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5 Adopted and Adapted: Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity

Neal W. Sobania

Introduction

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwāḥədo Church (EOTC) is one of the world's most ancient churches.¹ Its followers number in the millions, and not just in Ethiopia, but also in major diaspora communities in Australia, Europe, and North America. Putting a figure on the number of Ethiopian Orthodox faithful is challenging. The percentage of followers within Ethiopia is generally cited as about 40% in a population that today numbers over 100 million.²

Orthodox churches are generally identified by titles that recognize their geographical location (e.g. Armenian Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox) with each one drawing upon the cultural traditions of its believers. Being self-governing (autonomous) and having their own heads (autocephalous), these cultural differences are supported by Orthodox churches. Nevertheless, there are theological differences, the major one being over Jesus Christ's nature.

Whereas the Western world labels the eleventh century separation of western (Roman) and eastern (Byzantine) Christianity the Great Schism (1053),

for Orthodox Christianity the great schism took place 600 years earlier at the Council of Chalcedon (451) when it settled the theological issue of Christ's nature, a matter that had proven intractable for decades. Briefly, the "settled" Chalcedonian position on this issue, held by the vast majority of participants, decreed that Jesus Christ was to be "acknowledged in two natures [human and divine], without being mixed, transmuted or separated."³ Those who disagreed with this position, the so-called non-Chalcedonians, asserted Jesus Christ had only one nature, divine, even though for a time he had taken on an earthly human body. As no Ethiopian representative attended the Council, nor was the position taken there communicated to them, it has been suggested that a more accurate description of this position is pre-Chalcedonian.⁴

Today there are six non-Chalcedonian Orthodox churches that hold the position that Jesus Christ's perfectly united human and divine nature is indistinguishable.⁵ The Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwāḥədo Church (EOTC), the largest, makes their position clear by including "Tāwāḥədo" in its official name, which means "unity" or "oneness" in Gə'əz, the ecclesiastical language of the church. The

¹ Only the Armenian Apostolic Church is said to be older, adopted by the Kingdom of Armenia as its official religion ca. 300 CE.

² Ethiopian Orthodox 43.8%, Muslim 31.3%, Protestant 22.8%, Roman Catholic 0.7%, traditional 0.6% (2016). According to "People and Society: Religions," *The World Factbook: Ethiopia* <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/> (accessed January 18, 2021).

³ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Monophysite," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/monophysite> (accessed February 16, 2020).

⁴ A case can be made for using pre-Chalcedonian (Binns 2017, p. 145); however, given the antiquity of Ethiopian Christians' rejection of the Council of Chalcedon's formulation of

Christ's nature (Esler 2019, p. 107), this paper uses non-Chalcedonian to describe this position.

⁵ Also identified as Monophysites or Oriental Orthodox Churches, those who follow the non-Chalcedonian tradition are said to prefer the term *miaphysite* from the Greek *mia*, "single" and *physis*, "nature" to make the distinction between themselves and the fifteen Eastern Orthodox churches, such as Georgia, Greek, and Russian, that hold the "two natures of Christ" belief, and are nominally headed by the Patriarch of Constantinople; *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Monophysite,"

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/monophysite> (accessed February 16, 2020). See also Binns 2017, pp. 143–53.

other five non-Chalcedonian churches are the Armenian Apostolic Church, Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Church of India, and since 1992, the Eritrean Orthodox Tāwəḥədo Church. Note that each one's geographical location is reflected in its name. While in communion with each other (members of each Church may participate in the others' Eucharist celebration), each church is hierarchically independent.

Orthodox Christianity Adopted

Christianity's arrival in Ethiopia is closely linked to Aksum (Axum), a town in the north of the country's highlands that is the spiritual home of the EOTC. Aksum is both the name of an ancient kingdom and its capital. This empire emerged in the last few centuries before the Gregorian year 1, and its capital ruled over what by the third century was considered, along with Persia, Rome, and China, one of the world's four greatest powers. Situated at the hub of one of the world's great crossroads, where the peoples and cultures of Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean exchanged goods and ideas, meant that Ethiopia came in contact with Christianity within a century or two of its beginnings.

Aksum is inextricably linked to both the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the country's monarchy. Two different but widely known traditions supported this relationship and kept Ethiopia religiously Christian, socially hierarchical, and linguistically Semitic. One tradition focuses on the adoption of Christianity; the other links Ethiopia to ancient Israel as the inheritor of the Solomonic lineage. Although historically the two events fall into different time periods, this is of little importance in terms of popular understanding.

According to one tradition, for which there is contemporary written support, two young Syrian

Christian boys, Frumentius and Aedesius, were shipwrecked on the Red Sea coast. Presumably, this was at or near Adulis, the port from which Aksum played an active role in the trade of the Red Sea. Found sitting under a tree preparing their lessons, they were taken to Aksum where the brothers grew up and earned the high regard of King ʾIllä 'Amida. When the king died, his son 'Ezana was too young to be crowned king, so the queen asked Frumentius to be his tutor and Aedesius to be his cup-bearer. They agreed, and in serving 'Ezana they introduced him to their Christian faith. The clearest evidence for this is from numismatics. In the early part of 'Ezana's reign, the coins of his realm bore his image on one side and a crescent and disc symbol on the other. Later in his reign, a Greek cross replaced the crescent and disc suggesting Christianity was adopted ca. 330 CE.⁶ Additional evidence for the adoption of Christianity at this time is found in royal inscriptions of military victories. This is not to suggest the population immediately became Christian; rather it is likely that Christianity was limited at first to the royal court, from where the practice then spread to the general population (see below). What actual role Frumentius took in this adoption process is not clear, but what is known is that his involvement in Ethiopia continued after 'Ezana was crowned king. Frumentius left Ethiopia to return home but stopped in Alexandria to urge the patriarch, Athanasius (293–373 CE), to send a bishop to continue the evangelical work he had begun. The patriarch heeded this advice by consecrating Frumentius as a bishop and sent him back to Aksum to look after the newly converted faithful.⁷

The second tradition, also linked to Aksum, is the visit by the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon in Jerusalem. Accounts of this visit are found in both the Bible (Kings 10:1–13 and II Chronicles 9:1–2)

⁶ It has been suggested that this was the first use of the cross on coins anywhere.

⁷ Marcus 1994, p. 7. Rufinus (fl. fourth century) in his *Ecclesiastical History* (1:9–10) records the names of these two

brothers as having survived a shipwreck in 346 CE and Frumentius being appointed by Athanasius as bishop of Ethiopia. See Phillipson, 2014, pp. 91–93.



Figure 5.1. Painting of Mənilək I Bringing the Ark to Aksum by Zeluel Yohannes, New Maryam Church, 1991, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2012).

and the Qurʾān (Sūra 27:2–45).⁸ The Ethiopian version also relates how the Queen of Sheba, having heard of Solomon’s great wealth and wisdom, traveled to Jerusalem. However, this version takes a markedly different twist when six months after she returns to her own kingdom, the Queen, called Makədda in Ethiopia, gives birth to a son, Mənilək. Conceived with Solomon during her visit, Mənilək is held to be the founder of the Solomonic dynasty that reigned in Ethiopia until the overthrow of Emperor Həylä Šəllase I in 1974; amongst his many titles was “the 225th ruler in the Solomonic line.” It is a terrific story but factually presents more than a few serious challenges. The principal one, setting aside the question of whether the Queen of Sheba actually existed and if she did where she came from, is simply a matter of chronology. Solomon lived in

the tenth century BCE and the earliest evidence of an empire at Aksum begins only in the first century BCE.

The second issue is the thirteenth-century manuscript in which the legend is found, the *Kəbrä Nəgəst* (Glory of the Kings). It is a compilation of religious writings in Gəʿəz that were pertinent to that time when a new line of rulers replaced the Zagʷe dynasty, who were said to be usurpers of the Solomonic line. That the *Kəbrä Nəgəst* was foundational to this claim of a continuous line of rulers going back to Solomon, who were the keepers and defenders of the true faith, seems more than coincidental. As Steve Kaplan points out, “There is no credible evidence that any Aksumite ruler ever claimed Solomonic descent or that there was a continuous bloodline from the kings of Aksum to

⁸ In the Ethiopian tradition the Queen of Sheba is called Makadda. In Islamic tradition she is Bilqīs; Solomon is Sulaymān.

Yäkunno Amlak [the king who restored the Solomonic dynasty] and his descendant.”⁹ Thus, the real purpose of the Solomon and Sheba legend was to legitimize the claim of Ethiopian kings as part of the Solomonic lineage and thereby justify Ethiopian Christianity as the rightful heir to Israel — an unbroken chain of the Jewish-Christian relationship in Ethiopia.¹⁰

Hence the story of Solomon and Sheba is not only about the son that resulted from their union. It is also the explanation of how the Ark of the Covenant came to be in Ethiopia.¹¹ As a teen, Mənilək, desiring to meet his father, also traveled to Jerusalem. When it was time for him to return home, Solomon gave Mənilək a copy of the Ark of the Covenant and instructed the first-born sons of Jerusalem’s aristocracy to accompany him. This included Azariah, the son of high priest Zadoq. Declaring he could not live without the Ark, Azariah switched the copy for the original, and with divine assistance brought the Ark of the Covenant to Aksum, demonstrating not only how God chose Ethiopia but how “the glory of Zion passed from Jerusalem and the children of Israel to the New Zion, Aksum, and the new Israel, the Ethiopian people” (fig. 5.1).¹² Additionally, as John Binns relates, this reflects the Old Testament understanding of divine kingship. Azariah “is the priest who presides over and enables the worship of God. The ruler of the people is the king [Mənilək].”¹³

Though the Ethiopian Church dates to the fourth century, it was not fully independent. For the seventeen hundred years following the Patriarch of Alexandria’s appointment of Frumentius as bishop, Alexandria oversaw the Ethiopian Church through a succession of Egyptian monks who served as metropolitans. Because church law requires twelve bishops to appoint an archbishop, and the

Ethiopian Church did not have twelve of its own bishops, it could not consecrate kings, ordain priests, or sanctify churches. However, the king, who was both a temporal and a spiritual leader, was not indifferent to the affairs of the church and held considerable power over ecclesiastical matters. In reality, the leadership of the church was diffuse, with many different power centers — the Egyptian patriarch, various bishops, and the heads of major monasteries — a dynamic that was not all that dissimilar to the political scene in which regional kings and princes competed for authority, influence, and spiritual dominance. This status slowly began to change at the end of the nineteenth century when the first Ethiopian was consecrated as a bishop to work with the Coptic archbishop and continued until in 1959 when an Ethiopian Patriarch (*abunä*) was consecrated.¹⁴

In the years from Aksum’s adoption of Christianity to securing its own patriarch, Orthodox Christianity became uniquely Ethiopian. The next section briefly introduces five distinctive aspects that demonstrate this: language and literature, church architecture, fasting and feasting, veneration of saints, and visual representation.

Orthodox Christianity Adapted

Language and Literature

Gəʿəz (also called Ethiopic), the language of the Ethiopian Church’s liturgy and sacred texts, is an ancient Semitic language derived from an even older language, ancient Sabea (Epigraphic South Arabian).¹⁵ In the early days of the Aksumite Empire, Gəʿəz was the language of Aksum, but Greek, the trading language of the region, and Sabea were also in use, as evidenced by royal inscriptions that were written in all three languages

⁹ Kaplan 2017, p. 111.

¹⁰ Binns, 2017, p. 21; Kaplan 2017, p. 111.

¹¹ Yes, the same ark of popular culture made famous with the 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and the story Graham Hancock built upon in his 1992 book, *The Sign and the Seal*.

¹² Kaplan 2017, p. 111.

¹³ Binns 2017, p. 53.

¹⁴ Today, there are positions for eighteen archbishops and bishops. For more on the history of leadership in the EOTC, see Archbishop Yesehaq 1997; Ancel and Ficquet 2015.

¹⁵ Semitic languages are a large family of languages that also includes Arabic and Hebrew. Ancient Sabea was used in the southern regions of the Arabian Peninsula from ca.1000 BCE – sixth century CE.



Figure 5.2. One of the two “Ezana stones” with nearly identical inscriptions that recount a military victory in three languages, Gəʼəz (on the left), Greek (on the right) and Sabeen (on the back side). Fourth century, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2012).

(fig. 5.2). The widespread usage of Gəʼəz by the church is associated with the arrival of the “Nine Saints” in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. It is a tradition that recalls a group of holy men who came from “Rome” who were in reality from various locations in the eastern Mediterranean and likely to have been escaping persecution for their one-nature belief. The Nine Saints are credited with translating the Bible and other sacred writing into Gəʼəz, a critical factor in spreading the faith to ordinary Ethiopians (fig. 5.3).¹⁶ Also important were the monasteries they founded, major centers of Christian learning spread across the north of the country in what is today the Təgray National Region.¹⁷

Gəʼəz probably ceased to be an everyday spoken language by the tenth century, replaced by two related Semitic languages, Təgrəñña and Amarəñña (Amharic), the vernacular languages spoken at the royal courts.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as royal power spread



Figure 5.3. Painting of the Nine Saints, Pāñālewōn Monastery Church, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2010).

throughout the highlands and beyond, so did Christianity. As the language of the Church, Gəʼəz has preserved a rich tradition of ecclesiastical writing, including treatises, homilies, hagiographies, and collections of miracles, as well as secular works, often chronicles of kings. Whereas the earliest translations were from Greek, the fifteenth century witnessed a revival of translation activity. This time, however, it was of works from Coptic literature in Arabic. Among these important liturgical works were the Praises of Mary (*Wəddase Maryam*) and the lectionary for Holy Week (*Gəbrä Həməmat*). Two others that were not only translated but also greatly expanded demonstrate how Ethiopia built upon translated literature and made it their own. The Synaxarium (*Sənkəssar*), a compendium of short biographies of Coptic and other eastern saints, added commemorations of indigenous saints. Similarly, the translation of the Miracles of Mary (*Täʼammərä Maryam*), which in the original included thirty-two miracles, grew so extensively that some collections comprise over 300.¹⁹ This

¹⁶ As Appleyard 2002, p. 127 notes, “Ethiopian Christian literature is often said to be essentially a literature of translation.”

¹⁷ Whether nine is an accurate number or not, monasteries they established still bear their names and paintings of the nine appear in churches everywhere. See also the essay by Madison Gilmore-Duffey (ch. 10)

¹⁸ Written Gəʼəz, like Sabeen, uses only consonants and no vowels. Rather than an alphabet, it has a syllabary — characters

that represent both a consonant sound and a vowel sound. Indeed the syllabary for Gəʼəz is the same one for Amarəñña and Təgrəñña, and, though the readers of one language can read in another, they will not necessarily be able to understand it.

¹⁹ For more on the translations of the ecclesiastical works of this period see Appleyard 2002, pp. 128–29.



Figure 5.4. Choristers chanting on Hosā'ēna (Palm Sunday), Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2009).



Figure 5.5. Priest and deacons during *Mäsqäl* service, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2012).

same period also saw the writing of a number of original works. Characteristic of these is the Book of Light (*Mäṣḥafä Bərhan*), in which the king makes clear the reforms and regulations he has imposed, and attacks magical practices that have persisted from earlier times. Many of these works are used regularly in performing the liturgy.

To celebrate the Eucharist Mass (*Qəddase*) requires at a minimum, two priests and three deacons. Priests (*qäsis* in Gəʿəz, *qes* in Amarəñña and *qäšši* in Təgrəñña) may marry, but bishops and monks should remain celibate. In addition there are quasi-clerics (*däbtära*) who are religiously educated but not ordained. These serve the church in a wide variety of roles from scribes and scholars to administrators and choristers. They also have a dark side because they are believed to harbor mystical powers, including divination and the making of healing scrolls (cats. 34, 35). Dressed in their finest ecclesiastical garments the distinctions can be hard to discern. The choristers with their prayer sticks and clinking sistrums perform liturgical music and dance (fig. 5.4). A deacon holds a processional cross aloft, a priest swings a censer to engulf the proceedings in the sweet smell of frankincense, while another reads from a manuscript shielded under an umbrella; they all have hand crosses. Ethiopian Church services are stunningly rich and colorful and can be an imposing sight to behold (fig. 5.5). However, the most sacred act — the consecration of the bread and wine — takes place in the *mäqdäs* (Holy of Holies) of a church, where only priests and deacons (and kings when Ethiopia had them) may enter.

Church Architecture

Ethiopian churches, whether round, octagonal, square, or rectangular, have an architectural feature that not only serves as a reminder of the Ark coming to Ethiopia, but without which the building is not considered a church. Regardless of its exterior shape, the most distinctive feature of an Ethiopian church

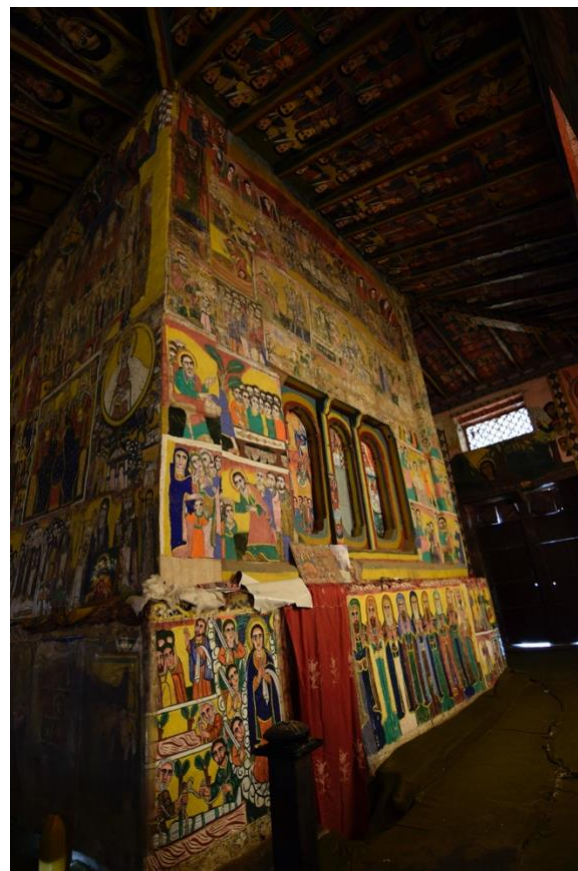


Figure 5.6. Paintings by a variety of artists on the southeast corner of the *mäqdäs* (Holy of Holies), Arba'atu İnsäsa Church, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2015).

is its interior tripartite structure. Free standing in the middle of a church (or at the eastern end of a rectangular church) is the *mäqdäs* or Holy of Holies (fig. 5.6). This is where an altar tablet (*tabot*) is housed, the presence of which makes the church sacred. Of wood or stone, the *tabot* is inscribed with a name of God, a saint, or biblical event that gives the church its name.²⁰ The *tabot* is kept in an altar cabinet (*männbärä tabot*), literally, “Seat of the Tabot” that is understood to be a representation of the Ark of the Covenant. It is in the *mäqdäs*, a space that is generally square, even in a round church, where the Eucharist is consecrated. The walls of the *mäqdäs* are well suited for the display of paintings that present key elements of Ethiopian Christianity.

²⁰ Some churches have more than one *tabot*, especially the larger ones in towns and cities.



Figure 5.7. Interior of Saint Mika'el Church during mass, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2012).



Figure 5.8. Worshipping outside *Abba Mäṭā'* Church, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2012).

Architecturally, two additional areas extend outward from the *māqdās*. The next, the *qəddəst*, is where the congregants receive communion, with the outermost space, the *qəne mahlet*, where the choristers chant their hymns of praise.²¹ Generally oriented on an east-west axis, the primary entrance to the church is on the west. Churches have a further division — males stand or sit on the north side and females on the south. Generally, there are no pews or chairs so sitting means on the floor, though this is changing (fig. 5.7). And yet, all that said, the majority of worshippers actually stand outside the church or even the compound to hear the service (fig. 5.8).²² Entry to the church building itself, and the taking of communion, is strictly governed by rules of cleanliness.

Fasting and Feasting

The rules of cleanliness include cleansing and purifying the body through acts of piety such as confession and fasting. The Ethiopian calendar is replete with fasting days — the Fast of Salvation (every Wednesday and Friday), the fifty-five-day Easter Fast (Lent plus the Sundays of Holy Week), the Fast of the Apostles (between ten and forty days after Pentecost), the Fast of Maryam (sixteen days before Mary's assumption), the forty-day Christmas Fast, and the three-day Fast of Nineveh. It is mostly monks and those who are particularly devout that maintain the 250 days that this totals. Still, most Ethiopian Orthodox Christians fast about 175 days of the year.²³ For these Christians fasting means no eating or drinking until noon and the food consumed must not include meat or animal products.

Just as fasting days fill the liturgical calendar, so too do feast days. There are nine canonical Feast Days and another nine minor ones. Additionally there are holy days dedicated to particular saints, some of which occur each month. As to be expected

in an Orthodox church, there are feast days associated with Mary, who as the mother of Jesus is the mother of God, the *Theotokos* ("Giver of birth to God"). As such, Mary has the primary place of honor in Orthodox churches but in Ethiopian Christianity this is particularly prominent. For example, the Armenian Church recognizes five main holy days in honor of Mary — annunciation, her conception, her birthday, presentation to the temple, and her assumption; the Ethiopian Church recognizes thirty-three.

Veneration of Saints

Reverence for saints is yet another characteristic of Ethiopian Christianity. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians venerate many saints, both foreign and indigenous, (see below under Visual Representations), but none more than Mary. The particular expansion of feast days related to Mary dates to the fifteenth century, but this and the other changes that characterize this century need to be put in context. The Zag'we dynasty, though responsible for both the remarkable and spectacular rock-hewn churches at their capital Lalibāla and the expansion of Christianity southward, did not speak a Semitic language and were regarded as culturally different.²⁴ Thus when Yəkunno Amlak toppled the last king of this short-lived dynasty in 1270, it marked the restoration of the monarchy to the lineage of Solomon and Sheba.

The importance of this lineage connection to Ethiopian national identity cannot be overstated. For example, Zār'a Ya'eqob (r. 1434–68) reinforced this connection and his authority to rule, by returning to Aksum for his coronation and the blessing of the church. During his reign, he continued the work begun under his predecessors; spreading Christianity into new regions, including that around Lake Ṭana. He provided patronage for writing and translating manuscripts and sought to

²¹ On some churches this third space is not part of the interior but the roofed portico that surrounds the building.

²² The liturgy is conducted in Gə'əz with the sermon given in the local vernacular.

²³ Binns 2017, pp. 896–97.

²⁴ Esler 2019, pp. 52–53; Phillipson 2009, p. 22.

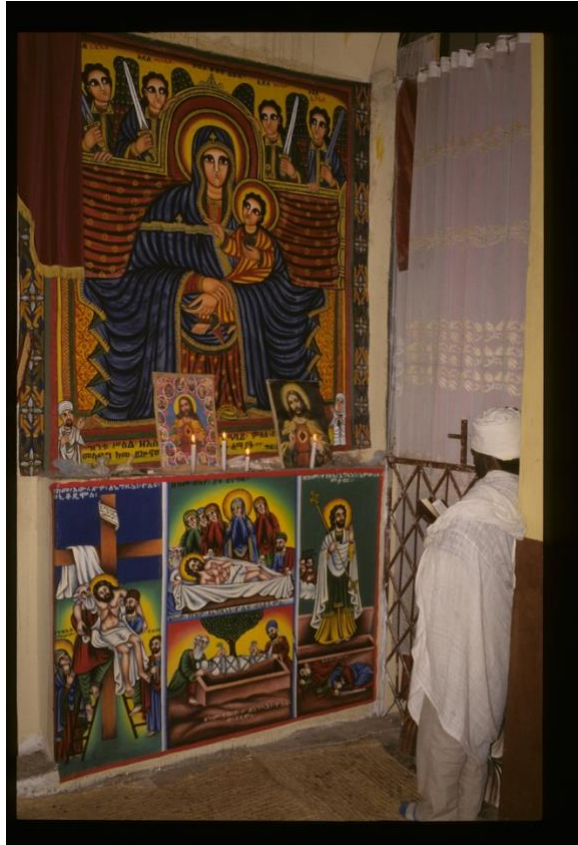


Figure 5.9. Painting of Our Lady Mary with Her Beloved Son (events from the Passion are below) by Berhanemeskel Fisseha, Iyäsus Church, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2001).

settle controversies of theological doctrine.²⁵ Notably, Zär'a Ya'eqob was particularly uncompromising on matters related to the veneration of Mary. He insisted that Abyssinians wear amulets inscribed with declarations that proclaimed, "I belong to the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost," or "I am the servant of Mary, the mother of the Creator of the World," introduced thirty-three Marian feasts, required the readings from *Tä'ammärä Maryam* (The Miracles of Mary) not only on her feast days but as part of the liturgy,

²⁵ A major controversy he personally engaged in settling was whether the observance of the Sabbath as a day of rest and religious celebration was Saturday or Sunday. He held a council that decreed the Eucharist (communion) could be celebrated on either or both days. For a brief description of this issue, see Esler 2019, p. 60.

²⁶ Boylston 2012, p. 230.

and promoted the display of visual images. His influence on religious practice in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has been long lasting with many elements still easily recognizable in the EOTC today.

One that we might single out amongst the thirty-three mandatory commemorations of Mary introduced by Zär'a Ya'eqob, is the celebration of Our Lady Mary as Intercessor — when Mary prevails upon Jesus, her Beloved Son, to forgive the sins of those who call her name. Because Jesus is perceived as being spiritually too distant, believers do not pray directly to him, and instead do so through an intercessor, a mediator such as Mary, a saint or priest.²⁶ As a priest in Addis Abäba explained, "Jesus is the one who is begged by mediators, but he is not a mediator himself. How can God mediate with God?"²⁷ All the requirements put in place by Zär'a Ya'eqob "created an immediate and urgent need for images of Mary."²⁸ Today Our Lady Mary with Her Beloved Son is the most prominent of the many religious images found in Ethiopia (fig. 5.9).

Visual Representation

Painting of religious figures and biblical narratives is a distinctive element of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and represents another of the Church's cultural adaptations. Often characterized as one of the most distinguishing features of Ethiopian Orthodoxy, this visual imagery includes illuminations in manuscripts, icons, and wall paintings.²⁹ The oldest extant examples of church paintings are illuminations of the Gospel writers. Dated to the fifth to seventh centuries, they reside in the *Abba Gärima* Monastery that has also given its name to these two Gospels (fig. 5.10).³⁰ With these exceptions, most of the earliest imagery, which is in

²⁷ Boylston and Malara 2016, p. 48.

²⁸ Grierson 1993, p. 73.

²⁹ Such imagery is also found incised on metal objects such as pendants, hand crosses, and processional crosses and may also date to the reign of Zär'a Ya'eqob; Grierson 1993, p. 91.

³⁰ McKenzie and Watson 2016.

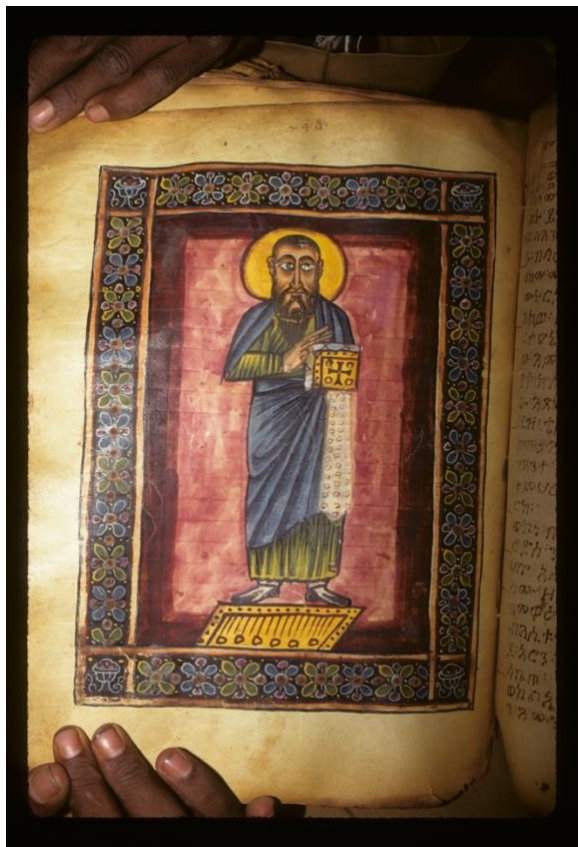


Figure 5.10. Manuscript illumination of Saint Luke the evangelist, fourth to seventh centuries, *Abba Gärima Monastery*, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2004).



Figure 5.11. Lady prostrating before a painting of the Crucifixion by Zeluel Yohannes, 1982, *New Maryam Church*, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2012).

manuscripts and on the walls of a few of the rock-hewn churches in the north of the county, dates from the twelfth century. The earliest icons are from the fifteenth century. The production of these wood panel paintings dramatically increased in the fifteenth century when Zär'a Ya'eqob elevated Mary to a central position of ritual devotion, and decreed that every church display a painting of Mary, and that the population should prostrate themselves in front of paintings of her (fig 5.11).³¹

Unlike manuscript illuminations and icons that are generally not widely accessible to believers, the walls of churches have proven particularly well suited for paintings and are visible to all who enter.³²

³¹ For more on Ethiopia's devotion to Mary and the role played by Zär'a Ya'eqob in its expansion, see Heldman 1994, pp. 165–68; and Heldman 1984, pp. 131–42.

³² Some paintings were done directly on a wall but the vast majority were and are painted on canvas and then pasted to a

This is especially the case with churches that have a freestanding *mäqdäs*, the Holy of Holies. The images of holy figures and biblical narratives on these outer walls present a means for communicating with the divine and a clear and concise visualization of religious doctrine.

Because there is little remaining evidence of painting before the twelfth century, understanding how the subject matter of the paintings may have changed or been influenced by regional differences is complicated, but the dominant program was and remains that of paintings illustrating the life of Christ, the Salvation Cycle (annunciation, nativity, crucifixion, and resurrection) (fig. 5.12). Above this

wall. A discussion of stylistic and iconographic conventions is beyond the scope of this short essay. For more on these conventions and twentieth and twenty-first-century painting practices, see Silverman and Sobania 2022.



Figure 5.12. Paintings on the west wall of the *mädäs* by Gard Giday, 2012, Šallase Church, Guadeb, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2012).

are depictions of the Trinity (three identical white-bearded elderly men each holding an orb in the left hand that represents the world, with a raised finger of the right hand that indicates their unity) flanked by the Heavenly Elders.³³ The story of Adam and Eve is often depicted below this (fig. 5.13). In the eighteenth century the Passion Cycle was added. In the nineteenth a further expansion of Saint Mary with Her Beloved Son took place when she began to be painted on one side of the *mädäs* entrance opposite Saint George Slaying the Dragon on the other, a layout also found in manuscript

illuminations (fig. 5.12 and fig. 5.14).³⁴ Again, this is about her role as an intercessor. As protectors of the faith and the faithful, Mary should have her portrait painted with that of Saint George “so that it may be a port of salvation for those who pray in his name.”³⁵

The wall on which these paintings are found is the west wall of the *mädäs*, the Holy of Holies. Liturgically, this is the most significant. All churches will strive to fill this wall with paintings. If the church has a freestanding *mädäs* all four walls of the structure can hold paintings (see above) for which there is a generally prescribed program. On the south wall, facing the side of the church reserved for women, the painting program depicts the Miracles of Mary and an expanded narrative of her life.³⁶ The north wall with depictions of martyred saints, many of whom are equestrian saints, is on the side of the church reserved for men. The east wall includes paintings that illustrate miracles of Jesus and events from the Old Testament. Frequently these paintings are embellished with features that demonstrate traditions that link events to Ethiopia. In Mary’s life, for example, the Flight into Egypt often includes a scene “Hiding from Herod’s soldier during the flight to Egypt,” which is said to have occurred in Ethiopia, and the Holy Family typically includes a fourth person, Salome, a cousin of Mary, who accompanied the family on their journey to help look after the baby Jesus.³⁷ Again, this description is of an ideal program of paintings; variations of what paintings are included and where they are placed can vary.

Along with Mary, Ethiopian Christian traditions also include the veneration of a number of other saints (*qəddusan*) — angels, apostles, martyrs, and righteous ones — revered for their spiritual values. The veneration of many of these saints may date to Ethiopia’s adoption of Christianity, their

³³ Interview, *Abba* Ewostateos Gebrekristos, April 22, 2017.

³⁴ Balicka-Witakowska 2010, p. 4:98.

³⁵ Heldman in Grierson 1993, p. 185, citing Budge 1928, p. 4:1224. Saint George sits astride a beautifully caparisoned white horse after having thrust his spear, the top of which is depicted in the shape of a cross, into the dragon.

³⁶ For a good introduction, see Berzock 2002.

³⁷ This is not the infamous Salome, who danced before Herod, leading to the beheading of John the Baptist. Tradition records that this Salome was Mary Salome, the daughter of Saint Mary’s sister, who was like a second mother and present at Jesus’s birth and throughout his life. See Mark 15:40 and 16:1.



Figure 5.13. Painting of the Trinity, the Heavenly Elders, and Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden by *Yeneta Hailemaryam* in Old Maryam Church, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2015).



Figure 5.14. Manuscript illumination of Saint George Slaying the Dragon tipped into a *Miracles of Mary* manuscript, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2001).



Figure 5.15. Painting of scenes from the life of Saint Yared by Yohannes Teklu, Old Maryam Church, Aksum, Ethiopia. Photo: Neal Sobania and Raymond Silverman (2001).

hagiographies having been translated from Greek to Gəʿəz; others to later translations from Arabic to Gəʿəz. The saints and martyrs of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are recorded in the Synaxarium (*Sənkəssar*).³⁸ In another demonstration of adaptation, some of these saints are of Ethiopian origin and others are not, yet images of both sorts appear on wall paintings, icons and in manuscript illuminations. In addition to Saint George who is said to be from Cappadocia, there are the Nine Saints who introduced monasticism, played a significant role in the translation of the Bible, and are credited with performing many miracles. One of

the nine, *Abunä Arägawi*, is often singled out as being the most famous. As the founder of the mountaintop monastery of Däbrä Damo, he is said to have ascended the sheer cliff face hanging on to the tail of a large snake. Other well-known saints include *Abba Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus*. Born in Egypt, he is depicted in a long cloak of bird feathers standing among wild animals. Some indigenous saints have greater regional popularity, but the thirteenth-century *Abunä Täklä Haymanot*, who travelled widely evangelizing non-believers, many of whom became his devoted followers, has been called “the great national saint.”³⁹ Near the end of his life (he lived to be ninety-nine) he is said to have become a recluse and after praying for so long while standing on one foot, his other foot withered and fell off. He is commonly pictured standing in prayer with his withered foot off to the side (see lower left, fig. 5.12). Another indigenous saint is Saint Yared, the father of Ethiopian church music who in the sixth century is said to have created the three distinctive types of musical chant still used in Ethiopian Orthodox worship services; three birds represent these in paintings of him (fig. 5.15).⁴⁰

Whether saints have their own hagiographies or only short biographies in the Synaxarium, these as well as other ecclesiastical writings are written in Gəʿəz. Whether their feast day is celebrated locally or nationally, monthly or annually, it is a day the church sets aside to celebrate a saint or a significant theological event. Whether a saint’s image is incised on a cross, or painted as an illumination in a manuscript, on an icon, or is painted on a wall in a church, it is done in a characteristically Ethiopian way — figures and objects are outlined, eyes are large and wide, fingers are often elongated, with no sense of three dimensionality. These and other distinctive cultural characteristics give the Christianity practiced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Təwāḥədo Church a uniquely Ethiopian identity.

³⁸ The Synaxarium in Gəʿəz, a late fourteenth-century collection of Christian saints, is likely a translation from Arabic with Ethiopian additions.

³⁹ Chaillot 2002, p. 133.

⁴⁰ The numbers of saints recognized by the Ethiopian Təwāḥədo Orthodox Church are too numerous to list and not all are painted, although an artist will say, “They could be.”

Conclusion

Orthodox Christianity is at the heart of Ethiopia's history.⁴¹ For more than 1600 years, from the adoption of Christianity in the fourth century, the Church flourished alongside monarchs who ruled the highland regions. As these rulers expanded their kingdoms to the south, west, and east, so Christianity spread until, by the end of the nineteenth century, the country took on the geographic shape it has today. This close relationship between church and state came to a dramatic end in 1974 with the overthrow of Emperor Ḥaylā Səllase I, the last ruler of the Solomonic line. The Military Coordinating Committee or Därg, with its Marxist-Leninist ideology that came to power in the aftermath, was truly revolutionary. The feudal-like nobility who had governed in the provinces and nationally, and the aristocrats who owned enormous estates, were jailed and stripped of their holdings. The impact on the church was equally profound. Whereas the monarchy had safeguarded the privileged status of the EOTC as a state religion, the Därg promoted freedom of religion, and gave voice to Protestants (the largest denomination being the Ethiopian Evangelical Mekane Yesus Church), Pentecostal churches, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Muslim communities. The new dynamics created by the separation of church and state was most profound when in 1975 the Därg initiated a national land reform. The Church, which reportedly owned

5% of all land, but most importantly 20% of the cultivable land, lost a significant portion of its economic base.⁴²

After sixteen years of the Därg's disastrous rule, the EOTC again found itself having to adjust to a changing political environment. In 1991, a group of ethnically based liberation movements militarily defeated the Därg. Generally referred to as the EPRDF (The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front), this new government came to power promoting policies based on ethnicity and regionalism. This included the reconfiguration of long-standing administrative provinces into ethno-linguistically-based regional states. The political upheavals this engendered were also reflected in the EOTC when this new government unceremoniously removed the Patriarch of the church and replaced him with a new one from a different ethnic group. This led to a split in the Church with the diaspora community in North America breaking away and forming its own synod.⁴³ Though reconciliation after twenty-seven years led to their reunification in 2018, the hardening of regional and ethnic divisions continues within Ethiopia. Often fraught with tension and too often with violence, it is hard to imagine how Ethiopia will overcome the persistent effects of ethnicity. Yet, if the EOTC can surmount its internal differences and retain its remarkable uniqueness, there is hope that this can find application in the political situation.

⁴¹ This is in large part because the rulers of what was once called Abyssinia, the lands encompassing the central and northern highlands of the region, have written the country's history. As the African proverb says, "until the lions learn to write, hunters will tell their history for them."

⁴² For more on the Därg's impact on religion in Ethiopia, see Haustein 2009.

⁴³ The Diaspora community is large with estimates from 70 to as high as 100 million. Most are recent creations and scattered globally — stretching from the Caribbean and North America, to Africa and Europe, and to New Zealand and Australia.

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