

Frumentius, Athanasius and Constantius

Anthony Alcock

The following note looks at two documents that provide information about the establishment of the Church in Ethiopia¹ (1) by Frumentius with the support of Athanasius and (2) despite the interference of the Emperor Constantius. The first text is a brief historical note about Frumentius in Rufinus *Historia Ecclesiastica* 10: 9,² which I will summarize with citations from the Latin text. The second is an imperial letter to the co-regents of Ethiopia requesting the return of Frumentius to Alexandria so that he can familiarize himself with the Arian doctrine favoured by the Emperor. It is attached to a speech prepared by Athanasius, known as the *Apologia ad Constantium* and written in about 356.³ It is not known how the letter came into Athanasius' possession. The letter is translated below, with reference to the Greek text.

The story of Frumentius and his younger companion Edesius begins with their voyage, in the company of Meropius *quidam Tyrius philosophus*, from Tyre to India to convert that country to Christianity, presumably via the Red Sea by ship. Off the coast of Ethiopia their ship, docked in a harbour, was boarded by hostile townspeople, who killed everyone but them. The young men were then taken to the king, Ezana, who saw how quick-witted Frumentius was and made him a sort of chief minister (*Frumentio . . . rationes suas scriniaque commisit*). Edesius was appointed butler (*pincerna*). When the king died, the boys were given their freedom. The queen begged them to stay in Axum to govern the country until her own son became old enough to do so. Frumentius was the inspired by God to see if there were any Christians among the merchants (*negotiatores*), and he made it his business to ensure that the Christian 'seed' would take root and grow there (*ut Christianorum inibi semen exurgeret*). He built a small church just outside the city where Christians could worship. When the queen's son was old enough to administer his country, both young men returned to the Roman empire (*ad orbem nostrum*),⁴ Edesius for family reasons to Tyre and Frumentius for missionary reasons to Alexandria that he might be consecrated bishop and return to Axum to continue the work he had already started. One can merely speculate that Frumentius had come into contact with Egyptians at Axum and the nearest large Christian diocese was Alexandria, so he went there. If it is assumed that he knew of the Arian controversy, it would seem that he accepted the decision made at Nicaea and had no difficulty talking to Athanasius, who had just returned from his first period of exile

1 Christianity may have been introduced into Ethiopia in the Apostolic period (Acts 8, 27ff.), but there is no evidence of a 'Church' there before Frumentius.

2 For the text see J.-P. Migne *Patrologia Latina* 21 (1849) cols. 478-480. The same material is also provided by the later church historian Sozomen.

3 For the text see J.-P. Migne *Patrologia Graeca* 25 (1837) cols. 593ff. The document in question occupies cols. 636-637.

4 Ethiopia was not part of the Eastern Roman Empire, but by the time Constantius wrote his letter to the Ethiopian co-regents it was clearly being drawn, if not into the *orbs*, then at least into the orbit, of the Empire.

(*nam is nuper sacerdotium susceperat*),⁵ listened carefully to what Frumentius had to say, introduced him to his council of bishops (*concilio sacerdotum*) and convinced them that Frumentius was the best person to appoint. Rufinus vouches for the accuracy of this information by saying at the end of the chapter that it came from Edesius, by now a presbyter in Tyre, the former companion of Frumentius (*qui comes Frumentii prius fuerat*). There are Ethiopian sources about Frumentius, but the only one I have been able to consult is the Synaxary in the English translation by Wallis Budge.⁶ There is no mention of any doctrinal dispute in this brief historical notice.

Athanasius became Patriarch of Alexandria in 328 and during his 45 year tenure of office endured various periods of exile:

1. 335-337
2. 339-346
3. 356-362

In 362, while Julian the Apostate was Emperor, Athanasius went travelling through Upper Egypt until Julian died in 363. The next Emperor, Jovian, appears not to have been hostile to Athanasius, so the latter returned to the capital, where he was able to stay until Jovian died in 364 and was succeeded by Valens, who apparently subscribed to the Arian doctrine, and this precipitated another period of exile from 365 to 366.

The letter of Constantius is part of the text known as the *Apologia ad Constantium*, a text that falls roughly into two parts: §§1-26 and §§26 to the end. In §§ 27 and 29 it is clear that Athanasius was on his way to meet the Emperor to deliver his speech in person, but decided not to when he discovered how great the persecution (τοσοῦτος . . . διωγμός)⁷ was at Alexandria, not believing for a second 'that it was the business of a pious Emperor to wish bishops to be driven out, virgins to be denuded and churches in any way to be disturbed' (μὴ γὰρ εἶναι θεοσεβοῦς βασιλέως θέλειν ἐξορίζεσθαι ἐπισκόπους καὶ γυμνοῦσθαι παρθένους ἢ ὅλως τὰς ἐκκλησίας ταράττεσθαι)⁸. Another reason why he decided not to present his speech to the Emperor was that he had come into possession of two letters from the Emperor, one (§30) warning the Alexandrians about himself and one (§31) to the Ethiopian co-regents Aizanas and Sazanas requesting the return of Frumentius. The Emperor does not address Frumentius directly, probably because he did not know him.

Constantius as an Arian clearly did not want the new Ethiopian Church to follow the doctrine of Nicaea, very probably for political⁹ as well religious reasons, and his hostility to Athanasius is quite open in his letter to the Alexandrians, in

5 I take *sacerdotium* to refer to the office of Patriarch. The Ethiopian Synaxary says that he 'had been restored to his office'. The reference seems to be Athanasius' return from his second period of exile in after 345.

6 E.A.W. Budge *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church* (1928), of which I have consulted a reprint published by the Tewahedo Church (USA). The entry is on pp. 669ff. for Hamle 26 (August 2). Apart from details it is substantially the same story as that told by Rufinus. The Ethiopian names given to him are Abba Salama (Father of Peace) and Kasate Berhan (Revealer of Light).

7 §28

8 §29

9 The *Codex Theodosianus* 12. 12. 2, issued by Constantius in 356, specifically prohibits those with business in Axum from spending more than one year at Alexandria: *Idem aa. et iulianus c. musoniano praefecto praetorio. nullus ad gentem axumitarum et homeritarum ire praeceptus ultra annui temporis spatia debet alexandriae de cetero*

which he attacks Athanasius, anonymously, as 'impostor' (ἄπατερόν) and (φενάξ), praises his own man George and finally names Athanasius, describing him as a criminal 'on the run' (γῆν πρὸ γῆς ἀπεληλαῖσθαι) bent on destroying the state (τῇ κοινῇ πολιτείᾳ λυμαινόμενος).

There is no evidence that the Ethiopians sent Frumentius back, a sign perhaps of the bond between the two Churches that was to make the Ethiopian Church a dependency of the Coptic Church until 1948, when Joseph II in Alexandria agreed to an 'autocephalic' status for the Tewahedo Church in Ethiopia and allowed Ethiopian bishops to elect their own Patriarch. After several decades of disorder, including a Communist government in Ethiopia, dialogue relations between the two Churches were resumed in 2007.

§31. Concerning Frumentius, the Bishop of Axum, a letter to the rulers of the same city.

Victor Constantius Maximus Augustus to Aizanas and Sazanas

Knowledge of the Superior One¹⁰ is our greatest concern. For in this I believe that people should exercise the greatest care so that, having learned of God,¹¹ they should live their lives with as much hope as possible and agree with each other in their examination of justice and truth. Since we feel confident that you deserve such forethought and regard you as equals with the Romans, we bid you to hold the same dogma¹² as them in your churches. So, send Frumentius the Bishop to Egypt as soon as possible to be with the most revered George¹³ and other Egyptian bishops, who above all

demorari nec post annum percipere alimonias annonarias. dat. xviii kal. feb. mediolano indictione xv constantio a. viii et iuliano c. cons. (356 ian. 15).

10 Arius uses this designation in his Thalia hymn (ll. 27ff.)

11 If the letter was sent about 355, Frumentius had been at Axum for about eight years, and by that time Ethiopia was Christian country. It is a carefully worded document that avoids overt pressure and excessive flattery.

12 An indirect reference to the Arian teaching

13 The following description of George is from Ammianus Marcellinus 22 c. 11 §3: the Alexandrians turned their anger against Bishop George, 'having often, in a manner of speaking, been attacked by his viper-like fangs' (*vipereis (ut ita dixerim), morsibus ab eo saepius appetiti*). In the next section he is said to have been born in Cilica and 'flourished to the detriment of many' (*auctusque in damna complurium*).

have the authority to ordain and decide on matters of this sort. I assume¹⁴ that you know and remember this, unless you are pretending to be the only ones not know what has been acknowledged by all, namely that Frumentius was elevated to his station in life by Athanasius, who is guilty of countless¹⁵ wrongs. Since he was unable to absolve himself honourably from any of the charges brought against him, he was immediately removed from his see. And since he has found nowhere to live, he wanders from one place to another, as if in this way to¹⁶ escape from this wrong. If Frumentius is prepared to submit and take responsibility for the whole situation, it is clear that he will be in no way at odds with the law of the Church and the prevailing¹⁷ faith. When he is judged and tested¹⁸ about his whole life and gives an account to those who judge such things, he will be appointed by them if, in fact, it turns out that he is justly fit to be a bishop. But if delays and flees from judgement, then it will be clear that he has been led into impiety by the words of that scoundrel Athanasius and has chosen to reveal himself as wicked as Athanasius. The concern here is that, now that he is in Axum,¹⁹ he may corrupt Christians among you, with wicked and impious words, not only confusing and disturbing the churches but blaspheming against the Superior One and, as a result, bringing about complete upheaval and rebellion for the various peoples.²⁰ We are confident that Frumentius, being intelligent, will benefit²¹ greatly for the common good from his association with the venerable George, as well as the other bishops who are consummate teachers in such matters, and will return to this see,²² having mastered all the finer points of ecclesiastical matters.²³ May God preserve you, most honoured brothers.

14 Translates δήπου

15 Gk. μυρίοις. The Latin translator (presumably Migne) writes *sexcentibus*

16 Gk uses Fut. Participle with εἶναι, in what is probably meant to be a clause of purpose; . . . εἶναι διαφευξόμενος. The Latin translation uses a modal verb in the Subjunctive: . . . *effugere possit*. The portrayal of Athanasius as a vagrant was probably considered as further evidence of his unreliable character.

17 κρατοῦση, for the time being.

18 πείρα

19 If this letter was written c.355, Frumentius had already been in Axum as a Bishop for about eight years. There is evidence that Ezana had become a convert in the 340s cf. A.H.M Jones *History of Ethiopia* (1935) p. 28.

20 τοῖς κατὰ τὸ ἔθνος.

21 ἀπονίναμαι

22 τὴν αὐτὴν (ἐπισκοπήν), i.e. Axum. The slightly uncertain tone as to whether Frumentius was a suitable candidate for a bishopric expressed earlier has been replaced by this more 'upbeat' note at the end.

23 πάντα τὰ τῶν ἐκκλησιαστικῶν εἰς ἄκρον ἠκριβωκῶς.