Qidus (Saint) Yared 493-563 E.C. (501-571)
Religious scholar. Composer of liturgical songs & hymns
Saint Yared, the great Ethiopian scholar, was born on Me-}
gabit 27, 493 E.C.] / April 5, 501 in the ancient city of Ak-
sum. His father’s name was Adam, and his mother was
called Tawkeha. He descended from a line of prominent
church scholars. At the age of six, a priest named Yeshaq
was assigned to be his teacher. However, he turned out to be a poor learner and,
as a result, he was sent back to his parents. While he was staying home,
his father passed away. Then his mother asked her brother, Aba Gedeon, a
well-known priest-scholar in the church of Aksum Zion, to adopt her son and
send him to school.
Aba Gedeon taught The Old and New Testaments. He also translated these
and other sacred texts to Ge’ez from Greek, Hebrew and Arabic sources.
Even though Aba Gedeon allowed St. Yared to live and study with him, it
took the young boy a long time to complete learning the Psalms. He could
not compete with the other students, despite the constant advice he was re-
ceiving from his uncle. In fact, he was such a slow learner that kids used to
mock him. His uncle was so impatient that he gave him several lashes for his
inability to compete with his peers.
Realizing his poor performance, Yared left school and went to Medebay, a
town where another uncle resided. On his way to Medebay, not far from Ak-
sum, he was forced to seek shelter under a tree from a heavy rain, in a place
called Maikrah. While he was leaning against the tree, he was immersed in
thoughts about his poor academic performance. Suddenly, he noticed an ant
which was trying to climb the tree with a load of a seed. The ant carrying a
piece of food item made six attempts to climb the tree, but without success.
However, at the seventh trial, the ant was able to climb the tree and unloaded
the food item at its destination. Yared was impressed by the determination of
the ant. He then pondered why he lacked patience to succeed in his own
studies.
He learned a valuable lesson from the ant. In fact, he cried hard and then
underwent self-evaluation. The ant became his source of inspiration and he de-
ecided to return back to school. He realized that he had received valuable ad-
vice from his uncle to guide him in life. He begged Aba Gedeon to forgive
him for his past carelessness and give him one more chance.
His teacher, Aba Gedeon then began to teach him the Psalms. Not only was
Yared taking the lessons, but every day he would stop at Aksum Zion church
to pray to God to show him the light. His prayer was answered and he turned
out to be a good student. Within a short period of time, he showed a remark-
able progress and his friends noticed the change in him. They were impressed
and started to admire him. He completed the Old and New Testaments at a
much faster pace. He also finished the rest of lessons ahead of schedule and
graduated to become a Deacon. He was fluent in Hebrew and Greek, apart from
Ge’ez. Yared became as educated as his uncle was, and he later assumed the position
of his uncle when he died.
Yared’s Zema’s mythologized and sacralized to the extent that the composition is
seen as a special gift from heaven. One version of the mythology is presented in
Ethiopian book Sinkasar, a philosophical treatise, as follows: "When God sought
praise on earth, he sent down birds from heaven in the images of angels so that they
would teach Yared the music of the heavens in Ge’ez language.
With his song, he praised the natural world, the heavens and Zion. He called the song
Mabite Aryan, which means the highest, referring to the seventh gate of heaven,
where God resides. Yared, guided by the Holy Spirit, saw the angels playing drums,
horns, sistra, Masinko, the harp and tau-cross staff instruments to accompany their
songs of praise to God, he decided to adopt these instruments to all the church music
and chants.
The chants are usually recited in conjunction with aquaquam or sacred dance. The fol-
lowering instruments are used for Zema and aquaquam combination: Tau-cross staff, sis-
These are musical, dance and literary traditions that continue to inform the spiritual
and material well-being of a significant segment of the Ethiopian population.
St. Yared died at the age of 66 on May 20, 571 A.D. in a cave below the Semien
Mountains where he used to teach.
This biographical sketch is an abridged & slightly edited version of St. Yared - the great Ethiopian composer.
By Ayele Bekerie. Tadis Online Magazine. August 09, 2008. reprinted here with permission. Other
sources used to compile the above biographical sketch are:
Wikipedia: The free encyclopedia