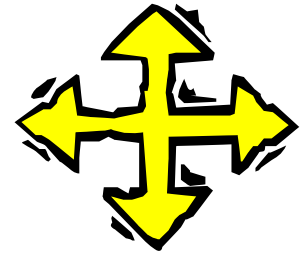


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Christianity flourished not only in spite of Rome but also because of Rome. Constantine the Great became Emperor of the Roman Empire in A.D. 306. He was a believer in the Roman sun god, Sol, the visible manifestation of the invisible Highest God, who was the principle behind the Universe.

In 312, on the eve of a battle against Maxentius, his rival, Constantine dreamt that Christ appeared to him and told him to inscribe the first two letters of his (Christ's) name (XP in Greek which would be CR in Latin) on the shields of his troops. The next day he saw a cross superimposed on the sun and the words "in this sign you will be the victor." Constantine marked the shields as instructed and defeated Maxentius.

Constantine who had been a pagan solar worshiper, now looked upon the Christian deity as one that brings victory. Persecution of Christians was ended, and Constantine's co-emperor Licinius joined him in issuing an edict of Milan, in 312, which mandated toleration of Christians in the Roman Empire. The church was given legal rights and large financial donations.

Constantine built churches in the Holy Land, and chaired the first ecumenical council of the church in Nicaea in 325. He was baptized shortly before his death on May 22, 337.

In 325 Constantine's mother, Helena, traveled to Jerusalem and founded the Church of Nativity and the Holy Sepulchre, on the spots where Christ was born and crucified. She is said to have discovered the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Hence, Demera in commemoration of the discovery. Followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Faith believe that part of the True Cross was found in Ethiopia. Helena died in 328.

Christianity became the state religion of the Ethiopian kingdom of Axum in 330 during the joint reign of the brothers Abrha and Atsbha. Constantinople

became the new capital of the Roman Empire in the same year until it fell to the Turks in 1453.

Split in Christendom took place at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 when the Ethiopian church along with the Armenian church, the Coptic church of Alexandria, the Syrian church and the Syrian church in India rejected the statement of faith adopted by the council.

Early in the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius, the Persians had captured the True Cross and carried it to Persia. The Emperor launched a great counterattack and recovered the True Cross in 630 and returned it to Jerusalem in triumph.

Meskerem 16 (September 27, according to the Gregorian calendar) is celebrated every year to commemorate the finding of the True Cross. Today (September 26, 2000) is according to the Ethiopian calendar Meskerem 15, 1993.

Pope Gregory (1502-1585), after whom the Gregorian calendar is named, reformed the old Julian calendar producing the system currently in use in many parts of the world. The Ethiopian church refused to accept it, probably because it emanated from the Catholic Church with whom the Ethiopian church was, at the time, waging a doctrinal struggle which had plunged Ethiopia in a religious war and political turmoil that lasted some thirty years. The problem started with the arrival of Jesuit missionaries in 1557, after Gragh Mohammed's most destructive Jihad against Ethiopian Christians was brought to an end with the help of Portugese musketeers led by the son of Vasco da Gama, the famous explorer. After succeeding in the conversion of Emperor Susnyos to Catholicism, the Jesuits embarked on the road to catholicize the Ethiopian church. But, the Ethiopian church as well as the laity saw this as a diabolical scheme on the part of foreigners to destroy Ethiopian independence and cultural heritages. Fasiladas, who succeeded the embattled Susenyos in 1632, asked all foreigners of the catholic faith to leave Ethiopia. As a result, the revival of the Orthodox Church was assured. The end of the religious war enabled Fasiladas to consolidate his power and concentrate on building Gondar as the new capital of Ethiopia. He was succeeded five years later by "Tsadiku" Yohannes, who probably was the legendary Prester John the West was looking for as a prospective ally against the powerful Turks, the underwriters of Gragh Mohammed's Jihad against Ethiopia's Christians.

So, for Ethiopians Orthodoxy is not only an expression of religious faith but also a potent force that binds them together.

Compiled/researched by: Tadesse Gebre-Kidan  
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Monrovia, Liberia