

# THE CHURCH OF ABYSSINIA

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### Ordination

The classical description of ordination has been given by Bruce and has been often quoted,<sup>3</sup> but the real situation has been best summed up by Le Grand:<sup>4</sup>

"The Abyssinians no less than the Copts and Greeks, give nearly the same definition of ordination as we do; agreeing that it is a sacred sign, accompanied with many solemn ceremonies, with which the bishop (Abuna), by the imposition of hands, confers on the persons ordained a portion of grace convenient for the ecclesiastical office

\* "A number of men and children present themselves at a distance and there stand from humility, not daring to approach him. He then asks who they are and they tell him they want to be deacons. On this with a small cross on his hands after making two or three signs, he blows with his mouth twice or thrice upon them saying, 'Let them be deacons'. I saw once all the army of Begemder made deacons, just returning from shedding the blood of 10,000 men, thus drawn up in Aylo Meidan, and the Abuna standing at the Church of St. Raphael, about a quarter of a mile distant from them. With these mingled about 1000 women, who consequently, having part of the same blast and brandishment of the Cross, were as good deacons as the rest."

Parkyns repeats a similar tale: "The ordination of priests and deacons is I believe, tolerable simple; for instance, I have been told, on the arrival of the present Abuna from Egypt, the candidates, who are only required to be able to read a little, were collected in a mass near the place where he was. The bishop (i. e. the Abuna) then went through some ceremony, and ended by pronouncing a blessing, and blowing in the direction of the assembled crowd, who were thus all ordained (!). Among these was a woman with her child in her arms, who had come thither from motives of curiosity. She, too, was of course ordained; but I don't remember hearing that she ever officiated." *Life in Abyssinia*, by Mansfield Parkyns. Vol II, p. 82.

Needless to say these two accounts of ordination are useless. The Church law of Abyssinia forbids the ordination of either those engaged in non-ecclesiastical occupations such as the warriors or women. Undoubtedly upon the occasions described above only a small number of candidates were ordained and the doctrine of intention prevented the crowd from being ordained at the same time.

<sup>4</sup> See Le Grand's *Dissertations on the Abyssinian Sacraments* (1728). These were translated by Dr. Johnson and are to be found at the end of his translation of Lobo's, *History of Abyssinia*, 1735.

to which they are raised. They believe with us that the episcopacy, the priesthood, and the diaconship, were instituted by Jesus Christ, and delivered down to us by the Apostles and their successors; that a man not ordained according to that institution cannot consecrate the Eucharist or perform any office of a priest." Again, "Whatever the missionaries, and after them, Father Balthasar Tellez, may say, there is no denying the validity<sup>5</sup> of the Orders conferred by the Abuna according to the practice of the Eastern Church."

### The Dabtera

Within the Abyssinian Church there is an intermediate class of personages between the clergy and laymen, the dabtera or scribes. Though the dabtera are not ordained and are not under the ecclesiastical supervision of anyone, no service can properly be held without their presence. It is their chief duty to chant the psalms and hymns. Most of the learning in the Church is said to be confined to them. On the other hand some of the dabtera have acquired shady reputations as having commerce with the devil and as being the writers of charms.

<sup>5</sup> The validity of Abyssinian Orders was a much discussed question for over a hundred years after the beginning of the Portuguese mission. As early as 1594, Takla Maria, a converted Abyssinian monk, was examined as to his previous ordination. While the form of ordination seemed valid it was discovered that the instruments were not delivered. Nor are they delivered today. The famous case of 1704 was referred to the Holy Office for a decision. In this year the Abuna had ordained an immense multitude of ordinands to the priesthood by a hurried imposition of hands and by the pronouncement of the words, "Receive the Holy Spirit". The answer to the inquiry was, "The ordination of a priest with the imposition of hands and the pronouncing (prolatio) of the form, as in the dubium, is valid".

This decision was neither the acceptance nor the rejection of the validity of Abyssinian Orders but merely a practical rule of procedure. In 1730 Joseph Simon Assemani, a converted Maronite who had received a West-

### The Alaka and Cities of Refuge

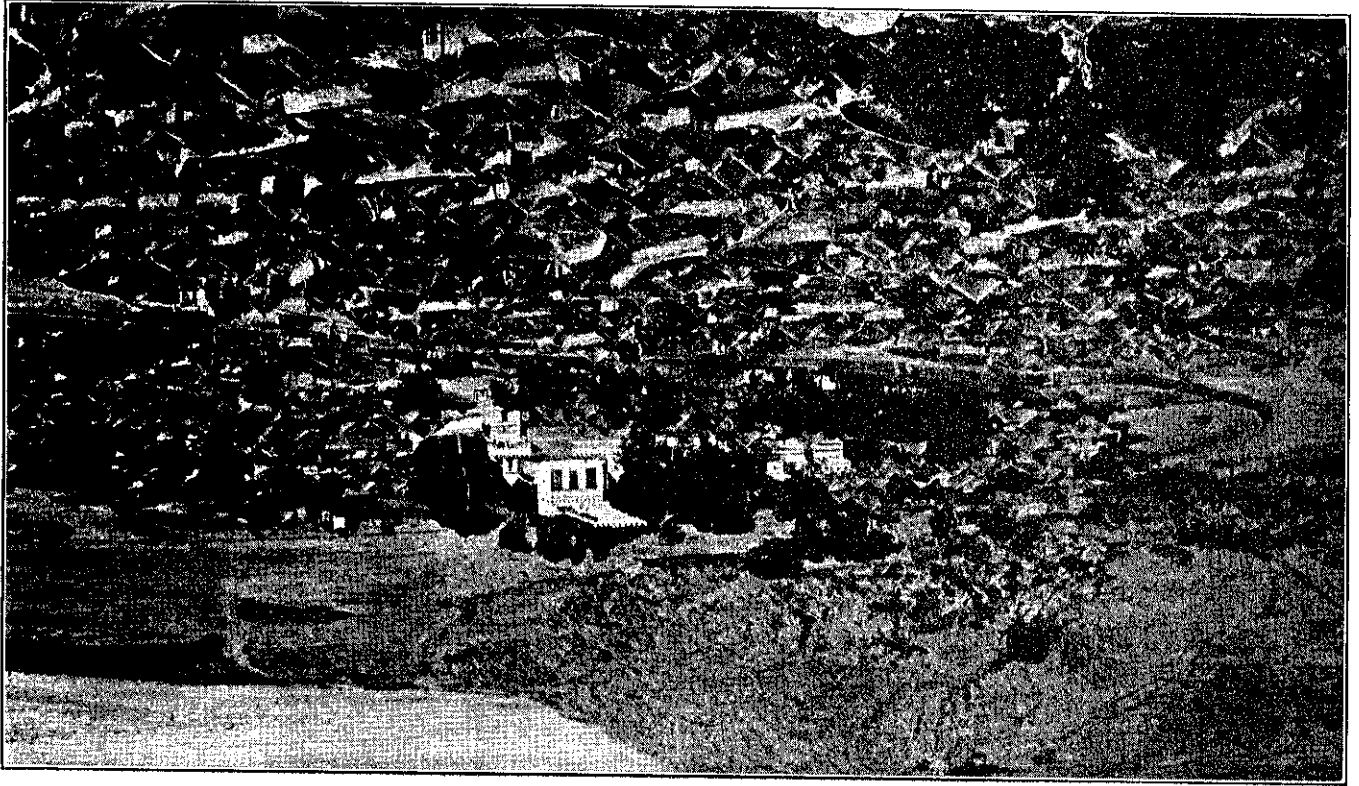
Geddem, or cities of refuge, are inviolate; and those who flee to them cannot be taken by civil authority. Taking asylum is done in the following manner: The fugitive approaches the porch of the sacred inclosure and rings the bell hung there for that purpose at the same time declaring his intention of taking refuge. This done he may live at the sanctuary until the danger is past. Food is supplied to him by his friends.

The most famous of these cities of refuge is Aksum. Not the city, but only the inner inclosure is the sanctuary, though in practice the privilege of refuge practically extends over the city. One peculiar feature of this sanctuary is that its privileges are not open to women, since they are not allowed to enter the inner inclosure, though they have access to the outer inclosure. Another feature of this sanctuary is that it serves as a safety vault. Here in times of trouble people bring their valuables which are placed in the church treasury.

Over each Geddem there is an official called the Alaka, who is appointed by civil authority and looks after the church revenue and acts as a judge. As such, they must be able to read and to write and to be conversant with the laws of the country. The Alaka need not be ordained. They are generally men of wealth and their po-

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ern education, was selected by the Congregation of the Propaganda to re-examine the whole question. The result of this investigation is contained in Assemani's "Controversia Coptica" (the two churches were investigated at the same time), a voluminous and tedious treatise. Assemani gave a full form used in Abyssinian ordinations and pointed out the errors of Ludolf and Mgr. Bel. This form contained the crucial words which had previously been omitted, "Qui ad Presbyteratum admissus est; Reple eum Spiritu Sancto—et regat populum tuum in puro corde—et opera sacerdotis super populum tuum perficiat." With sound theological arguments Assemani declared that Abyssinian Orders were valid.



*A view of Aksum showing Zion Church and the geddem.*

## CHAPTER VII

### THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY

The Abyssinian Church has been distracted by violent theological controversies and much of it as we shall see was not without political causes.

The first dispute of which we have record occurred in the early part of the reign of Zara Yaqob (1433-1467). It is not surprising that a number of theological controversies occurred at this time for the monarch himself was a great religious reformer and a number of extant works are attributed to him. The king's chief effort however, was directed against the magic and superstition of the country and this crusade aroused a bitter counter attack. The chief theological discussion of his reign was concerned with the "Persons", or "Faces" as the Abyssinian theologians express it, of the Holy Trinity. The principal disturber of peace was a theologian named Za Mikael who attacked the doctrine that Christ "was made in the likeness of man" and supported his contention by stating that the accepted opinion was anthropomorphic, for how could God "with three Persons be One in Substance". This attack was merely a denial of our Lord's humanity. A synod held by the king in 1439 condemned the heretic in a decision which reaffirmed the Monophysite position.. It was in this year also and as a result of a theological controversy between Abba Giyorgis and a Frank that an Abyssinian

embassy was sent to the Vatican and was invited to the Council of Florence.

During the reign of Baeda Maryam (1467-1478), son and successor of Zara Yaqob, the doctrine of extreme Eutychnianism<sup>1</sup> was introduced into Abyssinia by some preachers who came from Syria and Egypt. Thus the seeds of future controversy were sown.

Theological controversy however, reached its climax during the Portuguese period when under the influence of and in opposition to the Jesuits old formularies were carefully scrutinized and renewed interest was aroused. Thus in 1604 King Za Dengel (1603-1604) called Pero Paez to his court and requested him to explain the controversy that had arisen between the Jesuits and the Abyssinian theologians. A number of monks were present to ask questions and the discussion centered around the two natures of Christ. Paez having explained the doctrine as held by the Catholic faith, the monks asserted that after the resurrection only one nature remained. Which one was it? As the monks were obliged to admit that the deity of Christ remained, Paez pointed out that after the resurrection the human body of our Lord was seen and touched by St. Thomas. The subtlety of the Jesuit's logic was too much for them and finally they admitted that Christ was perfect God and perfect Man, though still stoutly maintaining that after the Union they were not two but one nature. It seems evident that the difficulty arose from the Abyssinian theologians being unable to distinguish between

<sup>1</sup> So named from Eutyches an abbot who lived in Constantinople about the middle of the fifth century. He held that after the Incarnation there is only one nature, a doctrine which he explained by asserting that Christ is of two natures, but not in two. That is to say, Christ's human nature was absorbed in the divine. He also held that Christ's human body was not of the same nature (consubstantial) with our human bodies.

"nature" and "person". The king however, was convinced of the truth of the Catholic position but died soon after.

Susneyos came to the throne in 1607 as Seltan Sagad I (1607-1632). The new monarch was kindly disposed towards the new faith. Paez' ability as an architect, the conversion of many nobles, the holiness of the new converts and the knowledge imparted by their foreign teachers, made a great impression. Royal edicts began to be issued which were favorable to the new religion.

The conference of 1604 however, had not silenced the Abyssinian party but only served to sharpen its wits and ardor. Discussions continued and in 1623 the leading ecclesiastics and nobles of the kingdom assembled in a conference. This time the discussion which was only indirectly concerned with the natures of Christ, turned upon the question of Christ's Unction. Some of the disputants, like Azzaj Za Dengel and Abba Kefla Krestos, asserted that the Union of the Divinity and Manhood of Christ served as the Unction of His body. Others maintained that the Father had been the Anointer, the Son the Anointed, and the Holy Ghost the Unction. The king demanded both parties to submit evidence for their assertions and finally agreed with the latter party. Kefla Krestos would not submit to the decision and was accordingly flogged and Za Dengel was excommunicated.

By this time the religious condition of the country had reached a crisis. Though the king had not yet formally submitted to Rome strict edicts had been issued which practically affirmed the conversion of the country to the new faith. Rebellion after rebellion arose and were put down with severity. Paez now wrote to Rome, about 1623, requesting additional help but when the new mission arrived in Abyssinia in 1624, Paez was dead.

Susneyos formally submitted to Rome in 1626 and took the oath of obedience to the Holy See. Civil War again broke out. In all these rebellions in defense of the ancient faith the mountaineers of Begemeder took a leading part. The new faith was not popular with the people and hence in 1632 the old faith was restored by royal edict. Susneyos however, died a few years later still professing the Catholic faith. His son and successor, Fasiladas (1632-1667) immediately banished the Jesuits and the Roman mission came to an end.

One result of the Portuguese mission was the division of the Abyssinian Church into two theological groups; the party of Debra Libanos, which has been called the High Church Party; and the Party of Ewostatewos (Eustathius), which has been called the Low Church Party. In other words the cleavage was largely a quarrel between the two great monastic orders. The center of controversy was now the Union of Christ, and it is easy to see that the succeeding disputes around this issue were merely efforts of the Monophysites to ward off the ever present danger of the Catholic doctrine of the two natures of Christ.

During the reign of Fasiladas the "Uctionists" or "Gebatoch" produced the following formula, "Through Union Christ was Son consubstantial with the Father", which formula, with a few modifications, was later adopted by the Eustathians or the Party of Gojam as they were sometimes called since most of its adherents belonged to that province. The party of Debra Libanos countered with the formula, "By Union He was made consubstantial with the Father", that is to say, the human nature of Christ was absorbed by the divine nature through Union. This was merely an expression of the orthodox party of the Church with regard to

the one nature of Christ. From henceforth the battles became "Uction" and "Union". The former party or the heretics were excommunicated by the Echage Batra Giyorgis, but naturally this produced little effect.

Yohannes I (1667-1682), who succeeded Fasiladas, called a synod in 1681, in which Akala Krestos the chief spokesman for the Eustathians reaffirmed the old formula of his party and was answered by the formula of the orthodox party. As the Party of Debra Libanos had the weight of political authority upon their side Akala Krestos was condemned.

During the reign of Dawit (1716-1721) the Eustathians came into the ascendancy for a brief period and the adherents of Debra Libanos were severely persecuted. Finally the arrival of a new Abuna from Egypt calmed the situation somewhat when he attempted a reconciliation with the formula, "By Union the Son is only begotten Son and by Uction He became Christ". The Debra Libanos Party accepted this pronouncement as a victory for their side.

There was now peace until the reign of King Iyasu II (1730-1755) in the 20th year of whose reign a Syrian named George visited Abyssinia and was soon joined by an Abyssinian monk named Abba Eshate. Curious to relate, the old opponents, the Eustathians and the Debra Libanos Party, now united against the new heresy and excommunicated and expelled its advocate. A new development and a final episode in the Uction-Union controversy now appeared among the Eustathians in Tigre. The attempt was made to side-step the Uction of the Son of God by the Holy Ghost by asserting that the Holy Ghost was merely the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, in other words, that Christ had anointed himself. The formula for the new doctrine was, "Christ

the Son Anointing". That is to say the humanity of Christ was reduced to nothing. He was merely man in appearance.

Heretofore theological controversy in Abyssinia had centered around the Nature of Christ and the Unction of Christ, now the issue became concerned with the Birth of Christ. This discussion first arose in the Debra Libanos Party and was known as the "Sost Ledat" or the "Three Births". This doctrine asserted that Christ was born: (1) of the Father, from all eternity; (2) of the Virgin Mary, in time; (3) of the Holy Ghost. The Eustathians of Tigre immediately answered the new doctrine by cutting down the last two births to one, hence they became known as the adherents of the "Knife Faith" (Karra Haymanot). Out of this controversy came the proverb, "The faith we once had was Union and Unction, then when they brought in the doctrine of the Knife there was no flesh left".

The Tigrine doctrine of the "Two Births" acquired considerable prominence during the latter half of the 18th century largely owing to the influence of Mikael Sehul the governor of Tigre. Bruce found this doctrine well entrenched at Gondar in 1770 but by 1804 the "Three Births" had gained the ascendancy and the Echage, Walda Yonas, expelled from Gondar those who denied it, forcing them to take refuge in Tigre.

It was not until 1817, during the reign of Egwala Seyon (1801-1818), that an Abuna, Qerilos, championed the Tigrine doctrine. However, the triumph lasted a short time, only while the Abuna lived in Tigre (1816-1819) and was backed by the Tigrine clergy. When called to Gondar he found the "Three Births" party strongly entrenched under the powerful influence of Ras Gugsa who was supported by King Iyoas II

(1818-1821), who had succeeded Egwala Seyon, and was forced to retire to Tigre. Supported by the Dajazmach<sup>3</sup> Sabagadis, Qerilos retaliated by forcing all his opponents in Tigre to accept the "Two Births" doctrine. One of his important opponents, Gabra Masih, was cast into prison but was released after a hunger strike of thirteen days.

The province of Shoa now entered upon the scene. Formerly it had been subject to the rule of the Negus at Gondar but now had become the most powerful state in Abyssinia. Towards the end of the 18th century, this province had been converted to the "Three Births" doctrine by a priest from Gondar named Bassana. In 1840 this faith was made compulsory.

The suppressed party in Shoa retaliated by accusing two prominent ecclesiastics of the Debra Libanos Party of a heresy concerned with the question of the possibility of an embryo in the womb sinning. The Ras of Gondar, Ali, reproached the king of Shoa, Sahela Sellase (the grandfather of Menelik II), for appointing such ecclesiastics. Indignant, Sahela Sellase had the two clerics tried for heresy and they were condemned.

The "Two Births" party not yet defeated found a champion in the new Abuna, Abba Salama IV, who immediately threatened Sahela Sellase with excommunication, which had little result as the Abuna himself was soon forced to take refuge in Tigre. However, Kassa, the Dajazmach of Dambaya<sup>4</sup>, found it to his interest to support the Abuna and later was rewarded by being crowned in 1855 "King of Kings of Ethiopia". Upon

<sup>3</sup> Dajazmach i. e. "Keeper of the Gate", later became a title for generals of the army and governors of provinces.

<sup>4</sup> A district near Lake Tsana. Formerly Lake Tsana had a number of names and one of them was Dambaya. Roughly this district corresponds to the present province of Amhara.

coronation he took the name of Theodore. He now undertook a crusade against Shoa and in one battle defeated Khaylu Malakat, son and successor of Sahela Sellase. This victory was followed by a synod which Theodore called at Azazo in order to reconcile the contending parties.

This synod was something of a farce, as Theodore, who prided himself upon his theological knowledge, demanded that all parties accept Abuna Salama as the chief ecclesiastic of the Church. When the Abuna was accepted the king replied, "You are heretics from the moment you differ in opinion from the Abuna and me, the defender and upholder of the Church. Abjure your errors or the executor will take off your heads." The important members of the "Three Births" party were confined in prison on bread and water and finally submitted.

Upon the suicide of Theodore after his defeat by the British at Magdala in 1868 Yohannes IV (1872-1889) came to the throne. Menelik, son of Khaylu Malakat, having been imprisoned after the latter's defeat by Theodore escaped in 1866; he supported the "Three Births" party, but upon the accession of Yohannes submitted to him. When ordered by the latter to expel the Italian missionary Massaia, he did so.

Yohannes, like his predecessor, supported the "Two Births" faction, and at once began to persecute their opponents. In a synod he submitted his own confession of faith which was pure Eutychnianism. The members of the "Three Births" party who became sarcastic and criticized had their tongues cut out. The final result was a royal decree of uniformity which demanded absolute submission from all. Those who refused to submit were killed with ruthless cruelty.

Yohannes was succeeded by Menelik II (1889-1914) and a new era began in Abyssinia. He was not only the founder of the Abyssinian Empire but also brought his country into contact with the modern world and deserves the title of Menelik the Great. The ruthless methods formerly employed in the old theological controversies gradually subsided.

At present there are three schools of theological thought<sup>5</sup> in Abyssinia: (1) the *ya-segale* (son of the flesh), which maintains that Jesus in the flesh is Son of Mary only and that his Divine nature was later infused into him by God. They do not admit Christ's divinity as a man. (2) the *gebat* (unction) which asserts that he only became a participant of Divinity when he was anointed by the Holy Ghost after his baptism in the river Jordan; (3) the *tawahedo* (unity) who are the orthodox churchman or the true Monophysites.

<sup>5</sup> These have been often designated as sects but such is not the case. With the exception of a few Abyssinian Uniates the Abyssinian Church is not divided.