

Ancient Interface: Ethiopia and Rome

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The Red Sea and “Land of Punt” (Ethiopia) were important for trade during early times; from the horn of Africa came a number of products greatly valued in Egypt, e.g., gold, incense, slaves, etc.; and it also led to India where other valuable products were found. The earliest records of the trade by way of the Red Sea come from Egypt. From as early as about 2,500 B.C. the pharaohs were sending expeditions to the “Land of Punt” (Ethiopia, Axum Empire). The best known Egyptian expedition was the one sent by Queen Hatshepsut, 1495 B.C. which brought back myrrh and myrrh trees, Blackwood, ivory, gold, cinnamon, incense, panther and leopard skins, monkeys, slaves and tortoise shells.

Later, the Ptolemies (Greeks) ruled Egypt, and particularly during the time of the Roman Empire, great trade was carried on down the Red Sea and with India. A most valuable source of information about the Red Sea trade is the Periplus, which is a book of trading conditions in the Red Sea, and Horn of Africa. Trade then was flourishing from Egypt to India during the 1st century AD and the rise of northern Ethiopia and of the Axumite Empire was certainly based largely on this trade. The maritime commerce also included trade from the coast, inland to Meroe, and the Nile.

Ethiopia occupies a unique place among African countries south of the Sahara, having evolved her own literature and language, Ge’ez in very early times. A vast body of literary works grew up from the 5th century AD onwards. Almost all of these works are religious in nature. Religion lies at the very core of Ethiopian civilization and the Ethiopian Church has been the storehouse of the national culture, but also its propagator, instrumental in shaping and molding Ethiopian culture and art. Ethiopian men of letters have, in almost all cases, are also men of the church and many scholars consider that the most distinctive attainment of Ethiopian culture lies in the vast collection of manuscripts, compiled and preserved in the monasteries and churches, which embody the national literary tradition. Their subject matter and their style are strongly imbued with religious concepts.

The major literary achievement of this early period was the translation of the Holy Scripture into Ge’ez. This work was undertaken by the Nine Saints who came to Ethiopia in 480 AD to escape the Byzantine persecution of monophysites. The Ethiopian Bible contains 81 books; 46 of these comprise the Old Testament and 35 are found in the New Testament. A number of these books are considered by the Church of Rome as, extracanonical, apocryphal, or deuterocanonical, such as the Ascension of Isaiah, jubilees, Enoch, the Paralipomena of Baruch, Noah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Maccabees, Moses and Tobit. These books are of intrinsic importance to scholars either because no other complete version of the text exists in any language other than Ge’ez, or because the Ge’ez version is authoritative.

Perhaps the most important of these works is the Book of Enoch, which has been preserved in Ge’ez. The name Enoch signifies “teaching” or “dedication” and Enoch is one of the great Biblical characters, Adam’s grandson, and the first born of Cain. The Book of Enoch was lost for centuries to western scholars who knew it because it is mentioned in the Epistle of St. Jude, until in 1773 James Bruce (Scottish writer and traveler), brought three complete manuscripts to Europe. This great prophetic work may be summarized in five general parts as follows:

1. The laws governing the heavenly bodies.
2. An account in the form of visions of the history of the world until the last judgment and the coming of the Messianic Kingdom with its center at the New Jerusalem.
3. The establishment of a temporary kingdom that heralds the approach of the last judgment.
4. A vision of Enoch and others and his journey through earth and heaven.
5. This section contains the Similitude’s and describes the coming of the Messiah as the judge of all mankind.

Other Ge’ez works of significance include the famous work known as “Qerlos” the collection of Christological writings which opens with the treatise of St. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, known as Haymanot Rete’et, or De Recta Fide. This book is based on the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Another renowned work of this period is

Ascetic Rules of Pachomius, which established the rules governing monastic life in Ethiopia. It is interesting to note that the same period saw the translation of a secular work, the Physiologus, the well known work of natural history, which was very popular in Europe during the middle ages.

Perhaps the earliest inscription in Axum was put up by King Ezana's father. The inscription records a series of conquests made during the first 27 years of the king's reign. King Ezana penetrated the mountains covered with snow and made a foot path to the Egypt to improve trade. He conquered part of the wide waterless plains, and a large part of the Yemen. This meant that the Axumite Emperor could control all the trade down the Red Sea, between the Roman Empire and India; and it was because of the control of this wealth that the power of Axum grew...

Judeo-Christianity became the state religion in Ethiopia under King Ezana (330 AD), and despite the east vs. west "schism" that developed during the Council of Nicaea 325 AD, there was interaction between the Church of Rome and the Church of Ethiopia. The 4th century Roman writer, Rufinus, points out a letter of the Emperor Constantine written in 356 AD in which he addresses Ezana and his brothers as "My precious brothers", warning them against Athanasius. Asceticism and monasticism proliferated following Christianity becoming the state religion in Ethiopia and contact with Rome and Europe became closer. The nine saints brought this esoteric ideal to Ethiopia (Axum), during the reign of Emperor Kaleb. Each of the saints founded a monastery and Judeo-Christianity was spread by monks and monastic orders, which were built in incredible places, such as Debre Damo, Rock Churches, and Lalibela.

When the nine saints came to Axum (Ethiopia) in 480 AD they were well received by Emperor Ella Amida and the inhabitants. They were all from the Eastern Roman Empire (Constantinople) and they were adherents to the same monophysite doctrine as the Ethiopian Church. It seems that they left their respective countries of origin because of religious differences; they were anti-Chalcedonians, and were thus persecuted by the Roman emperor Justinian. They went first to Egypt, and lived in a monastery founded by Pachomius for some years before proceeding to Ethiopia.

Controversies and intrigues continued to accompany the relationship between Ethiopian and European Christians, dating from the 4th century. During the 15th century some isolated European adventures had reached Ethiopia even before the Portuguese, and they were employed by the kings as masons, craftsmen, and amateur painters. Ethiopians were impressed with the material civilization and technical capacity of the Europeans, while the Europeans seemed to be preoccupied with their relations with Christian Ethiopia. Europeans apparently failed to appreciate the spiritual self-sufficiency of Ethiopia and the extent to which they are committed to the Church of St. Mark. Therefore, almost completely ignorant of the history and spiritual heritage of the Ethiopian Church, the Portuguese sought to act as the agents of the See of Rome. This caused much unnecessary bloodshed in the 17th century, and led to the expulsion of the Jesuit Mission by Emperor Fasiladas in 1632.

The Jesuit experience was very bitter for the Ethiopian Church, and it naturally led to the creation of very strong antipathies towards anything European for a long time. During the short sojourn in Ethiopia, the Jesuits had done much damage and they seriously disturbed the spiritual stability of the Ethiopian Church. Immediately after the expulsion of the Jesuit mission, there was a very long period of intensive doctrinal controversies within the church which lasted for two centuries. The end result of all this was an intensive movement of literary and intellectual revival in the kingdom of Gondar (the capital).

The first half of the 19th century was favorable to foreign missionaries. The political and material aid which the Ethiopians now began to receive from Europe was the main reason for the influx. They established centers in many important towns of Ethiopia without serious opposition. The Roman Catholic Church had already dispatched missionaries in the later part of the 18th century, headed by an Ethiopian bishop, Monseigneur Tobeyas Gabra Egziabher. In 1846, the Holy See established apostolic vicariates in Ethiopia, the northern area being entrusted to the Lazarists, later under Manager de Jacobs, and the southern area, the so-called Mission to the Galla, being given to the Capuchins under the leadership of Manager Massaia. Both prelates worked for many years in

Ethiopia and attained considerable success. The coming of Italians naturally favored an expansion of Catholicism in Ethiopia. However, eventually the Italians expelled almost all non-Italian missionaries from the country.

Protestantism did not expand with the same speed in Ethiopia. In the 19th century, the Bible Society printed the New Testament in Amharic and began to distribute it in Ethiopia. The Anglican Bishop, Samuel Gobat, played an important role in this respect. He twice visited Ethiopia and stayed in the major cities where he cultivated friendships among Ethiopians. He distributed the New Testament to various people. He was denounced by the Roman Catholic, however, on the grounds that he opposed the teaching of the Ethiopian and Catholic Churches concerning the veneration of the Virgin Mary and the Saints. His prestige began to diminish and he subsequently left the country. Other Protestant groups transferred their activities to Shoa, where they were active only for a short time. Here also, the Protestants were followed by the Roman Catholics who sought to arouse opposition to their teaching. Despite the strong reaction, Protestant Missions

have remained near Massawa, and on the Eritrean plateau, where they have remained very active. Before the Italian invasion of Ethiopia some Protestant Societies had established centers at Addis Ababa and Debre Tabor.

After the war with Italy, in 1944, the activities of foreign missionaries were regulated by decree. From this time onwards, the policy adopted towards foreign missions by the Imperial Ethiopian Government has been consistent and reasonable. The aim of the 1944 decree was if anything, to ensure complete co-operation between government and missions in the interests of the welfare of the people. Missions are permitted to operate educational and medical services in the so-called "closed" or "Ethiopian Church Areas." The teaching of Christian principles is encouraged, but proselytizing for any particular church is prohibited among Ethiopian Christians. In the "open areas" i.e. areas predominantly non-Christian, no restriction is placed on missionary activities. Addis Ababa itself is an Open Area. Almost all the foreign societies missions operate there today.