

Ethopia Shall Soon Stretch Out Her Hands Unto God

By Charles Bradford

Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God. (Ps. 68:31)

The Importance of Africa

Arising chorus of theologians and historians of religion is reporting on the dramatic growth of Christianity on the African continent. “While the story of Christianity’s spread in Africa is nothing less than awesome, it is also nothing more than the work of God,” says Ogbu Kalu.¹

Philip Jenkins is one of the leading spokesmen of this new awareness. “We are living through one of the transforming moments in the history of religion worldwide...” he writes. “The number of Christians [on the African continent] increased staggeringly, from 10 million in 1900 to 360 million by 2000.”²

Observes Andrew Walls:

It is now clearly the case that Christianity has become so much a part of the fabric of sub-Saharan African life that scholars in a wide variety of disciplines who want to undertake serious study of Africa need to know something about Christianity. The converse is equally true; anyone who wishes to undertake serious study of Christianity these days needs to know something about Africa.³

In biblical terms, Cush/Ethiopia refers to what we today call Africa. Zephaniah, himself a son of Cush, speaks of the inhabitants of the lands “beyond the rivers of Ethiopia” (Zeph. 3:10), who bring gifts to Yahweh. The prophecy of Psalms 68 describes a people thought of as estranged, far away from God, who turn to him en masse.

This is happening in our time. I call it the New Reality. Observers speak of the dramatic suddenness of this turn to Christianity in terms that echo the language of Psalms 68. Some have called the twentieth century the Century of African Christianity.

The message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are part of this reality. Membership in sub-Sahara Africa grew from 53,101 in 1945 to 3,611,255 in 2000, a growth rate of 680 percent! Seventh-day Adventist world



president Jan Paulson calls this growth “explosive.”

On the African continent, there are three divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist world church. The membership of these divisions totals about four million members. Five to seven million people attend worship services across Africa on any given Sabbath. The continent also has a large number of Sabbath keepers who are not Seventh-day Adventists.

Adventists, Africa, and the Sabbath

The connections among Adventists, Africa, and the Sabbath reach far back in time. In 1860, Ellen G. White urged J. N. Andrews, Adventism’s leading scholar of that day, to write a book on the Sabbath in history. The first edition of the resulting book, *History of the Sabbath*, published in 1862, informed all subsequent Adventist writing on this subject.

Ellen White used Andrews’s work extensively while producing *The Great Controversy*: “The history of the churches of Ethiopia and Abyssinia is especially significant,” she wrote (577).

In lands beyond the jurisdiction of Rome there existed for many centuries bodies of Christians who remained almost wholly free from papal corruption.... These Christians believed in the perpetuity of the law of God and observed the Sabbath of the fourth commandment. Churches that held to this faith and practice existed in Central Africa and among the Armenians of Asia. (63)

The world lost sight of Central Africa’s Christians during the Middle Ages, according to *The Great Controversy*, but they enjoyed freedom to exercise their faith. Eventually, the emperor of Abyssinia acknowledged the pope as vicar of Christ and they lost their freedom. *The Great Controversy* continues:

An edict was issued forbidding the observance of the Sabbath under the severest penalties.... After a terrible struggle the Romanists were banished from [Abyssinian] dominions, and the ancient faith was restored. The churches rejoiced in their freedom. (577)

The Sabbath in Africa Project

In 1991, I established the Sabbath in Africa Project. According to its statement of purpose, the project exists “to investigate and document historical and con-

temporary expressions of Sabbath consciousness on the African continent.” One result is my recent book, *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection*, which explores Africa’s ancient Sabbath keepers.

As the book explains, the Sabbath message being proclaimed throughout the world today owes much to Africa. This broader message, writes historian Douglas Morgan in a review of the book, “calls into being a community made up of every ‘race, tribe, language, and nation,’ united in worshiping ‘the maker of heaven and earth’ (Rev. 14: 6–7), living together in love and justice. What truth could be more for the present than that?” asks Morgan.[†]

But the project’s interests extend beyond history. The project also points to the fulfillment of prophecy. “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth,” reads Isaiah, “it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (55:11).

The Sabbath in Africa Project has become part of an important response to increasing fascination with African religion. In addition, it represents widespread multid denominational interest in the biblical Sabbath. In these ways, *Sabbath Roots* has become a powerful witness.

Ethiopia/Cush is important only as a service instrument to the world. Its value is not determined by its antiquity, or its wisdom, or its scientific genius and cultural achievements, but by Yahweh’s decree. The Sovereign Lord, with whom word and deed are the same, says, “Ethiopia/Cush shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”

Once again, African Christians are directing the world’s attention to the God of the Sabbath.

Notes and References

1. *Christian History Magazine* 70 (spring 2003): 7.
2. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1, 5.
3. Andrew F. Walls, “Consultation of Global Christian Historiography,” forthcoming.
4. Douglas Morgan, “Restoring the True Sabbath in the Ancient Kingdoms,” *Spectrum* 31.1 (winter 2003): 74.

In 1990, Charles Bradford retired from the presidency of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. The Ministerial Association of the General Conference published his book *Sabbath Roots: The African Connection* in 1999.