

## **The Ethiopian Monastery of Dabre Seltan and the Black Christian Presence in the Holy Land**

The monastery of Dabre Seltan, which is situated on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem has been long in dispute between the Coptic Church and the Ethiopian Church and it symbolizes the last stronghold anywhere near the Church of the Holy Sepulcher both for Ethiopians and Africans alike. The Ethiopian Community in the Holy Land dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. perhaps the longest presence of any African community in the Holy Land for the last two millennia. This is known through two Latin letters dispatched from Bethlehem by St. Paula and her daughter St. Eustochium at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century alarming to the presence of Ethiopian pilgrims at the time. During medieval times scarce documentation exists on the Ethiopians in the Holy Land as a distinguishable community, which makes us likely to think that the Ethiopians during that period and due to their meager resources might have found refuge within one of the other Christian communities in the Holy Land, but much remains yet to be studied in this regard.

It is well known that till the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Ethiopians owned four chapels in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century both Italian Friars Frescobaldi and d'Anglure in two separate visits to the Holy Land mention that the Ethiopians possessed in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Golgotha) the following chapels; Chapel of Our Lady and of St. John the Evangelist, Chapel of St. Michael, Chapel of St. John the Baptist, and Chapel of St. Mary Magdalene. All these chapels were lost apparently due to the dwindling of aid given by Ethiopian Emperors to the Ethiopian community in the Holy Land during Gragn's invasion in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a fact which led them to grow dependent on other Christian communities mainly Armenians and Greeks who eventually tricked them into giving away their possessions in the Holy Sepulcher, becoming the only ancient and African church without any possessions in the Holy Sepulcher. In 1532 a French Pilgrim named Charles Philippe de Champermony visited the Holy Land and testified to the presence of the Ethiopians in the monastery of Dabre Seltan in a book that was published in Paris following his visit. A more detailed account and description of the presence of the Ethiopians at the monastery of Dabre Seltan is provided by the Franciscan guardian Fr. Verniero who writes in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

*“There are a few of them [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 Sepulcher, where there are a few narrow, low and dark rooms, and there they sleep on the bare ground.”*

Beyond describing the dire poverty in which the Ethiopians were in the Holy Land and particularly in the monastery of Dabre Seltan, which they preserved till today with everything they have sacrificing their lives and health at times, tragically the condition of the Ethiopian monks there have not improved drastically since this account in the 17<sup>th</sup>

century. Nevertheless, most importantly this telling account confirms beyond doubt the Ethiopians' possession of the monastery of Dabre Seltan in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. An Ethiopian manuscript provides an interesting account of the events that took place in the monastery during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is said that an Egyptian named Ibrahim Giuhari and his 8 slaves were received as guests by the Ethiopians in 1774 in the monastery and hereafter claimed ownership of the monastery. Following this event the Copts intervened in 1820 forcing an Ethiopian priest named Abba Gabra Kristos to hand over the keys of the monastery to them. In 1838, a plague struck the monastery of Dabre Seltan and led to the death of all the monks and nuns sparing the lives of only two. The Copts and the Armenians according to the Anglican Bishop Samuel Gobat took advantage of the opportunity and burnt down the library from fear of contamination as they claimed. Thus all valuable documents and manuscripts in the library that could have decisively proved Ethiopian ownership of the monastery were lost forever. In the same period, the Copts also rallied a sympathetic Ibrahim Pasha ruling the Holy Land from Egypt to their cause. In 1850, the Ethiopians finally resealed the keys to the monastery, after having suffered very harsh treatment (invoking images of the Jim Crow) inflicted upon them especially by the Armenians whose Patriarchal Vicar according to the British Consul James Finn "*used the poor Abyssinians with great severity, beat them, chained them, and refused them access to the Church except in rare intervals,*" but also by the Copts, who used to lock them in the monastery and church for prolonged periods. In 1862, the Copts forcibly changed the locks to the chapels of St. Michael (the western door leading to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher), and the chapel of the Four Creatures (Medhanie Alem) and in 1890 kept them permanently locked for the next 80 years till 1970, which rendered them useless to anyone and forced the Ethiopians to erect a huge tent to celebrate their feasts and masses in the open air, a tradition which is followed till today in certain feasts.

Therefore, when the Status Quo arrangement came into affect by a Turkish *firman* issued in 1852 by Sultan Abdel Majid, the Ethiopians where in control of the monastery both de facto and de jure. The Status Quo arrangement which stipulated and decreed that the "current and existing state of affairs must be preserved" was further legitimized and reaffirmed in the 1856 Paris Peace Convention, the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty, and the British Mandate government's 1922 Palestine Order-in-Council. In the spirit of the *firman* and resting on legal documents that were obtained from the Turkish archive in Constantinople, Baron Boris Nolde, a Russian professor of law established the Ethiopian ownership of the monastery through a 16-pages legal opinion he wrote in French in 1925. In February 1961 and on the basis of these documents and legal opinion, a Jordanian court ruled in favor of the Ethiopians, ordering for the keys of the two chapels namely St. Michael and the Four Creatures to be handed over to the Ethiopians, and for the Coptic monk occupying a room in the Ethiopian monastery to be evicted immediately, it further stated that if the Copts failed to abide by this ruling all locks including that of the northern gate are to be replaced by the Jordanian government and handed over to the Ethiopians. Unfortunately, the decision was overturned within 40 days due to Abdel Nasser's pressure on Jordan. In 1966 and in accordance to the Status Quo arrangement which stipulated that in cases where a holy site was disputed, the responsibility for the restoration and renovation of the place fell only upon the government in control, the Jordanian governor embarked upon renovating the

compound and installed modern water and electric facilities, to which the Copts retaliated to by throwing stones on the Ethiopian Easter celebrations in 1967, which they claimed was because the Ethiopians violated the Status Quo after using electricity instead of oil lamps as previously customary. This began a long tradition of police presence at Ethiopian celebrations in Dabre Seltan, which continue till today so as to secure the safety of the clergy, laity and tourists who flock every year to celebrate Ethiopian feasts like Easter. After the above-mentioned territory came under Israeli control in 1967, the Israeli authorities in 1970 changed the locks of both chapels and gave the keys to the Ethiopians. Subsequently, the Coptic bishop in Jerusalem took the matter to the Israeli High Court of Justice who decided in March 1971 that if as claimed and the locks were indeed replaced in violation of the Status Quo, then the keys are to be returned to the Copts. Nevertheless, the Court understanding the great sensitivity of the matter left a door open for the Israeli government to intervene and take matters into its hands. The latter decided to reserve its right to appoint a special inquiry commission of ministers to look into the matter in accordance to the King's order in Council of 1924, and on this basis the keys are to remain in the hands of the Ethiopians till the committee reaches a conclusion and no conclusion whatsoever was reached till now. In the meantime of course, different commissions were dismissed and appointed but no solution was found to the problem.

It is important to understand that the Dabre Seltan monastery was sadly but successfully integrated in politics and the political maneuvers used by Israel and its Arab neighbors to nurture a pointless check and balances system that the main victims to were the Ethiopians. As recalled, the issue of Dabre Seltan was brought up in the 1978 Israeli-Egyptian peace accord and in later negotiations between the Israelis and the Egyptians notably in a meeting between Netanyahu and Mubarak in 1996. The Copts also brought the matter to international agenda through its protagonist Dr. Butros Ghali, the former Secretary General of the United Nations. These developments and more recent developments that failed to attract international attention and clear condemnation as in August 2002, where a fight broke out between the Ethiopians and the Copts after the Ethiopians accused the Copts of violating the Status Quo, brought to very unfortunate conclusions, when the aged Ethiopian monks in the monastery were attacked by unknown individuals, beaten and sustained very bad injuries, which necessitated their hospitalization, only point out to the failure of the current Ethiopian regime to gain the upper hand over Egypt in international politics, and place the issue of Dabre Seltan in international perspective and consideration. Therefore, at this time it proves rather essential for Ethiopians and Africans in the Diaspora to lobby for this paramount cause of preserving African presence in one of the Holiest Sites in the world. The contribution of the Ethiopian and Black Diaspora can be best realized as following:

1. Help design effective medium through which the history of African presence in the Holy Land and the dispute of the Dabre Seltan monastery is conveyed to the outside world for example through constructing an internet website for the benefit of the Ethiopian Church in Jerusalem and Ethiopians and Africans in the Diaspora as a whole, newspaper articles, radio programs and so on...
2. Raise the awareness of influential groups of African descent living in the Diaspora to this problem and obtain their lobbying and support for example the

Congressional Black Caucus. Also other influential Christian and Jewish lobby groups who understand the injustice committed against the Ethiopians and Ethiopia's contribution and strong affinity since past times to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

3. Organize visits of groups of people of African descent to the monastery so as to affirm our presence and possession of the monastery.
4. Rally the support of international law experts, who might be willing to get involved and work towards the restoration of the monastery to the Ethiopians.

I do hope that the gravity and implications of the matter is clear especially to many generations to come. In the past the weakness and limited capacity of the Ethiopians have prevented them to stand for their rights and fight against the injustice committed against them and this led to colossal and irretrievable losses. Now I want to believe that the situation is different. We must fight uncompromisingly for this last foothold of any African community near the Church of the Holy Sepulcher using all the legal ways available.

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