

# Abuna Yesehaq, the Pan-African Archbishop

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**Happy 14<sup>th</sup> Tribute Day**

**From Adwa to Jamaica**

I would like to congratulate all those of the Jamaican Orthodox faith who hold this special occasion every year for His Eminence Abuna Yesehaq. Thank you for the invitation to attend the anniversary. Even though I am not with you in person, I am with you in spirit.

I was introduced to Abuna Yesehaq in Washington DC by the late Yosif Ford, the son of Rabbi Josiah Ford who was the music director of the UNIA. Yosif told the Abuna that I needed help to find the work of Dr Malaku

Bayen, the founder of the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF). The Abuna invited me to his apartment in New Jersey and later sent me to Jamaica to meet individuals who incorporated the EWF in Jamaica. At the time, they were the founders of EWF branches throughout Jamaica. When I returned from Jamaica I stayed with him for two days and conveyed to him all that I had learned. He became uncomfortable when he heard that I had learned more about him than Dr. Malaku. The Abuna did not want to hear about himself. I told him that he had fulfilled what Dr. Malaku started. The Abuna said, "Nobody told me that my work is an extension of Dr. Malaku's". I also told him that he had managed to find a safe haven for the Ethiopiansim that had been uprooted by communism and tribalism.

To get to know more about his early life, I asked him who his friends were. He gave me a list of their telephone numbers, except that of Abuna Paulos, the late patriarch of Ethiopia, because of the ethnic politics that led the division of the Holy Synod in 1991. I managed to interview all of them, some in person and others through long distance telephone conversations. These were nine colleagues who had traveled with him by ship in 1962 from Ethiopia to U.S. to study theology in Buffalo, NY. While each one of them gave different perspectives, all agreed on his dedication and sociability.

Abuna Tadios, the Archbishop of the Caribbean and Latin America, whom I interviewed in 2005 in Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago, had fond memories of Abuna Yesehaq despite the division of the EOTC. Abuna Tadios said: "My heart and mind is with Abuna Yesehaq but I am serving who ever sits in Addis Ababa as Ichege of the Holy See of Saint Tekle Haymanot, who restored the EOTC in the 12 century and enabled the EOTC to share power with the monarchy for 700 years until 1974."

In my still un-published book, *Abuna Yesehaq: The Pan African Archbishop*, I highlighted seven major events of his life:

- His election by Emperor Haile Selassie;
- His interest in meeting Malcolm X in Harlem in 1963. (The Abuna left a note in one of the Muslim shops in Harlem to Malcolm X-saying that he wanted to discuss The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church with him);
- His connection with the founders of the Ethiopian World Federation (EWF) including: Lij Araya Abebe, (second in command to Dr Malaku Bayan), Weizero Aseggedech, (disseminator of *The Voice of Ethiopia*, the weekly newspaper of the EWF in New York City),

- Dorothy Bayen, (wife of Dr Malaku and Chief Editor of *The Voice of Ethiopia*);
- The special prayer he conducted on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in the 1980s;
  - His acquaintance with the four Reggae icons: Rita, Bob, Peter, and Bunny Wailer;
  - The baptismal ceremony of Bob Marley, why he named him *Berhan Selassie*, and how he led Bob's funeral services both at The Holy Trinity Church at Maxfield Avenue, and at The National Stadium as his godfather. Why he liked Peter Tosh and why he ordered to have his tomb painted with Orthodox symbols even though Peter never accepted his teaching of Christianity;
  - Finally, his invitation to the home of Nelson Mandela after his release.

My book outlines the Abuna's life story: from his birth place, Endabba-Girema, Adwa, to his work and final resting place, Jamaica. I have depicted him not only as an honorable Abuna but also as a person. I hope to publish it one day.

Abuna Yesehaq brought the EOTC, the bedrock foundation of Ethiopia, in 1970, to the Western Hemisphere. With New York City as his base, the Abuna helped to establish new churches throughout the Caribbean Islands, cities in the USA, Toronto, London, and Port Elizabeth in South Africa.

Martimo Planno (Wolde Hawariyat), who wrote the lyric; *Selassie is the Chapel*, for Bob Marley, said: "The Abuna was known here in Jamaica in the 70s for preaching the uniqueness of ancient Ethiopia's faith, along with Garveyism. To get our attention, he held a gold cross with his right hand, which he said was a gift from Emperor Haile Selassie, and a book on Marcus Garvey in the left. In his closing sermon, he would customarily say, "This church came to Jamaica on the orders of Emperor Haile Selassie the First," Martimo added, " We Rastafarians gave him tough times. We were more interested in the teaching of Haile Selassie than Christianity. Finally he managed to establish the Orthodox Church and baptized many Rastafarians in Kingston at the river he named Debre- Zeyt. I myself was baptized and was given my Ethiopian name. The meaning of my name fitted with the role I have been playing in the Rastafarian Community."

How the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church reached Jamaica, Dr Menase Haile, minister of information, said: "During the Emperor's visit to Jamaica in

1966, the government of Jamaica said to his majesty that all the Rastafarians who welcomed you would like to go to Ethiopia to live. Do you have a place for them? The Emperor replied, 'I want them to stay on this beautiful island, instead I will bring the value of Ethiopia to them. That was why the Ethiopia Tewahedo Orthodox Faith was established in Jamaica.'

The Abuna once was asked why he was bothering with Jamaicans who would prefer to be baptized in the name of Emperor Haile Selassie and he replied: "I love difficult children." These "difficult children" were the freedom fighters against the representative of the British colonial power.

When the Abuna learned that the police officers were using axe to cut dreadlocks inside the prison, he spoke with the head of the police department and said, "Every corner there are churches in Jamaica, but where is the morality of Christ? How could you cut a prisoner hair with an axe?"

Whether "difficult" or hated, the Rastafarians never disappointed the Abuna; they stayed with him in good times as well as in trying times. They showered him with love and honor. His disciples who converted from the faith of Rastafari to Tewahedo did not wait to get the approval of the Ethiopian Synod to sanctify him as a saint; they had already called him Saint Yesehaq since the day he passed away in 2005. To institutionalize the name, Deacon Greenland established a kindergarten in Kingston with the name Saint Yesehaq.

Shortly before the Abuna passed away, I was in New York with Dr Girma Abebe. He knew the Abuna for 40 years and the first Ethiopian who wrote the story of Dr Malaku Bayen in English. We were on one of our regular visits with the Abuna at Beth Israel Medical Center in New Jersey. While the Abuna was half asleep, he said to us, "How far away is our home!" After we left the hospital, Dr Girma told me not to forget the Abuna's final words. I hope that Dr Girma will talk about this occasion in his interview this Saturday on the Jamaican radio, as part of a special program on Saint Yesehaq's life and works.

Years before the Abuna's death, he and I visited one of his churches, St Mariam Church in Ocho-Rios, Jamaica and spent a night at the house of Father Hayle Malekot, who was the head administrator of the Jamaican Orthodox Church. The next day, Father Malekot was driving us to Kingston with the Abuna seated in the back while I sat in the front. When we reached

the beautiful breathtaking Dunn's River falls area, the Abuna interrupted my conversation with Father Malekot and said: "Listen both of you, when I die I want to be buried in Jamaica". I said, "Abbatachen (our father) why do you talk about death on such a beautiful day?" and he replied, "Don't you know the native Indian saying, it is a good day to die?" Yes, December 29, 2005 – the day that Abuna Yesehaq passed away in New Jersey, was indeed a beautiful day.

The following day, a few Ethiopians held a teleconference in New York to discuss and make a decision on the date and time of the Abuna's funeral service, and how and when to take the coffin to Ethiopia. Mergeta Afewerk, a church scholar, was one of the participants of the telephone discussion. I happened to be at his house and told him of the Abuna's wish to be buried in Jamaica. The Mergeta relayed this information and the issue was resolved.

The Abuna's remains came to Jamaica after a special service in New York. Ethiopians, African-Caribbeans, the Abunas's clergies, disciples, and Ethiopian Archbishops from all over the States, including the leaders of the two factions of the ETOC, Abuna Melketsede and Abuna Mathias, who is currently the Patriarch of Ethiopia, came to express their grief.

When any Ethiopian high priest dies in the U.S. his remains is usually flown to Ethiopia. It is the wish of every archbishop in the world to be buried in Jerusalem. However, Abuna Yesehaq chose Jamaica, the land where he served for 35 years. In doing so, he fulfilled the prophecy of the proverb that saying apostles don't have a country and a particular burial ground but they will be where they serve. He is the only non-Jamaican officially to be buried with such love and honor.

The last funeral service was held at the National Arena in Jamaica on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006. The event is now etched in the history of Jamaica. The nation's political parties' representatives and celebrities in many sectors were among the thousands of mourners. Portia Simpson, who later became the Prime Minister of Jamaica in the following election, gave her personal testament. She was one of the speakers at the National Arena. She took out the gold Tewahedo cross she was wearing and said "This is the cross that Abuna gave me along with a new Ethiopian name, Fikerta Mariam".

The highlight of the event at the National Arena was the Jamaican Orthodox prayer service. The seminaries in Habesha Shema, Priests and deacons were

in Tewahedo attire holding thuribales in one hand and vibrant umbrellas in the other. They were circling the casket and chanting in Geez. To set the mood of the Tewahedo, the arena was filled with the smoke and scent of incense. Performances by legends Rita Marley, Marcia Griffith, and Judy Mowat, famously known as the I-Threes, as well as the church choir, all stood behind the Abuna's coffin and sang songs to praise the Abuna for his incredible achievements.

Tesfa Mariam, a Jamaican Orthodox who was known for his role in Jimmy Cliff's, *The Harder They Come*, a famous film from the 70s, said, "Abuna Yeshehaq's funeral service is the most magnificent after Bob Marley's, for which the Abuna led the service. Abba was a star, with his unique Tewahedo's cape, circling Bob's coffin three times while burning frankincense and blessing the coffin with his cross and chanting in Geez language. This was something that we had never seen before. He made us proud of the Tewahedo culture."

After the Abuna's historical funeral service in the National Arena, the limousine decorated with the flag of the Lion of Judah was moving at a snail's pace towards St Trinity Cathedral (which the Abuna named Dejae Selam-House of Peace), while hundreds of cars followed in a long line stretching three miles. The people gathered on the sides of the road to find out who famous had passed away. To their surprise he was not Jamaican. They must have been felt that he was bigger than life. His story to them probably would match with a passage out of the Holy Bible.

St Trinity Cathedral was filled with a sea of people as the casket arrived. The elders, who were living within the church compound and could not go to the National arena, circled the burial site. They were weeping not only for the Abuna, but also for their uncertain future. The Abuna was the one who helped build their shelter. They knew him since 1970 when he arrived for the first time in Jamaica. In their youth, they were members of the UNIA and EWF, who had fought for freedom and equality but did not have a caretaker in their old age. Among them was Woltae Selassie who was the first female to receive this baptismal name. She was the scholar who beautifully edited a play by Mortimo Planno called "We Are God's Children". When the play runs at the University of Jamaica, the chancellor was so impressed that he helped three Rastafarians, three Pan-Africanists and three Garvites to earn free tickets to visit Africa in 1961.

The elders who were living in the church compound were good in Amharic, as lessons were offered by the late Deacons Tsgaye, an Ethiopian who was an assistant of the Abuna. Deacon Tsgaye was also the private Amharic teacher of Bob Marley.

I will leave you with the statement of Tekeste Berhan (baptismal name) famously known as Bigdaddy, one of Abuna's God sons. He said, "Abba's soul is so strong, it will guide us until we repatriate to Africa. His spirit makes the Babylon's sour life sweet"

On this occasion, we also give credit to Emperor Haile Selassie I who led Abuna Yesehaq to this great position.

I wish you all a very happy 14<sup>th</sup> Memorial Day!!