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## The Ethiopian Church and Its Living Heritage

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is indigenous to Africa. It is a founding member of the World Council of Churches and the All African Conference of Churches. It occupies a unique position among the Oriental churches, not only because it has the largest membership, but also because it is the only Christian Church in Africa that claims uninterrupted development from God's revelation to the people of Old Testament times, through the Apostolic Age of the New Testament, and from the patristic times of the ancient Christian Church to the present.

### Origin and History

Ethiopians trace their genealogical origin to Adam and Eve; from Adam to Noah, from Noah to Ham and from Ham to Ethiopia. The name Ethiopic is historically accepted to be not only for today's Ethiopia, but as the universal name for Africa in earlier times.

Although we are called children of Ham, we do not exclude ourselves from Shem and Japhet, for these leading races are but one as constituted in Noah. The concept of the Ethiopian church in this regard is universal. These three leading races, Ham, Shem, Japhet and their succeeding generations, are inseparable. It is the Church's belief that they all can live on the earth as brothers and sisters in unity, dignity and peace, and build a better world together. It is inappropriate to call one race inferior and

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another superior. Nor is it right to call one race "third world" and another "first world", for all humans are of one source.

Noah is our father. The covenant that God made with Noah is still maintained in Ethiopia. The green, gold and red national banner is derived from the rainbow which was the sign of God's covenant with Noah and his children.<sup>1</sup> The tri-color rainbow, while it is the sign of God's covenant, also represents the three leading races. It is a firm belief that the Ethiopians had worshipped the true God in early times after the pattern of Noah; "but this was confined to a limited number of families."<sup>2</sup> Later, the belief in the true God disappeared when a segment of the population strayed to other forms of worship. Cults were introduced directly to Ethiopia from Persia and among them were the "sun-god" and "serpent" worship. Nevertheless, the God of Noah was restored again in B.C. 1000 when Queen Makeda visited Solomon. During this visit her union with King Solomon produced King Menelik I who brought the ark to Ethiopia. Today the Ark of the Covenant which God gave to Moses is carefully preserved in the St. Mary of Zion Church in the sacred city of Axum, which is the center of Christian worship. Without the ark communion cannot be administered.

The Old Testament (I King 10) supplies the key to this Biblical belief and the versions of this tradition are treasured in the book of Kebra Negast (*The Glory of Kings*). The long and strenuous journey of Queen Makeda to Palestine in search of righteousness is a symbol of great faith, and so our Lord Jesus Christ, over a thousand years later, spoke of her to the generation of his own time. That generation was described as an "evil and adulterous generation that seeks after a sign."<sup>3</sup> It was a generation that would not believe in God unless a sign was shown them. Angered by their disbelief, our Lord said, "The Queen of the South shall rise up in judgment with this generation and shall condemn it; for she came from the uttermost part of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, a greater than Solomon is here."<sup>4</sup>

### The Old Testament Influence

Like the Eastern Christian Churches, the Ethiopian church inherited the Old Testament form of worship and this tradition is more faithfully preserved in Ethiopia than in any other Christian Church today. The reason is that the Ethiopians, having considered themselves children of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, have been strictly devoted to the Old Testament form of worship. Later, this tradition became even stronger when Makeda's son, Menelik I, brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia, accompanied by Azarias, the son of Zadok, the High Priest. With Menelik came all the first born sons of the house of Israel, including the Falasha Jews of Ethiopia, who to this day trace their origin to this event. Ullendorf writes that "Hebraic forms of worship were not more faithfully preserved than in the Ethiopian service with its emphasis on the Debtera, cantor and antiphony."<sup>5</sup> The Depteras are the disciples of St. Yared who composed the chants and music of the Church in the 6th century. The offices of the Depteras are, in most respects, comparable to that of the Levites, particularly in their role as cantors and choristers. Their primary duty is to chant from the Bible. The musical instrument of the Hebrews in II Samuel 6:5, which David and all the house of Israel played upon before the Lord, the harps and lyres, drums and sistra, are all alive in Ethiopia today. As a result of the rituals, the Ethiopian traditions mingle with the Old Testament traditions. Both the Hebrew and ancient Christian traditions that were handed down by Christ to his disciples and to their successors are still dominant in the life of the Ethiopian Church. These traditions are closely guarded and are steadfastly resistant to change. For this reason, fewer changes have taken place in the Ethiopian Church than in any other Christian Church in either the East or West.

### The Introduction of Christianity — The Ethiopian Eunuch

The worship of the "True God" in the Old Testament was an important witness to the New Testament and, more importantly, in shaping the people to accept Christ without bloodshed. Christianity was first introduced in 34 A.D. by the Finance Minister of Queen Candace, known as the "Ethiopian Eunuch" who was baptised by Phillip the Apostle.<sup>6</sup> Candace, whose conversion was due to the Eunuch, became the first African Christian Ruler. Evidence of her belief is a coin engraved with a cross and her name which was found in Axum.<sup>7</sup>

Although he was not called an apostle, the Eunuch was the first to preach the doctrine of Christ among his country's people. Eusebius speaks of him as the first fruit of the faithful in the world. Ireanaeus writes that he preached the gospel to the Ethiopians. Our tradition holds that during this time that the Eunuch preached Christianity, Ethiopian women wore crosses upon their foreheads to signify their recognition of the crucifixion of Christ. Furthermore, Saint Matthew, the apostle, preached the gospel in Africa and won a few converts to the doctrine before leaving the country. Christianity was officially announced as the state religion in the fourth century by King Edna (Ezana) A.D. 320-356, and during the Episcopacy of Frumentius, who was consecrated by Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria. This occurred after Constantine issued his decree of toleration, declaring Christianity to be a legalized religion of the Roman Empire.

Here students of history should note that Ethiopian Christianity is highly significant. It was founded on African soil by an African man (the Eunuch). It is also important to note that one of the wise men who worshipped the baby Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem was King Bazan who ruled Ethiopia for 17 years. Eight years before and nine years after the Nativity of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Since its inception in Ethiopia the Church has taken great responsibility for helping people in their relationship to God and the country remains

a stronghold of Christianity. Many men and women who led holy lives went to Jerusalem where they died as saints. The people have made the Church the focal point of their lives, devoting much time to worship and prayer, while the Church supports the people and shares their lives in times of happiness and sorrow, in war and peace.

The country's sense of justice and intellectuality originated in the church with the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, as head. Throughout its long history, the Church has made significant contributions to the people of Ethiopia, not only in their spiritual affairs, but also in culture — as the creator of arts, crafts, literature, secular and theological educational institutions. It was responsible for the training of the nation, including government officials, kings, emperors, even until the time of Emperor Menelik II (A.D. 1889-1913). For centuries this has been the role of the Church.

During this particular time, when the nation is being attacked by an unfortunate drought, the Church is actively involved with the interests of the nation by mobilizing its faithful at local and national levels to distribute donations and to act as a channel for all other types of assistance.

It has set up centers with houses, buildings and tents for orphans and the homeless, especially in the affected areas (i.e., Wollo, Tigre, Gondar, Gojam and Eritrea provinces). The World Council of Churches, the worldwide Christian communions, and other organizations of good will have generously contributed relief aid through the Church.

The extreme devastation and human suffering caused by the drought has shocked the whole world. Governments, churches, organizations, agencies and individuals throughout the world have pledged and sent millions of dollars in food and medical supplies. Even children have donated their lunch money. Indeed, the Ethiopian people are indebted to all of the many persons who have responded to their call for help.

### Ecumenical Relations

Beginning in the fourth century, the Ethiopian Church was affiliated with the See of Saint Mark of Alexandria. After Frumentius, her first bishop died, Egyptian bishops from Alexandria were appointed to head the Church. This continued until early in the twentieth century, but in 1959 complete independence was granted to the Church of Ethiopia, provided that the two churches remained canonically attached.

The church, though independent, maintained this special link with the Egyptian Coptic Church. It adheres strictly to the doctrine that confesses the one nature of our Lord Jesus Christ and thus refused to confirm the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. It is in full communion with the Coptic, Syrian, the Church of Malabar in India, and with the Armenian Orthodox Church.

During the past forty years the Ethiopian Church has made remarkable progress in the area of ecumenical relations with the World Council of Churches, the All African Conference of Churches, and other church bodies, and in the field of missionary activities at home and abroad, especially after 1959 when it became fully independent from the See of Alexandria.

### A Period of Confrontation

For centuries the Ethiopian people had to fight against internal and external foes for the maintenance of the Christian faith. For example, this can be traced through critical periods, the hostility of the Muslims whose aim was to eliminate Christianity from the faith of Africa and the world in general. Islam had occupied the Red Sea coasts including Yemen and Aden, and in the sixteenth century, Ethiopia suffered the fiery onslaught of Amed Gran ("the left-handed") who persecuted the church with the aid of Turkish troops, and Yodith, in the tenth century, who devastated the empire. Both of them were, in fact, native Ethiopians who merciless-

ly opposed the Church and in the end miserably failed in their endeavors.

The third great problem came during the 16th-17th centuries when the Roman Catholic Church determined to bring the Ethiopian Christians under the jurisdiction of the Pope of Rome. Several missionaries and bishops were sent to Ethiopia for the purpose of proselytism. One of the missionaries, Patriarch Mendes, who arrived in the country in 1624 with the purpose of instituting a dictatorship, ordered the people to kneel to him as representative of the Pope. He demanded that the priests of the Ethiopian Church to be re-ordained by him and that the entire population be regarded as heathen if not rebaptized in the Catholic Faith. Churches had to be reconstructed and altars rebuilt in Portuguese fashion.<sup>9</sup> As a result, revolt broke out and civil war went on without any prospect of ending. A similar offense was perpetrated by the same Church when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935. This invasion was the test of the Church and its faithful. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian people have retained their age-old independence, culture and way of life. They have been able to prevail over all dangers that have threatened them. This was due to the inseparable union of the Church, the government and the people, and their love of freedom.

It is proper that church and state work together for the betterment of their communities. Historically, the work of the Church and State is inseparable as both work towards the same goal. The real significance of Church and State relationship has been lost in many countries especially those in the Western world. Government which denies itself spiritual involvement (advice) impoverishes itself by this denial. It is in God that we live and God lives in us. Our lives cannot be adequately maintained without the help of God.

### The Mission of the Church

What is the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ?

The Church serves the people. The government protects it and provides for its maintenance. The Lord God demands this of all governments, kings, queens, princes, and princesses. It was just after separation was made between Church and State that corruption abounded everywhere on earth, which became difficult to handle for any government. In spite of the separation the Church is invited to intervene in this task, although criticized by governments that consider such involvement unduly political. But does this act make the Church a political party taking sides with political parties? Can the Church separate itself from communities?

The Church is the link between God and human beings and as such it is the duty of the Church of Jesus Christ to identify itself with the communities. As the government of God, it is an integral and democratic institution. It is called to proclaim freedom, justice, and peace in the world. Its mission is to restore people to unity with God and each other.

The Ethiopian people and their leaders who have turned aside from the temptations of the material world have devoted their riches to the glory of God and have left behind them innumerable churches, church schools, and monasteries, rather than palaces and other institutions of secular glory.

Throughout its history, the Church's economic sources were dependent on land ownership which comprised one third of the country's property. But now, as a result of land nationalization declared by the current government, the Church remains free of earthly possessions and has become totally dependent on the contributions of its parishioners.

### Missionary Activities Abroad

The Church's missionary activities outside of Ethiopia did not begin until 1952, with the exception of the Ethiopian monasteries in Jerusalem



(established since the beginning of Christianity) and its missionary work in the Sudan that began in 1940.

The later start of the Church's mission abroad is a result of Ethiopia being preoccupied for centuries with self-defense in an attempt to maintain the Christian faith against internal and external foes, against proselytism and imperialism. Because of these situations it had no opportunity to propagate the gospel outside of Ethiopia. Another factor was that since it existed under the leadership of the Coptic Church of Egypt it was impossible for Ethiopian Christians to initiate their own missionary activity abroad.

For centuries Ethiopia was completely cut off from the rest of the world and could not even hear the suffering cries of the African diaspora who were brought as slaves to the West against their will. On the other hand, for more than fifteen hundred years of isolation and struggle, Ethiopia has guarded the treasure of the Christian faith. It was the will of God that beginning in 1952 it established branch churches in Kenya, Sudan, West Germany, Djibouti, England, Canada, North and South America and the Caribbean countries. Thus, another contribution of spiritual power has been added to the nations of the world which are supposedly Christian. The establishment of the branch churches abroad was made possible through the invitations of the zealous followers of the ancient Ethiopian faith abroad and is the fulfillment of their dreams.

Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican national hero who was influenced by intellectuals such as Booker T. Washington and Edward W. Blyden, a worker in the Black Movement, played a great role in introducing the African Church to the Black people of the West. Garvey said, "We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God. . .that is the God in whom we believe. But we still worship Him through the spectacles of Ethiopia."<sup>10</sup> As a result many people began to call on the Ethiopian Church, asking for a branch to be established in the West. Today Ethiopia is the tree and millions of Black people in the diaspora consider themselves branches.

It has been a long time since African people were separated from each other against their will. Ethiopia, together with the Church, has been custodian of the culture and heritage of Africa to this day. She has put forward and maintained the greatest effort in keeping alive the heritage of Black people. The Church's presence in the Western world became valuable at least for the people who look for redemption and have no desire to join any other Christian denomination. They are now able through this Church to gather together as citizens of God and are living the Christian life. I asked people why they did not accept the sacraments in other denominations and the answer was that they would have fallen away if it had not been for the Ethiopian Church. Many people are aware that Christianity in the West was used as an instrument of human slavery. Their question is how can one people inflict oppression upon another and at the same time preach Jesus Christ and His love for humankind?

We are now in a period of national and cultural revival and have reached the right time for all people of African descent to investigate the past and rediscover their ancient heritage. It is the proper time for every national group to search for its identity. The Jew needs to practice the religion of Judaism; the Western nations need to identify with the life of the great Western civilizations; the African descendants too want to identify themselves with the Spirit of Africanism.

Based on this ground, special interest has been aroused among the Africans in Africa and since 1893, beginning in South Africa, many groups have called themselves the Ethiopian Church, without any official link with this ancient Church. Recently one of the largest and fastest growing independent Christian churches in Zaire and Central Africa, the Kimbanguist Church, has expressed a keen interest in the heritage of Christianity within the Ethiopian Church. And today, the African diaspora is becoming more and more aware of its origin and is searching for its identity. Marcus Garvey took the initiative when he said, "Where is the Black man's country, his God, his government, his king, his ambassadors, his

language and culture?"<sup>11</sup>. Not long afterward he found the answer in Ethiopia and said, "With the help of God, we feel that one day Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands, and whether it be at the second coming of Christ or before, we shall all sing Hosanna, shout her praises to God for freedom, for life."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed Ethiopia is the living heritage and symbol of freedom for all African descendants. She was entrusted by God to preserve and sustain, to indigenize the faith in varied cultural patterns. It has been her duty to treasure this from creation to the present, not only for the Ethiopians, but for the entire world. She has a special place in the record as Biblical Ethiopia. She has her Bible (46 books of the Old Testament and 35 books of the New Testament) that comprises a total of 81 books.

It is interesting to note that the Bible was written in four languages, Geez, Hebrew, Aramaen (Aramaic) and Greek. The books of Enoch and Jubilees were found only in the Geez language. Enoch is known to us as the seventh descendant from Adam, in the line of Seth. Because of this and other achievements, Ethiopia is called the land of God and the land of the Bible. This name is attributed to her because throughout her history, the lives of the people, including the administrative system of government, the political, economic and social history of the country, were laid down upon principles of the Bible. The influence of this Holy Bible in all aspects of Ethiopian life is deeply rooted. The venerable Christian Church, whose teaching is centered in the Bible and had a long standing experience working with people, is always eager to work along with other Christian bodies to improve the spiritual and social quality of life in the communities of the world. Further, it is most vital and unique for the Ethiopian Church to work with this "Pan-African Christian Church Conference" whose aim is unity and liberation through the spirit of Christ.

### Ethiopia As Origin Of Civilization

Can modern civilization be defined without understanding its origin? For many years the world has been misled by people's denial of truth. Numerous facts have been denied, but can historical facts in any measure be questioned? If the answer is yes, it would then contradict the living facts of civilization.

It is true that most ancient nations have fallen from the wisdom and happiness of former times. But if one carefully weighs the wisdom and knowledge they formerly enjoyed, one shall find more reality in their glorious past than in their present.

The development of arts and sciences, we have been informed, came from Babylon and elsewhere. But if curiosity were aroused to look back over the historical facts of ancient times, we would find that the first acknowledgement would have to be given to Africa, and special credit given to the Ethiopians. There is no doubt that industry, intelligence, and justice originated in Africa, but that historical fact has been hidden from the average person. It is therefore, the responsibility of this present generation to search the past for truth that will help us deal with the problems of civilization today.

Ethiopia, an independent African state, was the mother of civilization. History attests that worship, agriculture, alphabetical writing and other hallmarks of civilization originated in Africa. European and Western civilization came around 600 B.C. and developed after Alexander the Great visited Egypt in B.C. 332. Rawlinson writes, "For the last three thousand years, the world has been mainly indebted to the African races for its advancement by Egypt and Babylon." Mizraim (Egypt) and Nimrod, both descendants of Ham, led the way and acted as pioneers of humankind in various fields of art, science, literature, alphabetical writings, astronomy, history, and chronology. Architecture, navigation, agriculture and the textile industries seem to have had their origin in one of these countries.

Busen said, "The Hamitic family must be given credit for being the fountainhead of civilization. This family comprises the Ancient Ethiopians, the Egyptians, the original Canaanites and the old Chaldeans."

Doubtless, today's civilizations could not be other than the beneficiaries of Ethiopianism. No one can attempt to estimate the actual beginning of Ethiopian (African) civilization, the most pious and ancient of humankind. It would be correct to say that Ethiopia is the pride of the Africans and the origin of the civilizations of the whole human race.

### Notes

1. Genesis 9:8-7.
2. E.A.W. Budge, *A History of Ethiopia: Nubia and Abyssinia*, Vol. 1, (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. 1929) 142.
3. Matthew 12:30.
4. *Ibid.*, 12:12.
5. Ullendorf, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 98.
6. Acts 8:26-39.
7. Liqe Tebebt Akllile Berhan, Metschete Amin, *Amharic Text*, (Addis Ababa: Tensae Zeubae Printing Press, 1946) 28.
8. Aleq Taye, *Ye Ethiopia Hizb Tarik*, *Amharic Text*, (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Company, 1955) 62.
9. Sanceau, Elaine, *The Land of Prester John*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944) 209.
10. Jacques, Amy, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, Vol. 12. Introduction by E.U. Essien-Udom (London: Frank Cass & Company Ltd., 1976) 34.
11. *Ibid.*, 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 10.