

AN ETHIOPIAN LIBERAL.

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WHO would have suspected that in the study of Ethiopic, besides the translations of the Old and New Testaments, some Apocrypha, some earlier Christian writings, martyrologies, lives of saints, magical writings, a mixture of Christian and Pagan elements, the writings of an Ethiopian liberal would turn up?

Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia in the fourth century and became the state religion. Many Jewish elements were retained, such as circumcision and other ceremonial laws. In the sixth century the Ethiopian church joined the Monophysites, and thus became separated from the Greek and Roman Catholic churches. From the time of the inroads of Islam and of surrounding wild nomad tribes until the beginning of modern history Ethiopia met with troublous times. At the end of the fifteenth century the Portuguese mixed into the national affairs of the country, promising and giving help to the state on condition of bringing the Ethiopian church back again to the fold of orthodoxy. An embassy is said to have been sent as early as 1439 from Ethiopia to the council of Florence, which aimed to reunite the Greek church to the Roman. Although the influence of the Roman church prevailed with the rulers of the country for a time after the coming of the Portuguese and later of the Jesuits, it was finally put down again by the resistance of the Ethiopian clergy and the people. One of the rulers who had openly professed the Roman views was Socinius (1605-1632). Under him lived this liberal thinker, whose existence is wholly unique in Ethiopian religious history. This man, by name Zar' a-Jaq'ob, was the son of a poor peasant of Axum, the former capital of Abyssinia. He was very talented, received a good education and industriously studied learned works. In consequence he became a skeptic with regard to Christianity. The suspicions of Socinius were aroused and the scholar was obliged to live for several years in a cave. Later on he became a secretary and teacher in the family of a

wealthy man by the name of Habtu, of a place called Enferaz. Here he married and founded a family and died at the age of ninety-three honored by all. Walda-Hejwat, a son of his benefactor and his most ardent pupil, asked Zar'a-Jaq'ob to write an account of his life. This he did in his 68th year in concise but clear language as is related by C. Bezold in a review of Ethiopic research in Vol. VIII of the *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 1905 (Teubner, Leipzig) from whom I make this short sketch. The review is on the autobiography of Zar'a-Jaq'ob and a treatise of similar contents added by his pupil as published in Ethiopic with a Latin translation by Enno Littmann in *Philosophi Abessinici*, Series prima, tomus XXXI of *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Paris, 1904.¹

According to Bezold the opinions of Zar'a-Jaq'ob were as follows: The only postulates of reason are the existence of an infinitely good creator who can be proved, the immortality of the soul, love to fellow-men, the command to work, self-reformation, and prayer which is always answered in so far as it does not contain petitions which man can fulfil himself. Everything else in the sacred writings, as for instance the accounts of miracles, is subject to doubt or is to be rejected as not in accord with the will of God.

Accounts of miracles are intended for the multitudes who wish to be deluded. They are to be traced back to their inventors' avarice and desire for power. (For this somewhat radical and unhistorical view concerning the origin of accounts of miracles Zar'a-Jaq'ob may have found reasons in his surroundings). Celibacy and the life of an anchorite are also to be condemned, as is likewise Mohammedan polygamy; the laws concerning fasting and purifications are to be rejected and even the sanctity of the Sabbath. Divine revelation is not limited to one special race and Christianity has lost its original purity.

How lasting the influence of this Ethiopian liberal was, is not told. But the unstable political conditions of Abyssinia and the traditional belief of the Ethiopian Christians, often mixed as we know with the crudest superstitions; the use of magic scrolls as amulets to prevent disease and dangers; the use of certain mysterious names of God and Christ to conjure demons and the like, surely were not favorable to the spread of such advanced religious views as those of Zar'a Jaq'ob. That such independent and liberal thought was at all possible in his time and surroundings is certainly surprising.

¹The reviewer says that there also exists an essay by B. Turacus in Russian on the two treatises (Petersburg, 1903), but it was inaccessible to him.