BETWEEN ISLAM AND CHRISTENDOM: THE ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITY IN JERUSALEM BEFORE 1517

ANTHONY O’MAHONY

Introduction

The Ethiopian community in Jerusalem served, at least from after the Crusader period onwards, as an important point of contact between Ethiopia and the rest of the Christian world. The encounter which ensued took the form of a prolonged historical dialogue conducted by pilgrims, monks, and travellers who passed through Jerusalem on their way to Europe or Ethiopia. However, over time contacts became more difficult between these two parts of the Christian world as the forces of Islam sought to isolate and conquer the Ethiopian kingdom.¹

The great Italian Éthiopisant Enrico Cerulli, in his magisterial Etiopi in Palestina,² a comprehensive and meticulous historical survey of the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem, elaborates the above encounter between Ethiopia and Europe in the following terms: knowledge regarding Ethiopia found its way to Europe through the itineraries of the European pilgrims who had journeyed to the Holy Land; their informants were members of the Ethiopian community or pilgrims in Jerusalem who, on returning to Ethiopia, in their turn brought back knowledge of Europe; thus the history of the Ethiopian


presence in Jerusalem is also the history of the geographical, cultural and political knowledge regarding Ethiopia in medieval Europe, and at the same time the history of the initial encounter between Europe and Ethiopia. It was also in Jerusalem that the medieval European ideas regarding Ethiopia and its sovereign Prester John, considered to be a potential ally in Christendom’s war with Islam, were at least partly formed on the basis of the observations of the European pilgrims in the Holy Land. It was these ideas, both true and legendary, that stimulated the projects of the navigators of the great European discoveries towards the end of the fifteenth century. And as such, the Ethiopian presence in Palestine played an important role in the history of modern times. Ethiopian communities were also established in Rome, and monks and pilgrims were found in other parts of the Middle East, such as in the Coptic monasteries of Egypt, as well as in Cyprus, and in the second half of the fifteenth century a small Ethiopian community was known in Lebanon. The encounter with the rest of the Christian world beyond the fastness of highland Christian Ethiopia was a blend of religious, political and cultural contacts. A polyglot Bible attests to an Ethiopian community of monks and pilgrims at a Coptic monastery in the desert around Scetis in the twelfth century. Ethiopian monks were also found at the

---