



Blessed Ghèbore-Michael

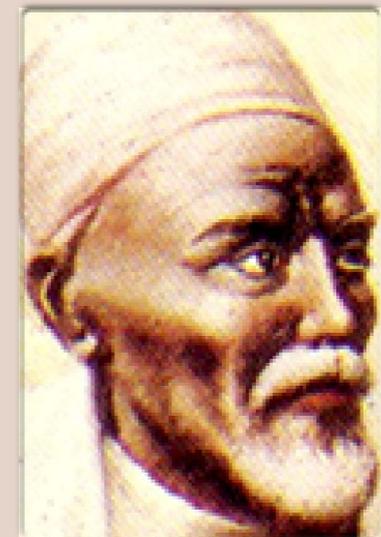


Ghèbre-Michael was an Ethiopian, born there in the Godjam region in either 1788 or 1791.

Incidentally, already in the uncertainty of the date of his birth we have an external resemblance to St. Vincent whose date of birth was disputed for many years.



Ghèbre-Michael was a very bright young man who from the very early years of his life engaged in a most anxious and persistent search for the truth. Indeed in the Ethiopia into which he was born it was difficult to find the truth.



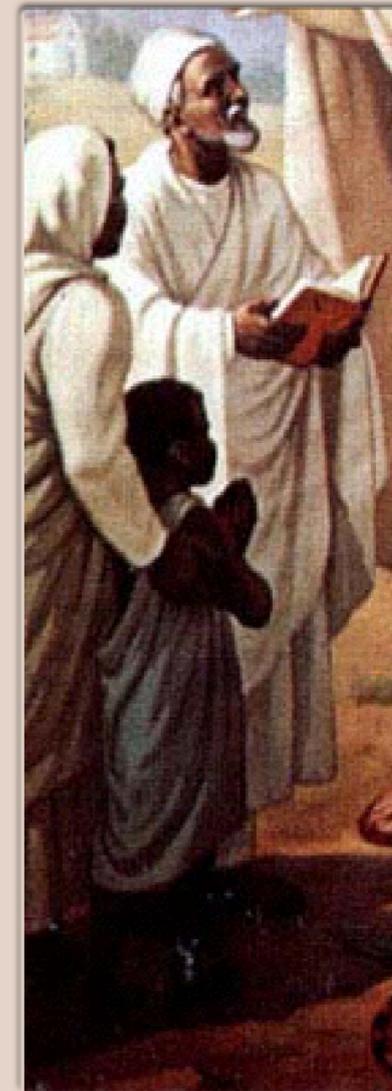
Though Ethiopia was evangelized as far back as the fourth century by St. Frumentius, the country has had a long history of struggle in the whole field of religion.

- The Jews were very prominent in Ethiopia and Frumentius ran into many of the difficulties in which St. Paul was involved in the early church in Corinth.
- The Moslems were a big obstacle to the spread of Christianity.
- [There were a number of other problems due to various schisms and heresies within the church.]
- The Council of Florence tried in 1441 to unite the different sects and Catholicism, especially with the Jacobite church and the Coptic church. The union was short-lived.



Brief though this sketch is it gives some idea about the situation into which Ghèbre-Michael found himself plunged.

When it came to the time for him to make a choice of career at the end of his secondary studies he opted for a career in the Church. In fact he was only nineteen years of age when he became a monk in one of the Coptic monasteries and was finally professed as a fully-fledged monophysite monk in 1813.



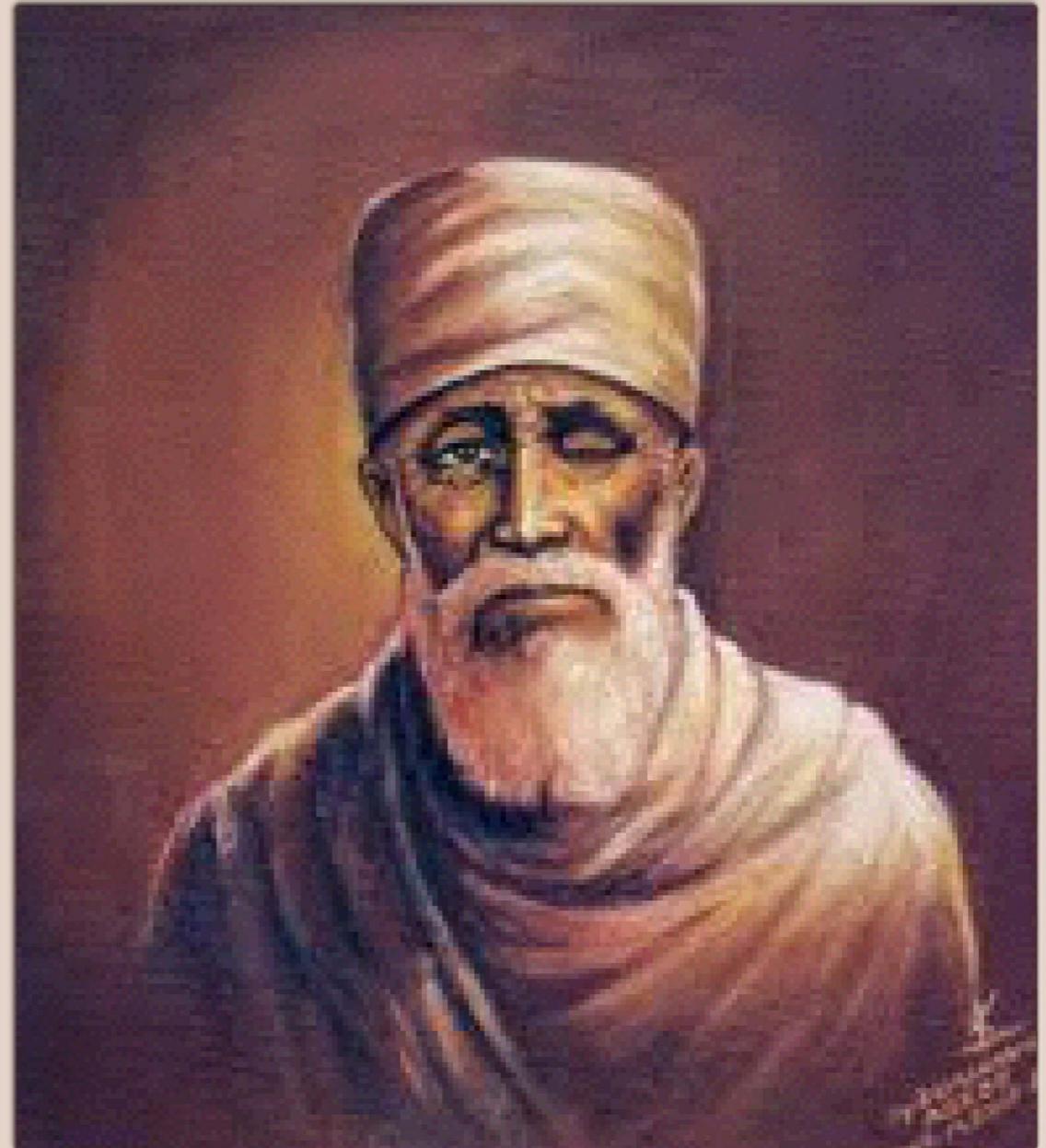
But this was in no way a signal for total contentment with the religious beliefs which he professed in the monastery. He was restless and uneasy and felt very deeply that he had not yet found the truth.

He continued his stated objective which was “to seek only the Church which seemed to him to be in possession of the truth”. The search uprooted him from his native Ethiopia and sent him on a very long pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to Cairo, Rome and Jerusalem.



The object of his pilgrimage to Cairo was with others to petition the Patriarch at Cairo for a bishop for Ethiopia. It was on this pilgrimage that Ghèbre-Michael met Justin De Jacobis for the first time.

The bishop appointed by the Patriarch did not meet with the approval of Ghèbre Michael or Justin. In fact the beginnings of Ghèbre-Michael's sufferings in the cause of the truth really began here. The newly-appointed bishop abused him, calling him "You wicked old one-eye..."; he had lost one eye as a youth.





The delegation now proceeded to Rome, Ghèbre-Michael still very much in search of the truth. Rome astonished the delegation for many reasons. For one thing they were astonished at the numbers attending services in the magnificent churches of Rome. And perhaps what was more remarkable the delegation was wholly overcome with the grandeur of the ceremonial. They themselves rightly of course are very proud of their ceremonial. Ghèbre-Michael was brought into discussions with Pope Gregory XVI and in this way his heart and soul which were aching for the truth were very much filled with excitement and enthusiasm.

The next stop was Jerusalem. Having visited the Holy Places they began their return journey through Cairo. Here they visited the Patriarch again and received a letter from him for the newly appointed bishop in Ethiopia. Ghèbre-Michael still avidly in search of the truth found that the Patriarch had come very near to conversion. In the letter he had imposed a new doctrinal decree on all the faithful in Ethiopia, enjoining that every doctrine rejecting the eternal and human generation of Christ must be rejected and regarded as heretical.

[The doctrine of eternal generation essentially teaches that God the Father eternally and by necessity *generates* or *begets* God the Son in such a way that the substance (divine essence) of God is not divided.]



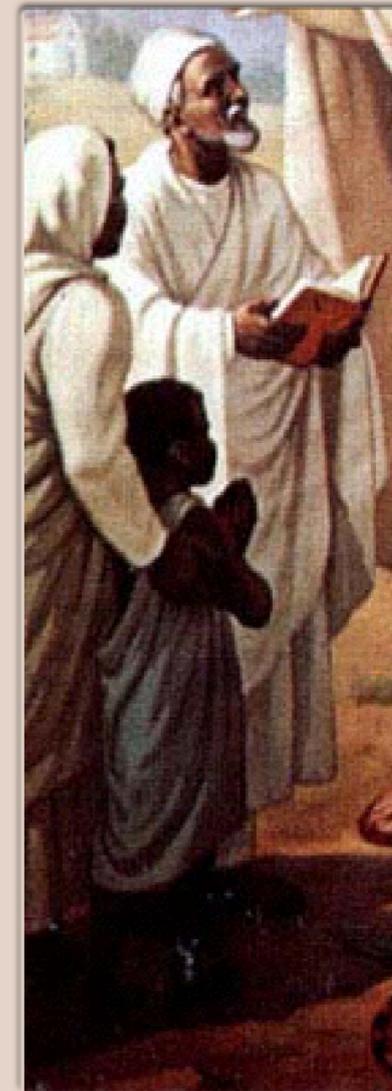
When eventually the delegation arrived back in Ethiopia the bishop accepted the letter from Ghèbre-Michael, but instead of opening it and declaring its contents to the priests put it back in his pocket. When the news got around that the delegation was back the Orthodox planned to kill Ghèbre-Michael. He was actually put in chains, but because he was a friend of the Emperor he was soon released. Escaping many times from traps that were laid for him he ultimately arrived at Adoua where he rejoined Justin De Jacobis.



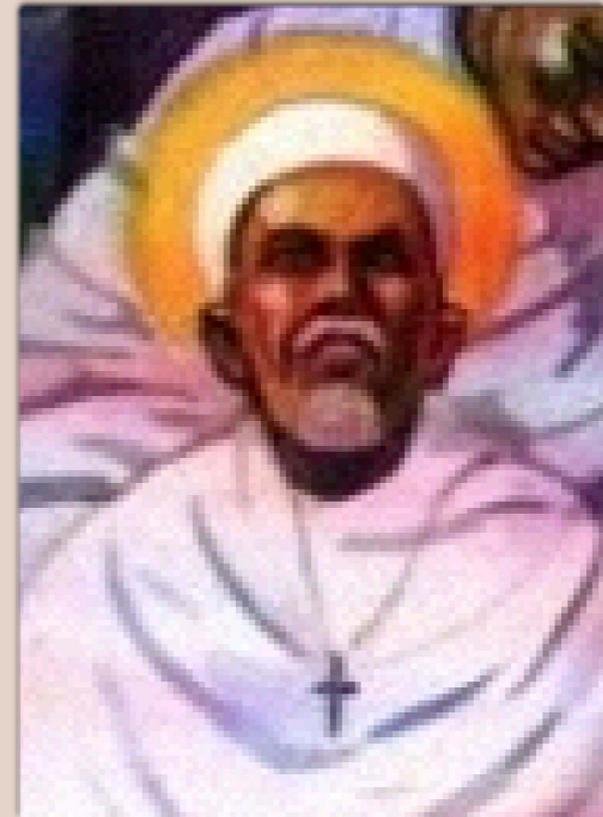
Naturally Justin received him with open arms. At this stage Justin writes of him: “He still reflected for a long time but once he embraced the truth he never rejected it again. Everything became clear to his mind and no objection of the heretics had any further influence on him”. At last he was formally admitted into the Catholic Church in February 1844. It was said of him after this that he was totally transformed and had no other desire than to spread the Catholic faith wherever he could. He soon found himself in the school which Justin opened at Adoua, where he rendered wonderful service to Justin, especially by the instructions which he gave every day to the clergy at Adoua and in the neighborhood.



He produced several books. In particular he wrote a kind of source-book about the Catholic faith which was simple and clear. He also got together a dictionary of the Gheez language used in the Liturgy which was a very important step, because up to that time there was no such work in existence and Gheez was always taught orally. But none of this interfered with his main objective and that was to form the group of seminarians which were entrusted to him by Justin. It was natural that the kind of formation which Justin inculcated was that of St. Vincent.



Unfortunately, he became unhappy in the seminary and decided to go to Gondar to set about converting some of his old enemies. Justin was very opposed to the move but Ghèbre-Michael insisted. He was recognized while passing through Adoua and was arrested and put in jail for over two months. Soon after his release he met Justin again. Justin ordained him a priest in 1851 in the little church in Alitiena; this was Justin's first priestly ordination. Ghèbre-Michael was now sixty years of age.



Once ordained a priest his zeal knew no bounds. While he continued teaching in the seminary he co-operated in producing a textbook of Dogmatic Theology and had his mind set on making the Catholic faith the faith of his own country. The Coptic authorities, in the person of Abouna Salama, were greatly disturbed by the activities of the Catholics and especially of Justin and Ghèbre-Michael. A veritable persecution was set afoot during which lay Catholics and priests were put in prison. This time neither Justin nor Ghèbre-Michael was caught; they escaped.

It is difficult for us to imagine the intense hatred for the Catholic Church which prevailed in Ethiopia at the time we are discussing. A typical declaration from the schismatic authorities is this: "If this formula (a heretical one) is not accepted I will break the necks of the offenders and cut off their feet".



Obviously people like Justin and Ghèbre-Michael would not subscribe to a heretical formula no matter what the threat. In fact both of them were imprisoned because of their rejection of this formula. An interesting fact about the imprisonment was that Justin was, generally speaking, treated better than Ghèbre-Michael, probably because of his connection with people in authority. There was a very special hatred of Ghèbre-Michael. He was constantly submitted to the most horrible torture in the hope, of course, that he would renounce the Catholic faith. The schismatics felt that if they could get a renunciation of the faith from him they would score a great victory.



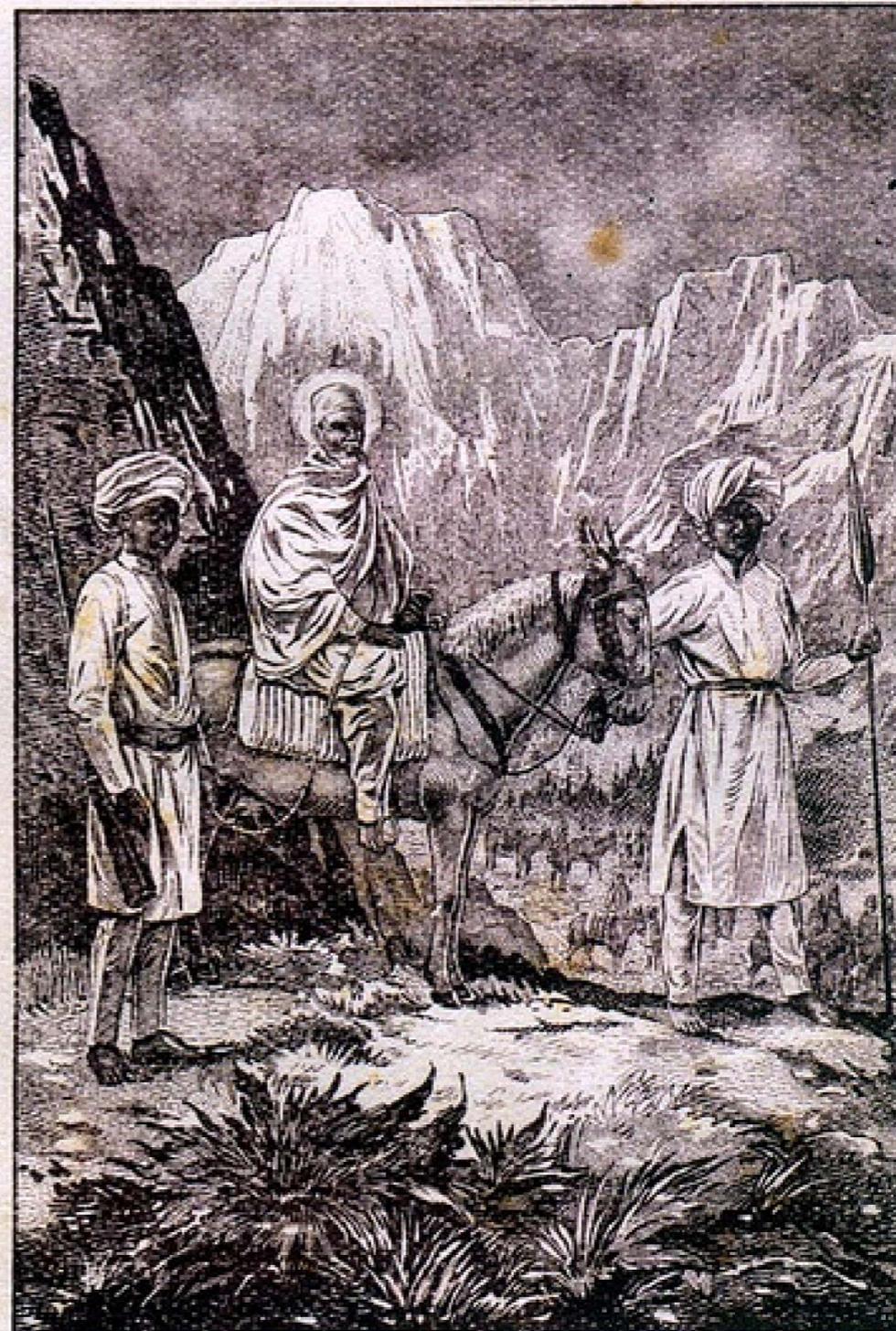
He was a very able man, very respected because of his ability and his singlemindedness, and hence the appalling tortures to which he was submitted. Occasionally the authorities varied their tactics and offered him all kinds of benefits if he would change his mind. “Father”, he said to a young priest undergoing similar punishment to himself, “we cannot be far from the great day when we will see Jesus face to face and when we will be ravished in his blessed presence”. Messages were constantly passing from Justin to his fellow-prisoners and to Ghèbre-Michael: “As we sit night and day on the floor of the cell we preach without saying anything; our mouths are closed but our dying limbs cry out unmistakably ‘Believe in the Catholic Church’”.



The prisoners were arraigned before the judges from time to time. One such occasion was on August 23, 1854. This was in fact the fourth time that they were summoned to the judges and of course once again they were called on to renounce the Catholic faith. The fiendish hatred for Ghèbre-Michael asserted itself again on this occasion when Abouna Salama called him “this detestable old deceiver”. Again, on Christmas Eve 1854 Salama again presented him to the public saying “Here is the great disturber of the Empire and he is the one who is causing the others to be obstinate [...] If you abandon your own belief and accept mine I will give you all the money you want”. Ghèbre-Michael’s response was: “I want neither your faith nor your property”. All this resistance of his meant more and more punishment.

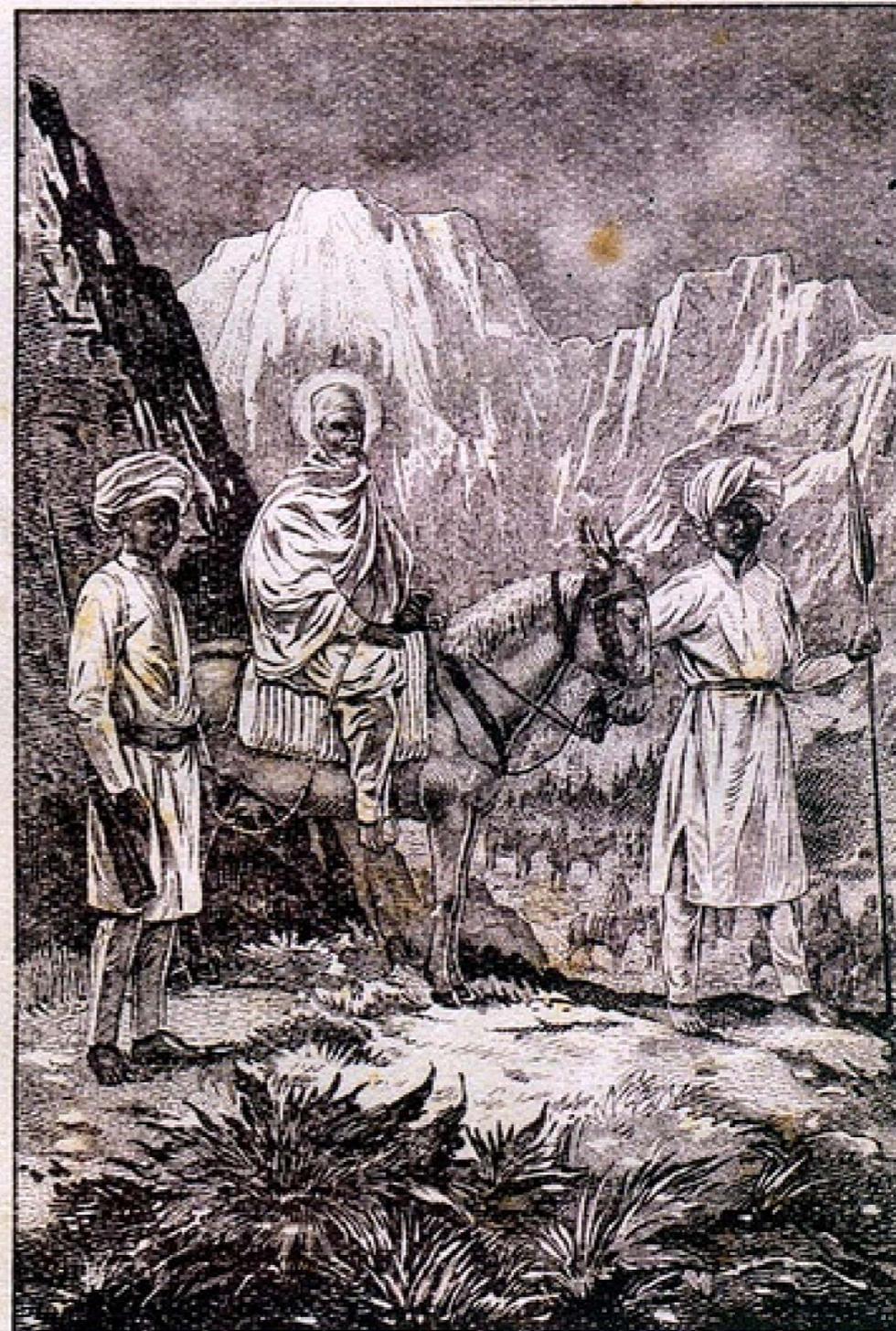


When a new Emperor was appointed in Ethiopia he too tried his hand with Ghèbre-Michael. All he got was “O king, I will never believe or proclaim any other truth than that Christ has a human and a divine nature”. To make a statement like this before the king would most certainly bring the prisoner execution. This was a capital crime at the time in Ethiopia. In fact they did not condemn him to death. They were very much hoping that if they were to continue the tortures he would ultimately give in. If he did, they of course would have gained an enormous victory, and as well as that they would not have to face the very real criticism that would have been leveled against them had they executed the great man.



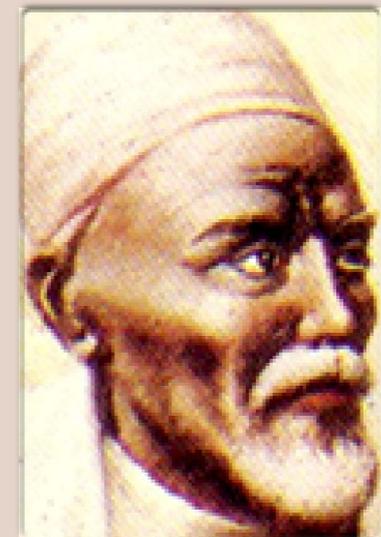
*Le B^x Abba Ghèbrè-Michaël, suivant
enchainé, les armées de Théodoros.*

But he did not give in; he continued to submit himself to the daily increasing tortures without the slightest sign of succumbing to them. In fact it was said that on one occasion, after being beaten very severely, to such an extent in fact that people thought he was dead, he stood up and moved away without the slightest trace of torture on his body. The people proclaimed him a second St. George; this was the saint who was said to have had seven lives.

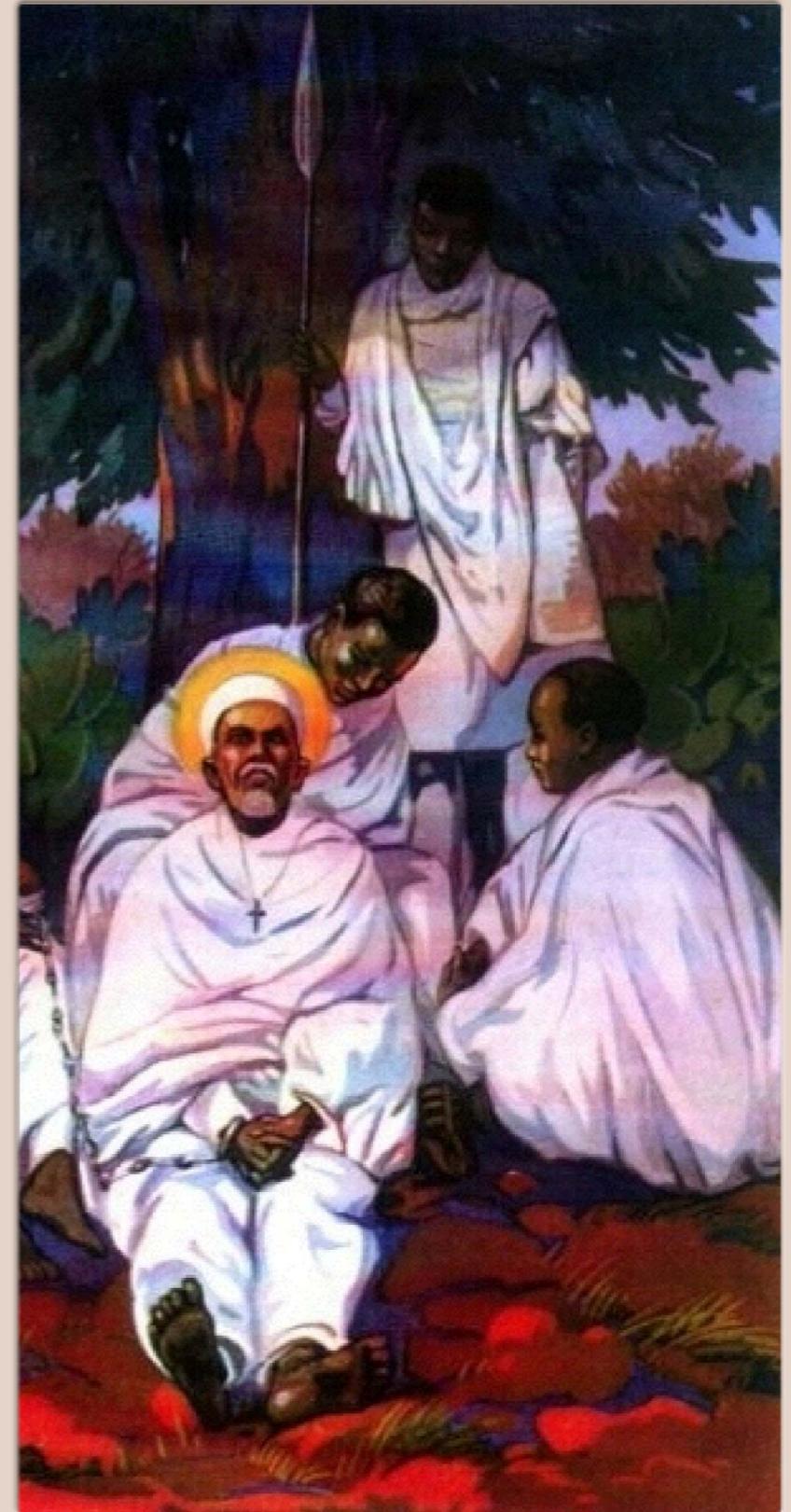


*Le B^x Abba Chèbrè-Michaël, suivant
enchainé, les armées de Théodoros.*

Ghèbre-Michael had to fall in behind the marching soldiers of the Emperor Theodorus and stumble along as best he could. And again with almost monotonous regularity he was presented to the public. This time it was a special occasion and there were many dignitaries present, including a very important English Anglican. Theodorus proclaimed publicly again that this old man was the only one of all his subjects who continued to resist him and refuse to renounce the despicable Catholic faith. Ghèbre-Michael stood firm. Theodorus asked the assembled crowd what did they think should be done with this man — How similar to Pilate's question! The people shouted that he should be put to death.



However, the British consul William Plowden with his entourage asked for mercy for him and it was granted in a qualified sort of way. The king agreed not to execute him but decreed that he should carry his chains to the end of his life. And so once again he must line up behind the marching soldiers. This time he was of course extremely exhausted. He was unable to walk; in fact he was unable to stay on the back of the mule which they gave him either. Ultimately, as we would put it, he died on the side of the road, totally exhausted and worn out, but not before he warned the soldiers and those standing by, that he was about to die. He died on 28 August 1855 only four years after his ordination.



The actual date of his death, like the date of his birth, has been disputed. Some say he died on 29 August, and the liturgical calendar gives his feast on 30 August. Many confrères have tried to locate his grave but without success. But does it matter? It is not his grave that really matters, but his amazing faith, courage and love. His last agony lasted for a period of over thirteen months, which was almost half of his priestly life. He was beatified on 31 October 1926 by Pope Pius XI.



St. Justin De Jacobis had a great love and admiration for Ghèbre-Michael, whom he called so often “the generous athlete of Christ”.

Naturally the Ethiopian Catholics earnestly desire his canonization. We must of course wait for Holy Mother the Church to bring this about, but surely we must pray for the acceleration of this event which would bring so much joy to this ancient Christian nation of Ethiopia.



Source:
Blessed Ghèbre-Michael
“The truth will make you free”
by James Cahalan

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