The past decade has been a momentous one for the study of African Christianity. The opposing figures of the missionary-hero and the missionary-imperialist have begun to vanish from the scholarly literature. The "metropolitan-ecclesiastical" and "nationalist" schools of mission history have, to a significant degree, given way to a number of more subtle and sophisticated lines of inquiry. Among these new approaches the most exciting has probably been that of African religious history. "In emphasizing the political, economic, and social factors in the spread of Christianity, nationalist historians largely neglected the religious dimension..."2 In recent years, however, a number of scholars have attempted to examine the mission-African interaction at the level of symbol, ritual, myth, and theology.3

In this article it is my intention to examine the conversion to Christianity of the fourth century Ethiopian ruler Ezana. An extensive literature exists concerning this king who left behind inscriptions containing polytheistic, monotheistic, and Christian formulae. However, to date scholars have focused their attention almost exclusively upon the political implications of these religious changes. As will be shown below, this approach has done a grave disservice to the sources and has left several questions of major importance unanswered. An analysis of Ezana's conversion which emphasizes the religious dimension of this act enables us to resolve several of the hitherto troubling features of the "turning point of Ethiopian history".4

While various legends seek to trace the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia to the Apostolic period, scholars are virtually unanimous in viewing the arrival of the Syrian brothers Frumentius and Aedesius in the early fourth century as the crucial event in the religious history of the Aksumite kingdom. The story of their activities, which appears with minor variations in both Ethiopian and
non-Ethiopic sources, offers a vivid picture of the process by which Christianity entered Ethiopia.\(^5\)

Arriving in Ethiopia as refugees from a plundered ship, the two Syrians were taken as captives to the court of the Aksumite king. Aedesius was made the king’s cupbearer, while Frumentius became his treasurer and secretary. When the monarch died, his queen asked the brothers to govern the country until her infant son was old enough to rule the kingdom himself. During this period, Frumentius took advantage of his position to seek out and support the Christian merchants residing in the kingdom. When the prince had grown up and assumed the throne, the two Syrians left Ethiopia. Aedesius returned home to Tyre and Frumentius travelled to Alexandria, where he met the bishop, Athanasius. Apprised of the situation whereby Ethiopia lacked both bishops and priests, Athanasius appointed Frumentius as the first bishop to Ethiopia. Frumentius then returned to Ethiopia and preached Christianity throughout the country.

Corroboration of this episode is found in a letter sent ca. 356 by the Emperor Constantius to the Aksumite rulers Ezana and Shaizana. In this letter the Arian Emperor advises the Aksumite rulers that Frumentius’ consecration by the anti-Arian Athanasius was not valid and suggests that they return him to Egypt to be reconsecrated by the Arian Archbishop, George of Cappadocia.

Send therefore speedily into Egypt the Bishop Frumentius to the most venerable Bishop George and the rest who are there... For of course you know and remember (unless you alone allege ignorance of what all men are well aware), that this Frumentius was advanced to his present rank by Athanasius, a man who is guilty of ten thousand crimes.\(^6\)

Since one of these rulers to whom this letter is addressed is the same Ezana whose inscriptions testify to his conversion to Christianity, the introduction of the new religion to Ethiopia is unusually well documented.

In his earliest inscriptions Ezana dedicates his victories to several of the gods worshipped in the Aksumite pantheon. He refers to himself as “the son of Mahrem, who cannot be conquered by the enemy”.\(^7\) Other divinities invoked include the god of heaven, Astar and the indigenous divinities Baher and Meder.\(^8\) Further evidence of the king’s beliefs is contained in the coins from this period of his reign which bear the pagan symbols of the crescent and the disc.\(^9\)