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Afonso Mendes, the Catholic Patriarch of Ethiopia, and His Debates With Salomon: A Jew From Vienna, at the Court of the King of Ethiopia

Abstract: Afonso Mendes was the first and only Catholic Patriarch of Ethiopia: he is a crucial figure in the early modern history of European-Ethiopian interaction. His intolerance towards Ethiopian religious practices is widely believed to have contributed to the failure of the Jesuit mission. His reprobation of Jews, as in the case of Salomon from Vienna, is just one illustration of his overall critical attitude towards non-Catholics. At the time Mendes was Patriarch of Ethiopia, a Jew from Vienna by the name of Salomon arrived in the country, where he imparted rabbinic interpretations of the Bible. This episode sheds light on the development of Betä ʾĪsra'el's Ethiopian-Jewish identity in a global context, as Salomon also participated in a religious debate with Afonso Mendes at the court of Emperor Susənyos. Because Jesuits were very hostile towards many rituals of the Ethiopian Church, which they qualified as “obsolete Jewish traditions”, such as circumcision and the observance of certain elements of the Sabbath, Salomon was perceived as an alien presence who planned to influence the correct developments of the Catholic tradition in Ethiopia and to corrupt it.

Keywords: Ethiopia, Jesuits, Latin, Christianity, Jews

Afonso Mendes was the first and only Catholic Patriarch of Ethiopia. He joined the Jesuits in 1593, studied philosophy and theology at the University of Coimbra, and was appointed there to a professorship in Holy Scripture. In 1618, he obtained a doctorate in theology from the University of Évora, where he also taught for some years. He arrived in Färemona, Təgray, on June 24, 1625. In Färemona – one of the main places where Jesuit missionaries operated – he gathered a community of Ethio-Portuguese followers.¹ In February 1626, in Dänqāz, situated 30 kilometers south-east of Gondär, he was welcomed with great honor by Emperor Susənyos.² During his patriarchate, Mendes attempted to strengthen and centralize Catholicism in Ethiopia. Some of the reforms that he enforced run as follows:

1 Martínez (2005) 525–526.

2 Cohen (2010) 770–772; Orlowska (2002) 422–434.

no clergy were to celebrate Mass or perform any ecclesiastical function before receiving his permission; churches were re-consecrated; liturgy was reformed; feasts and festivals were arranged according to the Tridentine calendar; disputes between husbands and wives were transferred from civil to ecclesiastical courts; circumcision was prohibited; and the faithful were re-baptized *sub conditione*. When Emperor Susānyos realized that he was losing his grip on the kingdom due to a strong opposition to Catholicism, Mendes proposed to decree religious freedom, but in the form of a compromise: this freedom would be granted to those who had not been received into the Catholic faith, but not to those who had already converted and communed as Catholics, so that the latter might not change their decision afterwards. When Susānyos refused and abdicated in favor of his son Fasilādās, the Jesuits were expelled from Ethiopia and Mendes left for India together with nine other missionaries. After a year of captivity in Sawākin (1635), he arrived in Goa.³

Modern historiography considers Mendes a controversial figure. He is regarded as a great preacher and a man of outstanding erudition. However, his toughness and rigidity are emphasized in contrast to the flexibility of the Jesuit Pedro Páez, who died three years before Mendes arrived.⁴ It has been argued that Mendes' personality is what ultimately caused the failure of the Catholic mission. To be sure, as a result of his intolerant attitudes towards local rites and customs, and of his inability to adapt Catholicism, the Catholic mission did not take root in Ethiopia.⁵

Mendes, like many other Jesuits in that period, was greatly dedicated to recording his own testimony and his thoughts on history, on everyday life, and on the religious controversies between the Catholics and the Orthodox Christian Ethiopians. Although Pedro Páez⁶ and Manuel de Almeida⁷ did so too, Mendes was the

3 Cohen (2007) 920–921.

4 Martínez (2010) 89–90.

5 The many scholars who have presented Pedro Páez, who was responsible for converting Emperor Susānyos, as the tolerant intellectual who built relations, tended to consider Mendes as an intolerant hard-liner who destroyed these relations by attempting to impose culturally unacceptable religious practices. See, for instance, Aregay (1998) 31–56; Pennec (2003). Noteworthy is the fact that, in 1622, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide was founded by Pope Gregory XV (1621–1623) during the last period of the Jesuit mission in Ethiopia. Therefore, Mendes' patriarchate began when the new instructions issued by the congregation in Rome took effect. Eventually, the missionaries had to cope with great demands and with the control of Rome, so as to centralize and unify the missionary methodology. This factor must be taken into account in the analysis of Jesuit activity and method in its last decade in Ethiopia.

6 Páez (1905–1906).

7 De Almeida (1907–1908).

only one who wrote in Latin. His book, *Expediitio Aethiopica*, was published in two volumes by Camillo Beccari at the beginning of the 20th century.⁸

When Mendes was Patriarch of Ethiopia, a Jew from Vienna by the name of Salomon arrived in the country, where he started to impart rabbinic interpretations of the Bible. This episode sheds light on the development of Betä ʿĪsraʾel's Ethiopian-Jewish identity in a global context, all the more that Salomon also participated in a vivid religious debate with Afonso Mendes at the court of Emperor Susānyos. Because Jesuits were very hostile towards many rituals of the Ethiopian Church which they qualified as “obsolete Jewish traditions”, such as circumcision and the observance of certain elements of the Sabbath,⁹ Salomon was perceived as an alien presence who planned to influence the correct development of the Catholic tradition in Ethiopia and to corrupt it.¹⁰

In chapters 12 and 13 of the second volume of his *Expediitio Aethiopica*, Mendes explained how the debates with Salomon ultimately prompted his expulsion from Ethiopia. By sharing the details of the controversy, he purported to denounce what he regarded as lies spread by this European Jew at the Ethiopian court.¹¹ This episode also casts light on the type of debates that the missionaries could have with local Church leaders. The missionaries' confidence that their arguments could defeat those of the Ethiopian priests and monks was rooted in the belief that the Ethiopian Church was a degenerate form of Christianity: in their view, although it had originated in Christian Orthodoxy, the Ethiopian Church had become heretical over the course of time.¹² Disputes thus became a legitimate tool in recovering theological truths which, though hidden, were still considered to be present in Ethiopian Christianity. That being said, the Jesuit passion for the art of dispute no doubt was also stimulated by the Ethiopian emperors' interest in religious polemics. One of Susānyos' favorite pastimes, which he shared with Ethiopian emperors and noblemen, seems to have been attending the religious discussions that took place at the emperor's compound (even though not all attendees

8 Mendes (1908–1909).

9 Cohen (2001) 209–240.

10 The Jesuit Manuel de Almeida reviewed in a short paragraph the controversy between Salomon and the Catholic Patriarch. See Cohen/Kaplan (2003) 211–216 [Hebrew].

11 Mendes (1908–1909), vol. 8, 231–255.

12 Cohen (2003) 649–655. According to Steven Kaplan and Chaim Rosen, «no group has as long and consistent a record of attempting to “correct” (that is undermine) Betä ʿĪsraʾel religious life as do those associated with the Israeli Chief Rabbinate.» Kaplan and Rosen adduce examples from commentaries in which rabbis state that «crucial progress was made toward returning them [the Ethiopians] to Judaism.» These efforts aimed at homogenizing the beliefs and practices of Ethiopian Jews so as to form a single universal tradition. See Kaplan/Rosen (1993) 35–48.

possessed the education required to understand them fully).¹³ As Donald Levine has remarked,

Amharic conversation gravitates toward a highly argumentative style. Casual disagreement, or even neutral deliberation over a common problem, often engenders a kind of protracted bickering [. . .]. In its more institutionalized form, this argumentativeness becomes litigation, which has long been regarded as the national sport of Abyssinia.¹⁴

A central issue in the debates between Salomon and Mendes was the question of the Messiah's divine nature. During 1626, Emperor Susənyos conquered the region of Səmen, home to the Betä ʾĪsra'el community. Mendes commented as follows:

At that time, as the emperor had left for war, a famous debate with a European Jew took place in the quartering camp of the Patriarch, one that gained significant renown among Roman affairs [. . .]. This man had brought some offerings with him: profusely laden with those, he had the books of Divine Scripture as well as those of the rabbis, which were set down in Hebrew characters. Furthermore, a rumor had spread among all: he had equipped himself with weapons to consolidate the basis of his pestilential teaching in the mountains of Səmen (which are commonly said to belong to the Jews).¹⁵

Mendes meant to demonstrate that the Jewish faith was wrong and that the population of Səmen was influenced by “the Jewish fables and the delusions of the Rabbis”.¹⁶

[Salomon] wanted to implant nothing more stinging in the mind of his audience than [the belief] that Christ, whom we Christians worship reverently, was not God, nor the Jews' Messiah who was to become God, but that he was limited to the worth of a mere man. As he noticed that he was being incriminated, he argued that, if he had taught anything, he had devoted himself to his own house, fowling after no one else's audience but that one. In response, the Patriarch said: “The same treatment is inflicted, Salomon, upon whoever mints fake coins of his own house and displays it for sale in the forum. And if you do not consider

13 Aregay (1984) 127–147, in particular 144. Hagar Salamon devotes a chapter of her book, *The Hyena People*, to the subject of religious controversies between Jews and Christians in Ethiopia. «Everybody loves to argue that the inhabitants regard disputation as a form of entertainment.» See Salamon (1999) 83–95.

14 Levine (1965) 230.

15 “*Id temporis, Imperatore ad bellum egresso, in statariis castris Patriarchae celebris obtigit cum Iudaeo europaeo velitatio, quae non minimam peperit romanis rebus existimationem. [. . .] Qui merces aliquas secum invexerat, quarum opimior erant libri tam Divinae Scripturae, quam Rabbiorum, hebraicis characteribus exarati. Et omnium linguis pervulgata erat opinio, his se armis instruxisse, ut in montibus Semen, qui vulgo Iudaeorum dicuntur, pestilentis doctrinae suae cathedram firmaret*” (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 231).

16 Mendes (1908–1909), vol. 8, 231. See fn. 26.

that you are to pay penalties owing to your impudence, you, who are unfair not only to Christians but also to yourself and to your kind, [still] neither at home nor abroad should you behave like a teacher of lies. When you [people] could pride yourselves on [having] an advocate of your submission to God and to the son of God, you prefer to have a ragged beggar.”¹⁷

Mendes quoted Salomon’s response as follows: “What are such things? What about the Messiah, God’s son? Is there a son born to God like a twig from underneath a tree? Who could have conceived such absurd things about God?”¹⁸

During the debate, Patriarch Afonso Mendes rejected Salomon’s statements before Emperor Susenyos and quoted the Psalms:

God himself wrote it, and it is not shameful to observe it on the basis of Psalm 2: “You are my son. I have begotten you today”; and Psalm 109: “I have begotten you from the womb before daylight, as well as dominion along with you on the day of your virtue, among the splendors of the Saints.” Therefore, these things, which you think are absurd, can be conceived, and it is not inappropriate for God to have a son.¹⁹

Throughout the course of the 17th century, other vernacular languages gradually replaced Latin. However, even after the Reformation, the official texts of the Catholic Church remained in Latin, as illustrated by the Jesuit correspondence from Ethiopia. *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* reveal the importance of the Latin language in Jesuit daily life: “Everyone, and especially the humanists, should speak Latin regularly, and should remember by heart whatever their teachers teach them, and they should practise their style in compositions, [al-

17 “*Sed opus non fuit testium aliunde evocatu, cum duo illi senatores et plures, qui aderant, unanimes oratione affirmarent Salomonem diversis locis docentem a se auditum et nihil acrius velle adstantium animis inculpere, quam nec Christum, quem christiani reverenter colimus, Deum esse, nec Iudaeorum Messiam Deum futurum sed puri hominis censu conclusum. Se convictum ille perspicies, dixit, se, si quid doceret, domi suae tradidisse, nec cuiusquam audientiam extra illam aucupatum. Cui Patriarcha: Eadem, inquit, Salomon, illi poena irrogatur, qui adulterinam pecuniam domi suae cudit et illi, qui venalem in forum producit. Nec domi nec foris mendaciorum doctorem agas sin minus scias te debitas tuae proterviae poenas daturum, qui non solum christianis, sed tibi ac tuo generi sis iniurius, ut, cum Deo ac Dei filio vestrae servitutis assertore gloriari possitis, panosum hominis mendicabulum habere malitis*” (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 232–233).

18 “*Hic Salomon: Quid, inquit, sunt isthaec? Quid Messias Dei filius? Quid Deo filium, quasi arbore stolonem subnasci? Qui possint in Deo haec absurda componi*” (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 233).

19 “*Sed quia eum librum hebraice non habetis, composuit Deus ipse, quem non suppudivit in secundo Psalmo testari: Filius meus es tu. Ego hodie genui te; nec in centesimo nono: Tecum principium in die virtutis tuae in splendoribus sanctorum, ex utero ante luciferum genui te. Possunt igitur ea, quae tu reris absurda, componi, nec Deo dedecorum esse filium habere*” (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 233).

ways] having someone correct them.”²⁰ The goal of teachers and pupils was to understand classical authors, to speak the language properly, and to write it with Ciceronian eloquence. The *Ratio Studiorum* (“The Official Plan for Jesuit Education”) stated that

at home the use of the Latin language is careful maintained among the students. They should not be exempted for this regulation about speaking Latin except for break days and recreation hours, unless in some regions it seems to the provincial that the practice of Latin can easily be kept during these times as well. He should also make sure that when Jesuits who have not yet finished their studies write letters to one another, they should write it in Latin.²¹

The Jesuits in Ethiopia alternated between writing in vernaculars and writing in Latin. Consequently, a broad spectrum of Jesuit correspondence was not conducted in Latin, but rather in Portuguese, in Spanish, or in Italian, the mother tongues of the missionaries who arrived in the country. Their reasons for choosing a particular native language over Latin varied. For instance, the Jesuits in Ethiopia, who depended on the *Portuguese Padroado* (an agreement through which the Holy See delegated administration of its churches to the Portuguese Empire), saw themselves as an extension of the Portuguese maritime empire. This naturally granted the Portuguese language a special status. However, when corresponding directly with the Holy See, Latin was preferable, and many authors actually gave preference to Latin when composing theological and historical works, especially Mendes. His hagiographers wrote extensively about his admiration for Greek and Latin eloquence, and for the writings of Demosthenes and Plutarch in particular. “Among the Latin poets, he [Mendes] was the most elegant of his time”, wrote the Portuguese Jesuit historian Balthazar Tellez in 1660.²² Father Bruno Bruni, who was born in Rome, was also said to have a great command of Latin. As Tellez remarked in the same volume, Bruni, who went to Florence to study Latin, became “famous in this language, [being] an eloquent rhetorician.”²³

On the whole, the Latin of Afonso Mendes says as much about himself as it does about the characters of his epistles. In the debate that took place at the Ethiopian court on the divine nature of Christ, and which set apart two rival doctrines, Christianity and Judaism, he often appears as a colourful character. He could be flippant, biting, or stubborn, and often ended up playing a role in the dispute that he purported to recount as a mere observer; his views on the matters discussed he almost always expressed, either explicitly or by way of innuendo.

²⁰ Arzubialde *et al.* (1993) 181.

²¹ Pavur (2005) 32.

²² De Almeida (1660) 385.

²³ De Almeida (1660) 637.

An unbending perversity, like the Jewish one, usually comes with wariness, but not with improvement, and it progresses in a way that is all the more destructive that it is stealthy.²⁴

Mendes' style is personal and sharp. Certain unsavoury remarks highlight his extreme hostility towards Jews; some certainly overshadow the initial subject of the debate by focusing on the danger that Judaism generally represented:

From the beginning, the fathers have been warning the Patriarch of the damage that the harmful teaching of the Jew brought about. When, at the gates of the palace, *Ras Sə'älä Krastos* first found a man on his way (although he did not trust this man, he gladly listened to him on account of the attractiveness of the novelty), he admonished him so that he might keep away from these fables of his, which should be scattered in the dust, and so that he might do like him, should he really want to teach anything about the Holy Scriptures and their interpretation. While using his livelihood as an excuse, this man replied that it was all that he had, with the merchandise business.²⁵

When reading these letters, one often wishes that Mendes had addressed more promptly and directly the “fables” of this man. He eventually does so later in the narrative by discussing theological matters at length and by citing Biblical sources; his first response, however, suggests that his priority was to warn the reader: the divine nature of Christ is a foregone conclusion that should not require any arguing, all the more when a Jew initiated this debate. Indeed, in Mendes' view, that a Jew disputed the nature of Christ should exhibit his dishonesty in the first place. In the end, it is clear that the fact that such a debate could happen concerned him more than the debating itself, as he firmly believed that the falsity of the Jewish doctrine reflected the immorality of Jews in general.

When this very Salomon found the emperor in the middle of an argument with the Jews of Səmen ([the emperor's goal was] to pluck them off the ancient nest that was stuck into these stones), he aimed his weapons against the Christians in order to drive them away from the path of truth and to force-feed them Jewish fables and rabbis' delusions.²⁶

24 “*Praefracta perversitas, qualis est iudaica, cautionem sibi adhibere solet, sed non correctionem, et tanto perniciosius grassatur, quanto et occultius*” (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 243).

25 “*Patriarcham a principio patres iacturae a Iudaeo illatae et damnosae doctrinae admonuerunt. Et cum primo obvium habuisset in foribus aulae Ras Selä Christôs (a quo, si non credebatur, ob novitatis illecebram benevole audiebatur) hominem commonuit, ut a suis fabulis in rudes spargendis abstinere, et secum ageret si quid vellet de Scriptura Sacra et illius interpretatione edoceri. Qui, sui quaestus excusatione usus, respondit, unum sibi esse cum mercibus negotium*” (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 232).

26 “*Sed cum is Salomon Imperatorem cum Semen Iudaeis confligentem reperisset, ut eos ab antiquo nido petris illis affixo deturbaret, arma convertit in christianos, ut eos a veritatis itinere deduceret et iudaicis fabulis atque Rabbiorum somniis infeciret*” (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 231).

Again, Mendes' assertive way of expressing himself showed his desire to end a debate which he considered desecrated the Christian faith and humiliated an overly gullible audience. Although the emperor was warned that he himself was in danger, he allowed the Jew to stay and carry on: Mendes accounted for this, with regret, as an act of cultural and intellectual curiosity on the emperor's part.

There was no great response among the petty rabble before the novelty of this teaching; on the other hand, those left among the most elevated and honourable Catholics [reacted] with great indignation. How many times had the fathers unsuccessfully fought to chase him away from Ethiopia; still, their commercial bonds, whereby Salomon supposedly sold goods, kept him there. There is even some kind of pastry which he gave in return (swallowing this type of food, once sliced, is easy, and it is not at the risk of vomiting). The return of this man seemed dangerous even to the emperor as [the latter] feared that [the Jew] might complain among the Turks of Spain and the group of Abyssinians, as though they were at fault. He did banter very often about this, in a wanton and disgraceful way.²⁷

One may sometimes sense a hint of sarcasm in Mendes' tone. Before he actually engaged in the dispute itself and began to use theological weapons against what he perceived as a threat to the Catholics' dignity, he repeated that he tried his best to have the Jew expelled from the emperor's entourage. However, the Jew had outwitted him in this respect.

Later on, it suited the Patriarch to have him as his mediator with the emperor, which job the man did not turn down; through him, he could command that money be paid from his debtors to him, or that his merchandise be confiscated. Then, he would understand that he was responsible for the justice that dealt not only with Christians, but also with heathens and Jews; then he would understand that this might be an opportunity to drive him out of Ethiopia more promptly. But as this man took his time, he did not interrupt the harmful teaching that he forced into many an ear.²⁸

27 "*Nec magni tantum fiebat ob doctrinae novitatem a vili popello, sed eum magna reliquorum offensione a summatibus ac probatissimis catholicorum. Saepius patres connixi fuerant, sed frustra, ut Aethiopia extruderent, eum tamen illorum vincula pecuniaria retinebant, quibus merces credito tradiderat. Est enim, quod mutuum datur, instar hami, qui esca abductus facile hauritur, nec postea nisi cum vitae dispendio evomitur. Imperatori etiam periculosus ipsius regressus videbatur quod timeret, ne apud Turcas Lusitanorum et Abassinorum societatem, quasi ipsi noxiam, incusaret, quam saepius impudenter et indecore cavillabatur*" (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 231–232).

28 "*Postea Patriarcham convenit, ut illius esset apud Imperatorem deprecator quo sibi a suis debitoribus pecuniam solvi iuberet, vel suas merces redhiberi, quod officium ille non detrectavit, tum quod intelligeret se iustitiae procurandae non solis christianis, sed ethnicis atque Iudaeis esse debitorum, tum quod illa esse posset ansa illum citius Aethiopia pelli. Cum vero ille cunctaretur, nec a perniciose doctrina multorum auribus ingerenda otia retur*" (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 232).

Once Salomon had succeeded in disseminating his ideas, Mendes made it clear that it was then too late to react: “Some had been contaminated by their contact with him since the beginning; in particular, Senator Læssanä Krəstos who, as a result, from then on, owned a psalter that had been disfigured by the interpretations and comments of this man”.²⁹

Mendes eventually decided to fight fire with fire in employing an array of theological points based on Scripture in order to address the very subject of the debate. As he failed to have the Jew expelled, his goal was then to disparage his dangerous teaching and to avert its propagation.

Conclusion

Much of the official correspondence between the missionaries and the Jesuit and ecclesiastical authorities in Goa and Rome remains inaccessible to an audience that has not been initiated into Latin, as is the case with many scholars of Ethiopian and African studies. Particularly significant in this regard are the letters of Patriarch Mendes, who, unlike many of his peers, conducted most of his correspondence in Latin. Mendes is a crucial figure in the early modern history of European-Ethiopian interaction. His intolerance towards Ethiopian religious practices is widely believed to have contributed to the failure of the Jesuit mission. His reprobation of Jews, as in the case of Salomon from Vienna, is just one illustration of his overall critical attitude towards non-Catholics.

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²⁹ “Aliquī ex primoribus illius contagione essent infecti et praecipue senator Lessana Christôs, de quo infra, qui Psalmos habebat illius interpretationibus et notis deturpatos” (Mendes, 1908–1909, vol. 8, 232).

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