

Wolde Sellase Kenfu from Semen - a reformer in Hamasen

One of the St. Chrischona "black missionaries" became very active in Hamasen itself: Wolde Sellase Kenfu from Semen, born in 1841. He may serve as an example for the effects of the mission in Hamasen. His work depended on the steady flow of money from Massawa and had started with the secret arrival of Amharic bibles in Hamasen. Wolde Sellase Kenfu, in German sources also called "Selassie Könfu" (Debrunner 1979:318f.), led a most dynamic life, visiting many countries during his contacts with the mission.

Originally he was a young priest at the court of Tewodros in 1860-61, carrying the *tabot* on the emperor's military campaigns, after having received traditional church education in the monastery of Woldebba until the age of 14 and then in Gonder. In 1861, however, he disagreed with the *ats'e* and fled to the Northern border lands. He had decided to worship to Jerusalem, but when run out of funds on his way, he entered into the services of the governor of Hamasen, *dejjazmach* Haylu Tewelde-Medhin. During the last years of Tewodros's reign, two boxes with Amharic bibles arrived at the training centre for teachers and priests, which was led by him. These boxes had been sent by Flad from the coast, who had discovered them in Massawa (remnants from an earlier missionary attempt of St. Chrischona and now stored in the consulate of Great Britain), when he came back from his diplomatic journey to Great Britain in 1867 - shortly before the outbreak of the war against Tewodros. Originally the boxes were destined to go farther inland, but the donkey driver deposited them simply there (Debrunner 1978:318).

Flad himself describes this event in the following way (rough translation)¹: "During my stay in Massawa I had, almost daily, the opportunity to read the word of God and to preach Jesus Christ the Crucified. As I lived in the English Consulate, once I searched the magazine and found a greater number of Amharic Bibles and New Testaments. These had been given to the Consulate by brother Worke, when he came back from Bombay, where he had been educated. As it seems, there had been no funds later to send them to Abyssinia. With the consent of the consular agent Werner Munzinger I freed the books from their captivity, cleaned them and distributed them under the Abyssinians. Four loads were sent by donkey through my servant to the governor Hailu in Hamazin, whom I asked in a letter to distribute them among his subjects, which he did, as long as my servant was with him. He expressed his gratitude to me by letter. Wolda Selassie, a Christian, who later received education at St. Chrischona in Basle, and a number of other Abyssinians from Hamazin were (...) converted by reading these Bibles. Two of them are still today (1886) serving the Swedish mission in M'Kullu."

Students read these bibles in secret, against the strict interdiction of Wolde Sellase. He himself, however, also started soon to read the bible in the vernacular language during a long lasting disease. This made him change his attitude radically. Vivid religious discussions started, which was the starting point for religious reform in Hamasen. In 1869 he contacted the missionary Maier in Massawa, who helped him to realize his original plan to make his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1871, where he

¹Flad 1922:197.

stayed at the Ethiopian monastery and at Gobat's school for one year. Then, on May 8, 1872 he arrived in Basel, where he visited the seminary of St. Chrischona: He was now to become a "black missionary" together with a number of Falasha converts, who had arrived there in 1870 (Pankhurst 1962:250). However, when one of them died of a lung disease in 1873² the mission decided to stop this experiment and to send all of them back.

In Kornthal, a centre of Pietism in Germany, Wolde Sellase helped Krapf in the revision of the Amharic bible starting from February 1873. But following news on persecutions of the "bible readers" of Hamasen, he returned to Hamasen in spring 1874, officially being sent on the account of St. Chrischona as an Evangelist³. His demand for a church reform and his wish for an increase of the knowledge of the bible caused religious unrest, then conflict with the political leadership. Several reports of him on the situation in Hamasen are documented in the *Mitteilungen* from 1874 to December 1876. Together with refugees he stayed in 'Aylet and Massawa and preached there. He soon came back to Hamasen, assembling an increasing number of followers around him in its political center Tse'azega. His life being endangered there, he founded a bible reading circle at the Egyptian-Abyssinian border, in Ginda'. In 1876, however, he couldn't escape from the decisive battle of Wakki-Debba, a battle between the *ras* Woldenkiel (Wolde Mikael) of Hazega and *dejjazmach* Haylu of Tse'azega and their pro-Egyptian and pro-Ethiopian parties. Woldenkiel destroyed Tse'azega completely. Wolde Sellase was found among the dead.

Haile-Ab, a Protestant priest, closely related to the Swedish mission, together with the Swedish missionary Lager took refuge in the church of the founder of Tse'azega, expecting that the traditional right of asylum would be respected. A mercenary soldier from another region, however, who felt no obligations towards the founders of this church, arrived - and a strange dialogue, which illustrates well the basic ideas of Protestantism, was followed by the murder of Haile-Ab and Lager (cf. Arén 1978:199ff.). The soldier remarked, that they could not take refuge in the church, as they don't believe in the power of the church's saint (a Protestant doctrine developed in contrast to the Orthodox and Catholics). Haile-Ab answered with the words, that - yes, the saint would not be able to protect him from a break of church asylum. These were, reportedly, his last words, before the (Orthodox) soldier killed him together with Lager. - Flad notes sadly:

"Two able workers for Abyssinia are now lost for the Abyssinian mission, and one stands before the Lord and asks: Oh Lord, Why? A dark providence, at least for me. I believed that Wolda Sellassie was save from the persecutions of the king and his priests. Now he is the first to give his life for the Gospel. The extrication of brother Lager from an Abyssinian sanctuary, where [even] murderers are safe, show clearly a diabolic enmity against the Gospel."⁴

²Cp. Wolbert Smidt: "Eine hebräische Eintragung im Basler Kirchenbuch: Der Tod des Äthiopiens Hailu Wossen im Jahre 1873", *Regio Basel* (forthcoming)

³Cp. *Mitteilungen*, April 1874.

⁴Staatsarchiv Basel, PA 653, Q1, 1.) Flad; letter of October 4, 1876.

Repeatedly the missionary correspondence mentions Wolde Sellase as a great hope for the mission. Now the Ethio-Egyptian war of 1875-76 turned bad (from the Egyptian and missionary's point of view). It was foreseen, that the mission might fail definitely if *ras* Alula, Yohannes's general (now Hamasen's governor, the first of non-Hamasen origin since long), might even occupy Keren and later Massawa. The letters of that time predict fearfully that the Swedish missionaries could only save their lives by fleeing over the sea⁵. But, as history tells us, Alula didn't occupy the Egyptian province. Even if weakened, Massawa remained outside his jurisdiction and in 1885 served as a base for a renewal of the province - this time under the Italians und soon receiving a new name - "Colonia Eritrea".

Eritrea continuously served as a basis for supplying funds to the missionary work in Abyssinia, but has also become a field for missionary work itself - especially with some impact on Hamasen, where several villages became Protestant. When the Italians took over the area, they somehow fulfilled the hopes of the missionaries, which were first connected with the idea of Egyptian colonisation. This is illustrated well by the enthusiasm, with which Flad (1922:417) describes his last visit to Massawa and Monkullu in 1894, which were Italian then:

"How much had Massawa changed positively, since it had become Italian! Good, clean streets, magnificent shops, well ordered, peaceful conditions."

⁵"Sollten die Abessinier Keren (Bogos + Mensa) zurück erobert haben, wäre für das Leben der drei schwedischen Missionare in Mensa alles zu befürchten, u. sollten sie gar nach Massua kommen, könnte sich Br. Lundahl nur durch Flucht auf das Meer retten." Staatsarchiv Basel, PA 653, Q1, 1. Flad; letter of October 4, 1876.