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A NEW DAY FOR ETHIOPIA

(With Map)

In THE MOSLEM WORLD for July, 1920, Mr. W. J. W. Roome supplied us with a very excellent map, showing the tribes and sub-tribes of Central Africa on the advance line of Islam. A careful study of this map should stir to vision and suggestion all who are interested in the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Mohammedan lands. The present article has reference only to Abyssinia (or Ethiopia, as the natives prefer to name it) which is one of the greatest countries in the border marches of Islam in Africa. The accompanying map (frontispiece) may serve to give a little further detail regarding the languages and religions of that country. Ethiopia is said to have a population of about 8,000,000, one-third of which is Moslem, the remainder being Christian and Pagan. The late Emperor Menelik II was known as a strong man and he stoutly prohibited the building of mosques or the propagation of Islam in his kingdom. We are told that where a mosque did exist he had it replaced by a church. Nevertheless in later days Islam has succeeded in finding many inroads into Ethiopia.

The church of Ethiopia claims high veneration for its antiquity. It was in the year 330 that this country received the Gospel through the teaching of Frumentius, who was ordained the first Bishop of Abyssinia by Athan-

asius, then Patriarch of Alexandria. From Frumentius to Simeon (A. D. 1613) they count ninety periods of rule.

For over 1,200 years the Christians of Ethiopia withstood the encroachments of their neighbors, the Mohammedans. Separated only by a narrow sea and strip of territory from the very gate of Mecca, this Christian church has flourished like an oasis in the desert; while nations to the north, the east and the west have been desolated by Mohammedan usurpation.

The attachment of this people to the religion of their ancestors has been attributed to the circumstance that Christianity was introduced into the country not by force of treaty but by knowledge of conviction. Hence it is that both rulers and subjects have ever united in their defence of the faith; and Ethiopia exhibits the solitary instance, in Africa, of Christianity surviving as the national religion. The Christians of Arabia are almost extinguished; in no part of Nubia is Christianity now professed; in Egypt it was subjugated and dwindled; no native church on the Barbary coast invites our cooperation; yet Ethiopia remains a Christian African nation. Attachment to a religion often survives long after the knowledge of it has become obscured by ignorance, and the observance of it blemished by superstition. This has been the case in later ages, of Ethiopia. The zeal of a simple people tenacious of the severities of will worship; and the jealousy of everything Mohammedan, viewed with growing aversion, as an enemy ever in sight, must be the moral causes, combined with the peculiar advantages which a mountainous country affords as an asylum to the persecuted, which explain, in some measure, the methods by which the overruling Providence of God has preserved Ethiopia as a Christian nation. May it not be that Ethiopia, spiritually enlightened and wisely trained, shall mainly contribute towards performing the great work of holding up and turning back the power of Mohammedanism, right along the advance line, and of planting Christianity from the Red Sea to the African coast of the Atlantic? It is not

our purpose here to say how far heresy and contention have corrupted the simplicity of the faith in the Ethiopian Church but to point out the fact of the existence of a great people in Central Africa, who are strong in their love for the Word of God. The position of the Ethiopian toward the Scriptures is much the same as that of the Jew toward the Old Testament. This is surely an immense advantage in having a people so placed geographically needing only the living touch and diffusive spirit of the Gospel. It is not by anathemas that the Church of Ethiopia will be restored but by the faithful and affectionate administration of the truths and ordinances of the Gospel, which must be applied as a healing balm to her festering wounds.

We believe that the new day has already dawned for this interesting old country. In the south a railway from Jibuti on the Red Sea makes it possible now to reach Addis Ababa, the capital, in three days. In the north a good railway from Massowa climbs the mountains to the tableland of Asmara. From the western side at high water regular steamers ply the Nile from Khartoum right up into Abyssinia.

These three points of access are being used by the British and Foreign Bible Society and Scriptures are steadily entering the country. This Society has acquired its own building site in the capital together with the permission and good relations set forth in the following letter:

"From Mattheos, Archbishop of the Kingdom of Abyssinia, to Mr. Hooper, Director of the British and Foreign Bible Society, Port Said:

"Peace and grace to you from the Lord Jesus. We have received your letter dated February 7th last, and we thanked the Lord Christ for your arrival in Egypt in health and peace.

"With regard to the place which you ask to establish in Addis Ababa under our patronage for the sale and distribution of the Holy Scriptures. You know quite well

that this work rejoices us greatly, and we therefore inform you that there is no hindrance to its establishment on the conditions you promised us to carry out when you visited Abyssinia—which are, that there be sold in this place nothing besides the Holy Scriptures, and that, as is the principle of your Holy Society, the employees of the place do not make any opposition through preaching.

“With regard to our opinion as to what concerns the success of this place, and if you agree, there should be some copies of the Holy Scriptures in the Abyssinian language containing the ancient and modern together, and some containing them separately; and there should be also copies in the Arabic language in the same way, printed in large visible type, some vowelled and some with references. We see that this will greatly help the distribution of the Holy Scriptures, and this is our hope and desire.

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

“Written in Addis Ababa, 11 Barmhat, 1630 (which corresponds to March 20, 1914).

(Seal of Abba Mattheos, Archbishop of Ethiopia.)

(Signed)

“MATTHEOS,

“Archbishop of the Kingdom of Abyssinia.”

At the close of 1920 the Bible Society sent up to their depot in Addis Ababa Mr. T. P. Bevan, an experienced worker, to organize colportage throughout the country. For over one hundred years the society has been working for Abyssinia with the result that the Scriptures now exist in Ethiopic, Amharic, Tigré, Tigrinya, Galla, Harti and Ogaden. Other translations for the smaller tribes are in process of preparation. The ecclesiastical language of Ethiopia is the Ethiopic, which bears a very close affinity to the Hebrew and Arabic. In this language the Abyssinians possess all the books of the Holy Scriptures and in it their liturgy and devotions are performed. They have also their ecclesiastical canons and historical memorials.

Since the discovery of the Abyssinian Church by the Portuguese, the languages of the country have been cultivated with great success both by members of the Romish Church and by Protestants. The fruits of the labours of the Jesuits, however, in this department, are not before the world. To the Roman Catholic Church, and everything connected with the memory of the Jesuit missions, the Abyssinians have an unconquerable repugnance. It is not likely they will ever forget the attempts made by that Church to obtain dominion over their faith, but Protestant churches, by adopting measures of another kind, will escape such hostility as has been excited by the Latins.

Had the Portuguese missionaries, instead of attempting to torture the Abyssinians into Popery, presented them with the Scriptures in their vernacular languages, may we not justly entertain the belief, that Christianity would, long ere this, have penetrated, by the way of Abyssinia into the very heart of Africa?

Justly may this noble race unawed by Mohammedans and not yet dislodged by Pagans, claim our deepest sympathy. Still they seem to elevate the Royal Standard; and to proclaim in the words of the motto inscribed on it, to the whole world, "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah hath prevailed." The crying need of Abyssinia is the Gospel. The translation work is done, the books are ready, the people are waiting. The great Head of the Christian Church is saying to us, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Ethiopia still stretches out her hands to the Protestant Church saying, "Come over and help us."

C. T. HOOPER.

Port Said, Egypt.