

Kassahun, Dessie (1912–1988)

MANDEFRO ALEMAYEHU

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Early Life

Dessie Kassahun was born in 1912 in South Gondar zone, Ebenat province, Feresmeda Kebele (subdistrict), Ethiopia. His father was one of the founders and evangelists of the Adventist Church in northern Ethiopia. He was the second born in the family and had five brothers and five sisters.¹

As a youngster, he dreamed about studying at a modern school. He had heard about a missionary school in Eritrea and at the age of eight, with the help of his uncles and with some of his relatives of similar age, left his village and headed to Eritrea on foot. The journey took more than a month.²

After completing fourth grade, the maximum level of education allowed by the colonial rule, young Dessie returned home. Shortly afterwards he traveled to Addis Ababa for further training. He studied at the Seventh-day Adventist School in Addis Alem. It was at this institution that he developed a very close and lifelong friendship with Pastor Negassa Aga, a renowned educator at Akaki Mission School, and Ato Ephrem Boru, a prominent minister and ambassador with Emperor Haile Selassie.³ Through their influence, and also that of his Adventist parents, Dessie accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and was baptized in 1931 in the Fersemeda Tequen River.

Joining the Ministry in the Adventist Church

After his training at Addis Alem, young Dessie worked within the developing Adventist organization in Addis Ababa.⁴ One prominent project in which he participated in a leadership position was establishing one of the most successful mission stations in Ethiopia, the Debre Tabor Mission. They built a church, hospital, and school. These institutions have trained several Ethiopians who later became leaders in the Adventist Church and other organizations in Ethiopia.⁵

While enjoying the work that he was doing, Dessie's desire to further his education remained unsatisfied. He knew that he had to acquire more education to be more effective in his ministerial work. To this end, he joined

his friends, Negassa and Ephrem, and sailed to India to study at Spicer College. Upon completion of his studies, he set sail for Kenya, as Ethiopia at the time (beginning in 1935) was occupied by the Italians.⁶ Dessie's sojourn in Kenya was quite eventful. In 1938 he married Almaz Woldeselassie; he also mastered the Kiswahili language and worked as a teacher for five years. He and his two associates lived in Kenya, albeit in different cities, for the duration of the Italian war. Living in Kenya was an experience that he and his wife enjoyed and fondly spoke about for many years.⁷

With the expulsion of the Italians from Ethiopia in 1941, Dessie and his wife returned to Addis Ababa where he resumed his work at the Kebena Mission. He finally returned to Addis Ababa to continue his evangelistic work. He was ordained, the second Ethiopian to be ordained for ministry (Pastor Qubagzie in Eritrea was the first), and went to Dessie, a city and a zone in north-central Ethiopia, to spearhead the establishment of the church, hospital, and school. He served for more than a decade there. He continued his ministerial work in the Kuyera SDA School, in Jimma, and served as a chaplain at Zewditu Memorial Hospital until his retirement.

He is best remembered for his ministerial efforts, which took him to the most interior parts of the Amhara region, and his literary work which includes translation into Amharic of the book *The Bible Speaks* and several hymns. Pastor Dessie Kassahun served the Adventist Church for 43 years in various capacities and passed away in 1988, at the age of 76.⁸

Source

Woldeselassie, Truneh. *Adventism in Ethiopia: The Incredible Saga of the Beginning and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventist Work in Ethiopia*. N.p., 2005.

NOTES

1. Alazar Dessie (son of Dessie), interviewed by Mandefro Alemayehu, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 18, 2020.
2. Truneh Woldeselassie, *Adventism in Ethiopia: The Incredible Saga of the Beginning and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventist Work in Ethiopia* (n.p., 2005), 179.
3. Ibid., 195.
4. Alazar Dessie (son of Dessie), interviewed by Mandefro Alemayehu, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 18, 2020.
5. Woldessilasie, 199.
6. Ibid., 195, 2020.

7. Alazar Dessie (son of Dessie), interviewed by Mandefro Alemayehu, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 18, 2020.

8. Ibid.

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