

## Chapter Four

### Christianity in Sudan and Ethiopia

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“Ah, land of rustling wings, beyond the rivers of Kush.”

(Isaiah 18:1)

Sudan is a biblical land. It is not at the center, like the Holy Land—or even a major player like Egypt, Syria and Babylon. It is not part of the central geography: the fertile crescent or the Mediterranean world. Yet it is not outside like Japan or the Americas. Kush is found in our Bibles 48 times. It begins early: Kush is one of the sons of Ham.<sup>62</sup>

Kush is a clear *geographical* place, its northern boundary very distinct. Ezekiel talks of the whole of Egypt “from Migdol (in the north) to Syene (i.e. Aswan), *as far as the border of Kush*.”<sup>63</sup> For at Aswan, the fertile Nile valley, which south of the Delta is 16 miles wide, narrows drastically, as the rocky hills crowd to the edge of the river, forming the Nile’s first cataract. It is the heart of the Sahara desert, with the world’s longest river winding through it. Kush is all the land south of the first cataract—Aswan. Kush is also racial. At Aswan, the Black or Brown, the Negroid people began. Kush meant the *black race*. The Nile was the most accessible road to reach that race. Beginning with Egypt’s first dynasty, Egypt sought gold and slaves there. Kushites were noted as warriors. And finally, Egypt’s 25th dynasty was Kushite: Napata in Nubia conquered and ruled Egypt, and appeared in the prophecies of Isaiah.<sup>64</sup> For that reason, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used “Ethiopia” for “Kush”, and

<sup>62</sup> Genesis 10:6.

<sup>63</sup> Ezekiel 29:10.

<sup>64</sup> See Isaiah 18-20.

“Ethiopian” for “Kushite”. *Ethiopian* in Greek meant literally a black person. Almost every modern reader assumes it is the ancient version of the modern nation of Ethiopia. In the Bible an Ethiopian is a black person—or from Nubia.

The arenas of the Bible were: the *holy land*; the *fertile crescent*; and the *Mediterranean world*. Kush belongs to the *outside arenas*. The Old Testament projected a break-out from the arenas of Israel and the ancient world. The Ideal King envisioned by Psalm 72 “will rule ... to the ends of the earth.” “Distant shores” as well as “Sheba and Seba” will be the King’s domain. Jesus took this up. He told his disciples that they were his witnesses “in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The *ends of the earth were crucial*: they proved the truth of the Good News itself, that the Great King had truly come. The Kingdom was for everyone, anyone who simply believes. So Acts 10 tells how Peter was led to preach to a Roman centurion, and that story directs the church throughout the remainder of the book of Acts.<sup>65</sup> Yet, as a matter of fact, the first Gentile baptized appeared before Acts 10, in Acts 8:26-40, the story of Philip unfolding the Good News to a black man—and when he believed, Philip baptized him.<sup>66</sup> He was the first believer from outside the Bible world—and its arenas. He was an official for a queen-mother, from Meroe, along the Nile in northern Sudan. Here Sudan moved out of the edges into the center of the biblical story: the Gospel to “the ends of the earth”, Act One. The story of Cornelius the centurion was really Act Two of the same biblical drama. And then it continued—even until now.

### I. “KUSH WILL SUBMIT HERSELF TO GOD”

Many people naturally assume that the conversion and baptism of the Treasurer of Candace (Acts 8:26 ff) was the beginning of the history of the Nubian Church. History rarely goes in such neat straight lines. The Treasurer was an official of the Meroitic Empire. Its center was at Meroe, south of where the Atbara River joins the Nile. It is between the fifth and sixth cataracts, just north of Khartoum. This empire lasted a thousand years, but it dissolved by 300AD, and disappeared. We do not yet know how to decipher its language. There are no Christian remains from that period.

<sup>65</sup> See Acts 11:1-18 for the first Jerusalem Church Council. Also Acts 15:7-11, again refers to Acts 10.

<sup>66</sup> *Ethiopian* meant simply a Black man. It did not mean a man from modern-day Ethiopia, but was the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew for a *Kushite*.

The land immediately south of Aswan—Lower Nubia<sup>67</sup>—between the first and second cataract, went through great changes as well. From the time of Moses to the time of baby Jesus, Lower Nubia became empty of people. They only began to return in the first century AD, when the *saqia*<sup>68</sup> was introduced. This was very important. Agricultural land was scarce in Lower Nubia, since it was a rough, rocky country. Strips of land were not very large, and were often high above the river. The *saqia* made it possible to water fields more than 25 feet above the Nile. As the Meroitic Empire broke up, Nuba peoples from western Sudan moved in. Eventually, they formed three kingdoms, stretching from Aswan to south of modern-day Khartoum. These were called *Nuba*,<sup>69</sup> *Maqurra*,<sup>70</sup> and *Alwa*.<sup>71</sup> all independent of each other, all independent of Egypt and the Byzantine Empire. An animal also had revolutionized transportation: the introduction of the camel, just before the Christian era. This made travel in the desert much easier. As a result, most travel did not follow the Nile, but cut through the desert to miss the great bend in the Nile between cataract 1 and Abu Hamid (between cataract 4 and 5).

### 1. Beginnings of Nubian Christianity

At first, there was a seeping of Christianity into Nubia. Mark is credited with founding the Church of Alexandria. The Christian message went out to villages in the Delta, and spread to Upper Egypt. Its wide growth caused consternation to the Roman rulers, and in 250AD, and then again in 297, great persecutions fell on Christians in Egypt—as well as throughout the Roman Empire. Probably some of the persecuted found refuge in the quiet, less populated parts of Nuba. Others probably came: some hermits looked for God in the desert, and perhaps some of them wandered into Nuba. There is no record of them. However, the people changed. In the early fifth century, the Christian Byzantine (Roman) rulers

<sup>67</sup> Note: “Lower Nubia” means northern Nubia, just south of the first cataract. *Nubia* is used in the text to designate the people from Aswan to Khartoum—and for their land. But the particular people of Lower Nubia, in Christian history, I will call the *Nuba*, and their land *Nuba*, the Arabic name. In Arabic, there is actually no distinction between Nubia and Nuba.

<sup>68</sup> Ox-driven water-wheel (Arabic).

<sup>69</sup> Greek name—Nobatia.

<sup>70</sup> Greek name—Makuria.

<sup>71</sup> Greek name—Alodia.

of Egypt decided to stop worship of the goddess Isis<sup>72</sup> in the temple of Philae, on a little island near Aswan. The Nubans were furious. Isis was a favorite goddess in Nuba. They often marched with her image through the country blessing the crops. They violently demanded the temple remain, and even forced the Byzantines to make a “Treaty of Philae” which gave Nubans the right to process with the Isis image at any time.

One hundred years later, about 540AD, Byzantine Emperor Justinian came to Egypt. He wanted to strengthen Christianity, and to extend Christianity to peoples on and beyond the Empire’s borders. He ordered Philae converted to a Christian cathedral. This time Isis had no defenders. Very soon after, missionaries came to the land. Their message was readily accepted by king and people.

There also was as early as mid-fifth century, a Christian church in the capital of Nuba, Faras. It was in the humbler part of town. This probably helped in the rather dramatic turning of the kingdom to Christianity. Probably early hermits, and monks, or maybe traders settled in Faras. They had their worship, and quietly spread the faith to some Nubans.

## 2. The Mission to Nubia and Conversion of the Kingdom

Another story unfolded as well. In the sixth century, missionaries were sent to Nuba, Maqurra and Alwa, and those kingdoms all accepted the Christian faith.

The first with a vision for Nubia<sup>73</sup> was Theodore, Patriarch of Alexandria. He was in exile in Constantinople. While on his death-bed, he called the Deacon Julian, and commissioned him to be a missionary to Nubia. The Patriarch and Julian were both Egyptians. They were in Constantinople in exile because they were Monophysites, opposed to the Orthodox definition of who Jesus Christ was. One hundred years before, in 451, a church council met at Chalcedon. It declared that Jesus should be understood as having two natures—that of man and of God—joined together perfectly in one person. Other opinions were condemned. There was an extensive movement which disliked this definition. They were called Monophysites (believing that Christ had only one nature) or

<sup>72</sup> Isis was an extremely popular Egyptian goddess. She had restored the god-king Osiris back to life— and he became the god of resurrection. So Christians replaced Osiris with Christ, and Isis with the Virgin Mary. The Nuba needed Isis for the fertility of their fields.

<sup>73</sup> Here “Nubia” means any and all of the Nubian Kingdoms in general: Nuba, Maqurra and Alwa, see note 5.

Jacobites (named for the Syrian bishop who was an outstanding leader of the movement). Most Egyptians (called Copts) were Monophysites. They opposed anything coming from Constantinople, the imperial capital. And their favorite Bishop, Cyril of Alexandria, had taught that Jesus had two natures, that of God and man, but these two were joined by the Incarnation. So he said, “after the Incarnation, there is one nature of God-incarnate.” “One nature of God-incarnate” became the watch-word for Egypt. Justinian revived the Byzantine Empire greatly, and did all he could to promote and defend the Orthodox Christian faith. But, Justinian married Theodora, an Egyptian Copt, friend of Julian and Patriarch Theodore.

Julian spoke of his calling, of his commissioning by the dying Patriarch, and of the spiritual need of Nubia, lost in idolatry. She equipped Julian to go to Nubia, but Justinian, hearing about it, sent an orthodox mission. He ordered the governor of Thebaid (Upper—i.e. southern Egypt) to prepare stores and camels for the mission. Theodora wrote to the same governor, ordering him to see to it that the mission of Julian reach Nubia first. If not, she threatened, she would have his head cut off. The governor complied. He delayed Justinian’s Orthodox mission, saying the gifts and camels were not yet collected. When Julian arrived, the governor arranged for them to “steal” the camels and baggage, and went with them on the mission to Nubia. The governor had some more explaining to do to the Orthodox mission, but at least he saved his head.

Julian went to the king of Nuba, and found him very receptive to Christianity. The new religion was embraced, and the king of Nuba was baptized with his household and nobility. Then, in that hot country, Julian found a cool cave where there was water. There he instructed and baptized people in great numbers. He also carefully instructed the Nuba king not to accept the mission from the king (the Orthodox mission). The Christian message spread quickly. When Julian left Nuba in 545, after just over two years’ ministry, he turned the work over to Bishop Theodore. Theodore was the first Bishop of the cathedral, made by converting the temple of Isis in Philae. He was a tireless missionary, and appointed a number of priests to lead in Nuba’s conversion. The missionary usually started by coming to a new town or village, and planting a cross there. Then he started instruction, and baptism. As in Egypt before, and as at Philae, they often converted idol temples into churches. When the people accepted the new message, the pictures and hieroglyphic texts were plastered over, and idols destroyed. Christian pictures were painted: Christ, the angels, the apostles,

etc. The temple of Dendur was one of the first Nubian temples so changed. An inscription which was left there reads:<sup>74</sup>

“By the will of God and the command of the King, Eirpanome... zealous in the word of God, and by our receiving the cross from the hand of Theodore, bishop of Philae, that I, Abraham, the humblest priest, should place the cross on the day of the founding of this church.”

That church was founded in January 559, 16 years after Julian arrived. The king Eirpanome may have been the king converted through Julian’s mission—or he may have been his son or grandson. But whoever he was, the work, started by Julian and other missionaries from Egypt and directed by Bishop Theodore, prospered.

### 3. The Mission of Longinus

There seems to have been some concern about the new church and mission. Another Jacobite Patriarch of Alexandria, Theodosius, on the day of his death in 566, commissioned a fellow Jacobite Patriarch, Paul of Antioch, to consecrate a new missionary for Nuba—Longinus. They believed they had an opportunity: the emperor Justinian died the year before, in 565. They hoped his successor, Justin II, would be more liberal. He turned out to be much less tolerant. Longinus had been representing the Jacobites to the Emperor in Constantinople, so was well-known. Justin immediately threw him in prison. He could not easily escape either, for Longinus was bald—and every time he tried to leave the capital, he was recognized and arrested. Finally in 569 or 570, he disguised himself with a wig, and slipped past security during a heavy storm. He reached Nuba, and set up the organization of the church, and established the worship. Liturgy was in Greek—as it was for all the Eastern churches of the Empire. The Nuba king testified that Longinus helped them truly understand and follow their new Christian faith.

<sup>74</sup> R. WERNER, W. ANDERSON & A. WHEELER, *Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment: The History of the Sudanese Church Across 2000 Years* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 32.

#### 4. Spread to Maqurra and Alwa

As usual, each Nubian state had problems with its neighbors. One of the first instructions Julian gave the king of Nuba was: “Do not accept the mission from the king.” So when Justinian’s mission, the *Melkite*<sup>75</sup> mission, came to Nuba, the king rejected them. The mission soon learned that the Nubian kingdom just to the south—Maqurra—would welcome them. Evidently, they took up the opportunity. Maqurra was a much larger kingdom, centered on Dongola, reaching to the Atbara river or beyond.

The southernmost Nubian kingdom, Alwa, learned of the ministries of Longinus—and asked for him to come. The Melkite mission tried to extend from Maqurra—but Alwa refused. Alwa and Nuba were friends: Maqurra was a rival to both. That posed a problem for Longinus. He prepared to go, but Maqurra—much the larger kingdom—prepared to block him, and even warned him that they were endangering their lives if they even tried. Longinus and the Nuba took the long way around, going far east through the country of the Beja. Seventeen camels died, and the party barely made it. Longinus reached Soba, the capital, near present-day Khartoum. The missionary party was welcomed as heroes. Longinus found Soba a great city. It included among its people some who were already Christians, although their understanding of Christianity was quite faulty. They believed that Christ, because he was the Spirit of God, never suffered pain on the cross, or anywhere. Julian helped turn them to the Apostolic faith—that Jesus indeed “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died....” He instructed the king of Alwa, and that Nubian kingdom also turned to the Christian faith. Soon Longinus called in two more bishops from Egypt to help with the newly-converted people.

#### 5. What Did the Conversion of the Nubian Kingdoms Accomplish?

The change looks outwardly to have been superficial. It started with the king, and then to the people in a very short time. How much did it touch the common man’s life? We cannot be entirely sure. But it certainly had a dramatic effect on the faith and hope of the people. Already, we have noted that when Justinian turned the Temple of Isis into a cathedral around 540—before the official conversion of Nubia—there was no complaint from the people. Already among the people there was an extraordinary readiness to

<sup>75</sup> The Orthodox were dubbed “Melkite”—which meant “the king’s party” by the Jacobites. All considered and called themselves Orthodox, so the Jacobite Monophysites were named Orthodox.

change, to leave idolatry. In another dramatic way, the people changed: in their attitudes toward death. Before the sixth century, Nubians buried people with wealth and goods: food, water, clothing and weapons. They often mummified the bodies. After Julian and Longinus, they buried their dead without anything: no food, water or weapons, and wrapped only in a cloth. No more mummies, either. Each Christian was buried in an East-West position, on the back, with the head on the western side. This was because Christ would return to summons believers from the eastern sky, and would raise up each person to greet Him face-to-face.

Even the kings and royal families made the same change. For 2,500 years in the past, the major public work of a king was building his personal tomb and monuments. For the great kings it was a pyramid: Nubia has more pyramids than Egypt! After Julian and Longinus no tombs were built. No pyramids either. Kings were buried wrapped in a cloth, without clothing, weapons, food or drink for the after-life. No slaves or others were killed to accompany them. The king was no longer divine. Jesus was the last King who was both God and man. Now decisions and treaties were no longer done by the divine genius of the god-king, but by the king under God's leadership and protection. Man had taken a step forward towards making his own decisions. The king was no longer the religion of the realm. Many of the old kings' temples were remote and difficult to access. The Christian faith made God available to all, and a church was built in all the towns and villages of Nubia.<sup>76</sup>

Other great changes came. Of the four written ancient languages of that corner of the world—Coptic, Ge'ez (Old Ethiopic), Nubian and Meroitic—three of them were written in languages created by or influenced by Christianity. Only the Meroitic language was an exception: it used an old Egyptian Demotic script, and it has never been deciphered. A new spirit was born. Reading and writing in Greek, Coptic and later "Old Nubian" became more common. Christians often visited Philae, the first Nubian cathedral. Several left graffiti, saying in effect "I came here". One graffiti has these scrawled words: "The Cross has won, it always wins!"<sup>77</sup> The Christian revolution was a fact, a sweeping one indeed.

<sup>76</sup> W. ADAMS, *Nubia, Corridor to Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 535-538, 441.

<sup>77</sup> WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, p. 39.



## II. CHRISTIANITY AND THE STATE

Nubia had extended periods as a victim in its early history. Egypt, from the first dynasty, went to it for gold and slaves. It mined beautiful stone for its gray-stone monuments. Black slaves were usually household servants of the rich and great, or more often the soldiers of the Pharaoh. Then the Egyptian Empire faded. Egypt broke into warring factions—Nubia was enticed into that confusion, and took over for a hundred years. The 25th dynasty was a Nubian dynasty. Nubia (with its capital then at Napata) became a regional super-power, even threatening Palestine for a short time. That is why Isaiah 18-20 talks about Kush (Ethiopia), but that Kush was actually Nubia-Egypt. Nubia soon retreated to Napata.

The center was moved further south to Meroe, and a strong long-lasting empire of a thousand years was built there. The Meroitic Empire traded African elephants—used as war-elephants—with the Ptolemaic Greek rulers of Egypt just before the Christian era. The Romans mined some gold, but gave up mining and occupying parts of Lower Nubia. Instead it made Nubia the guardian of the southern edge of the empire, at the first cataract. Soon after Nubia's conversion to Christianity, it changed its role: it became a recognized power for many centuries.

### 1. Egypt in Trouble

Christian Egypt had a special relationship with Nubia. The missionaries first sent there—Julian, Longinus and Bishop Theodore—all were Egyptians; all were Jacobites; all had trouble with the Empire. Longinus developed the structure of the Nubian church. It was ruled by bishops, and bishops came only from the monasteries of Egypt. They were chosen and consecrated only by the Patriarch of Alexandria. These Patriarchs were constantly under the suspicion of the Empire, even exiled from Egypt. The three Nubian kingdoms had no restrictions. They were independent.

Then the Byzantine Empire began to rock. In the year 618, the Sassanids of Persia took much of Syria-Palestine and the whole of Egypt. They may have reached a little into Nuba. Sassanids believed in the God of Fire: so they torched a large number of churches in Egypt, and the most holy cathedral, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. After a few years, the Byzantines recovered and drove out the Persians. But it was a much-weakened, much-shaken Byzantine Empire.

In 638 the Arab conquest of Egypt started. The Byzantine forces had little stomach for the fight. Many Coptic Christians saw Arabs as possible liberators, and some Copts gave the invaders crucial help. In a surprisingly

short time of 3 years, Cairo and Alexandria fell. The Arabs offered Christians conversion to Islam, or payment of *jizya*, the special head tax on all “people of the book”. *Jizya* was at first no more oppressive than the huge Byzantine taxes. Greeks and Nubians living in conquered Egypt were given the option: “submit to Islam, or leave Egypt.” Coptic Christians believed the Arabs, like the Sassanids, would not remain. That was a serious misperception. The Arabs, under Islam, were on a *jihad*, a holy obligation to conquer the world and bring it to Allah. That *jihad* lasted a hundred years, from 632 to 732. These warriors of God found nothing which could stop them, until they reached the center of France 100 years later; nothing, except Nubia.

## 2. Invasion of Nubia, and the *Baqt*

Nubia appeared to be three small, weak states, nothing like the great armies of the Byzantines they had defeated in Damascus, Jerusalem and Alexandria. In 642 an army crossed the desert to the capital of Maqurra, Dongola. Unlike Egypt, Dongola fought fiercely, and the invaders withdrew. Ten years later, a more determined effort was made. This time, parts of Dongola were destroyed, but the Maqurrans defended the inner walls of the city. They were so accurate and deadly with the bow they were dubbed “pupil-smiters”. They were reputed to hit anyone with an arrow in the eye!

With the battle stalemated, the Arabs drew up an agreement with the Nubians. It was called the *Baqt*—from the Greek word “pakton”. Like a pact, it was a non-aggression and trade agreement. Egypt wanted yearly from Nubia 300 slaves,<sup>78</sup> plus many African goods: frank-incense; ivory; and performing baboons. Egypt paid for this with wheat, lentils, horses, cloth and other Egyptian goods. The place for the exchange was *al Qasr*, five miles south of Aswan. Both parties agreed to not attack the other. One important regulation was that Arabs were not allowed to buy land or settle in Nubia, but could travel for purposes of trade. Nubians could similarly travel through Muslim territory, but not settle there.

## 3. The Great New Christian Champion

The impact of all this was profound: Nubia emerged as a great power, a mighty Christian Empire reaching into the heart of Africa. It had inflicted

<sup>78</sup> It was not entirely clear if the exchange was yearly or not. Different accounts say the agreement was to give 300 or 360, or even 400 slaves.

the only serious set-back to the Islamic *jihad*, until the defeat at Tours, France, much later in 732. Nubia declared itself the champion of all Christians, Jacobite and Melkite, in the new Islamic empire. It was defender particularly of the Egyptian Church, and several times it forcefully intervened. The Arab invasion was probably a shock for Christian Nubia as well. Islam appeared as a highly dangerous opponent and rival. Soon after the *Baqt* treaty, at about 700AD, Nuba and Maqurra united peacefully, with Dongola the capital city.

The new united kingdom made its first mark on Egypt under King Kyriakos ( c.747-797) The Arab government in Egypt fell into chaos for several years. Around 745, the Sultan demanded a huge payment from the Coptic Patriarch, Michael I, to meet his debts. The Patriarch could not raise the money, so he was imprisoned. Kyriakos invaded Egypt, picking up Coptic support along the way. The Sultan would not budge; so Kyriakos besieged Cairo. The Sultan finally gave in, freeing the Patriarch. The incident made an indelible impression on the Egyptian Church. They had a powerful friend in the South. One glowing Egyptian said of Kyriakos, that he was “the Great King upon whom the crown had come down from heaven.”<sup>79</sup>

#### 4. Unification—the New Constantine

At a certain stage, close to 700AD, Nuba and Maqurra formed a united kingdom. The move appears to have been peaceful. The king lived in Dongola, the capital. The much less-populated Nuba, between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cataracts were under a sub-ruler, given the Byzantine title of Eparch, and headquartered at Faras. The king, who led the unification, was Merkurios, whom enthusiastic outsiders dubbed “the New Constantine”. Although Dongola (Maqurra) had become Christian through Melkite missionaries, and the smaller Nuba was Jacobite (Monophysite), there appeared to be no quarrel. The theological differences meant very little to Nubians when their political rivalry was over-ruled by the threat of a great danger from warring Islam.

Traditions die hard. The Meroitic official (or “Ethiopian eunuch”) of Acts 8 was said to be “the treasurer of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians”. (Acts 8:27—NRSV) The title was Kandaka. It was that of the Queen-Mother of Meroe.<sup>80</sup> Meroe passed on the kingship through the son

<sup>79</sup> WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, p. 48.

<sup>80</sup> The modern African nation, Ethiopia, only took on that name in the twentieth century. Traditionally it has been known as Abyssinia (Arabic, *al Habash*).

of the king's sister, and often the Kandaka ruled as regent while her son matured. Often the Kandaka had some authority, and always much honor. Although the Meroitic Empire expired by 300AD, the tradition of the Kandaka remained alive. Nubian inheritance was through the son of the sister of the dead king—usually.

### III. PIETY AND POWER:

#### CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

Zacharias was the son of Merkurios, the “new Constantine”. He showed the combination of Christian piety along with kingly power which was the hallmark of the Nubian church. The church in Nubia was closely associated with the Patriarch of Alexandria, and the whole Coptic Church. It depended totally on the Patriarch for bishops, and without bishops the Church could really not function. For a long time priests and monks were sent from Egypt. The Egyptian church functioned independently of the government. This was because it was under Islam, but was just as true when it resisted the Byzantine power and the imposition of Melkites. Not so for the Nubian church. The king, from the first acceptance of the missionary message to the end, had a key, important church role. Zacharias resigned early from the throne to give himself to the “Word of God and the salvation of his soul.”<sup>81</sup> Zacharias was also concerned with the salvation of the kingdom, for he was the king-maker, even while in the monastery, for four successive kings. The first three are easy to forget. The fourth was a king of stature—Kyriakos. His invasion of Egypt, and the rescue of the Patriarch from prison, marked him as an outstanding king, and raised the reputation of Nubia in Coptic Egypt.

#### 1. George I Visits Baghdad

Almost a hundred years after Kyriakos, the Arab empire fell into more than a decade of chaos, particularly in Egypt. Then, in 833, Ibrahim al Mutasim took over and stabilized power, and demanded from Nubia 14 back years of *Baqt* to be paid, at once. The Patriarch sent a letter accompanying the Caliph's demands. He advised the Nubian king to pay.

Unfortunately, the NRSV has not cleared up this confusion even though it explains that “the Candace” was not a name but a title.

<sup>81</sup> See WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, p. 47. Note: this whole history was written by John the Deacon, Coptic secretary to the Patriarch Michael I (744-768), see footnote p. 46.

The king, Zacharias II, met with all his counselors, discussing what response to make. The amount demanded was clearly impossible. One set of advice was to make a deal with the Caliph. The other was: "Go to war". George, Zacharias' bright young son pushed for war. Zacharias II mulled over the case, then made a bold decision. He decided to send his young son, George—Kirki in Nubian—to Baghdad to confer with the Caliph. George was only 20 years old. Zacharias first had him crowned, to send him as the crown prince, the highest possible emissary. So, an incredible event unfolded.

George set off with a large caravan heading north into Egypt. George was seated on a horse, holding in his hand a scepter and a golden cross. In front of him was a retainer, carrying a large golden cross. This solemn and large procession containing many servants and officers went through Upper Egypt to Cairo. This was astonishing to the Christian population of Egypt, which at that time was quite big. Christian processions were banned: the display of the cross was offensive to Muslims. But this was the powerful crowned king of the Christian kingdom of Nubia! In Cairo he first met with the Patriarch, and then with the Sultan. Honors were showered on him: he received a daily allowance of 30 dinar, and was given many camels to carry his gifts to the Caliph. His passage through Syria was awe-inspiring: the great black Christian king ruling to the ends of the earth. Before he reached Baghdad, he contacted Patriarch Dionysios, the senior Jacobite churchman from Antioch, asking if he could visit. The Patriarch was delighted at the news. Dionysios could not meet with George in Antioch, but promised to meet with him in Baghdad.

When he finally reached Baghdad, the visiting king hit a snag. Accusations were made that George was not a genuine king. In fact, his father Zacharia II had a real problem of legitimacy, but not George. Nevertheless, it took a full six months to confirm George's status. In the meantime, the Patriarch of Antioch came, and the two met. George, although a young man of between 20 and 21 years, impressed the Patriarch with his knowledge and devotion to the Christian faith. He could even distinguish the Monophysite doctrine of Christ's one nature, from the Orthodox Chalcedonians.

When confirmation of George's status reached Baghdad, he met with the Sultan.

(1) The first problem—the 14-year *Baqt* debt—the Sultan cancelled it, said it must be forgiven. He even straightened out the terms of the treaty, saying that the exchange should take place every three years rather than annually.

(2) The Sultan immediately released a number of Nubian prisoners into the control of King George.

(3) However, other requests he refused. George had ordered the withdrawal of the Muslim Egyptian garrison from al Qasr near Aswan—this the Sultan could not accept. According to the *Baqt* treaty, no Arab/Muslim was to buy land or live in Nubia. Many had bought land and settled in Lower Nubia. George insisted that any purchase of land was illegal, since purchases had to be made through the king according to the *Baqt* treaty. The Sultan insisted that these purchases were made in good faith on both sides, and could not be cancelled.

The visit of George to Baghdad had wide repercussions for Nubia, and for the Christians in the Middle East. It was an extraordinary sight for Muslims. As Werner states it, a Christian prince met with the supreme Muslim potentate “not as a defeated foe ... but as the head of an independent Kingdom.”<sup>82</sup> The story of this fabled visit was repeated many times in accounts of both Christian and Muslim chroniclers. It added greatly to the fame of Nubia as a powerful and proud people, who were of a clear, definite Christian faith, which they actively defended.

George’s return was triumphant. He probably stopped in Jerusalem, and received a piece of the “true cross”—although this cannot be confirmed. Patriarch Joseph of Alexandria heaped on him gifts and honors. He asked from the Patriarch, and received, a portable wooden altar for his worship. When he returned to Dongola, the kingdom celebrated by erecting a grand new church. George insisted that it be cruciform: a rather square building, with the worship area in the form of a cross. This was a style George had observed widely in Syria-Palestine—and later it became the predominant new style for Nubia. This great new church was called “*Isoun Kisee*”—“Church of Jesus”, and became the Church most often used to crown new kings. George I went on to rule for a very long time.

## 2. George II

George II came in the line of George I, but reigned a hundred years after. He was on the throne in the middle of the tenth century, when a great change took place in Egypt. In 969, Egypt fell under the rule of the Fatimids. The Fatimids were a line of Shi’ite rulers who had reigned over a North African empire for many years. Although they besieged Egypt and held her for 200 years, they made no dent in the staunchly Sunni Islam of Egypt. The Fatimids, with one exception, were tolerant towards

<sup>82</sup> WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, p. 52.

Christianity, and friendly with Nubia. Jawhar was the first Sultan, and he despatched Selim al Aswani to Dongola to learn more about Egypt's Nubian neighbors. Selim wrote an excellent account of his visits to Nubia and Alwa, and about his findings in those mysterious kingdoms.

Selim gave George II a letter from Jawhar, which was a presentation of the truths of Islam, and the errors of the Christian faith. The Nubian King was urged to embrace Islam. George called a great consultation of the dignitaries of the kingdom—church and state—for both were inextricably entwined in the kingdom. After careful discussion, George called in Selim, and refuted all Jawhar's arguments in favor of Islam as the true religion, demonstrating hereby that Christianity was the real faith. He then invited Selim himself to become a Christian. In state matters their discussions were fruitful. Selim stayed many months, and asked permission when *Eid al Adha* (the great Festival of Sacrifice) rolled around if he could be permitted to celebrate. George gave his assent, but told him he must celebrate outside the city. Some of George's councilors criticized him for being so liberal. However, the act shows that the Christianity of Nubia was strong, but not intolerant.

In one way George II served the wider church. Ethiopia was a sister church, linked also to Egypt. Like Nubia, all its bishops were consecrated by the Patriarch of Alexandria. Early in the century, Patriarch Kosmas (901-903AD) had consecrated an Archbishop for Ethiopia. The Ethiopian king rejected the man appointed. Instead, he elevated an Egyptian monk, already serving in Ethiopia. The monk had forged papers, indicating that he had been consecrated by the Patriarch. Kosmas immediately put the whole kingdom under the ban. For decades, no new priests were ordained, no new bishops consecrated. After 60 years, the emperor was faced with growing rebellions, so he sent an appeal to the sister Christian kingdom, Nubia. George II then wrote a strong appeal to Patriarch Philotheos (AD 979-1003) asking him to take action. The Patriarch did: he went to Wadi Natrun, the foremost convent of Egypt, and consecrated a monk to be the new Archbishop in Ethiopia.<sup>83</sup>

King Solomon, who came to the throne in Dongola around 1079, abdicated and went to a monastery in Lower Nubia. He was a deeply devout man, but the Egyptian commander at Aswan remembered how a former monarch-monastic Zacharia had been king-maker of four rulers. Taking no chances, he sent troops to arrest Solomon and bring him to

<sup>83</sup> In the Orthodox churches, bishops are chosen only from the monasteries.

Cairo, where the former king devoted himself to prayer and fasting in an Egyptian monastery.

There were dangers lurking among the friendly Fatimids. Al Hakim, who inherited the throne in 1096 (as a boy aged 11) was mentally disturbed and very unbalanced. He launched several persecutions against Christians in Egypt and Palestine, destroyed thousands of churches—including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. This earned him the nickname from Copts of “Nero” for his persecutions against the Christians. Al Hakim was somewhat liberal towards Nubians, allowing them to pass through Egypt and Palestine to go on pilgrimages.

Nubians were much favored in Egypt, particularly as soldiers, especially in the Fatimid period. Black soldiers from Nubia had been sought for a long time. Shishak the Egyptian Pharaoh (long before Christ), used them in his assault on Judah.<sup>84</sup> Sultans in the Muslim era liked them. Mercenary troops were more reliable, less likely than the locals to be involved in plots. During the Fatimid era, the Nubians were not only numerous in the army, but they became a large community in Cairo, up to 50,000. All or virtually all of them were Muslim. However, they were caught up in racial clashes, especially with the “Turkish” or white troops from the northern regions of Islam. Under Al Mustansir (died 1094), who was half-Nubian himself, Nubians were favored, but also massacred and driven out of Cairo, by a serious uprising. Nevertheless, they returned, and after some decades had reached 50,000 again.<sup>85</sup>

#### IV. FAITH AND LIFE OF THE NUBIAN CHURCH

There is much we do not know about Nubian faith and worship. The sources are incidental: the pictures they left behind; the ruined churches; and some documents. This gives us a few glimpses of what certain leading people believed and did. How the common believers were taught, and what they really believed is only partly known. Yet we can reconstruct some of it, and form a fuller picture of what that faith and life was like. At the beginning, it is important to say that it differed much from the earlier religion. Early Nubian religion was based strongly around the king, his court, and the nobility. It was devoted much to the glorifying of the king as an example of divinity. For the Nubians, there was a church in every village. It became a part of their every-day life.

<sup>84</sup> See II Chronicles 12:3.

<sup>85</sup> G. VANTINI, *Christianity in the Sudan* (Bologna: EMI Publishers, 1981), 119-131.



## 1. Pictures and What They Say

Faras was the capital of Lower Nubia, all of it covered with drifted sand. Under the threat of flooding by the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, a Polish team of archaeologists was given the job of excavating the site. They selected the highest mound. After much luckless digging they feared they had made an unlucky choice. Just then they came upon a wall and unearthed the brilliant picture of the three men in the fiery furnace, saved from death by the Archangel Michael.<sup>86</sup> The Poles had discovered Faras' cathedral, long deserted and buried in sand.

Pictures played a fundamental role: for teaching Christian truth and for worship. Two types of pictures are found most widely: pictures of the Nativity, the birth of Jesus Christ; and pictures of the three men saved inside the fiery furnace. The Nativity pictures were commonly found on the northern walls of churches, the women's entrance, but visible for most worshippers on their left. It spoke of one fundamental truth of the Christian faith, the Incarnation: "The Word (of God) became flesh, and made his dwelling among us."<sup>87</sup> A picture of the three men in the fiery furnace was usually found on the southern wall of the church, the men's entrance. It could be visible to worshippers on their right. This spoke of another foundational truth of Christian faith, Salvation: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."<sup>88</sup> Had these verses been written on the walls, hardly a soul could have read them. The common people, almost all without exception illiterate, were taught through pictures. This was a translation of the Savior's ways, who taught his disciples in parables, which were picture-language.

Other pictures and representations were part of the believers' worship. The Church was always built so that the altar where the Eucharist was celebrated was on the eastern side. This had a particular meaning: Christ would return again after His sign—the cross in the sky—appeared in the East. The altar was under an apse, an archway. At the top of the apse was a

<sup>86</sup> The story is found in Daniel 3. Faras Cathedral had many paintings on the walls. The original paintings had been covered with a layer of plaster, then another painting made on top. The archaeologists were able to separate multiple layers, and angels were important. The angel in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is named: he is Michael, found in 150 pictures on various walls of the church. The picture of the three men in the fiery furnace (and others) is found in WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, in section of pictures between pp. 64 & 65. A picture of the cathedral under excavation is found on pp 70-71.

<sup>87</sup> John 1:14, NIV.

<sup>88</sup> I Timothy 1:15.

picture of Christ on his throne in glory. Worship was directed to the reigning Christ in heaven. Underneath him was a picture of Mary on a throne, with the twelve apostles: six on her right, and six on her left. Then below was a picture of birds. This was teaching that, when we look above the world, there are the apostles and Virgin Mary leading us to Jesus, the King. He is the supreme object of worship. There were many other themes as well. The Trinity was taught in pictures. One picture showed three likenesses of Jesus side by side in heaven. This is the Trinity, with each Person being alike. Another showed three crosses on earth—then clouds—and then above them three crosses in heaven. This declares that the God who is three-in-one in heaven also appears and rescues man on earth, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## 2. Languages of the Church

Three languages were used in the Nubian church. Greek was the language of liturgy: prayers; songs and chants; and Scripture recitation. This was the language used throughout the Eastern Church. Coptic was the language of communication with the mother-church, the patriarchate of Alexandria. Nubian languages were increasingly used as time went on. They were used to recite Psalms or prayers. The priest would recite the first line in Greek, the congregation would repeat that line in Old Nubian (or Old Dongolawi); or the priest and congregation alternated, the priest reciting in Greek the first line, and the congregation reply the next line in their own language.

At first, the Scriptures were only in Greek, but as time went by, translations were made. In hardly anything did the Nubian church divert from the practice of the Church in Egypt. However, it did develop its own lectionary, a set of Scripture readings which appears not to have been copied from any lectionary in Egypt or the East. This is unusual. The spirit of Nubian Christianity was not at all to develop along its own lines, to be innovative. Rather, it was out-and-out Orthodox, not diverting from the traditional Christian faith as it could discern it. It copied Coptic and Syrian styles of holy art, and adopted the cruciform Church building from models in Syria and Palestine, introduced first by George I.

There was also a translation of the Scriptures into the “Old Nubian” language. No complete Bible or even book has been discovered, but fragments have. These make it clear that there was extensive translation. We have translations from seven Old Testament, and fifteen New Testament books, including the four gospels. Many of these were probably

translations of the lectionary, but translations were probably made of some complete gospels, if not of the entire New Testament.

### 3. Sacraments and Activities

Nubians followed the traditions of the Coptic Church in Egypt. The sacrament of Eucharist was celebrated with loaves of leavened bread. This was to celebrate a living, resurrected Jesus Christ, and was a break from the Jewish tradition of unleavened bread for Passover. Like all Orthodox, they insisted that the Bread and Wine were indeed Christ's body and blood. Nubia like the Copts in Egypt was somewhat distinct in the mode of the sacrament of baptism: it was by total immersion, even for babies. Churches had on their south-eastern corner a baptistry, dug large enough in the ground to take two adults, and deep enough for immersions. At first many baptisms were of adults.<sup>89</sup>

Many activities the Church developed were distinctive to the life of Nubia itself. On special feast and celebration days, Christians loved to make pilgrimages. Many trekked to famous monasteries. Others went to caves or hovels belonging to a pious and powerful hermit. Church centers, such as Faras, Qasr Ibrim, Dongola—and many others—became sites for pilgrimages. The great pilgrimage through the centuries was a trip to the Holy Land, especially to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. In later years, the Nubian Church made a chapel deep under that Church staffed by Nubian monks, who sang songs day and night.

### 4. Jesus, the Glorious Cross—Center of Faith

There can be no doubt that the center of faith in the Nubian church was Jesus Christ. Their Jesus, as seen in writings, hymns and pictures had a number of sides.

He is the bringer of the Gospel, the Good News; King of kings; Great healer; Incarnate God; and Second Person of the Trinity.<sup>90</sup> Even something of the distinct teaching of the Jacobites was commonly shown by Nubian Christians. When they made the sign of the cross, it was done with only one finger. This indicated that after the Incarnation, Jesus had one nature only, the nature of the God-man. How much the common believer understood this is impossible to know now. His suffering on the cross hardly appears in the Nubian piety which has survived to us today.

<sup>89</sup> WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, pp. 85-86. *Pictures of baptistry*, p. 87.

<sup>90</sup> John 14,9 NIV.

All in a sense are summed up in the fascination of Nubians with the Cross. The cross was the omnipresent symbol of their faith. For a time, young babies were branded on their foreheads with the sign of the cross. George I carried a golden cross all the way to Baghdad and back. He began the tradition of the cruciform church, which became the model for Nubia after the ninth century. The cross for them meant Jesus—as indeed the first cruciform Church in Dongola was called *Isoun kisee*—“the church of Jesus”.

Devotion to the cross centered on “the Glorious Cross”. This is a square cross, festooned from arm to arm, anchored in the soil, but sprouting up with live shoots.<sup>91</sup> The tradition of it is much wider than Nubia: it was deep in Eastern Christianity. The background story goes like this. Between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, Peter asks why the sign of Jesus’ glorious return is the light cross in the eastern sky. Jesus replies, “The cross, once a symbol of defeat and shame, now is the sign of indestructible glory.” Then follows the hymn of the Glorious Cross, in what is known as the *Stauros Text*.<sup>92</sup>

Several striking elements are found in it. The “Glorious Cross” has some similarities to how the cross has been described over the centuries, and even now. The cross is called “the forgiveness of sinners” and “the hope of the forlorn”. And the beautiful last line: “The cross is life-giving, on account of God, who hung upon it in the flesh, because he conquered for us, who need peace.” But clearly the Glorious Cross represents much more: it is primarily the resurrected, reigning and coming Christ. It is the living Christ who heals. As Nubians in the past paraded the goddess Isis through their lands for fertility, now the Cross brings the “watering of seeds”. The Glorious Cross brings hope to people with nothing—the slave, the poor, the forlorn. The “glorious cross” was a representation of the glory and power of Jesus Christ: it stood for Him in a unique way.

## 5. Saints and Angels

Saints appear frequently on the walls of cathedrals, and must have occupied a large place in believers’ lives and devotions. Some were monks and hermits. Others were famous Christians of all sorts. St. George was a warrior, and to a warrior nation he could be very popular—as a number of kings took his name. Another warrior, St. Menas, was not remembered for

<sup>91</sup> WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, in the middle of the colored picture section between pp. 64-65.

<sup>92</sup> *Stauros* is the Greek word for Cross. Nubians called it *staurosil*, from the Greek.

his military exploits. The story was told that a woman in the Delta (northern Egypt) was barren. Because of a prayer addressed to St. Menas, she conceived. As a result the woman believed. This story was told again and again in Nubia—and seemed to be popular, for it dealt with the problem of barrenness—and of faith.<sup>93</sup>

Biblical saints were most addressed in people's prayers. And of these all, the saint on most people's consciousness was the Virgin Mary. It is striking how large the Virgin Mary is. Some historians feel that as she was a "continuation of the goddess Isis" in Egypt, she was very similar to the Kandaka among the Nubians. There are not only the scenes of the birth of Christ, with a large Virgin Mary, and a rather small Joseph. There are the many pictures of her standing behind or with a bishop, a queen, a king or princesses, as their protection.

There was a particular fascination with archangels. These could be diversions as well. Nubians had a great passion for the bizarre. Angels and archangels, their names and their functions were one of their obsessions. The angel in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is named: he is Michael. Other spiritual beings as well: especially the "four living creatures" which appear first in Ezekiel 1:5 ff. Each creature has four faces, four wings, and four hands under the wings. They fly in a square. After appearing all through Ezekiel 1, they re-appear in Revelation 4:6 ff., before the throne of God. These held endless fascination for the common man. Magic and wonderful tales grew increasingly important in the later centuries of Nubian Christianity.

## 6. The Organization of the Church

Nubian Christianity, like that of Ethiopia, depended on the priest. He was the one who brought Christ to the table at Eucharist. And he had to be ordained by a bishop. Priests came from the people: they were expected to marry; to have children; to farm or do something to support themselves. The bishops had to be consecrated from a different source: the monastery. They were selected and consecrated by the Patriarch, the Jacobite Bishop of Alexandria. At first, all bishops were Egyptians. However, in later years, a number of Nubian bishops were consecrated.

The monasteries were therefore a key institution. At least 30 monasteries have been located in Nubia; perhaps there were many more. However, exactly what they did is not so clear. Some seem to have contained mostly or entirely Egyptian monks. The very fact that some

<sup>93</sup> WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, p 74.

Nubian kings became monks indicates that this was considered a true godly calling. Nevertheless, very little is known about these monasteries, their ministry, their contributions. In near-by Ethiopia, monasteries were a key instrument in Christianizing newly-conquered, and even unconquered peoples.

It is clear that Nubian Christianity spread. The Nuba people came from the West—from the area today labeled Kordofan. There is evidence that Christianity also went West—to Kordofan and to DarFur. Who took it, or how it went is not known. When the Catholics first reached the Nuba Mountains at Dilling, they found the people had a tradition of monotheism, and still practiced baptism. There may have been attempts to reach the Beja in the Eastern Red Sea hills. Nubians were frequently fighting the Beja—that would certainly have inhibited good relations. How far they moved south is pure speculation. Arab travelers in Dongola and especially at Soba found people who practiced traditional African religion. These great centers were reputed to be reaching out in influence to the ends of Africa, but whether or not they took their faith there is unknown.

Finally, the role of the king was crucial in Nubia. It is extraordinary that Nubia and Ethiopia, the two churches in Africa started and nurtured by Alexandria, were dominated by strong lines of Christian kings. Beginning from the decision to accept Christianity as the national faith, kings in Nubia were key actors. When Zacharias II faced the demands of 14 years' payment of *Baqt*, he called all his advisors, church and state. When George I traveled to Baghdad, he represented church and state. In Baghdad he visited both a Patriarch and a Caliph. When George II was challenged to “embrace Islam” by Selim al Aswani, he called all his advisors, church and administration, to formulate an answer. Vantini<sup>94</sup> mentions three vital roles of the Nubian king. First, he was patron, the protector, of the Orthodox faith. Its well-being and defense were tied up with his well-being. One great example is George II's desire to bring a settlement to the estranged Ethiopian Church. Second, the church was his protector. There are paintings of the king or members of the royal family under the protection of Mary, and of Christ-Emmanuel. And third, he was the builder or initiator of new church buildings, such as *Isoun kisee*, the Church of Jesus, initiated by George I in Dongola.

There was always the danger that the King could “use” the church for his purposes—and vice-versa. No doubt it happened, probably many times. But also there is the memory of a Zacharia resigning from kingship to

<sup>94</sup> Rev. Giovanni Vantini is a missionary and one of the longest students of Nubian Christianity.

become a monk; there is King Solomon who also did the same, and lived and died a very humble pious man. Nubians set up their own chapel at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, alongside Jacobite brothers like Egypt and Ethiopia. But there was nothing very different, African or Nubian, about the Church. They recited the same Apostles' Creed as did other churches. As Werner remarks:<sup>95</sup>

“Because the Nubians as Christians adhered to all the central beliefs and teaching of the Christian Church there was no specific ‘Nubian’ faith as if they had invented a new kind of Christianity. The Nubians were Christians in the full sense of the word.”

It had some very clear characteristics, but anyone looking for an “*authentic* early African” Christianity of a distinct nature, should not look at Nubia. Ethiopia was more like that, and anyhow the Ethiopian church has left far more documents detailing its history.

## V. NUBIA'S CHURCHES COLLAPSE

Nubia, the powerful giant, can be compared with Samson the judge and warrior. He seemed to have had limitless power against his enemies. Then his wife cut his hair, the hair that could not by covenant be cut. He woke up: nothing had changed. But, for the first time, his strength was gone. In as sudden a way, Nubian Christianity, the Nubian Kingdom, the powerful champion of Egypt's Christians, woke up to find that everything had changed, its power was gone.

### 1. Changes in Palestine and Egypt

Egyptian rulers loved Nubian soldiers. They were not involved in plots and politics like the “Turks” from the north. They were the favorites of the Fatimids. But the large Nubian community was a problem. They had already been driven out once when Mustansir was Sultan. Nubians slowly returned—but still they were resented by the people of Egypt, especially the people of Cairo—and the rest of the non-Nubian army.

Then, into Palestine came the Crusaders: European Christians who were determined to liberate the Holy Land from the infidels (i.e. Muslims). They stormed into Jerusalem in 1099, took it, and set up their rule in Palestine. At first, the Arab Muslims did not stir. Their empire was too

<sup>95</sup> WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, p. 78.

broken up and dysfunctional. Trouble came first in Cairo. The “Turks” (or white northern mercenaries) turned against the Nubians, the darlings of the Fatimids. It was a desperate fight, but the people joined with the rebels to drive out the Nubians; and a new commander, Salah ad Din,<sup>96</sup> came to power. Nubia rushed to the defense of their Fatimid allies, and invaded Egypt—but were driven back. Then Salah ad Din sent his brother into Nubia. He wanted to see if his own rebel army could retreat there in case they were defeated in Palestine, or pushed out by the Egyptians. The campaign was relatively simple. Faras Cathedral was partly destroyed. But the country was so poor, so lacking in food, Salah ad Din was advised not to think of retreating there. He went on to capture Jerusalem from the Crusaders, and to drive them out of Palestine, and set up the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt. Now Nubia was in a fix: it had lost its friends the Fatimids in Cairo, and Egypt was wary and suspicious of them. The Muslim world feared the powerful Nubians would join with the Crusaders from Europe to drive Islam out of Egypt.

## 2. Nubia Falls into Disarray—Egypt Intervenes

In spite of fears, Egypt and Nubia remained stable, the early doubts went away. Then in 1260, the Ayyubids were driven from Egypt, and that land fell under the rule of the *Mamlukes*—a military caste. The first Sultan was Baybars. He did not want to test Nubia’s power—its reputation was that of a great African nation. The *Baqt* remained in force and stabilized relations between Egypt and Nubia. So the *Baqt* was all Baybars demanded.

Then, out of the blue, in 1272, King David I of Nubia suddenly sacked the Egyptian Red Sea port of Aidhab. Three years later, David II sacked Aswan. Baybars sent in his army, captured and executed the “Lord of the Mountain”, the Eparch of Lower Nubia. Suddenly, the rules changed. Plotters and pretenders to the Nubian throne went to Cairo for help for the first time, and Cairo listened, and acted. There followed a numbing array of coups and counter-coups as the kingdom descended into complete disarray.<sup>97</sup> Shekanda, with a claim to the throne, went to Baybars for help.

<sup>96</sup> In English, his name is usually spelled *Saladin*. He was actually Kurdish.

<sup>97</sup> In 1275, Shekanda pulled Baybars and Egypt into Nubia, sacked Dongola, captured and executed David. Shenamun took over—but was pushed out two times by intervention from Cairo. Budemma was installed by Cairo—but was caught and executed by Shenamun. Shenamun ruled until death, Kudanbes was the last Christian King. In 1315 Egypt deposed him.



Baybars was interested. He gathered an army, went in, besieged and took Dongola. There were no “pupil-smiting” archers, in fact no archers at all. The Nubian army was a shadow of the army which had turned aside the Arab invasion 600 years before. Part of Dongola and the great Church of Jesus was destroyed, but Shekanda was crowned king in another church, and put on the throne, in 1276. He took the throne, putting himself under the Mamluke sovereignty. Nubians were ordered to become Muslims, or pay the *jizya*. So a Nubian claimant opened the door for the Mamlukes, the first Nubian king to invite in a Muslim power. This was also the first time Egypt seriously involved itself in the governance of Nubia. This proved to be the effective end of the large Christian Nubian kingdom.

Shekanda invited some even more fateful guests from Egypt. He was the first to bring in Arab bedouin. These were coming in great numbers from Arabia to Egypt. Egyptians were farmers, and could not tolerate sharing their land with nomadic tribesmen and their goats. So Egypt happily forwarded them to Nubia. Beginning with Shekanda, the chaos in the Nubian Kingdom made it impossible to limit or control these nomads.

In 1315, Abdallah Barshambo became the first clearly-Muslim king of Nubia. In 1317, he turned a room in the Palace into a mosque, the first for Dongola. Nubia was now becoming Islamic at the top, but the population remained Christian. However, the Arab bedouin intermarried with the Nubians. Through Nubian matrilineal inheritance Arabs gained land, and even the kingship. The Arabs, though, were split into clans, and they fragmented the kingdom. The chaos was such that by 1365 Egypt was no longer interested in Nubia. Dongola city was ruined: Egyptians turned it over to the Arabs. The ancient Christian kingdom of Nubia was gone, at least from Dongola to the Atbara River. For a time, it was a kingdom, or fragments of a kingdom, with a Muslim king, and a Christian population. However, the king had always been a key player in the Nubian church. Christians either mixed with the Arabs and were absorbed into Islam—or moved north to the smaller kingdom of Dotawo. Christianity slowly died in what was the old Kingdom of Maqurra, from Dongola to the Atbara River.

### 3. The Christian Kingdom Continues—at Dotawo

The Christian kingdom of Nubia did not actually die out with Shekanda and Abdallah Barshambo. The royal line was reconstituted at Daw, further down the Nile. This centered on Lower Nubia, the old Nuba Kingdom, from south of the second cataract until the first at Aswan. The Christian kingdom remained with a line of Christian kings far into the fifteenth century. Even after it disappeared as a kingdom, Christianity

remained as a relic in certain villages until the eighteenth, maybe the nineteenth century.

#### 4. Alwa

Alwa was the southern Nubian kingdom. Several travelers visited it, including Selim al Aswani. He and Ibn Hawqal—both of them Arab visitors of the tenth century, mentioned that Alwa was larger than Nubia, it had a larger population, it had connections and trade with the outside world to the East and to the West. Its army was also larger. However, we know much more about Nubia than Alwa.<sup>98</sup> Alwa not only had irrigation farming, but also large inland farms growing *dhurra* (Arabic name for sorghum) and other crops from rain. They had large herds as well. One archaeological fact has confirmed the conversion of Alwa. By the seventh century, the people of Alwa no longer mummified the dead, nor did they bury them with clothes, food or weapons. As in Nubia, graves were all situated East-West in expectation of the resurrection.

Selim al Aswani said the people of Alwa were mixed: Nuba—from the West—and Beja—from the East. Even in the tenth century, Alwa had a Muslim community in Soba, the capital city near today's Khartoum. They controlled the White and Blue Nile, including a large part of what is now the Gezira. The Nile River there fits Isaiah's description of Kush—"Land of rustling wings", with birds and wild animals.

Alwa seems to have extended its Christianity to the West—to parts of the Nuba Mountains and Darfur. But it could not stop powerful enemies. Its rule extended east as far as today's Ethiopia. The Funj Empire began to grow and prosper there. Arab nomads caused the downfall of Soba. The Abdullab Arabs had settled in the northern regions of Alwa, from the Atbara River to near Khartoum. They grew in power, and then in about 1500, they took Soba. Probably not long after that, the Abdullab Arabs—and Soba—were added to the growing Funj Empire. The Christian kingdom ceased to exist.

This was not the last word. In 1520, a delegation from Alwa visited the Ethiopian court. There they found a delegation from Europe: Alvarez and his party had been sent by Portugal to report on the fabled "Kingdom of

<sup>98</sup> The reasons are: Alwa did not connect with Egypt, except for the Church which was related to Egypt as the Nubian church was. Alwa was in a rainy zone. As a result, documents and mud buildings did not last—and none have come to us by archaeology. The archaeology of Nubia flourished because of the High Dam at Aswan: over a short period great teams tried to save what they could.

Prester John”.<sup>99</sup> The people of Alwa said they were Christians, but they needed priests, for their priests had died out, and they had no bishop. Ethiopians gave them a discouraging reply. Ethiopia was living through a very tense time. Militant Islam was on the move, and active, and trying to isolate them. They complained they found it difficult to receive their bishops from the Patriarch of Alexandria. The Christians of Egypt were experiencing great difficulties—for the rule of the Mamlukes was a harsh rule for the Copts ... Alwa’s cry was unheard. This was the last call for help.

## 5. Evaluating the Collapse of Christianity

### (1) *External Circumstances*

Most of those circumstances came to the Nubian churches unexpectedly, unintentionally. They could not have been anticipated or avoided. These circumstances are particularly:

- a) The involvement and interference of the Mamluke Egyptian government in affairs in Nubia (which of course was instigated by Nubian claimants to the throne);
- b) The Crusades made the times more tense, and probably pushed Egypt into a higher degree of interference;
- c) Allowing Arab nomadic tribes to enter was the undoing of Nubia and Alwa. They spread Islam, but the great damage they caused was to break up Nubia completely;
- d) Isolation. Nubia was isolated. It could not find help when it needed it. In fact, at the time of the fall of Alwa, the Egyptian Church was experiencing perhaps its most difficult testing time;
- e) The imposition of *jizya* after conquest by Egypt was an incentive to conversion to Islam.

<sup>99</sup> Europeans believed there was a great Christian Empire in the East, under the rule of “Prester John”—which meant “Priest John”. Christians in Europe hoped to link up with him and together overthrow Islam. When Ethiopia was discovered, it was labeled that fabled kingdom.

## (2) *Internal Weaknesses of the Nubian Church, of Nubian Christianity*

The strengths of the Nubian Church became its weakness in the end. The church was powerful, effective, and had a strong organization. But that same church could not adjust significantly to a radical change. Every detail of its Christianity was sacred, too sacred—so it was untouchable and unchangeable. The church did not function without bishops or priests or king. No one dared to innovate: that would be interfering in the ways of God.

The contrast may be seen in 1964. All missionaries, Catholic and Protestant, were swept out of South Sudan, Blue Nile and Nuba Mountains. Some expelled missionaries gloomily said or thought that the church was “condemned to death”. Although many churches were paralyzed for a time, Sudanese leadership emerged. There was a spirit of innovation—and the church grew powerfully.

### 6. New Ambassadors to the “Land of Rustling Wings”<sup>100</sup>

Nubia and its failing church dropped off the Christian world’s radar screen. Alvarez and his delegation from Portugal told about the appeal of Alwa. Ethiopia, Egypt and even Portugal could not or did not respond. Catholics sent missionaries who passed through Nubia on their way to Ethiopia, and an Ethiopian monk went down the Nile. They all noticed a fading Christianity—but nothing was ever done to help.

Much later, in the nineteenth century, Egypt conquered northern Sudan, and gradually moved up the White Nile to Lake Albert (in today’s Uganda). A priest in Malta read about Sudan, and heard the unnoticed cries of the exploited and enslaved, especially in the Nuba Mountains.<sup>101</sup> So, missionary societies were started. In contrast to the missions of Julian and Longinus, missionaries could no longer muster the support or opposition of the emperor, but had to organize their support from ordinary Christians. The first missions of the nineteenth century were all Roman Catholic. And in contrast to Julian and Longinus, they did not always go first to the king, but to the ordinary people, and worked much with freed slaves. They hoped

<sup>100</sup> For a very detailed record of Christianity in Sudan, see WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, pp. 121-667.

<sup>101</sup> The Nuba Mountains are called that because many people who use Nuba languages live there. Since it is mountainous, it has received many other peoples as well, who run there to escape extermination. In Arabic, both Nuba Mountains and Nubia (along the Nile) are called *Nuba*.

to defeat slavery, and plant the Church—and made heroic efforts to do so. Indeed, they produced a great missionary hero, Bishop Daniele Comboni, who gave his life to Sudan, and died in Khartoum in 1881.

Again, though, a new epoch ensued. A holy man, Muhammad Ahmad, in the same year as Comboni's death, was proclaimed "Mahdi". His call was for Sudan to rid itself of the "godless Turk", and to bring to the world the righteous rule of God. During 1885 in Berlin, while the colonial powers were regularizing Europe's scramble for Africa, the Mahdi stormed into Khartoum. Egyptian rule ended, and General Gordon, Khartoum's defender and British hero, died in its defense. No open practice of Christianity was allowed.

However, by 1898, Britain and Egypt moved back into the Sudan. They were eager to renew the empire, and to permit Christianity—but not to allow in missionaries. In the end, the new Sudan Government permitted missions as long as they focused on the non-Muslim southern Sudan. The messengers of Christ returned to that land, sailing up the White Nile. The flocks of birds whirring reminded them of the punishments and promises found in Isaiah 18. Their message was the same message brought by Julian, Longinus and Bishop Theodore. But, in contrast, it was directed not so much to kings, but to the people—as perhaps the first monks and refugees from persecution had done in Nubia long before Julian. The missionaries studied the languages of Sudan, they started education, they started medical services and a few hospitals. They even tried to evangelize Muslims in northern Sudan, with limited success.

The Sudanese demanded their independence, and in 1956, they took over from the British. The ones who took over government power were northern Sudanese. They were Arab by culture, Muslim by religion. Their program for unity was the Arabic language: English and the local languages had predominated in the South. Underneath, though, there was anger that the British had sown a "foreign religion" in their land, stopping the march of Islam into Africa. That anger fell on the missionaries, and on the few Sudanese Christian leaders. An Arabization and Islamization program, begun in 1958, pushed southern Sudan into active revolt. The missionaries were blamed, and in February 1964, all missionaries in southern Sudan, southern Blue Nile and the Nuba mountains were ordered out of the country. Pessimistic missionaries declared that the fledgling church in Sudan had been "condemned to death". In some places it seemed so. In Doro, in southern Blue Nile, there were only about seven Christians. Missionaries predicted the church would collapse when they left—and it did. But, when they returned to visit Doro 11 years later, in 1975, they found 40 churches had sprung up. These had even re-ignited the failed

church at Doro mission. Churches grew in many areas, particularly in places where there had never been any Christianity before.

The “Anyanya War” of 1963-1972 came to an end with a political settlement. Peace lasted only 11 years. Peace brought new opportunities for development. Exploration discovered oil, and that oil was found mostly in southern Sudan. Oil is a corruption of development, and a developer of corruption. Leaders began to plot the overthrow of the peace plan that ended the Anyanya war. Islamists demanded that Sudan become Islamic; and political plotters contrived to cut up the country in order to grab control of the oil. Sudan was declared an Islamic state, ruled by *shari’ah*. Rebellion, already bubbling, boiled over. War has been devastating. What the politicians did not gain by politics, they have worked to gain by violence. More than 4 million people were uprooted, with more than a million seeking shelter in northern Sudan, and hundreds of thousands fled as refugees. There have been attempts to annihilate the Southerners, mostly by devastating raids and manipulating famine relief. Perhaps two million, perhaps more, have perished.

Christianity has flourished and grown even amid the devastation. Christians have believed the days of Isaiah 18 are here. One Dinka prophet, Paul Kon, went naked for three years, preaching repentance to his people, as Isaiah had done when proclaiming judgment to Judah in Isaiah 20.<sup>102</sup> They have felt the terrible punishments of famine and war—declaring these to be what God had willed to punish Kush. Also, in hoping that the day would come when the people of Kush could become the people of God, bringing their gifts to Mount Zion. In 1999, the Episcopal Church in Sudan celebrated its centenary.

## VI. ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIANITY

“Hear O Ethiopians, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

Further up at the source of the Nile, beyond the divide of the White and Blue Nile lies Abyssinia that inherited the name for the entire region, Ethiopia. Their relationship with their northern Nubian neighbors was often fraught with hostility. Inscriptions brag about the defeat of Meroites and it is said the constant raids from the south broke the back of the kingdom of Meroe. Here the story of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims an

<sup>102</sup> Isaiah 20:2, “The Lord said, ‘take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet,’ and he did so, going around stripped and barefoot.” NIV. For story of Paul Kon, see, WERNER, *Day of Devastation*, pp. 545-546.

existence that spans the roots and branches of the Jesus movement harking earlier than the birth of Jesus and thereafter. To symbolize this long pedigree, their priests start every worship act by first proclaiming an adapted version of Jewish *shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4. Rulers would do so before issuing any public decrees or modifications to the law. There are in fact two voices in the story of Christianity in this region, sometimes converging and at other times betraying a gulf of ideological biases.<sup>103</sup>

The history books provide the basis of the introductory overview that is like the voice of the outsider. We must listen to the insider, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Their story embeds their journey into the Egyptian experience. Thus, the sojourn of the infant Jesus is a shared heritage as the party allegedly crossed the Sinai peninsula by the northern caravan route from Gaza to Raphia to present-day al-Arish; then to al-Farama (Pelusium). Equally shared was the ministry of Mark, the first Patriarch of Alexandria whose parents were from Cyrenaica. His charismatic ministry ended when he dared to build a huge church building in the suburban part of Alexandria called Baucalis. The enraged mob of unbelievers attacked him while celebrating the Easter mass, but he had written the gospel known by his name. The Ethiopian church laid claim to a long history that was not surrogate. Though other historians may place Queen Sheba in Yemen, the Orthodox Church's account claims that she resided in Axum, a great city built by a grandson of Ham named *Aksumawi*.

Planting the feet firmly in two ancient documents, *Kebrā Negast (the glory of the kings)* and *Fetha Negast (the law of the kings)*, it claims that the queen was Medaka whose grand parents reigned from 1076-1026BC. Of great beauty and endowed with an inquisitive mind, she was attracted to King Solomon through the stories of a merchant prince, Prince Tamrin who was supplying Solomon with some of the materials for constructing the temple. He organized the trip to visit King Solomon and the six month's stay included long conversations and other forms of learning. The salacious part of the *Kebrā Negast* (sections 29-32) is about Solomon's wise trickery or old-fashioned seduction that resulted in her pregnancy and the ring that she took back with her. Later, her son, *Ebria Hakim, the son of the wise one*, visited the father. Solomon recognized his image and ring as proofs of paternity, but failed to persuade the young man to stay and inherit the throne instead of the foolish Rehoboam. He commanded the princes of Dan, Levi and Gad with Azariah, the son of Zadok (the priest), to go back to Ethiopia with Hakim. More trickery followed as Azariah made a dummy

<sup>103</sup> The insider view is represented by Brahana SELASSIE, *Towards a Fuller Vision* (Leicestershire: Upfront Publishing, 2003).

ark and replaced it with the stolen real ark that he took to Ethiopia. Hakim came to the throne with the royal name of Menelik I and proceeded to establish a Judaistic religion.

This explains the heavy dosage of Old Testament aspects of Ethiopian Orthodox spirituality. Matters did not end there: when Christ was born, the claim is that the three magi were all Ethiopians. This disputes the other reconstructions that claim that one was the king of Afghanistan, the other the king of Persia, and the third the king of Ethiopia. As if the fuse has not been blown, the story continues that the Ethiopian eunuch was really from Ethiopia not Nubia, even if the *Kandace*, *Queen Mother*, sounds like Meroitic language. He was Djan Darada, baptized in 34CE and died in 55CE and the queen was Qarsemot, the fourth Axumite queen. The treasurer's conversion and extensive preaching installed Christianity in the kingdom.

But there is the fact that the conversion of the court was known to have commenced in the third century, when the young people Frumentius and Sidrakos Adesius were captured at the Red Sea port of Adulis (Assab in Saba?). These Syrians arrived there unaware of the controversy between the Ethiopians and foreign traders from Egypt and South Arabia. The reigning couple, King Ala-Amida and Queen Sofya (294-325AD), engaged them as servants in the court. According to this story line, it was king Ala-Amida who sent a delegation to Rome to congratulate Constantine on his victories. At the king's death the queen appointed Frumentius the teacher of her sons, Abaraha and Asbeha. They later succeeded jointly to the throne as Ezana and Shaizana, and declared Christianity to be the official religion of the state; installed the statues of saints, decorated worship places with icons and dedicated the Church of St. Mary of Zion as the location for the ark. The task was to blend the inheritance from the Levites and the missionary achievements of the famous eunuch into a Christianity that was typically Ethiopian. The rest of the intriguing story centers on the illustrious career of Frumentius, who was sent to Nicaea in Bithynia when the Council was still in session over the claims by the Lybian, Arius. From there, he traveled to Egypt, where he was detained and re-trained in the Alexandrian School before ordination as *Abba Selama*, the Archbishop of Ethiopia, in 330CE. This wove Ethiopia into the heritage of the Alexandrian School that was the most prominent place of learning in the early church and served as conservatory of the Monophysite tradition. More: as Abba Selama returned to Axum in 334CE, he brought back ancient manuscripts such as the Greek Old and New Testament, Apostolic Canons, Apostolic Traditions, Didascalia, the Didache and books by the doyens of the school, Pantaneus, Clement, the much-maligned Origen,



Dionysius, Didymus (who headed the school during the student days of Frumentius), Alexander and Athanasius. This would have been like a drop of water in a bucket compared to the resources he used in his studies, or the number of volumes that survived in King Ptolemy II's (283-246BC) smaller library in Alexandria after Julius Caesar behaved like a Vandal, and destroyed the larger of the two libraries that housed over half a million volumes and was one of the wonders of the world.

In this insider perspective, the crucial position of the royal family in the church is moored with the *Fetha Negast*, which provides that the legal position in the church would be based on their loyalty to the canons and discipline of the church. The power in the church was, therefore, rooted in the combined interactions between the *abuna*, king and monastic heads. Monasticism became significant in the fifth century after the "Tsad-kan" (just), or Tesseaton Ki-ddussan (nine saints) arrived. These were Monophysites who escaped from the imperial harassment that followed the Council at Nicaea.<sup>104</sup> They evangelized the hinterland, translated ancient manuscripts into Ge'ez, Amharic, Tegreniya, Gallina and other indigenous languages, established the eremitic tradition and domesticated Christian values in Ethiopia beyond the courts. For instance, Abba Aregawi went to Debra Damo, confronted the worship of the python and established a monastery and schools just as Gerima went to Mettera near Senafe, Afese, and compromised the worship of fertility gods at Yeha. As they dispersed, so did learning and the inculcation of matured and informed Christianity. The significance is not usually manifest until one looks behind the history of Ethiopia.<sup>105</sup> Certain groups from across the Red Sea had come in large numbers into Ethiopia, overawing the indigenous people and establishing at Yeha, Matara and Asmara in present Eritrea, building temples, palace compounds, covered markets that displayed circles and crescents that signified their gods, Mahrem and Almuqah. Admittedly, Ethiopians migrated into South Arabia and founded communities, but the point is that these diverse communities were being molded in this period into a national entity through Christianity. Moreover, the new Christian communities came into conflict with Jewish communities that had established since the exilic period. The Sedaqan also mentored the future leaders of the church, such as the most beloved St Ayared, who was educated at the school established beside St Mary of Zion, Axum where the ark rested. His

<sup>104</sup> They were: Abba Aregawi; Abba Gerima; Abba Likanos; Abba Pantalewon from Constantinople; Abba Gubba from Cilicia; Abba Afese from Asia Minor; Abba Tsehma from Antioch; Abba Alef from Caesarea and Abba Yemata from Cooz.

<sup>105</sup> Laszlo TORK, *The Kingdom of Kush* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997).

composition of music and hymns dominate Ethiopian liturgy whether it was the *kum-zema* or the *zemane* whose melody swings back and forth like a pendulum or the chanted *meregde* or hand-clapping *tsfat*, the entire range was like a doctrinal commentary.

Oral tradition has it that the decline of Axum started in the ninth century under Anbessa Waddem when the Felasha queen, Yodit, who was not from the Solomonic line but may have descended from Queen Sheba's handmaid, essayed to rout Christianity and install Judaism. She initiated the Zagwe line that ruled from the tenth to the thirteenth century. About the same time, Muslims successfully took over Ethiopian communities of South Arabia. Ethiopia lost intimate contact with Egypt and could not secure the appointment of an *abuna* because of Fatimid rulers who used this ploy to ensure that the people in the south did not unilaterally declare themselves as independent from paying tributes in gold, salt and frankincense. The story line of the internal history is that this was the period when the Solomonic line was destroyed as the new Zagwe rulers moved the capital from Axum in Tegray southwards to Wollo. The spirituality survived through its concentration on sacramental liturgical worship, ascetic life, daily calendar of fasting and feasting, use of icons and illustrated handwritten copies of the Old and New Testaments.

Since the Solomonic lineage is the core of the internal story line, Brahan Selassie could declare with glee:<sup>106</sup>

“... in 1270 Atse Yekuno Amlak became Emperor and restored the Solomonic line to power. He held these cords of power until 1285. During his time as Emperor, the province of Shoa became the center of the nation, and the population underwent a renewal of its political, social, legal, educational and religious institutions.”

He put one third of his kingdom in the custody of the monastery at Debra Libanos. This brought to prominence the career of St Tekla Haimanot (1215-1313) whose evangelistic campaigns and itineration refreshed Christianity throughout the nation. He had studied in the great monasteries, Debra Estifanos and Debra Damo, and mastered the lives of Egyptian saints; he could ride rough shod of intra-mural conflicts and appeal to the masses with a show of sterling credentials of orthodoxy. There is a painting of this saint which depicts him as praying so long standing on one leg that the other dropped off. To help keep him standing,

<sup>106</sup> SELASSIE, *Towards a Fuller Vision*, p. 176.

he had spear points placed on all four sides so that if he became drowsy and fell, the spears would awaken him.<sup>107</sup> He made the monastic life attractive as some sought an access to his mystical powers, others pursued the education by monasteries, some of the devotees escaped from their evil past while the allure to power through the endowed cloisters remained strong. Monasteries themselves enfolded a wide variety of personalities, including healers, prophets, seers, scribes and scholars, confessors, fathers and mothers, icon painters, musicians, vestment makers, carpenters and masons, chefs and bakers, weavers, farmers, and those who lived in solitude for five days a week and would re-emerge on Saturdays and Sundays. Motivations therefore varied.

Seven significant themes serve as a guide through the rich tapestry of the presence of the gospel in Ethiopia and the people's responses. These include the relationship between the church and the state, especially the significant roles of various monarchs in determining the expansion of the faith; the level of popular participation and how the gospel challenged the cultural soil of Ethiopia; theological development as could be perceived in some of the doctrinal debates about two-day Sabbath; patterns of spirituality and fashioning of liturgical tradition, especially achieved by the distinguished lives of monastic figures; the challenge from Islam; the disastrous attempt to integrate Ethiopian Christianity into the Papacy; and the resurgence of Ethiopian Christianity in the twentieth century after some dark days.<sup>108</sup>

As indicated, the fortunes of the church were always tied to the fortunes of the throne and bound with legal cords. Thus, the crown practically funded the clergy, founded most of the monastic houses and supported them by donating revenues from parts of the kingdom or the payments from Egypt for using the waters of the Blue Nile. Emperors provided diplomatic cover in the negotiations for the *abuna* from Egypt and promoted the struggle to have indigenous archbishops. Text-books mention some of the great kings but there was an unusual king who left indelible imprints. Emperor Lali-bella (1185-1225) was born in 1140 at Roha in the Lasta region (northern Ethiopia) and it was said that mysterious signs appeared around him at birth. A thick cloud of bees engulfed the child and the mother had a revelation that he would be a great king and accordingly named him, *the bees know that the child will be a great king!* In his youth he sojourned in Jerusalem for twenty-five years, visiting shrines, living an

<sup>107</sup> Ephraim ISAAC, *The Ethiopian Church* (Boston: Henry N. Sawyer Co., 1967), 24.

<sup>108</sup> See, Tadesse TAMRAT, *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

ascetic life. Reputable seers visited this mystic. When he ascended the throne, he commissioned eleven churches to be carved out of the rock based on a vision he had. Masons and icon painters were sourced from Nubia, Egypt and all over the country. He named the buildings after a liturgical formula: *Alem (Savior of the world)*, *Geneta Mariam (the paradise of Mary)*, *Beit Masqul (house of the cross)*, *Beit Dengel (house of the Virgin)*, *Beit Kiddus Mikael (house of the archangel Michael)*, *Beit Golgotha*. The beauty of the architecture has amazed generations. The Muslim invader, Ahmad Gran, was stunned in disbelief while the Jesuit missionary, Francisco Alvarez who visited Ethiopia between 1520 and 1527, feared that readers may not believe his descriptions of these churches in the *Narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Abyssinia*. After the completion of the churches, he secured archbishops from Egypt, retired from the throne and went back into solitary life of silent prayers in the wilderness.

Kings expanded the church, as when Emperor Kaleb invaded Zafar and Najram in 525BC, in revenge for the massacre of Christians in that region. He established Ethiopian churches in South Arabia and gave the Ethiopian monarchs the reputation of being great warriors and defenders of the faith in Africa. But sometimes, a king would derail and face the rebuke of the clergy as when Emperor Amde Zion (1314-1344) became sexually promiscuous. Abba Anorewos, from one the prominent monastic houses confronted him; the king had him whipped in public and persecuted many houses until he was stunned by an incredible fire outbreak that consumed his palace; he repented and became one the most generous patrons of the church. Kings posed as arbiters in matters of doctrine, convoked debates on doctrinal matters and threw their weight on one side or the other. For instance, Emperor Zera Yacob (1434-1368) intervened in the debate on two-days Sabbath, which ranged some indigenous heads of monastic houses against the Egyptian archbishops; but the king insisted upon two days to remember the period that Christ spent in the grave and the resurrection day. He summoned the Council of Mitmaq in 1450.

Zera Yacob, *the seed of Jacob*, was unusual in the broad range of his reformation of the church: he must have understood that the character of Christianity in his domain was centered on the court and the monasteries and that the rural dwellers resorted to magicians and sorcerers for solutions to urgent life problems. The challenge was to move beyond a religion of ceremonies and redolent liturgy; a religion that served as a cultural signifier. Indeed, the monastic leaders would occasionally lash out at the prosperous merchants and courtiers who engaged in slave trade in Nubia and Adal and yet lavishly endowed monasteries as if to bribe God. The

Emperor strove to ensure that the masses would exchange the covenants with deities such as *Dasek, Dial, Guidale, Tafant, Dino, Maku-uawze* for the Christ; he demanded that Christians wear arm and head bands with Biblical affirmations; he revised the church calendars and promoted pilgrimages to the Holy Land. It should be recalled that the calendar has many Jewish features but is related to the Julian as used in the Egyptian Orthodox Church. It starts from September and each year is sacred to one of the four evangelists. Luke usually gets the leap year and nearly every day is named after a saint. Jesus was born 55501 years after creation.

Above all, he increased Ethiopian contact with Europe and sent a mission to the Council in Florence, 1432-1445. It is said that when the Ethiopian delegation was on its way, Pope Eugenia IV moved the meetings to Rome so as to give them an appropriate reception. The hidden agenda was the effort to unite the Byzantine, Armenian and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches with the papacy to shore up his reputation and mobilize against Muslims. The resistance of Ethiopia continued for many more years as the contact initiated the intrigues by Rome to rein the land of *Qeys*, as the Ethiopians called themselves, into the papal ambit.<sup>109</sup> But the exposure attracted a beehive of explorers, ambassadors, soldiers and Roman Catholic missionaries to the kingdom. After a long period of splendid isolation, Zera Yacob opened the Pandora's box.

The pressure from Rome and Portugal dovetailed into the series of Muslim attacks that had intensified since the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Various rulers spent enormous military resources to ward off Muslims, who gradually consolidated around the coast and forced the capital to be relocated a number of times. Perhaps, Emir Almad ibn Ibrahim, who was nicknamed, Ahmed Gran, because he was left-handed, conducted one of the most devastating raids in the period between 1527 and 1578. By 1539, he had destroyed many churches, palaces and libraries; and carted away national heirlooms. In desperation, Emperor Lebna Dengel pleaded for Portuguese intervention which came in October 1542 and rescued Ethiopia. The price was to subject the monarch, under pressure from a Jesuit mission, to accept papal authority. Forged documents, blandishments and military attacks were pressed into service until it boomeranged as the people suspected that their emperor had succumbed and rose up in arms to defend the faith of their fathers. Rumors circulated among the nobility and monastic houses that Emperor Za-Dengel had yielded to the pressures by Pero Pais who

<sup>109</sup> J.E. HARRIS (ed.), *William Leo Hansberry: African History Notes, vol. II: Africa and Africans as Seen by the Classical Writers* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1981), 9.

arrived in 1603 and made it clear that his mission was to reform Ethiopian spirituality and ensure submission to Rome. Za Selassie led the rebellion that killed the emperor. Matters did not end there as his successor, Emperor Susenyos was badgered by Pais, who died in 1622. Alfonso Mendes took over the task when he became, not only the new papal envoy, but was brazenly consecrated Patriarch of Ethiopia by Pope Urban VIII. He forced the emperor to swear a formal oath of allegiance to the pope. The cultural history of Ethiopia was electrified as revolt after revolt broke out, and civil wars went on without any hope of ending. The Emperor's loyal followers, including his son, began to argue with him to break with Rome; his army began to murmur against having to fight fellow Ethiopians. By 1630, the emperor was forced to back down and restore the pristine Ethiopian Christianity.

The civil war may have damaged the fabric of the society more than was apparent because Ethiopia lost its peace throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as rival princes and theological factions tore the seams apart. One disastrous debate was over the nature of Christ. It should be explained again that the Ethiopian Church held that Christ had two natures before incarnation, but only one after the union; the humanity being absorbed by in the divinity. In the new debate, one side held a conception that was nicknamed, *Karra Haimanot* meaning, "*the belief of the knife as it cuts off the third birth*". This was maintained against those who believed that Christ had three births from God the father, at conception and at baptism from the Holy Spirit. Worse, Ethiopia could not secure an archbishop from Egypt from 1803 to 1816. The story of Christian presence at the beginning of the nineteenth century was a gloomy tale. It was as if a desolate wind scorched the efforts of yesteryears. In the Horn of Africa, the decline had been steady with the incursion of Islam from the seventh century. However, the varied policies of different Islamic regimes preserved signs of life among the rural Egyptian Copts, permitted Nubia to remain Christian till the fifteenth century and left Ethiopian Christianity in a splendid isolation with an image of a muscular church with the character of pristine first century Christianity, monastic spirituality, creative music, fine architecture and fascinating art. However, by the end of the eighteenth century, Ethiopian Christianity was in a traumatized state. Henry Salt painted a sorry picture in *Voyages and Travels* (1809):<sup>110</sup>

"The nation, with its religion, is fast verging on ruin; the Galla and

<sup>110</sup> Cit. in HASTINGS, *The Church in Africa*, p. 224.

Mussulman tribes around are daily becoming more powerful; there is reason to fear that, in a short time, the very name of Christianity may be lost among them.”

The state structure had grown soft, its boundaries dwindled and internecine theological debates on the Sabbath and Nature of Christ created virulent divisions between the court, the leading monastic houses and the *abuna*. Its ancient liturgy in Ge'ez became less intelligible to Amharic speakers and less inspiring; learning declined as the infrastructure decayed. Indeed, hundreds of churches were destroyed or abandoned amidst violent strife. Henry Salt referred to the fact that non-Christian Galla communities and Muslims had settled over large areas that were once Christian. This is the period known as *zemane mesafint*, *the era of the princes*. This backdrop gave much significance to the regenerating careers of Emperor Tewodros (1855-1868) and Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889). But this was also a period when a number of foreign interest groups, Jewish, Protestant and Roman Catholic had discovered Ethiopia. Quite intriguing is the first group of Germans employed by the British-based Church Missionary Society into Tigre, Gondar and Shoa from 1830. Their goal was ostensibly to purify Ethiopian Christianity rather than to open new mission stations. They deployed evangelical doctrines as the litmus tests on such practices as praying to Mary, and saints, venerating images, kissing the cross, keeping fasts and cherishing monasteries. All these would indubitably contest Protestant perceptions and evoke hostile response from the indigenous folk. The missionaries invited the imperial powers of Britain and France to soften the unyielding ground with violence around 1842. Equally intriguing is that the Roman Catholic Lazarists who came later, appeared to be more culturally sensitive and equipped to operate in such cross-cultural contexts, and used the ordination of indigenous priests to gain influence before the contemporary Abuna Salama saw through the insidious project and attacked it with as much violence as he could muster to preserve Ethiopian identity.

The man who initiated the regeneration of Ethiopia, Kassa Hailu was born in Qwara, brought up by an uncle, trained in monastic education but soon joined a band of bandits, became a mighty warrior and one of the princes who held a part of the land. His victories over other warlords gave him the crown and he took the royal name of Tewodros, *King of Kings*. He has intrigued historians because of his sheer energy and activities. First, he was the one who tried to consolidate the Solomonic pretences of the crown by designing the titles and acting it out; he choreographed it from the conflation of myth and history that always played at the background of

Ethiopia's story. He was perhaps driven to this by the enormous energy spent by various missionary groups in propping the Falasha whose Jewish origins were much clearer. Second, he attempted to unify the nation by military conquest. His persistent success impressed upon him that the divine hand was strong on him and that he was special. Third, he reformed the church by insisting on monogamy and down-sizing the number of the clergy so as to enforce stricter discipline. Fourth, he had a deep social conscience and sensitivity towards the masses. His populist agricultural reform included land redistribution that evoked the opposition of the monastic houses, the biggest land-owners. As other rulers, he intervened in doctrinal disputes and ruled against three births and, commissioned the translation of the Bible into Ahmaric because Ge'ez was becoming incomprehensible to many.

It was his foreign policy that brought his death as the French and the British tried unsuccessfully to trick him. He arrested and imprisoned the British representatives and when diplomacy failed, he lost in battle but proudly killed himself, a king to the end. The ruler of Tigre had become the prominent prince and was crowned in 1872 at Aksum as Yohannes IV, *King of Zion of Ethiopia*. The flamboyant title was not lost on many observers as he built on the tradition of Tewodros. He ruled until 1889. The same problems followed him to the grave, namely, unification of the nation, doctrinal uniformity, a viable foreign policy and an adequate response to Islamic insurgency. Military engagement that required a reliance on foreign technological support eased the first problem; the Council of Borumeda tackled the second; an ingenious division of the state into four Coptic bishoprics was equally helpful and even enhanced the Christianization process among the Galla. It was the Madhist revolt that snuffed off his illustrious career. Menelik II completed most of the ambition of Yohannes. The defeat of the Italian imperial greed at Adwa in March 1896 inspired black imagination all over the world and made Abyssinia, the hub of Ethiopia, a name that Western writers meant for the whole region inhabited by the sons of Kush. Adrian Hastings puts it aptly:

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“the years after Adwa were for Ethiopia years of exceptional peace. The authority of Menelik was almost unchallenged, the feudal independence of the great provinces was quietly diminished. His rule was far more a revival of the traditional royal

<sup>111</sup> HASTINGS, *The Church in Africa*, 238.



system, the combination of a network of great lords, a loyal army, and the church” ... and yet more.

### 3. Early Christianity in Nubia

