

# Heye, Bekele

## (1933–1998)

TEMESGEN BULTI

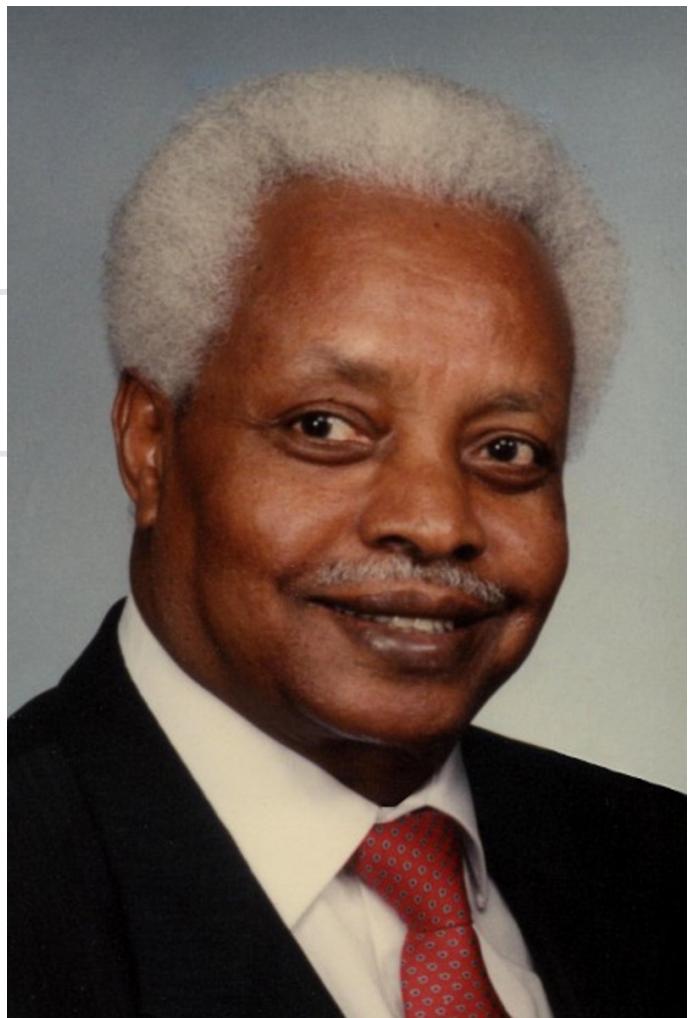
Temesgen Bulti

Bekele Heye was a prominent African Adventist Church leader for over thirty years. He served the Church as a teacher, dean of students, union departmental secretary, union president, division department secretary, and division president.<sup>1</sup>

### Early Years

Bekele Heye was born to Heye Birra Boba and Beyenech Gurmu Ero<sup>2</sup> in Kalala Village in the outskirt of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1933.<sup>3</sup> Bekele was the only child of his farmer parents. His mother had a difficult labor that forced the family to bring her to Finfine, not far from where the Ethiopian Union Mission office is now situated, in pursuit of a traditional “midwife.” Bekele’s mother successfully delivered a healthy baby boy, however, the process apparently precluded further childbearing.<sup>4</sup> The young Bekele lived in Kalala Village until he was about nineteen years of age, helping his parents with farming. He did not attend school during this time.

Teklehaymanot Kelecha, one of the eminent veteran pastors in the early work of the Adventist Church in Southern Ethiopia, was Bekele Heye’s paternal uncle. At the time, Teklehaymanot was working at Kuyera, Shashamane, where Ethiopia Adventist College was under development. Teklehaymanot offered to take his nephew, Bekele Heye, to Kuyera so that the latter could begin formal education.<sup>5</sup> Bekele’s father was not comfortable with the proposal. He wanted Bekele to stay at home and take care of the family’s property as the future heir. However, Bekele’s mother, a progressive woman, insisted that her son receive a formal education by



Bekele Heye

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

going to Kuyera with his uncle. Before long, Bekele accepted the Adventist message and was baptized. Partly because of his age and partly because of his genius, Bekele Heye completed elementary, middle, and high school education in a short time, graduating in 1958.<sup>6</sup>

## Family and Further Education

Bekele Heye was hired as a teacher at Kuyera Adventist School after his graduation from high school. He worked with his close friend and brother-in-law-to-be, Fekede Gemechu (now Dr. Fekede Gemechu), from Gimbie, Wollega Province. Haregewoyine Gemechu Kumsa arrived at Kuyera in 1958 to stay with her brother, Fekede, while she pursued her education. Before long, Bekele and Haregewoyine fell in love and were married on August 14, 1960, at Kuyera Adventist Church, Shashamane.<sup>7</sup>

Just one month later, in September 1960, the newlyweds received scholarships to attend Newbold College in England, where Bekele earned a Bachelor of Arts in theology in 1964. Newbold was not only a place of education, but also of child rearing for Bekele and Haregewoyine. Three of their four children were born there, Yared Bekele in October 1961, Aser Bekele in October 1962, and Sofia Bekele in July 1964. The youngest child of the family, Yafet Bekele, was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in December 1965. Obviously, the growing size of the family had its economic bearing on the couple, though Bekele's tuition was taken care of by the Church. Caring for her young children caused Haregewoyine to forfeit her education. Bekele covered the family's expenses by canvassing in Sweden and Norway during his summer vacation.<sup>8</sup>

After graduation from Newbold, Bekele Heye and his family returned to Ethiopia to serve at Ethiopia Adventist College. Bekele served the college as dean of students. However, his ministerial calling was well recognized, and he was ordained to the gospel ministry in 1967 at the Ethiopian Union Mission headquarters in Addis Ababa. In the same year, the family moved to Addis Ababa where Bekele was called to serve as the Sabbath School department secretary of Ethiopia Union Mission. He served in this capacity until September 1969 when he received a post-graduate scholarship to Andrews University in Berrien Spring, Michigan, United States. Bekele Heye completed his Master of Arts degree in religion at Andrews University in less than a year, graduating in June 1970.<sup>9</sup>

Before returning to his country, Bekele attended the 1970 General Conference Session in Atlantic City, New Jersey, United States, where he was elected Sabbath School department secretary for the Afro-Mideast Division. This made him the first African to hold a division departmental position in the Adventist Church. Bekele Heye served in this position for five years, residing in Beirut, Lebanon, for five years.<sup>10</sup>

## Service as Ethiopia Union President

In 1975, Bekele was elected Ethiopia Union Mission president—the first Ethiopian to hold that position. The five years of his union leadership (1975-1980) were executed in an unfavorable national political climate that made his work very difficult. Until 1974, the Church enjoyed Emperor Hailesellasies' friendly relationship.<sup>11</sup> However, the monarch was overthrown in 1974 by the socialist regime under the leadership of Mengistu Hailemariam. Many churches were closed down across the country. Christians, particularly Protestant Christians including Seventh-day Adventists, went through severe persecution. Many church-owned institutions, including Empress Zewuditu's Hospital in Addis Ababa City, were confiscated. Missionaries were forced to leave the country. Bekele Heye was summoned twice to the office of President Mengistu. Fortunately, he was not imprisoned.

The situation could have become even worse had God not intervened. Divine intervention was manifested in Bekele Heye's exceptional diplomatic demeanor and the presence of his cousin, Colonel Teka Tulu, heading the Derg regime's security department. Consequently, a few churches in and around Addis Ababa and in a few regional towns remained functional.<sup>12</sup> As a church leader, Bekele Heye was praised for appointing capable young ministers to positions of leadership. By so doing, he infused a national flavor into the Adventist Church in Ethiopia.

## Division President

Bekele Heye was elected president of Afro-Mideast Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church at the 1980 General Conference Session in Dallas, Texas, United States, once again making history as the first native African division president in the history of the Church.<sup>13</sup> The Lebanese civil war forced the division to work from Nicosia, Cyprus, beginning in 1978. Bekele and his family served in Nicosia until the end of 1981 when the Afro-Mideast Division was officially dissolved by the re-organization process that created the Eastern Africa Division.<sup>14</sup> The family moved to Nairobi, Kenya, where Bekele served as the president of the new Eastern Africa Division organized on January 1, 1982.<sup>15</sup> In 1983, three African countries from the Trans-African Division—Botswana, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—joined the Eastern Africa Division.<sup>16</sup> This was followed by the relocation of the division office to Harare, Zimbabwe. Bekele continued to serve as division president from Harare until the family returned to Ethiopia after his retirement in 1992.<sup>17</sup>

Bekele Heye was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease in 1996 and passed away on December 31, 1998, at the age of 66. A massive stroke was his immediate cause of death.<sup>18</sup> His body was laid to rest at the St. Joseph Cemetery in Addis Ababa on January 3, 1999.<sup>19</sup> The news of his death attracted the attention of major national mass media in Ethiopia as a prominent national figure. Thousands, including government dignitaries, attended his funeral ceremony. Bekele Heye was survived by his wife, Haregewine Bekele, who was nearly 80 at the time of this writing.<sup>20</sup>

## Awards

Bekele was awarded a medal of honor from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in 1980<sup>21</sup> for his contribution to the sustainment of Christianity in Ethiopia as a spokesman for all religious organizations during the oppressive communist regime. He was also awarded an honorary doctor of divinity from the Adventist University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, Eldoret, Kenya, in 1990.<sup>22</sup> This was in recognition of his vision in establishing the university, which he also served as the founding chancellor.

## Legacy

Apart from his excellent contribution to the Seventh-day Adventist Church as one of its distinguished leaders, Bekele Heye contributed to the Church in writing. He authored the book *The Sabbath in Ethiopia: An Exploration of Christian Roots*.<sup>23</sup> This book analyzed the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's<sup>24</sup> observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath in the medieval era, the period of study of the book.<sup>25</sup> His research furnished contemporary Christians with the evidence for continued observance of God's true Sabbath several centuries after the Christian West abandoned the commandment.

Bekele Heye wanted to establish a school for children in the Kalala Community where he was raised. His poor health condition prevented him from realizing this wish. However, his wife, children, and his brother-in-law, Dr. Fekede Gemechu, implemented the vision on his behalf in Kalala Village. The school (preschool to grade 12) was named after Bekele Heye's great grandfather, Shibu Ejersa, who was one of the influential landlords near Addis Ababa at the time of the city's founding 125 years ago. The official name of the school is "Shibu Ejersa School in Memory of Pastor Bekele Heye." It serves over 2000 students from the community. Kalala Seventh-day Adventist church and Sammit International Clinic are also part of the school, providing wholistic service to the surrounding community according to the vision of Elder Bekele Heye.<sup>26</sup>

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### SOURCES

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## NOTES

1. "Veteran African Adventist Leader Dies," *ARH*, February 25, 1999, 22-23, accessed on November 23, 2021, <https://www.adventistreview.org/archives/pdf/1508-1999.pdf>.
2. Note that Ethiopians do not use surnames. The first name is their proper name. The proper names are followed by father's name, grandfather's name, and so on. Neither do married women take their husbands' names. Rather, they keep their fathers' names. For instance, Heye is the father of Bekele. Birra was his grandfather. Gurmu was the father of Beyenech, the mother of Bekele.
3. Yared Bekele, interview by author, Shibu Ejera School, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 24, 2021.
4. Ibid.
5. Yared Bekele, son of Bekele Heye, information given in writing, November 24, 2021.
6. Ibid.
7. Haregewine Bekele, interview by author, Bole, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 29, 2021.
8. Ibid.
9. Yared Bekele, son of Bekele Heye, information given in writing, November 24, 2021.
10. Haregewine Bekele, interview by author, Bole, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 29, 2021.
11. Tiruneh Woldeselassie, *Adventism in Ethiopia: The Incredible Saga of the Beginning and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventist Work in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Finfinne Printing and Publishing S.C., 2005), 343; 393.
12. Many Ethiopian Protestant churches were completely closed down during the socialist regime. The Seventh-day Adventist Church (especially the Central Church in Addis Ababa) was their place of worship. The author has heard many Protestant Christians expressing their gratitude for the church for hosting them during the difficult time.
13. Bekele Heye, "Author's Biography," in *The Sabbath in Ethiopia: An Exploration of Christian Roots* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2003), 2.

14. Adventist Church history indicates that the Beirut office of the Afro-Mideast Division was a temporary arrangement from the beginning. This was because the membership of the division was largely from African churches and they were growing quickly. Africans urged the General Conference leadership to bring the division office closer to its largest constituency. Bekele Heye was one of the notable instruments in facilitating the relocation of the division office to Africa. It is not difficult to understand how delicate the process and how strong the urge on the part of African churches would have been as colonialism waned and Pan Africanism grew.
15. General Conference Committee, October 8, 1981, 81-284, General Conference Archives,  
<https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1981-10.pdf>.
16. Nathaniel Walemba, "East-Central Africa Division," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, accessed November 28, 2021.  
<https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=8ELJ&highlight=east-central|Africa|division>.
17. "Veteran African Adventist Leader Dies," *ARH*, February 25, 1999, accessed on November 23, 2021.  
<https://www.adventistreview.org/archives/pdf/1508-1999.pdf>.
18. Haregewine Bekele, interview by author, Bole, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 29, 2021.
19. "Veteran African Adventist Leader Dies," *ARH*, February 25, 1999, 22-23, accessed on November 23, 2021,  
<https://www.adventistreview.org/archives/pdf/1508-1999.pdf>.
20. Haregewine Bekele, interview by author, Bole, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 29, 2021.
21. Yared Bekele, information given in writing to author, November 24, 2021.
22. Ibid.
23. Bekele Heye, *The Sabbath in Ethiopia: An Exploration of Christian Roots* (Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry, 2003).
24. The state church of Ethiopia until 1974.
25. Observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath continued among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians until recently. In fact, many Orthodox Christians still observe both Saturday and Sunday as Sabbath.
26. Yared Bekele, interview by author, Shibu Ejera School, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 24, 2021.