



The Ethiopian Servant of Christ

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The Life of Father Abd el-Mesih el-Habashi

The
Ethiopian
Servant of Christ



Fr Abd El Masih the Ethiopian

By: H.G. Bishop Macarius

Fr Abd el-Mesih el-Habashi is one of the twentieth century's great ascetics who lived in the Egyptian desert. He life is a witness to the continuity of the desert spirituality of the 4th century. He was a man who was not concerned about anything or for anyone. His only concern was for the One; his eyes were directed towards eternity. He was content with enough food sufficient to keep him alive and enough clothing to cover his nakedness. He chose God as his way as well as his means.

He unintentionally attracted us to him through sharing and exchanging the many tales that thousands of people have experienced in mixed feelings of wonder, joy, and deep contemplation. The multitude of people who saw him and dealt with him have all attested to that lion who has the heart of a child. He had a clear vision and a way of life. He did not act haphazardly but his behavior was a result of deep spiritual understanding.

Fr Abd el-Mesih's character combines the weakness of the human nature and the strength of the spiritual personality. He was not of a special breed of people, like anyone he was agitated, tasted pain, and suffered trials. He left all these experiences for us as an example in persevering in trials. He lived an austere ascetic life and experienced many hardships. The devil waged many wars against him but he escaped them all.

All the information in this book are documented in either voice recordings or written accounts of Metropolitans, Bishops, Priests, Monks, or Lay people, who gratefully shared their stories and photos that they had for this great father.

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"The Great Man from the Cave... Departed to Jerusalem"

By: H.H. Pope Shenouda



Monasticism of this Christian era did not know a monk who lived the life of continuous solitude to the degree of Father Abd el-Mesih al-Habashi. He lived all the facets of the ascetic life fully, bearing the famous name Father Abd el-Mesih al-Habashi (*the Ethiopian*).

He was born into a very wealthy family in Ethiopia, and he received education from one of its schools. When he realised that his teachers took special interest in him due to his intelligence, he decided to leave the world and go to the monastery. When he could not accommodate to the life in the monastery, he departed from there and went to live in the Shehete desert. He came to it from Ethiopia on foot, and he joined El Baramous Monastery. He then left the monastery and lived in a cave alone. He faced many great hardships in the beginning, but he stood strong until he settled in.

Father Abd el-Mesih al-Habashi spent more than 45 years fasting, never once eating meat, fish, or any dairy products. At some period in his life, the only thing he ate was breadcrumbs. He stayed in his cell for many decades. I myself was a disciple of his for a period of my monastic life.

Anybody who visited him said that he told them to sit down with him on the ground, and he would talk to them about the Bible. He was very strict about the truth, and doing the Lord's commandments and the rules of monasticism. One of the people who took care of the needs of Father Abd el-Mesih al-Habashi and supplied him with food and clothes was Bishop Theophilus the abbot of El Surian Monastery.

His asceticism is greatly inspirational, and we hope that we could publish some of his stories in upcoming editions.



Finally, Father Abd el-Mesih al-Habashi dearly wished that he could spend his last days in Jerusalem, so he came to Cairo, met Pope Shenouda, and insisted that I approve his departure to Jerusalem on foot! After long discussions, he finally agreed on taking a ship to Syria and from there to Jerusalem.

(From: *The Keraza Magazine*)

**A Group of youth from Arch-Angel Michael Church
Spending time at the monastery**



the Baptist rebuking all including the emperor himself without fear or favour. As Shimei reviled King David, so the bahtawi have been known to hurl abuse at all and sundry including the emperor. Some live completely separately from society, unseen by all, their bones occasionally discovered after their deaths in the remotest of places. Others lived in trees (dendrites) or small holes in the ground. Often they live on leaves and bitter roots and reduce sleep to an absolute minimum. Those living in wilderness zones on the edge of the empire had the effect of expanding the empire because they invariably attracted followers. Evangelization was not systematic but the effect was to extend the frontiers of Christianity by being so successful in converting the surrounding population.



It would not be an exaggeration to say that the spirituality of the laity in Ethiopia is essentially a monastic spirituality. Some emperors even saw themselves as monk kings. 'When Lalibella established the throne he submitted himself to a fast more severe than that of the monks because to him the kingship appeared as the monastic life'. This may have been the ideal but of course there was always a tension between this and the reality.

(From: H.G. Bishop Macarius, "The Ethiopian Servant of Christ")



On the feast of St. Takla Haymanot The Ethiopian on the Twenty-Fourth Day of the Blessed Month of Misra a group of people from the Ethiopian community came to the monastery with their two priest to celebrate the feast of the great saint. In the photo above H.G. Bishop Daniel with the two priests and the Ethiopian congregation.



The Ethiopian Monastic Tradition

The fifth century saw an important development with the arrival of a group of monks from Egypt. They were perhaps among the refugees from the Byzantine Empire who refused to accept the Chalcedonian Christology. They established monasteries which became very important centers of learning and evangelization. It would indeed be true to say that all evangelization and all education in Christian Ethiopia was in the hands of monks until modern times. Many of these monasteries are still flourishing e.g. that of Debre Damo near the Eritrean border, still only accessible by rope.

These monks translated the Bible into Ge'ez probably using the Septuagint for the Old Testament. They also translated some extra books as well as monastic writings so that the Ethiopian canon is much more extensive than any other church.

St Aragawi received his monastic habit from Theodore, a disciple of St Pachomius. There were Ethiopian monks in the Egyptian desert from early times e.g. St Moses the Black who was head of a band of robbers until his conversion. He was changed one day when he and his group attacked a monastery, intending to rob it. Moses was met by the abbot whose peaceful countenance and warm manner overwhelmed him. He immediately felt remorse for his past sins and joined the monastery. For years he was continually tormented by his past ways and especially by lust until the prayers of his abbot St Isidore the Great miraculously healed him. Near the end of his life he became a priest and formed a monastery of 75 monks, the same number as his robber band and was martyred in 405 at the age of 75.

So there has been a continuous monastic tradition in Ethiopia from this time though there are some gaps in our historical knowledge. Further declined in the 9th century and later the Zagwe dynasty emerged which was responsible in the 12th century for the famous churches at Lalibella carved out of the solid rock and recognized as one of the architectural wonders of the world.



The great monastic revival of the 14th century led to the establishment of the monastery now known as Debre Libanos whose founders were St Tekle Haimanot and St Ewstatewos two very great influential Christian leaders through whom the monks of today trace their origins. The number of monks and nuns before 1908 has reached 12000, in 800 monasteries

In their extremes of austerity the monks provide a prophetic and eschatological ministry in the Ethiopia Church. The bahtawi are an independent class of hermits who represent the anchoritic tradition – modern successors of St John



A Testimony by Dr Otto Meinardus (1925-2005)

Today, 4.5 km west of Dair el-Baramous is one of the few inhabited caves in the ancient Desert of Scetis. Abuna Abd el-Mesih el-Habashi has lived there since about 1935. Of the three caves, two are used by him. Some of the equipment of Abuna Abd el-Mesih is without doubt Second World War material. This solitary goes to the Dair el-Baramous weekly to obtain water, which he carries in an old gasoline tin on his head, as well as some bread. A number of years ago he would carry the tin full of water. Today, however, due to his age, he can carry it only half-filled. Abuna Abd el-Mesih is a great story-teller. During the Second World War, at the time of Field marshal Rommel's advance in North Africa, one night the British saw a small fire in the desert around Dair el-Baramous, and believing it to be that of a German spy, they began to shoot, almost killing Abuna Abd el-Mesih. Later on, the British apologized to Abuna Abd el-Mesih, using the good offices of the monks of Dair al-Baramous



Though peculiar in many ways, Abuna Abd el-Mesih was, and still is, a real inspiration to several Egyptian monks who cherish him greatly. Thus Abuna Matta el-Maskin (now at Dair Anba Samwil) wanted to live with him. The Ethiopian, however, in true Antonian manner, refused to allow Abuna Matta to come close to him. Only after five days of continuous persistence and by leading an exemplary eremitical life, did the Ethiopian receive Abuna Matta who then stayed with him for several months. Another hermit influenced by the example of Abuna Abd el-Mesih is Abuna Antonius el-Suriyani (H.H. Pope Shenouda III), who also lived for a time in one of the caves near those of the Ethiopian solitary.

I have visited Abuna Abd el-Mesih at two different occasions and was impressed by his utter indifference to the world. It was difficult for the solitary to understand that a German could be in Egypt, and that, furthermore, a German could also be a Christian. "A German is not, no, never a Christian, for Germans don't believe in God." His strong anti-German reaction is due undoubtedly to his war experience, where he was taken by the British for a German spy.

The food which we brought along, the hermit refused, expressing his disgust by informing us that he would give it to the Bedouins. "God gives me my daily bread, you don't have to come and feed me." While trying to convince him that he should eat a little more to keep, healthy, he merely answered: "When I am sick I enjoy the blessings of



God even more, what else can I want than the blessings of God.” When Abuna Antonius suggested a wooden door for his cell he merely retorted : “A wolf doesn't need a door, does he?” He continued his discourse by saying: “All the monks, for that matter especially those at Dair el-Baramous and, Dair el-Surian are making war against me, telling me to eat and eat. “They should know better that when you eat oil and fish (sardines), the devil will visit you at night, and you are at the mercy of the devil.” In 1958, Abuna Abd el-Mesih left his cave for the first time to be taken to a physician in Alexandria. The doctor admonished him to eat, but the food which he received from him he merely passed on to the driver of the car. “My doctor is Jesus Christ, my food is Jesus Christ, my fuel is Jesus Christ.”

The personality of Abuna Abd el-Mesih reveals many characteristics of Oriental psychology, and it is not easy for the Western Christian to understand the dynamics of this solitary monk. That these however, are real, is evident from the influence he has had on, at least: three people who already have made a distinct contribution to the Christian Church in Egypt: Abuna Matta el-Maskin, Abuna Antonius el-Suriy and Abuna Mina el-Muttawahad el-Baramusy or Anba Kyrillos VI, the 116th Patriarch.

(From: Otto F.A. Meinardus. “*Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts.*”



A group of youth from all Universities spending a spiritual day at the Monastery



Christianity in Ethiopia



Christianity Started in Ethiopia in the time of the Apostles, when a eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians was baptised by the hands of St Phillip (*Act 8:26-40*). After his return to Ethiopia he told the Queen of his encounter, so she declared Christianity to be the official religion of Ethiopia. The king who succeeded Queen Candace forced Christian to put on a blue ribbon on their shoulders to distinguish them from the pagans. The Christians did so happily but they sawed crosses on this ribbon which they called (matb).

During the papacy of Saint Athanasius (365-297) AD, a rich merchant and his two sons Frumentius and Aedesius, were shipwrecked at one of the neighboring ports to Ethiopia, where they killed the father and the servants who came with him, and spared the lives of Frumentius and Aedesius. When the king of Ethiopia saw the boys he loved them and gave them a job in his palace. After the kings death the two brothers wanted to go back to their homeland but the queen asked them to stay with her until one of her sons is enthroned.



After the new king was enthroned the two brothers went to their homeland. Later on Frumentius went to Alexandria to express to St Athanasius the need of the Ethiopian people for a shepherd to look after the church and the spiritual needs of the congregation. St Athanasius seeing the zeal of Frumentius, decided to ordain him a bishop over all of Ethiopia in the year 330 AD by the name Salama (*Father of Peace*) or Kesate Berhan (*Revealer of light*).

From this we see the close links from the beginning between the Ethiopian and Coptic Church. The tradition begun by St Athanasius continued until the late 50s of the 20th century with the Patriarch of Alexandria sending the 'Abuna' to lead the Ethiopian Church. Obviously there were difficulties in having a foreigner who often did not speak the language as head of the Church on earth, but there were no Ethiopian bishops until the 20th century.

(From: H.G. Bishop Macarius, “The Ethiopian Servant of Christ”)