

The Land of Seyon: Fourteenth-Century Ethiopia



92 ▼ ETHIOPIAN ROYAL CHRONICLE

Ethiopia, a kingdom to the southeast of ancient Kush (or Nubia) in Africa's north-east highlands, looks out across the Red Sea to Yemen, the southwestern portion of the Arabian Peninsula. Settlers from Yemen, known as the *Sabeans*, crossed these waters, perhaps as early as the seventh century B.C.E., and mixed with the indigenous inhabitants to produce a hybrid civilization whose language, *Geez*, was essentially Semitic but contained significant Kushitic elements. Because of its strategic location astride a trade route that linked Egypt and the Mediterranean World with the markets of East Africa, Arabia, and India, Ethiopia flourished. A Greek shipping manual of the first century C.E. notes that Adulis, Ethiopia's port on the Red Sea, was northeast Africa's premier center for the ivory trade.

The Ethiopian Church claims that Christianity came to the land and its people in the first century C.E., at the time of the apostles. Given Ethiopia's commercial importance, this is credible, but Christianity only became the state-sponsored religion of Ethiopia in the early fourth century, when *King Ezana* (r. 320?–350?) converted to Christianity around 333. In the years that followed the Ethiopian people gradually adopted the new faith. Under the influence of Egyptians and Nubians to their north, Ethiopians embraced a type of Christianity known as *Monophysitism* (from the Greek words for "one nature"). This form of Christian belief, which arose in the fifth century, centered on a doctrine that deemphasized Jesus' humanity to the point of maintaining that he had a single, divine nature. When the Churches of Constantinople and Rome condemned Monophysite teachings as heresy in 451, the Ethiopian Church was doctrinally cut off from these two Mediterranean centers of Christianity. The Arab-Muslim conquest of Egypt in the 640s further cut Ethiopia off from its Christian coreligionists in Byzantium and the West. In time, most of previously Christian Egypt converted to Islam, although its native Christians, known as *Coptic Christians*, remained a significant minority, as they are today. Egypt, the land that had introduced Christianity to Nubia and Ethiopia, was now an Islamic stronghold. On their part, Nubians and Ethiopians vigorously fought to retain their political autonomy and Christian identity in the face of Islamic pressure from Egypt. After the mid thirteenth century, however, Nubian resistance to Islam weakened. By the mid fourteenth century Nubia no longer had an independent Christian monarchy, and the Christian faith was fast losing out to Islam. By the sixteenth century, Nubia's Christian population was a minority and would remain so down to the present. (Nubia today is the nation of Sudan.)

Farther to the south, Ethiopia, fairly secure in its mountain strongholds, continued to hold out against Islam. The following document, a fourteenth-century royal chronicle, tells the story of how King *Amda Seyon I* (r. 1312–1342), whose throne

name was *Gabra Masqal* (Servant of the Cross), resisted an invasion in 1329 by Sabr ad-Din, the ruler of Ifat, an Islamic emirate on the coast. More than simply a monarch on the defensive, Amda Seyon was a militant expansionist, who in his thirty-year reign undertook a series of offensive operations against neighboring Islamic states in his drive to control access routes to the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. Between 1320 and 1340 he managed to bring Ifat and other Islamic states of the highland plateau under the control of his expanding kingdom. As the chronicle points out, Sabr ad-Din was actually a tributary prince who revolted against Amda Seyon's authority.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What picture emerges of Muslim-Christian relations in fourteenth-century Ethiopia?
2. The Christian Ethiopian attitude toward Jews and Judaism has been characterized as ambivalent. Do you find in this source any evidence to support such a judgment? Please be specific in your answer.
3. Reread Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History* (source 49). Do you see any parallels between the tone and message of that source and this document? What are they? What conclusions do you draw?

Let us write, with the help of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the power and the victory which God wrought by the hands of Amda Seyon king of Ethiopia, whose throne-name is Gabra Masqal. . . . Now the king of Ethiopia . . . heard that the king of the Rebels¹ had revolted, and in his arrogance was unfaithful to him, making himself great, like the Devil who set himself above his creator and exalted himself like the Most High. The king of the Rebels, whose name was Sabradin, was full of arrogance towards his lord Amda Seyon, and said, "I will be king over all the land of Ethiopia; I will rule the Christians according to my law, and I will destroy their churches." And having said this, he arose and set out and came to the land of the Christians, and killed some of them; and those who survived, both men

and women, he took prisoner and converted them to his religion.

And after this he said, "I will nominate governors over the provinces of Ethiopia." . . . And he appointed governors over all the provinces of Ethiopia, even those which he had not been able to reach.

But the feet cannot become the head, nor the Earth the sky, nor the servant the master. That perverse one, the son of a viper, of the seed of a serpent, the son of a stranger from the race of Satan, thought covetously of the throne of David² and said, "I will rule in Seyon,"³ for pride entered into his heart, as into the Devil his father. He said, "I will make the Christian churches into mosques for the Muslims, and I will convert to my religion the king of the Christians together

¹The word *elwan*, translated here as "rebels," can also be translated as "infidels," or nonbelievers.

²The Ethiopian royal family, known as the *Solomonid Dynasty* (1270–1974), claimed descent from the union of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Israel (r. ca. 962–922 B.C.E.), son of King David. See the Bible, 1 Kings 10:1–13, and 2 Chronicles 9:1–12, for an account of the queen's visit to King Solomon. According to Ethiopian tradition, *Menelik*, son of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon and first king of

Ethiopia, stole the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem and brought it to Ethiopia, where it is still revered as the country's most sacred relic.

³The Geez transliteration of *Zion*, one of Jerusalem's hills and a common symbolic term for Jerusalem and even the entire Holy Land. Here *Seyon* refers to Ethiopia because the Ethiopians claim partial Hebraic descent (note 2). Amda Seyon means *Pillar of Zion*.

with his people, and I will nominate him governor of one province, and if he refuses to be converted to my religion I will deliver him to the herdsmen . . . that they make him a herder of camels. As for the queen Zan Mangesa, the wife of the king, I will make her work at the mill." . . .

Saying this, he collected all the troops of the Muslims, and chose from among them the ablest and most intelligent. These in truth were not able and intelligent, but fools, men full of error, impostors who foretell the future by means of sand and take omens from the sun and moon and stars of Heaven, who say, "We observe the stars," but they have knowledge only of evil, they have no knowledge of God, their knowledge is of men which fades and perishes, for as Saint Paul says, "God hath made foolish the wisdom of this world."⁴

Let us return to the original subject. This evil man then questioned the diviners, saying, "Now tell me, I pray you, shall we conquer when we fight with the king of the Christians?" And one of them rose, a prophet of darkness. . . .

When Sabradin the king of the Rebels examined him, this diviner answered him persuasively, saying, "Behold, the kingdom of the Christians is finished; it shall be given to us, and you shall reign in Seyon. Rise, make war on the king of the Christians, and conquering you shall rule him and his people." And all the diviners said likewise. So the Rebel king sent into all the lands of the Muslims and called together his troops, and formed them into three divisions: one division set out for the land of Amhara, another set out for the land of Angot, and he himself prepared for war and set out to invade Shoa where the king was, — the slave of slaves against the prince of princes, the tail of the dog against the head of the lion, trusting in the false prediction that the Christian kingdom was come to an end.

As for us, we have heard and we know from the Holy Scriptures that the kingdom of the Muslims, established for but seven hundred years,

shall cease to be at the proper time. But the kingdom of the Christians shall continue till the second coming of the Son of God, according to the words of Holy Scripture; and above all we know that the kingdom of Ethiopia shall endure till the coming of Christ, of which David prophesied saying "Ethiopia shall stretch her hands unto God."⁵

The messengers whom the king had sent to that Rebel returned to him the whole answer of the renegade, that rebel against righteousness. Hearing the insults of the evil man, the king called together his commanders. . . . He sent them forth to war against the evil Sabradin on the 24th day of Yakatit,⁶ saying to them, "May God give you strength and victory, and may He help you." . . . And they fought with him and forced him out of his residence; and he fled before them. And they defeated him through the power of God. . . . And they pursued him till sunset; but he escaped them, going by a different road. God threw him down from his glory. . . .

Then the army of the king set forth and attacked the camp of the Rebel. They looted the rebel king's treasure houses and took gold and silver and fine clothes and jewels without number. They killed men and women, old men and children; the corpses of the slain filled a large space. And those who survived were made prisoners, and there were left none but those who had escaped with that evil man. But the soldiers could not find a place to camp because of the foul smell of the corpses; and they went to another place and made their camp there. . . .

The king, hearing that the Rebel had escaped, went into the tabernacle⁷ and approached the altar; seizing the horns of the altar⁸ he implored mercy of Jesus Christ saying, "Hear the petition of my heart and reject not the prayer of my lips, and shut not the gates of Thy mercy because of my sins, but send me Thy good angel to guide me on my road to pursue mine enemy who has set himself above Thy sheep and above Thy holy

⁴The Bible, 1 Corinthians 1:20.

⁵The Bible, Psalms 68:31.

⁶February 18, 1329.

⁷A tent used as a chapel in the king's camp.

⁸As was the fashion in ancient Israel, Ethiopian altars had horns on all four corners. Suppliants would grasp one while praying.

name." And having said this, he gave an offering to the church of colored hangings for the altar, and went out. Then he sent other troops, . . . cavalry and foot-soldiers, strong and skilled in war, powerful without comparison in warfare and battle; he sent their commander . . . to make war in the land of the renegades who are like Jews, the crucifiers,⁹ . . . Because like the Jews, the crucifiers, they denied Christ, he sent troops to destroy and devastate them and subject them to the rule of Christ. . . .

The Rebel was filled with fear, and not knowing where to turn, for fear had taken possession of him, he sent to the queen¹⁰ saying, "I have done wrong to my lord the king, I have wrought injustice against him, and it is better that I fall into his hands than into the hands of a stranger. I will come myself and surrender to him, that he may do what he will to me." Thereupon the queen went to tell the king the whole of the message from that Rebel Sabradin, whose acts, like his name 'broken judgment,'¹¹ consist of insults, mad rage, errors, contentions, and arrogance. When the king heard this message which the Rebel had sent to the queen, he was exceedingly angry, and said to the queen, "Do you send him a message and say: 'If you come, or if you do not come, it will not trouble me; but if you go to a distant country I will pursue you through the power of God. And if you go into a cave, or if you just run away, I will not leave you alone nor will I return to my capital till I have taken you.'"

Now when he received this message, Sabradin set out and came to the king, and stood before him. And the king asked him, saying, "Why have you behaved thus to me? The gifts which you formerly sent to me you have given to your servants; and the multitude of goods of silver and

gold which I gave to the poor you have taken away. Those who traded with me you have bound in chains; and what is worse, you have aspired to the throne of my kingdom, in imitation of the Devil your father who wished to be the equal of his creator." When that Rebel heard these words of the king he was at a loss for an answer in the greatness of his fear, for he was afraid of the king's presence; and he answered, "Do with me according to your will." And immediately the soldiers who were on the left and right of the king stood forth in anger and said, "This man is not worthy of life, for he has burnt the churches of God, he has slain Christians, and those whom he did not kill he has compelled to accept his religion. Moreover he desired to ascend the high mountain of the kingdom." And some said, "Let us slay him with the edge of the sword"; others said, "Let us stone him to death"; and others again, "Let us burn him with fire that he may disappear from the Earth." And they said to the king, "Think not, O king, that he comes to you honestly and freely, for he trusts in his magic art." And so saying, they lifted from his bosom and arm a talisman and revealed the form of his magic. Then said the king, "Can your talismans deliver you from my hands in which God has imprisoned you?" And he gave orders for his two hands to be bound with iron chains; he did not wish him to be killed, for he is merciful and forbearing. Thus was taken the Rebel in the net which he himself had woven, and in the snare which he himself had set. . . . After this the king sent news to the capital of his kingdom. . . . "There is good news for you: with the help of your prayers I have defeated my enemy who is also the enemy of Christ."

⁹The *Falashas*, or Ethiopian Jews, are Kushitic people whose ancestors had intermarried with Jewish immigrants from Yemen. They are termed *crucifiers* here because of the notion that the Jews were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion.

¹⁰Queen Mangesa, wife of King Amda Seyon.

¹¹A pun. In Geez *sabara* means "break" and *dayn* means "judgment." Actually, the Arabic name Sabr ad-Din means "Constant in the Faith."

In 1351 Ibn Battuta returned to Morocco, but one more journey awaited him. In February 1352 he joined a camel caravan of merchants as he embarked on his last great adventure — a trip to the West African kingdom of Mali, which lay some 1,500 miles to the south of Morocco across one of the world's most inhospitable deserts. Two years later he arrived back home with marvelous tales to tell of this land of gold, whose leaders had converted to Islam in the early thirteenth century.

His days of long-distance travel now over, Ibn Battuta narrated his many travel experiences and observations to Ibn Juzayy, a professional scribe who fashioned these stories into one of the most popular forms of literature in the Islamic World: a *rihla*, or book of travels centering on the *hajj* to Mecca.

The following selection does not describe any of Ibn Battuta's several pilgrimages to Mecca; rather, it tells of his last great journey into the kingdom of Mali in West Africa's Niger River region.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What did Ibn Battuta admire most about these people? What did he find hardest to accept? Why?
2. Did Ibn Battuta understand fully all he encountered? Can you find any evidence of tension or misunderstanding?
3. In what ways were the cultures of the people whom Ibn Battuta encountered a mixture of indigenous West African and Islamic elements?
4. How organized and controlled does the state of Mali appear to be?
5. Compare fourteenth-century Mali with eleventh-century Ghana (source 91). What are their similarities and differences? Which seem more significant? What do you conclude from that answer?
6. Based on a careful study of sources 91 and 93, as well as of this document, what inferences do you draw about the social status of women in sub-Saharan West Africa?

Then we reached the town of Iwalatan . . . after a journey . . . of two whole months. It is the first district of the Sudan and the sultan's¹ deputy there is Farba Husayn. *Farba* means "deputy." When we arrived there the merchants² placed their belongings in an open space, where the Sudan³ took over the guard of them while they went to the *farba*. He was sitting on a carpet under a *saqif*⁴ with his assistants in front of him

with lances and bows in their hands and the chief men of the Masufa⁵ behind him. The merchants stood before him while he addressed them, in spite of their proximity to him, through an interpreter, out of contempt for them. At this I repented at having come to their country because of their ill manners and their contempt for white men.⁶ I made for the house of Ibn Badda, a respectable man of Sala to whom I had written to

¹The sultan, or king, of Mali, for whom this was an outlying province.

²Berbers and Arabs from North Africa.

³Here this Arabic word, which means "blacks," refers to the local people and not to the region.

⁴A colonnade.

⁵A Berber people of the western Sahara.

⁶Merchants from North Africa: Berbers and Arabs.