

Stuart C. Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria. The Metropolitan Episcopacy of Ethiopia*. Warszawa-Wiesbaden, 1997 (= Bibliotheca nubica et aethiopica 5) XI, 240 S. ISBN 83-901809-3-6

The relation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church with the see of Alexandria is the longest in ecclesiastical history and dramatic. No other church remained for so long a time under the guardianship of another church procuring a single primate for a Christian population numbering more than double in size of the Coptic Church itself. It is a fact, the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in the year 325 gave to the church of Alexandria a blanket mandate on churches which will be founded in sub-Saharan Africa in the future. Taking this provision as a leverage the Coptic Church manipulated the notorious article 36 in pseudo-Nicene canon, in which the Ethiopian clergy was excluded from hierarchy and, consequently, from the leadership. Only a single Egyptian primate had the right to head the church who was honoured with the title of Metropolitan. The Ethiopians knew long ago that this provision was uncanonical and dismissed it as an ›Egyptian trick‹ and they had been striving to gain autonomy of their church. One attempt during the Zagwe Dynasty in the reign of Harbe is mentioned in this book (p. 163). Another similar attempt, more forceful than the previous one took place during the reign of King Baʿeda Maryam (1468-1478). As it is mentioned in *Gadla Marha Krestos* (CSCO, Scr. Aeth, t. 62, p. 85 (text),) a huge council of 700 participants was summoned and after discussing the issue thoroughly they voted. The result was 400 in favour and 300 against the autonomy. Despite such a comfortable majority the resolution did not carry out. The view of the author on this issue is this: ›... this canon was accepted in Ethiopia as the legal statement of the position of their church‹ (p. 17).

The present work is trying to cover the first one thousand years of Christianity in Ethiopia using printed primary and secondary sources. He arranged the material into seven chapters.

The first chapter begins with ordination of Frumentius as primate of Aksum. After him, he thinks, all primates were ›native Egyptian monks‹ (p. 7). On another occasion, p. 73, he writes that Martyrius of Jerusalem (478-486) sent a certain Thomas to the patriarch of Alexandria to be ordained bishop of Aksum. Thomas impressed the patriarch and ordained him bishop of Aksum. Later in the Zagwe period, he mentions another incident. A certain man called Thomas again native of Ethiopia was ordained bishop of Ethiopia by Ignatius of Antioch (p. 91). On the same page 7 he says: ›the history of Ethiopian metropolitans are (sic) well known‹. A noble wishful thinking; but in reality it is not so.

For the history of Egyptian Metropolitans the main sources are two: Egyptian and Ethiopian documents.

The Ethiopian kings whenever they needed a new primate used to write letters, one to the political leader and another to the patriarch of Alexandria. The original of these letters did hardly come to light. Most probably they are still lying in state and patriarchal archives. Sooner or later, I hope, they might come to light. I say this because Blata Mersie Hazan, the indefatigable worker, as a member of the Ethiopian delegation to negotiate the autonomy of Ethiopian Orthodox Church achieved to get photocopies of some documents. The negotiation unexpectedly took several months. During that time Blatta Mersie Hazan took the advantage of his sojourn in Cairo to undertake a research relevant to the mission. He used to go to the patriarchal archive to look for Ethiopian documents. His effort brought a good result. He was able to get photocopies of the following original letters with their seals:

- 1) One letter of King Tewodros in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 2) One letter of a certain Woyezaro Mertit in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Peter.
- 3) One letter of Gwalu Hailu in Amharic and Arabic addressed to Patriarch Peter.
- 4) One letter of Dajazmach Kassa in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Demetros.
- 5) Six letters of King Yohannes IV in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.

- 6) One letter of King Yohannes IV in Arabic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 7) Three letters of Emperor Menelik II in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 8) One letter of Negus Takla Haymanot in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 9) One letter of Echage Teophilos in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 10) Five letters of Ras Alula in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 11) Three letters of Echage Gabra Selassie in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 12) One letter of Abba Tawalda Madhen and Giyorgis Rezaq in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 13) One letter of Queen Taytu in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 14) One letter of Ras Makonnen in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 15) One letter of Dajach Seyum in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 16) One letter of Dajazmach Yelma in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 17) Four letters of Empress Zawditu in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 18) Five letters of Ras Tafari in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 19) One letter of Dajazmach Gabra Selassie in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 20) Two letters of Woyezaro Mennen in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.
- 21) One letter of Heruy Walda Selassie in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril (without a seal).
- 22) One letter of Sahafe Te'ez Walde Masqal in Amharic addressed to Patriarch Cyril.

All together they are forty three letters. This achievement of Blatta Mersie Hazan raises hope to find more documents in the patriarchal and state archives.

As far as the Ethiopian sources is concerned, they are not easily accessible. By the work of Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) just have begun coming up new lists of Egyptian Metropolitans and some of their pastoral letters. It is hoped the more the work carries on the more fresh material will come to light.

The second chapter deals with actual introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia using available secondary and literary sources. Epigraphic and archaeological sources were virtually denied reference. The two Christian inscriptions of king Ezana in the Ge'ez language furnish us with adequate and reliable information about the first phase of the commencement of Christian life in the country. Moreover the oldest one published by Enno Littmann in DAE refers to the religious situation across the board in neighbouring Nubia. In fact, the use of this inscription brings double result. It is like killing two birds with one stone. The reference of this inscription to the religious situation in Nubia is substantive. It refers to the pagan temple as house, literally *bet* and the pagan priest as *mar*. Ezana seemed to have taken drastic measure on pagan cult with ultimate goal to pave the road for Christianity. If we put some pressure on the inscription of a certain Abraha, probably a roving envoy of King Ezana, found in Berenice, Egypt, and that short information of Synesius of Serene on the occasion of arrival of deacon Faustus briefly praises the courage and the endurance of Aksumite priests who used to traverse the desert of Nubia and reach Serene. The fact suggests that they had a religious mission. This prompts us to think that the Aksumite priests were engaged in evangelical activities in the fifth century. Such an activity, most probably, began with the fourth century. As such the expedition of Ezana on Nubia, inter alia, had a religious character. He contributed to the dissemination of Good News in that region.

Another serious issue is the following statement of the author: >... Aksum itself seems to have been abandoned as a capital of Ethiopian kingdom by about 630 AD< (p. 58). Whatever is the merit of this statement I challenge it. In DAE Enno Littmann published the latest Aksumite inscriptions under number 12. They are inscriptions of Hasani Daniel and other unspecified persons. Enno Littmann broadly dated them between 7th and 13th century. According to these sources there was a riot in Aksum and the situation was tense but not explosive. The day to day life of the city was running reasonably well, but gradually was getting worse. This is the picture we get from the inscriptions. It is quite certain that Aksum for a number of decades at least was still the seat of the government. It

seems using this unstable situation Guidit, the Amazon of Ethiopia, invaded Aksum and seized power in the tenth century. It is after this time that the seat of the government transferred to Lasta around the mid of 12th century. If we do not keep this course of events it would create a wide gap which would be difficult to bridge.

The part allotted to Zagwe period, I regret to say, is full of repetition, platitude and speculation. On the top of that it does not lack anachronism. Exception is the part where he discusses briefly the church dignitaries of the time (p. 180ff.) using the publication of C. Conti Rossini, *L'Evangelo d'oro*. Here too, I think, a redefinition is necessary. For example, *qala pappas* he translated it as 'interpreter of the *papas*'. Word for word it means speaker of a bishop in the sense of mouthpiece. Similar inaccuracies occurred in the following pages. On p. 186 *Masghal* (= *Masqal*) *Kabra* translated as 'Great is the Cross'. It should be rectified 'Cross is her Honour'. On p. 187 the plural of *gadl* is *gadlat* and not *gadlan*.

The rock-hewn churches are excluded of discussion, much less the murals and the inscriptions. As a matter of fact, these three items constitute the backbone of the history of the time. In passing he mentioned that the rock-hewn churches are the continuation of the architectural tradition of the Aksumite period (p. 180). In principle I agree with him. But one should not forget that they display also certain foreign elements. For example, Beta Maryam has the baptistery on the northern side in the courtyard. This is not a common practice of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. On the same side on the wall of the building one can see a swastika. On the western side top on the wall outside is found a relief of Saint George. Farther in Beta Mikael one can see a number of statues of saints with Ge'ez inscriptions of their name on the top. In Eastern Churches it is not a tradition to erect statues in the church. That is a tradition of western Christianity. As far as I know there are no other churches in Ethiopia which possess statues. The phenomenon is strictly limited to Beta Mikael. We are at the age of Crusade. It was the time the position of Crusaders was firmly consolidated in the Holy Land and other regions of Middle East. For Ethiopia the Holy Land was an outlet to the western world. Besides, the Ethiopian monks have their monasteries there since a long time. It seems King Lalibala was well-informed of the actual situation in the Middle East and when he decided to implement the project of rock-hewn churches, he, apparently, invited some craftsmen from among the Crusaders.

Beta Maryam, besides the items mentioned above, the inside surface of the walls is covered with murals from the bottom to the top. It is believed about one-third of the surface covered with murals with caption in the Ge'ez language. They are as old as the church itself. There are other rock-hewn churches in the vicinity. One of these is Gannata Maryam. Though this church was hewn during the reign of King Yekunno Amlak (1270-1285), founder of the Shewan Dynasty, chronologically it is immediately connected with the Zagwe period. It is believed that the murals of this church also cover one third of the internal facade. They are extremely valuable both for the history of Zagwe and Shewan period. A full picture of King Yekunno Amlak with a crown which looks like a tiara is depicted. The captions of the murals are quite enlightening. S. Chojnacki, most probably also G. Gerster possess an excellent collection of slides of these murals. They deserve a thorough study and publication in conjunction with the paintings of the Nile valley, particularly of Faras.

In Lalibala there are also some inscriptions. Unlike the Aksumite period they are mostly engraved on wood. There are small commodes commonly called *manbar* (= altar) virtually kept in many churches of Lalibala. The purpose of these commodes is not clear to me. They are too small for divine offer. Sometimes one finds two or three of them in one church. Most of them are covered with a Ge'ez inscription in elegant hand. They are important sources for the period of Zagwe Dynasty. Some of them are published by S. Strelcyn and J. Pirenne and Gigar Tasfaye. An alternate use of all three sources put us on better perspective.

Sergew Hable-Selassie