

Roots of African Americans

Everybody knows that African Americans originally came originally from Africa; however, not many people know what it means to born and live in Africa at the time of the ancestors of African Americans. To fully understand those ancestors, we need to mention some historical facts. First, the influence of the prophets who either stayed or lived in Egypt, Africa, that touched the hearts and minds of Africans, such as Abraham, Israel, Jeremiah, and Joseph. Moses the prophet was born and raised in Egypt and lived there for forty years. Then he led the children of Israel to the Promised Land.

Second, Jesus and his family fled to Egypt, Africa, and lived there for four years (Mat 2: 13-23). In fact, Jesus was born and raised in the Middle East and not in Europe. Furthermore, all of His disciples were from Middle East, which includes many African countries. For example, St. Mark, the writer of the second Gospel was born in Libya, Africa, and Simon the Cyrenian who bore the cross for Jesus (Mark 15:21) was from Tunisia, Africa.

In Egypt, St. Mark the Apostle established the first church in Africa around 45 AD, only fifteen years after Christ's crucifixion. From Egypt, Christianity spread to North Africa, Nubia, Sudan, and Ethiopia. Therefore, the Church of Egypt (known as the Coptic Orthodox Church,) is considered as the mother of all African churches. The first theological school in the world started in Alexandria, Egypt, by St. Mark the apostle, which attracted students from all over the world. Theology, Biblical studies, and Bible interpretations started and flourished in this school. Monasticism also started in Egypt. The impact of Africa and Africans on Christianity is so great.

History recorded names of hundreds of great African theologians, philosophers, monks, saints, and teachers, such as: Cyprian¹, St. Antony, Moses the hermit, Takla Haimanout, and St. Cyril the Pillar of Faith (as all churches called him). Origen and Clement of Alexandria were distinguished philosophers and theologians. Tertullian is the first Latin theological writer². The famous St. Augustine was the bishop of Hippo, a great church in North Africa³. And St. Athanasius was given the title "Apostolic" by all churches as recognition for his struggle

¹ Tim Dowley, *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 1977 Lion Publishing, page 83

² Catholic Encyclopedia, Tertullian

³ Britannica Encyclopedia, Saint-Augustine

against the Arian heresy that was about to eliminate the Christian faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The greatest number of Christian martyrs of the first three centuries of Christianity came from Africa. For example, the Theban Legion, from Luxor, Egypt, under Maurice, a Coptic officer, who went to help emperor Maximian (285- 305 AD) fight his wars. After securing victory, Maximian asked them to denounce Christ and worship idols. The whole legion, 6600 men, refused preferring to be slaughtered than to deny their Lord. He killed them all. Verena, an African girl, travelled with the legion, and stayed afterwards. She taught people the Christian faith and proper hygienic practices. In Switzerland, there are statues of Verena carrying a jar and a comb, as recognition of her great impact upon the Swiss people.

The Christian faith mingled into every aspect of the daily lives of Africans. They absorbed the great pure Christian values of respect, love, peace, acceptance, forgiveness, and service of the sick and the needy. Africans established the first hospitals, orphanages, and homes for the needy in the world as an expression of their Christian faith. The Africans followed the Orthodox churches, enjoying an abundantly rich faith-filled, living worship, first delivered by the apostles of Christ and handed down from one generation to the next without a change. Philo, a famous philosopher, described the depth of spirituality practiced by followers of the Egyptian Church.

Arriving to America, many of the ancestors of African Americans secretly met to pray their Orthodox Christian prayers in so-called "hush harbors". Their masters prevented them from these meetings, fearing that the Christian teaching of equality and freedom of all men could start a revolt among the slaves against them. However, these fearless, brave Christians continued to meet to pray. When they were caught, the "instigators," as they were referred to, were severely flogged. As a result, many ancestors of African Americans were severely tortured, and some even died as martyrs. Silas Ezekiel and Martin are among those who were martyred⁴. Charlotte, sister of Martin, recalls how her oldest brother Martin was whipped to death for taking part in one of the religious ceremonies. Eventually this cruel act halted the secret religious services. Yet, history recorded it as a sign of the strong rich Christian Orthodox faith the ancestors brought with them to America.

⁴ Father Paisius Altschul, *Wade In the River, The Story of the African Christianity Faith*, Cross Bearers Publishing, Missouri, 2001, pages 130-133

Today many of those African churches have parishes in all over North America that still keep the same faith and worship as practiced by the African Americans' ancestors. These churches are the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church (Coptic means Egyptian). Probably you wonder why words such as Ethiopian or Egyptian are part of the church name. In the first few centuries when all churches had the same faith and worship, they had no way to refer to a specific church except by its location, therefore the country of the origin of the church became part of its identity and title.

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