

YOHANNES III (d. 1761)

Most information about Yohannes comes from the chronicles of Negus Iyyasu II (1730-1755) and Negus Iyyo'as I (1755-1769). According to the chronicles, six and a half years after the death of the [Abuna](#) Krestodolu III (d. 1735), hence toward the beginning of the year 1742, Iyyo'as II formed a delegation consisting of two Ethiopian prelates accompanied by three Muslim merchants, provided them with 450 ounces of gold, and sent them to Egypt in quest of a new metropolitan. But the prestige of Ethiopia in the Red Sea area was then in decline, so much so that the mission suffered several misadventures on the outward and return journeys. It was first of all delayed at Massawa by the *na'ib*, a local chief nominally dependent on the Turkish authorities of the Red Sea, who before authorizing its embarkation relieved it of half the gold.

On arriving at Jidda, the mission found that the last ship bound for Egypt had already left, which compelled it to spend ten months in this port. Moreover, during this forced sojourn in Arabia, one of the two Ethiopian prelates became a Muslim; it was thus the other prelate, Abba Tewodros, who reached Cairo and submitted the request from the negus to the Coptic [patriarch](#) JOHN XVII (1727-1745). On 22 Maskaram 1736 (A.D. 1 October 1743, a Coptic synod designated the new metropolitan of Ethiopia, who was consecrated by the patriarch and whose name was Yohannes III. Accompanied by Abba Tewodros, the metropolitan landed at Massawa on 12 Miyazya 1736 (A.D. 18 April 1744), but once again the *na'ib* delayed them with the aim of extorting money from them; it appears that in his doings the *na'ib* enjoyed the covert support of Mika'el Sehul, all-powerful lord of Tigre and ambitious vassal of the "King of Kings."

At the end of five months, the metropolitan was able to escape from Massawa, thanks to the aid of the monks of Dabra Bizan, where he also found a refuge and was rejoined by Abba Tewodros after the latter was able to buy his freedom. It was in Sire that the metropolitan met Negus Iyyasu II, and finally, on 23 Terr 1738/A.D. 23 January 1745, Yohannes

returned to Gonder, where he was able to assume all his functions.

Some months later, in the course of a campaign in Tigre, Iyyasu II laid hold of a prelate who for eighteen months had passed himself off as the metropolitan of Ethiopia. Enjoying the protection of Mika'el Sehul, this usurper had even occupied Addi Abun, near Adwa, a fief of the metropolitan in Tigre. He was a Syrian priest who declared he had received the charge of metropolitan of Ethiopia from the hands of the [patriarch](#) of Antioch, and this although the latter had never had [jurisdiction](#) over Ethiopian territory. Taken to Gonder, this usurper was judged in the presence of [Abuna](#) Yohannes III and condemned to the amputation of his right hand (the hand, the chronicler specifies, with which "he had dared to consecrate in Tigre the *tabot* of so many churches and to ordain so many priests"); but the Negus remitted this penalty, limiting himself to expelling him from the country (February 1747).

In 1750, Negus Iyyasu II, together with Queen Mentewwab, his mother and coregent of the kingdom, decided to summon from abroad some Catholic missionaries. The exact purpose of this is not known, only that the negus asked for missionaries equipped with certain qualities (they had to be skilled artisans, have medical knowledge, and be good theologians). It was thus that in March 1752 three Franciscan missionaries arrived at the court of Gonder— two Czechs, Remedius Prutky and [Martin](#) Lang, accompanied by Antony of Aleppo, a Syrian who served as their interpreter. Naturally the Franciscans nourished the hope of reconciling the court of Ethiopia with the Roman church, but [Abuna](#) Yohannes III, supported by the Ethiopian clergy, intervened vigorously before the negus and had the Catholic missionaries expelled from the country.

On 24 Sane 1747 (A.D. 25 June 1755), immediately after the death of Iyyasu II, the metropolitan proceeded to the coronation of his son, Negus Iyyo'as I, who acceded to the throne at an early age under the guardianship of his grandmother Mentewwab. On 24 Miyazya 1750 (A.D.

30 April 1758), Yohannes III, accompanied by the *eccage* Henok, abbot of the monks of the order founded by [Abuna](#) Takla Haymanot, was present at Gonder at the translation of the bones of Negus Bakkaffa and Negus Iyyasu II, ordered by Queen Mentewwab; the remains of the two sovereigns were transferred from the [church](#) of Abuna Takla Haymanot to that of Dabra Sahay in the presence, and with the blessing, of the metropolitan.

In the last months of his life, Yohannes III had to intervene in events important for the religious [history](#) of Ethiopia. A monk named Esate formulated a new doctrine that provoked violent reactions among the regular clergy (see below); the metropolitan condemned this teaching as heterodox and excommunicated Esate, along with his partisans. Those excommunicated took refuge in Waldebba, where their teaching spread rapidly, expanding from there to other territories.

Since the sequel to these events unfolded after the death of Yohannes III but before the arrival of his successor in Ethiopia and since it had wide repercussions, it is appropriate to give a summary here: having rallied to the new teaching, the *eccage* Henok was anathematized by a part of the Ethiopian clergy. He appealed to the Coptic [patriarch](#) MARK VII (1745-1769), who in his letter of reply could only confirm the doctrinal position of the Coptic [church](#) and condemn the new teaching. Henok was then deposed by the clergy, but peace did not return to the country, where the new doctrine was to be the subject of discussion for a long time.

The doctrine condemned by Yohannes III is that of *Ya-sagga lej* (Son by Grace), according to which, since the Incarnation of Jesus took place by virtue of the grace of the Holy Spirit, it would be right to say that Jesus is Son by Grace. Later there arose another doctrine often considered as derived from the first—the doctrine of *sost ledat* (three births), according to which Jesus had three births: first of all the eternal one, which came from the Father; then the human birth, which occurred through the

Virgin Mary; and finally that which the grace of the Holy Spirit conferred upon him.

As for the teaching recalled by the Coptic patriarch, it received in Ethiopia the name of *karra* (knife) for reasons that are not clear, perhaps because of the trenchant terms used by the [patriarch](#) Mark VII in his letter. The text of this letter seems lost, but one presumes that the Coptic patriarch then confirmed the traditional doctrine of the [Alexandrian](#) church, specifying that one could attribute to Jesus only two births: the eternal one and that received from the Holy Virgin.

Yohannes III was present only at the beginning of these religious controversies, for he died on 10 Khedar 1754 (A.D. 15 November 1761); in giving this date, the chronicle of Negus Iyyo'as adds that this metropolitan was buried in the Quddus Gabr'el [church](#) at Gonder. He had as successor [Abuna](#) Yosab II, who arrived in Ethiopia eight years later.

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