

# The Dictionary of African Christian Biography and the Story of Ethiopian Christianity

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An arresting scene took place one day in the late 1920s in the Hosanna Shoa area of southern Ethiopia, involving Hakalla Amale, a young woman probably not even twenty years old. “While Hakalla was pregnant with her second son, the persecution increased. The village elders came to her home, forced her outside, and demanded that she deny Christ, threatening to curse her if she refused.”<sup>1</sup>

This story of Hakalla Amale from the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB), an online database documenting the history of African Christianity, is the only known historical record of one of the foremothers of the Kale Heywet Church (KHC or Word of Life Evangelical Church). KHC grew out of an indigenous people’s movement from seeds sown by Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) missionaries starting in 1928. One of the youngest Christian churches in Ethiopia, KHC is a relative latecomer in the long history of Christianity there. KHC is currently the second largest Christian denomination in Ethiopia after the Orthodox Church (40.1 percent), with believers numbering around 7.6 million or 8.7 percent of the population.<sup>2</sup>

Many stories like that of Hakalla Amale, stories that recount the courage and faithful perseverance of twentieth-century Protestant African evangelists, have been circulating for decades in the oral culture of local believers and missionaries in Ethiopia. They serve an essential function of building up and strengthening the Christian community by providing a source of instruction and comfort in times of adversity. Ten years after Hakalla’s ordeal, times of trial began for the few early *amanyoch* (believers), or *yesu mana* (followers of Jesus), in Ethiopia. When the Italians invaded the country in 1937, they expelled the missionaries and submitted local evangelical Christians to severe persecution. Under duress, the local leadership of the *amanyoch* developed contextualized teaching and appropriated the Bible in ways that were relevant to the culture, confronting issues for which the missionaries had been ill-equipped. These issues included the power of evil spirits and supernatural healing through the Holy Spirit. The missionaries returned in 1943 to find that, in their absence, the number of believers had swelled to tens of thousands, in spite of the persecution.<sup>3</sup>

## Focus of the DACB

Stories of believers who were steadfast in their faith helped the Ethiopian Christian community to persevere in hope during this difficult period. But as time wore on and these extraordinary Christians died, their memory faded and eventually was in danger of being lost. To lose these stories would be tragic; not only local Christians but also the rest of the global Christian



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community would be impoverished if this chapter of African history went silent. The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* was designed as a means to retrieve such disappearing strands of African Christian history, preserving these accounts by documenting the biographies of “the major creative and innovative local figures most vitally involved”—a history that is “virtually absent from the standard scholarly reference works.”<sup>4</sup> Born out of a deep respect for the ancient history of African Christianity, as well as for its astounding contemporary vitality, the goal of the DACB is to serve as a sort of “gallery of saints” that provides the insight and perspective of Africans into their own Christian history. Here the intended meaning of the term “saint” is that used by Paul in his greeting to the Romans: “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7).

The choice to make the DACB primarily a database of biographies rather than a collection of histories places the emphasis on the importance of remembering the particular African men and women who were the apostles of the Gospel. In the past, traditional historical accounts or missionary reports written by Westerners often failed to include the evangelist or catechist who may have been instrumental in the conversion of an entire village or area, as was Hakalla Amale. It also emphasizes the narrative aspect of history which is more in harmony with an African worldview and less given to interpretive theories.

The DACB collects biographies from a variety of sources, including published volumes. By providing resources online in this way, it is possible to fill gaps in the historical record for those who have little or no access to these volumes in distant or foreign libraries. For example, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the DACB was granted permission to republish entries from *The Dictionary of Ethiopian Biography*, vol. 1, *From Early Times to the End of the Zagwé Dynasty, c. 1270 A.D.* (1975), edited by Belaynesh Michael, S. Chojnacki, and Richard Pankhurst at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa. As a result, dozens of entries on the ancient figures of Ethiopian Christianity joined the DACB’s expanding online collection of biographies, making it possible to weave together many rich strands of this ancient history. The biographical material, written by Ethiopian scholars, provides not only historical content but also, and perhaps more importantly, an Ethiopian lens through which the narrative of Ethiopian Christianity unfolds. The importance of this perspective must not be underestimated. As Andrew Walls poignantly argues: “African Christian history is . . . distorted by attempts to make it an appendage of a ‘general’ church history, which is really a form of European clan history.”<sup>5</sup> The mission of the DACB is to provide an open-source platform for the biographical accounts of African writers that will, to a modest degree, rectify this distorted perspective. In this way, the DACB contributes to establishing African Christian history as an integral and essential component of world Christian history.

Within African Christian history, the Ethiopian chapter holds a place of honor because, in the words of Walls, “the significance of Ethiopia for all African Christians, as symbol of Africa indigenously, primordially Christian, and as symbol of a Christian tradition completely independent of the West, has been seized all over the continent, as the countless churches and societies all

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over the continent that take 'Ethiopian' as part of their title bear witness."<sup>6</sup>In the absence of other resources, the *DACB* biographies provided by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies can serve to help reconstruct Ethiopia's ancient and venerable Christian history up to the thirteenth century. After this point other sources must be culled, some from other published volumes, some from oral history researchers on the ground in Ethiopia. These researchers, who may be university instructors, graduate students, missionaries, scholars, or simply relatives, are central to the success of the *DACB* because they are the ones who have access to the oral histories and local sources necessary to write the biographies of African evangelists.<sup>7</sup>

## The Long History of Ethiopian Christianity

Acts 8:26–40 recounts the story of the unnamed eunuch,\* the treasurer of Queen Candace, baptized by Philip on the road to Gaza.<sup>8</sup> Candace is the traditional title of the queen of Meroë, a Nubian realm bordering the upper Nile (in southern Sudan, west of present day Ethiopia). This account is the earliest reference to Christianity making its way into the interior of Africa. While the eunuch may have been the first missionary to that region, the tradition of the Orthodox Church dates the actual birth of Christianity in Ethiopia to the fourth century.

*Old Testament roots.* The fact that this eunuch was in Jerusalem highlights an even more ancient connection between Ethiopia and Jesus' homeland. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church in fact owes a great debt to ancient Jewish roots. In 1 Kings 10 we read about the visit of the queen of Sheba to Solomon's royal court. According to Ethiopian church tradition, the queen, named Makeda,\* gave birth to a son sired by King Solomon during her visit. This son, who would eventually take the throne as Menelik I, later returned to Jerusalem to visit his father. According to one version of this account, the eldest sons of the nobles of Israel accompanied him back to Ethiopia, bringing with them the original Ark of the Covenant. After the country was Christianized in the fourth century, every Ethiopian Orthodox church kept a symbol of this treasure on its premises in the form of an oblong box.

*Early Christians.* In the fourth century, Christianity was introduced into Aksum, a powerful kingdom that dominated northern Ethiopia up until the twelfth century. Two young Syrian boys, Frumentius\* and his brother Aedesius,\* who had arrived on a ship from Tyre, became servants in the royal court of King 'Ézana.\* Frumentius rose to prominence within the government and constructed churches for the Roman merchants traveling through the country. He later traveled to Alexandria to request a bishop for Ethiopia. Athanasius, the patriarch at the time, consecrated Frumentius as bishop and sent him back to Aksum.

*Medieval figures.* In the late fifth and early sixth centuries, nine learned monks arrived in Ethiopia fleeing persecution against Monophysites that followed the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). These nine saints\* led a movement of revitalization in the church and translated the New Testament into Ge'ez.<sup>9</sup> The leader of the nine, Zä-Mika'él\*, founded the monastery of Däbrä Damo and attracted a large following of monks. Around this time, Yaréd\* was the first to compose music for the Ethiopian church—music, he said, that came to him directly from God. His collection of hymns, *Mazgaba Degwa* (Treasury of Hymns), is still used today.

Contemporary in time with events relating to the Nine

Saints, Ethiopian hagiographic tradition tells of a large number of unnamed saints called the Sadqan\* ("The Righteous Ones"), who came to Ethiopia from somewhere in the Roman Empire. Burning with missionary zeal, they are said to have ministered in many small groups in the areas of Bur or Mätära, Bäräknähä, and Berahto in Eritrea, Bétä Mek'eya near Agamé, Mänquraweya (in Tämbén) and Hawzén in Tegré. The local pagan populations persecuted them violently, to the point of exterminating most of them, in spite of the armed intervention of Emperor Kaléb\* on their behalf.

In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, Lalibäla\*, emperor of the Zagwé dynasty, constructed eleven monolithic churches hewn out of solid rock in Wallo Province, on the site of his capital. He had received a vision of these churches as a boy. During his reign, he put into practice the principles of voluntary poverty and charity he had learned as a hermit in the Tigray mountains.

Abba Estifanos\* (1380–ca. 1450) led a short-lived revival movement within the church in the fifteenth century called the Stephanite movement. As a young man, while pursuing studies to serve in the church, he went on several religious pilgrimages in an earnest search for salvation and peace for his soul. He became a monk at the Qoyetsa monastery led by Abba Samuel but still could find no peace. Finally, through the teachings of Abba Gebre Nazrawi, a famous Orthodox priest, he developed a Pauline understanding of the way of salvation and received a miraculous revelation of the Holy Spirit. He and his followers designed a plan to evangelize the country, but this initiative, as well as the unconventional religious behavior of his disciples, drew the attention of the authorities, and they were soon accused

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of heresy. Persecution followed. Emperor Zara Ya'iqob\* exiled the Stephanites and threw Estifanos into prison, where he languished for seven months before dying. His influence was such that, even after his death, the Stephanites continued to be persecuted until they were virtually eliminated.

*Catholic and Protestant missionaries.* In the mid-sixteenth century, Ethiopian rulers called on the Portuguese military to help aid Se'ela Krestos\* rid their country of Muslim invaders who were devastating their churches and wreaking havoc in the north of the country. The Portuguese obliged, bringing with them Jesuit missionaries in 1555. During this period, called the "Jesuit Interlude," Emperor Susneyos\* (ca. 1571–1632), influenced by his brother Se'ela Krestos (d.1536), converted to Roman Catholicism in 1620. Susneyos proclaimed Catholicism the official religion of Ethiopia in 1622, unleashing a decade of unrest and uprisings. A measure of peace was restored to the country a decade later when he agreed to restore the Orthodox faith, at the urging of his son Fasilidas.\* Susneyos died a brokenhearted but devout Catholic.

The renewal thread in Orthodox Christianity picks up again in

the nineteenth century with the life of *Sheikh* (teacher) Zākaryas\* (ca. 1845–1920), who was also recognized as a prophet. In 1892 he began to have visions that prompted him eventually to lead an evangelization movement among Muslims. As a former Muslim himself, he used his vast knowledge of the Quran and his dialectical skills to argue the case for salvation through Jesus. In 1920 he had perhaps as many as 7,000 followers.

The first Ethiopian Protestant missionary was Mikael Argawi\* (1848–1931), a converted Falasha Jew. Like many of the early indigenous missionaries, Argawi was a liminal figure.

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## The sources of this new historiography include oral histories and eyewitness accounts of local Africans.

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Raised by missionaries, he received his formal missionary training in Switzerland. Argawi ministered for over fifty years in Ethiopia, including several years among the Falashas. He distributed Bibles and religious literature as part of his work, and in his later years he worked with pioneer missionary Johann Martin Flad of the Basel Mission on the translation of the New Testament into Amharic.

In the 1920s an indigenous prophet by the name of Esa Lalé\* (ca. 1888–ca.1925) began preaching a message of renewal and liberation to his compatriots, the Omotic peoples of southern Ethiopia. He preached to crowds who gathered around him in the fields, teaching them to worship only Tosa, the creator God, and to forsake their fetishes and any other form of worship, divination, or magic. He instructed the father of each household to lead his family in prayer every Sunday by dipping his fingers in honey and flicking it toward the sky, saying, “You are the creator of all, Tosa, have mercy upon us. We offer this which is the best we have to you.” Esa also taught the people to cultivate peaceful relationships among themselves and in the community. So grateful were the people to find freedom in Esa’s message that they gave him the name Lalé, which means “the one who releases to freedom.” Recognized by some as a John the Baptist figure, he prepared the way for the coming of the Gospel preached by SIM missionaries, who arrived in the region in 1928.<sup>10</sup>

### Hakalla Amale’s Story

Having briefly surveyed Ethiopian Christian history up to this point, we can now return to our original story of Hakalla Amale. As her conversion can be dated to the mid-1920s, it is possible that, somewhere along the way, SIM missionaries played a role in the spread of the Gospel to her village. This is Hakalla’s history as it is presented in the *DACB*:

Hakalla Amale (c. 1905 to 1991) was the first woman to be converted in the Kambatta Hadiya area. She is remembered for her strength in enduring persecution in the early days of the church.

She was born in Kaburbaya, Ballessa, Hosanna Shoa, Ethiopia, to Amale Kassamo (father) and Faysse Lamongo (mother) and spoke the Hadiya language. She became the third wife of *Ato* Jate Malegu who kidnapped her and forced her to marry him. His first two wives had given him only daughters and he trusted that Hakalla would give him sons. In fact, she bore him three sons, Assefa, Estefanos, and Eshetu.

Hakalla first heard the gospel from her uncle’s son, Shigute Dadda, and came to faith in Christ at the age of eighteen, the same year she gave birth to her first son. She learned to read the Bible—a very rare achievement even for men at that time. Her family on both sides tried to force her husband to divorce her because of her faith, but he refused because she had given him a son. Hakalla was beaten with hippopotamus leather and forced to chew that same leather as a sign that she would deny the faith. But she would not deny Christ. In the late evenings, her brother and Shigute visited her to pray and strengthen her faith.

While Hakalla was pregnant with her second son, the persecution increased. The village elders came to her home, forced her outside, and demanded that she deny Christ, threatening to curse her if she refused. On that particular day she was preparing a traditional medicine which people believed made labour and delivery easier. In their presence, she drank the medicine in the name of Christ. The men then cursed her. Hakalla was willing to die rather than deny Christ. Later that day, she gave birth to a healthy second son and the people saw that the power of Christ had overcome the curse. Hakalla was then ordered not to communicate with her neighbors at all. In spite of this the number of believers kept growing. When her relative, *Ato* Aba Gole believed, his conversion eased the persecution. Later, her husband believed. Hakalla witnessed in her own village and often walked or traveled by horseback to distant villages to witness and preach.

Hakalla is known for her strong witness in her family which led her husband, children, and grandchildren to Christ. She was the first woman to serve when the Dubancho church was established. A strong advocate of women’s literacy, Hakalla traveled to Lemu, Kambatta, Shone, Sike, Wolayta, and visited many congregations even as far away as Ambo and Addis Ababa to teach women to read. She was a strong support when the women’s group was organized and she was invited to join the Women’s General Assembly at the national level to give her testimony. She was also the only woman with strong enough faith and determination to be allowed to enter prisons. She served Christian prisoners by traveling long distances to take them fresh food. She was also a model of hospitality and entertained many Christian guests and students, as well as some of her persecutors. Even in her old age she led the women’s prayer group in the local church. She wrote a song: “Lord Jesus, my heart is longing to be with you” (“*Wedante Yesus hoi libey yinafkal*”).

In her eighty-fifth year, she told her children one day that she felt ill. Two days later she passed away.<sup>11</sup>

### Role of the *DACB*

This biography of Hakalla Amale, which contains few historical details and draws its information from only three oral history sources, belongs to the new historiography of African (and world) Christianity to which the *DACB* project is contributing in a modest way as a first-generation repository of biographies. The sources of this new historiography include not only the traditional documentary and archival sources that may be available only in colonial or missionary repositories in the West, but also the oral histories and eyewitness accounts of local Africans. The focus is not on “church history” or “the church as institution” but on the full range of Christian expression in a global landscape, where the taxonomy of denominations is no longer adequate to describe the recent explosion of independent churches. This historiography eschews a “top-down view of God in history, to take in the landscape of an emergent world Christianity with its roots among workers, peasants, refugees, immigrants and the rural underclass.”<sup>12</sup> The subjects of these stories—“those unofficial agents, such as catechists, teachers, nurses, exhorters,



evangelists, and translators, who took the responsibility for church planting”—are mostly ignored in the traditional annals of Christian history, despite being the pillars of the African church.<sup>13</sup> The *DACB* authors who write their stories come from many walks of life, and in some cases their academic pedigree is only that they know how important it is to remember the contribution their biographical subject has made to the birth and growth of African Christianity. For many contributors, the work they accomplished in this way was a labor of love offered sacrificially in honor of their ancestors in the faith.

With 282 biographies as of July 2015, the Ethiopia index has the third largest collection of biographies (after Nigeria and South Africa) in the *DACB* database, but it is a mere trifle in the continent’s extraordinary historical legacy. Even this collection is dwarfed by the vast numbers of exemplary African Christians whose stories remain untold. If we are to believe the new “ecclesiastical maps,” African Christianity clearly has a leading role to play in global Christianity. The center of gravity of global Christianity, now located somewhere near Timbuktu, Mali, and steadily making its way toward the heart

of Africa, testifies to African Christianity’s astounding growth in the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

The task of the *DACB* is daunting. If the historical record is patchy, sometimes inaccurate, hagiographic, or inadequately documented, it is because of the nature of the *DACB*: a first-generation memory bank of Christians who labored for the Gospel in Africa. Growing up as a missionary child in Ethiopia, *DACB* creator and project director Jon Bonk knew many of these extraordinary Ethiopian evangelists who suffered beatings, imprisonment, and sometimes death for the sake of Christ. In February 2000 Jon formally launched the *DACB* on African soil, in Addis Ababa.<sup>15</sup> The *DACB* project is one way to keep alive the memory of these African saints, of whom the world is not worthy, not just for African Christians, but for the encouragement of believers all over the world.

In describing the mission of the *DACB*, Jon Bonk loves to remind his listeners that some memory, however imperfect, is better than no memory at all. We are indeed grateful for this humble, yet scholarly, labor of love—a selfless legacy of Christian witness for the whole world.

## Notes

1. Belaynesh Dindamo, “Hakalla Amale,” in *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, [www.dacb.org/stories/ethiopia/hakalla\\_amale.html](http://www.dacb.org/stories/ethiopia/hakalla_amale.html), accessed June 12, 2015.
2. Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill), [www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/](http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/), accessed July 2015.
3. Tibebe Eshete has written an excellent history of this period entitled *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor Univ. Press, 2009). His article “The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in Ethiopia (1928–1970),” *Northeast African Studies*, n.s., 6, no. 3 (1999): 27–57, gives a detailed account of the early work of SIM in the region.
4. Jonathan Bonk, “Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent,” in *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, [www.dacb.org/xnmaps.html](http://www.dacb.org/xnmaps.html), accessed June 12, 2015. In this article Bonk spells out the vision and modus operandi of the *DACB*.
5. Andrew F. Walls, “Eusebius Tries Again,” in *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 11.
6. *Ibid.*, 12.
7. Contributors to the *DACB* include persons such as Dirshaye Menberu, retired professor from Addis Ababa University and 2005–6 Project Luke Fellow, who wrote the story of Abba Estifanos (Abba means “Father”). Paul and Lila Balisky, retired missionaries with SIM International in Addis Ababa and former members of the *DACB* Advisory Council, supervised student research work and wrote several accounts themselves. From 1999 to 2011 the Project Luke scholarship provided scholarships for Africans to write biographies for the *DACB* while in residence at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut.
8. Names with asterisks are entries in the *DACB* and can be freely accessed using the indexes or online search function.
9. The Nine Saints were Abba ‘Afsé, Abba ‘Aléf, Abba Gärima, Abba Guba, Abba Liqanos, Abba P’antäléwon, Abba Sähma, Abba Yäm’ata, and Abba Zä-Mika’él ‘Arägawi. Brief biographies of each are in the *DACB*.
10. This narrative is an example of how the *DACB* might be a resource to gather together the strands of ancient and recent history, albeit imperfectly and with many gaps.
11. Dindamo, “Hakalla Amale.”
12. Lamin Sanneh, “World Christianity and the New Historiography,” in *Enlarging the Story*, ed. Shenk, 103.
13. *Ibid.*, 94.
14. The “ecclesiastical maps” metaphor belongs to Jon Bonk, note 4 above. See “Christianity’s Center of Gravity, A.D. 33–2100,” in *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910–2010*, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009), 52–53. The statistical center of gravity is defined as “the geographic point at which there are equal numbers of Christians to the north, south, east and west.”
15. Thank you to Paul and Lila Balisky, who provided this detail and other valuable information.