



From Abba Salama to King Lalibela

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS IN ETHIOPIA ARE AMONG THE OLDEST IN THE WORLD

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BIBLE TRANSLATORS AND PREACHERS This detail comes from a mural of the "Nine Saints" in the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum.

WHEN WESTERNERS ENTER a worship service among the Ethiopian Orthodox—as one Westerner has said—they enter an experience of “delighted disorientation . . . the opulent vestments, the sumptuous processional ‘parasols,’ the grand elaborate liturgies, the ornate gold crosses, the vivid icons, the drums and sistrums and ritual dance and mesmerizing pentatonic [five-note] chant.” This spellbinding worship experience expresses a very ancient faith, practiced today as it has been for centuries in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. (The word *Tewahido*, or “one,” refers to this church’s belief in Christ’s single nature, both human and divine.)

The historical roots of Christianity in Ethiopia can be traced back to the time of the apostles. Prior to the adoption of Christianity, Judaism was practiced in many places in Africa, and Ethiopian Christianity grounded itself firmly on those Jewish roots, valuing creation and celebrating the witnessing community.

The book of Acts tells how an African from Cyrene (modern-day Libya) and Egypt was present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). And Acts 8:26–40 recounts the famous story of the God-fearing Ethiopian eunuch: “Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship

and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah” (Acts 8:27–29). Philip interpreted the Scripture and its fulfillment in Christ for the eunuch before baptizing him.

Early church historian Eusebius describes the impact of this encounter: “Tradition says that he (the eunuch) who was the first of the Gentiles to receive from Philip by revelation the mysteries of the Divine word and was the first fruits of the faithful throughout the world, was also the first to return to his native land and preach the Gospel of the knowledge of God of the universe and the sojourn of our Savior which gives life to men, so that by him was actually fulfilled the prophecy which says, ‘Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God’ (Ps. 68:31).”

LOST AT SEA

But the most significant turning point for Christianity in Ethiopia happened later, almost unintentionally, as the result of a shipwreck near the mouth of the Red Sea around AD 316. Two young brothers aboard the ship were Syrian Christians from Tyre (modern-day Lebanon). Their uncle and mentor, the philosopher Meropius, was killed. But **Frumentius** (or **Fremnatos**, ca. 300–ca. 380) and his younger brother, Aedesius (Edesius), survived. Soldiers brought the boys to the



A RICH VISUAL TRADITION Above: Crosses on a manuscript book at the Bilbala Q'iros Church in Lasta are typical of Ethiopian ornamentation.

APOSTLE FOR ETHIOPIA Left: St. Frumentius (Abba Salama) preaches before Aksumite kings.

royal palace in the city of **Aksum** in northern Ethiopia. There, the young survivors demonstrated integrity, virtue, and wisdom and won favor with King Ella Mida. While Aedesius served as a cupbearer, Frumentius was put in charge of the royal records. Both apparently spread Christianity among the emperor's subjects. Shortly before Ella Mida's death, he set the boys free.

The young brothers then stayed in the city to assist the widowed queen until her son, the prince regent Ezana, was mature enough to rule. Aedesius later returned to Tyre to visit his parents. There he shared his story, and that of his brother, with Rufinus Tyrannius of Aquila (d. 410), a Christian historian.

Meanwhile, Frumentius went to visit **Athanasius**, the patriarch of the See of St. Mark in **Alexandria** and thus head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, to report on the status of Christianity in Ethiopia. In his report, Frumentius testified to the work of God and begged Athanasius to send a bishop to Ethiopia.

FATHER OF PEACE

After listening to Frumentius, Athanasius declared to the priests, "We will find no one [to be bishop] who is better than he." He told Frumentius: "What other man can we find than you, who has already carried out such

works?" Athanasius then consecrated Frumentius as the first bishop of the Aksumite Empire (much of modern-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia). Frumentius took the ordination name Abba Salama I, meaning "Father of Peace." He was also known by the honorary name Kessate Berhan (Revealer of Light, or the Illuminator).

Upon his return to Ethiopia, Abba Salama spread the faith, beginning with the former crown prince he had tutored. King Ezana became the first Christian convert to serve as emperor in Ethiopia. As a result, Ethiopia became one of the earliest nations to officially adopt Christianity, doing so in the first half of the fourth century.

Frumentius was revered and, after his death, celebrated as a saint on the twenty-sixth day of the month of Hamle (July and early August in the West). A homily in his honor is read every year in commemoration. Taken from the *Synaxarium*, the book of the saints, it declares: "This was the good yeast that came to the land of Ethiopia. He was the first to illuminate the land of Ethiopia. He was the one whom God sent as the Apostle for the land of Ethiopia. He was the first [Christian] religious leader."

Another turning point for Christianity in Ethiopia was the "Second Evangelization" in 480. A group of monks known as the "Nine Saints" (*Teseatu Qidusane*), who hailed mainly from Syria and also from Egypt and



Greece, led this movement. The Nine Saints improved the training in catechetical schools—which taught the basics of the faith—and in monasteries, which served both the church and the nation as spiritual and educational centers.

NINE FOR GOD

The Nine Saints and their disciples also produced Bible translations in Ge'ez (Ethiopic). The long process of translating the Hebrew Scriptures into Ge'ez began right after the Queen of Sheba visited Jerusalem (1 Kings 10). The entire Bible including the New Testament was completed by the end of the fourth century, making the Ge'ez Bible one of the seven oldest translations in the world.

The translation of the Bible into Ge'ez prompted subsequent generations of Ethiopian scholars to translate sacred works and produce original writings. The Nine Saints also translated *The Life of St. Paul the Hermit*, *The Life of St. Anthony* (by Athanasius), and *The Rule of St. Pachomius* (containing guidelines for community life). Additionally, they translated the *Qerlos* (which includes the major writings of Cyril of Alexandria as well as other theologians and is still used by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church as a doctrinal manual).

The Nine Saints' works took more than 50 years to complete. They left an inspiring legacy to their

followers and prompted the flourishing of indigenous scholarship and writings.

FOLLOW THE ANT

One writer they inspired was Yared (501–576). While growing up, Yared had difficulty grasping the basics of the alphabet. He gave up on his education. But according to a popular story, he was inspired to persevere academically while watching an ant successfully crawl up the bark of a tree after six failed attempts.

He eventually became a prominent scholar best known for his musical compositions, and some attributed his many compositions to supernatural revelation. He invented a musical notation and a form of liturgical dance in addition to starting an academy at Bete Qetin, in Aksum. His hymnody book also contributed to the school of poetry in Ge'ez. Others, too, wrote in this rich *Qine*, or poetic tradition. One example is this hymn to the Virgin Mary from a *Book of Hours*:

a. *What should we call you, O full of grace?*

You are the gate of salvation;
you are the portal of light;
you are the daughter of the palace.

b. *Should we call you heaven?*

Your Son is the sun of righteousness;



STEEPED IN THE WORD *Left:* This Ethiopian Orthodox Bible was written in Ge'ez on goat skin. The brown coloring comes from the hands of priests turning the pages over hundreds of years.

SWEET SONG OF SALVATION *Above:* Yared and some of his disciples perform for King Gebreme.

CARVED IN STONE *Right:* St. George's Church in Lalibela (the city named in honor of the king) was hewn from solid rock.



- His Apostles are your stars,
the lamps of your First-Born.
- c. Should we call you a garden?*
Your Son is the vine tree;
His Apostles are your vines,
the branches of your First-Born.
- d. Should we call you a ship?*
Your Son is the captain;
His Apostles are the crew,
The chosen ones of your First-Born.
- e. Should we call you a castle?*
Its builder is your Son;
His Apostles are your household,
the faithful of your First-Born.
- f. Should we call you an altar?*
Your Son is a high priest;
His Apostles are your deacons,
The disciples of your First-Born.
- g. Should we call you a golden basket?*
Your Son is the bread of life;
His Apostles are your stewards,
the sacrificers of the body
of your First-Born.
- h. Should we call you a chalice?*
Your Son is the wine of worship;
His Apostles are your priests,
the preparers of the blood
of your First-Born.

Ethiopian Christianity is rich not only in oral traditions but in visual expressions. One of the most famous came from **King Lalibela** in the twelfth century. Revered as a saint, he was the visionary behind the construction of 11 rock-hewn churches, which he called a "New Jerusalem." Each of these churches was carved from a single piece of rock as a symbol of inward spirituality and humility. Although hundreds of other rock-hewn churches exist in Ethiopia and around the world, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are particularly famous for their beauty.

Catholic and Protestant churches both on the African continent and in the Diaspora, the dispersed community of Africans throughout the world, rightfully share the legacy of this rich history of Christianity on African soil. Unfortunately, however, many are oblivious to much of the wealth of Ethiopian Christianity, as the story has traditionally not been told in Western textbooks. And yet, if historians and scholars remain quiet about Ethiopian Christianity, even the stones will cry out! ☩

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