

20. CHRISTIANITY IN ETHIOPIA TO A.D. 600

As we have seen, Ethiopia had a long tradition of knowledge of God. Although they used the ram as the symbol of the sun-god they worshipped, Jews and God-seekers had lived there for many centuries. The treasurer of the Queen in the time of the Apostles was God-seeker who turned to Christ and was baptized as a Christian when the Apostle Philip explained that the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled in Jesus. Later Matthew came to Ethiopia and evangelized there until he was put to death.

Traders and nobles of Kush traveled widely. One was baptized in Jerusalem.

In 308 A.D. maimed Christians were sent to work as slaves in Sudanese mines.

A SHIPWRECK BRINGS ETHIOPIA TO CHRIST

Ethiopia was a land thoroughly prepared for the Gospel, but we have no records that many turned to Christ until about 330, when two young men from Alexandria were shipwrecked off the coast of Ethiopia. Frumentius and Aedesius, closely related to the Coptic church, preached the Gospel. In 350 the Ethiopian emperor, King Ezana, was converted from worshipping the idol Michren to Christianity, and Christianity rapidly became the official religion of the land. Because of the Christian influence, Greek became the official court language for the next two hundred years. It was only during this time that Geez gained much prominence as an Ethiopian literary language. The New Testament was translated into Ethiopic around the beginning of the fourth century.

In the fourth century the ancient Ethiopian city-state Meroe was conquered by other Ethiopians whose capital was at Axum. Christian monks of the Eastern tradition, notably Julian, arrived in Ethiopia in 543, and from the Western tradition, John of Ephesus arrived at about the same time, a messenger of the Roman emperor Justinian. It was under the following Byzantine influence and control of the fifth century that Christianity took deepest root. In fact, Ethiopia became a protector of other Christians. In 526 the King of Axum sent expeditionary forces to Yemen to protect persecuted Christians there.

The Bible began to be translated into Ethiopic about 400 A.D. by Egyptian monks.

In about 500 the Syrian orthodox church established an influential monastery in northern Ethiopia, thus securing the monophysite character of the Ethiopian church. In 543 monophysite missionaries sent out by the Empress Theodora converted Silko, king of Nobatae of Nubia to monophysite Christianity. Melkite (anti-monophysite) missionaries sent by the emperor Justinian followed. The main Nubian pagan temples (including Abu and Simbel) were converted into Christian churches, and Christians were found also in Darfur and Kordofan. In 567, the monophysite Longinus was consecrated bishop of Nubia and became known as the apostle of Nubian Christianity. Other Nubian kingdoms also became Christian – the akoritae (south of Nubia with the capital of Dongola) becoming orthodox and Alodiae (twelve miles north of Khartoum with the capital of Alwa) becoming monophysite.

