The Ethiopian religious community and its ancient monastery, Dier es Sultan in Jerusalem from Foundation to 1850s

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በኢትዮጵያና በእስራኤል (ምድረ ፍልስጤም) መካከል ያለው ግንኙነት ከቅድመ ክርስትና የሚጀምር መሆኑ የሚታወቅ ነው። በዘመነ ክርስትና ኢትዮጵያውያን ክርስቲያኖች ቅዱሳን መካናትን ለመሳለም ወደ ቅድስቲቱ ሀገር አዘውትረው ከመንዙቸው ጋር ተያይዞ፣ ግንኙነቱ ሌላ ቅርጽ እየያዘ መጣ። ምንም እንኳን እንደሌሎና መቼ እንዳገኟቸው በትክክል መናገር ባይቻልም የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን ማኅበረ ምእመናን በኢየሩሳሌም ተመሥርቶ፣ የበርካታ ቅዱሳን መካናት ባለቤት በመሆን ለብዙ መቶ ዐመታት ሲያስተዳድሩ ቆይተዋል። በነዚኽ ረጅም ዐመታት ማኅበረ ምእመናኑ ከኢትዮጵያ ነገሥታትና መኳንንት ጋር የጠበቀ ግንኙነት በመመሥረት የቁሳቁስና የዲፕሎማሲ ድጋፍ ሲያገኙ በመቆየታቸው በዚያ ከሚገኙት ክርስቲያን ማኅበራት ጋር ሲነጻጸሩ በምጣኔ ጠንካራና ባለ ብዙ መብት ባለቤቶች ነበሩ። ነገር ግን ከ፲፰ኛው መቶ ክፍለ ዘመን በኋላ ኢትዮጵያ ውስጥ የተከሰተውን የፖለቲካ አለመረጋጋት ተከትሎ የማዕከላዊው መንሥግት በመዳከሙ ከኢትዮጵያ ይገኝ የነበረው ድጋፍ ተቋረጠ። በዚህም ምክንያት በኢየሩሳሌም የኢትዮጵያውያን ማኅበር የምጣኔ ሀብት አቅም በመዳከሙ ያስተዳድሯቸው የነበሩትን በርካታ ቅዱሳን መካናትን ጠብቆ መያዝ ባለመቻላቸው በዚያው በሚገኙ የሌሎች ክርስቲያን ማኅበራት እንዲነጠቁ አድርጓቸዋል። በ፲፱ኛው መቶ ክፍለ ዘመን የኢትዮጵያውያን ማኅበር አቋም እጅግ አሳሳቢ ከሚባል ደረጃ ላይ ደርሶ በእጁ የሚገኘውን አንድ ገዳም (ደብረ ሥልጣን) እንኳ ለማስጠበቅ ሲንገዳገድ ይታያል። በመኾኑም ከ፲፱ኛው መቶ ክፍለ ዘመን ጀምሮ ያለው የደብረ ሱልጣን ገዳም ታሪክ የኢትዮጵያውያን ማኅበር ገዳሙን ለማስጠበቅ ከግብፃውያን ጋር የሚያደርገው ትግል ትልቁን ድርሻ ይዞ እናገኘዋለን።

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1. Introduction

For many centuries the Ethiopian religious community in Jerusalem had been in possession of numerous ancient sites in the Holy Land (i.e. Palestine). In the course of time many of them were taken over by other Christian religious communities established there. At present it owns seven monasteries inside and outside of Jerusalem, many of which were built recently. These include: the Deir Sultan and St. Filləppos Monastery[1] in the Old City of Jerusalem; Däbrä Gännät Kidanä-Məḥrät ('monastery of the Covenant of Mercy') in West Jerusalem; a monastery in Jericho; the Holy Trinity Monastery in the River Jordan; Mäsabä Ḳəddusan Täklä Haymanot Monastery in Bethany (Ḥal'Azariya'); and the Monastery of Tabotä'Iyäsus (Ark of Jesus) in Bethlehem.[2]Of all the above monasteries, the most ancient and historically most important is Deir es Sultan. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to show the historical roots to the establishment of the Ethiopian religious community in Jerusalem and the founding of this ancient monastery.

Deir Sultan is an Arabic name which means literally "monastery of the ruler" or "the king's monastery". In Ge'ez, the monastery is known as "*ḍ̈äbrä Səlṭan*" a name which has an equivalent meaning with Arabic. According to a famous Ethiopian tradition, the origin of the name is closely associated with the manner in which the site where the monastery was built was obtained. It was founded on the land said to have been granted by King Solomon of Jerusalem to the Queen of Shaba[3] who came to visit him.[4]

It is located in Old Jerusalem adjacent to the Eastern wall of the main Church of the Holy Sepulchre on the roof of the Chapel of St. Helena.[5] The Holy Sepulchre is the place where the corpse of Jesus Christ is believed to have been buried and from where He rose from the dead. The site was discovered in the first quarter of the fourth century by St. Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine the Great, and a Church was built on it by about 335 A.D. It is called the Church of the Holy Sepulchre or the Church of the *Anastasias* or Resurrection.[6] Within the Holy Sepulchre is located the Calvary or Golgotha, the site of Jesus Christ's Crucifixion. It is the place where Adam's skull is said to have been buried.[7]

Situated in the north western part of Old Jerusalem, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has during the last two millennia been subject to much destruction, reconstruction and repair under different invaders and rulers of the Holy City. The present basilica, which was recently renovated, was built in 1810.[8] Unlike the first one, it is a very large building covering the site of Christ's Crucifixion together with that of His burial.[9]

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[1] The residence of the Ethiopian Archbishop is located there.

[2]Abba Mattewos, *Däbrä Səltan Bä'iyärusalem: Bä'iyärusalem Yä'itəyoṗəya Gädamat Tarik Mästawoša* (Jeruslam: n.p., 1996), p. 143; Kirsten Pedersen, *The Ethiopian Chruch and its community in Jerusalem* (Trier: Aphorismal Kulturvereign, 1996), p.34. [Hereinafter Pedersen, *The Ethiopian*]

[3] See above p.3.

[4]*Abba* Mattewos, pp. 5 & 7.

[5] Kirsten Pedersen, "Deir es-Sultan: The Ethiopian Monastery in Jerusalem," *Quaderni di Studi Ethiopici*, VIII-IX (1987-1988), p.33. [Herein after Pedersen, "Deir es Sultan"]

[6] F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 782; "Holy Sepulchre," *The new Encyclopedia Britanica*, 1993. p. 22; and Louis T. Garaventa, "Church of the Holy Sepulchre," *The Encyclopedia Americana*, 1985, p. 315.

[7] F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingston, p. 266.

[8] *Ibid*., p.782; "Holy Sepulchre," p. 22.

[9] Garaventa, p.315; "Holy Sepulchre," p. 22; F.L. Cross and E.A Livingston, p.416.

The Armenian Chapel of St. Helena is one of the major chapels in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The roof of this chapel constitutes part of the area to occupy by the Monastery of Deir es Sultan. The monastery is surrounded on all four sides by a wall, the northern part of which separates it from the large Coptic[10] monastery of Deir Mar Antunius. The living quarters of the community, "a row of wretched hovels", about twenty in number, are attached to the wall of the monastery in the east, south and west while the refectory and the kitchen occupy the south eastern part. A sacristy and a storeroom are situated in the western part of the monastery and a small two-storied building in the northwest. Two Chapels, that of St. Michael and the four living creatures, are located at different levels in the south-west corner of the monastery.[11] There is also another small room adjoining the eastern wall of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre which used to serve as a Chapel dedicated to Mädḫäne ʾaläm ("Saviour of the World), the only place of worship for the Ethiopian community before the chapels of St. Michael and the four living creatures were recovered in 1970. Currently it serves as a storeroom.[12] Parts of the monastery compound date from the period of the Crusades.[13] In the middle of the monastery compound there is the Dome of the Chapel of St. Helena. Within the premise of the monastery there is a very big olive tree and a number of other trees which protect the monastery from the extremes of the local climate.[14]

The monastery compound has three entrances, two of them are found in the north and east while the third is through the Chapels of the four living creatures and St. Michael to the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.[15] The Copts use the northern gate to go to their chapel inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre passing through the Ethiopian monastery via the aforementioned chapels.[16]

In 1991, Deir es Sultan was inhabited by sixteen Ethiopian monks[17] and nuns and a Coptic monk; this co-habitation led to confusion concerning proprietorship of the monastery. Consequently, the ownership of the terrain with all its property including the Chapels is contested by the Copts. Since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, it has remained the subject of litigation between the two sisterly communities.[18]

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[10] In this paper, the word `Coptic', unless specified, refers to anything of the Orthodox Christian Church established in Egypt by St. Mark the Evangelist. For further explanation see F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingston, p.416.

[11] Kirsten Pedersen, ;"Deir es Sultan," pp. 33; Otto Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, III/IV 1965, p. 227.

[12] Otto Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," p.227; and *Informant: Abunä* Gäbr'el.

[13] *Informant: ʾAbun*ä Gäbrə'el.

[14] Kirsten Pedersen, "Deir es Sultan," p. 33.

[15] *Ibid*., p. 33.

[16] Otto Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, p. 138.

[17] Ethiopian Orthodox Church Patriarchate Head Office (henceforth, EOCPHO) File No. 9*v*5-499, Ref. No.3966/499/83. *Mäl'akä Tabor* Teshom Zerihun, head of the EOCPHO External Relations Department, to the Transitional Government of Ethiopia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Addis Ababa, *Ḥamle* 17,1983.

[18] Kirsten Pedersen, "The Ethiopian," pp. 29 & 33.

2. Pilgrimage of Ethiopians to and their Permanent Establishment in Jerusalem

Ancient Ethiopian traditions claim that Ethiopian pilgrimage to Jerusalem began in the pre-Christian era (c.1000 B.C.). This is connected with the biblical narrative of the visit of the Queen of Shaba[19] and its elaboration in the *Kəbrä Nägäśt* (Glory of the Kings).[20] The Holy Bible tells us that the Queen of Shaba came to Jerusalem to pay a visit to King Solomon. Upon arrival she presented to the King the large quantity of precious gifts she had brought with her. King Solomon reciprocated by generously granting her of whatever she asked for. Then, the queen returned home having accepted the worship of Solomon's God. [21] The *Kəbrä Nägäśt* takes the story further by stating that the Queen of Shaba was an Ethiopian called Makədda.[22]

The above traditional narrative of early Ethiopian pilgrimage to the Holy Land contains two historical problems. First, the exact location of the country of origin of the Queen is not known.[23] No definite archaeological evidence has been found to date, linking the story of the queen with a specific historical place.[24] Secondly, the term referred to as "Ethiopia" in the Holy Bible does not correspond to any existing political entity with a clearly defined territory.[25]

The contemporaries of the writers of the Holy Bible understood the name "Ethiopia" as being a country occupying the area South of Egypt and "Ethiopians" as inhabitants of that region with darker complexion.[26] Nonetheless, it is impossible to rule out the possibility of the existence of, though not an early, contact between the people of the Horn of Africa and that of the Holy Land, especially considering the geographical proximity between the two places.[27]

With the beginning of the Christian era, when Aksum emerged as a commercial and maritime power in the Red Sea region, we see closer and continuous contacts being made. Merchants from the Greco-Roman world (in which the Holy Land was included) frequently visited Aksumite trade centres and some of them seem to have even settled there permanently.[28] Aksumite merchants, likewise, undertook long journeys to Greco Roman trade centres for the same purpose.[29] It seems probable that Christianity, before its official introduction in the fourth century, was initially brought into Ethiopia by individual merchants, both Ethiopian and foreign. Around 330 A.D., the Aksumite King Ezana was converted into Christianity through the works of two youths, Aedesius and Frumentius, sons of a Syrian merchant shipwrecked on the Red Sea coast.[30]

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[19] I kings X: 1-10.

[20] Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Shaba and Her Only Son Menyelek (*I), *translated* from the *Kəbrä Nägäśt* (1922); Sergew Hable Sellasie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1972), p.37. [Hereinafter, Sergew, *Ancient]* The *Kəbrä Nägäśt (*was a highly venerated epic edited in the 14th century.

[21] *Holy Bible,* King James Version.

[22] Budge, pp. 15 & 22.

[23] *Sergew, Ancient*, p. 36.

[24] *Ibid*., p. 40.

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 42

[26] *Ibid*., pp. 45-51.

[27] *Ibid*., pp. 39, 84, 100

[28] *Ibid.*, pp.84,100; Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 22-23.

[29] Sergew, *Ancient*, p. 72.

[30] Sergew Hable Sellassie, *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life* (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1970), p.3. [Hereinafter, Sergew, *The Church*.]

The first historical evidence about the presence of Ethiopians in the Holy Land can be found in the letters of St. Paula and St. Eustochium written to their friends in Rome in 386 A.D. Here, the Ethiopians were described as one of the many pilgrims coming daily to Jerusalem from different parts of the world.[31] In the first half of the sixth century, we see the Aksumites controlling both sides of the Red Sea and acting as champions of Christianity. They were capable of commanding a large number of vessels meant for military and commercial purposes.[32] This naturally enhanced the opportunity for Ethiopian pilgrims to visit the Holy Sites of Palestine in large numbers than before. It seems that some of those Ethiopians who went to Jerusalem preferred to remain there for good and, as a result, laid the foundation for the permanent establishment of an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian religious community in the Holy Land.[33]

An Ethiopian Orthodox Tewhido community seems to have existed in Jerusalem at the time of the Islamic conquest of the Holy Land in 636 A.D., Caliph Omar ibn al Khattab, who led the Islamic conquest, issued a *'fireman'* presumably immediately after the capture of Jerusalem, mentioning the "*Habash*" as one of the established Christian communities of the Holy City possessing religious sites of their own inside and outside Jerusalem.[34] However, with the exception of the above *fireman* and the mention of an accidental meeting between a German bishop, Wallibald of Eichstatt (786 A.D.), and an Ethiopian in Galilee,[35] the existence of an organized Ethiopian religious community in Jerusalem during the Byzantine and early Islamic periods is not clearly reported as yet.[36]

From the time of the Crusades, information about the Ethiopians in Jerusalem becomes abundant. This was because European pilgrims began to come to Jerusalem in large numbers; and many of them were eager to write about Ethiopian Christians with whom they had not been in contact since the rise of Islam and the subsequent fall of the Middle East and North Africa under the control of the Muslims in the seventh century.[37] Johann von Würzburg who visited Jerusalem in 1165 reported that the Ethiopians were present there keeping their own chapel.[38] In 1187, Salah ad-Din (or Saladin), who took control of Jerusalem and who restored Muslim rule over the city, is reported to have liberated the Greeks, Georgians, Copts and Ethiopians who used to come to Jerusalem from their taxation obligations. In addition, he granted to the Ethiopians two rooms below the Catechumen: i.e., the Chapel of St. Mary of Golgotha, and an altar in Bethlehem in the Church of the Nativity.[39]

In the thirteenth century, Ethiopians also resided in Jerusalem. The controversial appointment of a certain Ethiopian monk by the name '*Abba* Thomas as bishop of Ethiopia in 1238 by Ignatius II, the then Patriarch of Antioch, is a clear indication of the presence of Ethiopians in Jerusalem. Patriarch Ignatius took the action following a dispute with the Patriarch of Alexandria, Abba Kirillus III (1235-1245), over the appointment of an archbishop for Jerusalem. The appointment of an archbishop for the miaphysite Christians of Jerusalem had been the prerogative of the Patriarch of Antioch, since the Council of Chalcedon of 451. But, in 1238, Kirillus III assigned a Coptic bishop for the Holy City violating the already established custom.

[31] Cited in Enrico Cerulli, *Etiopi in Palestina,* Vol. I, Roma. 1943, pp.1-2.
[32] Sergew, *Ancient*, pp. 124, 126-135.
[33] Pedersen, *The Ethiopian*, p. 24.
[34] *Abba* Philippos, *The Rights of the Abyssinian Church in the Holy Places, Documentary Authorities. Vol. II* (Asmara: Kokäbä Ṣəbah Printing Press,1960), p. 4.[Hereinafter '*Abba* Filləpppos, *Documentary Authorities.*]
[35] Cited in Pedersen, *The Ethiopian*, p. 24.
[36] *Ibid*., p.25.
[37] *Ibid*., p.26.
[38] Cited in Otto Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, p. 117.
[39] Cerulli, pp.3, 132.

Then, Ignatius retaliated by consecrating *'Abba* Tomas, an Ethiopian monk living in Jerusalem, as bishop of Ethiopia, a right maintained by the see of St. Mark since the fourth century. The dispute was, however, solved with the intervention of the Latins and the *Status quo ante* was maintained.[40] In 1283, Burchard of Mount Ṣəon included the Ethiopians in his list of the Christians living in Jerusalem.[41]

With the beginning of what is called in Ethiopia "The Solomonic Period", Ethiopian sources also assume importance on the conditions of Ethiopians in Jerusalem. The letter of King Yagbə'a Ṣəyon (1285-1294) sent to the community, in1290, constitutes such one source. The letter clearly tells us of the presence in Jerusalem of an Ethiopian community which withstood the inconveniences of living in a hostile climatic environment.[42]

In 1323, two Franciscans from Ireland, Fra Simon and Fra Hugo, reported that they participated in an Ethiopian religious ceremony in Jerusalem. In1347, Niccolo da Poggibonsi witnessed that the Ethiopians possessed two chapels - that of St. Mary of Golgotha and St. Mikael - in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.[43] Johann von Bodmann, who was in Jerusalem in 1386, observed that Ethiopians were among the representatives of various Christian religious communities who maintained the main Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He further noted that at that time the Muslims closely watched the gates of the Church admitting no one except in case of the death of a representative. Three decades and a half later, an anonymous pilgrim of Loos (1419) repeated the same story that the Church was closed throughout the year except on the arrival of pilgrims. Only six priests, one from each of the communities of the Greeks, Georgians, Latins, Armenians, Jacobities, and Ethiopians, were allowed to reside inside. Another pilgrim Felix Fabri (1484) strengthens the above story by saying that it was only on two occasions, that is, "from Good Friday to Easter Monday and from the vigil of the Feast of the Invention of the Cross until the Vespers following," that the Church was opened for all Christians.[44]

During those years when the Christians of Jerusalem were closely supervised by the Muslims, the Ethiopians enjoyed certain privileges to which others were not entitled. In addition to the exemption from taxation which was granted to them together with the other Christian communities, the Sultan allowed them to move freely in the Holy Land with symbols of their Christian identity, such as the Cross, uncovered. Most contemporary writers associated the enjoyment of these privileges by the Ethiopians with the importance to Egypt of the Nile River that originates mainly from the Ethiopian highlands. The Muslim rulers feared that jeopardising the interests of the rulers of Ethiopia with regard to the Ethiopians in the Holy Land, might be taken as an excuse to divert the flow of the Nile River from its course.[45]

Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Ethiopians were fortunate with respect to the possession of holy sites. In addition to the Chapels of St. Mary of Golgotha and St. Michael in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and an altar in Bethlehem, in the Church of the Nativity mentioned above, they owned the altar of St. Joseph in the Church of the Sepulchre of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Gethsemane, and the Chapel of the Opprobrium inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.[46]

[40]Meinardus, "The Ethiopians, "I/II, 1965, p. 113; Pedersen, "Deir es Sultan," p. 35
[41]Cited in Cerulli, pp. 80-81.
[42] *Ibid*., pp.88-90; Meinardus "The Ethiopians," I/II, p, 118; Pedersen, *The Ethiopian,* p. 26
[43] Cited in Pedersen, "The Ethiopians," p. 26.
[44] Cited in Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, p. 119.
[45] *Ibid*., p. 120.
[46] *I bid*,, pp. 121-122.

Sebald Rieter Jr. (1479) said that a monastery on Mount near the Cave of David was also in their hands.[47] Generally speaking, during the period mentioned above, the Ethiopian religious community in Jerusalem was a prosperous and prestigious community possessing a number of holy sites inside and outside of Jerusalem and enjoying certain privileges beyond those of the other religious communities established in Jerusalem.

This relaxed position of the community seems to have continued until the first half of the sixteenth century. The firemen of Ottomans Sultans issued in the sixteenth century concerning the Holy Places also give us a clear description of the condition of the Ethiopians at the time. The first one of these, that of Sultan Selim I (r.1512-1520) made on Safar 25, 923 (1517 A.D.), gives a detailed description of the Ethiopian properties in Jerusalem and confirms the rights and privileges that the community used to enjoy till that time. It mentions among other things that the Ethiopians possessed four chapels inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as well as the Deir es Sultan and that they had been undertaking repairs in one of their chapels in Jerusalem since 1500 A.D.[48]

The importance of this firemen lies in that it served as a basis for later firemen of the Ottoman Sultans, especially for those of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (r.1520-1566) and Sultan Ahmad (r.1603-1617) who simply repeated what was said by Sultan Selim.[48] Though there are people who doubt the authenticity of this firemen of Sultan Selim,[50] Western pilgrims who visited the Holy Land in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries confirm the authenticity of the facts described in the firemen of Sultan Selim and those of his successors. Graffin Affagart, who was in Jerusalem in 1533-34, saw the Ethiopians in Jerusalem still enjoying the freedom of entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre without paying tax. Giovanni Francesco Alcarotti (1587), Aquilante Rocchetta (1599), Francesco Manerba (1604), Pietro della Valle (1606), Giovanni Paolo Pesenti (1612), Antonio de Castillo (1626), and Bernard Surius (1644) all noted that the head of the Ethiopian religious community in Jerusalem was among those religious leaders who played a leading role in the celebration of the Holy Fire on the Eve of Easter.[51]

The reason for the better position that the Ethiopian religious community in Jerusalem had particularly during the Mamluk period[52] was closely related with the protection and support it received from contemporary Ethiopian Emperors. For the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia the period was a time of relative peace and prosperity. The rulers were pious Christian Emperors who considered themselves as defenders of the Christian Church. They made it their duty to assist financially and protect diplomatically the interests of the Ethiopian community in the Holy Land.[53]

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[47] Cited in Pedersen, *The Ethiopian,* p. 26

[48] *Ibid*., p.124; ʾAbba Filləpppos, *Documentary Authorities.* Baron Boris Nolde, *Consultations Concerning the Right of the Abyssinian Religious Community in Palestine.* (1925). Translated from the Original French by Dr. Kirsten Stoffregen Pedersen, June 1979, p. 1.

[49] Nolde, p. 1.

[50] Pedersen, *Däbrä Seltan-Juridica*, p. 1.

[51] Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, p. 124.

[52] The Mamluks ruled Jerusalem from their base in Egypt beginning from 1291 to 1517 (*The Middle East: A Political and Economic Survey*, Second edition (1950; rpt. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1957), pp. 8-9.

[53] Cited in Pedersen, *The Ethiopian*, pp.26-27.

3. Decline of the Ethiopian Community and the Loss of its Holy Sites

It is a fact, however, that since the second half of the sixteenth century the condition of the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem showed continuous signs of deterioration. This was because of two factors. The first one was the change in the domestic political situation of Ethiopia. In the second half of the 1520s, the sporadic skirmishes which characterised the relations between the Christian Kingdom and the Muslim principalities of the south and the south east of Ethiopia in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries[54] developed into an all out war between the forces of the Christian Kingdom led by Ləbnä Dəngəl and that of the Muslims led by Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim (Gragn Ahmad'). The confrontation reached a turning point in 1529 when the Christian forces were overwhelmed by the Muslims.[55] Then followed the military occupation of almost all provinces of Christian Ethiopia by the Muslims, until 1543, when they were defeated and driven back by the Christian forces supported by Portuguese soldiers. In the meantime, the pastoralist Oromo people were pushing northward into the central provinces of the Christian kingdom from their bases in the South.[56] The rulers of Christian Ethiopia were, therefore, faced with these serious problems of reconstruction and consolidation of their power within the Christian kingdom, on the one hand, and the defence of the southern and south -eastern provinces from the invasion of the Oromos and the disturbances of the Muslims on the other.[37] Besides, in the second half of the sixteenth century, the Red Sea coastal areas of Ethiopia were repeatedly attacked by the Turks who were trying to expand in that direction. So, during the remaining years of the century, Ethiopia had to defend itself from these Turkish attacks.

The implication of these developments in Ethiopia was that Ethiopian rulers who used to sympathetically support and protect the Ethiopian religious community in Jerusalem were no longer in a position to devote their money and time for the benefit of the latter.[59] In addition, the safety of the land route to Jerusalem was threatened. Pilgrims were attacked in the deserts of Nubia, the majority of them being killed and looted. For instance, it is reported that, in 1520, out of the 336 Ethiopian pilgrims who set out their journey for Jerusalem only 15 managed to reach their destination, the rest being annihilated by the Bedouins around Suakin. These attacks led to a temporary halt of the Ethiopian pilgrimage to Jerusalem.[60]

The second most important reason for the deterioration of the condition of the Ethiopians in Jerusalem was the establishment of Turkish rule over Jerusalem in 1517. With respect to their relations with the Christian communities of Jerusalem, the Ottoman Turks were more demanding in economic terms than their Mamluk predecessors. The Ethiopians, whose economic status was already weakened as a result of the lack of support from Ethiopian Christian rulers, could not afford to pay what was required from them by the Turks.[61]

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[54] Taddesse, pp. 294-296; Mordechai Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea* (London: Frank Cass, 1980), pp. 69, 79, 82
[55] Abir, pp. 87-90, 92, 124-129.
[56] *Ibid*., pp. 86, 125, 133-134.
[57] *Ibid*., pp.127, 133, 137.
[58] *Ibid*., pp. 124-127.
[59] Pedersen, *The Ethiopian*, p. 27.
[60] Meinadus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, p.122.
[61] Pedersen, *The Ethiopian*, p. 27.

These two factors, manifested in the form of an economically weakened and morally depressed Ethiopian community, resulted in the inability of the latter to take care of its interests in the Holy Land. In 1604, Francesco Manerba reported that during his term of service as guardian of the Holy Land only two Ethiopians remained in Jerusalem. A year later, Henry de Beauvau described the Chapel of Abraham as being kept by an Ethiopian woman only. In 1625, the pilgrim Yves de Lille wrote that the Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem was completely deserted and that only a priest was responsible for the protection of Ethiopian properties there.[62]

The fact that Ethiopians were physically absent from some of their former sites in the Holy Sepulchre aroused the envy of the other numerically larger and economically wealthier communities, particularly the Armenians and the Greeks.[63] In addition, as indicated earlier, the Ethiopians were unable to pay the taxes expected of them by the Ottoman rulers of Jerusalem.[64] Therefore, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were characterized by fierce competitions between the Greek and Armenian religious communities over the right of "protection" of Ethiopian properties in Jerusalem. [65] By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Armenians had successfully taken control of almost all of the Ethiopian properties in Jerusalem. The Ethiopians were even driven out of their possessions inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and were forced to limit themselves to their convent of Deir es Sultan. Even here in Deir es Sultan, their status was not good. Francesco Verniero (1631-1647), the Franciscan guardian of the Holy Land, wrote the following:

> There are a few of them [the Ethiopians] in Jerusalem in such an extreme degree of need that they go around almost naked and although they do have some property which renders them something, the bishop of the Armenians in whose care they are confided, demands the income thereof, giving them something according to his own temper. They own a place in front of the square of the Temple of the Holy Sepulchre, where there are a few narrow, low and dark rooms, and they sleep on the bare ground.[66]

In 1655, it is reported that the Greeks seemed to have won the litigation at a Turkish court and that the Armenians were forced to hand over to them all Ethiopian properties which were in their possession. From the proces verbal of 1655 we see that the Ethiopian properties transferred to the Greeks from the Armenians included: the Chapel of Abraham, the Chapel of the Opprobrium, the Chapel of the Prison of Jesus, the Deir es Sultan, and the Ethiopian Chapel in the Rotunda.[67]

In the nineteenth century we find the Armenians acting, once again, as superiors of the Ethiopians. James Finn, the British Consul in Jerusalem in the 1850s and early 1860s, in his letter to the Foreign Office of December 9, 1850, wrote "that the Copts and the Abyssinians together with the Syrians and Armenians subsist in one ecclesiastical intercommunion - the Armenian convent being the wealthy and powerful patron of the other three."[68]

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[62] Cited in Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, pp. 125-126.
[63] *Ibid*., p. 126.
[64] Pedersen, "Deir es-Sultan," p. 36.
[65] Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, pp. 12.
[66] Quoted in Kirsten Pedersen; "Deir es Sultan," pp. 37-38,
[67] Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, p. 127.
[68] FO371/5508_Consul Finn to Viscount Palmerston, Jerusalem, December 9, 1850.

Coming back to the situation of the Ethiopians in Jerusalem, there were still Ethiopians in Jerusalem in the eighteenth century. The observations of A. Morison (1704), Charles de St. Maure (1721), and Johann Martini (1760) attest to this fact. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Ethiopians still inhabited the Deir es Sultan. In 1806, Ulrich Seetzen saw about ten Ethiopian monks and three nuns living there, together with a number of Coptic priests. Augustin Scholz testifies that, in 1820, he had seen Ethiopian monks residing in the convent behind the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with a large number of Ethiopian manuscripts in their possession. William Jowett (1823-1824) also wrote that he visited the monastery and that there were by then about 20 Ethiopians living in Deir es Sultan. He further narrates that the Ethiopians had a library from which he bought the Ethiopian New Testament in two manuscript volumes.[69]

Nevertheless, the living condition of the Ethiopian community has not been improved. They were still living on the daily provision of a limited number of meals by the Armenians.[70] This practice of the Armenians did not come out of charity or sympathy towards their co religionists. But, as Francesco Verniero rightly commented more than a century and a half age, it was rooted in the fact that they had taken possession of the properties of the Ethiopians which could have generated sufficient income for the upkeep of the Ethiopian community.[71] Even this precarious living condition of the Ethiopians could arouse the jealousy of the small community of the Copts in Jerusalem. The Copts began to claim the two chapels of the Deir es Sultan, that of St. Michael and of the four living creatures, which led to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre including the whole of the Ethiopian monastery of Deir es Sultan.[72] As a result, the history of the relations between the Ethiopians and the Copts in Jerusalem, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has been one of hostility and litigation over possession of the keys to the chapels and the monastery.

[69] Cited in Meinardus, "The Ethiopians," I/II, pp.129-131.
[70] *Ibid*.
[71] Cited in Pedersen, "Deir es Sultan," p.37; FO 371/5508, Memorandum respecting the Abyssinians at Jerusalem, by the Rev. W.W. Malet, July 22, 1967.
[72] FO 371/5508_ Consul Finn to Viscount Palmerston, Jerusalem, December 9, 1850.

4. Conclusion

The monastery of Deir es Sultan is the only religious site in the Christian holy places of Jerusalem owned by a black religious community. The community had witnessed periods of highs and lows in its past. As it had no any other means of generating income, the community depended solely on the support from members of the ruling family (including the emperors and empresses) in Ethiopia for its upkeep. The latter provided the community with whatever was necessary in the form of material and diplomatic support. So, at some point, especially between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the community was among the most prosperous religious communities in the Holy Land enjoying certain privileges to which others were not entitled.

This condition took a different feature with the change in the domestic political situation of Ethiopia and the shift in the balance of power in the Middle East. Since the second quarter of the sixteenth century, Ethiopia was in a state of civil war and political instability; thus impeding the ruling family from according their usual support to the community. Another development that adversely affected the condition of the Ethiopians in Jerusalem had to do with the control of Jerusalem by the Turks in1517. The Ottoman Turks were more demanding in economic terms than their predecessors, the Mamluks. The cumulative effect of all this was that membership of the community was reduced to a few people and it became economically weak to sustain itself and protect its vast holy sites in the holy land.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the community was limited to control of just two chapels and a monastery in Jerusalem. In the subsequent two centuries, the Ethiopian religious community in Jerusalem was locked in a protracted litigation with the Copts and other religious communities over the preservation of its remaining holy sites in the holy land.