Book Reviews

Carl E. Hansen, *Into Abyssinia: The Odyssey of a Family*, Westbow, Bloomington, Indiana, 2023. 335 pp. $24.99. ISBN 978-1-6642-9068-6.

The Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia was, from its conception, integrally linked to the Ethiopian imperial project. Initially invited into the country in 1945 as post-war relief following World War II and the Italian Occupation, the mission continued through the revolution as a player in the imperial nation-building agenda. Even when recognized as a mission and given permission to evangelize in 1948—an expansion of the original mandate permitting the establishment of hospitals and schools—the mission was only officially allowed to do so in non-Orthodox, non-Amhara areas. Carl Hansen's missionary memoir *Into Abyssinia* is an excellent illustration of the ways in which the Mennonite mission struggled with colonial and imperial mindsets even while attempting to evangelize and assist.

Hansen served two terms with the Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia along with his wife, Vera, and family. The first term, 1967–1970, was spent at the Nazareth Bible Academy teaching a wide variety of classes, from chemistry and biology to Bible doctrine and public speaking. A second term, starting in 1972 and terminating with revolution in 1975, was spent doing evangelism and economic development in Bedeno. *Into Abyssinia* gives a narrative account of that time interspersed by commentary on Ethiopian society and culture, family life, and political observations on both imperial Ethiopia and the early phases of the revolution. To write this volume, Hansen supplemented his memory with letters written home during his terms, collected by his mother.

Throughout the memoir, Hansen is consistently critical of the socioeconomic systems that ran imperial Ethiopia. He criticizes land use policy and feudal rents as direct contributors to widespread poverty and corruption as well as points out Amharic ethnonationalism inherent in governance during his tenure. Such is the clarity of his observation that, in contrast to every other piece of Ethiopian missionary literature I have encountered, he interprets the beginning of the revolution with its promises of reform as an answer to prayer (288). While the mission came to Ethiopia through imperial invitation, Hansen did not feel obligated by that provenance in his observation and work.

One of the key differentiations between *Into Abyssinia* and many missionary memoirs is Hansen's openness about failures. Much of the missionary literature tends toward the triumphal and heroic, especially in Ethiopia around the tremendous growth of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) under persecution. It is to

Hansen's credit that he does not take this tack, although he does tend toward the heroic in reciting the many difficulties in travel he encountered during his tenure in Ethiopia.

Two examples of failed attempts at community-based development discussed by Hansen illustrate this point and reveal the impact of colonial-imperialist thinking. The first was an attempt to bring wool-producing sheep into Bedeno with the goal of producing wool and hybridizing with local, non-wool-producing livestock. The entire affair is instance after instance of failing to consider appropriate methodology and arrangements, from inadequate preparation for transportation to failing to account for the effect of altitude on the well-being of the sheep; all forty-four specimens died in short order.

Further complicating the matter, local Ethiopians were not consulted in planning or preparing; Hansen reflects, "The people had not felt a need for these sheep; in fact, they did not even know such animals existed" (230). This story replayed itself during the 1974 drought in Burka. Keen to improve the situation and confident in his knowledge of what was best, Hansen arranged for funding to improve two springs with cement forms and water tanks to ensure clean water. But in the rush to solve the problem, Hansen reflects, "we had failed to involve the people in our planning. . . . A rumor began to circulate among them that there was a conspiracy between the Mission and the Amharas of the town to seize all the water rights for the town people and deprive the rural people of their spring altogether" (275). The project was abandoned. Even among the best intentioned, the colonial mindset can infiltrate the work of the church.

Into Abyssinia is not a perfect book. It struggles with organization, especially in the first half where Hansen attempts to give personal background, insight into Ethiopian history and culture, vignettes of mission life, and introductions to individual characters, all through tidbits interspersed with the main narrative. This is exacerbated by conversational prose that lacks structure itself on occasion. By the second half of the book and Hansen's transition to Bedeno, however, the narrative settles down into a simpler chronology that can more easily be followed.

From my interviews with Mennonite missionary women in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian mission community divided itself into categories of "old" and "new," loosely translating to those who had arrived by boat versus those who had arrived by plane. The two groups had markedly different experiences in missionary living because of differences in communication and travel technology as well as the state of the MKC during each time period.

Hansen's memoir joins a group oeuvre of Ethiopia Mennonite missionary literature, including reflections from Chester Wenger, Rohrer Eshleman, Naomi Weaver, and Nathan Hege. This is one of the first published memoirs from a new missionary, a distinction that gives it special value in understanding differences in missionary experiences during the Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia.

Because of this, the book will be of interest to all who are trying to understand the Mennonite Mission to Ethiopia, its methodology and practice, as well as the mission's struggles in context. Since Hansen straddled both evangelism and development, *Into Abyssina* is also a useful book for those interested in Mennonite missions more broadly. It covers a period of transition in the attitude of innovation-minded Mennonites regarding the purpose, effectiveness, and methodology required for meaningful international work.

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Seblewengel Daniel, *Perception and Identity: A Study of the Relationship between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Evangelical Churches in Ethiopia*, Langham, Carlisle, Cumbria, UK, 2019. 486 pages. $38.00. ISBN: 9781783686346.

This work originated as the author's dissertation, submitted at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute, Ghana, and has since been transformed into a book. The book delves into the self-perception of and mutual perceptions between Protestants and followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwaḥədo* Church (EOTC) across historical and contemporary contexts.

The EOTC holds a unique and significant place in Ethiopia, being both indigenous and one of the oldest churches globally. The historical interaction between the EOTC and Protestant churches in Ethiopia has been marked by challenges rather than smooth relations. The EOTC's negative experiences with Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century left them wary of foreign-based missionary activities; aiming to convert Ethiopians to Catholicism, the Jesuits had ignited doctrinal disputes, sowed discord, and jeopardized the stability of the country. Their expulsion from Ethiopia resulted from their interference with local customs, including circumcision and the Sabbath.

The Jesuit Mission, arriving in Ethiopia in 1557 to serve the resident Portuguese community and support King Lebne Dengel, sought to convert Ethiopians through patient teaching of Scripture, crafts, and science. Their efforts culminated in the conversion of King Susenyos and the court to Roman Catholicism in 1622. However, this Catholic influence was short-lived, as civil war erupted in 1632, leading to the expulsion of all Catholic missionaries. The conflict arose from the Catholics' desire to place the Ethiopian church under the Pope of Rome.