

THE MYSTERIOUS BLACK PROPHET FOUND AT LAST

Two and a half years ago the Methodist Churches of Great Britain were startled by the news that tens of thousands of people on the French Ivory Coast were calling to our Missionary Society for teachers. Ten years before, at the call of a strange black prophet, these multitudes destroyed their fetishes and shrines, received Christian baptism, and built for themselves churches in their villages.

A few months after the outbreak of the great European war, the Government of the colony, fearful of the influence of this African prophet, expelled him from their territory. His converts were left unshepherded and untaught. They had only the slightest knowledge of Christian truth, but they set themselves to keep the faith—and they kept it, for ten long years. Few, if any, went back to fetishisms; indeed, the old religion was absolutely swept away from the area influenced by the preaching of the prophet.

Nothing more surprising has ever occurred in the whole history of modern missions. It is wonderful that, in a short space of a few months, a simple African preacher should have won more converts than any missionary ever sent out to West Africa; it is wonderful that the old religion should have been so completely overthrown; but most wonderful of all that the tens of thousands of converts should, for so many years, have stood firm in the new faith they had accepted. The whole movement has been unique.

The Man

The man who was used by God to the accomplishment of this great work was an unknown African Christian. He was not connected with any missionary society; no church had commissioned or sent him forth. Believing that God had called him, William Wade Harris began to preach to his fellow-countrymen in Liberia.

That was in 1910. He does not seem to have met with much response; but about 1913 or 1914 he crossed the frontier into the French Ivory Coast, and there he met with his remarkable success. Like a second John the Baptist, he called men to repent, to forsake fetishisms and turn to God. Then, in the spring of 1915 he vanished as suddenly as he came.

From that time little or nothing was heard of him, and many people believed him to be dead. In 1924, the Rev. William J. Platt, in a very remarkable way, got into touch with Harris's converts, and they appealed to the Methodist Missionary Society to send them teachers.

At once there was aroused in Britain a great wave of interest in the remarkable black prophet who had so clearly been used by God in the conversion of possibly upwards of 100,000 Africans. Thousands began to ask: "Where is the Prophet Harris now? Is anything known about his life?"

The only answers that could be given to such questions were vague and unsatisfying. There were many rumors, but they were more or less doubtful.

Two years ago it became quite certain that Harris was still alive, and, in old age, living in the village of his birth near Cape Palmas in Liberia. So last autumn the Ivory Coast missionaries sent one of their number, Pastor Pierre Benoit, to find him. With him went

Victor Tano, an Ivory Coast Christian, who had known Harris well, for he had been converted under him, and became the prophet's interpreter.

Traveling with M. Benoit and his companion landed at the little town of Cape Palmas, a sleepy little place near the famous promontory. They did not know how long, or how difficult a search lay before them. Happily it proved a very short one, for they found one of the prophet's daughters living in the town, a married woman named Mrs. Neal. From her the missionary learned that her father had a house in the village of Graway, three miles along the coast. But, though now advanced in years, he still wanders about the country calling the people to turn to God. His movements are erratic, and she never knows when to expect him.

Following up this information, M. Benoit immediately set off to the prophet's village, not knowing whether he would find him or not. A hot, exhausting walk along the seashore, under the burning sun, brought him to Graway, and there, under a few tall trees, the prophet's humble dwelling was pointed out to him. It was in a half-ruined condition, and showed every sign of poverty and neglect. It looked as though it had not been closed for years.

Benoit entered. The house was empty and desolate. There was hardly any furniture, and as he passed from room to room he mused that a dozen years ago the old man who lives in this wretched place had been the means of the conversion of nearly one hundred thousand people. In his journal he wrote:

"Many have trembled before him; many have hated or adored him. In 1914 a word from him would have thrown the Ivory Coast into rebellion. He could have amassed a small fortune if he had accepted the gifts of his followers. Here in Liberia he is regarded as no more than a poor old visionary, and many people despise him."

A few ashes, and a bed that had evidently been recently slept on, showed that the place had been occupied only a few hours before; and, on enquiry, the neighbors declared that Harris himself had been there, and had left for Cape Palmas that very morning.

Dramatic Meeting

Afraid lest he might even now miss the prophet, M. Benoit and Tano immediately retraced their steps to Cape Palmas, and on entering the town came upon an aged man resting by the wayside. A glance showed that it was the prophet himself, and with great emotion the missionary sprang forward to greet him.

Harris rose and extended his hand, and on learning that M. Benoit had come from the Ivory Coast to seek him and tell him of the Churches he had founded, he, too, was overcome with emotion.

The old prophet stood there, exactly the man he had always been pictured. He still wears the long white gown, the turban, the ribbons, and small brass cross hanging round his neck. He still carries a rude baptismal cross, though he has painted it with feathers. He is considerably older, but his features have hardly changed.

He is tall, rather stout, has a full face with white beard and gentle eyes. "As I look at him, I understand the gentle compassion

which the people of the Ivory Coast have for him," writes M. Benoit. It is difficult to discover his true age; Africans are usually vague in such matters. Certainly he is between 60 and 80. This is an advanced age for a Negro, for very few live to be 65 or 70.

Physically he appears to be still remarkably strong; he can still walk for miles without exhaustion. But his mind is weaker. It is evident that the shadows of evening are upon him. He is liable to excitement, speaks with vehemence, and paces restlessly to and fro. It was only with difficulty that M. Benoit got him to compose himself for conversation.

Victor Tano knelt beside his former teacher and affectionately pressed his hands, and the missionary sat down beside the old man, and tried to tell him news of his converts on the Ivory Coast.

The Call of God

It was at once evident that Harris can think of nothing beside his work. He has an overwhelming conviction that God has called him, and he feels that he must preach to all. Speaking rapidly and with deep earnestness, he declares that he knows that there are still people who worship fetishes. Someone must preach to them; someone must tell them. The time is short; the time is short! More than once he turned over the pages of his Bible, and made Pierre Benoit read for himself the words: "The time is short." Then his eyes flashed, and he exclaimed that, unless men repent, God will send fire from heaven to destroy them.

He firmly believes himself to be a prophet sent by God, and he feels it to be a unique honor; with a touch of surprise he exclaims: "Me, a kroo-boy, to be a great prophet!"

In several long conversations with the prophet, M. Benoit managed to get information on several points about his personal life. He was born in Graway, and as a boy attended a school of the American Methodist Mission; as a youth he was converted, and at once began to preach—apparently as an exhorter, in a quiet way in his own neighborhood. For some time he took to the sea as a kroo-boy (canoe man), and then worked as a bricklayer. Then he got a post as a teacher of reading and writing in an elementary school.

The great crisis of his life came in 1910. His own tribe, the Grebos, had risen in rebellion against their republican masters, and in connection with this Harris raised over his house a Union Jack. He was arrested and thrown into prison. It was while in prison that the great call came. He firmly believes that he had a vision, and saw Gabriel come to him with a call to preach.

"Did you see Gabriel with your eyes?" asked Pierre Benoit.

"No," said the prophet; "not with my eyes. I saw him inside myself, spiritually."—F. Deaville Walker, in the Methodist Times, London.

There are three types of consciences—the sore, the callous and the tender. The sore conscience causes us to act like a man with a felon on his finger. Every time anything or anybody comes his way, he is dodging and feeling the hurt even if not touched. The one with a callous conscience hopes the other person is putting on the coat—when the owner of that type of conscience should recognize that the coat exactly fits him.