

Historical study of Missionary strategies that sustained Christianity in Ethiopia and the Challenges to Contemporary Churches, Missionaries and Mission Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the missionary strategies that enable the survival of Christianity in Ethiopia till today. The study was based on the library and internet materials. There were discussions on the historical background of Ethiopia, historical development of Christianity in Ethiopia, the historical background of religious war in Ethiopia and the Missionary strategies that helped Christianity to take root till today in Ethiopia. Lastly, the conclusion was drawn from the entire work. It was recommended that in this twenty first century missions to any community or country should be centred on conversion of political heads or local heads to the Christian faith as this would help a lot in the future of Christianity in that community and beyond. More so, any Christian community, nation, city, town or village that may be experiencing invasion of antichrist should quickly seek the help of other Christians in their neighbourhood or other Christians around the world. Finally, other Christians in other parts of the world should not fold their hands in protecting their brothers and sisters in the Lord from their enemies (e.g. Muslim jihadists or any anti-Christ group).

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia holds an important place in the history of Christianity in Africa. The role it played remains a legacy for us in Africa. This is a country that had been known as a Christian country for a very long time. The people there, especially, Christians had weathered storms of persecution in series and still retained Christianity in their domain. Unlike their neighbouring countries in North Africa that could not withstand the heat of persecution by jihadists but gave way to the threat and religion of the blood thirsty invaders.²

History unveils it that, despite the distance maintained by Ethiopia to other Christian countries that could come to their aid during the jihad, the people of Ethiopia tried their best

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² Ethiopian Muslims Burn down Christian Homes, Farm. Thursday September 30, 2010.

<https://www.worthynews.com/9539-ethiopian-muslims-burn-down-christian-homes-farms>. Accessed: 9 June, 2017.

to dispel the enemy of their country and Christianity.³ The kings were not keeping quiet to solicit for assistance of other Christian countries.⁴ Although as time goes on the hands of destruction of the jihadists fell on some Christians and Churches in the country. Incredibly, they could defend their nation and Christianity from being wiped out and devastated.⁵

There are factors that were responsible for the possibility of the existence of Christianity in Ethiopia up till today. These are what this paper aims to reveal to all Christians, missionaries, mission agencies, Churches, theological institutions, mission schools, theological lecturers, mission trainers, Mission trainees and other theological students who will have access to this paper. The focus of this research article is that it will enable all Christians, missionaries and mission workers to identify the strong area that could help Christianity to be well rooted in any community they might be reaching for the Lord. The mission agencies and churches will be able to instruct and plan well their tactics that will enable them to prepare well their missionaries or church members for successful mission enterprise in any community they might be sent to work for the Lord. The theological institutions and mission schools will be able to prepare and design the useful curriculum that will enable them to prepare skilful missionaries and ministers of the gospel that will go and establish Christianity that will be housed for ever in any community they may find themselves. The lecturers, mission trainers and mission trainees will also find this paper useful for their effective and affective training for missions.

Nevertheless, this paper will examine missionary strategies that helped Ethiopian Christians to retain Christianity in their land till today. This paper will be useful for all Christians in the world who are still planning or in the process of reaching the world for the Lord. The research question this paper will attempt to answer is: What are the missionary strategies that helped Ethiopian Christians to retain Christianity in their domain till today?

Therefore, the paper will discuss the operational terms, the historical background of Ethiopians, historical development of Christianity in Ethiopia, the historical background of religious war in Ethiopia and the Missionary strategies that helped Christianity to take root till today in Ethiopia and their challenges to Contemporary Christian Churches, Missionaries and Mission agencies. Lastly the conclusion will be drawn.

DEFINITION OF OPERATIONAL TERMS

There are certain terms to be defined for the purpose of clarification in this paper: the terms like Evaluation, Missionary, Strategy, Missionary strategies, sustainability, Christianity and Ethiopia.

First term in this paper is Evaluation. Evaluation, according to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, is “the act of considering something to decide how useful or valuable it is.”⁶ In this sense the term evaluation shall be used.

Second term is Missionary. Missionary has two perspectives. The first perspective connotes the idea of a person who is doing mission work⁷ or carrying out mission.⁸ The

³ Peter Falk. *The Growth of the Church in Africa*. (Bukuru: ACTS, 1997), 71-72.

⁴ Ibid, 72.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. The Complete Guide to written and Spoken English*. New Edition. (England: Longman Group Ltd, 1995), 467.

⁷ Ibid, 913.

second perspective means the activity or activities of the Christians or Christian community.⁹ The second perspective of missionary is more relevant in this research article.

The third term is Strategy. Strategy is defined as “the science and art of military command employed with the objective of meeting the enemy under conditions advantageous to one’s own force. It also has a more general application: a careful plan or method for achieving an end.”¹⁰ Both definitions are useful in this paper.

Fourth is Missionary strategies. Missionary strategies in the context of this paper refers to the methods used to carry out the activities that are in favour of the spread of Christianity.

The fifth is sustainability. This word plays the role of verb in the topic of this paper. It carries the sense of continual existence of the Church. Wherever the word is used in this research article it connotes the idea of continuity.

Sixth is Christianity. This is a religion of followers of Christ that Jesus Christ himself is the leader, founder, and the initiator.¹¹ The followers believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, Bible as the word of God and living their lives in conformity with the scripture. So, Christianity refers to the religion that holds the belief that Jesus is the messiah, the son of God and through him alone people can see God the father.

Lastly, Ethiopia refers to an ancient country of black Africa. There is continuous history of Christianity in it since the early centuries of the Church.¹²

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ETHIOPIANS

Ethiopians are inhabited the country of Ethiopia in the horn of Africa on the continent northeast coasts.¹³ People of Ethiopia shared borders with six countries namely: Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, Somalia and Eritrea.¹⁴ They had a capital city, called Axum, as commercial centre in those days, specifically tenth century BC. They had traded in the past with the countries of Middle East and developed a distinct civilisation of their own. The location of their country, Ethiopia, on the Red sea has aided their relationship and communication with other countries that surround the body of the water.¹⁵ They were privileged to trade with so many countries within and outside the continent of Africa, because of their sea port, Adoulis, which was established in tenth century. This enables the

⁸ Frederic C. Mish (Ed.). *Mariam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. Tenth Edition. (Philippines: Marriam-Webster, 1993),745.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ A. Scanlon Clark. *Missions Today. Biblical Basis & strategy. First Course: Missions*. (Texas: Carib Baptist Publications, 1977), 83.

¹¹ Frederic C. Mish (Ed.). *Mariam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. Tenth Edition. (Philippines: Marriam-Webster, 1993), 203

¹² Louise Pirouet. *Christianity Worldwide Church History 4: AD 1800 Onwards*. Delhi: SPCK, 1993), 126.

¹³ Neil Desai. *A Brief History of Ethiopia: Social, Geographical, Political and Cultural Background*. <https://busoundecology.wordpress.com/2015/03/17/a-brief-history-of-ethiopia-social-geographical-political-and-cultural-background/>. Accessed: 9 June, 2017

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Peter Falk. *The Growth of the Church in Africa*. (Bukuru: ACTS, 1997), 53-54.

flow of trade from Ethiopia to Egypt, Arabia, India, and as far as Malaysia.¹⁶ They speak Semitic languages known as Tigre, Tigrinya and Amharic.¹⁷ Abyssinia (Ethiopia) was very prominent in the world affairs because of the establishing relation with Persia, Constantinople and Rome. The kingdom was extended as the Bedja and Moroe kingdoms come to their submission.¹⁸

At this present time, Addis Ababa is the capital city to Ethiopia, locating in the middle of the country. There are 99 million people live in Ethiopia and the Oromo (34.4%) and Amhara (27%) are the major ethnic groups and their languages are used for communication locally. Urban areas of Ethiopia are populated with 17% of the total population and about 3 million live in Addis Ababa, the capital city. The population of the country mostly comprises young people of 17years both male and female.

Ethiopia had served as the place of refuge for Muslims in the early stage of Islam. Some Muslim adherents fled to the country when the persecution rose against them in Mecca because of the new religion (Islam). The king (Negus) warmly welcomed them to the country and offered them refuge.¹⁹ From the above statement it shows that the Ethiopians right from the past are kind and hospitable. But there is evidence that Ethiopians in the days of Negus were Christians. The presence of Christianity was on the ground before the flight of some Muslims to Ethiopia (Abyssinia).²⁰

The economy of Ethiopians is world renowned and strongest economy especially in the Nile region. The growth of their economy is mostly emanated from Agricultural production. They also boosted their economy through manufacturing, textiles and energy sectors. These had really helped their economy to encourage growth and the development of the country, Ethiopia.²¹

The beginning of their political history is controversial. There were two different reports that gave different date of the existence of the country politically. Peter Falk reports thus:

According to the national legend of Ethiopia, the history of the Axum kingdom begins in the tenth century B.C. with king Menelik, who is supposed to be the son of the queen of Sheba and Solomon, the Israelite king of that period. This tradition has been maintained by the Ethiopians and has served as a source of national pride and stability in the political leadership. It has also influenced the close relationship between the Church and the state in Ethiopia. With an occasional interruption, the Solomonic dynasty, until recently, has ruled Ethiopia since that time. Emperor Haile Selassie claimed to be a descendant of that dynasty.²²

In the above report of Peter Falk, there are two important things that are noted namely: date of beginning of Ethiopia and the first king to rule Ethiopia. Peter Falk

¹⁶ Ibid, 54.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Abd Al-Masih. Holy war in Islam. (Villach: Light of Life, no date), 12-14.

²⁰ Ibid, 14.

²¹ Neil Desai. *A Brief History of Ethiopia: Social, Geographical, Political and Cultural Background*. <https://busoundecology.wordpress.com/2015/03/17/a-brief-history-of-ethiopia-social-geographical-political-and-cultural-background/>. Accessed: 9 June, 2017.

²² Peter Falk. *The Growth of the Church in Africa*. (Bukuru: ACTS, 1997), 53.

maintained that Ethiopia started to exist around tenth century B.C. and Menelik was the first king.²³

The date and the account of the Menelik to be the first king contradict what the internet source claimed. The report states that:

Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in Africa. With the majority of its political history being monarchical, it has existed for over 2,000 years, dating back to the first century B.C. during its rule under the Aksumite Kingdom. Coptic Christianity was introduced by the Egyptians during the fourth century, and by the 15th century, Muslim leader Ahmad Gran had conquered the majority of Ethiopia. After a series of power shifts throughout much of the 19th century, Emperor Menelik II took control and led the country through an 1895 Italian invasion. The Ethiopian army defeated the Italians, allowing the country to be recognized as an independent state. By 1930, leader Ras Tafari Makonnen, soon named Emperor Haile Selassie I, came to power. By 1935 during World War II, however, the Italians attempted a second invasion and succeeded in capturing Addis Ababa in 1936, dethroning Salassie in the process. Soon after, Italian East Africa was formed, combining three separate nations – Ethiopia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. The Ethiopian Resistance, greatly assisted by the British army, defeated the Italian rule, which restored Selassie to power by 1941. Salassie continued to rule the country until 1974, when he was overthrown during a military coup and overtaken by General Terefi Benti.²⁴

This account demonstrated that the date of inception of Ethiopia was around first century B.C, differing from tenth century claimed by Peter Falk. But there is fact to be held from the two accounts. The fact that Ethiopia is an aged long existing country. It was an old country. Unlike some other countries in Africa that were just came to be in twentieth century, such as Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa and so on. Another good thing about Ethiopia is its independence since its existence, which had made it unique among its counterparts in Africa. Therefore, Christianity was able to have its root in the country among Ethiopians.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN ETHIOPIA

The time that Christianity enters Ethiopia was ambiguous. According to Boer, Christianity in Ethiopia has no actual date of entry. He maintains that the church in Ethiopia has no origin. But tradition recounts that it was founded by a captive youth from Tyre.²⁵ Peter Falk also corroborates that Christianity came to Ethiopia through the youths who came from Tyre with the decision to visit the lands bordering the Red Sea and to the India. As they

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Neil Desai. *A Brief History of Ethiopia: Social, Geographical, Political and Cultural Background*. <https://busoundecology.wordpress.com/2015/03/17/a-brief-history-of-ethiopia-social-geographical-political-and-cultural-background/>. Accessed: 9 June, 2017. “Ethiopia,” *The World Factbook*, Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency (2015), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>. Accessed: 9 June, 2017 “Ethiopia Profile.” *BBC News*. BBC, 20 Sept. 2013. Web. 16 Mar. 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13351397>. Accessed: 9 June, 2017.

²⁵ Harry R. Boer. *A Short History of the Early Church*. (Nigeria: Daystar Press, 2003), 25.

were coming back they fell into the hands of the hostile Ethiopians who held them captives. They killed other members of the crew but left Frumentius and Aedesius alive and took them to the King. The king gave the two of them posts in his cabinet and through them the church came into existence.²⁶ Boer's report favours one person as the one who introduced Christianity to Ethiopia. But Peter Falk's report favours two people named Frumentius and Aedesius.

Cheesman only affirms that Christianity came to Ethiopia through Missionaries but could not ascertain the time.²⁷ This report only indicated that two or more people were involved in bringing Christianity to Ethiopia unlike Peter Falk who clearly identified them by their names and they were two persons. But there was another claim that Christianity came to Ethiopia from Egypt, not from Tyre, in the fourth century.²⁸ This is more referring to the time that Frumentius went to the Bishop in Egypt, Athanasius, to request for the bishop for Ethiopian Church and he was later ordained as bishop of the Church in Ethiopia, then he came back to Ethiopia to lead the Church during 341 AD.²⁹ Although one would have believed that Christianity got to Ethiopia through Eunuch who was converted and baptised in the scripture by Evangelist Philip (Acts 8:26-40). But there is no other historical source that can prove that in the history of Christianity in Ethiopia. In order to avoid confusion, it is better to stick to the historical records that are in line with the Ethiopia national history.

History reveals that Ethiopia was a Christian country since early stage of its existence and Christianity became official religion of the country. This was possible because through the missionary efforts of Frumentius the king accepted Christian faith and established Christianity in his kingdom.³⁰ The missionaries who were working in Ethiopia quickly translated the scripture to the language of the people of Ethiopia.³¹ So many challenges later arose against Christianity in the country but the Ethiopians tried to put them under control.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RELIGIOUS WAR IN ETHIOPIA

As Ethiopia is well known as Christian nation both now and then, there were serious situations that befell the country so excruciatingly. The Ethiopians who were known as Christians were invaded by the Islamic jihadists. The other neighbouring countries like Egypt³², Eritrea³³, Sudan³⁴, Nubia³⁵ and North Africa (like Morocco and Tunisia etc.)³⁶ and

²⁶ Peter Falk. *The Growth of the Church in Africa*. (Bukuru: ACTS, 1997), 54.

²⁷ Graham Cheesman. *Mission Today. An Introduction to Mission Studies*. (Bukuru: ACTS, 1989), 42.

²⁸ Neil Desai. *A Brief History of Ethiopia: Social, Geographical, Political and Cultural Background*. <https://busoundecology.wordpress.com/2015/03/17/a-brief-history-of-ethiopia-social-geographical-political-and-cultural-background/>. Accessed: 9 June, 2017. "Ethiopia Profile." *BBC News*. BBC, 20 Sept. 2013. Web. 16 Mar. 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13351397>. Accessed: 9 June, 2017.

²⁹ Peter Falk. *The Growth of the Church in Africa*. (Bukuru: ACTS, 1997), 55.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 63-65.

³³ Ibid, 67.

³⁴ Ibid, 63, 70.

³⁵ Ibid, 65, 71.

³⁶ Ibid, 70-71.

the Red sea³⁷ fell under the control of Arabian Muslims. They advanced their struggle to Ethiopia with the sole aim of taking over the control of its government and driving out of Christianity from the country. Due to the isolation of Ethiopia from other Christian countries, Islamic jihadists attempted to override the country by surrounding it with Islamic forces.³⁸ The Ethiopian emperors played a very great roles in repelling the forces of Islam that surrounded them and spared both their country's governance and religion, Christianity.³⁹ Likewise the Ethiopians are in full support of their emperors defended their country against Muslim attacks and the seat of the government was relocated to southern part of the country from the northern area where it was located before. The church was not discouraged or quit its mission work at the period, instead the church pressed on towards new areas of the kingdom for the Lord.⁴⁰ The privileges of having Christians as national leaders encourage the unity between government and the Christian church in Ethiopia. So, they both fought out the Muslim attacks in the country.⁴¹ Emperors like Zara Ya'kob (1434-1468) and Lebna Dengel (1508-1540) sought for the help of other Christians, pope and Portuguese, from Europe to defend the Christianity and their country against Muslim attacks. This enables Ethiopia to retain its status as a Christian country.⁴²

HISTORICAL STUDY OF MISSIONARY STRATEGIES THAT SUSTAINED CHRISTIANITY IN ETHIOPIA AND THEIR CHALLENGES TO CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES, MISSIONARIES AND MISSION AGENCIES

Ethiopia is not just becoming a Christian country today. It took some efforts by the church to achieve it. Church really played very important and missiological roles that helped the country of Ethiopia to be proud of its status of being called a Christian country. Christianity survives in Ethiopia due to some certain missionary approaches used by the Church. Church in Ethiopia did not wait until the evil day before it started planning for it. When the Church found itself in tough time with Islamic adherents it did not entertain fear to confront it. Church within and outside Ethiopia employed useful missiological strategies that enabled Christianity to dominate the entire Ethiopia as an official religion. Not less than seven important missionary strategies championed the course. These missionary strategies are still challenging Christian Churches, Missionaries and mission agencies today to emulate them in their mission enterprise to the world.

First, church through the missionary youths was able to get the community leaders (Kings) converted to Christianity and through this church sprout up in Ethiopia⁴³ and some of the national leaders like Zara Ya'kob and Lebna Dengel were made in the Church.⁴⁴ This is a challenge for present days' churches and missionaries to have in their strategical plans the conversion of community heads they are trying to reach for the Lord and discipling them to participate in the affairs of their community without compromising faith. This will make the

³⁷ Ibid, 67.

³⁸ Ibid, 71-72.

³⁹ Ibid, 71.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 72.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid, 54 and 71.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 54-55 and 72.

task to be easy for their penetration among the people they want to introduce Christianity to. Second, Church, especially from Syria, sent missionaries to Ethiopia to advance Christianity.⁴⁵ The contemporary churches should not hesitate to send missionaries to unreached areas for the expansion of Christianity to the area.

Third, translation of the Bible to the language of the people.⁴⁶ This strategy is superb if Churches, mission agencies and missionaries can also engage in translating Bible from foreign language to the language of the people they are trying to reach.

Fourth, they conducted the services in the people's languages.⁴⁷ This strategy will help the people to have cordial relationship with God and happiest encounter with him in worship. So, missionaries should try to know and conduct service in the language of the people they are trying to reach for them to have meaningful worship experience with God in the service.

Fifth, the Church and the state were united to fight Islamic invasion.⁴⁸ So every Christian church should try as much as possible to build good relationship with the government of the land. This is not to the detriment of Church's authority or reducing Church's standard, but to preserve Christianity in the land.

Sixth, beckoning on other Christians to assist in defending Christianity and the country from Islamic invasion was used by the Ethiopian leaders and Christians.⁴⁹ This strategy is still relevant today, especially in a place where Christians are facing persecution. Christians in a persecuting community should give clarion call to other Christians in the neighbourhood and other parts of the world to come to their aid in preserving Christianity and lives of the Christians.

Seventh, non-stop Missionary activities during the persecution against Christians by Islamic jihadists was going on.⁵⁰ The Ethiopian Church and the missionaries kept on spreading Christianity to the new areas of Ethiopia. This is exactly the method used by Evangelist Philip (in Acts 8) to spread the Gospel to other places during the persecution in Jerusalem against the early Church. The Ethiopian Christians repeated the same in the order of the scripture. So, this strategy is useful for the church in its mission enterprise to the world. No matter how severe the persecution may appear Church must not allow fear to prevent her from propagating the gospel of Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Based on the history of Ethiopia, Christianity and the religious war in Ethiopia, there are seven notable missionary strategies that enabled Ethiopia to preserve Christianity in the Country namely: Conversion of the community leaders to Christianity and making of national leaders in the Church in Ethiopia; sending of missionaries to Ethiopia to advance Christianity; Translation of Bible to the language of the people; Conducting the service in the people's language; Good relationship between the Church and the State to fight Islamic invasion; Beckoning on other Christians to assist in defending Christianity and the country

⁴⁵ Ibid, 55.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 85.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 72 and 85.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 72.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 72.

from Islamic invasion; and Non-stop Missionary activities during the persecution against Christians by Islamic jihadists. All these have positive lessons for the present age Christians. Let the Churches all over the world take note of them and work with them in their mission enterprise. All these missionary strategies are still useful today, especially at this twenty first century that Islamic invasion against Christians and Christian countries is becoming the order of the day. All Christians should understand that preservation and expansion of Christianity in every community of the world is their collective and missiological responsibilities. The responsibilities rest upon the Church leaders, members of the Church and all Christian organisations.

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