

THE ABYSSINIAN CHURCH



As the chronicle of Axum relates, Christianity was adopted in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in the 4th century. About A.D. 330 Frumentius was made first bishop of Ethiopia by Saint Athanasius, the famous patriarch of Alexandria and champion of Nicaean orthodoxy. From Frumentius to the present day, with one brief break, the Metropolitan (Abuna) of Ethiopia has always been appointed from Alexandria, Egypt, and, oddly enough, he is always a foreigner.

Little is known of Abyssinian Church history down to the period of Jesuit rule, which broke the Abyssinian Church's connection with Egypt from about AD 1500 to 1633. But the Abyssinians, along with the Egyptians, rejected the Council of Chalcedon, and still remain monophysite ("one nature" in Christology). Union with the Coptic (Egyptian) Church continued after the Moslem Arab conquest of Egypt.

Abu Salih records (12th century) that the patriarch used always to send letters twice a year to the kings of Abyssinia and Nubia, till Al Hakim stopped the practice. Cyril, 67th patriarch of Alexandria, sent Severus as bishop, with orders to put down the Ethiopian practice of polygamy and to enforce observance of canonical consecration for all church buildings.

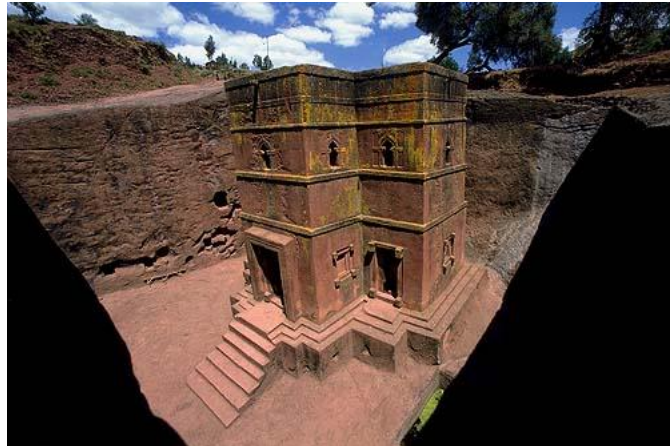


These examples show the close relations of the two churches in the Middle Ages. But early in the 16th century the church was brought under the influence of a Portuguese mission. In 1439, in the reign of Zara Yakub, a religious discussion between an Abyssinian, Abba Giorgis, and a Roman Catholic missionary had led to the dispatch of an embassy from Abyssinia to the Vatican; but the initiative in the Roman Catholic missions to Abyssinia was taken, not by Rome, but by Portugal, as an incident in the struggle with the Mussulmans for the command of the trade route to India by the Red Sea. In 1507 Matthew, or Matheus, an Armenian, had been sent as Abyssinian envoy to Portugal to ask aid against the Mussulmans, and in 1520 an embassy under Dom Rodrigo de Lima landed in Abyssinia.

An interesting account of this mission, which remained for several years, was written by Francisco Alvarez, the chaplain. Later, Ignatius Loyola wished to essay the task of conversion, but was forbidden. Instead, the Roman pope sent out Joao Nunez Barreto as patriarch of the East Indies, with Andre de Oviedo as bishop; and from Goa envoys went to Abyssinia, followed by Oviedo himself, to secure the Abyssinian king's submission to Rome. After repeated failures some measure of success was achieved, but not till 1604 did the king make formal submission to the Roman Pope. Then the Ethiopian people rebelled and the king was slain.

Fresh Jesuit victories were followed sooner or later by fresh revolt, and Roman rule hardly triumphed when once for all it was overthrown. In 1633 the Jesuits were expelled and allegiance to Alexandria was restored.

There are many early rock hewn churches in Abyssinia, closely resembling the Coptic churches. After these, two main types of architecture are found—one basilican, the other native . The cathedral at Axum is basilican, though the early basilicas are nearly all in ruins—e.g. that at Adulis and that of Martula Mariam in Gojam, rebuilt in the 16th century on the ancient foundations. These examples show the influence of those architects who, in the 6th century, built the splendid basilicas at Sanaa and else-where in Arabia.



Of native churches there are two forms—one square or oblong, found in Amhara and Shoa. In both, the sanctuary is square and stands clear in the center. An outer court, circular or rectangular, surrounds the body of the church . The square type may be due to basilican influence, the circular is a mere adaptation of the native hut: in both, the arrangements are obviously based on Jewish tradition . Church and outer court are usually thatched, with wattled or mud-built walls adorned with rude frescoes. The altar is a board on four wooden pillars having upon it a small slab (tabut) of alabaster, marble, or shittim wood, which forms its essential part.

At Martula Mariam, the wooden altar overlaid with gold had two slabs of solid gold, one 500, the other 800 ounces in weight. The ark kept at Axum is described as 2 feet high, covered with gold and gems . The liturgy was celebrated on it in the king's palace at Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and Feast of the Holy Cross.

Generally, the Abyssinians agree with the Copts in ritual and practice. The Septuagint (LXX) version of the Hebrew Scriptures was translated into Geez, the literary language, which is used for all liturgies, though hardly understood . Saints and angels are highly revered, if not adored, but graven images are forbidden . Fasts are long and rigid. Confession and absolution, strictly enforced, give great power to the priesthood. The clergy must marry, but only once. Pilgrimage to Jerusalem is a religious obligation and it is believed to cover many sins.

