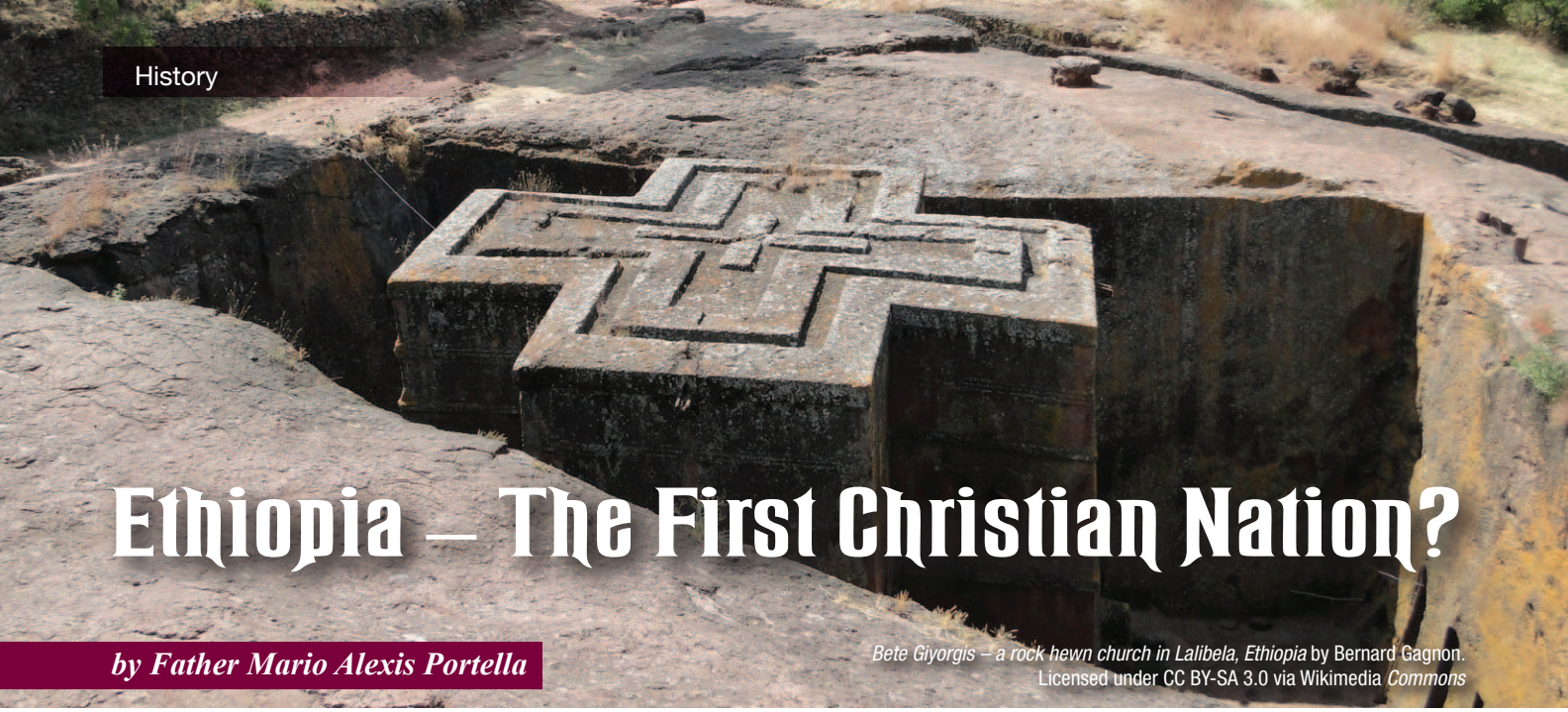

Ethiopia – The First Christian Nation?

by Father Mario Alexis Portella

Bete Giyorgis – a rock hewn church in Lalibela, Ethiopia by Bernard Gagnon. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia *Commons*

According to legend, dating back as early as the fifth century A.D., Saint Matthew the Apostle preached in ancient Ethiopia, and there he:

> …baptized [the Ethiopian king] Egippus with his wife and the whole people. Matthew dedicated Ephigenia, the king's daughter, to God, and put her at the head of more than two hundred virgins.[1]

The baptism of King Egippus meant that his entire kingdom became Christian. This is evidenced by the reaction of the Ethiopians to King Hirtacus killing Saint Matthew in church: *"The people found this out and thronged to the royal palace, intent on setting it and everything in it afire, but the priests and the deacons restrained them, and they all celebrated Saint Matthew's martyrdom joyfully."*[2] Since it was apparent that the entire kingdom embraced Christianity, this would make Ethiopia, according to the legend, the first Christian nation! While Armenia claims to be the first nation to officially embrace Christendom, this did not happen until King Trdat III was baptized in the early fourth century.[3] While legend holds when the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus preached in Armenia at about the same time Matthew was preaching in Ethiopia, they did not convert its king or his kingdom. Whether the account of Matthew is to be taken with a grain of salt, Ethiopians place greater emphasis on the evangelization of the Ethiopian eunuch in bringing Christianity to their homeland because personal affiliation with him paved the way for religious nationalism.

According to the first Church historian, Eusebius, after the Ethiopian eunuch was baptized by Philip the Deacon (as recorded in the eighth chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles*), he established and diffused the teachings of Christianity in his native land shortly after the Resurrection, even before the arrival of the Apostle Matthew.[4] One of the most prominent Church Fathers, Saint Iraneaus of Lyons (c. A.D. 130 – 202), mentions in his *Adversus haereses (Book III: 12, 8)*[5] that the Ethiopian eunuch:

> *"… was also sent into the regions of Ethiopia, to preach what he had himself believed, that there was one God preached by the prophets, but that the Son of this (God) had already made (His) appearance in human flesh, and had been led as a sheep to the slaughter; and all the other statements which the prophets made regarding Him."*[6]

Flight of the Holy Family from an Ethiopian psalter from the eighteenth century

There is even the legend that during the Holy Family's Flight into Egypt, they went to Ethiopia where the Virgin Mary preached the virtues of the Christ Child and His future redemptive mission.[7]

Despite the chronological dispute as to when Ethiopia became Christian, it can be deduced that since it was not Constantine who made Christianity the official state religion for his Empire but the Emperor Theodosius in 380, Ethiopia would be considered *"the second nation after Israel to believe in Christ; and the Ethiopian Church became the first Church in Africa"*[8] meaning the first *nation*[9] to accept the new religion! I am not making a conclusive statement that Ethiopia was the first *nation* to adopt Christianity as its state religion because, according to the hagiographical account of the monk

Agathangelos,[10] it would then be the Roman-vassal kingdom of Armenia[11] which did this in the year 301 after King Trdat III was baptized by the herald of Armenian Christianity, Saint Gregory the Illuminator,[12] a good generation before Ezana.

However, nothing is mentioned of the Kingdom of Edessa as the first Christian *state,* i.e., a political entity or people with a self-governing body, to officially adopt the Christian religion (c. 217) under King Abgar IX simply because some historians say that, unlike Armenia, it was *"a kingdom in the guise of a city-state without dominion over an entire nation."*[13] Do notions, such as *state* or *city-state* mean that a *society* with its own self-government cannot be termed as a *nation?* Where then does Ethiopia fall? As we shall see in the case of Ethiopia, a *nation* is not limited to mere political boundaries or uniformity of race.

Weakness in Armenia's Claim

There is obscurity, to say the least, as to when Christianity was accepted in Armenia. According to the *History of the Armenians,* Agathangelos records that he himself was an eye witness in his written accounts, which would include the baptism that took place at the Arsenias River.[14] Many historians, including Agathangelos, maintain that there was a decree from Trdat establishing Christianity as the official state religion, although no proof is available; they try to equate the conversion of Trdat to that of Constantine's, even though the baptism of the latter is questionable, let alone his own personal *"conversion."*[15] Michael Richard Bonner, a linguist at the Oriental Institute at Oxford University on the Sasanian Persian society of the sixth century, mentions that,

> Agathangelos has reshaped history to suit the contemporary political and spiritual reality... [he] wished to stress the independence and uniqueness of the Armenian church [and the History] is a tendentious compilation which has expanded and elaborated earlier traditions... [and therefore] promoting Gregory to the exalted rank of 'Hero of the Armenian nation,' greatly increased the prestige of the See of the patriarchs of the fifth century.[16]

The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch by Abraham Bloemaert

If one can then interpret the baptism of the Armenian king as a historical event based on what appears to be oral tradition, why can we not give equal credibility to Eusebius' account of the Ethiopian eunuch bringing Christianity into his own land?

Recent studies show that the dating of the *History* now appears to be no earlier than 450, especially in light of the fact that it was written in Armenian, and the Armenian alphabet did not come into existence until c. 405.[17] This would then place Agathangelos during the fifth century, thereby making it impossible for him to have been an eyewitness. In addition, *"some of the words he uses are taken directly from the life of Mesrob Mashdotz written by that great monk's student, Koriun."*[18] Would this invalidate what was written about Gregory the Illuminator as the herald of Christianity, especially since Agathangelos makes no mention of the tradition that the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus preached to and established the first Christian community in Armenia (c. A.D. 60-68)?[19] Where would the testimony of Eusebius on the Ethiopian eunuch then stand? Both apparently received such *"facts"* from oral tradition before they were written down. Ultimately, *"we cannot look at this History as merely an impartial recording of events, for it was not written to be that."*[20] Along with the increase of bureaucracy in the fourth century Eastern Roman Empire came an appeal for more educated men, who were for the most part formed by the standard rhetorical schools of the time; Christian orators fell into this category. These men were able to profit from their renowned status and new public platform and *"since rhetoric did convey power, Christians needed to make it their own,"* meaning that history was written from a Christian perspective, *"in the shape of a hybrid between panegyric and biography."*[21]

> Agathangelos had a purpose in mind as he wrote about Gregory. His purpose is mainly to enhance Gregory's role as the first bishop, first church builder, and first establisher of a hierarchy in the Armenian Church. He wants to show the importance of the

hierarchical structure of the Church, and emphasize the authority of the patriarch's position, and this he does by tying both to the great saint so highly venerated in the Church.[22]

Like so many other hagiographers, *"Agathangelos [or the author(s) of the 'History'] has produced an account which is meant to describe the Christian faith and its powerful effects, and to inspire those who read it to greater faith."*[23] If one can then interpret the baptism of the Armenian king as a historical event based on what appears to be oral tradition, why can we not give equal credibility to Eusebius' account of the Ethiopian eunuch bringing Christianity into his own land?

Credibility in Ethiopia's Claim

Peter Brown states, *"Armenia became a nominally Christian kingdom"* after the [accepted] baptism of 301.[24] Naturally, *personal conversion* is not the argument here, but rather the passing on of *historical* accounts of the *conversion* of public individuals and how they are measured in the formation of a people. Since for the ancient Ethiopians, the *private or personal conversion* of Ezana became a public conversion for Aksum (present-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia), Christianity was to eventually serve as a point of reference. On that note, unlike King Trdat III, we actually have a public acknowledgment of the Christian faith from Ezana,[25] not to mention that Aksumite coins bearing his image show the cross after his *conversion,* as opposed to the pagan imagery that was common prior to this event. Consequently, the promotion of the new faith developed into the single point of personal and public identification and unity for Ethiopians.

To the right see a set of coins produced before Ezana's conversion to Christianity and a set of coins produced after his conversion to Christianity in A.D. 330. The Christian coins are inscribed with the characters BACI LEYC with a draped bust in head cloth and the other with the characters +TOV TO APECH TH XWPA (May this [the cross] please the Country), and a small cross in a circle.[26]

The establishment of Christianity in Aksum witnessed the beginning of active pilgrimage traffic between Ethiopia and the Holy Land. Pilgrims traveled down the Nile valley and then across to Palestine and Jerusalem. They naturally brought their coins with them, and the overt Christian symbolism appealed to the local communities through which they passed. Hence, Aksumite bronze coins and local replicas saw considerable circulation in Egypt and Palestine.

Top: A set of coins produced before Ezana's conversion to Christianity; *Bottom:* a set of coins produced after his conversion to Christianity in A.D. 330.

Aksumite coinage, based on the Roman monetary system, began with the Emperor Endubis in A.D. 270, and bore the disc and crescent symbol derived from the southern-Arabian religion.[27] After Ezana's conversion, coins bear testimony of his acceptance of Christianity as the state religion. According to Jon D. Carlson, they were *"the first such emblem to appear on a coin anywhere in the world."*[28] Further conclusive evidence was discovered in 1969 in a Greek inscription, which expressed his personal and public profession of faith, translated here:

> In the faith of God and the power of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit who have saved my kingdom. I believe in Your Son, Jesus Christ who has helped me who will help me always. I Aezanas (sic) king of Axum…[29]

Ezana's conversion was the climax of an influx from the ever-changing Mediterranean world in Late Antiquity. However, it was only those who were related to such an impact, i.e., the higher classes, as already mentioned, who were exposed to Christian influence. The congregation of Frumentius probably consisted of only a section of the royal house, along with foreign merchants and their households. This was because his clergy was mainly of foreign provenance, and Greek was the language of the Church. This not only limited the scope of Christianity's expansion during that period; it also led to the rise of conservative anti-Christian forces with which the early Christian kings had to contend.[30] As a result, the sovereigns had to make sure that their subjects beyond the royal court were catechized.[31] According to Steven Kaplan, Ezana wanted to project himself as a Christian and as an ally to the small group of Christians who exercised influence in trade and commerce.

> He was thus forced to steer a middle path between proponents of the new religion [his own] and traditionalists. [When he said, "I believe in Your Son…"] in a Ge'ez inscription written at the same time, the king attempts to present himself in a manner acceptable to his pagan subjects. In this text, he refers to God as the *"Lord of Heaven,"* a designation which would certainly be understood by the bulk of the population as a reference to a pagan deity.[32]

There is a stone is written in Ancient Greek, Sabaean and Ge'ez, the holy language of Ethiopia (similar to the Rosetta Stone) which records the conversion of King Ezana to Christianity and his subjugation of other kingdoms.[33]

In any case, it was not until the arrival

The stone record of the conversion of King Ezana in three languages.

of the legendary Nine Saints during the late fifth century that Ethiopia, under its *Second Christianization,* was united as a Christian nation. If scholars who support Armenia's claim, based solely on legend, then why cannot the Ethiopian legend of the eunuch or of Saint Matthew be recognized? ✠

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Notes

1. Jocobus de Voragine. *The Golden Legend*. Princeton 2012, p. 571. The fifth century Church historian, Socrates Scholasticus, also attests to Matthew's preaching in Ethiopia. Historia Ecclesiastica Book I, 19.
2. Cfr. De Voragine. *The Golden Legend*, p. 571.
3. The conversion of the Armenian king, as historical fact, is disputed. Unlike Ezana in Aksum, scholars have failed to present any archaeological or literal evidence that can prove Trdat's conversion. Abba Abraham Buruk Woldegaber – Mario Alexis Portella. *Abyssinian Christianity – The First Christian Nation?* Pismo Beach 2012, pp. ix-xii.
4. Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History*, Book II, I, 10-13. Harvard University Press, 1926, p. 109. The seventh chapter of the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (some of the canons contained date as far back as mid-second century) *"we find that additional colour is lent to the claim of Ethiopia as the first Christian nation by the narrative."* See Op. cit., Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, pp. 12-13.
5. *Adversus haereses (Against the Heresies)* was a defence of the Christian faith against the tenets of Gnosticism. It was written c. 180.
6. *Against the Heresies* – Book III, 12, 8 in newadvent.org; According to the traditional account, Christianity was introduced in Ethiopia just a year after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, through the Ethiopian Eunuch, Bachos – who was baptized by Philip in A.D. 34 while on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Acts 8). It is also believed that Ethiopians were among the 3000 who believed and were baptized on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). History of the Church in *stmichaeleoc.org* – 2008 (web site page).
7. See Edward Ullendorff. *Ethiopia and the Bible*. London 1968, p. 13. Image: Cfr. Woldegaber – Portella. *Abyssinian Christianity*, p. 11.
8. *"Address of Abune Paulos to the Second Assembly of the Synod of African Bishops,"* (6 October 2009) in www.vatican.com.
9. Carlo Conti Rossini, Edward Ullendorff and others, deny this under the auspice that the *Ethiopia* mentioned in *The Acts of the Apostles* and *The Apocryphal Acts* is not the Kingdom of Aksum or Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia). See Op. cit., Conti Rossini, Storia d'Etiopia, p. 145 and Ullendorf, Ethiopia, p. 13. However, as will be discussed in Part I, Ch. I of this book, the concept of *nation* or *country* is not limited to geographical or political confines but a people who believe they have a common origin or a common being, i.e., having the same roots.
10. Traditionally held to be a "*secretary"* to King Trdat II (A.D. 217-252). See Thomas Shahan, *"Agathangelos,"* in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. Robert Appleton Company, 1907 in www.newadvent.org (2 April 2012).
11. For the Romans, "it was not essential who sat on the Armenian throne, as long as he was loyal to the Roman Empire and would agree to receiving his throne from the hand of the Roman emperor."See *"History of Armenia,"* in www.armenica.org (2011), p. 53. See *"Roman Armenia,"* in www.en.wikipedia.org (23 March 2012).
12. The consensus of historians is to place the year of the baptism in 301 and not 314 as was previously held.
13. Gabriella Uluhogian, Boghos Levon Zekiya and Vartan Karapetian. *Armenia*. Skira, 2011, pp. 21-22.
14. Technically speaking, it was not until the Emperor Theodosius at the First Council of Constantinople in 380/1 who proclaimed the Nicene Creed, i.e., the Christian faith against the Arians, as the official religion of the Empire, that the Christian religion is officially *decreed* as a state religion.
15. See Pierre Maraval, Constantin le Grand, Tallandier, 2011, pp. 214-221. Many who claim Armenia as the first Christian nation also mistakenly hold that Constatine converted to the new religion in 313. See for example, www.armenweb.org.
16. Michael Richard Jackson Bonner. *"Agathangelos,"* in www.jacksonbonner.com.
17. Until the nineteenth century, it was held that the *History* was first written in Greek and then translated in Armenian. See Op. cit., Bonner, web site page. Robert Torosian. *"1700th Anniversary of Christianity in Armenia Marked,"* from Series of Lectures of Dr. Robert Hewsen in Hey Sharzhoom – December 2001 [76] (Vol. 23, No. 2), Armenian Studies Program of California State University of Fresno – www.csufresno.edu; *"Agathangelos: History of Saint Gregory and the Conversion of Armenia,"* in www.vehi.net (2005).
18. The *History* suggests that its author, Agathangelos, was a Roman of the fourth century and was commissioned to write by King Trdat III. Since the *History* has been known to scholarship, such biographical details have been rejected as fabulous… Agathangelos is probably an assumed name, and the presentation of the author as a contemporary of King Trdat is surely a literary device meant to make his history seem more credible… Such considerations have led some scholars to believe that the *History* is a collection of materials compiled and redacted by an author of the fifth century… The work was written amidst the great struggle to resist both political and religious oppression by Iran, and *"persistent encroachments"* by the Syrian and Greek clergy. (It was in 451 when the Armenians where defeated by the Zoroastrian Persians at the Battle of Avarayr, but eventually gained religious freedom after continual guerilla uprisings.) Such resistance is the main theme of the *History,* and it was accomplished by surrounding the chief players, Saint Gregory and King Trdat III, with a supernatural aura and a cloud of miracles. Saint Gregory the Illuminator emerges as the national hero and vanquisher of paganism, and his life is embroidered with fable and legend. Such embellishment, nevertheless, suggests a development from pure history to romance, and we should not find that the *History* differs from the tradition that precedes it. See Op. cit., *"Agathangelos,"* web site page; *"Battle of Avarayr,"* in www.en.wikipedia.org (May 2011).
19. Although it is generally agreed that the Armenian institutional Church was founded at the beginning of the fourth century, according to original hagiographical sources from the first and second centuries, the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus brought Christianity to Armenia. See Gabriella Uluhogian, *Gli armeni*, Il Mulino, 2009, p. 77.
20. Cfr. *"Agathangelos*," Introduction page.
21. Cfr. Cameron. *Christianity,* p. 140.
22. Cfr. *"Agathangelos,"* Introduction page.
23. Ibid, Introduction page.
24. Cfr. Brown. *The Rise of Western Christendom*, p. 277.
25. See Kevin O'Mahoney, *The Spirit and the Bride*, United Printers, 1994, p. 144-145.
26. For explanation and image of coins, See *Ezana* in wildwinds.com; Images (both): Courtesy of CNG and wildwinds.com. After Ezana's conversion, coins bear testimony of his acceptance of Christianity as the state religion. Other studies indicate that the acceptance of the Christian religion by Ezana was in the year 333 of the Ethiopian Calendar (A.D. 340). Clearly the date must fall between 328, when Athanasius was first elevated to the patriarchal status, and 356/7, when the letter from Constantius II demonstrated that Frumentius was serving as bishop of Aksum, apparently under royal support or patronage. Cfr. Phillipson. *The Foundations of an African Civilisation*, pp. 97-99. Image: Courtesy of CNG and wildwinds.com.
27. Cfr. Henze. *Layers of Time*, pp. 30-31.
28. Cfr. Carlson. *"Externality and Incorporation,"* p. 171.
29. Cfr. O'Mahoney. *The Spirit and the Bride*, pp. 144-145; Fattovich, *The Aksum Archaeological,* p. 23; Silverberg, *La leggenda*, p. 216.
30. Cfr. Tamrat. *Church and State*, p. 23.
31. It must be restated that the Christian faith was largely restricted to areas under direct royal control for almost 150 years after Ezana's conversion. The populace, which was spread out into the rural areas, gradually accepted the new religion. Apparently, even among the elite inhabitants of outlying urban sites the old *pagan* religion was openly observed until at least the fifth century. Cfr. Phillipson. *Foundations of an African Civilisation*, p. 99.
32. Cfr. Kaplan. *The Monastic Holy Man*, p. 16.
33. Image and description: Creative House Commons.