

Courtesy of the Augustan Society

### **An Interview with the Venerable Getahun Atlaw, Archdeacon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, Israel**

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Dr. Bryant-Abraham: I would like to begin by expressing the appreciation of the Augustan Society for this opportunity to explore with you candidly and in depth a few issues of great interest to our society. I'm referring specifically to the origins of the Solomonic dynasty of the late Emperor Haile Selassie I and to the Abyssinian traditions of the Ark of the Covenant. You are aware, I believe, that one of the standing research teams of the Augustan Society, the Descents from Antiquity Committee, centers its attention on the investigation of possible genealogic links between ancient dynasties, such as the House of David, and royal and noble families extant today. Within this framework, the Royal House of Ethiopia and its "Solomonic" descent from the House of David presents an intriguing avenue of approach. Last week at the Ethiopian Church ceremony honoring Shlomo Hizak, founder of the AMI Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies and Research, we spoke of our possible collaboration in researching and publishing the Solomonic descent of the Lion of Judah, the late Emperor Haile Selassie I. You suggested that you could translate the Ge'ez and Amharic documents into one of your European languages, Italian, French or English, and I could then shape it up into acceptable, academic English and proceed with its publication in *The Augustan*.

Archdeacon Atlaw: Yes, as I indicated earlier, we realize the importance of working together with Western scholars and I would welcome such an opportunity. Actually the dynasty is well documented in Ethiopia, especially from about A.D.1270 on, when the Solomonic dynasty was restored after the political unrest from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries. But we have no known Ge'ez manuscripts before the fourteenth century, though the oldest have to have been composed much earlier. Archaeologists date a few inscriptions and legends on coins to the early Christian era; that is, around A.D.350.

Many are in a derivative of the Sabaeen script. And the Ge'ez translations of the Septuagint only go back to the "nine saints."<sup>1</sup> They came to us from Byzantine Syria at the end of the fifth century (Ethiopian calendar A.D.480.) It is the Ge'ez classic, *Kebrā Nagast*, "Glory of Kings," that first clearly records the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon and the birth of their son, Menelik I, who returned to Ethiopia accompanied by advisors from Solomon's court to begin the Royal House of Ethiopia. The *Kebrā Nagast* was compiled from earlier source material at the end of the thirteenth century. A colophon in the work states that it

was translated from an Arabic version of a Coptic original and the presence of Arabisms in the Ge'ez prose would tend to confirm this. But I'm afraid the Solomonic dynasty stretches back centuries further than our earliest written records and for that reason will not meet European standards for "proving" a pedigree. As far as we are concerned, the Kebra Nagast was received into the Canons and, though not scripture, does command the highest authority. For us it is unimpeachable, so our collaboration on the genealogic records of the Ethiopian Royal House would take the Kebra Nagast as its starting point. I do not believe these records are presently available in any European language and to publish them in your journal, *The Augustan*, would certainly be a worthwhile endeavor.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: The Augustan Society, would also be keenly interested in coming to a better understanding of the traditions of the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopian national and religious life. You and I had also discussed briefly the religious, military order dedicated to safeguarding the Ark. Didn't we refer to it by a Latin translation from Classical Ge'ez, *Sodalitas Arcae Foederis Domini*, "The Sodality of the Ark of the Covenant of God?"

Archdeacon Atlaw: The sodality foresworn to protect the Ark? It's an ancient monastic military order, which takes solemn vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. And they are secretive; I would say closed to external inquiry. But I could see what could be done in looking into historic documentation of the order.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: We would be interested in knowing, for example, how far back the records of the Sodality of the Ark reach. It has been suggested that they may represent an Abyssinian branch of the Knights Templars, which survived the ruin and destruction of that order in Western Christendom.

Archdeacon Atlaw: Perhaps, but my feeling is that they may actually be older. They may have co-operated with the Templars, particularly at the time the rock churches of Lalibela were under construction. We do find the *croix pattée*, symbol of the Templars, here and there in Lalibela, as at the Church of Saint Mary's. Also, local tradition recounts, the rock-hewn churches were built by men with white skin – they may also have been Byzantine workmen. Actually it's not impossible that the Knights Templar themselves may have originated as a European extension of the Ethiopian Sodality of the Ark. Just at that time in Jerusalem the Ethiopian presence was especially noticeable and shortly thereafter Prince Lalibela with his courtly retinue spent his years in exile there. But I would caution against undue expectations in this line of research. The Sodality of the Ark is fanatically xenophobic, and even with my assistance, I fear we'll meet an impenetrable stone wall.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: In your office as Liqa Diyakon [Archdeacon,] you are the spokesperson of His Grace, Abuna Matheous, Archbishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of Jerusalem, and your words are singularly significant. It is

appropriate to underscore this fact for our readership in this interview. Could we take just a moment to review briefly your academic background and interests?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Of course. I did my ecclesiastic work in a number of traditional Ethiopian schools, received ordination at the Ziway Liturgical Training Monastery, and did advanced studies at St. Yared Theological Seminary in Aksum, majoring in Nebabe “Ge'ez linguistics/literature,” Qedase, “liturgy,” and Ziema “cantillation.” I also carried out post-ordination studies there, specializing in Biblical theology, pastoral counseling and ecumenical relations. From 1993 to 1997 I was the recipient of a National Council for Education Award (N.C.E.A.) by the Irish Ministry of Education and spent four years at the Kimmage Manor House of Studies in Dublin. I concentrated my studies there on community development for one year, and cultural and theological anthropology for an additional three years. For this I was awarded a National Diploma from the N.C.E.A. of the Irish Government. Since then I have been in service to His Grace, the Archbishop of Jerusalem, and the Ethiopian Orthodox community here in Israel.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: You were commenting the other day it was in Ireland that you first became aware of the remarkable parallels between Early Celtic Christianity and the beliefs and practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Archdeacon Atlaw: Well, yes. I have found no evidence the Early Celtic Church was Non-Chalcedonian, as we are, along with the other Oriental Churches, the Armenian, Syrian, Coptic, and Indian. But in so many ways, the correspondences between our ecclesiastical traditions and the Early Celtic Church are striking. This even extends to the thematic artistry and scrollwork of the Celtic stone crosses and the Pictish miniatures in the Book of Kells. True, no documentary evidence has yet provided a missing link in our two branches of Christianity, but it's difficult not to think we do share a common ancestor, hypothetically retraceable to the early Palestinian Church of Jewish believers. Prima facie evidence might tend to point in this direction. You know, of course, that Early Celtic Christianity in Ireland pre-dates Saint Patrick by a couple of centuries. At first it resisted “Romanization,” and then for several centuries co-existed with the Church of Rome. And it lasted on into the fourteenth century on the island of Iona when the English replaced the personnel of that venerable monastic community with the Benedictine order. Throughout that long period, the Ethiopian Church and the Early Celtic Church on the far margins of Christendom cultivated what some scholars of ecclesiastical history have called “Johannine theology,” at notable variance from the “Pauline theology” associated with Western Christian dogma.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Can you sketch out for us briefly a few of the salient features of Johannine theology?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Yes, but at the outset, I must stress that the Gospel of John,

written by and for Galilean and Judean believers, is unfortunately often misread as the most anti-Jewish of the gospels. We Ethiopians have successfully survived in Jerusalem for almost 2,000 years, since long before the Crusades, specifically because we remain aloof from all politics. But theologically, we are outspokenly pro-Jewish; we owe so very much, an incredible debt, to the Jewish People. Neither do the Early Celtic Christian writings reflect any anti-Jewish sentiment. With us, it's almost as if the "parting of the ways" between the people of Jesus, the Jews, and the believers in Jesus, the Church, had never occurred. A good review of Early Celtic Christianity is found in *The Celtic Church in Britain* by Leslie Hardinge, but I would say that Johannine theology is distinctive in its use and interpretation of the Old Testament. We, like Early Celtic Christianity, have consistently sought to blend the Old and the New Testaments in our faith and practice. In the history of Western Christendom as we find in the Patristic literature and later, Johannine theology was roundly condemned as the "heresy of Church Judaizers." Remember, what today are recognized as "Christian denominations" were historically condemned as "Church heresies." Not only are we "Non-Chalcedonian [Monophysite] in our Christology but in other ways as well we would stand accused of heresy by the canonical standards of historic Christendom. For example, our Easter, like that of Early Celtic Christianity, celebrates the anniversary of Jesus' resurrection, that is, we are "Quatodecimans" in confrontation with the consensus of the Council of Nicaea in A.D.325. This means our Easter coincides with the Jewish Passover. By the way, in 1998, Easter and Passover fell together for all of Christianity for the first time since Constantine's mathematicians drew up the calendar in such a way that the two dates should not coincide. His mathematicians did know that in their distant future, 1998, the two celebrations would again occur on the same date, but they probably thought that the "End of Days" would surely have preceded it. By the way, the Quatodeciman Easter was the central issue of the Synod of Whitby in A.D.664. That was the event from which the onset of the decline of Early Celtic Christianity is datable. Among other differences I could cite would be our liturgical celebration of Kedamit or Sanbat [Seventh Day Sabbath,] as well as the Lord's Day. We keep very strictly the Levitical dietary regulations; we circumcise our male children on the eighth day after birth and in many other instances, we observe the practical, as well as the ethical commandments of the Orit [Octateuch, the Law of Moses.] You might want to look at Hammerschmidt's article, "Jewish Elements in the Cult of the Ethiopian Church," in the 1965 issue of the *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. During my sojourn in Ireland, I was surprised to discover how similar to our own was Early Celtic Christianity's position on these issues.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: It's too bad Thomas Cahill did not give more coverage to this in his book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.

Archdeacon Atlaw: Yes, the book is amiss in not clearly setting forth the facts and crucial importance of Early Celtic Christianity in Ireland on the continent. The decline of the strength and impetus in the Irish evangelization of Europe

chronologically parallels the waning of Early Celtic Christianity in Ireland itself.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Do you feel there indeed is a historical link between the two Churches so distant from each other on the peripheral poles of historic Christendom?

Archdeacon Atlaw: There is some archeological data, bas-reliefs, on stone crosses which seem to depict priests in liturgical vestments typical of Coptic and of Ethiopian usage. But I wouldn't push the point too far. It's too easy for justifiable speculation to become uncritical fantasy. In our own history, for example, we know that perhaps as much as 50% of the early Ethiopian population practiced Judaism, not Rabbinic Judaism, but the Biblical religion of the Beta Israel, whom we nickname Falasha, "foreigner." Most of them have now immigrated here to Israel. Their religion is very similar to the Alexandrian Judaism that Philo describes in his writings and to the practices of the Karaite Jewish sect. All are based on the Old Testament and do not incorporate the later developments of the Oral Law in the Mishnah and Talmud which define classical Rabbinic Judaism. In the early Christian period of Ethiopian history, about 50% of the people were animists and 50% were Beta Israel. When we speak of the early evangelization of Ethiopia, we have in mind principally the Christianization of the large Jewish population at that time. Most of the animists were eventually Islamicized. Today the demographic profile still reflects this division and about one half of the population is Islamic, with a negligible minority of animists in the far South, and the other half, Christian, with most of our Jewish minority now in Israel. Consequently, that we would retain our Biblically based Jewish customs and folkways as an integral part of our Christian life would be understandable, even predictable – especially our reverence for the Ark of the Covenant.

Subsequently, our scholars could have collated the principles of Johannine theology from the Matsahaf Qidus, the "Holy Bible,"- our Ge'ez recension has books lost to the Western Church- and they could have arrived at a position analogous to the Early Celtic Church. On the other hand, Celtic churchmen could have arrived at the same position through a well-reasoned examination of those same passages and a careful study of the Vetus Latina or Vulgata recensions in their entirety. We know the level of Latin and Greek scholarship was very high in the earlier era of Irish Christianity.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Some of our readers may not be aware of those Johannine passages you refer to. Could you elucidate?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Actually these key passages relate to the place of the "Law" in our Christian life. Consider, for instance, in the Epistles of John: I John 2:3-5, 3:21-24...by the way, here, in verse 23, the Greek conjunction kai is correctly translated "also" in Ge'ez, where it is often deleted or incorrectly rendered literally as "and" in European versions... and consider I John 5:2-4 or II John 6 or say, Revelations 14:12: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." There are a number of other such "Johannine" passages in the Addis Kidan, the "New Testament." The Early

Irish Christians could have re-constructed their own dogma from them and we, for our part, could have superimposed them on our indigenous Judaic folkways. So it is not necessary to assume a common starting point.

In Ethiopia, we have maintained an unbroken Apostolic succession and our doctrines are ancient. We affirm freedom within the incarnate Logos and that one of our viable options within that freedom is the voluntary practice of the Biblical commandments. You might say the commandments of God have become our day-to-day folkways, veritably “written on the heart.” We would maintain that, as religious customs, not legal precepts, girzat, “circumcision,” and the other Biblical commandments that can still be observed, indeed may still be observed without prejudice to haimanot, “Christian faith.” But dogmatically, we hold there are only five that indeed must be kept...and these are commanded in the Addis Kidan, the “New Testament.”

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: What are those five?

Archdeacon Atlaw: They are ethical commandments: 1) Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind (Matthew 22:37); 2) Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself (Matthew 22:39); 3) A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another, as I have loved you, that ye love one another (John 13:34-35); 4) Ye shall love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, bless those who curse you (Luke 6: 27); and 5) All things therefore which you would that men should do to you, do even so to them (Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:13.)

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: I was really quite surprised to find out that the Adoptionist heresy, extirpated from Western Christendom in the third century, is still an acceptable school of thought in the Ethiopian Church.

Archdeacon Atlaw: Not officially. There are some scholars who hold these beliefs underground. Yes, it is true; we conscientiously strive for toleration and, yes, we do have some who continue to hold such doctrines. The doctrine of Adoptionism may, in fact, have been much more widespread in Ethiopia in earlier centuries, but we sustained a concerted effort to align with the Church of Rome in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Several embassies were sent to us from Portugal then. The Portuguese wanted to consolidate their control of commercial activities on the Red Sea route to Goa and the East Indies and they were in economic competition with Venice and Egypt. They were convinced they had discovered in Ethiopia the legendary kingdom of “Prester John” but had no ethical problem endeavoring to Romanize us in furtherance of their imperial objectives.

At any rate, it is true that Adoptionism is still one of three schools of thought in contemporary Ethiopian Christianity: 1) Tsegga, the “son by grace” view, teaching that Jesus was not by nature the son of God, but by adoption. They hold that until his baptism, Jesus was an ordinary man, but that upon baptism he

became as it were, the “Son of God” through adoption. The Logos, the “first begotten” of God, infused into Jesus at baptism, at which time the “Word became flesh.” 2) Qibat, the “son by unction” view, also asserting that Jesus was not God by nature but became one with the Father when anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. They teach that through this same “baptism of the Holy Spirit” each believer also becomes a son or a daughter of God, as it were, a Christ one with the Christ, an “anointed” one “authorized to all things.” They tend toward Panentheistic thinking; 3) Our own, the Yityopya Ortodoks Tawahido Beta Kerestiyan. The Tawahido, “union,” view is the historic Non-Chalcedonian Church of Ethiopia. We also have “Uniats,” adherents of the Roman Catholic Churches founded by the Portuguese, and various Protestant denominations introduced by European and North American missionary societies.

Again, out of principle, we insist on tolerance. We had two historic groups of heretics: 1) the Stephanites, who sought separation of Church and State and were opposed to veneration of the Virgin Mary, insisting on the exclusive worship of God the Father; 2) the Mikaelites, who opposed Biblical literalism in favor of metaphorical exegeses. Under Zar'a Ya'iqob's reign [1434–68], both groups were severely repressed; but today even their writings find acceptance with a number of our scholars. Nor would we have judged the interpretations of the Celtic theologian, Pelagius [360-c420], particularly heretical to our own understanding of the Scriptures.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: The Rastafarians consider themselves a branch of Ethiopian culture and quite literally idolized the late Emperor Haile Selassie I. How does the Ethiopian Church view their philosophy and way of life?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Among many of our young people, as throughout all African pop culture, their music is much appreciated. But they are in no way to be considered a branch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Emperor Haile Selassie strongly discountenanced their excessive adoration of him ... should I say quasi-deification?

But I should indicate our interest in developing an Ethiopian Orthodox outreach program throughout the African diaspora, including Black America and the Caribbean. This outreach program has great potential for positively resolving certain aspects of the African-American identity crisis and we have already taken the initial steps in this direction through the Ethiopian Research Council at the Center for African American Culture, Florida State University in Tallahassee.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: All this seems a very enlightened policy. Are there any exceptions?

Archdeacon Atlaw: One. We are Non-Chalcedonian, inappropriately called “Monophysite” by the Western Churches. We reject any compromise with Dyophysitism. Though we seek the ways and means of an eventual reunion of Christians in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, we did not accept a

post-Vatican II overture issued by Rome to restate the ancient Monophysite/Dyophysite dispute as mere differences in interpretation of one and the same doctrine. After extensive deliberation our scholars found that to do this would be to condone and accede to the “error of Chalcedon.” On that point we declined the invitation.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: I’d like to explore these issues with you in greater depth at a later time. Could we shift our focus to the Ark? Since the premiere of Spielberg’s film, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and publication of Graham Hancock’s book, *The Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant*, popular interest in the subject has remained high. Could you share a few of your thoughts on this?

Archdeacon Atlaw: In the first place, Spielberg gave the world a Hollywood-sized Ark, far too grandiose and large. The Ark described in the Book of Exodus which we have preserved is a modest chest measuring 2.5 cubits [four feet, 2 inches] long; 1.5 cubits [2 feet, 6 inches] wide, and 1.5 cubits [2 feet, 6 inches] high. And Spielberg made the cherubim part of the top of the Ark, instead of attaching them to the embroidered cover over the Ark. Spielberg’s ark looks like a Hellenistic sarcophagus someone found in Las Vegas. Hancock, however, has done us a dubious favor, bringing to world attention our greatest national treasure, the Ark of the Covenant. The facts Hancock presents cannot be denied, but the conclusions he draws from his own fantasy and sheer speculation are simply inaccurate. And we really don’t need it any other way, do we?

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: What are some of your chief concerns now that world attention is fixed on Ethiopia as the final resting-place of the Ark?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Commercial exploitation. We have great natural and human resources, but Ethiopia is not a rich country. We are a developing country. On the one hand stands the danger of international art thieves and on the other, the dangers of unscrupulous, political graft. We have been entrusted by God to keep the Ark safe throughout the centuries, and we don’t want to wake up one morning to find it in the Vatican, in Jerusalem, as some travelling circus display, or at auction in a Persian Gulf sheikdom.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: It would require maximally high security measures.

Archdeacon Atlaw: Ask yourself a fair question. Given the history of incessant armed conflict throughout the Horn of Africa, including Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Eritrea, a history of unmitigated mayhem in intertribal vendettas, civil wars and Moslem-Christian confrontation, what are the probabilities that we would leave the original Israelite Ark in a low-security zone such as the Church of Saint Mary of Zion in Axum? What are the chances a replica, a decoy is actually there in its place?

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: I see your point. Is there a known precedent for changing its location in times of unrest?

Archdeacon Atlaw: I could mention Tullu Gudo, one of the five islands in Lake Ziway, the largest of the five northern lakes of the Rift Valley. The old name of the island was Debre Tsion and it has a medieval monastery on it with priceless illustrated manuscripts. Actually some of our oldest Ge'ez records documenting Aksum were discovered here. All this lends support to local folktales about the Zagwé Royal family and priests who fled the destruction of Aksum, taking the Ark with them in the ninth century. Thereafter, the Zagwé dynasty abandoned Aksum for about three centuries and shifted the center of gravity of the Christian kingdom to the region of southern Tigray and what is now northern Wollo. What happened to the Ark during this period? How long was it kept in the monastery of Debre Tsion, modern Tullu Gudo? When and by whom would it have been returned to Aksum? There are those who suspect that it's still kept in the monastery. But for the same strategic reasons I just mentioned, what do you think?

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: It is at least conceivable that the Ark might still be at the monastery on Tullu Gudo.

Archdeacon Atlaw: If it were, after all this time, people would know it and at the great festivals, wouldn't it be a much greater pilgrimage site than it is. Tullu Gudo is relatively easy to reach.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: I take it you yourself have never seen it.

Archdeacon Atlaw: The Book of Numbers 4:20 expressly states: "...but they shall not go in to see when the holy things are covered, lest they die." I am not worthy to look at it and I fear to approach it.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Yet the Ark is so central to Ethiopian Christianity. I must say I know of no denomination or historic Church with such deep reverence for it as you have in Ethiopia.

Archdeacon Atlaw: Your observation is correct. In every Ethiopian church, there must be a tabot, a wooden or stone slab representing the Ten Commandments within the Ark in order for any religious service to take place. It is the presence of the tabot that sanctifies a church. Even Ethiopian ecclesiastical architecture has evolved around the centrality of the ark. The tabot is housed in a Qediste Qedusan, "Holy of Holies," in the Bet Meqduse 2, the center of a church, which most often radiates in a circle out from it with four entrances, one for each of the cardinal points. Only those of the anointed Qesawst [priesthood] and the Jan Hoi may enter into the Bet Meqduse although the tabot may be covered over and taken out in procession during the great festivals

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Jan Hoi means “emperor,” right? Is that the origin of “Prester John”?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Most likely. As “defender of the faith,” the emperor is a “priest” and “Prester John” might have originated from something like “Priest Jan Hoi.”

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Does the word tabot have a root meaning, an etymology?

Archdeacon Atlaw: The word is from our classical language Ge'ez. Our Ethiopic languages, Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigriña, Tigre and others are classified as South Semitic and they are close to the ancient languages of the South Arabic inscriptions. All of them share a common stock of Hebrew loan words. Our word for “idol,” for example, is taot and comes from Hebrew ta'ut, “mistake.” The word tabot is derived from Aramaic teбота, also related to Hebrew tebah (plural, tebot) ; both mean “box, case” or a “chest” of some sort. In the Hebrew Scriptures tebah is the original term for Noah’s “ark.” But the expression, “Ark of the Covenant” is translated from “noe'aron ha-berith.” 'Aron is a synonym of tebah and means something larger than a “box” or “case,” something like a “big chest” or “cupboard.” Our use of the word tabot may go back to the Aramaic-speaking community of Judean warriors on Elephantine Island, opposite Aswan, just north of the first cataract of the Nile. The whole area is now under water at the Aswan Dam. The Judean community at Elephantine built a Temple there like the one in Jerusalem and offered all the prescribed sacrifices. That may seem irregular, but not if they understood Exodus 20:24b to refer to the Ark and they indeed had it there: “An altar of earth thou shalt make unto Me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings and thy peace offerings, thy sheep and thine oxen. In all places where I record My name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.” The whole region at that time, including modern Ethiopia, was one cultural zone, Upper Cush. The Ark could have been transferred down the Blue Nile and from there, following the Nile, to the Judean garrison stationed by the Persians at Elephantine. This is all conjecture, of course. At any rate, after the area was Christianized, the Jewish Temple was abandoned and we can assume the Judean inhabitants came down into Ethiopia to join the Beta Israel who were at that time politically dominant. The Aramaic word teбота could presumably have entered Ge'ez as tabot at that time.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Hancock wrote that the Knights Templar first looked for the Ark on top of the Temple Mount and there is at least one archeological team here in Jerusalem that is excavating with the intention of finding it. Could you comment on this?

Archdeacon Atlaw: I’m not competent to comment on the Templars or any of the other European elements in Hancock’s book, the Grail lore, the origins of Gothic architecture and so forth. But I can sketch out the broad lines of the Ark traditions. There are three: one Talmudic, one Apocryphal, and our own. The

disappearance of the Ark is considered in Western Christendom to be one of the greatest mysteries of the Bible. The Jerusalem Talmud [Yoma 5:2] states expressly that the Ark was among those items missing from the Second Temple, and another passage [Shekalim 6:1-2] adds that Josiah had hidden it "in its place." The Babylonian Talmud [Yoma 53b-54a] specifies that it was hidden "beneath the woodshed." According to Hancock, the Templars would have learned of these references and proceeded to excavate in the vicinity of Al-Aqsa Mosque which they had converted into their headquarters. What the Templars didn't know is that ground level for the First Temple is at least seven meters below ground level for Al-Aqsa Mosque and to even begin their excavations, they would have had to clear away that much sediment and debris. Moreover, scholarly debate is still quite lively over the actual location of the Temple; satellite photography clearly shows a rectangular outline in the open area just north of the paved plaza in front of Al-Aqsa. Today with electronic photography which works off sonar to measure soil and rock densities, it would be possible to obtain a kind of x-ray of the entire Temple Mount area, but in no way can we expect the Waqf [Moslem religious authority] to ever agree to this. However that may be, had the Templars or anyone else in the 1300's tried to excavate anywhere through the seven meters of desert sand and sedimentation that has settled over the Temple Mount since the Babylonian conquest, they would have spent their years in vain. Furthermore, there are well-documented accounts that when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, they actually had Jewish slaves cart away a great deal of the top layers of the mount in an attempt to level it or at least lower it. That would have been the time to uncover the Ark, yet no Roman record of its discovery is extant.

Occasionally one reads here and there of other popular theories. At present there is a small California-based team that has studied old Egyptian papyrus documents, now housed at the British Library in London, and satellite photos of the topography around Jerusalem. They have advanced a hypothesis that the ark was taken by Pharaoh Shishak from Solomon's Temple around B.C.918-917 and buried near what is now a Palestinian village. Over its burial site, Shishak is presumed to have built an Egyptian temple. Now, the papyrus documents may record a contemporary Egyptian policy of taking sacred appurtenances from temples of subjugated territories, burying them and constructing Egyptian temples over them. And satellite photography does reveal what may be the ruins of an Egyptian temple there. And the Palestinian Authority may grant them a license to excavate there, but it is preposterous to suppose they will find the ark buried under the ruins. I Kings 3:1, 9:16 attest to a political alliance between Shishak and Solomon solemnized by a diplomatic marriage. Shishak also intervened in the plans for revenge against Solomon by Hadad, King of Edom (I Kings 11: 14-22, 25.) The campaign by Shishak, recorded in I Kings 14:25-28 and II Chronicles 12:2-12, was directed against King Rehoboam and the north, and Jerusalem and Judah remained untouched. A relief at Karnac lists the 165 cities conquered by Shishak and there's no mention of anything as important as the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. This kind of transitory, feverish enthusiasm for "discovering" the ark reminds me of the verse in Ecclesiastes (4:16): "There is

no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them; they also who came after shall not rejoice in it. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit.”

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Your explanation is fairly thorough. So why are such archeological digs for the Ark still going on?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Well, for example, the Temple Mount is porous limestone, and ancient passageways have been discovered crisscrossing the whole infrastructure. Some persist on the hunch that the Talmudic phrase, “beneath the woodshed,” might have referred to an entrance into such passageways. But they’re digging in utter futility - we have the Ark in Ethiopia.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: You mentioned a second tradition about the Ark’s disappearance, an apocryphal one.

Archdeacon Atlaw: Yes. It’s in II Maccabees 2:4-8a. I have it here: “It was also contained in the same writings, that the prophet, being warned of God, commanded the tabernacle and the ark to go with him, as he went forth into the mountain, where Moses climbed up, and saw the heritage of God. And when Jeremy came thither, he found an hollow cave, wherein he laid the tabernacle, and the ark, and the altar of incense, and so stopped the door. And some of those that followed him came to mark the way, but they could not find it. Which when Jeremy perceived, he blamed them saying, As for that place, it shall be unknown until the time that God gather his people again together, and receive them unto mercy. Then shall the Lord show them these things...” Some say according to this reference that Jeremiah hid it on Mt. Nebo or Mt. Horeb. Hancock and others speculate that this passage at least documents that the Ark accompanied Jeremiah as he went into Exile in Egypt. By the way, whatever the meaning of the Greek word skene, translated here, “tabernacle,” it’s hard to imagine it referred to the Israelite mishkan, “tabernacle.” The Pentateuchal descriptions of the mishkan lead us to envisage something very large and very heavy, perhaps as much as half a ton. What everyone overlooks here is that according to Jeremiah 3:16, Jeremiah himself had no idea of what had become of the Ark: “And it shall come to pass when ye be multiplied and increased in the land, in those days,’ saith the Lord,’ they shall say no more, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ Neither shall it come to mind, neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit it, neither shall that be done any more.” The Masoretic Hebrew verse ends: ve-lo ye’aseh ‘od, “and it will not be made again,” clearly inferring that Jeremiah not only did not know where it was, but that he did not anticipate the construction of a replica. Well, we do know where it is and we have replicas of it all over Ethiopia.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: How then did the Ark come to rest in Ethiopia?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Well now, we’ve reviewed the various historic proposals. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, we accept the account in the Kebra Nagast,

which records the Ark was brought to Ethiopia from Jerusalem by Menelik I, the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Menelik I was conceived in Jerusalem but was born and raised in the royal palace of his mother. When he reached manhood, he returned to Jerusalem to visit his father, whom he resembled completely. Solomon immediately recognized and welcomed him as the royal prince, his first-born son. Menelik I spent many years learning from his father the administration of justice and the governance of a kingdom. When at last Menelik I left Jerusalem to return home, Solomon sent a large contingent of advisors with him. The old noble families of Ethiopia descend from these advisors and it was they who first brought us the biblical faith of Israel. Menelik I also brought the Ark with him at that time. Since then, the relationship between Ethiopia and Jerusalem has been continuous. There are numerous references to us throughout the Bible, which in The Hebrew Scriptures calls us Kushim “Cushites,” and in the Septuagint and New Testament Greek, Aithiopes, “Ethiopians.”

It's important to keep in mind the early cultural and linguistic unity of Abyssinia and Southwest Arabia. The earliest known kingdom in Yemen was the Minaean. They traded in spices and incense from India and the Malay Archipelago to Africa. The names of some twenty Minaean kings are known, but the history of its kingdom cannot be written. About B.C.700 the coexisting kingdom of Sabaea, called both Sheba and Seba in the Old Testament, together with its ally, the state of Kataba, destroyed and replaced the Minaean kingdom. As early as B.C.1500 the Sabaeans are mentioned on a Minaean inscription as nomads who raided the caravan road to El 'Ola. Radiocarbon dating shows that Sabaea flourished from about B.C.900 to B.C.450. It was a trading empire exploiting its proximity to Africa across the Straits of Bab el Mandeb and served as a center of the maritime trade from India and East Africa, transporting by camel caravans foreign luxuries and its own home-produced frankincense to Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt. The visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon was probably a trade mission. It was most likely occasioned by Solomon's occupation of the head of the Gulf of Aqaba and the commercial activity of his “ships of Tarshish” in the Red Sea which threatened the Sabaeian monopoly of the caravan trade. Assyrian inscriptions repeatedly mention queens in the northern Arabian Peninsula, though no South Arabian inscription has yet furnished independent evidence for the Queen of Sheba or for any other women rulers, for that matter. A ninth century B.C. South Arabian clay seal found in the debris at Beth-El attests to trade with the early Israelite monarchy, and, as I pointed out, radiocarbon dating reveals that the two kingdoms, Sabaea and Israel, were contemporary. From a very early period Sabaeian and Abyssinian commercial relations had led to migration and cultural inter-penetration. The Sabaeans are known to have been Jewish and, later, Christian and the final decline of Sabaea was clearly due to internal dissensions between its Jews and its Christians, who were sponsored by the Abyssinian Christian kingdom. Yusuf Dhu-Nuwas, the last monarch of Sabaea, adopted Judaism and it was his persecution of the Christian Sabaeans in A.D.525 that provoked the final Abyssinian invasion and occupation of the

country and the oases along the caravan route to the north. Abyssinia then ruled Sabaea until A.D.575 when, for about 50 years, the Sassanian Empire replaced it just before final absorption of the area into the new politico-religious empire of Islam. But the Bible already records the historical fact that the name “Sabaea” (Sheba/Seba) equally referred to Abyssinia at various periods. Compare, for example, Psalms 72:10: “The kings of Tarshish and all of the isles shall bring presents, the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.” And Isaiah 43:3b: “I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee.” This latter verse may either reflect one of the many transitory, regional divisions of early Abyssinia, or it may clarify that Seba specified Sabaea proper, and that in all other Biblical passages the name Sheba does indeed refer to Ethiopia. On the other hand, when we keep in mind that in Hebrew the sibilants samekh, sin, and šin do suffer confusion, sin sometimes interchanging with šin, as in Psalm 119:161-168, but more often with samekh, as occurs also in post-Imperial Aramaic, then we perceive that Sheba and Seba really are etymologically the same names and that Sheba/Seba, “Sabaea,” can equally refer at various times to both South Arabia and Abyssinia. At any rate, we emphatically do continue the Christian cultural legacy of Sheba, including the Ark, which we have kept throughout the years. Does the exact date the Ark was first brought into Ethiopia really have any other than incidental relevance?

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: But how can the Ark that you have in Ethiopia ever be authenticated?

Archdeacon Atlaw: Ah! There you have it! Let’s say that a group of world experts could have free access to the Ark. How would they go about authenticating it? The Biblical text is clear. It’s made of acacia wood overlaid inside and out with gold. After three millennia the acacia wood is held intact only by the gold surrounding it. Assuming, God forbid, these experts cut back enough of the gold, say, at the bottom on one side, so that enough of the organic material could be taken out for a reliable carbon-14 sample. We would have an approximate date and we could verify it to be acacia wood. That would dramatically increase the probabilities of its authenticity, but could they ever really be certain that it’s not just some contemporary Egyptian relic—unless, of course, they were all supernaturally stricken dead for the sacrilege.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: Do you really have an idea where it is?

Archdeacon Atlaw: I have stressed before, we are open to serious cooperation with Western scholars. Your own reputation had preceded you through your intimate involvement with the AMI Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies and Research. That’s why we agreed to this interview. Let me say this with full expectation: We do indeed hope to work together on many projects in the future.

In the remote high country east of Aksum, there is an area of extensive caves. The passes into this area are steep and rugged and all but inaccessible. They

are easily defended. Like the Wadi Qumran caves where the Dead Sea scrolls were found, these caves have optimal conditions of temperature and dryness for the long-term preservation of manuscripts. We have for centuries housed the Imperial Aksumite libraries in these caves. In quantity and perhaps in quality, the vast literature accumulated in these caves may far exceed the finds of the Cairo Genizah and even possibly the Dead Sea scrolls. The manuscripts are in Hebrew, Aramaic, Coptic, Greek, Latin, Arabic, Ge'ez and other languages. The research to be done is truly awesome and will require lifetimes of assiduous study. In the caves we can expect to find ancient records reaching back to the earliest days of Sabaean and Abyssinian history, of the Solomonic dynasty, and of the Ark. We call one of those caverns "the Cave of Sacred Vessels." But I am not at liberty to go further with my comments at this time. I would, however, again emphasize that I look forward to collaborating with you in the future. Together we could research the Solomonic pedigree and look into the feasibility of documenting the survival into the 20th century of the Knights Templars in our Sodality of the Ark - and eventually into other great questions. There is so much work to be done.

Dr. Bryant-Abraham: I deeply appreciate your confidence and on behalf of the Augustan Society, I want to thank you for the time you have accorded us for this interview.

End Notes:

1. The Nine Saints according to Country of Origin were:
  - 1.1. Abba Alef of Caesarea
  - 1.2. Abba Aregawi (Zemichael) of Constantinople
  - 1.3. Abba Aftsie of Asia Minor
  - 1.4. Abba Likanos of Constantinople
  - 1.5. Abba Gerima of Constantinople
  - 1.6. Abba Gubba of Cilicia
  - 1.7. Abba Yimatta of Cosia
  - 1.8. Abba Pentelion of Constantinople
  - 1.9. Abba Tsihima of Antioch
2. Cf. Hebrew Beth ha-Miqdash, "Temple."
3. Biblical citations are adapted by express written permission from The 21st Century King James Bible, precursor of The Third Millennium Bible, with Apocrypha, for which the Hon. Knight de Bryan served as Chief Linguistic Consultant.