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BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MONASTIC LIFE IN EARLY ABYSSINIA

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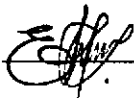
**A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies**

**Nairobi
7th February, 2002**

STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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ABREVIATIONS

A.D.	anno domini (year)
cent.	Century
Cf.	confer; compare
Chap.	Chapter
ed.	edited by
e.g.	exempli gratia (for example)
etc.	et cetera (and so forth)
Ibid.	Ividem — in the aforementioned place
ICC	International Critical commentary
NCE	New Catholic Encyclopaedia
St.	Saint
Vol.	Volume

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This essay will reflect about monasticism in Eritrea and Ethiopia and their evangelisation since they have the same Christian history. In it, I will show how the people of these two countries were attracted to monasticism in early ages through the mediation of the word of God and how they have shared their faith with others. In presenting this, for convenience sake, I will use the common name '*Abyssinia*' in the details of the research instead of repeating the names of these two countries again and again.

This essay is made up of three chapters and its objectives mainly are;

- a) to show that the monastic vocation was a particular way of responding to God's call to ascetic life as well as to evangelisation;
- b) to present the deeper values, risks and challenges of being monk;
- c) to show the role Abyssinian monks played in implanting inculturated Christian faith, in translating scripture into local languages, indigenisation of the liturgy, their active role of educating and through the witness of their lives; and
- d) to critically analyse both positive and negative aspects of monastic evangelisation and suggest areas that could be adapted and improved.

In the first chapter of this essay we shall see the active work of the word of God in the lives of his own people and the way he called them to monastic vocations abundantly. In the second part of the first chapter, I will focus on how the Abyssinian monks have evangelised Abyssinia untiringly. I will also clarify plainly

their goal, purpose, failures and achievements in the course of evangelisation. In this chapter, I will use many quotations from the scripture which were indicated repeatedly in many books written regarding Abyssinian monks as the main means of inspiration for their monasticism. Then in the second chapter, I will give the modern exegesis of these selected quotations by modern scholars.

In the last chapter, I will compare the daily early Christian life of Abyssinian monks and their interpretation of scriptures and today's modern exegetes. Then I will conclude my research with application and guidelines for adaptation and reformation of these monks.

CHAPTER I

THE EFFECT OF SCRIPTURE FOR ABYSSINIAN MONASTICISM AND ITS EVANGELISATION

INTRODUCTION

The scriptures are of absolutely fundamental importance for the pilgrim church for their life giving words. They initiate a new experience into the living faith of people. They vividly express the living Christ and their intention is urgently practical. They played a great role in Abyssinian monasticism by calling people to conversion and to the love of God through the ascetic life.

In this first chapter, I will explain what monasticism means and how it began in Abyssinia. Then, I shall explain how God had been calling Abyssinian people to monasticism through the mediation of his words in the scriptures. I will also describe how the monks, in their turn, responded to such Biblical inspirations and what kind of impact they have created in evangelising Abyssinians. Similarly, I will explain how God can also call his people by inspiring them directly without any mediation of his word. This will include those who used to be attracted by the ascetical life of the monks and decided to join monasticism.

1.1 Monasticism and Its Beginning in Abyssinia

1.1.1 Monasticism and Its Purpose

The word 'monastery' derives from Greek word $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\varsigma$ (*Monos*) which means 'one'. It applies to those who make 'one' in everything such as "one mind and one heart" (Acts 4:32), many bodies but not many minds or hearts, and so on. These can rightly be called *monos*, that is, one alone (Ps 132:1), however the crowd who make 'one' cannot be called *monos*.¹ In early usage, in its strict etymological sense, the term monastery (from $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\varsigma$ or $\mu\omicron\nu\omicron\chi\omicron\varsigma$) indicated a hermit's cell or a group of cells surrounded by a protective wall.² But later it applied to the dwelling of monks and clerics living a common life who have heard in their souls the personal call of "Follow Me".

Monasticism literally means the act of dwelling alone. It denotes the mode of life pertaining to persons living in seclusion from the world, under religious vows and subject to a fixed rule, such as monks, friars, nuns, or in general religious. The basic idea of monasticism in all its varieties is seclusion or withdrawal from the world to spend one's whole life in prayer and other ascetic practices. The object of this is to achieve a life whose ideal is different from and largely at variance with that pursued by the majority of human beings; and the method adopted, no matter what its precise details may be, is always self-abnegation or organized asceticism.³ This

¹ MOHLER, J. A., *The Heresy of Monasticism. The Christian Monks: Types and Anti-types*, New York: The Society of St. Paul, 1971, 123.

² SAUSE, B. A., "Monastery" in NCE, Vol. 9, Washington: Jack Hearty and Associates, Inc., 1967, 1021.

³ www.newadvent.org/cathen/1045.htm, 1; Tesfamariam, B., *Tarik Gedamat. Monastic*

practice began in the primitive church with a minority group and a community bearing witness to faith in Christ. They felt so strong in their creative newness and eschatological hope (Rev 22:20) that, while being in the world, they were, on the whole, aware of not being of the world but of being a community of 'saints.'⁴ They were using the gospel as their source for such lifelong ascetic practices.

From the beginning, monasticism has been built on the desire to escape from the present world of sin and death into the world of the eschaton. Perhaps it is an inner idealism of human beings, which drives them to seek happiness in far distant places, away from the evils of their present life. The later Christians also wanted to continue the ideal eschatological communities of early Christians, even though the archetype may have been embroidered over the centuries.⁵

If we seriously reflect so as to understand the main cause which begot monasticism, it was simply the desire to fulfil Christ's law literally, to imitate him in all simplicity, following his footsteps whose 'kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36a). In this spontaneous start, monasticism was informal, unorganised and uncommon.

History, Asmara: Fransiscana Printing Press, 2000, 177.

⁴ GRIBOMONT, J., "Monastery" in NCE, Vol. 9, Washington: Jack Hearty and Associates, Inc., 1967, 1032. It is also believed that Jews and other kinds of religions have had ascetic life in the early age of Christianity.

⁵ MOHLER, J. A., *The Heresy*, 43.

1.1.2 Beginning of Monasticism in Abyssinia

According to Harry Middleton Hyatt monasticism was introduced into Abyssinia from Egypt in 480 A.D. by Abba Aragawi who received the habit from St. Pachomius.⁶ With such a beginning, the nine Roman Saints of the order of St. Anthony arrived between the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th centuries from the Roman empire.⁷ They were consecrated religious monks. They gave a firm foundation to monastic life in Abyssinia and also strengthened Christianity which was already flourishing. They introduced one form of monasticism called 'coenobitism,' that is, a communal monastic life. However, before their arrival monasticism existed in Abyssinia in its primitive form known as 'anchoritism,' that is, withdrawal from the world.

Abyssinia in the time between the advent of Islam (640) and the restoration of the Solomonic line (1270) was in the Dark Age. It was the age of isolation from the outside world and of expansion into the interior of the African continent.

After a long time of guidance by foreign monks, monasticism in the Abyssinian church was reformed and took its dominant position only in the middle

⁶ WOND MAGENGEHU, A.,— MOTUVU, J., *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Addis Ababa: Berhanna Selam H. S. I. Printing Press, 1970, 23.

⁷ The *Nine Saints* came from different parts of the Eastern Roman Empire, such as Constantinople and Syria. They left their countries of origin because of religious differences; they were anti-Chalcedonians. They were persecuted by the Roman Emperor who was an ardent supporter of the Chalcedonian doctrine. The Nine of them were following the same doctrine. They first went to Egypt and lived some years in the monastery founded by St. Pachomius before proceeding to Abyssinia. In Abyssinia they studied the language and became familiar with the people and customs. After this preparation, they set out in different directions to proselytize and to introduce monastic institutions. (*The Church of Ethiopia*, 7.) Almost the nine of them founded monasteries of their own in Abyssinia which became for the coming centuries up to the present sources of monastic and Christian spirituality and centres of education. In fact they are well known and still remembered for their great contribution to monastic life, evangelisation, liturgy, literature, etc. Some of them crowned their holiness with martyrdom, which they suffered at the hands of the pagans among whom they

of the 13th century under the 'houses' of Teklehaimanot (1215-1313) and Ewostatewos (1273-1352). These are two Abyssinian monk saints who were educated by the Syrian and Egyptian monks but who later set up in their respective areas a properly inculturated Abyssinian monasticism. They brought a rapid development to monasticism by their attempt to reconstruct monastic institutions and these also brought religious revival. In those days the specific characteristics of the Abyssinian church took shape. Until this higher stage of monasticism, the Abyssinian church revolved around its Egyptian and Roman founders who, as a whole, were extremely defective and fragmentary.⁸ However, the reformed Abyssinian religious life, belief, inculturated faith, reflects the revived spirituality of Teklehaimanot and Ewostatewos.

Regarding the founding of new monastic communities and expansion, following the nine saints, most of them were started by Abyssinian founders who pursued a strict life of extreme asceticism in almost complete seclusion. After long experience in a monastery, if someone wanted, he was allowed by the leader to go to an isolated place and start a new community. The place is usually found in inaccessible hillsides, forest, semi-desert or remote areas. At the start, the small monastic community lived a very simple life by gathering wild fruits for their daily food and by hiring their services to the nearest farming villages at harvest times. However, when the community grew bigger, it would look around for a suitable site,

lived.

⁸ TADDESSE, T., *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972, 107-108. But until the monks reached their higher stage of reformation and in evangelization, the church seems to have been dominated in its evangelization and administration by the secular clergy; the married priests, the deacons, and the other functionaries of the church. They alone provided for the routine religious needs of the Christian communities and made up the backbone of

build a small church and a number of little huts for lodging and work towards self reliance.

The monastic rules, which all Abyssinian monks were led by, were derived from the founders of Egyptian monasticism, St. Anthony and St. Pachomius. They are used as basic rules for a guide in the journey of the ascetic life. Each monastery has its administrative head, called an abbot or “memher” (teacher). Abyssinian monks are clothed in sackcloth except those who are on or have made a pilgrimage either to Jerusalem or to any Abyssinian holy place. The latter are entitled to wear the yellow gown and, in addition, they wear the rough leather girdle about their loins in imitation of John the Baptist. All the monks are required to live in monasteries unless they have received a dispensation to do otherwise.⁹ There they live in virginity, celibacy, obedience, silent meditation, mortification and mutual charity.

1.2 Important Biblical passages as means of Inspiration for Abyssinian Monasticism

The scriptures are revered as ‘inspired writings’. They enter into hearts and build an irreplaceable foundation. God is present in them as the sovereign agent of creation and history because the word is spoken and the wisdom which comes from it accomplishes the purposes of God’s saving work.

the Abyssinian church.

⁹ AYMRO, W., -- MOTUVU, J., *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, 23-27.

1.2.1 Biblical Inspiration for the Monastic Vocation in Abyssinia

Monastic life in Abyssinia has its roots in the inspired Word of God. It responds practically and actively to what is written in the scriptures. It refers to John the Baptist whose voice is crying in the wilderness (Mark 1:2-4). His life style and dedication is the model for Abyssinian monasticism. It also refers to Jesus who, before beginning his public ministry was led by the Spirit into the desert (Luke 4:1-2). These accounts rendered in them the desire for and need of separation from the world and the conquest of sensuality and human ambition.

One of the passages in the Gospel that launched many Abyssinian monks on their spiritual career was the invitation of Jesus to the rich young man who asked, 'What must I do to be saved?' He was told, 'keep the commandments, love your neighbour as yourself.' But he was not satisfied: he had done all these and he pressed for more. In reply he received the devastating advice, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me' (Matt 19:16-21). This passage gave sleepless nights to many Abyssinian people. It made their minds and thoughts restless and disturbed. How can they answer such challenging advice? The rich young man answered it by going away sad, for he was a man of great wealth. However, many Abyssinian people accepted the challenge through the abandonment of worldly goods and prospects and followed him wholly (Matt 19:27). They showed in practice that they love only him, more than their parents, or children, and property. They renounced the world just as the dead are separated from it. They did not see any alternative to giving their lives voluntarily and freely for what called them from within through the

scriptures. Nevertheless, this act of renunciation was only the beginning of the journey of the monk because the quest for perfection involved more than this: his ultimate goal was union with God.

Jesus, following the example of his cousin John, fasted and prayed in the desert. Even though he did not demand this of his disciples, he required them 'to leave all' in order to follow him (Matt 4:19-22; 9:9; Luke 1:43). Many Abyssinians thought and believed traditionally that a monastic vocation was a sign of obedience to the word of God contained in the scriptures such as: abandoning everything (Luke 5:11b), punishing and controlling the body (1 Cor 9:27a), one mind and heart (Acts 4:32), and so on. This audible voice of God to the ones who are attentive to the scriptures, leads them towards the state of union with God. It is towards this that Abyssinian monasticism directs their lives which "lies in a total transformation of the will into the will of God, so that there is nothing in the life that is contrary to the will of God, but that, in all and through all, its activity may be that of the will of God alone."¹⁰ Then once he has beheld an interior vision of the pearl of great price to which no other value can be compared, he loses his interest in all other goods and is impelled by love of God to give himself completely to the search for it.¹¹ No compromise, negotiation nor discussion is possible because Jesus did not allow the man who decided to be his disciple to make arrangements for the people of his

¹⁰ VAN ZELLER, D. H., *Approach to Monasticism*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960, 100-101.

¹¹ PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic Spirituality*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1966, 150. Every part of this divine word is equally suitable for the spiritual profit and conversion of the monk. It was making them feel that all this world's goods had not brought them genuine happiness and believed that the material world is dust and ashes in comparison with the spiritual world. The more they withdraw in such belief from the sight of material and terrestrial things, the more they are purified and are given capacity to see Jesus Christ internally. cf. VAN ZELLER, D. H., *Approach*, 85.

home, to bury his father or to look behind (Matt 8:22). In this case the individual has only to listen and to open his mind and heart in order to gain an intimate familiarity with the divine word. This was how the Abyssinian monks used to find themselves face-to-face with the word of God in the scriptures at the beginning of their vocations.

If we pay attention to the scriptural call, it is like a fire which burns in the inner self of the person and makes one abandon the lesser in order to find the fuller and deny oneself totally in order to follow Christ fully. With such a deeper experience of God, for the monk, the baubles of the world are of little value compared to eternal glory, so that he concentrates only on heavenly possessions. Therefore in such continued self mortification he finds the newness of life of which the scriptures speak (Rom 6:4; 2 Cor 3:6).

In Abyssinian monastic history, the theme of '*a monk receiving his vocation during the reading of the scriptures*,' became a common issue for many. It is believed that the monk takes his place in the divine economy of the scriptures by responding to God's call as did the great people of the Old Testament, such as Abraham (Gen 12:1).¹² With such a call, most of them used to feel as if the scriptural passage they read or heard was delivering a personal message to them. For example, St. Anthony, father of monks, at age 18 heard the Lord speak to him through the proclamation of the gospel during the liturgy saying, "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven, and come,

¹² PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic*, 74.

follow me” (Matt 19:21). This passage made him feel that God was calling him personally for a special goal. Similarly, Abyssinian monks felt called personally and followed God without any conditional commitment or any anxiety about tomorrow (Matt 6:34). They trusted God who cares for the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields that he may watch over those who love him (Matt 6:25-27).

Holiness, for sure, is not far from us if we behave in the likeness of God as we are created. If someone seeks what is necessary for the salvation of the soul, he/she can earn it. The world must be denied because it will end shortly. This was their common understanding because they believed it was the only way to achieve holiness. They used to say; “Greeks cross borders and seas for the sake of temporal intellect but we do not need to go anywhere in order to inherit God’s Kingdom for Jesus said; ‘the Kingdom of God is in your midst’” (Luke 17:21b).¹³ Then everything in the life of a monk can only be a means to the attainment of such a supreme end, for the aim of monastic life is the search for God.

The whole of a person’s life is very short measured by the ages to come, so that all our time is as nothing compared to eternal life. The psalmist says: “The days of our life have seventy years and more, they are labour and burden” (Ps 90:10). If, then, we live the full seventy years, or even a hundred, in the practice of asceticism, we shall not reign for the same period in God’s Kingdom but we shall reign forever and ever. And although our striving is on earth, we shall not receive our inheritance on earth, but what is promised us is in heaven. Moreover, we shall put aside our

corruptible body and receive it back incorruptible.¹⁴ With such a common belief, many Abyssinians entered monasticism in order to save their souls and to lead a life of perfect morals.

1.3 The Life Response to the Invitation of the Scripture

Monasticism is a vocation like any other Christian vocation, calling for new life, holiness, the total gift of oneself; and this is impossible without renouncing or separating from everything. It needs a person who is totally free for the Holy Spirit. Such an act is more for the sake of developing the love of God in oneself (Matt 16:13).

Flight from the world is a very biblical theme. In the whole of sacred history, it is indicated that God is found in the desert. For example, in the Old Testament, Abraham left to go where God called him (Gen 12:1); Elijah and the sons of the prophets took refuge in the desert. The Israelites were told to leave Egypt and go to where God would lead them (Exod 16:3). Likewise, in the New Testament, John the Baptist and Jesus flee to the wilderness obeying God's call. Similarly, the early Abyssinian monks left for the desert being conscious that their mortified life was an imitation of Christ himself and a continuation of the life of the prophets. These few examples are not signs which contradict the goodness of God's creation: the monks deny the world since it does not possess the wisdom of God nor is it the source (1 Cor

¹³ BELAYNEH, S., *Yeberehaw Kokeb Kidus Antoniyos*, Gonder Ethiopia: 1985, 25.

¹⁴ MOHLER, J. A., *The Heresy*, 47.

2:12). Therefore, the wisdom of the world is foolishness (1 Cor 3:19) and the power of evil is in it (1 John 5:19).¹⁵

Monks escape from the world and live in the desert for the sake of seeking silence where they may meet God and encounter him. God speaks in silence and is heard in silence. He is found in the gentle whisper (1 Kgs 19:12). Even Jesus, during his ministry, often went to a silent place to pray (Luke 5:16). So, the Abyssinian monks also run away from the world, which is noisy and destructive, to a place where they can listen and wait for God, being very attentive.

The purpose of flight to the desert, therefore, is not to run away from the service of brothers and sisters, but instead to serve them without disturbing their own lives of prayer. "Certainly God is present everywhere but souls are drawn to meet Him more intimately in his own dwelling and on the mountain."¹⁶ Abyssinian monks, therefore, to strengthen their love for God, flee to the desert. Their essence is to seek God in his totality without interference of anyone in between. For example, they do not marry, not because this is a necessity for ordination or 'special power', but to avoid division of the heart from the love of God, and of others without being confined to one (1 Cor 7:33-34), so that Christ may remain as the centre of their lives.¹⁷

¹⁵ ABRAHA, A., *Spirituality*, 74.
¹⁶ VAN ZELLER, D. H., *Approach*, 125-127.
¹⁷ Cf. ABRAHA, A., *Spirituality*, 76-78. In the process of attaining *purity of heart*, the monk renounces comfort, deprives himself of food, sleep, conversation and submits to work. He, as is expressed in the words of St. Paul, "crucifies his flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24) to give full scope to the life of Christ in him. Again with the words of St. Paul he says, "With Christ I am nailed to the cross. It is now no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now

1.3.1 Monastic Vocation as Conversion

According to many Abyssinians, the monastic life was seen as a conversion, a metanoia. The decision to join is taken as a change of heart and absolute dedication in the service of the Lord for the rest of one's life. When such a new member is accepted, he begins a new life of grace in the monastery. All things for him are taken as vanity! Vanity of vanities! (Eccl 1:2). He, then, continuously lives this spirit throughout his active life. For him any human life which has no meaning beyond the terms of this present age will pass away with it.¹⁸ He seriously searches for the requirements which lead him to the explicit choice of the kingdom of God by avoiding the attractions of the world.

Conversion sometimes is a slow and painful process. It needs God's grace to be courageous to reject the temporal values, which the world most prizes and accept the eschatological values which it most disdains. Monasticism in Abyssinia gave that impression for many people and with such feeling many joined. As a rule, when an Abyssinian monk withdraws from these worldly pleasures and joins monasticism, he even changes his external garb as a symbol of interior change. Then he binds himself in profession to the observance of poverty, celibacy and obedience. He subjects his body and his higher faculties to various forms of mortification throughout his entire life.¹⁹

live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God who gave himself up for me" (Gal 2:19-20).

¹⁸ PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic*, 149-150.

¹⁹ PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic*, 151.

1.3.2 The Choice for Monasticism as Sign of Mortification

Mortification (Luke 14:33) is a result of the desire for complete union with Christ which leads the monk to the practice of asceticism. Jesus Christ required such renunciation of anyone who wished to come after him (Luke 9:29). It is renouncing, carrying the cross, losing one's life and making oneself ready to sacrifice this present life for eternal life. "All theologians agree that mortification is necessary for salvation because man is so strongly inclined to evil by the threefold concupiscence of the world, the flesh, and the devil, which, if not resisted, must lead to grievous sin."²⁰ It implies to choose Jesus than ones relatives, deny the world and oneself (John 12:25; Luke 14:26) and these mean to die in order to live a fuller life. The monk applies the principle of life through death to his every action because it is only by dying to his sinful tendencies that he can live fully his new life with Christ (Rom 8:13).²¹ If one wants to be a disciple of Jesus, he needs to put to death what is earthly in him (Col 3:5).

In Abyssinian monastic life, suffering is taken as sign of purification for total union with Christ. They believe God lets the person suffer with the suffering which he can tolerate so as to prevent him from pride in order not to fall. If we do not suffer even a little, we can easily betray God through haughtiness and arrogance. On the other hand, a monk has to suffer so that he may realize God's abundant grace in himself.²² Actually, God does not want our suffering, death and mortification for

²⁰ MULHERN, P. F., "Mortification", in NCE, Vol. 9, Washington: Jack Heraty and Associates, Inc., 1967, 1153

²¹ PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic*, 226-227.

²² GEBRESILASIE, T., *Metsahifte Menekosat Vol. I-II, The Book of Monks (In Tigringa)*, Addis Ababa: Tesfa Gebresilasie Publishing Centre, 1990, 41-43.

themselves but rather that through mortification we can glorify Him and kill sin and all tendencies towards it.

1.3.3 Ascetic Life as Practical Response to the Invitation of Scripture

Asceticism is the voluntary denial of things even if they are good in themselves, in view of a greater union with God.²³ It is the continuation of conversion. The word asceticism derives from Greek noun ἀσκησις, which means, “exercise,” “practice,” or “training” for the purpose of obtaining something that is of great value.²⁴ There is no authentic Christianity without self-denial. We have to give up something of value to us in order to acquire something which is better. Such a call and firm invitation echoes throughout the scriptures. It implies self-denial by following Jesus Christ and sharing his experience, such as the hardships, dangers and betrayals, in order to attain eternal salvation. Abyssinian monks, whose prayers are nourished by the scriptures, felt invited by Jesus to follow him and to participate in his suffering to which they answered positively.

Asceticism is freedom from the slavery of the flesh and internal purification. The body has to be dominated (Luke 9:23). The heart has to keep vigil for it is there that evil thoughts are born. In the Bible, we do not find the word ‘ascetic’ but ‘effort to struggle’ (1 Cor 9:24-27). It is struggle and battle to acquire the crown like John the Baptist. It is struggle for internal union with God. Paul talks about the ascetic life like the life of a soldier (2 Tim 2:1-3) and Jesus tells us, if we have to follow him,

²³ DRIOT, M., *Fathers of the Desert. Life in the Spirituality*, United Kingdom: St. Paul Publications, 1992, 41.

we need to renounce ourselves and carry the cross (Matt 16:24). Asceticism is a dedication to a superior way. All people are called for such renunciation. It is a feeling of a person to respond to the gift of grace received.²⁵ The monks take the ascetic life as the rule of their life to pursue perfection. Pope Paul VI said: "A Christian life without a spirit of asceticism cannot maintain itself and persevere in fruitful spiritual richness and as an apostolic testimony."²⁶

Asceticism is not an end in itself, the end of life is to love God. The purpose of asceticism is to allow the new life received in baptism to be fully developed. Through it we co-operate with God's redemptive work in our life. Monastic asceticism then means the removal of obstacles in loving God. Love is the union of wills. If the creature is to love God, he/she can do it in one way only; by sinking his/her own will in God and by practising it all the time: "If you love Me keep my commandments" (John 14:15; 15:10).

1.3.4 Requirements to Be a Monk

The key requirement to becoming a monk in Abyssinia is to abandon everything and follow Christ fully (Matt 19:21). Any person who feels called by God for this life can be a monk. The person with that feeling normally presents himself to a monastery and after a certain procedure he is accepted by the Abbot. However, the real monastic life begins after the noviciate, which normally lasts seven years, and is a period of discernment and education to a great spirit of

²⁴ LACHOWSKI, J., "Asceticism in the New Testament" in NCE, Vol. I, Washington: Jack Hearty and Associates, Inc., 1966, 938.

²⁵ ABRAHA, A., *Spirituality of Abyssinia*, (on process of publication), 47.

sacrifice, humility and obedience. In addition, there are six obligations that the postulant monk should follow. These are:-

- a) "to give up marriage;
- b) to leave one's blood relatives, and the world's pleasures;
- c) to dwell in a monastery;
- d) to abstain from meals unless it is absolutely necessary;
- e) to live together as a single soul even if they are many in body; and
- f) the monk dedicates his life to fasting²⁷ and prayers, to fatigue and labour, remembering God constantly, reading his Holy Books, ..."²⁸

²⁶ DRIOT, M., *Fathers*, 42.

²⁷ Abyssinian monks strictly observe the seven Lents (Sebeatu Aswam) of the Abyssinian calendar, altogether 237 days:- (1) The Great Lent, before Easter 56 days; (2) The Lent of Salvation, all the Fridays and Wednesday of the year except those during the period from Easter to Pentecost, 81, days; (3) the Lent of the Apostles, 40 days; (4) the Lent of the Assumption of Our Lady the Virgin Mary, "Felseta", of 15 days; (5) the Lent of the Prophets, in preparation for Christmas, 40 days; (6) the Lent of "Ghehad" of the eve of Christmas and Temqet, 2 day; (7) the Lent of Nineveh, 3 days. TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-"Miscellanea Aethiopica"*, Addis Ababa: Desktop Publishing, 2000, 271-272.

²⁸ Cf. TSADUA, P., *The Fitha Negest. The Law of the Kings*, Addis Ababa: The Central Printing Press, 1968, 66-67.

1.4 The Role of Monks in the Evangelisation of Abyssinia

The Abyssinian church is one of the earliest Christian communities, whose origin goes back to the Apostolic period.²⁹ However, it is hard to know exactly how and when Christianity entered Abyssinia.

Monastic life, in general, is the original form of religious life and for many centuries it remained the only form. It was the only religious body available to assume the tasks of the apostolate during the early centuries of the church's history.³⁰ In such a way, the mission of Abyssinian monks, though limited by circumstances, was meant to lead people to salvation so that the entire universe may share in God's redemption.

In their evangelisation, their apostolate in the broader sense included the contribution of their self-dedication and personal sanctity, their prayer life and personal commitment to the mission of the church. All these were focused on the sanctification of the church of God in order to bring her closer to Jesus for absolute union. Their evangelisation at large, included diversity of ministries but a oneness of mission. Some monks by vocation were contemplatives, others busy in other

²⁹ This might be the result of the baptized Abyssinian eunuch (Acts 8:27-38) who after his return home is believed to have spread Christianity to his people. On the other side, the Greek-Egyptian traders in transit through Eritrean ports on the Red Sea are also believed to have had a part in the evangelization. Then, after such long Christian experience, when St. Frumence arrived in Abyssinia in the first half of 4th century, he found many Christian communities. He then informed the Patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius (295-373), about this blossoming Abyssinian Christianity and asked for a bishop for them. Athanasius consecrated Frumence himself as bishop and sent him back to Abyssinia. Following this, in the end of the 5th and the beginning of the 6th centuries, the nine Roman Saints arrived in Abyssinia who gave a firm foundation to monasticism and evangelized widely in early times. TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-Miscellanea*, 144.

³⁰ PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic*, 321-322.

missionary activities such as: education, visiting families or sick people, and others had always been engaged in both manual and intellectual labours.

Abyssinian monks were mostly of two kinds in their evangelisation.³¹ This normally is based on the conditions of the environment in which the monastery is founded. For example, the houses of Teklehaimanot (in the South) emphasized missionary activities, because they were established in the pagan areas; while the houses of Ewostatewos (in the North) were founded in a Christian area and consequently emphasised the ascetical spirituality which is expressed thus, "It is better to see the face of lions, than that of women".³² The work of evangelisation of those who follow the ascetical spirituality is principally an apostolate of prayer and of personal asceticism. It is practised in the context of the church's effort to become ever more worthy of her divine spouse and oriented toward the welfare of the entire people of God. But the work of evangelisation of those who follow the missionary activities, is to be engaged in active participation of evangelizing and spreading the good news to all kinds people.

1.4.1 Ge'ez Rite as Great Means of Evangelization

Ge'ez is the Abyssinian indigenous language in very early times. A vast body of literary works in this language grew up from the 5th century A.D. onwards,

³¹ The function of these *two kinds of monks* in their apostolate, is to bear witness to the reality of the Church. They are the living signs that the church is a supernatural reality manifested in human form. They bear testimony by their uninterrupted dialogue with God, their dedication, their lives and their very existence, that what is transitory in this world will all pass away.

³² ZERAYOHANNES, H., *Ethiopian Monasticism From XII-XV centuries and its effects in today's monastic life*, 1993, 24.

almost all of them religious in content.³³ Since that time, Ge'ez became not only the vernacular of the Abyssinian race but also the liturgical language. This liturgy included the respected tradition and cultures of Abyssinian people and their theology through which they experienced God's presence in their history and day-to-day realities. It emerged from the situation and daily life experience of the people. It observed many Jewish practices, for example, customs like circumcision, purification rites, eating clean food and not eating unclean animals, traditions of long and strict fast, the liturgical year and feasts, etc. The Ge'ez rite also brought in the church of Abyssinia different ecclesiastical discipline and daily practices which are highly respected till today. Some of these are: removing shoes before entering a church, artistic and religious paintings, and the high respect and worship of the church as sacred place. Likewise, whoever passes the church stops and, facing the church, bows towards the tabernacle and makes the sign of the cross.

The Ge'ez rite helped the people to develop a model of church by respecting the values of their culture and tolerating their convictions. In such a way of inculturation, Christianity intermingled with the culture in its highest stage and this reality made the evangelisation spread fast and gave a bright future.

In Abyssinia, the liturgy was and still is celebrated in the Ge'ez language. It is accompanied by indigenous musical instruments and uses Semitic-sounding melodies. All the sacraments in this liturgy are celebrated during the Eucharistic celebration. The rest of the many liturgical prayers, like funeral services, the

³³ *The Church of Ethiopia. A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life*, Addis Ababa: A

blessing of water at the feast of the baptism of the Lord, Easter procession, washing of the feet on Holy Thursday, are given with prayers taken from the Eucharist celebration.³⁴ The Eucharist is always sung or solemnly celebrated only on Sunday, Saturday, Friday, Wednesday and on feast days, but not every day. It has 17 Anaphoras. It is celebrated with people who communicate and with penitents who have their respective places, but never individually. It is an inculturated celebration which is relevant to Abyssinian society and mentality. It is full of catechesis from the scriptures and it keeps the early Christian tradition without much change.

1.4.2 Works of Evangelization and Inculturation

In the long period between the 6th and the mid 13th centuries, Abyssinian monasticism revolved around the old establishments founded by the Nine Saints, the Syrian and Egyptian monks. However, from the 14th century onwards, Abyssinian monks, Abba Teklehaymanot and Abba Ewostatewos, took over the mission and inculturated the monastic life in Abyssinian style. They re-shaped monastic life according to Abyssinian culture. They widened the Christian frontiers and developed a fruitful evangelizing mission in its full sense of the proclamation of the word of God and of witnessing to it in their daily life.³⁵

In their process of inculturation and move towards evangelization, the Abyssinian monks introduced the use of drums and other musical instruments into

Publication of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1997, 73.

³⁴ ABRAHA, A., *Spirituality*, 52.

³⁵ Cf. TEKLEHAYMANOT, A. *l-Miscellanea*, 283-284.

liturgical celebrations and chants, which is typically African.³⁶ However, the drums, dance and rhythm which are used in liturgical celebrations are different from those used for secular celebrations. They also taught the sacredness of the church³⁷ and introduced a culture and belief that every Abyssinian Christian and each family may have its patron saint, whose anniversary is commemorated by generation after generation: is practised strongly up to present times.

Abyssinian monks, as is indicated in their hagiographic writings, are very active in proclaiming the *word of God* and *faithful* in witnessing it in their practical lives. This is the pillar on which the effectiveness of their evangelisation and inculturation is built.³⁸ The inculturated Christianity which they planted is today inherited by every Abyssinian. It created strong local Christians with their own traditions, culture, usage and customs. For these and many other reasons, today the Abyssinian church is among the principal Oriental churches noted for its deep rooted Christian tradition and its flourishing Christian life.³⁹

The wide spread of Abyssinian monasteries in the whole area was strategic in preventing the advance of Islam at that time and for the advanced spreading of the

³⁶ ABRAHA, A., *Saint Justin De Jacobis, His Missionary Methodology in Eritrea and Ethiopia*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1995, 13.

³⁷ In Abyssinia the 'sacredness of the church' is much respected. A person must be ritually pure and remove his shoes before entering a Church. The form of the altar is also structured in a different form and contains the Tabot (Ark of the Covenant). The Church is divided into three areas: a) Qine Mahlet: the place where people stand to sing hymns. b) Qiddisat: where communion is served. c) Meqdes: the most holy place, where the Tabot (most sacred object) is placed. ABRAHA, A., *Saint Justin*, 35.

³⁸ TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-Miscellanea*, 284; cf. TAMRAT, T., *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, London: Oxford University Press, 1972, 156-196; cf. TESFAMARIAM, B., *Tarik Gedamat*.

³⁹ Cf. TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-Miscellanea*, 145.

Christian faith.⁴⁰ They prevented the spread of Islam by organising a great apostolic counter-offensive and excommunications against those who ate meat slaughtered by Moslems or who entered into any relations with them. Following this heroic struggle of the monks, some Abyssinian emperors also started to fight against Moslems in order to break down their advance.

During the struggle for the survival of both church and culture, the traditions of the Abyssinian church were kept rigidly, without any change. The church, in fact, contributed to the civilisation of Abyssinia, mainly in art, architecture, education, music, poetry, law, theology, literature, liturgy, philosophy, medicine, historical records, Christian naming system and national identity, etc.⁴¹

1.4.3 *Life Witnessed Evangelization*

Abyssinian monks gave firm foundation to Abyssinian Christianity through the holiness of their lives, their meekness, purity of heart, humility and their devotion to God in the ascetic life. In their journey of missionary life, they built many monasteries and promoted the building of places of worship, like churches and chapels. Through these works they were welcoming many people who were attracted to listen to them and so this was a great means of evangelization.

⁴⁰ Their united proclamation of the 'word of God', took the right shape flowing from the strategic positions of key monasteries, such as; *from the North* Debre Bizen, Debre Sina, Sa'ada Emba, Enda Sellasiè *from the West* Waldebbba Mahbere Sellasiè *from the South* Zuquala and *from the South-East* Debre Wagag. From these monasteries the monks spread the light of faith and witnessed Jesus who is the light of the world. TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-Miscellanea*, 285.

⁴¹ ABRAHA, A., *Saint Justin*, 18-19.

The monk is a witness not on account of what he preaches and how many people he converts, but because his own life manifests what Christianity truly stands for. He practices his love of God by serving and loving others (Phil 4:12). The common life they lived as monks, with care for each other, giving priority to each other's benefits, co-operation, their discipline and good manners, enabled others to see God acting in those people. These acts of charity have drawn many people to God and made them realize that withdrawing to the monasteries was not for the sake of running away from people or responsibility but instead for better service of God.⁴² As a monk, he represents the reality of grace in the church through his being because that is his decisive and essential task. Therefore, this life of prayer, witness, solitude and isolation from the world was much favoured by all Christians but especially by the great number of the 'qeshi' (married priests) and 'debtera' (lay theologian) to whom was left a considerable part of the task of pastoral activity among the Christian population. They grasped these inspiring spiritual examples from the monks and, as ministers and good shepherds of people, shared it with the rest of Christians.

1.4.4 Monastic Evangelization and Acts of Education

In evangelizing and educating Abyssinia, the monks take the greatest credit. Monasteries were not only centres of prayer but also centres of study⁴³. In the past, the art of writing was practised mainly by the clergy. However, the church developed an elementary system of education which served not only the needs of the

⁴² ABRAHA, A., *Saint Justin*, 14.

⁴³ Since the Axumite Kingdom, Abyssinian has a particular alphabet character. They also

church itself, but also the cultural needs of society in general.⁴⁴ Most of the people who obtained any serious religious and literary training by monks, when they returned home would teach the local children. Monasteries like Debre Libanos became some of the most important religious centres of Christian Abyssinia and many leaders emerged from them. In their respective places, they provided education facilities. This kind of evangelisation made the church expand rapidly and gain many faithful followers. Even at the present day, many of the churches and church institutions have remained the source of basic education for the Abyssinians, and the hierarchy plays a key role in it.

As a process of traditional education, every Christian church has its school which indicates the scope of church activity in this field. However, each monastic community runs a number of schools, depending on its size and sources. The students study in groups according to proficiency, the more advanced teaching the beginners, under the eye of the teacher (*marigetta*) who supervises the entire process. The courses which were given by each school were mainly religious, and depended on the level of the stage of the school. "Besides the exclusively religious curriculum, the student is imbued with the traditional values of humility, obedience to authority, and deference for service of the church."⁴⁵ Some parents used to send their children to monastic schools for spiritual or academic education or some with the hope that one day they too would become monks.⁴⁶ There were four general

have numbers and ways of counting time and a unique calendar.

⁴⁴ MARKAKIS, J., *Ethiopian Anatomy of a Traditional Polity*, London: Oxford University Press, 1978, 143.

⁴⁵ MARKAKIS, J., *Ethiopian*, 143.

⁴⁶ Cf. PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic*, 87.

levels of education in these monastic communities. The *first level* concentrated on training children how to read. *The second level* was dedicated to studying different levels of church music. *The third level* was what can be called the 'Poetry School', to master grammar and learn how to compose poems. The fourth level was the study of the writings of the Fathers and the mastery of the interpretations of all the canonical books.⁴⁷

Abyssinian monks, through their role of evangelization, have also made signal contributions even to the promotion of justice and civilisation. For many centuries they were almost the only ones who undertook such good works on a large scale in this land. They were also the means of development in all cases though they withdrew from the world and renounced the temporal values inherent in it. In this way, Christianity deeply entered into the life and customs of the people and became a basic element of Abyssinian culture. The Synod of Africa, surveying the different Christianities of Africa, refers to Christian Abyssinia with great "distinction" for being the country where Christianity had a deep influence on the culture of the people so that it became its basic constitutive element.⁴⁸ That is why we have, today, much respected Abyssinian church culturally and structurally.

1.4.5 Translations of Spiritual Books and their importance in evangelization

With the advent of the monks, there also began the educational and literary work of the church. Especially when Christianity began to spread, the need of

⁴⁷ Ethiopian Orthodox Church Leaders, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations*, Addis Ababa: Tensae Publishing House, 1996, 22-25.

translating the scriptures, liturgical and sacred books was felt. The translation took place through a gradual process, obviously involving a number of translators. Works were translated from Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew and Coptic or Arabic languages to Ge'ez language in the Ge'ez alphabet. Some translations are literal while others merely reflect the general sense of the original book.

Some scholars assign the Abyssinian Bible translations to the 4th - 6th centuries.⁴⁹ This translation made Abyssinia one of the earliest nations to have translated the Bible into their own language. Abyssinia also had the privilege of preserving in its literature, the precious documents of the ancient Christian traditions. Additionally, many works which are lost in their Hebrew or Aramaic original, and in their Greek translation, exist only in the Ge'ez translation, for example: the book of Jubilees, the book of Enoch, the Ascension of Isaia, the Apocalypse of Moses, etc.⁵⁰

Many other important works of early ages were also translated in Ge'ez and all these great works were the fruit of monks. Such interpretation accelerated the evangelization in the area and opened the eyes of the people in reading the word of God from the sacred books in their own languages. The massive task of translating

⁴⁸ TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-Miscellanea*, 248.

⁴⁹ EDWARD, E. U., *Ethiopia and the Bible*, London: Oxford University Press, 1970, 44. For example, Abyssinian authors assure us that the translation of the Bible in Ge'ez language was done either by St. Frumentius in the 4th century or by the Nine Saints in the 5th century.

⁵⁰ TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-Miscellanea*, 237-244. a) '*The Book of Jubilees*' is one of the writings of the early Christian time existing only in Ge'ez language. It is of the 2nd cent. B.C. written in Hebrew then translated into Greek. b) '*The Book of Enoch*' is an apocalyptic compilation, surviving whole and integral exclusively in the Abyssinian version. c) '*The Ascension of Isaia*' is an Apocrypha of the 2nd cent. dealing with the prophecy relating to Christ and his Church. In the first part it refers to the Judaic legend of the martyrdom of the prophet Isaia. The complete work is available in the Abyssinian text only. d) '*The Apocalypse of Moses*' is kept in the Abyssinian

the whole Bible was taken by the Nine Saints using the Syrio-Greek text since they were familiar with it.

CONCLUSION

After Christianity started, it took long time in evangelizing Abyssinia. However, after a few centuries, many passages of the scripture became outstanding means in drawing increasing numbers of people towards life in monasteries. Monks in their turn drew thousands of people to permanent discipleship in their desert retreats through the force of their single-minded search for God and the freshness and vigour of their teachings. As an outcome of this, a great number of people began to sense the presence of God in their daily life. They acquired a deep spirituality rooted in their culture. Therefore, the greatest share in this missionary field is to be attributed to the monks.

CHAPTER II

THE MODERN EXEGESIS OF THE IMPORTANT SCRIPTURAL PASSAGES WHICH WERE SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR ABYSSINIAN MONASTICISM

INTRODUCTION

In early Abyssinia, there were many passages of scripture which were a great means of arousing the spiritual feelings of so many people towards the ascetic monastic life. Some of them grasped the passages as if they were directly written to them and this made them flee from the world and join monasticism.

These passages which I have chosen for exegesis are not just picked from anywhere in the scripture, but are repeatedly mentioned in the life history of many Abyssinian monks, in the two volumes of their rules and in many books which are written about them.⁵¹ On the other side, it is believed that the gospel of Matthew has been the first scriptural book which was preached in Abyssinia.⁵² I selected such repetitions and arranged them into five subtopics according to the message they are

⁵¹ BELAYNEH, S., *St. Anthony the Star of Wilderness*, Gonder-Ethiopia: 1985. GEBRESILASIE, T., *Metsahifte*. BEKELE, Z., *The Life history of the Monk Gebremeskel Hylemeskel*, Addis Ababa: Bolie Publishing Centre, 1995; MANNA, G., *The History of the Catholic Church in Eritrea: Its Incultruration as a Model for Neo-evangelization in AMECEA Regions*, Nairobi: CUEA Publications, 1996.

portraying. Then, I will elaborate as to how modern scholars interpret these passages, by which early Abyssinians were attracted. This will help me in the end to see the similarities and differences of understanding the scriptures by early Abyssinian monks and today's modern exegesis in the third chapter.

2.1 Separation of Oneself From the World as Path of Perfection

i) *Matthew 19:16-21*

In the language and manner of Israelites, the people who used to seek righteousness and eternal life thought they could get it by fulfilling and observing the works of the Law. For them, having eternal life is equivalent to being perfect (v. 21) and being saved. Similarly, in this passage, the rich young man expected eternal life by doing some good. But he did not know exactly what good to do. In Matthew 19:8, '*lacking to know what is good to do*', is referred as hardness of heart. Therefore, the questions of this man to Jesus shows that "he does not want to have a hard heart and Jesus' response helps him know what good to do."⁵³

"This young man was not a follower of Jesus but a Jew who had a firm belief in eternal life."⁵⁴ He was convinced that there is happiness in the next world for those who prepare for it in this world. He was deeply concerned more than anything else, to make sure that he should live eternally. He desired to know what his duty

⁵² TEFAMARIAM, B., *Tarik Gedamat*, 57-111.

⁵³ HARRINGTON, D. J., *The Gospel of Matthew, Sacra Pagina Series Vol. 1*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991, 269.

⁵⁴ <http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Mt+19:16-22>

was and appeared ready to do it by obeying Christ (Heb 5:9). Deep within his heart, he clearly perceived that something was lacking to make him truly happy. It seems he is saying, "better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it" (Prov 15:16). It was a surprising and rare thing for one of his age and quality to appear so concerned about eternal life and request Christ for the right path.

Jesus in reply said, '*Keep the commandments,*' which shows God's great design in giving his law to the Jews in order to lead them to the expectation and enjoyment of eternal life. This includes faith in Jesus Christ, for that is the great commandment (1 John 3:23). It seems to foresee and prophesy the possibility that salvation for Jews is apart from the route of Christian discipleship.⁵⁵

As Jesus called the apostles, he also calls this rich young man to detach himself from earthly riches. Jesus asks him to dispose of his possessions which were becoming obstacles for his redemption. To give up possessions is not obligatory for all, nor does Jesus present it as absolutely necessary for this young man to enter eternal life. But in his case, possessions seem to be a hindrance in his following the path of full discipleship.⁵⁶ Therefore, Jesus invited him to leave his possessions and give himself totally to a life of discipleship.

⁵⁵ HARRINGTON, D. J., *The Gospel*, 281. On the other side, this was one of the laws of Moses, that, when the great Prophet should be raised up, they should hear him. This rich young man, listening to his inner desire asked to know further what his duty was by asking, '*what lack I yet?*'

⁵⁶ Cf. HARRINGTON, D. J., *The Gospel*, 278.

2.3 Comparison between Present Suffering and the Future Glory of God

i) *Rom 8:18 (2 Cor 4:17)*

Paul, in this passage, confronts the presence of suffering in the lives of believers. He starts this verse with '*I consider*', to mean 'I am firmly convinced.' He is convinced of the fact that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy being compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us in future.⁷⁰ Our present sufferings, be they ever so many and bitter, fade into insignificance when compared with our future glory. Paul seems to be holding in his hand a scale or balance. In one side he places "the sufferings of this present time" and in the other, "the glory that is to be revealed in us".⁷¹ For him it is beyond dispute that salvation is present. He then believes that his present suffering will reap a reward from God far out of proportion to its bitter experience (cf. Wis 3:5).

Paul uses the word 'sufferings' in general and therefore can include "any pain, sickness, disappointment, unemployment, poverty, frustration, etc."⁷² By using this word, he is showing us that suffering, though painful, is the path we walk as we move to blessing and to glory. In the first part, the suffering is a result of sin. If there had been no sin, human beings would not have had to suffer (Gen 3:16-19). In the second part, the glory is the result of grace. As far as God's children are concerned,

⁷⁰ Dunn, D.G. James, Romans 1-8. World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 38A, Dallas, Texas: World Books, Publication, 1988, 467-468.

⁷¹ HENDRIKSEN, W., *Romans, Vol. I*, Southampton: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1980, 264.

⁷² HENDRIKSEN, W., *Romans*, 265.

Truly fulfilling the commandments involves giving up everything (Matt 19:21) for the sake of one's relationship with others. But this young man responded negatively to such a call of Jesus. His *sorrow* shows, even if he is able to do it, he is unwilling to do it. Thus, the effort to overcome hardness of heart fails. He mistakenly thought that hardness of heart was just a matter of not knowing what is good to do, but this was not true. Instead, not having a hard heart is being totally committed to this ultimate good.⁵⁷ Therefore, by the end of the story the rich young man has not gained what he really needed because his need was only the *will* to enter eternal life (19:17b).

ii) *Matthew 19:29*

This verse speaks not only of the disciples but of everyone who has left everything for Jesus sake because the promises of eschatological blessings are for a much broader group.⁵⁸ Also, it does not refer only to the disciples of Jesus' time but to any believers whether at that time or in any age, that should be called to quit their habitations, or leave their loved ones, friends and wealth. Such people will be richly blessed, receiving a "hundred fold"⁵⁹ in this life and in the world to come. This is really a glorious portion for a persevering believer because all earthly inheritances

⁵⁷ PATTE, D., *The Gospel*, 271.

⁵⁸ PATTE, D., *The Gospel*, 275.

⁵⁹ The 'hundred fold' which Matthew speaks of in Matt 19:29 may be understood in spiritual things. This can be in the love of God, the presence of Christ, the comforts of the Holy spirit, the communion of saints, and the joys and pleasures felt in the enjoyment of these things; being a hundred times more and better to them than all they have left or lost for Christ's sake. But this does not mean that they should receive, for the leaving of one house, a hundred houses; or for forsaking one brother, a hundred brethren, which might be true as to a spiritual relation; but it means that the small earnings of this world's goods and the few friends they should have 'with persecutions' along with them and amidst them, should be so sweetened to them with the love and presence of God that these should be more and better to them than a hundred houses, fields, and friends.
<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/GillsExpositionoftheBible/gil.cgi?book=mt&chapter=019>

are corruptible, defiled, fading and perishing. But eternal life is infinitely best of all. Those who are worthy to follow this call of Jesus will be favoured with his presence here on earth and shall enjoy eternal glory and happiness with him in the world to come.

To believe in Christ and to profess his name does not necessarily require separation from all worldly goods and natural relations. But when these things stand in competition with Christ, he is to be loved first and to be opted for, before them all. Believers should always be ready to detach themselves from material possessions. All these should be abandoned so that Christ be the aim and goal of one's life.

iii) Matthew 10:37-39

Verse 37 explains that family ties, if they in any way become a hindrance to discipleship, must be broken. "The verse is not an attack on family relationships and natural attachments, but is a clear insistence that following Jesus is more important than family ties; if it is necessary to choose between the loyalties, then a man ought to choose to follow Jesus".⁶⁰

For Matthew, the cross is the outstanding symbol of self-denial. To break relationships with one's family is to take up the cross and lose one's life in this

&verse=029&next=030&prev=028

⁶⁰ DAVIES, W. D., - ALLISON, D. C., *Matthew, Vol. II*, in ICC, Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1991, 221.

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world.⁶¹ Certainly Matthew might have seen in 10:39 a pronouncement about eschatology: he who loses his life in this world - because he looks only to God (cf. 6:25-34) - will win it for the world to come; and he who wins his life for this world - that is, seeking to secure his earthly existence (cf. Luke 12:16-21) - will lose it in the world to come (cf. John 12:25).⁶² Therefore, Jesus in this passage presents the conditions for discipleship. He welcomes as his true disciples those who are prepared to say 'no' to many of the strongest desires of their nature. Such people need to '*take up their crosses*' not once, but all the time. The cross is the pain of the self-denial required by the preceding words. It is the symbol of fulfilling our responsibility even at the cost of the most painful death. Self-denial can be a difficult task but it is no more than what our Master learned and practised to redeem us and to teach us.

The intention of this passage is to show that Christ is infinitely above all creatures. He is to be loved more than all the dearest relations. This passage underlines the issue of worthiness as it is repeated three times. Being worthy of Jesus is similar to being worthy in the context of the disciples' mission (10:11-13), to being worthy of the kingdom. But now, when one loves a family member more than Jesus, he demonstrates that he lives according to the wrong system of values of the human realm. He still views the family as a source of security instead of placing

⁶¹ DAVIES, W. D., - ALLISON, D. C., *Matthew*, 221.

⁶² DAVIES, W. D., - ALLISON, D. C., *Matthew*, 224.

his trust in Jesus and in the Father in heaven.⁶³ This attitude shows that if one is not worthy of Jesus, he/she does not belong to the realm of the kingdom.

2.2 Eunuchs for the Sake of God's Kingdom

i) Matthew 19:10-12

The practice of celibacy was unusual in ancient Judaism. Later rabbinic statements are very strong on this matter: for example, "Eliezer said, 'Any Jew who does not have a wife is not a man'"⁶⁴. But in the first century the Essenes and the Therapeutae, members of Jewish sects who lived a "monastic" life, were celibate. Likewise, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul do not seem to have married. The rabbinic emphasis on the duty of marriage need not be read back so as to cover all forms of first century Judaism. The most important about Matthew 19:10-12 is the motivation proposed for voluntary celibacy: "on account of the kingdom of heaven."⁶⁵ In this passage, our Lord distinguishes between the various sorts of persons that can and do live in a single state with contentment.

Everybody is not gifted to receive celibacy for the sake of the kingdom but the disciples do. This teaching is similar to the goodness of marriage. To be aware of this similarity one needs to have gained a full understanding of the kingdom of God and its mysteries.⁶⁶ In fact, the number of those who have chosen this life are few in comparison with those who have chosen a conjugal state of life. Therefore, though

⁶³ PATTE, D., *The Gospel*, 155.

⁶⁴ HARRINGTON, D. J., *The Gospel*, 276.

⁶⁵ HARRINGTON, D. J., *The Gospel*, 276.

there are eunuchs of different sorts, those who abstain from marriage voluntarily are the very ones who have chosen to be eunuchs for the right reasons.

These people who have chosen a celibate life in order to be more available, became free from the hardships of a marriage state and this helped them to be devoted for worship and service of God. Celibate life is not obligatory, it is a free choice for those who are able to receive it. It is received cordially and embraced heartily and those having the gift of continuing, can live with this virtue. Such persons may have less worldly troubles and be more useful for God and to the interest of religion.⁶⁷

ii) *1 Cor 7:28, 32-34*

We have to be aware that 'pleasing the Lord' is our first duty and that we must not put anyone in his place. If our worries overwhelm us, we are lacking trust in God. The married struggle how to please their spouse and God then they remain in the middle divided. But the unmarried person is not anxious about worldly affairs or how to please his/her partner as the married would. He/she is free to concentrate with undivided devotion on the affairs of the Lord and on the cultivation of holiness in body and spirit. Nevertheless, there are many other things besides marriage which may 'divide' people, and may draw their attention away from pleasing God, e.g. politics, sports, business, and so on (v. 19).⁶⁸

⁶⁶ PATTE, D., *The Gospel*, 268.

⁶⁷ Cf. bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/GillsExpositionoftheBible/gil.cgi?book=mt&chapter=019&verse=012&next=013&prev=011

⁶⁸ HARGREAVES, J., *A Guide to 1 Corinthians*, Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Dotesios Printers Ltd.,

The apostle is not discouraging people from marriage, as a thing sinful and criminal, because there is no law forbidding virgins to marry since they break no law of God. Rather, it was more advisable for such as could, to abstain from it, under the present circumstances of things. The apostle is not saying that married persons would be the only ones that would have trouble in this way, but he is saying that such persons would be less able to bear it or to escape from it.⁶⁹ Moreover, this may be extended to all the sorrows, troubles and distresses which attend a married state.

Indeed to be careless regarding eternal life is a fault. A wise concern about worldly interests is necessary. But how is this possible when the mind is swallowed up by the cares of this life? Ordinarily, the less care we have about the world the more freedom we have for the service of God. In this case, the unmarried would be able to make religion a priority in life because they would have less distraction from worldly cares.

All worldly things show nothing is solid. All will be quickly gone. But to be full of care or anxious for this is a sin. By this maxim, the apostle solves the case of whether it is advisable to marry or not. That condition of life is best for every person which is best for his soul, clear for him of the cares and snares of the world. It helps him to serve and honour God preserving from external pollution of his body.

1991, 95.

⁶⁹bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/GillsExpositionoftheBible/gil.cgi?book=1co&chapter=028&next=029&prev=027

the first is temporal, however the second is never ending.⁷³ Suffering, according to Paul, “does not mean that all suffering is productive of glory but leads one to humility so that as the ‘I’ decreases, Christ increases (John 3:30).”⁷⁴ In this sense, the Apostle learnt that “through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Therefore, for him “this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4:17).⁷⁵

Paul holds that the believer must expect suffering in this present age. There is suffering that is the direct result of our sinfulness and there is suffering that we endure for Christ’s sake. This means suffering that arises directly from our Christian profession in a world that rejects Christ. Beyond that, there is suffering that arises simply because we are in this imperfect world.⁷⁶ Paul often speaks of the reward of our light and momentary troubles as “achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Cor 4:17). In this passage, he emphasises the glory that is to be revealed ‘in’ us. This glory will come to us, enter us, and then, having filled us and enveloped us, will be revealed in us. We ourselves will be part of that glory: the redeemed will see it in each other. The angels will behold it in us, and will be filled with thanksgiving and praise of God.⁷⁷

⁷³ Cf. HENDRIKSEN, W., *Romans*, 264.

⁷⁴ HUGHES, E. PHILIP, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986, 157.

⁷⁵ MOO, D. J., *The Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996, 511-512.

⁷⁶ MORRIS, L., *The Epistle to the Romans*, Leicester: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988, 319.

⁷⁷ Cf. HENDRIKSEN, W., *Romans*, 265.

ii) Gal 6:14

Paul rejects for himself any ground of boasting except “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which made all sort of boasting meaningless. Even if others boast in things external, for him life is meaningless without the cross of Christ. He exalts it as the sole ground and object of his boasting. He shows conclusively the absolute centrality of the cross in his thinking.⁷⁸ “He embraces it as the most worthy gift though this was unmentionable⁷⁹ for the Romans. For him, the cross of Jesus completely breaks the connection with the old ‘outward world’ and gives both Jew and Gentile a new perspective. The only thing that matters now is that Jew and Gentile alike are ‘newly-created people’ in Christ, with a new way of looking at everything.”⁸⁰

In verse 14b Paul gives the reason for the cross being his sole object of boasting. He says, through the cross the world has been crucified to him and he to the world. Here he refers to ‘the world’ in its character as “the epitome of unredeemed creation,” that is, “of everything outside of Christ in which man seeks his glory and puts his trust.”⁸¹ He seems to be speaking about the cross as the decisive event in salvation history which effected a radical separation between two worlds, so that between them there can no longer be any communication.

⁷⁸ Cf. 1 Cor. 1:18, where Paul calls his message “the doctrine of the cross”.

⁷⁹ In Roman society even when one was being condemned to death by crucifixion the word *crux* was unmentionable. But Paul not only dismisses as the merest refuse those things in which he had once taken a proper pride but embraces as the most worth-while goal in life the knowledge of the crucified Christ and boasts in his cross - a shocking paradox indeed. cf. BRUCE, F.F., *Commentary on Galatians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983, 271.

⁸⁰ COLE, A., R., *Galatians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984, 16.

⁸¹ FUNG, R. Y. K., *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988, 306-307.

2.4 God's Glory: Not Attained in This Life

i) *Phil 3:13-14*

Some Philippians were claiming that they have already made God's glory their own and are already perfect. But Paul declares very emphatically that he himself has *not yet* made it his own. For him, it is not apprehended, not yet attained, it is still imperfect.⁸² He then describes his Christian life "as involving the continual forgetting of 'what is behind,' and the relentless centring of his energies and interests on the course that is ahead of him. 'Forgetting' did not mean obliterating the memory of the past but a conscious refusal to let them absorb his attention and impede his progress."⁸³ Hence, Paul presses on toward the goal on which he fixed his eye in the race of faith to attain the prize of the perfect fellowship with Christ and his glorification with Christ in the immaculate heritage of heaven hereafter (cf. 2 Tim 4:8). This prize is connected with the upward call of God which he received at his conversion when God's saving call to everlasting life came to him 'in Christ Jesus'.⁸⁴

Some may have taught that performance of Jewish rites could bring such perfection but Paul knew it was not so. One thing, therefore, was the consuming passion of his life. No present attainment could lull him into thinking he already possessed Christ and his kingdom. His goal was the complete knowledge of Christ,

⁸² MULLER, J. J., *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984, 120.

⁸³ KENT, H. A., *Philippians. In Expositor's Bible Commentary Vol. 11*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: The Zondervan Corporation, 1978, 142.

⁸⁴ Cf. MULLER, J. J., *The Epistle*, 124.

both in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings (v. 10). When the goal was reached, this prize would be fully his.⁸⁵ Therefore Paul, in this passage, is opposing both an overconfident declaration of perfectionism on the ground that Christians are blessed with a share in his immortality, and a silent life which would lead a person to approve his present experience and become forgetful of the eschatological hope set before the church.

ii) *Heb 12:1-2*

This letter seems to have been written for first generation Christians and calls for strength for those who are having challenges in their faith.⁸⁶ The writer talks to them about endurance under persecution. He sees the Christian life as movement towards a goal, hence the analogy of Israel journeying to the promised land. He encourages them to participate seriously in the struggle and race with endurance (10:32). "At times this struggle is not just a mental, emotional, or social struggle, but also involves real physical torture."⁸⁷

The first task for the Hebrews in this race is "to put off' what encumbers them, specifically every 'weight' of sin that they may be able to run the race of Christian life".⁸⁸ Also, they are not being asked to put on a final spurt to the finishing-post but to keep on going in the long distance race of life. They are to run

⁸⁵ KENT, H. A., *Philippians*, 143.

⁸⁶ Cf. MONTEFIORE, H., *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, New York and Evanston: Harper & Row Publication, 1964, 213.

⁸⁷ Cf. BUCHANAN, G. W., *To the Hebrews. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972, 208.

⁸⁸ ATTRIDGE, H. W., *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989, 356.

with endurance looking toward a model who is Jesus. He is the leader of those who run the race of faith. Also, he is the specific source of the faith of the addressees and the first person to have obtained the ultimate goal of faith, the inheritance of the divine promise, which the ancients only saw from afar.⁸⁹ Jesus' willingness to accept the 'cross of shame' rather than 'the joy laid out before him' fitted perfectly the author's ideal of righteousness. In this way, Abraham had left Haran for the promised land where he remained a stranger; Moses left a royal position of wealth in Egypt to identify himself with the Israelites who were badly treated; and Rahab denied her countrymen to become identified with a tribe that had no country.⁹⁰

Jesus, in Hebrews 12:1-2, is presented both as the one who has blazed the trail of faith and the one who himself ran the race of faith to its triumphant goal. However, to imitate this positive example of Jesus, Christians need to throw off everything that hinders them in their race, as the athletes carry nothing with them in a race. The writer is not thinking of a short, sharp sprint but of a long distance race that requires endurance and persistence.

2.5 The Wilderness as the Best Place to Deny the World and Renew Spiritual Powers

i) Exod 3:1-5, 10

In early Christianity, the wilderness was taken as a place of discipline for God's people as the wilderness of the Red Sea had been (Ezek 20:35). The Hebrew

⁸⁹ Cf. ATTRIDGE, H. W., *A Commentary*, 356.

⁹⁰ BUCHANAN, G. W., *Hebrews*, 208.

word 'midhbar' for wilderness denotes not a barren desert place but a district or region suitable for pasturing sheep and cattle (Ps 65:12). In a wilderness you become alone and loneliness is a good friend to our communion with God. Jesus initiated his ministry with forty days in the wilderness.⁹¹ In the wilderness you pass a humble and hidden life, entirely oriented toward the search for the absolute. God gave Moses a gracious call in the wilderness, to which he returned a ready answer. When Israel's deliverance out of Egypt was promised to Abraham, he saw a burning lamp, which signified the light of joy which that deliverance should cause (Gen 15:17). But now it shines brighter, as a flame of fire, for God in that deliverance brought terror and destruction to his enemies,⁹² light and heat to his people, and displayed his glory before all (Isa 10:17).⁹³ Hence, the wilderness became for them place to renew spiritual power so as to let captives free.

Moses received God's call in the wilderness and responded positively by removing his sandals as an act of willingness and submission. He denied the world totally with its security and peace and returned to Egypt to share the hardships and obstacles of his own people in captivity. It was not a light assignment that he was

⁹¹ DRIOT, M., *Fathers of the Desert*, 97-103. cf. CLAUDE J. P., *Monasticism*. cf. www.newadvent.org/cathen/04749a.htm; When Christ was baptised, he did not go to Jerusalem in order to publish the glories that had been put upon him but was drawn to a wilderness. After communion with God, it is good to be alone for awhile, if not we lose what we have received, in the crowd and hurry of worldly business. Christ withdrew into the wilderness in order to gain advantage for himself. Retirement gives an opportunity for meditation and time to be alone with God.

⁹² Wilderness is not only a place for the search of God in silence but it is also a place of trial by Satan. As spiritual enemy, using advantage of such lonely place, devil tries to cheat us so that we may remain unsuccessful in our struggle. Christ retired, to make his victory the more illustrious. He also retired that he might have an opportunity to do his best himself, that he might be exalted in his own strength. For this reason it was written, "I have trod the wine-press alone and of the people there was none with me" (Isa 63:3). <http://www.ccel.org/wwwsb/Matthew/4.html>

⁹³ www.ccel.org/wwwsb/Matthew/4.html, 3.

given, nothing less than the task of liberating his countrymen from their bondage and leading them to the land of promise, the land of milk and honey.

ii) *Matthew 3:1-2*

Matthew, in this passage, narrates what John the Baptist did in the wilderness. Though all places are open to God to visit us for divine grace, still the word of the Lord found John the Baptist while he is in the wilderness. Commonly the sweetest encounter the saints have with Heaven, is when they are withdrawn furthest from the noise of this world. There they march with full realisation of God's presence. They are in full communion without much disturbance. For instance, it was in the wilderness of Judah⁹⁴ that David composed the 63rd Psalm, which speaks so much of the dear communion he then had with God (Hos 2:14). In a wilderness the law was given; and as the Old Testament, so the New Testament (Israel) was first found in the desert land and there God led them with care towards the promised land (Deut 32:10).⁹⁵

John preached repentance not in Jerusalem but in the wilderness of Judea among the plain country people. He came preaching here and Jesus was tempted here. Therefore, it is a place where someone can be purified from sins and sent to preach the word of God. Isaiah prophesied that the wilderness would be a fruitful

⁹⁴ When it says "*in the wilderness of Judea*"; John here was not preaching to trees and to the wild beasts of the desert; for the wilderness of Judea was an habitable place, and had in it many cities, towns, and villages, in which we must suppose John came preaching, at least to persons which came out from there. There were in Joshua's time six cities in this wilderness, namely Betharabah, Middin, and Secacah, and Nibshan, and the city of Salt, and Engedi, (Joshua 15:61-62).

⁹⁵ <http://www.ccel.org/wwsb/Matthew/3.html>

field (Isa 32:15) and the desert would rejoice (Isa 35:1-2), the deserts of Jordan, the very wilderness in which John preached.

The Jews have an observation of many things coming from the wilderness;

“... the law, they say, came from the wilderness; the tabernacle from the wilderness; the Sanhedrim from the wilderness; the priesthood from the wilderness; the office of the Levites from the wilderness; the kingdom from the wilderness; and all the good gifts which God gave to Israel were from the wilderness.”⁹⁶

CONCLUSIONS

It is true that the level of culture is very diversified from century to century. Looking at this reality, modern exegetes have clarified the meaning of the above passages for guidance relative to their faith and practice. The exegesis is done, keeping its original or root meaning and discovering the message it passes to today's people depending on time and circumstance. In their exegesis, they clarify what the passage says to a modern reader and for those who desire to understand its significance for their lives at the present.

⁹⁶<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/GillsExpositionoftheBible/gil.cgi?book=mt&chapter=003&verse=001&next=002&prev=017>

CHAPTER III

COMPARISONS AND ADAPTATIONS OF ABYSSINIAN MONASTICISM

INTRODUCTION

After looking at the scriptural passages which attracted Abyssinians towards monastic and ascetic life and their exegesis by modern scholars, in this chapter, I will compare the differences and similarities of these two. In the end, I shall conclude with guidance for adaptation and reformation of Abyssinia monasteries.

3.1 Comparison between Early Abyssinian Monasticism and Today's Modern Exegesis

3.1.1 Similarities

i) John the Baptist claims that he is *a voice of the one crying in the wilderness* (John 1:23). God is the *Speaker*, who makes known his mind by John, as a person does by his voice. The word of God must be received as such (1 Thess 2:13). Then, what else is Paul and what is Apollos, but the voice. John is called *the voice*, the voice of one crying aloud, which is strange and awakening. Christ is called *the Word*, which, being distinct and articulate, is more instructive. John as the

voice, roused people, and then Christ, as the Word, taught them. As we find in Revelation, the voice of many waters and of a great thunder made way for the melodious voice of harpers and the new song (14:2). Some observe that as Samson's mother must drink no strong drink, he was designed to be a strong man; so John the Baptist's father was struck dumb, and yet he was designed to be the voice of one crying. When the crier's voice is begotten of a dumb father, it shows the excellency of the power to be of God, and not of human beings. Similarly, Abyssinian monks were also the voice of God to their people, transmitting the true message of God both by their preaching and by their ascetical practice. God's power worked through those simple monks who dedicated their lives for the kingdom of God. They preached repentance, which implies a total alteration in the mind, a change in the judgement, disposition, and affections, another and better bias of the soul. They have called people to a change of minds that they may think again and think righteously.

ii) John the Baptist prophesied, "... prepare a way for the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mark 1:3). He means, in short, "renounce the world".⁹⁷ This is the message we find overwhelming in the Bible, requesting us to abandon the world totally and to surrender ourselves to God fully. This act had been emphasised in the life of the early Abyssinian monks and in their evangelisation as it is by modern exegetes.

iii) The scope of monasticism is the attainment of purity of heart, emptying the heart of earthly attachments so that it can be free, be silent, hear God, and pray

⁹⁷ www.newadvent.org/cathen/1045a.htm, 2

always. Abyssinian monks have always sincerely struggled for the fulfilment of their purpose and right intention. This is what the modern exegetes explain for us, which the early Abyssinian monks used to practice in their daily asceticism.

iv) Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples and the whole of scripture invites human beings to live in love and be one, as Jesus is one with his Father. This is much stressed by modern exegetes just as it was the daily practice of Abyssinian monks. They formed communities of like-minded disciples and their communities came together as the Body of Christ while the superior serves as the eye.

3.1.2 Differences

i) *Moralistic Approach*: Early Abyssinian monks were evangelising with a moralistic approach and understanding of the scriptures. For them to receive Christianity and to practise it faithfully was the only means of salvation. They were not dependent highly on God's mercy, which is a free gift for everybody. They believed that if someone does good he will be saved; if not he will be condemned and God is taken as a judge, more than a merciful Father (Matt 15:22-24). However, modern exegetes teach us that God gave us free will and freedom which he will not take away from us because if he does so, he destroys our capacity of loving him. Even if we fail to love him, he still continues to love us unconditionally (2 Tim 2:12). Thus, Abyssinian Christianity, having a monastic inclination in its spirituality, caused in this church a monastic attitude.

ii) *Fresh Interpretation*: Early Abyssinian monks used to see the Bible from a dogmatic point of view. They were very strict and straightforward. They were rough in leading their lives in the ascetic way and also in leading the faithful Christians. They were more interested in keeping what they consider is infallible interpretation than in making a living and continuing the effort to develop the totality of its theological implications and content. However, Jesus came to liberate us from such an understanding and if not, what does Good News mean? The bible is not the only source as word of God but is one part of God's word. The word of God is so vast. For example, the life of Jesus itself was a word of God and all of it is not contained in the scriptures (John 21:25). Instead, modern exegesis grasps the word of God from its wider and deeper way of understanding because it is more than the scriptures. It teaches God's mercy and love but not vengeance.

iii) *Spirituality is Centred on the Liturgy*: Liturgy is the base of Abyssinian spirituality. Monks', as well as the rest of Abyssinian Christians' spirituality, is centred on the liturgy. Their prayers are all within the Liturgy, for example, *Wazzema*⁹⁸ (Vigil Song), *Qene*⁹⁹ (hymn), the *evening* and *morning prayers*, etc. But the Eucharistic celebration is the centre of the their liturgy. Then all the silence, spiritual readings, fasting before Holy Mass, mortification, etc. lead Christians to the celebration of the Eucharist. This has to do with concrete human beings and the concrete historical, social and political factors that make up human life. The

⁹⁸ 'Wazzema' is the evening prayers used on the 'vigil of the feasts'. They are sung with different melodies and are used with different musical instruments such as Kebero (church drum) and Tzenatyil (sistrum). BAHLEBBI, H., *The Biblical-Liturgical Theology*, Rome: 1989, 24.

⁹⁹ 'Qene' (hymn) is a liturgical poetry used on holidays. It is one of the characteristics of Abyssinian Liturgy. It always contains double meanings, i.e. a literal meaning and a hidden meaning. It is used in honour of the Trinity, Jesus, the Paraclete, Mary, angels and saints and even for kings

person's experience, that is, the real or existential level, is part and parcel of spiritual life.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, everything to do with their spirituality is always within the circle of liturgy. Instead, modern exegetes first read the situation people are in, their background, culture, etc. and then explain to find the true message that the inspired author wants to transmit for his people. From that perspective, they try to contextualise the scriptural message. But this contextualization has nothing to do with liturgy. It does not touch liturgy nor has it any connection with it.

iv) *Literal Understanding of the Bible*: For Abyssinian monks, the Bible was the favourite and sometimes almost the only book which they used to read, or listen to as another read. For them it was like a mirror in which they could see the story of their own salvation in their lives being reflected. They were not only reading or listening it, but lived it daily.

The Bible is the inspired word of God. At the same time, it is literature like any other books. To understand it we need to treat it as literature. The words, the method, capacity and cultural background of the inspired authors also influence in passing the message of God, though the intention is always kept. Therefore, we need to study well the finished form of the text to understand the message the author wants to convey to us. However, Abyssinian monks stayed closer in adhering to the literal meaning rather than its wider understanding. They were not flexible and directly followed what is written. Instead, modern exegetes have given more value for broader thoughtfulness and work on more diligently.

and other important persons. (Ibid., 23.)

v) *Abyssinian Christianity, a Monastic Christianity*: retains much of the austere life and profound spirituality of those missionaries.¹⁰¹ It is in fact monastic Christianity, in the sense that it keeps the forms of the strict Christian life of the first centuries. Some, especially singular aspects of Abyssinian popular spirituality, include the ascetical practices consisting not only of abstinence and fasting from food, but also from any other amusement and material pleasure.¹⁰² The methodology they used to follow in evangelising influenced the kind of Christianity they were to plant in Abyssinia. They made great impact, thanks to the following reasons:- (i) The holiness of their lives. They were not only good preachers but also holy monks. (ii) The support they received from the royal house. (iii) The wise policy of compromise (finding a middle course) they followed.¹⁰³ (vi) Their monasteries were built in strategic positions for the sake of evangelisation.

Abyssinian monks also composed a new calendar for Abyssinia as the continuation of planting monastic Christianity. This calendar is easy to follow even by the illiterate people. Since it originated from monasteries, it includes monastic culture and spirituality. It includes all the liturgical feasts. It made Abyssinia self sufficient and independent in its Christianity. On the other side, these monks also introduced a culture which makes Christians fully participatory in contributing to the building of their churches, administration and maintenance of the clergy.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ ABRAHA, A., *Spirituality*, 67.

¹⁰¹ The Syrian missionary monks known in Abyssinian history by the name "The Nine Roman Saints" and Abyssinian monks.

¹⁰² TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-Miscellanea*, 145.

¹⁰³ TEKLAY, T., *Monasticism and its way of Prayer in Abyssinian Church*, Asmara-Eritrea: 1998, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. TEKLEHAYMANOT, A., *I-Miscellanea*, 248.

3.2 Application and Guidance for Adaptation and Reformation of Abyssinian Monasticism

It seems that the first attempt of Abyssinian monks was to lead an ascetic life for themselves and to organise a successful programme of evangelisation in the pagan and Muslim provinces of Abyssinia. Their other aim was to bring about basic reforms within the church itself. They have led the church and evangelised successfully. In the beginning, the life history of many of them used to inspire or to attract a significant number of imitators and many joined monastic life. It was normal to see people in great numbers flocking to join monasticism. However, since monastic life did not adapt its rules and life style hand in hand with the fast development of the world, it started to lose many vocations. People admired the monastic life style and dedication of the monks but did not feel inspired to join them. This heavy loss of vocations caused a reduction in number of monks. New vocations failed to keep pace with deaths of older monks. Monks were much involved in worldly concerns but lacked the inner spirit of renewal, and were often reduced to pitiful conditions by the wars and disturbances of the times.

Monasticism today finds itself in a period of renewal and improvement. The spirit of restoration will enable its spirituality to become once again a vital force in the life of the church, as it was in the days of its origins. What form will monastic life take in the future? This reality might lie in the independent lay families, the

poor, celibate, obedient, humble, people leading a balanced life of the *opus dei*, labouring alongside the clerical church structure, etc.¹⁰⁵

Will vocations to the monastic life resume? Since this is the life of the spirit, it cannot die, although it now suffers a period of decline. Many orders at present consist largely of old men or women. During my holidays in May - June 2000, I visited two monastic centres in Eritrea in order to clarify and give meaning to my research. There, the youngest monks I saw were over 40 years of age. The number of monks in all monasteries is highly reduced in comparison with the statistics of earlier years. Some monastic centres have already closed. This might cause death to present monastic traditions or it can remain undeveloped. Therefore, it needs to be substituted by new reforms, idealists who are more adapted to the present time.

The other point which can be considered as cause for the decline of monastic vocation is the backwardness of the monastic schools. Monastic schools used the same method as they were before six hundred years ago i.e. study by heart which is very exhaustive. Hence in order to attract the people of our era, their theology must be progressive and they have to deal with the methods of the 21st century not with that of 14th and 15th centuries. Therefore, their school must scope with the secular schools of their century.

Since the idea of a life-long commitment seems unattractive to many today, perhaps the door should also be left open for a return to the secular community after

¹⁰⁵ Cf. PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic*, 238.

a short or longer term of service in the monastery. For the time being, the number of solemnly professed makes the future seem bright if they are open and ready for adaptation and reformation. The spirit of monasticism hopes to persevere as an ideal type of life, inspiring the church with a vision of eschatological hope in the midst of a world sometimes far removed from the eschaton.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

A Monastery is a witness to the demands of the Reign of God and to its presence among people. Christians have ample witness from their divine Master of the importance of going apart, at least periodically. Therefore, monasticism is a gift for our church which needs care for its continuous existence. It also needs improvement in some areas of its life style that the dedication of people in joining it may resume.

¹⁰⁶ PEIFER, C. J., *Monastic*, 239.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

This essay mainly reflects upon the life of Abyssinian monks and their evangelization. "Monastic life is the wisdom of the Christian law, and monks are earthly angels or heavenly men, followers of Christ as much as it is humanly possible."¹⁰⁷ This life was a contemplative life. And precisely as such, through the great contemplative spirits it produced, it had an immense social, economic, and political impact on society. They were attracted by the word of God and offered their life freely to seek what is necessary for the salvation of their lives. Some of them were famous for their sanctity and missionary zeal, and some founded monasteries or renewed and strengthened monastic communities. Others were martyred especially during the Muslim invasion or during battles between Muslim armies and the Christians. Their sanctity and ascetical exercises attracted many people. Generally, monasteries, in an eminent way, were the depository of the Abyssinian culture.

Christians, from their side, helped the growth of monasticism especially by donations of lands and also by other material things. They have respected the monks and appreciated the greatness of their work for the expansion of Christianity, the

¹⁰⁷ TSADUA, P., *The Fitha Negest*, 65.

revival of the church, in inculturation, in literature and arts, in education, etc. They worked in co-operation with them by respecting them as trusted leaders of their religion. Therefore, monasticism deeply penetrated the mentality of the people and their language in their daily lives.

Comparing early Abyssinian monastic life with modern exegesis, it is easy to see some similarities and differences. The early monks formed in Abyssinia a monastic church in all its spiritual, liturgical and disciplinary aspects. Their moralistic approach to the scripture, its literal understanding, its lack of fresh interpretation, etc. show the different approach they had in contrast with modern exegetes.

Analysing directly the Abyssinian monastic life and its history, we realize that it is still primitive, therefore a bit rough as well as tough, but it is authentic. There can be several causes which contributed its crises such as war, atheistic ideology of some Abyssinian governors, etc. but the main one is lack of renewal in their constitutions and the traditionalistic character of their formation.

Finally, Abyssinian monks gave great opportunity to their people to grasp their faith easily and express it in their own way. As years passed, Christianity became the cultural force in Abyssinia by which the life of the church and the values of the Gospel became integrated into the real day-to-day life of the people.

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