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Joan A. Francis
Columbia Union College

Doug Morgan
Columbia Union College

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DIGGING FOR TRUTH

Theologians re-examine Christianity and Sabbath keeping in Africa.

Most Christians assume that Christianity began in Africa during the 19th century, when missionaries from Europe and America poured into the continent. In reality, Africa has had a long historical role in sustaining Christian faith, theology, and belief. In their eagerness to Christianize Africa, missionaries overlooked the Christian concepts and ideas long embedded in the cultures of many areas. Even today, in regard to its role in the formation and spread of Christianity, Africa is largely the forgotten continent.

This unfortunate oversight is difficult to understand: Christian tradition acknowledges that the Apostle Mark was the first to preach

the gospel in Alexandria, North Africa. Early church scholars—Tertullian from Carthage (now Tunisia); Athanasius, who served as Bishop of Alexandria around A.D. 297; and St. Augustine, native of what is now Algeria—are referred to as citizens of Rome, but they were

** Joan A. Francis is Professor of History and Political Studies at Columbia Union College in Takoma Park, Maryland. Doug Morgan is Chair of the History and Political Studies Department at Columbia Union College and has written *Adventism and the American Republic*.*

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products of Africa as well. As Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist point out in *History of the World Christian Movement*, “Alexandria was the pre-eminent intellectual city in the Mediterranean world in the first century of the Christian era.”¹

Sabbath Roots

Academic circles began examining the role of Africa in Christian history more than two decades ago and have recently accelerated their research. Charles Bradford, retired president of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, has devoted much time to researching, writing, and speaking on the history of Christianity in Africa—in particular, the Sabbath dimension. In his book *Sabbath Roots, The African Connection*, he reveals that the Sabbath, often overlooked in today’s Western culture, has always had observers in a number of African countries.

To further research and documentation of the history of Christianity in Africa, Bradford—along with historians and theologians—formed the Sabbath in Africa (SIA) project in 1991. Recently SIA achieved publication of the late Bekele Heye’s Master’s thesis, *The Sabbath in Ethiopia: An Exploration of Christian Roots*.²

Says Bradford: “You can imagine the interest in a lecture given by Emory Tolbert of Howard Univer-

sity,³—a graphic account of Ethiopia’s fight against the establishment of Sunday instead of Sabbath as the day to worship. And Bertram L. Melbourne of Howard University⁴ reported that ‘some African religions that Europeans labeled “pagan” actually “reflected elements of Christian thought that, if exploited, could have provided common ground upon which to build.”’” Bradford pointed out that the Bible mentions Africa’s unique role in history: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”” (Ps. 68:31, KJV). According to Bradford, Andrew Walls’ statement—“the most striking feature of Christianity at the end of the second millennium is that it is predominantly a non-Western religion”—is true for the Adventist Church. Statistics highlight the explosion of Adventist Christianity’s growth in Africa between 1945 and 2000. “Membership in sub-Sahara Africa grew from 53,101 in 1945 to 3,611,255 in 2000,” Bradford notes. In addition, the African continent now hosts three divisions of the Adventist Church. Close to a third of all Adventist members live in Africa, where, in 2001, an average of 600 members a day joined the church.

Evidence Unearthed

With such evidence of growth, Ellen White’s comment, “The history



Isaiah Shembe

of the churches of Ethiopia and Abyssinia is especially significant.”⁵ Challenging the church today is the need for greater appreciation and study of the early church’s spread into Africa and the contribution of Africa to Christian theology and practices. Some interesting discoveries already have been made: The establishment of monastic orders within Christianity can be traced to the work of Egyptian Christian Pachomius, born around A.D. 290 in Egypt.⁶ Scholars, including Heye, have confirmed that the Sabbath was kept in Ethiopia until leaders of the Islamic faith and Roman Church challenged it. For 145 years, between 1520 and 1665, Ethiopia was under constant pressure from the Por-

tuguese government and the Pope to renege on Sabbath keeping and accept Catholicism. The Ethiopian Christians’ success in finally expelling the Jesuits and others sent to convert them, ensured that nation’s independence for many years. Says Bradford: “This information needs to be included with the teachings of the Waldenses and other Christians who faithfully kept the Sabbath.”⁷ A fascinating footnote: One African religion called its Supreme Being “*molimo o diala di maroba, rammolobi*”—literally, “God with the scars in the hands, the Father of salvation.”⁸

Most remarkable of modern African advocates of Christian Sabbath keeping was the Zulu prophet Isaiah Shembe, circa 1870-1935, who founded the Church of the Nazarites. Shembe proclaimed the restoration of the true Sabbath, as he considered it essential to the freedom and welfare of the Zulu people.⁹ Moreover, contemporary indigenous evangelists have succeeded in “propelling Christianity in Africa from between 8 to 10 percent of the population in 1900 to nearly 50 percent today.”¹⁰

Rich Rewards to Come

Much of the richness of Africa’s Christian past remains to be unearthed. The impact of the growth of Adventism in Africa in itself more than justifies the need for all

of us—in and out of the churches and classrooms—to become informed about that continent’s contribution to our Christian and Sabbath heritage. □

Notes and References

¹Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1, *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 86.

²Bekele Heye was a convert from Ethiopian Orthodoxy who became an Adventist Church administrator.

³Emory Tolbert, Ph.D., is chair of the History Department at Howard University in Washington, D.C., associate dean for academic affairs and associate professor of Biblical Language and Literature at Howard Uni-

versity School of Divinity.

⁴Bertram L. Melbourne, presentation of “The Richness of Africa’s Christian Past,” Allegheny East Conference camp meeting, 2003, Pine Forge, Pennsylvania, 2003.

⁵*The Great Controversy*, p. 577.

⁶Constance B. Hilliard, ed., *Intellectual Traditions of Pre-Colonial Africa* (McGraw-Hill, 1997), p. 133.

⁷Bekele Heye, *The Sabbath in Ethiopia: An Exploration of Christian Roots*; Charles Bradford, *Sabbath Roots*, Emery Tolbert, Presentation of “The Sabbath in Ethiopia,” Allegheny East Conference camp meeting, 2003.

⁸Bertram Melbourne—Ibid.

⁹Bradford, *Sabbath Roots*, pp. 206-209.

¹⁰Chris Armstrong and Collin Hansen, “Did You Know? The Stunning 20th Century ‘Baptism’ of Africa,” *Christian History*, 79 (Summer 2003), XXII:3, p. 2.

The Sabbath in Ethiopia: An Exploration of Christian Roots

Author: Bekele Heye

Publisher: Center for Creative Ministry
at (800) 272-4664 or <http://www.creativeministry.org/resources/Ethiopia>

Price \$9.95

Bekele Heye documents the commitment of Ethiopian Christians to Sabbath keeping from the time of the apostles to the 20th century. *The Sabbath in Ethiopia* highlights the intense resistance of Ethiopians during the 15th and 16th centuries when outsiders attempted, through a variety of strategies, to change their day of worship to the first day of the week. Thousands of Ethiopians gave their lives to defend the seventh-day Sabbath. Charles Bradford, retired president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, who discovered the manuscript, says the Bible puts the world on notice about Ethiopia’s unique role in world history. “If Ethiopia is key to understanding the Sabbath in Africa, then Heye’s book is key to understanding Ethiopia.”—Norma Sahlin.