More commonly known as Frumentius (Ethiopian, Fremnatos), he is considered a saint in the Ethiopian church (festal date 26 Hamle [Abib]), as well as in the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches. He is said to have been born at Tyre. After his consecration as bishop, he took (or was attributed) the name Salama (peace), a term probably derived from Syriac. In Ethiopia, he is often referred to as Abba Salama Kasate Berhan (Father Salama, Revealer of Light), for he is credited, in both historical and religious records, with having officially introduced Christianity into the country.

Details of the historic event were first written around 410 by Rufinus Tyrannius, bishop of Aquilea, who heard the tale directly from the aged Aedesius, companion or brother of Frumentius. The story has since been recorded, with minor variations, by other writers such as Socrates Scholasticus, Theodoret, and Sozomen in the fifth century and Nicephoras Callistus in the fourteenth century, all of whom depend entirely on Rufinus’ text.

According to this account, a certain Meropius, a citizen of Tyre, undertook a trip to “India” (actually the empire of Axum, but called India because of its location on the long sea route linking the Egyptian ports on the Red Sea to the markets of India). It was essentially a cultural voyage because Meropius took with him Frumentius and Aedesius, two children for whose education he was responsible. On the return trip, they stopped at an “Indian” port (probably Adulis, near present-day Zula), where, because of a breakdown in relations between Axum on one side and Byzantium and its allies on the other, the ship was pillaged, and Meropius and his crew massacred. Only the two boys were spared and handed over to the king of the country (unnamed by Rufinus), who made Aedesius his cupbearer and Frumentius his secretary.

Upon the king’s death, the queen regent asked the two young men to aid
her in the duties of state while her son was still a minor, and thus, Frumentius was able to have some churches constructed for Christian merchants trading in Axumite lands. When the young prince came of age, he allowed the two foreigners to leave Axum. Aedesius returned to his relatives in Tyre, where he became a priest, and Frumentius journeyed to Alexandria to request that a bishop be named for the Christians in Ethiopia. Upon receiving Frumentius’ petition, Saint ATHANASIUS, twentieth patriarch of Alexandria (who, according to Rufinus, had recently been consecrated to this position), ordained Frumentius a priest and then consecrated him as bishop and sent him back “to the land whence he had come.” Once again in Ethiopia, Frumentius was able to convert a great number of pagans, and thereby the Christian church made its beginnings in “India.”

According to Rufinus, Bishop Salama, as Frumentius was now known, must have arrived in Ethiopia between 328 (Athanasius’ election to the See of Saint Mark) and 335 (Council of Tyre; i.e., the beginning of Athanasius’ first exile). This date may be further confirmed in the Ethiopian traditions, for, according to the abridged chronicle of Ethiopian kings (Béguinot, 1901, p. 2), Salama is supposed to have come to the country 333 years after the birth of Christ (333 of the Ethiopian calendar corresponds to A.D. 340-341). This same chronicle notes that during this time, the ruling kings in Ethiopia were Abreha and Asbaha, names that modern Ethiopian specialists consider to be the crown names or surnames of the Axumite king ‘Ezana (well known through pagan and Christian coins) and of his brother and coregent, Se’azana.

Precise knowledge is lacking concerning Salama’s religious activities in the Axumite territories. However, his name appears twice in relation to an episode important in the early history of Christianity, as follows: Emperor Constantius II (337-361), son of Constantine I, who favored the heretical doctrines of ARIUS, wrote a letter to Aezenus and Sazanas (i.e., king ‘Ezana and his brother Se’azana), rulers of Axum, wherein he severely criticized the doctrines of Athanasius and his fight against
ARIANISM, and called upon the two Axumite princes to send Frumentius (Salama) back to Egypt for severe judgment and rectification of his faith. This missive, dated 356 and probably never answered, shows that Abuna Salama I was still alive at this time, that he had preserved the church from Arianism, and had kept it close to the orthodox dogma championed so brilliantly by Athanasius.

The names of the immediate successors to Salama I remain unknown. After him the first abun mentioned in historical documents as metropolitan in Ethiopia is Yohannes I, who held the episcopacy toward the middle of the ninth century. However, the Ethiopian tradition lists a bishop by the name of Minas as the immediate successor of Salama, and attributes to the former the authorship of a number of homilies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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