

In memory of the late Megabe Beluy Sayefa Selase Yohannes

by Morgan Johnson.

In 1980 the late Megabe Beluy Sayefa Selase Yohannes attended a religious journalism course at the Africa Literature Centre at the Mindolo Ecumenical Center in Kitwe, Zambia. I was then teaching illustration for the Art students. Abba Yohannes was studying journalism. I had recently purchased some slides from the British Museum of pages from a seventeenth century Ethiopian manuscript in the Maqdala collection, , Or. 790, in connection with a study I was pursuing of the story of Joseph as it has been retold in **ግሥጢረ፡ዘመን** Africa. Abba Yohannes agreed to translate the Ge'ez text of these pages into English for me and introduced me to the beauty of Ethiopian liturgical poetry. I learned that this manuscript was an extended liturgical poem addressed to the Holy Trinity. Abba Yohannes also let me record his chanting of the opening verses of the portion included in the slides that I had, folios 16 verso through 19recto.

It was an opportunity also to know briefly this very learned and humble man. He told me how he was orphaned as a young boy of peasant parents and had been raised and educated by the church. Before he came to Mindolo he had been broadcasting over Radio Voice of the Gospel, an ecumenical radio station which I had been listening to in Zimbabwe and Zambia. After the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie and the military regime of Mengistu that followed the ecumenical broadcast was ended and the radio station was confiscated by the State. After the six month course in journalism at the Africa Literature Centre Abba Yohannis was called to teach New Testament at the orthodox Theological School in Addis Ababa.



Mindolo Ecumenical Centre, Kitwe, Zambia, 1980

In the years that followed I lost touch with Abba Yohannes. But last year (2010) my son made a trip to Ethiopia and I asked him to see if he could locate him. When he was in Addis Ababa he found out that Abba Yohannes was at that time visiting Washington DC. From my friend, Fentahun Tiruneh, of the Library of Congress, I learned that Abba Yohannes had made major contributions to the study of Andemta and now had the title of Megabe Beluy as confirmed in the recent publication, **የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን ታሪክ ክርስቶስ አስከ 2000 ዓ.ም.**

Since I am now living in DC I hoped that I could meet him again, but before I could do so I learned that he had returned to Ethiopia and died suddenly on the journey to his home from the airport in Addis Ababa. I learned that he had been sent to Washington to try to bring reconciliation between members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church here in the United States.

In reflecting on the person I had met so many years ago and who had so tragically died after a mission to bring reconciliation, I thought of three lines from the poem that he translated for me.

Portion of folio 18 verso of the ምሥጢረ : ዘመን

እምልበ : የሴፍ : ሥላሴ : ዘእጥፋእክሙ : በቀለ፤
አጽንዑኒ : በፍቅርክሙ : ወረሰዩትኩለ✠
ከመ : በስምክሙ : እሙት : ወእጹር : መስቀለ✠

O **Trinity** who caused the heart of Joseph to forget revenge,
Strengthen me in your love and make me stand straight
That I die and carry the cross in your name.

About the author:

Morgan Johnson, BFA, BD, MA, Dr.Ed, was a United Methodist Missionary in Zimbabwe and Zambia from 1951-1991.

This was an article that Fentahu Tiruneh of the Library of Congress asked me to write for an American Ethiopian periodical.