Controversy*, p. 578)

It was my privilege to come across a book written by an Ethiopian churchman and scholar, Bekele Heye, who writes as a person on the scene, thoroughly conversant with the history of his nation and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. If Ethiopia is key to understanding the Sabbath in Africa, then Bekele Heye's book is key to understanding Ethiopia.

Charles E. Bradford
June 2003

Preface

Drawing up on his personal experience, the late Bekele Heye, who grew up in Ethiopia and whose Christian faith was nurtured in the Ethiopian Orthodox (Coptic) Church, introduces us to the remarkable story of Christianity in Ethiopia. It is a history that is unique in two major ways.

First, the continuity maintained by the Coptic Church with pre-Christian Judaism is without parallel in church history. This Israelite heritage profoundly shaped Aksumite culture and prepared the way for the acceptance of Christianity as the national religion during the reign of Emperor Ezana in 331 A.D. In fact, Ethiopians came to regard themselves as the True Israel, the chosen people of God, inasmuch as the old Israel had rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. This continuity is manifest in their keeping of the Sabbath, dietary rules regarding clean and unclean foods, circumcision on the eighth day, the celebration of Israelite feast and holy days, and is visually expressed in their churches by a replica of the ark of the covenant, tripartite division into most holy, holy and outer spaces, and in priestly vestments. In no other major branch of Christianity has this continuity been maintained in similar fashion.

Second, in spite of centuries of isolation, continuity has been maintained with the early Coptic Christianity of Syria and Egypt as taught by Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa. As a result, biblical patterns of worship, practice and theology, largely uninfluenced by Hellenistic thought and other Western developments, have been maintained.

Heye introduces the reader to this unique and largely unknown expression of Christianity that has so faithfully maintained biblical forms of belief and practice. After providing a general background to the history of the Christian church in Ethiopia, he concentrates upon a tumultuous period from 1500 to 1645 during which the nation was torn in conflict between Muslim conquest and Portuguese Catholic colonial and missionary endeavors. Two great fundamental issues were at stake during this multifaceted struggle: Ethiopia's very survival as a Christian nation and the maintenance of the traditional, defining religion of the nation. Two major theological issues were at the center of the later issue: their understanding of the nature of Christ and the seventh-day Sabbath. Heye concentrates upon the latter and graphically relates the story of the heroic and ultimately victorious Ethiopian battle for the Sabbath of the Bible. This, too, constitutes a unique Sabbath history which is without parallel in the annals of the Christian church.

This largely unknown story is of increasing interest today as the center of gravity for Christianity moves to the southern hemisphere. The roots of the church in Africa have in some ways preserved more clearly the origins of Christian faith than have Western traditions. These circumstances make this book more relevant today than ever, and more important to Christians in all traditions that look to the future of the church.

Of course, all of this is of great interest to Seventh-day Adventists, because it illustrates our own concerns regarding the significance and holiness of the Sabbath. However, it is significant on a wider scale because the Coptic Church was influential in the early spread of Sabbath-keeping Christianity in North Africa. And its influence continues. The Ethiopian Church has both inspired and informed many contemporary Sabbath-keeping independent churches in Africa. In his book, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*, Charles Bradford points to both dimensions of this influence. He uses Heye's study as an important source in his research, and its publication will constitute a valuable addition to this line of inquiry.

Begun as an M.A. thesis at Andrews University in 1968, this volume is replete with many interesting quotations and references, some from original Ethiopian sources. This study unfolds a magnificent chapter in the history of Christianity in Africa as well as the story of the Sabbath. I am delighted that the treasures of this study that have been buried in the vault for many years are now being published. This book constitutes both a valuable source of knowledge and inspiration to all serious Sabbath keepers in its disclosure of the continuity of Sabbath observance in the Christian church through the ages.

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June 2003*

Introduction

The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia was organized into the national church in the year A.D. 331. Its first bishop was Frumentius, who was consecrated by Athanasius of Alexandria. Emperor Ezana, who reigned in the fourth century, was made titular leader of the national church. Even during the mid-1900s, the Ethiopian emperor had a great deal of power: he was both the head of the state and the head of the national church.

Toward the end of the 5th century A.D. monasticism reached Ethiopia through the nine monks from Syria. The Scriptures were translated into Ge'ez, the Semitic language often called Ethiopic by western people. This language ceased to be spoken about the 10th century A.D. but remained the church or the ecclesiastical and literary language of Ethiopia until recent years. We still have many books in this language that are not translated into Amharic, the present official language of Ethiopia. In the 7th century, the conquest of the Muslim Arabs cut off the Ethiopian Church from contact with other Christian nations except for the minority Coptic Church in Egypt.

According to the Ethiopian narrative, there was a period of prosperity and peace in the 16th century. Emperor Lebna Dengel, who reigned from 1508 to 1540, looked for trouble and wars. His undisputed sovereignty led him to command his soldiers to whip the earth that it might give birth to some enemies for him to fight. The earth then "brought forth" the left-handed Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim El Ghazi (the *Gran*) of the Muslims, and a terrible war began. In the year 1530-31 the Imam invaded Ethiopia with the object of subjecting the Christian Empire to Muslim rule and converting the people to Islam. The invasion was successful, and the Muslims conquered a great part of the Ethiopian plateau. Debre Libanos and Aksum, the most venerated places in Ethiopia, were burned. Emperor Lebna Dengel was driven from one mountain fortress to another in the northern part of Ethiopia. He died in 1540 and was succeeded by his son Galawdewos, and Christian Ethiopia was in great danger at this time.

In the face of this peril, Emperor Galawdewos appealed to the Christian nations of Western Europe to help him against the invading Muslims. Portugal ordered the Portuguese viceroy of India to dispatch an expedition to Ethiopia. Estevam Da Gama sent an expeditionary force right away which disembarked at the Ethiopian port of Massawa on the Red Sea Coast in 1541. The priest and writer Francisco Alvarez accompanied the Portuguese expedition.

The Portuguese army joined the Ethiopian army in resisting the Muslims. The leader of the Portuguese army, Estevam da Gama, was taken prisoner by the Muslims and executed in 1542. A few months later a combined Ethiopian and Portuguese army defeated the Muslims near Lake Tana, and Gran was killed in the course of the battle.

During this time, closer relations were established between Ethiopia and Catholic Portugal. Ethiopia's need to obtain European aid against the Muslim danger gave the Roman Catholic Church an opportunity to attempt to establish a full union with the Ethiopian Church. A mission with instructions from St. Ignatius de Loyola arrived in Ethiopia in 1554 under the leadership of Andrea de Oviedo, a Spaniard. Years of patient work and hardship followed during which theological differences between the two churches were discussed. The Ethiopians held fast to their ancient practice of Sabbath observance and Monophysite Christology. The ideas and methods introduced by the missionaries had a deep influence on the emperor, but Ethiopians as a whole resented them.

In 1603, a great and learned Spanish missionary, Pedro Paez, arrived in Ethiopia. His personal authority and eminent qualities were such that in 1614 Emperor Susenyos was persuaded to accept the Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ and Sunday observance in place of the Sabbath. He notified the King of Spain (in that period Portugal and Spain were united under the same king.) and Pope Urban VIII of his acceptance of the doctrines mentioned above. This made the Ethiopians so furious that they took up arms and fought against their emperor. Paez died in 1622. Portugal and Spain failed to assist the king against his enemies and when Susenyos discovered that his army forsook him, he proclaimed his return to the creed of his fathers and abdicated the throne in favor of his son Fasilidas. In 1645, Fasilidas expelled the Jesuit missionaries.

This book covers a period of 145 years, during which the Roman Catholic Church launched its vigorous attack upon the Sabbath observance of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. At this time in the history of the church in general, most of Western Christendom had knelt and acknowledged the authority of the Bishop of Rome by accepting Sunday as a substitute for the true Sabbath. The defiance by the Ethiopian Church of this Catholic authority was not only a threat to the supremacy of Rome but also a living witness that Sunday is not the Sabbath ordained by God. Rome was determined at the outset to convince the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to accept Sunday in place of the Sabbath by peaceful means and, thus, bring her into a full union with the rest of Christendom. If this failed, force was to be applied to compel the Ethiopians to accept Sunday in place of the seventh-day Sabbath.

Both means mentioned above were applied, but neither could convince or compel the Ethiopians to obey Rome "rather than God." They finally shed their blood to tell Rome in a very determined way that they would "rather obey God than Rome." This was not easy for the Ethiopians. It cost them millions of souls during this long period of tribulation and bloodshed. But history bears witness to their loyalty to God and to their determination to die for His cause.



Chapter 1

The Ethiopian Church - Chosen of God

The Ethiopian Orthodox (Coptic) Church is the established church of the Empire. Its members, almost entirely the people of central and north Ethiopia, believe themselves to be the “chosen people,” in communion with God and the world of saints and spirits. This is the major base for the ethnic identity of the Ethiopian people. The observance of its adherents gives unity to the Ethiopian culture.

According to Ethiopian history during the first part of the fourth century, in the year 331, A.D. Emperor Ezana adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Axumite Empire. (Axum was the ancient capital of Ethiopia, and Ezana’s empire got its name from the capital.) Ezana set up several stone inscriptions that may be seen to this day at Axum. These inscriptions begin by listing the countries ruled by the emperor or claimed by him as part of his empire. The emperor’s first inscriptions mention the pagan god of war, known to the Greeks as *Ares* and to the Ethiopians as *Mahrem* and three other pagan divinities: *Astar*, the moon; *Beher*, the country; and *Meder*, the earth. He gives glory to these gods for his conquest over other nations

and his enemies. One of the most interesting of the inscriptions describes Ezana's expedition against the Bega people of the northwest. He introduces himself as the son of this pagan god.

Ezana, King of Aksum and of Himyar and of Raydan and of Ethiopia
and of Saba and of Sahlen and of Tseyamo and of Bega and of
Kasu, the King of Kings, the son of the invincible god, Ares.¹

Another of Ezana's inscriptions tells of an expedition against a wild people called the Isarane, who had attacked a merchant caravan and killed the people in it. Wishing to punish them, the emperor sent three armies against them and later intervened himself. Again he makes reference to the pagan god, this time using the Ethiopian form of the name, as documented by Pankhurst:

Ezana, the son of Ella Amida, of the family of Halen, King of Aksum,
and of Hemer (Himyar) and of Raydan, and of Sab and of Sahlen,
and of Tseyamo, and of Bega, and of Kasu, the son of Mahrem.²

Emperor Ezana was victorious at the battle. Seven hundred and five (705) people on the enemy side were killed against 40 on Ezana's side. As booty, Ezana carried off 31,957 cattle, 827 baggage animals, and several thousand prisoners. The emperor then set up a throne in Shado on his way back from war as champion of the battle and committed himself to the protection of the pagan gods Astar, Beher, and Meder. At the same place the emperor offered 100 cattle and 50 prisoners as a thank offering to his chief pagan god, Mahrem, who "had begotten him."

After Ezana accepted Christianity in 331 A.D. and made it the official religion of the Axumite Empire, all the names of pagan gods and pagan practices disappeared from the inscriptions made after this period. Ezana's chronicler mentions only one Supreme Being, the Lord of Heaven. Although the emperor became a Christian, he makes no mention of his conversion in any of the inscriptions. In the latter part of his reign, he issued coins bearing the cross.

The most important inscription of Ezana was the last one, which deals with his conquest of the Nubians. In this inscription, he no longer styles himself "son of the unconquered Mahrem," but simply

“son of Ella Amida, the unconquered.” He attributes his victories to “the Lord of the Heavens who has power over all beings in heaven and earth.”

By the power of the Lord of Heaven who is mightier than everything which exists in heaven or on earth. Ezana, the son of Ella Amida, of the descent of Halen, King of Aksum and of Herner, Raydan, Saba, Salhen, Tseyamo, Bega and Kasu, King of Kings ... and invincible to the enemy. By the might of the Lord of Heaven, who has made me lord, who reigns as the perfect one for all eternity...³

This time he showed mercy to his enemies. His soldiers showed kindness to women and children. Prisoners were given food to eat and beer, wine and water to drink. They were not offered as burnt offerings this time. Of the 10,560 cattle and 51,050, sheep there is no record that any were given as burnt offerings. He does not take glory to himself for the victory over his enemy. He praises the God of heaven for it.

May the Lord of Heaven make my kingdom strong! And as he has this day conquered my enemies for me, may He conquer for me wherever I go. As he has this day conquered for me, overthrown my enemy, I will rule the people with righteousness and justice. And may He preserve this throne which have set up for the Lord of Heaven, who has made me king...⁴

Emperor Ezana is one of the most important figures in the history of Ethiopia. He was the only emperor from this period who has made known his exploits to posterity in a series of inscriptions. One of these inscriptions was written in Sabeian; the rest were in Ge'ez, or Ethiopic, as it is sometimes called. The last inscription is of great interest to us because it is the first Christian document of Ethiopia.

Frumentius and his fellow youth from Tyre were shipwrecked in what is now Eritrea and rescued by Ezana's father. Frumentius was imbued with Syrian Coptic Christianity and a great zeal for the gospel. He evangelized ancient Ethiopia. Ethiopians came to know him as “Abba Soloma Kisati Berhan” which means “Father of Peace and Illuminator.” In due course, he went to Egypt to report on his work in Ethiopia to St. Athanasius, Patriarch of the Church at

Alexandria. The Patriarch consecrated him bishop of the newly converted empire and sent him back to Ethiopia with a number of priests, thereby establishing the tradition of an Alexandrian-appointed non-Ethiopian to head the Ethiopian Church.

Coptic Church law states that twelve bishops are required to elect a patriarch. The Church at Alexandria was unwilling to permit Ethiopia to have more than seven bishops because it feared that the Ethiopian church would make itself independent, elevating the *abune* (bishop of Ethiopia) to the rank of patriarch. But because of the difficulties of communication with the Alexandrian Church, the Ethiopian kings uncanonically appointed an Ethiopian *abune* from time to time. Even under the Alexandrian appointed *abune*, the *lohege* (an Ethiopian appointed by the king from among the monks of Debre Libanos) served as the chief administrator of the church and also was specifically charged with supervision of the monasteries. An Ethiopian has now been elevated to the rank of Patriarch, and he consecrates fourteen Ethiopian bishops, one for each province:

The emperors of Ethiopia were Defenders of the Church, dutybound to combat heresy and to spread the Coptic faith throughout the land. As the anointed of God, the Ethiopian emperors were due absolute obedience from the common people and from all Church officials. In 1945, Emperor Haile Selassie stated, The Church is like a sword, and the Government is like an arm; therefore the sword cannot cut by itself without the use of the arm. ⁵

With few exceptions historically, the monarch controlled the church in several ways. He had the power to pronounce articles of faith and make decisions in doctrinal disputes. The monarch also had direct control over the *abune* (the bishop heading the church) and the power to appoint the *lohege* (the highest ranking Ethiopian ecclesiastic). Finally, through his power to arrest and try church officials, including the *abune*, the emperor was the real head of the Ethiopian Coptic Church.

The church served the monarchy in many ways. It provided the link between the people and the king, teaching obedience to him, excommunicating his enemies, and providing the man and the institution of kingship with the aura of divinity. In turn, the church received grants of taxfree lands and other gifts as well as royal support in the establishment of new churches in conquered territories.

Even before the achievement of semi-autonomy from Alexandria, the church was, for most Orthodox Ethiopians, not Coptic but Ethiopian and a God-given sign of their superiority over other non-Orthodox peoples at home and abroad. Christianity was imposed upon and blended with already present Judaic customs and traditions:

Judaic elements were preserved. It is difficult to say which of them were present before Christianity and which were introduced through Christianity. Such elements include the distinction made between clean and unclean food, the method employed for slaughtering animals, the circumcision of males after the eighth day. . . . and the observance of the Sabbath on Saturday. In these and other respects, the practices of the Ethiopian Church differ from those of Alexandria.⁶

Even in architecture the Ethiopian churches differ from the Alexandrian churches. It is true many of the early churches and some recently constructed in Addis Ababa are built in the traditional Alexandrian cruciform. But most churches in the countryside are circular with galvanized metal roofs and some with thatched roofs. Others are octagonal and made of stone.

The internal structure of the circular or octagonal church consists of three concentric rings. The innermost ring is the sanctuary (*Makdas*) and contains the Holy of Holies, a representation of the Ark of the Covenant. The area is screened off from the second circle of which it actually forms a part. Only the priests and deacons may enter the sanctuary.

The second circle (*Kedest*) is reserved for communicants who receive the sacrament. The women are segregated from the men. Only those who feel pure, have fasted regularly, and have conducted themselves properly, take communion, chiefly the very young and the very old.

The rest of the congregation stands in the outer circle (*Mahelata Kene*), where the women are again segregated from the men. The *dabtaros* (clergy) and priests pass around both of the outer two circles during the service, chanting, sometimes dancing. The priests pass among the congregation swinging a metal or clay censer from which rise clouds of incense. Those who feel particularly unclean ritually, stand in the churchyard. Often there are as many people, if not more, in the churchyard as in the church.

There are no seats in the Coptic churches of Ethiopia. But mats are often spread on the floor. Everyone must remove his shoes or sandals. Because of the lack of seats and the lengthy services, the *dabtaros* (clergy) lean on tall *makomia* (crutches). They also use the *makomia* during the dancing. The dances and all the songs are typically Ethiopian, not to be found in the Alexandrian church. The people believe that the *dabtaros* dancing dates back to the dance of the Levites before the Ark in the temple at Jerusalem. They do it in a graceful back and forth movement.

Attendance at church is a small part of religious observance. Upon marriage, every couple chooses a local priest to serve as *Yenafs Affat* (soul father), often the same priest who has ministered to other members of the family. After blessing the house, he calls regularly, hears confession, prescribes penance, and serves as an adviser.

On the fortieth day after birth, a boy is taken to church to be "raised up to Christianity" and given a name; a girl is taken on the eightieth day. At this time the child is given the *mahatab*, one of the obvious distinguishing marks of the Orthodox Christian. It is a neck cord of two blue threads. At the age of ten a boy is sent to the local church school to learn portions of the Bible, the funeral service, several prayers, and the miracles of Mary.

Local churches are usually named after a saint, and each community holds a special festival on the day set aside for such a saint. There are also important national and church holidays. The most important ones are Christmas, Easter, Epiphany, the Feast of the Assumption, and *Maskal*, a September festival celebrating the finding of the cross by St. Helena. There are other church holidays that are not so significant and which are celebrated by smaller groups in different parts of the empire.

Every church member has his own favorite saint. Once a year he invites his friends and his confessor to a small feast known as *zeker* held to honor this saint. If a person can afford it financially, he is advised by his confessor to participate in a communion association called *mahbar*. Membership in this association is usually limited to twelve persons according to the number of the disciples of Jesus. Once a month the members hold a feast in their homes, in rotation, and at such events give gifts of food, drink, and money to the poor.

A father acts like a patriarch of old for his household. He gives a short prayer at the family worship in the morning. He pronounces the blessing before and after every meal. A child is trained to bow three times when passing a church. If he enters the church, he is supposed to kiss the doorway or other part of the building. Upon meeting a priest, he kisses the cross that the priest carries, and then receives a blessing.

There are about 250 fast days in a year. Wednesdays and Fridays, except during the fifty days after Easter, are fast days. On these days, no meat or other animal product such as butter or eggs may be eaten. In fact, nothing may be taken before noon on these days. In addition, fasts are observed for 56 days during Lent, for 43 days during Advent, and for 15 days before the Feast of the Assumption. No animal product may be taken during these long period fasts.

When a person dies, mourning and wailing takes place for two or three days. Professional mourners are employed when a wealthier person dies, and the onlooker cannot resist joining the mourners. Elaborate commemoration feasts are held on the third, seventh,

fortieth and eightieth day and at the end of six months, one year and seven years. The most expensive feast is the one held on the fortieth day. Several animals are slaughtered and much wine and beer and liquors of different kinds are brewed for this occasion. A whole family may go into debt for several years to hold this feast known as *lazkar*. Those who have less money make it less expensive and give it another name *kurban*. Traditionally, the more expensive the feast the more prestige gained by the relatives of the deceased. In his reforms, Emperor Haile Selassie inveighed against the burden of this feast. It is against the law to even attempt to hold it in some areas.

The ancient Ethiopians' canon of Scripture contains books not included in that of the other churches. Among these books are the Shepherd of Hermas, the Ascension of Isaiah, the book of Enoch and the book of Jubilees. The book of Enoch proved to be important to western Christians since there was no complete version available in any other language. Westerners had access to this manuscript after it was brought back from Ethiopia by the traveler James Bruce, and R. Laurence translated it in 1821.

The most interesting book composed during the beginning of the early literary work of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is the book called "Glory of Kings." The book is a combination of mythical history, allegory and apocalypse. The central theme of the book is the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon and the birth of a son, Menelik, who became the founder of the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty.

Two other ecclesiastical books of the same period highly valued in Ethiopia are known as the Sinodos and Didascalia. They are collections of canons, constitutions, and statutes. Sinodos is considered as a canonical book of the New Testament, with some of its ordinances being attributed to Christ himself. Emperor Galawdewos who ruled from 1540 to 1559 refers to this book in his defense of Sabbath observance, "As our fathers the Apostles have instructed us in the Didascalia." Two semiliturgical works from the same period are ascribed to Abba Giyorgis of Gasechcha. Sa'atat ("Book of Hour") and Seife Selassie ("Sword of the Trinity") are books of daily devotions.

There are numerous books from early church history. Woddase Maryam ("Praise of Mary") is ascribed to St. Ephraem Syrus of Syria. The work is appended to the Psalter, and thus has almost canonical status. Begra Hemamat is a lectionary for Holy Week. Gadia Samaetat and Gadia Hawadat mean "Acts of the Martyrs" and "Acts of the Apostles" respectively. The Apocalypse of Peter and the Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Elucidation of Jesus, Mystery of Heaven and Earth, Book of Light is concerned with improper practices corrupting the Ethiopian Church. This book refuted heresies promoted by an unidentified European who tried to introduce Sunday observance. Other books include the Royal Chronicles and Bandlet of Righteousness. As far as Sabbath observance is concerned, the most important ones are the Didascalia, Mashafa Berhan ("Book of the Light"), and The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles.

END NOTES

1. Richard K. P. Pankhurst, ed., *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, (Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.3.
2. *Ibid.*, p.4.
3. *Ibid.*, p.5.
4. *Ibid.*, p.7.
5. George A. Lipsky, et. al., *Ethiopia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven: Hraf Press, 1962), p. 101.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

Chronology of the Emperors of Ethiopia

Ezana	Mid-4 th century
Caleb	Mid-6 th century
Zagwe Dynasty	12-13 th century
Yimrha-Kristos Lalibala	

The new Solomonid Line:

Yikunno-Amlak	1270-1285
Yagbe'a Seyon	1285-1294
Amda Seyon	1314-1344
Sayfa-Ar'ad	1344-1379
Dawit	1380-1412
Tewodros I	1412-1413
Yishaq	1413-1430
Zara Ya'qob	1434-1468
Baida Maryam	1468-1478
Eskender	1478-1494
Na'od	1494-1508
Lebna Dengel	1508-1540
Galawdewos	1540-1559
Minas	1559-1563
Sarsa Dengel	1563-1597
Jakob	1597-1603, 1605
Za Dengel	1603-1605
Susenyos	1607-1632
Faselidas	1632-1667
Yohannes I	1667-1683
Iyasu I	1683-1706
Takla Haymanot	1706-1708
Takla Giyorgis	1779-1800, intermittently
Tewodros II	1855-1868
Yohannes IV	1872-1889
Menelik	1889-1913
Haile Selassie	1930-1974

Source: Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950*
(Oxford: Clarendon Press)



Chapter 2

Emperor Lebna Dengel Forms an Alliance with the Portuguese

During the first half of the 15th century, Portugal made constant efforts to establish strong commercial communications with India and Ceylon. The presence of the Muslims in the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden hampered the Portuguese ambition to establish this trade link.

Meanwhile, Prince Henry the Navigator sent explorers sent along the African coast to discover an all-sea route from Portugal to the Indies brought back reports of a great Christian king who ruled somewhere far in the interior of Africa. These reports seemed to agree with the then current identification of Prester John as a king who reigned beyond Egypt. Rumors began to trickle through Europe about this great Christian king in the East and the Christian people surrounded by the barbarians. King John II of Portugal conceived the idea that an alliance with this mighty Christian king would be very useful in establishing the connection between Portugal and India:

He accordingly, in 1487, dispatched an expedition under Bartholomew Diaz down the coast of Africa to investigate the possibility of reaching him by sea, and at the same time sent an envoy, one Peter de Covilham, to the Levant to endeavor to establish contact by that route. De Covilham succeeded in entering Abyssinia and reaching the king, but he was never allowed to return. Alvarez met him at the Abyssinian court some thirty years later.¹

Covilham was well received by the King of Ethiopia; but when he desired to return to Portugal, he found out to his dismay that the law of Ethiopia at that time did not allow a person to leave. Though Covilham was not permitted to return to Portugal, he was allowed to correspond with his king. He strongly advised his king to send missionaries. These would, of course, accomplish two purposes: gain a favored position for Portugal and the conversion of Ethiopia to the Roman Catholic faith. A mission was at once fitted out and finally reached Ethiopia. Its description of the riches and wonders, things that never existed, aroused the fancy of Europe. It was still thought that Ethiopian Christianity was exactly like that of Rome.

Portugal got much information from Ethiopia that fired her interest in that country. The king of Portugal instructed the governor of the Indies to send some more people into Ethiopia to gather more information. Albuquerque, who was then the governor of the Indies, landed two envoys at Cape Guadafui. These two managed to reach the court of the Ethiopian king, but they, too, could not return. Their coming, however, aroused such interest in Portugal that the Ethiopian court started looking to the west.

The Ethiopian Queen Helena, who acted as regent for her son Lebna Dengel, sent an Armenian named Mathew as an envoy to Portugal in 1507 to solicit aid in the struggle against the Muslims. The Queen also sent a letter with the same envoy to Pope Clement VII requesting a papal ambassador or a nuncio. The letter to the king of Portugal is printed in the *History of Ethiopia from Lebna Dengel to Towodros*, by Tekletsadik Mekuria pp. 22, 23. But there is no trace of the letter from the queen regent to Pope Clement VII.

Mathew reached India on his way to Portugal. (In those days, they used to travel from Ethiopia to India first, and then they took Portuguese ships from India to Portugal). The Portuguese governor of India suspected Mathew of spying for the Turks. He was arrested and imprisoned. Some Catholic priests who visited Mathew in jail convinced the governor that Mathew was not a spy but a genuine messenger from the Ethiopian court to Portugal. Mathew was released and eventually reached Portugal three years after he had left Ethiopia. However, the Portuguese authorities questioned the authenticity of his credentials and his reception in Portugal was cold.

Meanwhile, plans were underway between the Pope and the king of Portugal to send a diplomatic mission to Ethiopia. Eventually, it was determined to dispatch a regular embassy to the court of "Prester John." This Embassy was to have a double mission to study the possibility of making Ethiopia a Portuguese colony and then of making her people Roman Catholics. Men that were to form this embassy were carefully selected. The king appointed leading politicians and shrewd colonizers to this embassy, and the Pope selected leading missionary priests and writers for the diplomatic mission:

To preach the Roman Catholic faith to the Ethiopians, the Pope appointed Don Francisco Alvarez, Giovanni. Fernandez, and Pietro Alphonsu Mendez. The king appointed Dom Edouardo Galvam as head of the diplomatic mission. This regular embassy sailed from Portugal to Ethiopia in October 1514 with letters and gifts from the king of Portugal and the Pope of Rome to the queen regent, Helena, and to the young king, Lebna Dengel.²

Some of the men sent on this diplomatic mission died on the way. But, fortunately for the Roman Catholic Church, the leading priests arrived safely. Of the small party that arrived in 1520, Father Francisco Alvarez gave the western world the first full account of Ethiopian life and customs. The Portuguese mission on its arrival found Lebna Dengel on the throne. This embassy stayed in Ethiopia for about six years and was at length permitted to return. The chaplain of the embassy, Father

Francisco Alvarez, subsequently published an account of it and a description of the country. As a priest, Alvarez was much interested in the Ethiopian Church and devoted many pages to describing its ceremonies and customs. His account makes very pleasant reading since he was not biased as a writer.

The reception given to the Portuguese embassy was on the whole very friendly. Emperor Lebna Dengel convinced himself that they were Christians, and he showed a deep interest in their religious faith and practice. Alvarez arranged for long interviews with the emperor. The emperor was greatly attracted and impressed by the Catholic faith as expounded by the tactful Alvarez. The emperor was more anxious to bring the customs of the native church into conformity with those of the Roman Church than was Alvarez himself. The following reference shows how deeply interested was Lebna Dengel in the Roman Church:

He had long interviews with Alvarez, repeatedly made him vest himself and explain the liturgical significance of each vestment, watched the celebrations of the mass with great attention and apparent pleasure, made him produce all the holy books he had with him and had passages translated; he was greatly interested in the *Flos Sanctorum* and asked many questions about the western saints of whom he had never heard.³

Alvarez was a man of remarkable breadth of mind. The first thing he did upon his arrival in Ethiopia was to make friends with the officials of the Ethiopian court, with the bishop and other leading priests, and with the emperor himself. He told the bishop and the emperor how he was greatly impressed with the multitude of churches and monasteries. He told the emperor and the bishop that the Ethiopian churches were more numerous than all those of medieval Europe combined. Winning the confidence of the emperor, the bishop, and other leading Ethiopians, he started condemning such practices that he considered non-canonical. He was not afraid to declare his views openly to the bishop or to the emperor himself.

He was the first to launch an attack on the practice of strict Sabbath observance by the Ethiopian church. He was rather shocked by the fact that the national church of Ethiopia was observing the Bible

Sabbath on Saturday rather than Sunday. In his biography, he later told how he became quite intimate with the bishop and with the emperor. He in fact boasted of accomplishing the following great deeds:

When first he came to the country (according to his own account fifty years ago, but his chronology is contradictory and confused) he had been a zealous reformer and had persuaded the then king to forbid the keeping of the Sabbath and the avoidance of pork and unclean meat. But the native clergy had won the day, for they pointed out that Brancalone and de Covilham (who had gone native) observed the Mosaic Law and argued that it must be the universal law of the church if even Franks observed it.⁴

Alvarez was also subjected to frequent theological catechisms. In those he floundered unhappily, for he was no theologian and his knowledge of early church history was shadowy. The native clergy were suspicious of him.

Alvarez's great achievement during his stay in Ethiopia was to secure letters from Emperor Lebna Dengel to the Pope of Rome, declaring his submission to the Holy See. On the political side, the emperor was dissatisfied with Portugal; and the negotiations did not run smoothly. The emperor was unhappy with the rather meager present that the embassy presented. Lebna Dengel suggested that the kings of France and Spain and Portugal should cooperate in the contemplated crusade against the Muslim neighbors of Ethiopia. The Portuguese could not accept this at all. However an agreement was eventually reached. The Portuguese representative of the Indies had suggested that the emperor should cede Massaua as a naval base to the Portuguese. The emperor willingly consented to this and the seizure of Zalia, the port on the Indian Ocean controlled by the Muslims. The emperor promised his assistance with men, food, and money.

The main concern of Emperor Lebna Dengel, as is clearly indicated in his letter to King Manuel of Portugal, was to crush the power of the Muslims and destroy the pagans that Christianity might prosper and his empire might enjoy peace. To achieve this goal, he was willing to obey suggestions given to him by the Catholic priest,

Alvarez. In his letter to Manuel the emperor recapitulates the history of the various embassies from that of Mathew onwards. He records his joy on seeing the Portuguese envoys carry the cross and learning that they were Christians. He boasts of his victories over the "Pagans and Moors, dirty sons of Mohamed, and others are slaves who do not know god, and others pay reverence to sticks and fire and others to the sun and others to serpents." He urges Manuel not to rest till he has taken the holy house of Jerusalem. He then returns to the embassy and praises its members, especially Alvarez, described as "a just man and very truthful in speech."

The commission that was sent by Lebna Dengel to King Manuel of Portugal and to the Pope of Rome consisted of Alvarez and his Portuguese party and an Ethiopian by the name of Tsega Ze-Abb. They were supposed to leave Ethiopia in 1521, but Turkish pirates delayed the boat that was expected to come to the Ethiopian port from India. They had to wait for five years. In the meanwhile, King Manuel of Portugal died; and the Ethiopian emperor had to call the commission back to his court to make amendments to the letter and change the address from Manuel to his successor, his son, King John III. The commission finally left Ethiopia in 1526, and Father Joao Bermudez remained behind in Ethiopia according to the wish of the emperor.

END NOTES

1. A.H.M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), p. 62.
2. Tekletsadik Mekuria, *A History of Ethiopia from Lebna Dengel to Tewodros* (Addis Ababa: Tinsayie, The Gubayie Press, 1953), p. 25.
3. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
4. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 76.



Chapter 3

Out of the Scorpion Pit - the Muslim Invasion

While attacking Egypt in 1516, the Ottoman Sultan Selim gained control of the whole Red Sea. The coming of the Ottoman revived the dormant spirit of jihad, the sacred war of Islam against the infidels (the Christians). The coming of Turks also had introduced firearms into this area. Both Ethiopia and Portugal were aware of the gathering storm clouds, but they did not fully realize the urgency of the danger. Meanwhile, the king of Adel (a neighboring Muslim Walashma dynasty) had been closely watching the negotiations between Ethiopia and Portugal. With firearms he received from the Turks, he decided to strike promptly.

Within a year of the departure of the Portuguese embassy from Ethiopia, the Muslim forces of Adel, under the leadership of Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim el Ghazi, swept into the plateau of Ethiopia. Known to the Ethiopians by his nickname *Gran* ("the left handed"), Ahmed Ghazi was a general of very remarkable ability. Prior to this campaign, he was the Emir of Harrar, the largest province of Ethiopia. Gran knew the immense importance of the new weapons, and he obtained a large number of matchlock riflemen (men who

operated firearms ignited by a burning fuse) from the Turks through gifts and tribute. The effect of the skilled and well-disciplined matchlock riflemen was catastrophic to the Ethiopians. The Ethiopian chronicler described this catastrophic event in detail:

Up to this time the country had neither been dismembered nor invaded by any enemy; on the contrary, the kings (of Ethiopia), had conquered many kings. Amda Tseyon defeated ten kings even before he had his troops. The invasion of our country by enemies began under King Lebna Dengel, the son of King Naod.

At this period victory favored the Muslims....They dominated the church of Ethiopia. They were the victors in all fights to the east, west, north and south, and destroyed all the churches whose walls were covered with gold, silver and precious Indian stones; they put to the sword, a large number of Christians, and led into captivity young men and women and children of both sexes and sold them as slaves....

Many of the faithful moreover renounced the faith of the church and embraced the religion of the Muslims; it is doubtful if one in ten retained his faith....

The King was chased from his throne and wandered from desert to desert facing hunger, thirst and cold in complete destitution.¹

The Ethiopian armies broke and fled "like chaff before the wind." The whole of Ethiopia was overrun, and Gran proceeded systematically to reduce the Ethiopian strongholds. The treasure fortresses were captured and the accumulated wealth of the kingdom was carted off. The churches and monasteries were looted and burned.

At this time of trouble and distress, the bishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church died, leaving the bishopric vacant. During this turmoil, the Ethiopian church had no time to send a priest to Alexandria to be consecrated as head of the Ethiopian church. There was no connection with the mother church of Alexandria now. This was, of course, a great opportunity for the Catholic Church to seize spiritual power and to bring the Ethiopian Orthodox Church under direct control of the Holy See.

Joao Bermudez, a member of the Portuguese embassy, who remained behind when the rest left for Lisbon, started to apply to fill the vacancy as a Catholic bishop. Despite the rejection of his application to become bishop, he continued to press for the appointment.

In his distress, Emperor Lebna Dengel started thinking of his Christian ally, Portugal. He waited in anguish to get a reply from his letter to the king of Portugal in which he requested a supply of arms. But there was nothing coming from Portugal. He then naturally turned to the Portuguese representative in Ethiopia, Father Bermudez. But Bermudez would not move an inch unless he was appointed bishop. Against his desire and to the dismay of the Coptic clergy, Lebna Dengel appointed Bermudez bishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, thus disarming the militant Church of Ethiopia and putting it at the mercy of the Holy See.

Having been appointed bishop, Bermudez was now willing to go to Portugal to seek aid against the invading Muslims. About 1535, Emperor Lebna Dengel succeeded in smuggling Bermudez out of Ethiopia. Bermudez succeeded eventually in reaching Portugal, and the Portuguese king decided to send a relieving force from India. But it was too hard to get to Ethiopia:

Communication with Abyssinia had in the meanwhile grown much more difficult. While the Portuguese remained inactive, the Turks had in 1538 occupied Yemen and established strong garrisons in all the seaboard towns, including Aden, and a powerful Ottoman fleet now controlled the Red Sea.²

In the meantime, Alexandria consecrated a new bishop and sent him to Ethiopia to succeed the bishop who died a number of years earlier. When bishop Marcos arrived from Alexandria, he found out that the bishopric was taken from Alexandria and given to Bermudez, a Roman Catholic. Marcos struggled very hard to convince the emperor that his decisions were wrong and that he should return the bishopric to the mother church, Alexandria. But the struggle was absolutely hopeless, and Bishop Marcos was finally ordered out of Ethiopia.

Emperor Lebna Dengel's letters to John III of Portugal and Pope Paul III of Rome yielded political and spiritual sovereignty to Portugal and Rome respectively. As the first extant diplomatic and spiritual communications of an Ethiopian emperor with European leaders, these letters are worth quoting:

We are willing to subject our faith and our Church to the Holy See at Rome. We are willing to recognize the sovereignty of Portugal over our Empire. We and the peoples of our Empire are willing to become Portuguese and Roman Catholic subjects. To make this effective, we have given the bishopric to Bermudez.³

Emperor Lebna Dengel was driven from one mountain fortress to another, and there was no help from Portugal. Lebna Dengel died in 1540, leaving Ethiopia in peril.

END NOTES

1. Richard K. P. Pankhurst, ed., *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*, (Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 49-50.
2. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
3. Tekletsadik Mekuria, *A History of Ethiopia from Lebna Dengel to Tewodros*, (Addis Ababa: Tinsayie, The Gubayie Press, 1953), pp. 194-195.



Chapter 4

Allies in Dissension

When Lebna Dengel died in 1540, his son Galawdewos succeeded him as emperor of Ethiopia. But Galawdewos, contrary to his father, was a strong adherent of the Alexandrian tradition. This great and important emperor succeeded with great skill in rallying his exhausted subjects against Gran. His father had explained to him the meaning of the Holy Scriptures while his teacher had instilled into him the virtues of men. The Chronicle, which often gives the emperor the Syrian title *Mar* ("Lord") claims that Galawdewos, who was only about eighteen years old at the time of his accession, was already a young man of wisdom and ability:

God made Mar Galawdewos reign over the beautiful country of Ethiopia and placed him on the throne of his father, giving him wisdom, knowledge and intelligence like that of Solomon, the son of David. Despite his youth he inspired complete confidence because of his wisdom and knowledge which was greater even than that found among old men....

With such studies, Mar Galawdewos grew up fortified by the grace of the Holy Spirit and learnt all the doctrine of the church in his first youth; he was later shown how to ride a horse, draw the bow, and hunt animals; then as was the custom for the children of kings, he was taught everything concerning the art of war. ¹

Galawdewos did not wait for the arrival of the Portuguese army to attack his archenemy, Gran, who had now settled in Ethiopia near Lake Tana. He devoted all his attention to rallying his people against Gran. He was fully confident of success. Even though the armies of his enemy were "as strong as olive trees and as numerous as locusts,"² the young emperor was not afraid. Though by no means always victorious, he set an example for his people. In 1541, the emperor's new army attacked the enemy and initially gained the victory.

After considerable delay, Portugal ordered its viceroy of India to send an expedition to Ethiopia. In 1542, four hundred Portuguese soldiers under Christopher de Gama, a brother of the famous explorer Vasco de Gama, disembarked at Massawa.

Emperor Galawdewos was far away in the interior when the Portuguese arrived. The Portuguese were, however, received by Isaac, the Governor of the coast Province, and the Queen Mother, who was living in a neighboring fortress. After a while, the Portuguese army started moving southward into the interior. Gran, who was near Lake Tana, was determined to prevent this junction and attacked the Portuguese force. Even though the Muslims were more numerous, the Portuguese held their own.

Gran succeeded in delaying the progress of the Portuguese into the interior (and the emperor) until the rainy season. When the rain began, Gran retreated to the plain of Danakil and sent an urgent request to the Turkish pasha of Yemen for reinforcement. The pasha sent him nine hundred matchlock riflemen, and Gran promptly attacked the Portuguese camp. The battle was decisive for Gran. Christopher de Gama, the Portuguese leader, was wounded and captured. Gran cut off his head with an ax and sent it to Constantinople as a trophy.

After the victory, Gran dismissed the Turks, keeping with him only his regular force and returned to his Lake Tana headquarters. Emperor Galawdewos came up from the south and met the surviving Portuguese. Rearming themselves from a depot that Christopher de Gama had established, the Portuguese were ready to avenge their leader. A combined Ethiopian and Portuguese army defeated the Muslims near Lake Tana, and Gran was killed in the course of the battle. After this defeat and the loss of their leader, the Muslims were no longer formidable.

The religious dissension between the Ethiopian and the Roman Churches began under Galawdewos. The success of the Portuguese gave Bermudez a favorable position, but Bermudez tried to use this advantage unwisely. It may be remembered that Joao Bermudez had been appointed bishop by Emperor Lebna Dengel and had been sent by him to Portugal to solicit aid. But, returning to Ethiopia with Christopher de Gama's party, Bermudez found his friend Lebna Dengel dead and his successor, Galawdewos, a strong adherent of the Alexandrian and Ethiopian traditions, on the throne.

As soon as Galawdewos arrived to meet the Portuguese army, Bermudez announced to him that he was a patriarch of Ethiopia and demanded Galawdewos' submission to his authority and that of the Pope. He tried to fabricate fictitious stories to convince Galawdewos that he was patriarch:

When the abune Mark was on the point of death, King Lebna Dengel had ordered him to institute Bermudez, in accordance with his custom, as his successor. This the abune had done, having first ordained him in all the sacred orders. Bermudez had accepted on condition that his appointment was confirmed by the pope and the king had agreed. Bermudez had then on his way to Portugal visited the Pope and had been confirmed in his office and moreover created: Patriarch of Alexandria.³

Historians agree that the whole story appeared to be a tissue of lies. They also agree that the first part of the story is difficult to test. But it is most unlikely that the bishop of Ethiopia had appointed him as his successor on the point of death. Furthermore, it was by no means "in accordance with his custom." Ethiopian bishops were

consecrated at Alexandria and they did not have the custom of appointing their successors. The latter part of the story can be tested: Not only is there no record in the Papal archives of Bermudez's appointment, but at the very date when Bermudez is supposed to have visited the pope, another patriarch of Alexandria is recorded, and while Bermudez was still alive the pope appointed another patriarch of Abyssinia without alluding to Bermudez's existence.⁴

Bermudez also told Galawdewos that his father, Emperor Lebna Dengel, had promised the third of his kingdom to Portugal and the conversion of the natives to the Roman faith. Bermudez was supposed to be the governor of this part to be allocated to Portugal and to be patriarch. Galawdewos naturally rejected these claims. Bermudez managed to make himself a great nuisance in demanding that the Roman rites should be enforced throughout the country and that all the clergy should be re-ordained by him. The emperor dealt with him decisively:

There was war between the Portuguese and the royal army. The emperor decided to settle the fight in a diplomatic way. After a pretending to submit, he scattered the Portuguese by granting them estates in remote provinces. Bermudez threatened to excommunicate him and the emperor retorted that the Pope himself was a heretic. After the Portuguese forces were separated, Bermudez was exiled to Efat.⁵

In the meanwhile, Emperor Galawdewos secured a bishop from Cairo. Bermudez escaped from his place of exile. The emperor now took a strong line in dispatching him to Portugal. After this, Bermudez "retired into obscurity and died." This was a total failure for the Catholic Church.

END NOTES

1. Pankhurst, *op. cit.*, pp. 7071.
2. *Ibid.*
3. A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1955), p. 86.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Tekletsadik Mekuria, *Ethiopia from Lebna Dengel to Tewodros* (Addis Ababa: Tinsayie The Gubayie Press, 1953), p. 203. .



Chapter 5

Emperor Galawdewos and Jesuit Diplomacy

A completely uneducated man, Bermudez avoided all theological discussions while in Ethiopia and existed simply on his authority. In his discussion with the native clergy, he made blunders that later put the Jesuits in a difficult position. But, at the same time, he won some friends for the Catholic Church. Some Ethiopian priests had actually yielded to the Catholic faith. After Bermudez completely failed to convert Ethiopia to the Roman Catholic faith, some Ethiopian clergymen went all the way to Rome to advise him of the best methods.

An Abyssinian priest on arriving in Rome asserted that the failure to convert Abyssinia had been due only to Bermudez and that men of sense and capacity would be heard. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order, volunteered to go in person; but eventually thirteen other members of the order were chosen at the head of whom were Nunez Barefto, elevated to the rank of patriarch, and Andre Oviedo, Bishop of Hieropolis.¹

When Ignatius Loyola himself desired to spread the “true faith” among the Ethiopians, he was forbidden by the Pope to do so. But when King John III of Portugal suggested to the Pope that he send a Roman Catholic bishop as patriarch to Ethiopia, the Pope decided to leave everything to the Jesuits. It was at this time that Ignatius Loyola suggested to the Pope that he consecrate Nunez Barefto as patriarch and to send with him Andre Oviedo and Melchoir Carneiro as bishops to assist and eventually succeed him.

The king of Portugal dispatched them to India, ordering his Viceroy to install them with a force of five hundred men at their back. The viceroy was unable to spare such a force, and as he had by a preliminary mission discovered that Claudius (Galawdewos) would by no means welcome the arrival of a patriarch from Rome, he decided not to risk the person of the Patriarch who in fact died some years later in India, never having seen his province but to send Oviedo with a few priests.²

The mission under Oviedo landed at Massawa in 1558. Oviedo was well received by Emperor Galawdewos. The emperor told Oviedo that he was well disposed towards the Portuguese and that he would grant them lands and permission for settlement. But he warned the Portuguese that they could only exercise the rites of their religion in private. He also refused to admit Oviedo's authority as patriarch and told him that he had brought a patriarch from Alexandria. He reaffirmed his belief in the Orthodox faith of Alexandria. At the same time, he declared himself open to conviction. An assembly was held, and in it the emperor personally disputed with Oviedo. The Ethiopian Chronicler left the following account of the dispute of the emperor and Oviedo:

The object of this voyage of the bishop was to criticize the true faith that was brought to Ethiopia from Alexandria and openly to proclaim the false belief which issued from Rome.... At this time King Galawdewos had two major cares. One of them was his controversy with the *ferenje* [white people] scholars on the subject of the lack of faith; he defeated them in argument and, confounded their falsehoods. On this occasion, he composed a large number of dissertations in which he laid stress on sacred texts chosen from the writings of the Apostles, the Prophets and the learned men of the church.³

A learned theologian, the emperor challenged Oviedo. Using the scriptures to prove his points, the emperor defeated Oviedo. The Portuguese themselves admitted later that the emperor was victorious in this dispute about theological questions:

The Jesuits, who were learned men, were betrayed into long theological disputes. The abune and the native clergy could not stand up against them, but the king, as they freely admit in their own dispatches, often drove Oviedo into a corner. ⁴

The glorious King Galawdewos (may he enjoy peace!) Replied to them with words drawn from the books of the Catholic faith; he confounded them with shame. He composed a dissertation on the subject which he put in a book. ⁵

The practical outcome was a decision by the emperor and of those assembled that neither the emperor nor the people owed allegiance to Rome. Then the emperor produced the famous "Confession of Faith" in which he established Sabbath observance as scriptural. Concerning the Jesuits' accusation that the Ethiopian Church kept the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday, instead of the Christian Sabbath, Sunday, the emperor replied that the Ethiopians kept the Sabbath not because it was the Jewish custom but "as our Fathers the Apostles have instructed as in the Didascalia." This famous "Confession of Faith" is of great importance to people concerned with the history of worship on Saturday.

THE CONFESSION OF CLAUDIUS⁶

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, one God. This is my faith, and the faith of my fathers, Kings of Israel; and the faith of my flock, which is within the fold of my kingdom.

We believe in one God: And in his only Son Jesus Christ, his Word, and his Power, his Counsel and his Wisdom; who was with him before the world was created: And in the last days he came unto us, not laying aside the throne of his Godhead: And was made man of the Holy Ghost, and of Mary the Holy Virgin: And he was baptized in the River Jordan, in his thirtieth year; And he was perfect

man: And He was crucified on the wood of the cross. In the days of Pontius Pilate; He suffered, died, and was buried: And He rose again on the third day; and then on the fortieth day ascended with glory into heaven, And sat on the right hand of his Father: And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father: And we believe in one Baptism for the remission of sins: And we look for the resurrection of the dead: And the Life of the world to come. Amen.

And we walk in the King s Highway, evident and true; and neither to the right nor to the left do we turn aside from the Doctrines of our Fathers, the Twelve Apostles; and of Paul, the Font of Wisdom; and of the Seventy-Two Apostles; and of the Three Hundred and Eighteen Orthodox, who were gathered together in Nicea: and of the One Hundred and Fifty, in Constantinople; and of the Two Hundred, in Ephesus.

Thus do I proclaim and thus do I teach, I, Claudius, King of Ethiopia, whose reigning name is Asnaf Sagad (1), the son of Wanag Sagad, the son of Naod.

Now with regard to our observance of the original Sabbath (Saturday): We do not keep it as the Jews do who crucified Christ saying, His blood be on us, and on our children because those Jews neither drink water nor light a fire, neither cook food nor make bread, nor do they move about from house to house; but we keep it in that we celebrate thereon the Lord s supper, and held Love Feasts, even as our Fathers the Apostles have instructed us in the Didascalia. We do not observe it as the Sabbath of the first day of the Week (Sunday), which is a new day concerning which David saith, This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it because on it our Lord Jesus Christ rose again, and on it the Holy Ghost descended on the Apostles in the upper room of Zion, and on it He became incarnate in the womb of Saint Mary, ever Virgin; and on it He will come again to reward the righteous and to recompense sinners.

Again, concerning the question of Circumcision: We are not circumcised as the Jews, because we knew the words of the Doctrine of Paul, the Font of Wisdom, who saith, Neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision. All the books of the Doctrine of Paul are in our hands, and teach us concerning circumcision and uncircumcision. But circumcision amongst us is according to the custom of the country, like the tattooing of the face in Ethiopia and Nubia, and like the piercing of the ear amongst the Indians. And what we do is not in observance of the Mosaic Law but according to the custom of men.

Finally, with regard to eating the flesh of swine: We are not prohibited from it, as the Jews are by observance of the Law of Moses. But him who eats thereof we do not abhor or consider unclean, and him who does not eat thereof we do not compel to eat: as our Father Paul wrote to the Romans, saying, Let not him who eateth despise him who eateth not, for God receiveth all. The kingdom of God does not consist in food and drink. All is clean to the clean, but it is evil for a man to eat with offense.

THE SABBATH

Claudius in his confession says, With regard to our observance of the original Sabbath (Saturday): We do not keep it as the Jews do who crucified Christ because those Jews neither drink water nor light a fire, neither cook food nor make bread, nor do they move about from house to, house; but we keep it in that we celebrate thereon the Lord's supper, and held Love Feasts, even as our Fathers the Apostles have instructed us in the Didascalia. Regardless of this disavowal, the Sabbath is still strictly observed in Abyssinia. No work of any sort is done upon this day and journeys are interdicted. Travelers and others have accused the Abyssinians of observing a Jewish custom and, so it is but one that was transmitted by the early Church rather than one taken over from the Jews directly. No doubt Claudius gives us the reason for its observance, As our Fathers the Apostles have instructed us in the Didascalia.

At the same time Galawdewos was making compromises. Even though he didn't believe in Sunday observance, he introduced it in a shrewd manner because he wanted to please the Portuguese since he still depended on their help against his foe, the Muslims. But the Ethiopian clergy refused to accept this compromise:

Claudius seems to have enjoyed these discussions and was highly indignant when the abune [the Ethiopian bishop] threatened to excommunicate him for reading a dissertation of the errors of the Abyssinians which the Jesuits had translated into Ge ez. He treated the Jesuits with uniform kindness and respect, and they speak very highly of his character, saying that but for his obduracy he would have been a perfect king.⁷

Even with this compromise, the Jesuits were not satisfied. In fact, Oviedo was so displeased that in retaliation he placed his spiritual ban over the Ethiopian Empire on February 5, 1559.

At this point, the Adel invaded Ethiopia and Emperor Galawdewos once more entered battle. He was warned by a monk from Debra Libanos not to fight, but Galawdewos brushed aside that advice as nonsense. In March 1559, he perished during battle. His brother Minas succeeded him and was determined to avenge the death of his brother at the hands of the Portuguese. He, therefore, canceled the land grants that had been given to them as reward for their service:

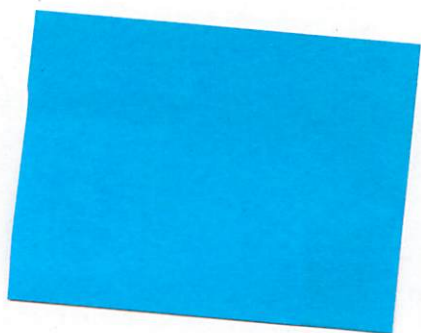
Claudius had allowed the Abyssinian wives and slaves of the Portuguese to adopt the Roman faith, and had permitted the Abyssinians to attend the Roman churches. Minas forbade this, and when Bishop Oviedo defied him, Minas was barely restrained from killing him with his own hands. The bishop was several times banished to mountain fortresses and several times threatened with death, but bravely stood his ground.⁸

When the emperor refused to allow even the Portuguese soldiers to practice their faith, Oviedo again retaliated by stirring up a provincial revolt. Unfortunately for the Jesuits, this revolt proved abortive. Minas' intolerance was, in the eyes of Oviedo, the greatest obstacle to the propagation of the Catholic faith. Lacking tact and

persuasiveness, Oviedo was a very unsuccessful missionary. The Catholic attempt again failed after thirty years of constant efforts, and Oviedo died in 1577.

END NOTES

1. Harry Middleton Hyatt, *The Church of Abyssinia* (London: Luzac & Co., 1928), pp. 3536.
2. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
3. Pankhurst, *op. cit.*, p. 76
4. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
5. Pankhurst, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
6. Ludoff, *Historia Asthigpio* (Frankfort, 1681), Vol. 11, pp. 237241.
7. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
8. *Ibid.*





Chapter 6

Missionary Paez Influences Emperor Sartsa Dengel

Sartsa Dengel, who bore the throne name of Malak Sagad, reigned for thirty-four years, from 1563 to 1597. He was one of the many emperors of Ethiopia who came to the throne as a child. The young emperor had in fact inherited his throne at a time of great difficulty. Besides trouble with many of his nobles, he was faced with the fact that the Turks had extended their control of the coast. This made the young emperor more tolerant of the Jesuits than his father. He allowed them to resume the operation of their mission. But they gradually died off, and the mission was finally deprived of all its priests. The members of the Society in India tried many times to re-staff it, but the difficulties were almost insuperable because the Turks at Massawa kept a careful watch and prevented any Jesuit from entering the country.

At this time King Philip II of Spain stirred up new zeal. In 1603, efforts were resumed to bring Ethiopia within the Roman Catholic fold. A small band of priests arrived in Ethiopia that year, with Pedro Paez among them. Pedro Paez was an able and learned Spaniard who had mastered the Amharic and Ge'ez languages while yet in Spain.

He had suffered imprisonment on his way to Ethiopia, but it did not discourage him. He had been detected by the Turks and held captive in Yemen for seven years. From Yemen he went to India where he established friendly relations with a Turk. His Turkish friend arranged for him and his party to safely arrive in the Ethiopian port of Massawa.

Upon arriving in Ethiopia, Paez did not present himself to the emperor. He went directly to the Portuguese settlement at Fremona where he opened a school for the Portuguese children and accepted as many Ethiopians as wished to attend the school. He was a man of diverse talents and accomplishments. In addition to being a teacher, he was a linguist, an architect, a mason and a carpenter. He was a man of great patience who was able to adapt himself to the local situation.

Sartsa Dengel died in 1597; and his son, Za Dengel, succeeded him. Za Dengel was not as militant as his grandfather when it came to the Portuguese and the national church. Meanwhile Paez's fame as a brilliant teacher was spreading all over Ethiopia. His students showed more command of the Ge'ez language than those trained by the national clergy at church schools. The fame of Paez reached the ear of the emperor.

One of the Portuguese officers mentioned the good work that Paez was doing in Tigre and the King summoned him to court. He presented himself with two of his star pupils, a theological discussion followed in which the two boys confounded the Abyssinian clergy, and Paez delivered a sermon in Ge'ez which took the audience by storm by its eloquence and purity of diction.¹

Paez now began to subtly convince the emperor that Rome was right and that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was wrong. He tactfully satisfied the emperor by argument that the Ethiopian Church needed re-conversion. The main argument was Sabbath observance by the Ethiopian Church. Using it as evidence that the Ethiopians did not accept Christianity but Hebraism, the tactful Spaniard convinced the emperor to believe that the Ethiopian Church was wrong. He decided to show the Ethiopians how misled they were in their practice of keeping the Jewish Sabbath:

The king was greatly impressed and soon privately informed Paez of his conversion. Unfortunately, the zeal of the royal convert outran the bounds of prudence, and despite Paez's protests he immediately began to issue decrees forbidding the observance of the Sabbath and abolishing all the errors of the Abyssinian Church.²

This open attack by their own emperor upon the cherished practice of Sabbath observance by the Ethiopian Church caused the common man, the nobility, and the clergy to denounce the emperor as a heretic. The emperor discovered that his position was not secure. He wrote another letter to King Philip III of Spain explaining his dangerous position and asked for a large loan of troops. The Jesuit commission was dispatched to Rome and Spain to ask the Pope and the king to act fast. A strong military force was needed to enforce Sunday observance.

But the Ethiopians who were gravely disappointed with their emperor would not wait silently for the Catholic force to arrive. The nobles called an emergency meeting and decided to act in time to save the Ethiopian Church and its practice of the observance of the true Sabbath:

The nobles who were of the opposing party did not delay to strike. They raised a rebellion and induced the abune to take a step unprecedented in Abyssinian history, to release the Abyssinians from their oath of allegiance to the king. Za Dengel's army melted away, and he was defeated and killed.³

This event again introduced another period of confused intrigues and fighting. The Portuguese army in Ethiopia fought desperately to maintain the Roman Catholic cause. The Ethiopians, though not armed with firearms as the Portuguese, were more than willing to die to maintain God's standard for His Church. Even the royal chronicler seems to have laid down his pen during this period. No mention of Emperor Za Dengel and of this period was made in *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*. This was one of the periods the Ethiopians decided never to remember.

END NOTES

1. Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-94.
2. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
3. *Ibid.*



Chapter 7

Emperor Susenyos, Power, and Paez

Emperor Susenyos, who reigned for twenty-seven years, from 1607-1632, had an adventurous reign. He was a nephew of the late Sartsa Dengel. On the death of his predecessor Za Dengel when civil war broke out over the question of Sabbath observance, Susenyos fled to the Sudanese border where he found refuge in the southern part of Gojam. Later he raised an army and fought his way to power.

Once he was emperor, he decided to ally himself with the Portuguese Jesuits who survived the period of confused intrigue and fighting. He totally relied upon the support of the Portuguese and thus naturally protected Paez and kept him in the royal court.

Early in his reign, he wrote to the Pope and also to the king of Spain, renewing his predecessor's request for troops. But he did not make the same mistake as Za Dengel. He spent the first five years of his reign consolidating his position and re-establishing the royal power over the governors and nobles. He also reconstructed cities and the

churches that were destroyed during the civil war. He appointed Paez as chief architect and supervisor of the construction:

The . . . King of Kings chose a place called Azazo in the region of Dambea.... He decided to build a church there ... He himself carried the stones on his head and laid the cornerstone of the church. This church had a foundation two cubits deep and a circumference of fiftysix cubits.... There was a skillful ferenji [white man] called Padre (*Father*) Paez, an architect, who planned the building and supervised its decorations.

Paez later built the emperor a church at Gorgora by Lake Tana.

The King of Kings Saitan Sagad (i.e. *Susneyos*) went down.... to Gorgora, his former town, for he had caused the construction there of a big church with stone and lime, and without any wood; it was full of arches and was built on the site of his former house. No one has seen such a church in Ethiopia nor has so much gold ever been given to the lime bearers, stone carriers, builders and carpenters. The chief of the skilled men and carpenters was Ermaw who came from Portugal.¹

Elsewhere the chronicler tells of the erection of a palace at Dangaz where foreigners were once again, employed.

The King of Kings started out from Danqaz.... He left Abetohun Faselidas (i.e. *his son, the future emperor*) to guard his town of Danqaz.... He also left behind (a certain) Gabre Krestos and ordered him to build a house with lime with the help of many skilled men of Egypt and Rome (*probably Constantinople*). The chief mason and maker of lime was a Banyan (Indian) called Abdul Kedm. The chief carpenter was a person called Sadaqa from Egypt. There were also many Egyptians.²

This work of reconstruction seems to have been planned by Susenyos to divert public hatred away from the Portuguese. The Ethiopians now see the Portuguese as builders of their nation. They see them making much contribution in architecture, even rebuilding Coptic churches they themselves destroyed during the conflict. The Ethiopians begin to accept the Portuguese as their friends.

Having won the confidence of the Ethiopians, Susenyos and Paez now began to move in opposite directions in order to achieve their goal. In 1612, Susenyos called his brother, Seela Kristos, from Gojam, the seat and stronghold of the national church. It was arranged for Seela Kristos to live with Paez at the court. After awhile through Paez's subtle and tactful approach, Kristos was converted to the Catholic faith. Then he installed the Jesuits in his province and gave them freedom to indoctrinate the inhabitants of Gojam. Preaching in public gatherings and market places, they started baptizing converts to the Roman Catholic faith.

Shortly after that, Emperor Susenyos publicly declared that he was a Roman Catholic. The emperor's public confession of the Catholic faith triggered a civil war that lasted for many years. The political, economic, and religious ascendancy of the Jesuits was now complete. They actually succeeded in inducing Emperor Susenyos to proclaim the Roman Catholic faith as the national religion and to renounce the Alexandrian doctrine. *Susenyos was the first Ethiopian emperor to issue a nationwide decree in 1622 to do away with the seventh-day Sabbath and keep Sunday in its place. He used force to make his proclamation effective.*

The Emperor Susenyos showed him (Paez) much favor and became more and more susceptible to the influence of Paez's teaching. He relaxed prohibitions against the Roman Church, permitted proselytizing and discouraged observance of the Sabbath.³

The Ethiopian bishop began denouncing Emperor Susenyos. When the first decree was sent out discouraging Sabbath observance, the bishop excommunicated Susenyos. Meanwhile, Susenyos called pagan Ethiopians to rally around him and tried to compel the bishop to retract the excommunication. The bishop refused, and civil war broke out. The emperor, the Portuguese and the pagan Ethiopians were on one side and opposed by the Ethiopian bishop, the clergy, and the faithful adherents of the national church on the other side.

The war proved to be disastrous for the national church. The Ethiopian bishop and his men were determined to fight to the last man and die the death of the martyrs for the true faith. The royalist

army was superior in number and supply of modern arms. The Ethiopian bishop was killed in the course of the fight and almost all his men were wiped out:

Encouraged by this, by his success over Julious, and by the peaceful interval that had followed, Socinious (Susenyos) now went a step further and sent out another proclamation forbidding all persons to keep Saturday but only Sunday as the true Christian Sabbath.... A wave of fury swept through the country at this, and an anonymous letter in which he was devoted to hell was addressed to the King, and distributed throughout the land. This so enraged him that he issued yet another proclamation ordering everyone to work on Saturday under pain of all sorts of drastic punishment; and by way of showing that he meant what he said, he ordered a monk to have his tongue cut out for upholding the single nature and caused a general who had refused to work on Saturday to be beaten with rods and publicly degraded.⁴

Another rebellion followed this decree, and faithful members of the Coptic Church were so determined to defy their emperor whom they labeled heretic and betrayer of the national cause. Emperor Susenyos met stubborn resistance everywhere he went. With the support of the missionaries, he responded with violent measures.

In spite of all the force applied and the efforts made, Susenyos failed to restore peace and order. He then decided to send the Jesuits as his emissaries to Rome and Spain to enlist the support of the Pope to take over the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the king of Spain to take over the country. Fearing that the letters might be intercepted, he decided to send the communication out of the country through the port in East Africa:

. . .he sent his emissaries, two Jesuits, southwards in the hope that they might reach the coast at Malindi (north of Mombasa). The two fathers penetrated as far as the upper waters of the Omo but were forced eventually to retrace their steps.⁵

However, Paez died before the letters reached the Pope and the king of Spain; and Emperor Susenyos was deprived of his prudent adviser.

END NOTES

1. Pankhurst, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians-An Introduction to Country and People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 78.
4. C. F. Rey, *The Romance of the Portuguese in Abyssinia* (London: Seeley Service & Co., 1935), p. 253.
5. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 95.



Chapter 8

Mendez – the Roman Catholic Patriarch

Having killed the Ethiopian bishop during the civil war, Emperor Susenyos began putting much pressure on the Pope to send him a patriarch. Paez also had sent many good reports regarding the struggle of Susenyos to bring the Ethiopian Church to full union with the Roman Catholic Church and the efforts he had made to make Spain and Portugal exercise authority over the Ethiopian empire. The Pope was hesitant to comply with his request to send a Latin patriarch, but after much consideration and encouraged by Paez's report, he finally complied. Alphonzo Mendez, a Spanish Jesuit, was chosen. After Mendez was consecrated in Lisbon, eighteen other Jesuits were appointed for the hazardous journey and mission.

Mendez and his Jesuit missionaries landed in the Muslim kingdom near northeastern Ethiopia. The Muslim kingdom was just a nominal kingdom at this time since the Muslim king was forced to pay tribute to the Ethiopian emperor. When Mendez and his staff arrived they were given a royal welcome by the king of Danakil. From there they were conveyed to the Ethiopian border where Mendez was again

received with great state. They started making preparation to take him to the court where he would meet Emperor Susenyos who was waiting desperately for the arrival of the Latin patriarch.

Mendez was not as clever and as wise as his predecessor, Paez—a man of great personal charm, patience, and discretion. Mendez, unlike Paez, was overbearing and narrow-minded. As soon as he arrived at the Ethiopian court, Mendez started demonstrating the supremacy of the Holy See.

He ordered that a solemn assembly of notables be held, and in their presence, Sisinnius [Susenyos] had to kneel and swear fealty to the patriarch as representative of the Pope....Mendez then proceeded to reform the church. The Jesuits had naturally detected many irregularities. With ruthless logic the patriarch set them right.¹

Mendez began to reform the practices of the Ethiopian Church, particularly the true doctrines taught by the Apostles and by the early church. Again, like his predecessors, his main attack was against seventh-day Sabbath observance. Mendez thought that Sabbath observance by the Ethiopian Church was a real challenge to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. At this time, the western churches and most of the eastern churches had acknowledged the supremacy of Rome and knelt and obeyed the Pope in accepting the Sunday substitute for the true Bible Sabbath. The fact that the Ethiopian Church had kept the true Sabbath for 16 centuries was a living witness that the Holy See was wrong. Mendez was too proud to accept this. The Jesuit historians themselves admit that Mendez's zeal for reform was carried to excess. He said that the Ethiopian bishop did not have full right to ordain priests. He accordingly suspended all priests till they could be re-ordained by him. He also alleged that priests whose ordination was not canonical had baptized members of the Ethiopian Church. In addition to insisting that all the members were to be re-baptized, he introduced many other changes in his reform.

The churches were re-consecrated and altars of the Roman form erected and graven images, such as the Abyssinians considered idolatrous, introduced. The calendar was brought into conformity with that of Rome. The liturgy was remodeled, though on the

request of the King it was permitted to be celebrated in Ge ez. Everything was done in fact, that could antagonize not only the clergy but the simple worshiper.²

As one would expect, such reforms were met with resistance by violent measures. Revolt followed revolt. No longer the work of discontented nobles, these revolts were genuine popular insurrections. Initially, Susenyos and the Jesuits were able to suppress most of them, but this only hardened the nobles' determination to fight. The civil war continued for eight years.

In the 27th year of his reign, during the time of religious war, Susenyos became ill and lost his power of speech. The royal family, and especially his son Faselidas, attributed the muteness of the emperor to his unjustified proclamation against the holy Sabbath of God.

Faselidas began writing circular letters to the clergy and to the nobility asking them to pray for his father. He promised the Ethiopian Church that he would restore the Alexandrian faith and especially Sabbath observance if his father's speech capability were restored. Upon this promise, the clergy and the nobility made a nationwide proclamation to pray of the ailing emperor.

When the emperor's health was restored, his son, Faselidas, forced him to restore the true faith. According to his promise, Susenyos made the following proclamation:

Hear ye! Hear ye! We first gave you this faith believing that it was good. But innumerable people have been slain, Julius, Gabriel, Takla Giorgis, Sartsa Kdstos, and now these peasants. For which reason we restore to you the faith of your forefathers. Let the former clergy return to the churches. Let them put in their altars, let them say their own liturgy. And do ye rejoice.³

Susenyos did not resume his power as emperor after he had made this confession. He knew very well that the civil war would not end if he resumed power. In 1632, Susenyos abdicated the throne in favor of his son, Faselidas.

After this final renunciation, Susenyos sought toleration for his friends, the Jesuits. But this toleration was short lived since his son and successor, Faselidas, had no affection for the Roman faith. Shortly after Susenyos died, the Jesuits faced hard days.

END NOTES

1. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
2. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
3. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 98.



Chapter 9

Emperor Faselidas Expels the Jesuits

When Faselidas ascended the throne as emperor in 1632, he was determined to expel the Jesuits and to restore peace in Ethiopia. As soon as he was proclaimed emperor, he reversed his father's religious policy completely. Even when his father was in power, Faselidas never had any affection for the Roman faith. He saw loyal Ethiopians cutting each other's throats. He saw his father's army fighting not pagans or Muslims, but their own fellow Christians. He then came to the conclusion that the cause of disorder and continual civil wars was the presence of the Jesuits in the country. He embarked upon the seemingly difficult job of seeing every Jesuit out of Ethiopia and the total suppression of the Catholic faith.

Realizing that his tyrannical power was gone, Mendez began humbling himself in the sight of Faselidas, proposing various concessions. But it was too late. Faselidas in his determination had come to a point of no return. He had only one answer for the humble petitions and suggestions made by Mendez:

...he sternly replied that he was resolved to extirpate the Catholic faith, and would soon deport the Jesuits; in the meanwhile they were to be concentrated and interned at Fremona, and all arms and ammunition in their possession were to be surrendered.¹

At the same time he was proposing a compromise to Emperor Faselidas, Mendez, was appealing to the governor-general of India for armed intervention on behalf of his Jesuits. He strongly recommended that the governor-general send four hundred men to occupy Suakim and Massawa as a base for re-conquering Ethiopia for the Catholic Church. He was also determined, if possible, to remain in the country with his staff and continue his missionary efforts.

But Faselidas, who was highly suspicious of armed intervention from Spain and India, did not wait for the Spanish army to arrive, and he struck promptly. The Jesuits were in trouble. Many of them succeeded in finding refuge with the Ethiopian notables who accepted Catholicism with fervor at the time of Emperor Susenyos. Mendez, with the main body, "eluded their guards and fled to the Bahrnagas, Johan Akay, who was in rebellion."²

John Akay treated Mendez and his party comparatively well. But John Akay was in terror of being attacked by Faselidas whose army was far superior to that of his own. He also received a message from Faselidas to surrender the Jesuits, and threatened him with punishment if he refused to do so. Johan Akay was terrified when he received this message and he gave way, as describe below:

He declared that he could not surrender them to the king, since this would be a breach of the laws of hospitality, but he reconciled it with his conscience to sell them to the pasha of Suakim. The pasha...resold them to the Spanish government at a very considerable profit.³

Emperor Faselidas and the remaining clergymen rejoiced over this. Their archenemy was now defeated and sold as a slave. But, they thought the reform was not complete while there were still some Jesuits hiding in the country and some Ethiopian notables still professing the Catholic faith. Faselidas decided to crush the Roman

Catholic vestige totally and completely from the land of Ethiopia. At this stage, the faithful Ethiopians rallied around the emperor, giving him full support against Roman Catholicism. Jones clearly described the outcome:

Basilidas [Faselidas] then hunted down the remaining Jesuits that lurked in the country; these he executed summarily, since they had defied his authority. He likewise banished and confiscated the property of all Abyssinians who still clung to the Roman faith; a few highly placed recusants, including Se ela Kristos, his uncle, he executed.⁴

The Holy See was shocked by these events. The uncompromising Jesuits were blamed for the failure. But Rome was determined not to give up without seeking some concession. Other channels of approach must be discovered.

It was decided to make another attempt with priests of a different nationality and order. Catholic countries that had good relations with Ethiopia were sought. France proved to be on the top of the list of such countries. Accordingly, six French Capuchins were dispatched. Two tried to enter Abyssinia via Magadocha. But the natives killed them before they reached Ethiopia. Two succeeded in entering the country. But they boasted of their nationality upon arriving in Ethiopia. When Faselidas discovered that they were Catholics, he ordered that they should be stoned right away, and they were stoned. The remaining two, who were waiting to enter the country, heard what had happened to their comrades and returned to their country from Massawa.

The last attempt by the Catholic Church was even more fatal to the Catholic cause in Ethiopia. It made Emperor Faselidas determine not to be pestered by them any more. His hatred drove him to sign a treaty with an enemy, the Muslim pasha of Suakim and Massawa. According to this treaty, the pasha of Suakim agreed to kill all the priests that might attempt to leave:

This treaty bore fruit in 1648 when three other Capuchins landed at Massaua. They had been foolish enough to announce their coming to Basilidas. He notified the pasha, who promptly beheaded

them and, flaying their heads, sent the skins to Basilidas, that he might know by their color and tonsure that the Frankish priests had been faithfully killed.⁵

The Roman Catholic Church was forced to end all official contact with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. After 145 years of struggle and bloodshed, the Jesuit mission was ordered out the country, leaving behind it a reinforced suspicion of foreigners and a hatred of Catholics. They did not make the best use of their opportunity. In fact, they so embittered the national suspicion of the Ethiopians towards foreigners that the Christian emperor of Ethiopia employed his enemy, the Muslim Turk, to keep Christians out of his country. This was indeed a lamentable chapter for the Catholics in the history of their church.

One must admit, though, that the Jesuits had a difficult task. During centuries of isolation, the Ethiopians had developed a strongly nationalistic spirit. They were deeply attached to the doctrines of their ancient national church—doctrines handed over to them by the apostles and the early church. Because they so loved and cherished the truth taught in the Bible they were willing to say with the Apostle Paul "...neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, or things to come. Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8; 38, 39 (KJV)

END NOTES

1. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
2. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 100.



Chapter 10

Twentieth Century Sabbath Observance in Ethiopia

In the northern provinces where the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is strongly embraced, the seventh-day Sabbath is still strictly observed. This is also true in most parts of Eritrea, and the Governorate Generals of Tigre and Begemdir. A traveler can see the farmers threshing wheat on Sundays, especially on Sunday afternoons during harvest time. But people who adhere to the traditional religious beliefs do no work of any sort on the Sabbath. Housewives draw their water on Friday and do all their cooking on the preparation day just as it was in the Old Testament time. Even though this does not appear in the revised constitution of the Ethiopian government, Sabbath-breakers are occasionally brought before local chiefs to receive punishment for breaking the law of God.

In his work entitled, "*The Church of Abyssinia*," Harry Middleton Hyatt writes extensively about the institutions and life of the Ethiopian Church, in particular the practice of Sabbath observance. He refers to the time of the Portuguese mission to Ethiopia and to

the confession of Emperor Galawdewos as the result of this Portuguese mission:

Regardless of this disavowal, the Sabbath is still strictly observed in Abyssinia. No work of any sort is done upon this day and journeys are interdicted. Travelers and others have accused the Abyssinians of observing a Jewish custom and so it is, but one that was transmitted by the early church, rather than one taken over from the Jews directly. No doubt Cladius (Galawdewos) gives us the reason for its observance, as our Fathers the Apostles have instructed us in the Didascalia. ¹

The above reference from Hyatt's book can be explained by earlier incidents in the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In the middle of the fifteenth century, a serious controversy took place between the two great monastic orders of Ethiopia. The largest monastic order in the northern part of Ethiopia kept only the seventh-day Sabbath whereas the other monastic order in central Ethiopia also kept Sunday as the day of rest to commemorate the resurrection of Christ. This created such an intense struggle between the two monastic orders that the government was forced to intervene to avoid religious civil war:

While the position of the Sabbath has long been firmly established in Ethiopia, there had at one time been acute theological struggles until King Zar a Ya qob, in the fifteenth century, intervened to remove successfully the threatening schism between the two great monastic orders in Ethiopia; for the main point at issue in this controversy was the strict observance of the two Sabbaths (Saturday and Sunday) by the northern Eustathian monks (mainly based on Debra Bizen). Zar a Ya qob did not introduce a new conception of the equality of the two Sabbaths, but merely gave preference to the long-established northern tradition which, in the original home of the Semitized Aksumites, had always preserved Hebraic ingredients more faithfully.²

In March 1968, a group of Ethiopian Adventist workers and missionaries visited the bishop of West Ethiopia in his office at Lekempti, the provincial capital of Wolienga. During a extensive

interview regarding the position of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church on the seventh-day Sabbath, the bishop stated plainly that the Coptic Church has never given up Sabbath observance. He referred to Matt. 5:17-18 and said that the Decalogue is still binding. Edward Ullendorff also mentions this fact:

The history of Sabbath observance in Abyssinia is fairly chequered, and sources are often ambiguous or even contradictory, but the retention of the Sabbath drew support from a number of unimpeachable authorities.³

The Ethiopic Didascalia as well as Gregory of Nyssa whose prestige amongst Ethiopians stands high enjoin the keeping of both the Sabbath and the Sunday. And most significantly: is not the continued validity of the Decalogue and the law expressly prescribed in Matthew 5:18 that one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law? ⁴

It is interesting to note that the word "Ehud" for Sunday is derived from the Ethiopic word "Ahadu" that means "one," and the Arabic word "Wahid" also means "one." So the word "Ehud" for Sunday really means the first day of the week. The name used for Wednesday means the fourth day, and the name used for Thursday means the fifth day.

The largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, the Galla tribe has a very interesting name for Saturday Sabbath, or "the original Sabbath." This tribe has named Sunday "the little Sabbath" or "the second Sabbath." Ullendorff also described the feasts celebrated by this tribe:

The feasts mentioned in the Pentateuch are observed by the Falashas [Black Jews of northwest Ethiopia] in a manner often materially different from that of Jews elsewhere. Postexile feasts are not celebrated by them. The Sabbath is observed with considerable strictness, and the prescriptions regarding ritual cleanliness are practiced with great zeal both features which exist among very many other Ethiopians.⁵

These and many other factors indicate that the history of the seventh-day Sabbath is deeply rooted in the culture of the Ethiopian peoples. There is no record at any time in the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that this church has officially given up Sabbath observance.

END NOTES

1. Harry Middleton Hyatt, *The Church of Abyssinia*, (London: Luzac & Co., 1928), p. 224.
2. Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to the Country and People*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 105, 106.
3. C. F. Dillmann, *Kitchenordnung*, p. 45
4. Ullendorff, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Conclusion

Acts 8:26-39 relates the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was baptized by Philip while on his way back from Jerusalem where he was worshipping and who then brought Christianity to his homeland during the first century A.D. According to tradition, the Apostle Mark was also in Ethiopia.

During the earlier part of the fourth century, Christianity was propagated widely throughout Ethiopia. Declaring it the national religion in 331 A.D., Emperor Ezana assumed bifanous power by proclaiming himself head of the church and of the political kingdom, a practice that lasted into the late 20th century.

In the 5th century, monasticism came to Ethiopia through nine monks from Syria. The establishment of several monasteries enriched the Ethiopian Church with liturgical books and also helped the church obtain the translation of the New Testament during this period. The Old Testament had already been translated from the Septuagint.

In the 7th century, the Muslim Arabs conquered the entire northern area of East Africa. This conquest cut off Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Church from contact with the other Christian nations of Asia and Europe. Without any influence from outside churches on the development of the Ethiopian church, the seventh-day Sabbath remained sacred and unchanged in Ethiopia.

During the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire made its power felt and civil wars continued for 145 years. This was a period of confusion and bloodshed. The time came when soldiers for the truth had to win. Emperor Fasilidas was very sympathetic to the cause of his people and the national church. While yet a crown prince, he persuaded his father to restore the religion of the fathers. Susenyos proclaimed his return to the creed of the fathers. Sabbath observance was once more restored.

As soon as Fasilidas was proclaimed emperor he enforced the reversal of his father's religious policy and accommodation of the Jesuit priests. He knew full well that restoration of the creed of his fathers by proclamation was not enough. As long as Jesuits were allowed to operate in Ethiopia, there was no real guarantee for the security of the national church. He embarked upon the difficult task of removing every Jesuit from Ethiopia and of total suppressing the Catholic faith.

The heritage of the seventh-day Sabbath in Ethiopia spans the centuries from the time of the apostles to the 20th Century, despite vigorous efforts of the Roman Catholic Church. This is compelling evidence for those who are committed to keeping holy the same on which Jesus worshipped and rested.

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ISBN 0-9710264-4-0



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