



Qidus (Saint) Yared 493-563 E.C. (501-571)

Religious scholar. Composer of liturgic songs & hymns

Saint Yared, the great Ethiopian scholar, was born on *Megabit* 27, 493 E.C.] / April 5, 501 in the ancient city of Aksum. His father's name was Adam, and his mother was called Tawkelia. He descended from a line of prominent

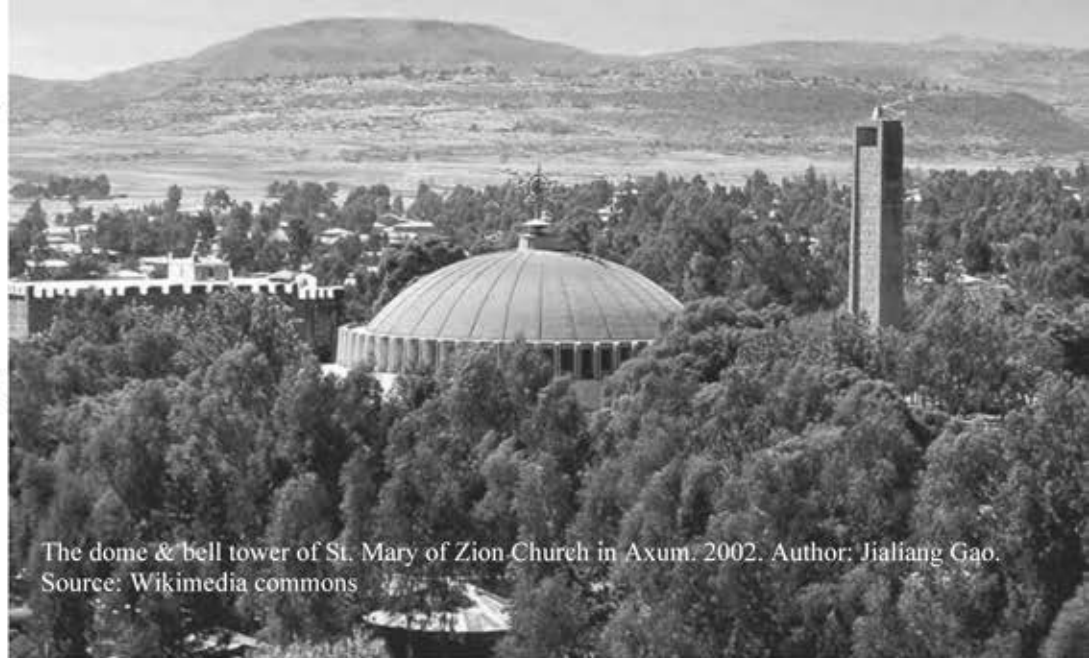
church scholars. At the age of six, a priest named Yeshaq was assigned to be his teacher. However, he turned out to be a poor learner and, as a result, he was sent back to his parents. While he was staying home, his father passed away. Then his mother asked her brother, Aba Gedeon, a well-known priest-scholar in the church of Aksum Zion, to adopt her son and send him to school.

Aba Gedeon taught The Old and New Testaments. He also translated these and other sacred texts to Ge'ez from Greek, Hebrew and Arabic sources. Even though Aba Gedeon allowed St. Yared to live and study with him, it took the young boy a long time to complete learning the Psalms. He could not compete with the other students, despite the constant advice he was receiving from his uncle. In fact, he was such a slow learner that kids used to mock him. His uncle was so impatient that he gave him several lashes for his inability to compete with his peers.

Realizing his poor performance, Yared left school and went to Medebay, a town where another uncle resided. On his way to Medebay, not far from Aksum, he was forced to seek shelter under a tree from a heavy rain, in a place called Maikrah. While he was leaning against the tree, he was immersed in thoughts about his poor academic performance. Suddenly, he noticed an ant which was trying to climb the tree with a load of a seed. The ant carrying a piece of food item made six attempts to climb the tree, but without success. However, at the seventh trial, the ant was able to climb the tree and unloaded the food item at its destination. Yared was impressed by the determination of the ant. He then pondered why he lacked patience to succeed in his own studies.

He learned a valuable lesson from the ant. In fact, he cried hard and then underwent self-evaluation. The ant became his source of inspiration and he decided to return back to school. He realized that he had received valuable advice from his uncle to guide him in life. He begged Aba Gedeon to forgive him for his past carelessness and give him one more chance.

His teacher, Aba Gedeon then began to teach him the Psalms. Not only was Yared taking the lessons, but every day he would stop at Aksum Zion church to pray to God to show him the light. His prayer was answered and he turned out to be a good student. Within a short period of time, he showed a remarkable progress and his friends noticed the change in him. They were impressed and started to admire him. He completed the Old and New Testaments at a much faster pace. He also finished the rest of lessons ahead of schedule and



The dome & bell tower of St. Mary of Zion Church in Axum. 2002. Author: Jialiang Gao. Source: Wikimedia commons

graduated to become a Deacon. He was fluent in Hebrew and Greek, apart from Ge'ez. Yared became as educated as his uncle was, and he later assumed the position of his uncle when he died.

Yared's *Zema* is mythologized and sacralized to the extent that the composition is seen as a special gift from heaven. One version of the mythology is presented in Ethiopian book *Sinkisar*, a philosophical treatise, as follows: "When God sought praise on earth, he sent down birds from heaven in the images of angels so that they would teach Yared the music of the heavens in Ge'ez language.

With his song, he praised the natural world, the heavens and Zion. He called the song *Mablete Aryam*, which means the highest, referring to the seventh gates of heaven, where God resides. Yared, guided by the Holy Spirit, saw the angels playing drums, horns, sistra, Masinko, the harp and tau-cross staff instruments to accompany their songs of praise to God, he decided to adopt these instruments to all the church music and chants.

The chants are usually recited in conjunction with *aquaquam* or sacred dance. The following instruments are used for *Zema* and *aquaquam* combination: Tau-cross staff, sistra and drum. St. Yared pioneered an enduring tradition of *Zema*, *Aquaquam* and *Qene*. These are musical, dance and literary traditions that continue to inform the spiritual and material well-being of a significant segment of the Ethiopian population. St. Yared died at the age of 66 on May 20, 571 A.D. in a cave below the Semien Mountains where he used to teach.

This biographical sketch is an abridged & slightly edited version of *St. Yared - the great Ethiopian composer*. By Ayele Bekerie. Tadias Online Magazine. August 09, 2008. reprinted here with permission. Other sources used to compile the above biographical sketch are:

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