# ACCIDENTAL DIPLOMATS



## *American Missionaries and the Cold War in Africa*

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CHAPTER 1

# *Romance in a Marriage of Convenience*[1]

## *The Missionary Factor in Early Cold War US-Ethiopian Relations, 1918–1960*

Marching bands boomed and flags waved as a blizzard of confetti poured down on the crowd of over a million New Yorkers who had come to catch a glimpse of the fabled Ethiopian Emperor. The ticker-tape parade that greeted Haile Selassie as his motorcade slowly made its way up Broadway came on the back of a remarkable week. Among other things, Selassie had made the first address to a joint session of Congress by an African head of state, met privately with President Eisenhower, and had been an overnight guest at the White House.[2]

The warm welcome Selassie received throughout his two-month state visit to the United States in 1954 reflected the close relationship that had been growing between the two nations for at least a generation. As early as 1944, the United States had chosen to creatively interpret the language of the Lend-Lease program in order to provide aid to an Ethiopian nation recovering from a hostile five-year Italian occupation.[3] The next year Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) and Haile Selassie held meetings in Egypt that helped establish the foundation for Ethiopia's inclusion in the Point Four Agreement (1952), a pivotal mutual defense agreement in 1953, and multiple additional development pacts.[4] By the 1960s, Ethiopia had become the single largest recipient of American aid in sub-Saharan Africa.[5]

1 This chapter was first published in Diplomatic History, Volume 35, Issue 5, November 2011, Pages 949–959, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.00999.x. Revised and used with permission.

2 Schumach, "Visiting Emperor Hailed"; "Text of Haile Selassie's"; Vestal, *Lion of Judah*, 1–3.

3 Zwede, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, 184.

4 Bolton, *Report of the Special Study*; Wrong, *I Didn't Do It*; White, *Holding the Line*, 41–66; Zwede, *History of Modern Ethiopia*; Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*; Kisse, "Politics of Famine," 113–31; Duignan and Gann, *United States and Africa*; Ambassador Shinn's remarks at Howard University on "A Tale of Two Nations" (26 March 2004); Marcus, "American Security and Ethiopia."

5 Duignan and Gann, *United States and Africa*, 317.


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In the context of the early Cold War, a limited and pragmatic relationship between Ethiopia and the United States made sense.[6] Yet while geopolitics help explain why a Cold War marriage of convenience developed between the two nations, it does not adequately explain the extent and intimacy of that relationship. Indeed, relative to the intensifying Cold War battle for Europe, rising tensions in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, and conflict on the Korean peninsula, Ethiopia's privileged place in US relations during this period continues to seem disproportionate to its Cold War significance and has remained a matter of incredulity to observers.

Similarly, Haile Selassie's enduring enthusiasm for the United States seemed to fly in the face of opposition from many Ethiopian elites and to contradict centuries of deeply-held anti-foreigner sentiment within its culture. Yet, as the Emperor's long-time American political advisor noted in his memoirs, "[T]hroughout his reign, as automatically as a compass needle drawn towards the magnetic Pole, His Majesty turned towards the United States. Even in retrospect, I cannot be confident of correctly ascribing the reason for that steady and incontestable attraction."[7] This chapter will contend that the otherwise inexplicably close relationship that developed between Ethiopia and the United States in the early Cold War period makes the most sense when the influence of American evangelical missionaries is taken into account.

## "Dating," 1918–1941

The influence of American evangelical missionaries on early Cold War US-Ethiopian relations does not begin with the missionaries' arrival near the beginning of the twentieth century, but with a set of shared religious memories. Despite being separated physically by a still vast ocean and culturally by sixteen hundred years of Ethiopian isolation, the worldviews of the Ethiopian Amhara and the American evangelical held important elements in common. Most significantly, both were rooted in the authority of the Bible. For each community, biblical stories were much more than guiding myths, they were sources of identity and a trustworthy description of the transnational grand narrative in which God called them to play a part.

Two biblical accounts simultaneously formed the very heart of the ancient Ethiopian national identity and created a powerful symbolic link between these otherwise dissimilar communities. The first, the Old

6 National Archives II, "Confidential Report," 7 October 1943, National Archives II (NARA) RG165/Entry 77/Box 777; Iyob and Keller, "US Policy in the Horn," 102–3; and Zwede, *History of Modern Ethiopia*, 185.

7 Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 102.


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Testament relationship between King Solomon and the Ethiopian "Queen of Sheba," and the related prophecy of Psalm 68 stating that, "Ethiopia would soon stretch out her hands unto God," tied Ethiopia theologically, historically, and (Ethiopian Orthodox tradition suggests) genetically to the Jewish people.[8] Likewise, the well-known New Testament story of the Ethiopian Eunuch's conversion to Christianity through the testimony of Philip, a Jewish convert to Christianity, grafted the African kingdom into the story of Christianity from its very beginning.[9]

Over the next two thousand years, the experience of being an island of Christianity within a rising and hostile tide of animism and, later, Islam in the region, so conflated Christianity and Ethiopian nationalism that, as one scholar put it, "the cardinal criteria for being Ethiopian was acceptance of the Orthodox creed."[10] Despite its relative isolation from the rest of Christendom for over a millennia, Ethiopia remained a highly potent symbol for all Christians, and in particular, Protestants like Martin Luther who regarded it as the first and most authentic Christian kingdom.[11]

Thus, as the twentieth century dawned, there already existed a powerful, if still largely dormant, biblically-inspired bond between Ethiopia and the American evangelical community.[12] It is not surprising,

8 1 Kgs 10 (NIV); Kihss, "Ethiopia's Emperor Lands."

9 Acts 8:26–40 (NIV); Ps 68:31 (KJV). Christianity did not become the official religion of Ethiopia until AD 341, but this is still prior to the Edict of Thessalonica, AD 380, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilization*, 77.

10 Eide, *Revolution and Religion*, 36. Yet, Ethiopian allegiance to Christianity did not necessarily make it natural allies with Christian Europe. In fact, when Catholic and Protestant missionary outreach to Ethiopia after the sixteenth century was regularly followed by military efforts, Ethiopia's deep suspicion of foreigners was extended, at least to some degree, to non-Orthodox European Christians and remained deeply entrenched as the twentieth century dawned. Hanson and Hanson, *God and the Emperor*, 11.

11 Daniels, "Martin Luther's Fascination."

12 It is important to note, and this will be developed much more in chapter 2, that despite (and perhaps because of) the important religious connections between the two Christian communities, the relationship between the American evangelical missionaries and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) was uneasy from the beginning. Many of the missionaries, while enamored with the Ethiopian church's historical ties to both the biblical Israelites and the first century church, were often highly critical of what they considered to be the EOC's rigid traditionalism and extra-biblical theology. This blend of admiration and contempt is found throughout the accounts of their experiences in Ethiopia. (See among others, "Church in Ethiopia," and Barnhouse, "In the Emperor's Palace.") For their part, the EOC hierarchy, almost without exception, viewed the American missionaries as unwanted intruders, and a threat to their cultural, political, and religious dominance. In fact, it was the EOC, and not the Muslim or animist populations, that exhibited the most virulent antagonism towards the American missionaries and their evangelical converts. (See "Visit to Anglo-Egyptian," as well as a summary by US intelligence of an intercepted letter dated 9 November 1943 from an American missionary in Ethiopia to another based in Egypt, NARA/RG165/77/776.)


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then, that the increasing political threat represented by Muslim and animist minorities on the country's periphery, coupled with Ethiopia's need to modernize, pushed the monarchy to seek out transnational allies in the form of Protestant missionaries from countries not closely associated with colonial ambitions in Africa—first Sweden and then the United States. Beginning with the Presbyterians (1918) and building with the Seventh Day Adventists (1921), the Sudan Interior Mission (1928), and a number of other organizations in the 1930s, American evangelicals responded enthusiastically to Ethiopia's openness to missionary involvement, setting up mission stations, churches, schools and hospitals across the country.[13]

Living for years at a time amongst the Ethiopians, becoming fluent in their languages, eating their foods, sharing their stories and absorbing their history, by the 1930s approximately one hundred evangelical missionaries had developed an unparalleled understanding of Ethiopian cultural and political dynamics.[14] To be sure, a considerable cultural gap remained between the missionaries and the Ethiopians they worked amongst, and this gap did sometimes produce errors in perception. Nevertheless, during this period no other group of Western expatriates, American or otherwise, could begin to boast of anywhere near the same level of familiarity with Ethiopia.[15]

As fellow Christians and, theoretically, apolitical agents of the modernization he hoped to initiate, Haile Selassie had made a point of closely following the progress of their work and had met with virtually every American missionary working in Ethiopia prior to the Italian

13 Cotterell, *Born at Midnight*, 11.

14 The exact number of American missionaries working in Ethiopia in the 1930s is unknown. We do know that by 1936, the largest mission, SIM, had fifteen stations. Some stations might have been as small as a missionary couple or two single missionaries, while others, such as schools and hospitals, likely had larger missionary numbers. A conservative estimate is, therefore, that the average mission station had three missionaries. The other two missions most active by the 1930s were the Presbyterians who had a long history in Ethiopia, and the Seventh Day Adventists. While smaller, the two missions combined likely had at least the same combined number of stations as SIM. Therefore, when you add together the three larger missions and the several smaller and newer missions that came in the 1930s, we have an approximate number of 35 stations and 105 missionaries. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers*, 37.

15 Indeed, as we shall see later, their "American eyes" did promote a vision of Haile Selassie that appears to have been at least partially at odds with reality. Among multiple examples of missionary awareness of these challenges see the essays in Winter and Hawthorn's, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*. Also see the well-known critique by Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. In addition, as we shall see later, between 1909 and 1943 there were also small numbers of African Americans in Ethiopia: see Joseph E. Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936–41*. For a description of the intimate interaction of the American evangelical missionaries with the Ethiopian peoples and cultures, see: Hanson and Hanson, *God and the Emperor*; F. Peter Cotterell, *Born at Midnight*; Charles Partee, *Adventure in Africa*; and Don McClure, *Red-headed, Rash, and Religious*.


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invasion in 1935.[16] In the process, a number of these working relationships developed into genuine friendships. Dr. Thomas Lambie was just one notable example. Since arriving as an energetic young medical missionary in 1918, Lambie had built four hospitals and been embraced by the Emperor who the *NY Times* described as "an intimate friend."[17] Lambie's commitment to his Christian calling and to the Ethiopian people was such that in 1934, in order to purchase land for another hospital, he renounced his American citizenship and pledged his allegiance to Haile Selassie.[18] When Italy invaded in 1935, Lambie led the Ethiopian Red Cross and was (along with several other American missionaries) the source of much of the information the outside world received regarding the Italian atrocities prior to their occupation.[19] His commitment to Ethiopia, and friendship with the Emperor, made a deep impression on Haile Selassie that was only partially compromised by events during the Italian occupation.[20]

Lambie's decision to continue to work as a missionary under the occupation required at least a partial recanting of the damaging claims he had made concerning the Italian use of mustard gas during the invasion.[21] Fortunately for the American missionary community, the resulting rupture of Lambie's relationship with the Emperor was more than balanced by the reaction of the rest of the American missionary community to the threat of the invasion. Responding to the official request from the US government to evacuate before the invasion, a spokesman for the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) stated publicly that "While we thoroughly respect our Government's attitude in their request for evacuation, the obedience

16 Hanson and Hanson, *God and the Emperor*; Friederichsen, *Dr. Bob Hockman*; Willmott, *Doors Were Opened*; and many others.

17 Associated Press, "Missionaries to Stay."

18 Cotterell, *Born at Midnight*, 79.

19 According to Haile Selassie's American legal advisor John Spencer, American missionary, J. L. Rohrbaugh wrote for the *Times of London*. Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 65, 68. Articles that were almost certainly his or the result of his work include the feature article "The Bombing of Daggah Bur," 19 December 1935. Articles that credit Hockman as the source include, "Missionary Tells First-hand Story of Ethiopian War," in the *NY Herald Tribune*, 18 November 1935; and others in *The Chicago Tribune*, 26 September 1935; and *The Chicago Daily News*, 17 October 1935. Dr. Lambie is credited with writing reports that "aroused expressions of outrage, especially in Britain." Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 49.

20 Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 49.

21 For instance, after pledging allegiance to Italy for the fifteen stations of the Sudan Interior Mission, Lambie is quoted in an AP press dispatch on 30 May 1936 that, "We have never entered politics as a Mission and never will. If the Government is Italian, we shall support the Italian Government—even as the Lord said, 'Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.'" SIM/ SIM EA/1/7.



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