John Ethelstan Cheese 1877-1959

God's ambassador in Palestine, Lebanon and Somaliland



A Palestinian Family

Many famous workers sent by God to Muslim peoples were been brilliant linguists – Henry Martyn, Joseph Wolff, Valpy French, Ion Keith Falconer, Temple Gairdner and Roy Whitman.

But God also sent many who were poor linguists and who probably wouldn't be sent out by any agency today!

John Ethelstan Cheese, who preferred to call himself Ethelstan, was one of these. He worked faithfully in different parts of the Middle East for forty-six years.

Ethelstan was English. He was educated at Rugby (the school that invented the game) and then went on to St. John's College, Cambridge. He wasn't a great scholar and he only managed to gain a third class degree. He was ordained in the Church of England and was sent for his first curacy to a church on the Isle of Wight off the south coast of England. While he was there he had a nervous breakdown. Part of his cure was a tour of the Holy Land for a month or two.



Grocer's shop in Old Jerusalem 1910

He arrived in Jerusalem in 1912. At that time Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire. While in Jerusalem, Ethelstan sensed God's call to stay. CMS (Church Missionary Society) didn't know what to do with him and in the end they sent him to teach in a school for Druze boys in Aley, Lebanon.

No one suggested that Ethelstan should learn Arabic Since he was only a 'short termer'!



Lebanese Druze villager

So he had no formal training in Arabic, but he did learn Arabic from the Druze boys in the school. He spoke with a unique dialect of English-inflected Arabic. Temple Gairdner later said, **"He speaks no known dialect of Arabic, but it is intelligible."**

Ethelstan came from a very wealthy family. While he was in Lebanon, he gave away some of his inheritance and lived on £60 a year for the rest of his years in the Middle East. Once, to save money, he took a ship from Aden booked in the hold as a piece of luggage!

He was interned by the Turks in the First World War and was very badly treated. After his release in 1918 he moved from Lebanon to Cairo. One Egyptian Christian worker said this of Ethelstan:

"I saw someone come in at whom one had to look. His face shone with piety and goodness. A slight man of middle height simply dressed and wearing sandals ... you would have thought of him as a monk ... we all loved him and he was welcome wherever he went."

He had a long fair beard. As an itinerant preacher he made long walking trips from Cairo into the villages of Egypt especially visiting Palestinian Bedouin across the Sinai. People knew him as the 'wali' – a holy man. He was allowed everywhere and in most places was welcomed



Bedouin Sheiks preparing coffee 1936

warmly. He always knelt to pray with others while they were doing their 'salat' (formal prayers). In fact, it was his habit to always prayed like that – quietly – face down on the ground – whether in a Bedouin tent or in a dhow on the Red Sea. He did this from 1918-1934.

Through his friendship with a Somali street cleaner in Cairo he discovered Somalis were a neglected, unreached people.



Bedouin women in Palestine 1920

Only Mark's Gospel had been translated into Somali. So in 1934 he went to Somalia. He spent 18 months in Addis Ababa where he was chaplain at the American Presbyterian Hospital. They gave him a bed in a small apartment, but he never slept in his bed. Why? He had trained himself to sleep on the floor and he was afraid of getting 'soft'.

Ethelstan spent the next twenty-four years as a wandering apostle to the Somali peoples. They were nomadic, so too was he. He slowly learned their language. He walked where they went, slept in their camps and ate their food. He even learned to milk a camel! A British colonial official in the north of Somalia once asked some of the Somali chiefs if they knew Mr. Cheese. This was their reply:

"Of course, he is a Christian so we don't believe what he believes. He is wrong and we are right. But he is without doubt the holiest man in all Somalia. We love him."

Ethelstan passionately believed in the importance of distributing God's Word in the language of the people. He attempted to translate some more of the Scriptures into Somali using the Roman script. But the work he did never achieved the standard required by the Bible Society for publication. He produced a number of tracts in Somali he had written himself. He also translated Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan into Somali where 'Christian' was called 'Hajji Osman' – i.e. a contextualised version of Bunyan's book!

The complete Bible was not translated into Somali until 1979.



Somali Bible

In 1957 Ethelstan was knocked down by a car in Mombasa, Kenya. This accident badly affected his speech and he became increasingly deaf. He went back to Lebanon. In 1958 he gave away his few books. Friends put him on a boat to return to England. He died alone on the voyage back to England.

What was the secret of this man's endurance and joy in the task that God had called him to? It was a life of holiness. He lived a life of simplicity – even poverty, but what shone forth brightly from his life was the presence of Jesus.



Somali Youth a boy and two girls

Ethelstan offered friendship to all he met and he also accepted friendship from all. He was willing to be vulnerable. Others said of him, **"Love flowed out of the man."**

His life is a great example of the truth of 2 Cor. 12:9:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."