

## **Africa: A Troubled Continent (8)**

### **Ethiopia: Africa's Oldest Independent Country (1)**

The disastrous famine of the 1980s in Ethiopia made headline news around the world. Although famine is not unusual in the area, this was the worst and the longest in recent times. By mid-1985, some 300,000 people had died of starvation. Many of the dead were children. Since November 2002, the Ethiopian government is making renewed appeals for international food aid as a new drought is sweeping the country. It fears a worse famine than in the 1980s.

Aid workers say the most vulnerable people in the drought-affected regions, such as children and the elderly, are already dying from lack of food. Many livestock have also died. The main cause of the crisis is the failure of two seasonal rains. Although Ethiopia has attracted the attention of politicians, explorers, as well as missionaries for many years, its history is not well-known by Christians in the West. Now you may well ask, "Why should we become acquainted with the troubled history of that ancient land?" My answer is simple. Our Lord has been and still is building His church there.

During the era of European expansionism, the whole of Africa had ceased to be independent, except the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia. (Its old name was Abyssinia.) For centuries it was an isolated nation with a fertile mountain plateau surrounded by the deserts of the Red Sea coast. It borders on Somalia, Kenya, and Sudan. And when Eritrea gained its independence in 1993, it became landlocked. Historically, Ethiopia had a civilization all of its own; a predominant language, Amharic, written in Ethiopian script, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as its main faith. Governed by a highly centralized imperial authority, it was able to keep its Christian identity and resist the militant conversion attempts of its largely Muslim neighbors.

#### **Its Christian Roots**

The authentically African Ethiopian Church has a history going back to apostolic times. It is connected with the story of the eunuch of the Ethiopian Queen Candace in Acts 8:26-30. It tells how God arranged for the Gospel to come to Africa. God knew that the Ethiopian was an important government official and that he would be able to influence many people. The conversion of this Ethiopian court official shows that Africa had received Christianity before Europe.

The recorded history of the Ethiopian Church goes back to the first half of the fourth century. Frumentius, a Syrian's merchant's son, was captured after a shipwreck in the Red Sea and enslaved at Axum, a city in the north of Ethiopia. The king made him his private secretary. He was very pleased with Frumentius's attitude and work and gave him his freedom. With his newly found freedom Frumentius spread the Gospel and banded together with a group of traders who were Christians to start a church. He went to Alexandria, Egypt, where Athanasius (c. 339-97) made him bishop of the Ethiopians

and sent him back to Axum. He won the king of Axum to Christ, and Christianity became the official religion of the kingdom. He served until his death as the head of the Ethiopian Church, with the title Abba Salama, father of peace. The coming of the "nine saints," monks from Syria, in the fifth century transformed Christianity from a court religion to a grassroots faith.

## **Ethiopian Church History**

The rise of Islam in the 7th century was the beginning of over a thousand years of isolation for Ethiopia. Because of its lack of contacts with other Christian communities, it was obliged to rely on its own traditions. Hence, it developed its own original theology and customs. As a consequence of Muslim invasions and pressure, monasticism played an important role in sustaining the Christian faith during centuries of difficulties, and also in preserving most of the cultural treasures of art and literature, even though many monasteries were destroyed. As a result of the withdrawal during the time of persecution, the monastic movement in Ethiopia became increasingly less involved in an active public ministry. But the onslaught of Islam also defined the relationship between church and state. The emperors of Ethiopia not only assumed the responsibility of defending the church, they also took on a very prominent role in the religious activities of the country, relegating to the monasteries the task of preserving the faith. Some of the Ethiopian emperors declared that all their subjects had to accept the Christian faith. Theodore (1855-1868) used force to bring some tribes in subjection to the government and to become Christians. In his opinion the state and church were synonymous. Since the emperors considered Christianity the religion of Ethiopia, the tribes they attempted to conquer and convert regarded Christianity as the religion of their enemies. This mission- effort-by-the-sword attitude did not promote the expansion of Christianity.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was recognized as the established church in 1955. The archbishop and bishops were elected by the ecclesiastical electoral college and approved by the emperor who also had right to proclaim decrees, edicts and public regulations concerning the church, except in matters of monastic and spiritual administration. Emperor Haile Selassie (1892-1975) had a special place in the life of the church, This was symbolized by the fact that the Patriarch of the Church and the Emperor had their thrones side by side at St. George's Cathedral in Addis Ababa. It remained the stronghold of the monarchy until a communist military coup deposed him in 1974. Even then the links to the state were not cut off. For the traditional Ethiopian Christian the church is part of the national identity, influencing everyday life.

## **Ethiopia - A New Israel**

A Protestant Christian from the West travelling in Ethiopia will be surprised by the many religious beliefs and practices which make the Ethiopian Orthodox Church so unique, including religious practices that stem from Judaism. As evidence one can cite the observance of the Saturday Sabbath, dietary rules of ritual cleanness, circumcision on the eighth day (a custom almost universally observed, but not as a religious duty), etc.

Fasting is also strictly observed and comprises about 180 days for laity, 250 for clerics. At the heart of these Judaic elements is the legend of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. As recorded in the 13th century Book of Kings, the Solomonic dynasty began with Menelik I, son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Furthermore, tradition maintains that Menelik brought the ark of the covenant from Jerusalem to Axum, and turned Ethiopia into a new Israel. A replica of the ark is placed in every Ethiopian Orthodox church because of its belief that God's presence dwells in the ark. With the acceptance of Christ as Lord in the fourth century, Ethiopia became even more the true Israel and its capital the new Jerusalem. The legend of the origin of the "Solomonic" dynasty has been maintained by the Ethiopians and has served as a source of national pride and stability in the political leadership. The last emperor Haile Selassie claimed to be a descendant of that dynasty.

Furthermore, besides the Judaic elements in the Orthodox church, the Protestant traveller will also notice the predominance of folk religion, the mixture of Orthodox Christianity with animism. Amulets are widely used; the Psalms, the most popular book among Ethiopian Christians, are used for daily prayers, and together with other texts, for magic and healing.

## **Islam**

The troubled history of Ethiopia clearly demonstrates that Muslims have problems living peaceably with their neighbours. From the 14th and 16th centuries Muslims attempted to conquer Ethiopia. The country was almost wiped out in a deadly jihad in the early 16th century. The Arabs were defeated in 1543 with the help of the Portugese. Although the church and the kingdom survived, Ethiopia had been ruined and its culture annihilated. A large part of the population had been massacred or carried off as slaves. It was some years before Ethiopia could recover, to a degree, from the war. However, because of Portugese assistance, it was able to remain independent.

In the 20th century Islam was advancing once again. In the 1950s, Muslims were increasing more rapidly than Christians because of a differential in the birth rates. And Egypt's president Nassar was sending Muslim missionaries to Ethiopia. The Muslims strengthened their position when Marxism controlled the country and Christians were persecuted. They are now poised to launch the Islamization of Ethiopia by penetrating Christian areas with offers of bribes and a mosque-building programs. Their numbers are growing significantly with converts out of animism and the Orthodox Church. Wherever Islam is the dominant faith, Christians suffer. Ethiopia is no exception. In regions where Islam is strong, Christians are under increasing pressure. Christian leaders have even been targeted for assassination by extremists Muslims.

Johan D. Tangelder