



## Adventures of Writing and Researching for **The Epic of Mekonnen**

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**W**riting and researching for my epic tale of the adventures of *Mekonnen* has been—and still is—an interesting journey for me in all aspects of my life, physically, intellectually and spiritually. It has led me to some mysterious circumstances, led me to great people some of who have become new friends, awesome discoveries in the history, myths and legends of the ancient land and kingdoms of Abyssinia, which is now called the countries Ethiopia and Eritrea. It has also expanded my historical knowledge of the whole continent of Africa and her connections with the history of the whole ancient world.

My experiences has inspired me create the right setting, atmosphere and culture of the world of my main character *Mekonnen*, creating a back drop for this tale of personal growth, internal conflict and spiritual warfare. I've become enamored of the richness of the culture and history of Ethiopia and I'm now a big fan of almost all things Ethiopian/Abyssinian. "Why Ethiopia?" you may ask, and some already have. Why did I pick this particular country from this particular continent that has been underestimated and subdued for centuries and for a long time stereotyped and thought of by most as only a vast land of jungles, deserts, and primitive natives in loin clothes? A land with a long and glorious past and whose history of Monarchs, Priests and Warriors in palaces and fortified cities has been mostly forgotten.

This journal recounts my experiences and reveal how and why I feel I was led to explore the Horn of Africa, the African Ark.

## Who is Mekonnen and what is the Story About?

Firstly, a short description of who is *Mekonnen* and what he represents in my story. Mekonnen is a fictional character placed in the real ancient world with real historical figures and events, mixed in my own imagination of fanciful situations, creatures and characters for dramatic effect. He lives in an alternate world where the earthly and spiritual realms intertwine to demonstrate mankind's struggle with his moral shortcomings, attacks and temptations from evil forces in the world and God's redemption plan for mankind and the battles His heavenly armies fight for us against those evil forces. The story demonstrates that we must be equipt and prepared to fight these battles, where in this world Mekonnen's spiritual weapons are manifested naturally as real armour, sword and shield, being plugged into ultimate source of power that flows from the throne of The Almighty One, and joining forces with fellow warriors from around the world to defeat the invading armies from the dominions of Darkness.



*Mekonnen Sofaniyas, warrior in the Kingdom of Aksum, 6th century AD*

## Warrior from the Ancient Ethiopian Kingdom of Aksum

Mekonnen is a warrior in the royal court of the Kingdom (Empire) of Aksum, one of the first Christian kingdoms of the world. He lived during the prosperous reign of King Amida, also known as Emperor Gebre Meskel (Servant of the Cross), who reigned in the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Mekonnen represents Christians in their walk by faith and the victories and defeats he/she will face in the way of life. There are other main and supporting characters Mekonnen encounters in his journey that will represent many different aspects and situations we may all face in our lives and in our walk with the almighty God and the way we relate to each other. Like all of us, Mekonnen will meet characters and creatures that will either lift him up to take him to the next level in his life and spiritual growth or try to destroy him or lead him astray, off the path of God's special calling for his life.

The basic framework for Mekonnen's adventure is Bible based, from a Judeo-Christian's point of view. This story is not intended to promote any particular church denomination but is dedicated *all believers in Jesus Christ*. You will notice a lot of imagery, festivals and languages that are dominant in the Ethiopian culture and religion - especially in Book one - which is used to set the atmosphere and background for that particular period in history. As the story progresses characters of various cultures and ethnic backgrounds will be introduced, some becoming major or supporting characters.

Even though the Epic of Mekonnen was initially inspired by sacred scriptures and ancient writings, I'm hoping it will have a universal appeal to a wide audience and that many may be inspired. It is spiritual but for a general audience, like C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and *Ben Hur*. Like any good fantasy tale Mekonnen must be balanced with enough down to earth situations that we can relate to, like when a loved one dies, falling in love, looking up to a mentor or becoming prideful and falling to temptations. And a good measure of action, suspense and intrigue to keep you on the edge of your seat, turning the pages for more.

## Who is the True Enemy of us All?

Also, I would like to make it clear that this story is not intended to put down or alienate other religions or faiths but to reveal who the real enemy of mankind is, in the opinion of myself and many others, due to experience, observation and research. The true enemy of mankind is not people of differing races and cultures, not the white man, the black man, the Arab or Jew, but the enemy of us all, the one who is responsible for all evils in the world, all our sadness, miseries and sorrows, the one called Satan (*and many other names which I will refrain from listing here*). He who hates mankind and set us against each other to start wars and cause destruction of precious life. This is the true enemy of us all, human beings, the animal kingdom, and the holy beings and creatures of the heavenly realms in the universe, including the Almighty One that created it all.





*The multiethnic, international and inter-dimentional cast of characters from the Epic Adventures of Mekonnen. From left to right: Bahetawi Abba Shiloh, King Shekanos, Lord Jalleel Ibsaa, Abner Ben Zebadiyah, Kandake Amanikadetedede, Mekonnen Sofaniyas (center), Nuhamin Wolette-Semayat, Rabbel ibn Mansur, Issai Theophilos, Vymla Thomas, Tsi Ming Moon, and Arch-Angel Miykael (the Lion Hearted). Characters for the Epic of Mekonnen by J.M. "Matiyas" Griffith, copyright 1992, 2009.*

## A Trilogy With a Cast of International Characters

I would like this epic to be a trilogy (or possibly a tetralogy), with the story beginning in Book one as Mekonnen starts his adventure as a young warrior for the Kingdom of Aksum in Abyssinia, today that will be northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Then he will drift up the Nile River in to a remote village where he will meet an enigmatic holy man (Bahetawi) named Abba Shiloh who will become a mentor to Mekonnen. Here he will also meet the noble Lord Yohannes and falls in love with the beautiful Lady Nuhamin. Then he forms an alliance with the strong willed warrior Queen, Kandake Amanikadetedede of the southern Nubian kingdom of Alodia. Ultimately he finds himself in a great war among the Nubian Kingdoms as King Basiliskos of Nobatia has gone mad and launches an attack King Shakanos' realm of Makurria, who is suspicious of the Aksumites and Amanikadetedede's ulterior motives for helping him in this war. Meanwhile Mekonnen meets the Iron Lion of Zion sent from the Realms of Semayat (Kingdom of Heaven) to assist Mekonnen in this heated battle, and entrusts him with the Armour of God (Agzio). After this Mekonnen and Abba Shiloh tackle the root cause of this chaos, coming from evil forces in high places and positions. Abba Shiloh confronts a high ranking suspect in Alexandria, Egypt, while Mekonnen and Lion Zion battles forces in the pyramids of Giza where his faithfulness will be tried and tested. Somewhere in the course of Mekonnen journey in book one he will acquire the Armour of Agziaheber (Armour of God) as described in Ephesians 6:10-18, That's Book one in a nutshell without giving away any spoilers, I hope.

In Book two Mekonnen's adventures will take him to the Middle East from Israel (Palestine) to Persia where he will team up with other followers of Yesus Kristus, including among others, an Israelite name Abner ben Zebadiyah and a Nabataean Arab named Rabbel ibn Mansur. Most of us don't know, and neither did I, that an Arab nation called the Nabateans were one of the first nations to accept Christianity in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, around the same time the Abyssinians/Ethiopians did.

In the third (and final book, though there may be a fourth) Mekonnen will enter Europe through Russia then be captured and taken to the heart of the Byzantium Empire in Asia Minor (Anatolia). Then he goes through Greece and other Byzantine territories, sail the Mediterranean Sea to North Africa and eventual his adventure ends and he's back home in Aksum.



## Possibly a Fourth Book

Recently, as of October 2009, new ideas and stories have been developing in my mind and spirit that may bring the epic to conclude with a 4th book. The 4th book may be something of an epilogue, connecting dots and tying up loose ends in a mystical way, this time the story will be telling the tale of Mekonnen's adventures and inter-dimensional warfare from the Arch-Angels' point of view and the celestial battle from their perspective. Think of it as the mystical fourth Gospel of John book of the epic. This will complete the mystical/spiritual connection between my four books to the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; the four Arch Angels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel; the four cardinal points on earth: East, West, South, North; the four elements of Water, Fire, Earth and Air; the four camps of Israel in the wilderness; Judah, Joseph, Reuben and Dan; and the four Heavenly Creatures that surround and worship at the throne of the Almighty One, Yahweh and His Anointed One, Yehshua, having the faces of a Lion, an Ox, a Man and an Eagle.

## The Ancient Battle Between Light and Darkness

I'm aware that not everyone that reads my story, the Epic of Mekonnen, will agree with or understand some of the principles and ideas presented. I've written based on what I've learned through study, research and from my experiences and careful interpretation, and I happen to believe in the Son of God, Jesus Christ (Yahshua Ha Meshiach, Iyesus Kristos) and that he is my Lord and King. According to the prophecies in the Holy Scriptures, like he did in the past, leading Joshua's army to claim the promise land (Joshua 5:13-15), in the future he will fight for his people and battle against the Devil and his armies and will defeat them and cast them into Hell (Revelation 19). Even now when we pray and put on the spiritual Armour of God, he dispatches his angels to fight for us. Like when the angel Gabriel told the prophet Daniel that there was a battle going on in the spiritual realm from the time he started praying and fasting (Daniel 9:20-27).

## Why I chose Ethiopia

I chose Ethiopia to be the origin of this story because this east African nation seemed like the best place to represent Africans and Christians in a positive way. Other than the kingdoms of Egypt, the general public, including people of African descent, know little of the glories of the kingdoms of Ethiopia and Nubia, which were known as the land of Kush in the ancient world. Instead many have this false stereotypical view of most of Africa being primitive, uneducated, full of just jungles, or desert. That's the view I had anyway because that's how it was portrayed in the news and movies. For me Christian Nubia and Ethiopia breaks all the stereotypes we and even I had about Africa.

Another reason is the fact that many people of the African diaspora look up to Ethiopia as a model of freedom and independence, being the only African nation that has not been colonized by Europeans. Also being the first, and right now the only African nation to recognize Christianity to be its state religion. They also have close historical and spiritual ties to Judaism and the nation of Israel going back to almost 3000 years ago, probably beginning with the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Jerusalem to speak to King Solomon (some experts speculate Judaism may have entered the Ethiopia region since around the time of Moses). Not to mention that The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, monarchy and government claim to have the sacred Ark of the Covenant in their country. In the Caribbean Ethiopia is venerated and recognized as being mentioned in the Bible many times and some churches and the Rastafarians believe the Garden of Eden was in Ethiopia. Although I don't agree with some of the beliefs



*Above: A painting I did for an art class project in the early 1990s. This piece illustrates Ephesians 6:11-18 showing a warrior suited in a golden suit of Armour battling a fire breathing dragon. This is one of the first pieces that gave me an idea for a story and will later develop into the Mekonnen character and his adventures.*

and Bible interpretations of the Rastafarian movement, they I have done a lot of promoting some understanding, history and culture of Ethiopia and encourage descendants of slaves to remember where we came from.

## How my Adventure began

It all started way back in 1992 or 1993 when I was about 18 or 19 years old, living in the Caribbean island nation of Trinidad, in the town of Arima. I was a fairly new born-again Christian of about two years and was very involved and active in my home church, *Arima Church of God*, in Malabar, Arima. I read my Bible fairly often and spent significant time studying the word with my Church's Youth group, tuning in to Christian radio programs, and studying in my own personal devotional time. Around this time I became familiar with *Ephesians 6:11-18*, the Apostle Paul's well known verse about the *Amour of God*. The elements of a Roman soldiers armour is used to illustrate the way to resist and fight off the attacks and deceits of the enemy forces in the spiritual walk of the Christian faith. This became one of my favourite verses in the Bible. The verse demonstrates in simple, relatable terms and objects for anyone to understand and picture in one's mind.

This verse also sparked my wild imagination, being a young, budding artist and aspiring writer, I quickly pictured an armoured warrior with helmet on head, decorated breast plate, shield in one hand and wielding a sharp sword in the other hand, fighting off some devious fiends or some fierce, fire breathing dragon like in the fantasy movies. Back then I was, and still, a big fan of Fantasy/Sci-Fi, sword and sandals, styled epic movies like *Star Wars*, *Ben Hur*, *Conan the Barbarian*, and then *Willow*. I used to read and collect certain comic books and several publications of Robert E. Howard's *Conan* by *Marvel Comics* became my favourite. I enjoyed the savage battles, sword fights and pseudo-historical backdrop of Conan's world. His epic adventures were very exciting to me and the Victorian dialogue and vocabulary carefully written by the comic writers were very well done. Reading these comics actually helped me to improve my English grammar and writing skills in secondary school.

What happened is that I took this verse and applied it to my already present fondness for this "genre" of ancient and medieval "Sword & Sandals" or "Sword & Sorcery" films and books. After I became a born-again Christian in 1991, I realized in several bible verses that God is apposed to magic and sorcery and that there was a spiritual warfare going on between the angels of God and the devil's angels. This realization that there is a spiritual warfare going on fueled my imagination even more.

Then I began doing sketches and drawings of how I would like my new character to look like and what sort of clothing and armour he would wear. Eventually I planned out most of the story with little summary notes and descriptions with drawings of various scenes and adventures my new hero may have. I was determined to make it into a three part graphic novel, because like I mentioned before, I was very much into comic books and graphic novels back then.



Above: The extent of the Kingdom of Aksum and its conquered territories in 6th century AD. At its zenith the Habesha Kingdom of Aksum ruled north and central Ethiopia, Eritria, Yemen and parts of Sudan reaching the southern border of Egypt.

## Cush and Ethiopia in the Bible

Another key element of influence for Mekonnen are sermons and Bible study classes I remember from my



church in Trinidad, pointing out where Cush and Ethiopia are mentioned in the Bible many times, in many contexts, most of them in positive light.

One of the main verses of inspiration and encouragement for me is the account of the Ethiopian Eunuch that was witnessed to and baptized by the Apostle Philip in the book of *Acts 6:26-40*. The Eunuch who was probably actually a Nubian (presently Sudan), was a treasurer for the Candace of whom history states was Queen of the Nubian Kingdom of Meroe at the time in the latter part of the first century AD. At this time in history, and even in more ancient times, any African region south of Egypt past the first cataract at Aswan, was called *Ethiopia*, and people from that region were called “Ethiopian” which in Greek means “burnt-face” because they were darker skinned. Further south of Meroe was the Abyssinian kingdom of Aksum which is what we know today as the regions of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD Aksum over came and conquered Meroe, making it part of the Aksumite Kingdom.

So here we have one of the first non-Israelites in *Acts 6:26-40* to convert to Christianity being a black African coming from Africa. It seems the Ethiopian Eunuch may have already been practicing the Jewish religion because was going to Jerusalem to worship and had a copy of the Jewish scrolls with him. It is known now that there were Jews living in Egypt, Nubia and Abyssinia since the time of Moses or Queen of Sheba.

Further more, if one goes back to the Old Testament prophet of *Amos 9:7* where the prophet makes an interesting statement from God concerning the Israelites,

*“Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel?”* (KJV)

And another from Jeremiah,

*“Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?”* – Jeremiah 13:23.

God dealt with Moses’ sister Miriam for speaking against his Ethiopian/Cushite wife:

*“And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married.”*

– Number 12:1, (KJV)

In the *Song of Solomon 1:5-6*,

*“Behold I am dark and comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me...”*

There are many more examples, including the Queen of Sheba that visited King Solomon as told in 1 Kings 10:1-13, of who some believe the lover mentioned in the Song of Solomon is actually this same Queen. Historically, Sheba or Saba was located in the South Arabic region across the Red Sea from Ethiopia and Eritrea in present day Yemen.

As I continued to discover these positive and affirming verses of stories in the Bible of the role of Africans and other people of color in God’s plan, also realizing that the Israelites are also people of colour. Africans, Cushites or Ethiopians were known as respected, honourable, noble people whether they were dark, brown or light complexion. The Greeks, Romans and other ancient European people saw Africans in a positive light and even claimed their gods originated from or vacationed in Ethiopia. The Greek historian Herodotus who in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC wrote in *Histories Book 3: 20* that:

*“The Ethiopians, who were the objects of all this attention, are said to be the tallest and best looking people in the world.”*

So between 1991 and 1993 I did a lot of illustrations, some brain storming, wrote a few chapters here and there and even wrote a 7 page poem briefly recounting to whole story in 1995. But I was never able to complete it for

various reasons. I went to a commercial art school for 1991-1995 that took up a lot of time, Then, I ran out of resources for more information on Ethiopian history, culture, languages, names, etc. Sure there were libraries I could and did go to, but there is only so much you can find in a library and limited time to borrow books. This was also before the internet was invented so information was not as easy to find then as it is now.

After 3 years of art school and not doing very well in the final exams, I took a computer graphics course, did very well, then got my first full time graphic design job in my home town of Arima in Trinidad in 1996. I worked there until 1998 and in that time made little progress with my Ethiopian /Aksumite hero, who was going by the name “Martigon” because I could not find a proper Ethiopian name for him. In mid 1998 my family and I left the sunny island of Trinidad to Baltimore, Maryland USA.

### **Moving to Baltimore MD, USA**

Coming to Baltimore Maryland with my family in August of 1998 was a big step in my adventures of producing Mekonnen’s adventure. My mom was already living in the US since 1989 but it took until 1998 to be able to get my father, brother and myself to come up to join her. I was only able to come into the country on a student visa because of my age of just over 21. My hope was to get into a computer animation program, so I started with acquiring an Associates degree in Interactive Design before graduating with honors in June of 2001 at the Community College of Baltimore County, Catonsville (CCBC). After this I really wanted to go to UMBC and get a Bachelor’s degree in Computer animation but lack of funding did not permit this and I had to seek a well paying job.

At least now information was much easier to acquire with the internet and computers everywhere. Yet between 1998 and 2001 I was still so busy with work and school project that I could not spend too much time on my stories, but I managed to squeeze in some time to work on a few details. It was during this time I finally found the name “Mekonnen” for my main character. A good, strong name that means “respected”, “elite” or “general”. It was also during my time in college that I met Ethiopians for the first time and was able to tell them about my story and ask a few questions. This was when I met Israel Endalkachew in a couple of my graphic design classes and we hung out a bit and kept in contact. But some time after 2002 we lost contact of each other until we met again at a mall in 2006. Up until that time still very little progress was made with Mekonnen, but the stage had already been set.

## **2006: Renewed Zeal to Complete the Story**

### **Things started falling into place**

By early 2006, after getting over some major disappointments and disillusionment in my personally life, I went back into researching online and purchases several books on ancient and modern Ethiopian and Eritrean history and culture. Watching the *Lord of the Rings* and *Chronicles of Narnia* movies also inspired me to continue with it. I also started looking online for Ethiopian churches in the Baltimore and DC area hoping that one day I may call on the phone and ask a few questions that will help me to learn more about the country and people, and hopeful to visit some time. I found a few in the area and even noticed there was one very near to my house but I couldn’t figure out exactly where it was, and surprised I never saw it before.

Then one day in early 2006 I ran into Israel in a mall near where I lived, after not seeing him for almost 4 years. We kept in contact and this time he was working in the mall. A few months after that on a Saturday afternoon in July or August of 2006 I went to a Greek carryout place in my area just to get a gyro for lunch. While I’m sitting waiting for my order, I look down and saw a free local paper called *The Baltimore County Times* and on the front cover was an article about a cultural festival at an Ethiopian church called Emmanuel Evangelical Church on Liberty. There were two photographs, one of an Ethiopian lady in traditional clothes pouring coffee into cups

and other of Pastor Daniel Berhanu and Mr. Abraham standing together. This was interesting so after I paid for my order I called Israel and ask him if that was the church he attends and he said yes it was. I said I would like to visit one day and he told me about the Youth service they have on the last Sunday of each month.

A couple of weeks later I went to Emmanuel Church Youth service on a Sunday night. At first I was a bit nervous not knowing what to expect but I was looking forward to it. It was very nice and different and I felt like I was in a different world when they sang in their language, Amharic and played their music with its eastern rhythms. It was different but it still felt familiar because the Spirit of God was there and I know they were praising God but in a different language. Pastor Daniel himself preached the sermon then we had fellowship and food downstairs. Some of the youth people there, and even the pastor, told me that I look like Ethiopian and they wouldn't have known if I didn't tell them. It's interesting some of them do look like some Trinidadians and other Caribbean people especially those mixed with two or more ethnic groups.

Then about a month or two later when I was getting ready to visit the Ethiopian church again I decided to call my aunt Janet who lives in Chicago just to Hi, and since I did not hear from her in a while. While talking to her I started to hear the voices of little children in the back ground so I asked who was making those noises. My aunt said they were her two twin daughters she adopted from Ethiopia about two years before. When she said that I was surprised at the coincidence and the fact that I did know that before. My aunt told my dad, who is her brother, and thought my dad would have told me and the rest of the family, but he forgot to. Then I told her about my story and I was just getting ready to visit an Ethiopian church as we spoke.

## My Adventure Continues

So this was the beginning of my miraculous journey back to writing this story. As I think back I realize it's a good thing I did not try to complete it before because I did not know half the things I know now to make it a better story.

Since then I've been to the Ethiopian church many times, almost every Youth service since then and even during the regular morning service many times and on special trips like to restaurants and the beach at Ocean City. I've also visited The Ethiopian Evangelical church in Silver Spring and an Ethiopian Orthodox Church service once in DC. Also celebrated the Ethiopian New Year 2000 in September of 2007 and been to the Ethiopian Yellow Pages New Year and Anniversary celebration in DC. I've bought many books about ancient and modern Ethiopia and Eritrea and I'm current trying to learn Amharic, and a little bit of Oromo, Tigrinya and the ancient language Ge'ez. I have a basic understanding for reading and writing the Ethiopic script called *fidel*, and own a few Amharic-English dictionaries, phrase books and fidel/alphabet charts on hand help me along. Occasionally I practice what I learned with my *Habesha* (Ethiopian and Eritrean) friends and they gladly, sometimes jokingly, help me with proper pronunciation, and encourage me when I get it correct.

I've also learned quite early on that a lot of people I've met and became friends with are actually from Eritrea, which used to be a state of Ethiopian but became independent in 1992 after some wars and disputes. Historically though, the kingdom of Aksum (and the D'mot kingdom before that), where my story begins, extended from Eritrea to northern Ethiopia. Despite this I am happy to see different groups of peoples worshipping and fellowshiping in unity in Christ. I also learned that in Ethiopia and Eritrea there are many different languages spoken of the Semetic, Cushitic and Nilotic groups (I was told about 80 different languages and dialects) and several ethnic groups, the largest being Oromo, then Amhara, Tigrinya, Tigre, Gurage, Harari, Afar, Bilen, and many more.



So this is where my adventure has taken me so far, and I'm still in the midst of it, waiting to see where else God leads me, where ever he allows me to go. Some day I would like to go to Ethiopia and set foot on the land that's been on me mind and dreams for more than 16 years now. Maybe someday my dreams and imagination will become reality.

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