

# ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIANITY

by G. A. C. van Winsen CM

## I. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ETHIOPIAN CHURCH

### 1. *The coming of Christianity*

There are many traditions about the first preaching of the gospel in Ethiopia. The *Roman Martyrology* states that St. MATTHEW suffered martyrdom in this country. The Ethiopians on the contrary believe that they received the Christian religion without shedding apostolic blood.<sup>1</sup> The introduction of the Christian religion in the Axumite kingdom by St. FRUMENTIUS (for the Ethiopians ABBA SALAMA i.e. Father of the Light) is well testified by ecclesiastical writers, and the early presence of Christianity in Ethiopia can be proved by archeological finds. Since FRUMENTIUS was consecrated bishop of Axum by St. ATHANASIUS, the Ethiopian Church is a daughter-church of Alexandria.

The Ethiopian Church is a Christian church: it shares with Orthodox and the Catholics all the sacraments, the eucharistic sacrifice, the Creed of Nicea and so on.

### 2. *Jewish influence*

The Ethiopian Church has some characteristics of her own. The Ethiopians circumcise the boys eight days after birth; they observe the saturday-sabbath; their churches have the same division as the temple of Jerusalem. As told in the *Kebra Negest* the Salomonic dynasty of the emperors descends from King SALOMO and the Queen of Sheba. Their son MENELIK I stole the Ark of Covenant and brought it to Axum. Tradition tells that it is still in the chapel of the city's cathedral.

Those Jewish customs, did they descend from the Ethiopian Jews, the Falashas? There are now 20 000 in the country. 250 of them emigrated to Israel, where they wond in 1972 a long battle for their recognition as true Jews. The Falashas believe to be descendants of the tribe of DAN. They don't, however, have the later Jewish traditions as the feasts of Purim. Lately, Prof. EPHRAIM ISAAC defended the opinion that early Christianity in Ethiopia was influenced by Jewish Christians, coming from Syria. They first established the oral tradition and then collaborated with the Bible translators.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. *Monasticism*

Another characteristic of Ethiopian Christianity is the influence of monasticism. Monastic life was introduced in early times. Later the monks

<sup>1</sup> *The Church of Ethiopia*. Addis Abeba 1970, a publication of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> E. ISAAC, An obscure component in Ethiopian Church History: *Le Muséon* (1972) 226—258



were divided in different theological schools. Today one is inclined to see the Ethiopian Church as a static body, but history gives many evidences to the contrary.

Under the influence of monasticism there are more than 200 fasting-days during which the use of animal produce is forbidden.

On the other side, perhaps under the influence of the monks, Ethiopian Christianity gives foreigners the impression that it emphasizes more the customs than the very moral life. This must be the reason why travellers and other foreign people describe the Ethiopian Church as static and without dynamism.

#### 4. Church and State

The connection between Church and State has always been very strong. Public life is regulated by the feasts of the Church. The emperors have taken many initiatives to bring order in theological discussions and in liturgical life.

#### 5. Isolation

For many years the Ethiopian Church developed without contact to outside Christianity. The reason for this was the coming of Islam to the coastlines of the Red Sea. The Axumite kingdom lost its trade with the outside world and had to defend itself internally against the pagan Agau-people. Missionary activity of the Ethiopian Church and defending the kingdom have gone hand in hand.

It is believed that the mixture of Christianity and indigenous religious customs is another factor in the moulding of the Ethiopian Church. This might be the explanation for the presence of dances and drums in the liturgy. But the historical facts are not so clear.

One can say that the centre of the kingdom was moved from Axum to Roha, where King LALIBELA made the famous rock-hewn churches. Later on the centre of the kingdom moved to Gondar (17th century).

For centuries (after friendly contacts in the beginning) the Islam remained the great enemy. When in the 16th century AHMED GRAGNE menaced to conquer the country, it were the Portuguese who helped the Ethiopians to drive out the Moslems. The Portuguese influenced the art of painting and building (castles of Gondar, bridges).

Another factor shaping the Ethiopian mind is the physical environment. The country is closed to foreigners in the north, where the mountains rise up to more than ten thousand feet. In the south of the Ethiopian homeland, the Blue Nile is searching its way through canyons: a natural barrier hard to overcome.

Inside the mountainous area there are the *ambas*, i.e. tablelands, which form natural fortresses against attacks. These *ambas* are the places where the monks sought solitude. There they built their monasteries. Dangerous pretenders to the throne were imprisoned on the *ambas*.



To understand something of the Ethiopian liturgy one has to be present at a liturgical service in a village-church in the regions of the north where the farmers sow their seeds in a stony soil and the people live on the fruits of the cactus for three months of the year. This may create a spirit of understanding of the 'hard' songs of the Ethiopian liturgy.

## 6. Theological literature

The theological literature was influenced from outside.<sup>3</sup> During the first period (500—700) the Bible and the Fathers were translated from Greek originals. Under the title of *Querlos* (CYRIL) appeared later dogmatical treatises and homilies of the Fathers of the Church, in particular the work known as *De recta Fide* by St. CYRIL. This book is the basis of the teaching of the Ethiopian Church. — During the second period (1350—1450) one finds translations from Arabic and numerous Ge'ez works. We mention only the *Mashafa Mestir* (Book of the Mystery), which had a great influence on theology in the Ethiopian Church. The original literature produced many lives of saints (*gedles*). — During the third period comprising the 16—17th century (invasion of AHMED GRAGNE and the coming of the missionaries) books were written not only in Ge'ez but also in Amharic. For the controversy with the missionaries the *Haymaniot Abaw* (The Creed of the Fathers) was written. It was this book that was studied by GIUSTINO DE JACOBIS CM in order to understand the belief of the Ethiopians. In one of their monasteries he found a manuscript where the catholic explanation of the Incarnation of the Verb had been substituted by the monophysite idea of the one nature. This period also produced the *Anqatse Amin* (Gate of the Faith) by EMBAKON, an Arab convert to the Ethiopian religion. He became the abbot of Debre Libanos. His work is an apology for the Christian faith directed to AHMED GRAGNE.<sup>4</sup>

## 7. Monophysitism

Another point, not yet sufficiently cleared up, is the origin of the monophysite doctrine of the Ethiopian Church. Generally scholars say that it was introduced by the 'Nine Saints', monks who came from Syria in the 6th century. Others say that the Ethiopian Church became monophysite since she followed the doctrine of Alexandria.

Prof. ISAAC points out that the Ethiopian contact with the Monophysite Coptic Church remained minimal until 1270. The status of the Egyptian monastic Coptic Abunas presiding over the Ethiopian Church was never fully regulated before the time of TEKLA-HAYMENOT, the

<sup>3</sup> cf. M. A. v. D. OUDENRIJN, *Ethiopiërs: Theologisch Wordenboek*. Roermond en Maaseik 1952; BERNARD VELAT, *Ethiopie: Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, t. IV, col. 1453—1477; E. CERULLI, *Äthiopien, Christl. Literatur: Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* I, 1005f

<sup>4</sup> E. J. VAN DONZEL, *Enbaqom, Anqasa Amin* (La Porte de la Foi). Leiden 1969



churchman, monk, theologian, diplomat and revolutionary leader. He may be said to have been the first Ethiopian to be 'converted' to Coptic Monophysitism and thus became the main mediator for the Coptic alliance with the Ethiopian Church.

Another new opinion holds that the Ethiopians became monophysites in the discussions with the Jesuits. In defending their opinions, they hardened their positions.

This incertitude among the scholars has pastoral consequences: There has never been a formal schismatical act of the Ethiopian Church.

The studies of the scholars demonstrate that the information about the Council of Chalcedon came to the Ethiopians through the eyes of the opponents. As one Ethiopian scholar says: "The Ethiopians believe in fact that Chalcedon condemned all the propositions which it justly promulgated." The general conclusion now is that the differences between the Ethiopians and the Catholics and the Orthodox Greek Churches as well is not a question of contents but of expressions. It is the same conclusion that was given in the communique of PAUL VI and CHENOUDA III, the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria, who visited the Pope in 1973.

The Ethiopians protest against the name of 'monophysite' and in this they are right. The Ethiopian Capuchin MARIO DA ABIY-ADDI concludes that the Ethiopians are not monophysites in the true sense, because they word with the formula of 'one nature' only the numerical and not the specific unity of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The Ethiopians prefer the name 'Non-chalcedonians', and this states their viewpoint very well. They are anti-Nestorian and against the Council of Chalcedon because, in their opinion, Chalcedon followed the heresy of NESTORIUS. They therefore do not accept the formula 'two natures in one person'. Our terms 'person' and 'nature' do not correspond with the Ethiopian words *accal* and *bahriy*. *Bahriy* means something like subsists in se. It is therefore for them impossible to sustain two natures in Christ. They prefer the formula of CYRIL: 'One incarnated nature in one person'. Their keyword is *tewahido* = unity. That is also the official name of their Church: *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Christian Church*. The Ethiopians believe therefore that Christ is he Son of God and the Son of the Blessed Virgin. Many texts in their liturgy prove this point. During the last two centuries there have been violent theological discussions. But the doctrine of the Church as preached at present is clear and was formulated at the Council of Boru Meda, in Wollo, under the protection of Emperor JOHANNES (1878).

#### 8. Psychological and Cultural Schism

Even if there is no dogmatic schism as such, there still exists one that is largely cultural and psychological. There is an anti-Roman attitude.

<sup>5</sup> MARIO DA ABIY-ADDI, *La dottrina della Chiesa Etiopica dissidente sull'Unione Ipostatica*. Roma 1956



TADESSE TAMRAT writes about the Jesuits of the 17th century: "The Jesuit experience was very bitter for the Ethiopian Church and naturally led to the creation of very strong antipathies towards anything European for a long time. During their short sojourn in Ethiopia, the Jesuits had done a great deal of damage and they seriously disturbed the spiritual stability of the Ethiopian Church."<sup>6</sup>

One has to admit that some of the reasons for the expulsion of the Jesuits (of whom there had been 56 in the country between 1555 and 1633) were the latinisation of the Ethiopian rite and the imprudent method of their preaching. On the other hand: the Egyptian Abunas were afraid to loose their influence and position.

The ever latent animosity against the Chalcedonians came to the open in the case of the Ethiopian Orthodox Bishop of Jerusalem, Abuna PHILIPPOS. He has written a booklet (1964) in which he speaks about the two natures. The Abuna had to defend himself and his book was taken out of circulation.<sup>7</sup>

The official attitude to the Roman Catholic Church is more differentiated. In their meeting of 1965 at Addis Abeba the non-Chalcedonian Churches declared: "In our relation with the Roman Catholic Church the principle of dialogue will be accepted. In this relation we wish to request the Roman Catholic Church to reconsider her theory and practice to the uniate churches as well as to her proselyting among the members of our Churches."

### 9. Autocephalism

Until recent times the Ethiopian Church depended on the see of St. MARK of Alexandria. This dependency was based on the 42th apocryphal canon of the Council of Nicea. This canon was incorporated in the *Fetha Negast*, translated in the 14th century from the code of the Coptic Church. GUIDI observes: It was regarded by the Abyssinians as a true ecclesiastical and civil code.<sup>8</sup>

A modern Ethiopian says: "The authenticity of this article was highly suspect to the Ethiopian Clergy, but it was nevertheless respected until the thirteenth century, when a new wave of independence arose. Then the same article was inserted in the *Fetha Negast*."<sup>9</sup>

The struggle for autocephaly came to its end in 1948, when the first agreement about this question was signed with Alexandria. The Ethiopians expressed themselves about this question as follows: "After the defeat of the Italians the question of submitting the national church to

<sup>6</sup> *The Church of Ethiopia*, 29

<sup>7</sup> ABUNA FILIPPOS MENGUSTU, *Emmanuele, Dio con noi*. A cura di G. M. Modena 1971

<sup>8</sup> I. GUIDI, *Fetha Negast* (1899) p. viii; cf. J. S. TRIMINGHAM, *Islam in Ethiopia*. Oxford 1952, 24f, note 2

<sup>9</sup> *The Church of Ethiopia*, 9



Egyptian tutelage could no longer be tolerated.”<sup>10</sup> For the first time in history an Ethiopian Abuna took possession of the metropolitan seat in 1951. It was Abuna BASILEOS († 12 Nov. 1970). Twenty years later the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Church herself chose an Abuna: Abuna TEWOFILOS (6 April 1971). Autocephaly was then a fact.

In Ethiopia there are now 14 dioceses. Furthermore there are dioceses in Jerusalem, in the West-Indies and in North and South America.

Recently there is some adaptation of the Ethiopian Church to modern times. Some priests made their studies in Greece and Russia. In Addis Abeba there is a Theological Institute, but most of the graduates do not become priests. In 1972 a Church Commission for development was erected. The members are the bishops of the under-developed areas in Ethiopia as Sidamo, Wollega, Arussi, Gomu Gofa and others. In Menagesha a pilot-program in family-training for priests and their families is to be set up. In Sebeta there is a center for religious women who receive spiritual and practical training.

On the other hand there are difficulties with the more conservative members of the Church. The youth no longer respects the priests in the villages. These priests attended only an ecclesiastical school, where they studied to read Ge’ez and to perform the ceremonies. The great problem is the ignorance of those priests and deacons. To respond to the modern times it will be necessary to provide the priests with a more adequate instruction.

#### *10. Ecumenism*

The Ethiopian Church is taking part in the ecumenical movement of our times. From its beginning in Amsterdam (1948) the Church is a member of the World Council of Churches. The Central Committee of WCC gathered in Addis Abeba in January 1971. The emperor HAILE SELASSIE I opened the conference.

The department of Inter-Church Aid has a branch in Addis Abeba and participates in two projects: the Kumana-project is meant for the evangelization of the Kumana-people in Northern Erytrea, in Zuway a training school for missionary workers in the countryside was set up.

The Ethiopian Church had also a special observer at the Vatican Council. This was the first time that the Ethiopian Church opened at least an indirect dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, whereas the Ethiopian Government had established contacts with the Holy See already in 1957.

The Ethiopian Church was represented at the Panorthodox Conference at Rhodes (1961) and took part in the dialogue between the Orthodox Chalcedonians and Non-Chalcedonians at Aarhus (1964), Bristol (1967) and later in Addis Abeba.

<sup>10</sup> *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, published by the Ethiopian Orthodox Mission. Addis Abeba 1970, 11



For the first time in centuries the leaders of the Non-Chalcedonian Churches came together in Addis Abeba (1965). A standing committee was erected which has its seat in Addis Abeba.<sup>11</sup>

There are also many unofficial contacts with other churches. In 1972 for example, the Patriarch held talks on church unity with the visiting Anglican Archbishop of West-Africa. In september 1972 170 delegates of the United Bible Societies held their first assembly in Addis Abeba, where the Emperor opened the conference in the presence of the Patriarch.

## II. SOME FACTS AND PROBLEMS WITH RELATION TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

### 1. *The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church*<sup>12</sup>

Mgr. ASRATE MARIAM YEMMERU, Metropolitan Archbishop of Addis Abeba and his Auxiliary Bishop Mgr. PAULOS

Mgr. SEBHAT LEAB WORKU SDB, Exarch of Adigrat

Mgr. FRANÇOIS ABRAHA, Exarch of Asmara

These four bishops are Ethiopians and belong to the Ethiopian Rite and their territories depend on the Sacred Congregation for the Eastern Churches.

Mgr. URBAIN PERSON OFMCap, Apostolic Vicar of Harrar

V. R. Fr. LUCA MILESI OFMCap, Ap. Administrator of the Ap. Vicariate of Asmara

V. R. Fr. HERMAN TEUBEN CM, Ap. Adm. of the Ap. Vic. of Jimma

V. R. Fr. DOMENICO MARINOZZI OFMCap, Ap. Adm. of the Ap. Prefecture of Hossana

V. R. ARMIDIO GASPARINI FSCJ, Ap. Adm. of the Ap. Pref. of Awassa

Of these *Ordinari* one is a Frenchman, one a Dutch and the rest are Italians. Their territories depend on the S. C. *de Propaganda Fide*.

The Catholic Church as such does not have a legal existence, but has an existence *de facto*, which is recognized by the Civil Administration.

### 2. *International personnel*

Like the hierarchy the missionary personnel of the country is international and this does not always prove to be an advantage. The foreign priests com from French, Italian, Dutch, English and American traditions. This creates difficulties in the evaluation of major problems as the education in Minor and Major Seminaries, the improvement of the catechetics and the priorities in pastoral and socio-economic activities.

### 3. *Bi-ritual Situation*

The Ethiopian Clergy comes mostly from Eritrea and Tigre. Their culture differs from that of the Amhara, Galla and Kaffa people.

<sup>11</sup> G. VAN WINSSEN, *Monophysitische Kerken te Addis Abeba bijeen: Het Christelijk Oosten* 1965—66, 3—7

<sup>12</sup> G. VAN WINSSEN, *L'Eglise catholique en Ethiopie: Nouvelle Revue de science missionnaire* 1965, 118—131; G. MOJOLI, *La Chiesa in Ethiopia*. Roma 1973



In general the Ethiopian Catholic Church follows the traditions established by GIUSTINO DE JACOBIS in the previous century. There still exists a great admiration for his person, because he fully understood the Ethiopian mentality and tried to adapt himself to it. In his nomination letter as Apostolic Vicar, DE JACOBIS received the faculty: 'ut functiones sacras omnes ritu Abyssinio valeat peragere'. Previously some latinisations were introduced in the Ethiopian rite: such as daily mass, said by one priest only and the use of azymes. Nowadays there is a new wave of 'ethiopianization' of the liturgy. The Catholic priests may use the books of the Orthodox Ethiopian Church. In general the Ethiopian Catholic Rite wants to stay close to the Orthodox Church. — The Congregation for the Eastern Churches has printed a *Ritual of Baptism* in 1972 to be introduced in the Catholic Rite. It is the same as that used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. — Both the ceremonies for the celebration of the High Mass and of Baptism are too long for modern times and revisions are under way.

In the territories of the South the Latin Rite has come in use during the last century.<sup>13</sup> After the Italian occupation priests from the North introduced the Ethiopian Rite in some parishes. The missionaries of the Ap. Vicariate of Gimma have for some time been speaking about the introduction of the Ethiopian Rite for the southern areas, and some steps have been made together with the other Latin territories. Since 1964 the Latins observe the Easter date of the Ethiopian Rite. Similary the other major feasts of the year are now celebrated on the same dates as the Orthodox do. In 1967 the Latin priests received permission to use the breviary of the Oriental Rite. Originally the Ethiopian breviary consisted of psalms and prayers. Some years ago the Orientalis edited an *Orologion*, consisting of psalms, prayers and readings.

In 1969 the Congregation for the Divine Cult approved the use of the *Anaphora of the Apostles* in the Amharic translation instead of the Latin eucharistic prayers. Also the use of the Ethiopian Mass called of the Apostles, translated into Amharic, was permitted.

On November 11, 1970, the *Propaganda* declared that in matters of ethiopianization great prudence was necessary. Practical was the advice of the Pro-Nunzio: 'Opérer un glissement du rite latin pour arriver assez près des cérémonies, qui seront celles du rite oriental après son aggronamento.'

Experience showed the missionaries of the Vicariate of Gimma that even the Galla and Kaffa peoples like the ceremonies of the Ethiopian Rite, as more adapted to their mentality. But on the other side the foreign missionaries feel the need to grow more acquainted with the total background of the Ethiopian liturgy and for this they look forward for

<sup>13</sup> G. VAN WINSEN, Het probleem van de ethiopische ritus: *Het Christelijk Oosten* 1964—65, 276—285



the help of their Ethiopian colleagues. This could have far-reaching consequences for their own spiritual life and outlook.

Moreover the missionaries have their own responsibility towards their flock as it is not only the task of the Ethiopian clergy to adapt the rite to modern exigencies. It is the whole clergy of an ecclesiastical territory who stands in the service to the people.

During their assembly of January 1973 the missionaries of the Gimma Vicariate came to the following practical conclusions:

To introduce the Ethiopian Rite one must proceed gradually. Therefore:

1. In parishes where the Christians are not yet accustomed to the Ethiopian Rite one should follow the Latin Rite using the Amharic language; there may be the assistance of some deacon, more frequent use of incense, use of the cross and veneration of the Gospel Book in solemn Masses. These are elements of the Ethiopian Rite.

2. In parishes where people and priest are ready for the transition one can say

- a) The *Anaphora of the Apostles*

- b) the entire *Mass of the Apostles* in Amharic or another language

- c) there should remain a bi-ritual situation for the time being.

#### 4. Ecumenical Contacts

What is the task of a foreign missionary in a Christian country like Ethiopia? In the Government regulations on Mission activities, decree no 3, 1944, there is stated<sup>14</sup>: "It is the desire of this Government that Missions should not direct their activities towards converting Ethiopian Nationals from their own form of Christianity... but rather should concentrate on non-Christian elements of the population."

Can a Catholic missionary follow this point of view? The answer to this is yes, on the condition that freedom of religion is safeguarded.

GIUSTINO DE JACOBIS wanted to unite whole communities with the Catholic Church. But this method emphasized the differences between the two churches. Since the Council it is more usual to see the similarities of the different churches. This point of view is very appropriate with regard to the Ethiopian Church, since her differences with the Catholic Church are not of a dogmatic, but of cultural and psychological nature.

If this opinion is right, then the Ethiopian people, unaware of the nature of the theological disputes, are very near to us. Moreover, this position can be used as a starting point in pastoral work. The old doubts about validity of ordinations in the Orthodox Church have practically disappeared in the new sacramental theology. It is again possible to follow the old opinion of ASSEMANI: It is impossible to assume that in a Christian land like Ethiopia the ordination should not be valid.

<sup>14</sup> *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Appendix C, pp. 171—174



Proselytizing does not seem to be the foremost aim of a missionary in this country. The main purpose of his work is to promote the unity of the Churches as Christ wants it to come.

The first step to serve Christ in the practical daily missionary life is to make contacts with the people by means of educational and socio-economical activities, working for all: Orthodox and Catholics. As for the Catholics, it should be clear that their communities should be open to the people of the whole area. Above all nobody should become a Catholic because this offers material advantages.

In order to prepare for unity it is preeminently necessary to contact the Ethiopian Orthodox Clergy. They must be helped to get a good ecclesiastical culture, a deep spirituality and a priestly way of life. Such an attempt was made by the Capuchin Fathers in Adi Ugri who erected an ecumenical center called *Fruementius*. There Orthodox priests can follow courses in theology and pastoral and apostolic life. The aim is to educate good Orthodox priests who go back to their Orthodox communities, better equipped for pastoral work. Most of the participants, however, asked to become Catholics and so the center became a training center for converted priests. By decision of the *Orientalis* the two functions of the institute had to be separated: contact with Orthodox priests and education of converted priests. The Capuchins opted for the first and have now contact-center only.