

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION OF AXUM.

BY THE EDITOR.

DR. E. Littmann has started the publication of an Abyssinian library called *Bibliotheca Abessinica*, in which he proposes to publish studies concerning the languages, literature and history of Abyssinia. The first volume before us contains the legend of the Queen of Sheba, which of all Abyssinian traditions will prove especially interesting on account of its connection with the Solomon and Old Testament traditions, also mentioned by Jesus in the New Testament,* and it is interesting to notice that the title "The Queen of the South," which is the exact name used by Jesus, literally agrees with the Abyssinian term *Etiyē Azēb*.

Dr. Littmann publishes the text of an Abyssinian manuscript together with an English translation and dedicates his work to "R. Sundtröm, Missionary and Scholar," who is living in the Colonia Eritrea. To him he owes not only the manuscript, but also much help in the translation.

The legend exists, as stated by Dr. Littmann, in two other versions, one published in French by M. E. Amélineau, the other by Dr. Conti Rossini. In all essential points the three translations agree. The story as published by Dr. Littmann is the Tigrē version of the legend and apparently a local tradition of Axum, for one part of the story refers to the ark that is preserved in the Axum church.

Briefly told the legend is as follows:

King Menelik was the son of Etiyē Azēb, e. g., "the Queen of the South," a Tigrē girl who was destined to be sacrificed to the dragon that in the age of fable infested the country. She was tied to a tree, but while she awaited her fate seven saints came and

*Matt. xii. 42, Luke xi. 31. Jesus calls her ἡ βασιλίσα τοῦ νότου.

seated themselves in its shade. The girl began to weep and one of the tears fell on them. Upon inquiry who she was, whether Mary or a mortal woman, and why she was bound, they heard of her fate and decided to rescue her. The seven saints fought the dragon, and one of them smote him with the cross so that he died. The girl returned to the village, but the villagers expelled her because they thought she had merely escaped, but when she showed them the dead monster they made her queen and she chose a girl like herself as prime minister. Now it happened that some blood of the dragon had trickled on her foot, and her foot had turned into an ass's heel. Having heard much of the wisdom of Solomon, she decided to visit him to be cured of her infirmity; and so she went with her companion to Jerusalem in male guise, announcing herself as the King of Abyssinia and his Prime Minister. King Solomon suspected his visitors to be women, but invited them to stay and made them sleep in his own bedroom. He put some honey in a skin, hung it up in the room and placed a bowl under it. The queen and the prime minister tasted of the honey, and now he knew that they were women. He at once married them and on their departure he gave each of them a staff of silver and a ring, saying, that if their children should be boys, they should give them the ring, if they were girls, the staff. When the boys grew up the Tigrē people called them "fatherless children," but the Queen of Sheba said to her son: "Your father is King Solomon, and he lives in Jerusalem." She gave him a mirror and said: "The man who looks in color like you is King Solomon." When the boys reached Jerusalem, King Solomon hid himself in the stable and placed another man on the throne. The prime minister's son greeted the man on the throne as King, but Menelik looked into his mirror and saw that his color was not like his own. Finally he discovered the King in the stable and greeted him as his father. Solomon said: "Thou art my true son," and seated him on the throne.

The people complained saying: "We cannot have two chiefs. Send away your son." Solomon at the request of Menelik answered: "Is he not my first-born son? Send ye your first-born sons with him." When Menelik was ready to depart Solomon said: "Take the ark of Michael with thee." But Menelik took the cover of Michael's ark and put it on Mary's ark and departed with Mary's ark, which his father thought to be only the ark of Michael. A few days afterwards a storm arose, and it appeared that the ark of Michael was not strong enough to avert the evil,

so Solomon discovered that under the cover of Mary's ark had been left the ark of Michael. Thus the ark of Mary reached Axum where it is still standing.

The legend is interesting for many reasons. Not only do we have here a dragon story, such as is given in fairy tales all over the world, but we learn also that the ark of Axum, which contains stones, was supposed to have been stolen from Jerusalem by trickery in a similar way as Rachel, the daughter of Laban, stole "the images," the gods of her fathers.* It is characteristic of a certain age to regard theft, fraud, and lies, on the sole condition that they are successful, as virtues. We only mention the Greek *Odyssey*, where the hero is constantly lying even where there is no need of it, and the German *Reynard the Fox*.

It is well known that stories of folk-lore are never consistent either in chronology, names, or in other historical data. Thus, in the times of King Solomon we meet saints and the Virgin Mary, and the cross as a magic charm, but we need not doubt that the saints are only substituted for ancient pagan heroes, the cross for magic weapons, and Mary for "the Queen of Heaven," the mother goddess of the pagan world. It is characteristic of pre-Christian paganism that the ark of Mary, whom we might as well call Ishtar, is tacitly assumed to be more powerful than the ark of Michael. It is quite in keeping with the ancient pagan beliefs. The stones which are preserved in the ark of Mary at Axum are undoubtedly of pagan origin, and we may very well assume that Yahveh's ark of the Covenant originally also contained a stone. It is characteristic of ancient times that the ark, or rather the sacred stones preserved in the ark, are not only the representatives of the deity but are assumed to be the deity itself. Thus we read in the Bible (1 Sam. iv. 7) that the Philistines said when the ark of Yahveh reached the camp of Israel, "God is come to the camp." The same words are used of the ark of Mary. When the ark reaches Axum, we read that Satan was just building a house in order to fight God, and the people said: "Mary has come to thee." Thus Satan was obliged to retire from Axum and leave the field to Mary.†

We might add that the legend of the Queen of Sheba is al-

*Genesis xxxi. 19 ff.

† As to the details we refer the reader to Dr. Littmann's first fascicle of the *Bibliotheca Abessinica*.

luded to in the Koran, Sutra 33, 38. As to different versions of the same legend Dr. Littmann says:

“The reason why the Queen of Sheba travels to Solomon is in almost all the other forms of the legend her desire to test or at least to experience his wisdom, of which she has heard so much spoken. The healing of the Queen from her hairiness is known to the Arabs also, but in the Ethiopian version it is only an episode and of minor importance. Now in the Tigrē legend this is made the main reason: the Queen of Sheba goes to Solomon only to be cured of her ass’s heel. To the minds of a very large class of people all over the world, wisdom, healing-power, and sorcery are nearly synonymous, and driving out the devil of disease—for the diseases are caused by or identical with the demons—is the most palpable proof of wisdom. We need not wonder, therefore, that the simple Abyssinian who told our legend probably considered Solomon only as a great sorcerer, and that the healing-power of this ‘king of all demons’ impressed itself more deeply on the mind of the common people than his intellectual wisdom.”