

An Account of Saint Frumentius, Enlightener of Ethiopia

Compiled from the Ecclesiastical Histories of Socrates and Sozomen

IN THE DAYS of Saint Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor, a certain philosopher named Meropius, who was from Tyre in Phoenicia, determined to acquaint himself with the country of the Ethiopians (which was called India by the Romans), being stimulated to this by the example of the philosopher Metrodorus, who had previously traveled through that region. Meropius took with him two young men to whom he was related, named Frumentius and Edesius, whom he had educated liberally, conducting their rhetorical training himself. They reached Ethiopia by ship; and when Meropius had inspected whatever he wished, and was on the return journey, he touched at a certain place which had a safe harbor, for the purpose of procuring some necessaries.

It so happened that a little before that time, the treaty between the Romans and Ethiopians had been violated. The Ethiopians, therefore, having seized the philosopher and those who sailed with him, killed them all except his two youthful kinsmen; but sparing them from compassion for their tender age, they sent them as a gift to the king of the Ethiopians, who resided at Axum. He being pleased with the personal appearance of the youths, constituted Edesius, who was the younger, cup-bearer at his table; Frumentius he entrusted with the care of the royal records, perceiving that he was an intelligent and capable administrator. The king, dying soon after, left them free, and the government devolved on his wife and infant son. Now the queen seeing her son thus left in his minority, begged the young men, who had served the late king faithfully and capably, to undertake the charge of her young son, until he should come of age.

So the youths accepted the task, and entered on the administration of the kingdom. Thus Frumentius controlled all things and made it his task to enquire whether among the Roman merchants trafficking with that country, there were any Christians to be found: and having discovered some, he informed them who he was, and exhorted them to select and occupy some appropriate places for the celebration of Christian worship. In the course of a little while he built a house of prayer; and having instructed some of the Ethiopians in the principles of Christianity, they fitted them for participation in the worship.

On the young king's reaching maturity, Frumentius and his associates resigned to him the administration of public affairs, in the management of which they had honorably acquitted

themselves, and besought permission to return to their own country. Both the king and his mother entreated them to remain; but wishing to revisit their native place, they could not be prevailed on, and consequently departed. Edesius hastened to Phoenicia to see his parents and kindred at Tyre; but Frumentius arriving at Alexandria, reported the affair to Athanasius the Bishop, who had but recently been invested with that dignity; and he acquainted Athanasius both with the particulars of his wanderings and the hopes that the Ethiopians had of receiving Christianity. He also begged him to send a bishop and clergy there, and by no means to neglect those who might thus be brought to salvation. Athanasius having considered how this could be most profitably effected, requested Frumentius himself to accept the bishopric, declaring that he could appoint no man more suitable than he.

Accordingly this was done; Frumentius, invested with episcopal authority, returned to Ethiopia and became there a preacher of the Gospel, built several churches, and, it is said, discharged the priestly functions so admirably that he became an object of universal wonder, and was revered as no less than an apostle. God highly honored him, enabling him to perform many marvellous cures, and to work signs and wonders, healing with the souls also the bodily diseases of many. [*The Church historian*] Rufinus assures us that he heard these facts from Edesius, who was afterwards ordained to the priesthood at Tyre.

Saint Frumentius converted many to Christ, including the King of Axum and his brother with whom he shared his throne. The Arian emperor Constantius conceived an implacable jealousy against Saint Frumentius, because he was linked in faith and affection with Saint Athanasius; and when Constantius found that Frumentius was not even to be tempted, much less seduced by him, he wrote a haughty letter to the two converted kings of Axum, in which he commanded them with threats, to deliver up Frumentius into the hands of George, the Arian invader of the see of Alexandria. This letter was communicated by the royal brothers to Saint Athanasius, who has inserted it in his apology to the Emperor Constantius.

The holy bishop Frumentius continued to feed and defend his flock till it pleased the Good Shepherd to recompense his fidelity and labors and take him to his eternal rest. Saint Frumentius is popularly called Aba Salama, "Father of Peace," and is considered the Apostle of Ethiopia. His feast is kept on the thirtieth of November. Through his holy prayers, O Lord, have mercy and save us all.

Pearls from the Holy Fathers Fifth Week of November, 2007