

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

As to the amount of endowment of these new Sees, a few words must be said. The *minimum* required in all the recent Bishopric Acts has been £3,000 a year, with a house of residence. And there is one reason for not lowering this requirement which perhaps has not been sufficiently borne in mind, namely, that it would lead to much misconception on the part of the public if the Bishops of the new Sees—intended to be in all other respects co-ordinate with the Bishops of the old Sees—were conspicuously distinguished from them in respect of income. A saintly man will move easily through all classes, from the court to the cottage, winning reverence from all; but to all men this is not given. And it would be lamentable if Prime Ministers thought it necessary to limit their recommendation to men whose private means made them independent of any large official income.

But these details are of secondary moment; the really important thing is that Church people should grasp the plain fact that the Church's Episcopal regimen is utterly inadequate to the vastly increased requirements of our time; and that there will be an utter breakdown of Church discipline unless the extension of the Home Episcopate keeps pace with the growth of the work to be organized, superintended, and sustained.

J. P. NORRIS.



#### ART. IV.—THE STORY OF ABE SIDI.

RELIGIOUS controversy is like the autumn wind, which runs to and fro up and down our streets sweeping all kinds of things before it. When it gets into a corner, or finds out the recesses of some area, it makes quite a whirl for a time, and sends the leaves and papers flying around.

The wind has got into the African corner just now. It is having a great time with the missionary societies. Their affairs are being thoroughly ventilated. If the details of all their various ways and means are not—to use a Scotch expression—being “sorted,” they are, at least, being vigorously sifted.

For all this the friends of missions ought to be thankful. Any scheme that is sound should be able to stand investigation, and should even thrive upon criticism. At the same time, as we listen to all that Canon Taylor and his authorities, Mr. Joseph Thompson and Dr. Blyden, have to say on one side of the question, and to what their numerous and eager assailants have to reply on the other, it may be well that we should remind ourselves that we have, after all, very few data upon which we may form an absolute opinion as to the efficacy

of the methods of any of the various systems which are advocated by either party. The interior of the great continent of Africa has only very recently been made the object of missionary endeavour of any kind. In the days of the early Fathers of the Church the term "Africa" applied to those northern provinces only which were comprised within the Roman Empire. There is no proof that Christian missionaries penetrated to any considerable distance southward among the savage negro tribes; though it is not likely that the work of a missionary would have been much more arduous or hazardous then than it is at the present day.

Nor do the emissaries of Islam seem to have made, until quite recently, any serious attempt to proselytize the peoples of the wild interior, from which they were in the habit of drawing their most docile slaves.<sup>1</sup> It is true that Capuchin missionaries have laboured for centuries among the natives of Africa with a zeal and self-sacrificing devotion which cannot be overrated or overpraised.<sup>2</sup> But their efforts were very partial, and have not been to any great extent promoted by the Roman Church. As for Protestant Missions, they are literally of to-day.

Whether, then, Islam, or this or that form of Christianity is likely to make most converts from among the pagan tribes of Africa is a study of transcendent interest, no doubt; but we venture to think that there is not yet sufficient evidence to hand to enable us to declare with any confidence that one or another is proving itself to be successful, or is predoomed to failure. In the meantime, the rapid spread of Mohammedanism throughout the north of the continent, and the manner in which it is already affecting the more intelligent tribes of the interior, is sufficiently alarming to a Christian, especially when he remembers how heavily weighted he is in the race with the Arab for the supremacy of his faith.

Thus the creed of Islam is simpler and more easily under-

---

<sup>1</sup> A very interesting map, "Die religiösen verhältnisse von Afrika," by Dr. A. Oppel, in the *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin*, Nos. 129, 130, shows with much clearness that the Mohammedan faith prevailed at the close of the seventh century only throughout the northern provinces. That, by the end of the seventeenth century, Islam was predominant about as far southward as the 15th parallel; and that, at the present date, it does not extend much below the 10th, except on the west coast, where it has reached the mouth of the Niger; and on the eastern seaboard, where it has followed the track of Arab trade as far as Cape Delgado. Thus it will be seen that the vast interior, south of the northern desert tracts, has, until the present century, been wholly uninfluenced by Islam.

<sup>2</sup> "They persuaded, among others, the Kings of Owerri and Benin, and induced the cruel and heroic Queen of Matamba, Anna Zingha, in 1652, to allow herself and her people to be baptized."—Mosheim, "Eccl. Hist.," Book IV., i. 18.

stood than even the *elements* of Christianity. Islam, moreover, leaves the social customs of the people almost untouched, changing only those which relate to the outward worship of their idol gods. The convert may retain his slaves and his wives, and may, if he please, even add to the number of his concubines. Added to this are numerous political considerations. Not to mention that the old grim alternative is still offered to those who are weak enough to be coerced—"The Koran, the tribute, or the sword,"<sup>1</sup>—and that whole districts are thus often swept wholesale into the Mohammedan net, "the faithful" are also bound together by a community of political as well as spiritual interests, and form a mutually protective alliance. All this makes it likely that Islam will gain more adherents at first than a system like Christianity, which requires (a) a more attentive ear, (b) a changed heart, (c) a radical change of life, and which, lastly, comes to the people backed up by no political influence whatever, and with no prospect of being able to add materially to their temporal advantages.

It is, moreover, against the rapid spread of Christianity that it has come to the people of Africa mostly as "the white man's religion." No, I do not forget Bishop Crowther and his excellent staff of native clergy, but they are all manifestly black "white men." They are the white man's agents. They all dress in the regulation white man's clerical garb, and adopt his manners and customs. There is (perhaps one may say there *should be*) a tremendous chasm between their state and that of the wild warriors to whom they preach. It is, no doubt, unavoidable (since no one could, surely, be found to recommend these native gentlemen to go back to their grass huts, leopard-skins, and feathers!), but it is none the less a positive hindrance to their intimacy with the people that they have ceased to be natives in all except colour and physical form. One can scarcely hope for any great general advance of Christianity throughout Africa until the faith be propagated by a Native Church, the *uses* of which shall be specially adapted to meet native needs; and the missionaries of which, living in all blameless things as natives among the natives, shall carry on the tidings of "eternal life" from tribe to tribe; and thus the movement, which was commenced by the European from without, be continued and extended by the African himself from within.

It would be most instructive could one gather together into

---

<sup>1</sup> Comp. the summons of Khâlid to a Persian satrap: "Accept the faith and thou art safe, or else pay tribute, thou and thy people; a people is already upon thee, loving death as thou lovest life."—Sir W. Muir, "Ann. Early Caliphate," p. 72.

a single volume a full and detailed history of each case in which the Gospel of Christ has laid hold upon the mind and heart of a native African so as to induce him, apart from European influence, to propagate the faith and to form a community of believers. No doubt such cases have here and there occurred. I do not know, however, that any so remarkable an instance can be given as that of Abe Sidi. His community at Fulladoyo would seem to prove to demonstration that Christianity is not beyond the intelligent comprehension of the most simple-minded of the denizens of desert and forest, as also that it is not unsuited to their way of life. The story of Abe Sidi throws so much light upon what may be the probable effect of the teaching of native converts filled with an enthusiasm for Christ, and also upon the special difficulties with which Christianity will have to contend before it can be accepted as the religion of Africa, that I am tempted to narrate it almost as fully as my knowledge of the circumstances will allow.

The following facts are gathered mainly from various publications of the Church Missionary Society, but also from information with which travellers like Dr. Felkin have kindly supplied me.

It appears that about fifteen years ago a native servant of the pioneer evangelist, Rebmann, ran away from the mission station of Rabai under somewhat peculiar circumstances. He was a Christian, and, as the event proves, a sincere one. But one cannot reasonably expect that an untamed savage should be changed in an instant into a cultured saint. This man's fierce temper was not yet wholly under control. He therefore, falling into a passion with his wife—under what provocation is not said—so struck her that she died. A stranger thing is that he should have been filled with horror and an overwhelming sense of remorse. He was a native of Godoma, a little village in Giriama country, which lies northward from Rabai about thirty miles as the crow flies. Thitherward he wandered into the Nyika, or desert, and presently, finding a convenient clump of trees far enough removed from observation, and away from any beaten track, built for himself a nest-hut among the branches. There he lived for some time in great obscurity and absolute solitude. It is remarkable that, with the burden of that crime upon him, he did not return to his original savagery. On the contrary, he seems to have lived a life of penance, spent chiefly in the study of the Gospel of St. Luke, his sole possession when he left the station.

It happened upon a certain day that a man of Godoma, gathering wood in the forest, chanced upon the hermit reading his book. The encounter was alarming to both; but presently

the man recognised in the forlorn student an old acquaintance, and called him by name—Abe Ngoa. After this the two had several interviews. The man of Godoma was curious to know what was the nature of the book which had so engrossed the other's attention. Abe Ngoa offered to teach him to read its pages. A comrade soon joined them, and the two persuaded the man of letters to leave his retreat and to return with them to the village as their instructor. He proved to be no ordinary tutor. His mind was saturated with the spirit of the Book which he had so long pored over in his lonely eyrie. He imparted his knowledge with such fervour of faith that eleven persons renounced the heathen "customs," and made it known that they had "joined the Book."<sup>1</sup>

The first news of this reached Frere Town in 1874, and in that year three men made a pilgrimage thither from Godoma to ask for baptism. As the clergy there knew nothing of what had taken place, they did not at once accede to the request, but sent a certain native catechist, named George David, to inquire into the circumstances of the case. This David was enthusiastically received by the Christians of Godoma, who by this time numbered thirty-four. He found that they had been well taught up to a certain point, and that they were very eager to learn more; in fact, he seems to have been beset from morning to night by their untiring questionings.

It is noteworthy that this body of thirty-four catechumens, so strangely found in an unknown village of a wild district, and far removed from all outside influence of any kind, had been gathered together solely and entirely by the teaching of one man, himself but half taught, and the possessor of a single copy of one of the Gospels, but whose faith had been intensified by his long solitude in the wilderness, and by his continued pondering over the words which brought him a release from his sense of guilt. The figure of that remorseful hermit, alone in his grass cell within the leafy embrasure of his tree, and with the Gospel of St. Luke as his sole companion through the long months, recurs to one with strange pathos.

The first baptism took place on August 22nd, 1875, and about two months later a very important convert was won in the person of Abe Sidi, the head-man of the village. This Abe Sidi was a remarkable man, well fitted to be a leader, and who could not fail to influence others strongly. He is described by Dr. Felkin as a tall man, of lean and wiry habit, lighter in colour than most of his people, and of a commanding presence.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* the Mohammedan title for Christians, as "The People of the Book."

There is a photograph taken in 1877, in which Abe Sidi and two of his head-men are seen at the doorway of one of those beehive-shaped grass huts, like a trim haystack, of which the Nyika villages are composed. The photograph is a small one, but it shows a face of unusual seriousness and force of purpose, rather suggestive of the Arab than the Negro race to which he belonged. On his head is a black skull-cap, and he is clad in a long white surplice-like shirt reaching below the knees, his sole and altogether becoming garment.

This man at once assumed the leadership and direction of the new Christian settlement, and became a zealous propagandist of the faith. Under his directions a sufficient church was built, and the community was regularly organized. When Mr. Lamb visited the place in 1877, he was much surprised at what he saw. Daily prayers were held in the church. On Sunday there was a cessation from all work. A Kiswaheli edition of the Book of Common Prayer was in use, and the responses were made in a manner that would put many a congregation in England to the blush. The Eucharist was celebrated by Mr. Lamb, who writes: "If these people of Godoma had all partaken for years, they could not have done so with more solemnity or propriety."

From this time this "independent, self-supporting, and simple" native church continued to increase rapidly. In 1880 the opposition of the surrounding chiefs became rather pronounced, as more and more of the people declared against the old Fetish "customs." The medicine-men began to be aggressive. There were threats of burning down the church and village, and even of shooting or poisoning Abe Sidi himself. For this and other reasons it seems to have been decided that Abe Sidi should leave a strong community at Godoma, and himself lead off a "swarm" to seek a new settlement farther north. He found a good site at Fulladoyo, which is an island on the River Voi. There he built his church and erected his grass huts, and there a considerable Christian population soon gathered around him, as they had done at Godoma.

That the Christianity taught by Abe Sidi was both spiritual and practical may be apparent from the following:

Mr. Streeter, who visited Fulladoyo in 1880, spoke to a woman who had much to suffer, and reports such a reply as would not have been unworthy of the most advanced Christian matron at home in Britain. "It does me good," she said, "to try and help others. *It teaches me, and makes my own heart light.*"

Their Christianity also seems to have been of such a kind as to wake them out of their native indolence. Mr. Price, who was at Fulladoyo in 1882, speaks of "a regular bridge

and a wide road ;" and adds, "So much energy and public spirit I have seen nowhere else in Africa."

Abe Sidi and his congregation had, however, a worse enemy to encounter than the fears of their countrymen about the "customs." They soon found that they had incurred the fierce wrath of the devastating dragon of the slave trade. Mr. Price thought that he saw in this spontaneous Christian movement in the interior "the beginning of a great movement which bids fair to give a death-blow to the wretched slave system." The slave system was, however, not even "scotched." It was to devour poor Abe Sidi, and perhaps many another knight-errant, before that country was to be rid of its detestable presence. Just at that time the slave question had become a burning one at Frere Town. The public road from the port inland lies through the midst of the station. Miserable slave gangs are driven openly through the smiling settlement. From time to time runaways have sought for refuge with their freed brothers under the wing of the mission. At the time of which we are writing quite a number of these refugees were at Frere Town and Rabai ; nor had the missionaries the heart to refuse them. Every day slaves were being flogged or burned to death, or even buried alive, and outraged in every conceivable and inconceivable abominable manner. Unfortunately the freed slaves at Frere Town had complicated matters by, at least upon one occasion, taking the law into their own hands, and had forcibly rescued a gang of miserales who were being treated in an exceptionally shameful way. In consequence, the mission stations were for some weeks in serious danger of an attack. They were saved mainly through the accidental presence of a man-of-war in the harbour of Mombasa.

Abe Sidi and his people now found themselves involved in the same difficulty. It was a serious one for them. It is a far cry to Fulladoyo, and no European help of any kind could be expected. As early as 1880 runaway slaves had begun to cluster around Godoma and the island church of Fulladoyo. Abe Sidi saw the danger, but could not persuade them to go away. He therefore contented himself with teaching them, and in due time received a considerable number of them into the Christian community. The slave-owners tried to bribe the neighbouring tribes to destroy the place and recapture the fugitives. Mr. Streeter, who visited the settlement in 1880, found Abe Sidi active and vigorous as ever, but "very down-cast about the state of affairs." Indeed, there is no doubt that his position was a critical one. The disaster, however, did not occur until some three years later. How it then all happened we cannot tell with any accuracy. The Bishop of Mauritius



was in the district in 1883, and found that the church at Fulladoyo had ceased to exist, and that the scattered remnants had formed a new settlement nearer the coast, which they had named Kamlikeni, or the Hill of Praise. Bishop Hannington sought for the site of Fulladoyo in 1885. He found the place in the possession of a renowned outlaw named Mbaruk, who had fled from Zanzibar. Some of Abe Sidi's former flock were still in the neighbourhood, and he writes, "They still observe the Sabbath, and, for the most part, have only one wife."<sup>1</sup>

As for Abe Sidi, his personal fate is uncertain. "He is said to have died 'a horrible death' at the hands of the Mohammedan Swahili slave-holders, to whom he was betrayed."<sup>2</sup> It is clear that an organized attack was made upon his village by this pack of human wolves; and, as the man would not leave his adopted children in the hour of their need, they took him, and doubtless "made an example" of him after their own brutal fashion.

So perished a great and a good man. One of those rare men who are raised up in every nation once in a while. One writes of him, "He was a fine character." Another says, "I never met him without feeling that I was in the presence of one of God's saints, and that, instead of teaching, I should sit at his feet and be taught."

The story is a pitiful one. It is a record of the triumph of ignorance, lust, and greed, and of how they trampled in the mire the white robes and the palm-branches. It is a story which should be brought into greater prominence than has yet been given to it. I hope that further light may yet be thrown upon it. It is full of suggestions as to the prospects of the African Church in the immediate future, and may help one to understand how it is that Christianity makes a comparatively slow progress among the tribes of the Dark Continent. The same forces of evil which oppose pure Christianity at home are to be met with there—only unbridled and established by law and custom.

Chaos, Cosmos!—Cosmos, Chaos! Who can tell how all will end?  
Read the wide world's annals, you, and take their wisdom for your friend.

E. C. DAWSON.

EDINBURGH, *November*, 1887.

<sup>1</sup> "Life of Bishop Hannington," p. 361.

<sup>2</sup> "C.M.S. Report, 1885."

