



The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Cathedral

WORSHIP IN THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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The Church of Ethiopia is one of the few Churches of Christendom where the worship of the primitive church has been preserved. This is largely due to the geographical position of Ethiopia and to the historical developments that led to her virtual isolation from the rest of the Christian world from the seventh century, as a result of which Ethiopia retained the form of worship she had received in the 4th century. It is of interest to consider this subject in broad outline.

I. The Place of Worship

The noted church historian Rufinus has provided us with information that confirms the existence of prayer houses in Ethiopia before the introduction of Christianity as the official religion. In the story of St. Frumentius and his brother Aedesius he tells us that "while they lived there and Frumentius held the reins of government in his hands, God stirred up his heart and he began to search out with care those of the Roman merchants who were Christians and to give them great influence and to urge them to establish in various places conventicles to which they might resort for prayer in the Roman manner."

According to traditional sources, after the official acceptance of Christianity as the state religion, the Emperor Ezana, the first Christian ruler of Ethiopia, built a magnificent church at Aksum. It was supported by thirty-two monolithic columns and had no arches. During the early Christian period old temples of pagan times were transformed into churches. The old Sabaeen temple at Yeha was made into a church by Abba Afse, one of the Nine Saints who came to Aksum from the Roman Empire in the 5th century. Recent archaeological excavation of the eastern corner of this building brought to light Christian objects, such as bells and crosses, of great antiquity. The same can be said of the church of Abba Pantalewon, in a suburb of Aksum. The site was once center of pagan worship; both Sabaeen and Greek gods were worshipped there. Abba Pantalewon either transformed the ancient temple into church or else built a church upon the ruins of the temple.

Excavations in the area of the old Aksumite kingdom, at Adulis and Hawlti-Melazo, have brought to light the ruins of basilicas of Syrian type. This may be due to the influence of the Nine Saints, since the majority of them are believed to have been of Syrian origin. An existing example of the basilica type of church is found at the ancient monastery of Debra Damo. According to hagiographical sources, the church was built by the Emperor Gebre Maskal, son of Caleb, in the 6th century. During the same period a remarkable church was built at Sana'a by Abreha, the Ethiopian viceroy of Yemen. This church was much admired by Arab writers. It was known as al-qalis, a corruption of Ekklesia. Abreha brought architects both from Aksum and Byzantium and they designed a church that was marvel of architectural skill, combining the basilicas and Byzantine styles.

In the mediaeval period the basilica form was retained, but underwent modification in certain cases. The amazing monolithic churches of Lalibela are developments of this period. The churches of Medhane Alem (Saviour of the World) and Gennet Mariam (Paradise of Mary) are decorated by external columns of a type completely new in the architectural history of Ethiopia. The interiors have many features in common with the old church of Aksum. The external facade of Bete Emmanuel (Church of Emmanuel) is reminiscent of Aksumite style of alternate recessions and projections. The churches of Lalibela, hewn as they are out of the living rock, may be said to be among the architectural wonders of the Christian world. The interiors are hollowed out and decoratively and ingeniously carved, with varieties of vaulted roofs and complex arches. Each church is constructed in a different style.

In the late mediaeval period, ecclesiastical architecture underwent a radical change. Churches of octagonal or circular shape were constructed. It seems probable that these forms were increasingly adopted as Ethiopian power moved southwards and the churches acquired the form of the round dwellings common in the south. This type of circular or

(octagonal church is abundant in the southern and western areas where Christianity was introduced later. The basilica form) has been retained to a large extent in northern Ethiopia.

The internal structure of the circular and octagonal churches consists of three concentric rings. The innermost part is the Maqdes or Sanctuary, also known as the Qeddusa Queddusan or Holy of Holies, where the Tabot or Ark rests; only priest and deacons have access to it. The Tabot represents the Ark of the Covenant, believed to have been brought to Ethiopia by King Menelik I, the son of King Solomon. It rests upon the Menbir, which may be said to correspond to the altar in other Churches. The sanctity of a church depends upon the presence of the Tabot and without it services cannot be held. The blessing of the Tabot by the Abuna constitutes the consecration of the church. On occasions when the Tabot is removed from the church and carried in processions as on the Feast of the Epiphany it is covered with a cloth and everyone bows or prostrates himself to it on passing. The second chamber is the Keddist, which is reserved for communicants, who receive the Sacrament, the women segregated from the men. Only those who feel pure, have fasted regularly and have conducted themselves blamelessly receive Communion. For this reason communicants are usually babes-in-arms, infants and the very old. The third division is the outer ambulatory which is known as the Qene Mahelet (the place of the cantors). The Qene Mahelet is divided into three sections by curtains. The western part is occupied by the Deberas or cantors who sing hymns and praise God to the accompaniment of musical instruments, drums, prayer-sticks and sistra. One part of the ambulatory is reserved for women only and one part for men. There are three doors, to the east, north and south. The latter is used as the only entrance by women. The other two entrances are used exclusively by men; men may also sometimes use the women's entrance, but women never use the men's entrance. Those of the congregation who feel particularly unclean ritually stand in the churchyard throughout the service. Often there are as many people, if not more, in the churchyard as in the church. It should be noted that the church precincts and the surrounding wall are considered sacred, therefore those who remain outside the church during the service are considered to have attended church.

A few modern city churches are built in the traditional Alexandrine cruciform. They contain pews for the congregation. It is customary in such churches for men and women to sit on separate sides of the church. The traditional Ethiopian church contains no seats, however Rush mats may be spread upon the floor and it is customary to remove one's shoes before entering the church. As the services are lengthy, prayer-sticks, known as Makomiya, are provided for the Deberas and for elderly or important members of the congregation to lean upon. However the truly devout may refuse to make use of a prayer-stick during the service and a few exceptionally pious people may try to mortify the flesh by standing upon one leg only throughout the service.

2. The Times of Worship

Church Services

One can distinguish two types of church service in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, indoor and outdoor. The former is conducted in the Holy of Holies by priests and deacons. A minimum of five persons, two priests and three deacons, is required to celebrate Mass. In certain monasteries a minimum of seven persons is still required. The celebrants are required to abstain from food for at least twelve hours in advance. The sacramental bread and wine are prepared by one of the deacons in the compound of the churchyard, in a small building known as the Bethlehem. The times of the services depend upon fasting periods and holy days. During fasting periods the service commences at 1 p.m. In some churches and monasteries it may begin as late as 3 p.m. The normal duration of a service is about two hours, but it may be lengthened or shortened upon occasions. At Easter, Mass is celebrated at 1 a.m. and at Christmas about 4 a.m. is the usual hour. On Sundays the service usually commences at 6 a.m., although it may start earlier and in some monasteries and churches the usual hour is 5 a.m. In some churches in Addis Ababa, the service now begins at 7 a.m. and at 8 a.m. on Saturdays except on Holy Saturday when the service is conducted at midday.

The times of the outdoor services, conducted by priests and Deberas also vary. On Sundays the service begins at 7 a.m. until replaced by the service in the Holy of Holies. During fasting seasons, the service commences at 6 a.m. and continues until the beginning of Mass at 1 p.m. There is also a short service towards the end of the Mass which consists mainly of the reciting of Qene, or verse which is epic in type.

3. The Types of Worship

a) Liturgy

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has retained the ancient service of the Early Church and still uses the Mass of the Catechumens. In the Early Church, adults receiving instruction in the Christian Faith would attend the Mass until the reading of the Gospel and the sermon. Then the deacon would dismiss the Catechumens and they would leave the church.

(The mass is still retained in the Ethiopian Church, though there are no longer Catechumens under preparation for baptism.)

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The real liturgy begins after the point in the service marking the departure of those not yet baptized. The church of Ethiopia has fourteen Anaphoras, a unique phenomenon in any Christian Church. Each is used on special occasions to mark the observance of a particular holy day. Through the Anaphoras differ in length and content, they have common characteristics. They stress the Incarnations, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. In principle the Mass is conducted in Ge'ez, the ancient classical and liturgical language of Ethiopia. Today, however, the readings and certain portions of the liturgy are in the vernacular, Amharic. The congregation. Both men and women may join in the singing. Choirs of the western type are unknown in the Ethiopian Church.

b) Se'atat, the Horologium

There are two types of Horologium, for day and for night. The Horologium was composed by a distinguished 15th Century scholar, Abba Giyorgis of Gascha; during the ensuing century it was gradually enriched by additional hymns and prayers. In big churches it is usual monks, Priests and deacons to conduct the Se'atat in the northern part of the ambulatory, while the Deberas are conducting a different service.

c) Mahelet

Cantillation is an integral part of worship in the church of Ethiopia. Hymns are sung in different modes and Rhythms. The Deggua or hymnary is attributed to Saint Yared, a scholar who lived in Aksum in the 6th century. During the course of the centuries. Hymns have been added by various composers. The cantors or choristers are the Deberas. On joyful occasions they chant and sing to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Hand-clapping an rhythmical movement of dignified and solemn kind. The rhythmic bet is marked by the movement of the prayer-sticks carried by the Deberas. During periods of mourning the chanting is in a melancholic mode and is not accompanied by hand-clapping or rhythmic movements. During Lent, the use of the drum is forbidden except on Palm Sunday. From the beginning of Lent until Palm Sunday, a special hymn is sung called Tsome Deggua. Throughout Holy Week, special prayers are said, accompanied by prostration, culminating on Good Friday. During this week extensive reading from the Bible, works of the Church Fathers and Lives of the Saints take place.

4. Manner of Prayer

The Fetha Negest, or Law of the Kings, reminds us that prayer is man's way of communicating with Almighty God. In prayer, man thanks God, praises Him and recognizes His domain, confessing his sin and seeking on his part the way of pleasing Him. The following precepts are laid down for one who prays. Firstly, he should stand up, as enjoined on the words of the Lord; "When you rise up for prayer; you shall stand up." Secondly, he should gird himself with girdle; as the Lord has said "Let your loins be girt." Thirdly, he should turn towards the east, for that is the direction from which Christ will appear in His second coming. Fourthly he should make the sign of the cross from the forehead downward and from left to right. Fifthly he should recite the prayer in fear and trembling. Sixthly he should kneel down and prostrate himself, since the gospel tells us that on the night of his passion, our lord prayed prostrating himself and kneeling.

Prostration plays an important part in worship in the Ethiopian church. The faithful are enjoined to begin prayer by prostrating themselves once or thrice and to do the same at the end of prayer. At certain times kneeling or genuflection is substituted for complete prostration, i.e. on Sundays, the days of Pentecost, the feast days of our lord and our lady, and also after receiving the Eucharist. On good Friday, the faithful spend the whole day at church, usually in the courtyard, performing the act of prostration many hundreds of times, to the limits of their physical strength.

5. Times of prayer

The faithful should pray seven times each day. First upon arising from bed in the morning and before beginning work. Secondly at the third hour; thirdly, at the sixth hour; fourthly, at the ninth hour; fifthly, the evening prayer; sixthly, the prayer before sleep and lastly, the midnight prayer.

The morning and evening prayers should be said in church, especially on Saturdays and Sundays. Anyone who omits prayer, unless he is ill, should be cut off from the congregation of the faithful. Anyone who is sick should attend church if he possibly can, for he may be healed. The other prayers should be said at home. When the hour for prayer arrives and one of the faithful finds himself in a place where he cannot pray, he should pray mentally.

6. Fasting

In the Fetha Negest* fasting is defined as follows:

"Fasting is abstinence from food, and is observed by man at certain times determined by law, to attain forgiveness of sins and much reward, obeying thus the one who fixed the law. Fasting (also) serves to weaken the force of concupiscence so that (the body) may obey the rational soul."

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Fasting is strictly observed by all faithful members of the church. There are approximately 250 fast days in the year although not all of these are compulsory for everyone. The average person may fast about 180 days in the year. There are seven official fasting periods for Ethiopian Christians.

1. All Wednesday and Fridays, except for the 50 days after Easter.
2. The Lenten fast of 55 days.
3. The Nineveh fast of 3 days.
4. The vigils, or gahad of Christmas and epiphany.
5. The fast of the apostles; this varies in length, depending upon the date of Easter, and maybe a minimum of 14 days and maximum of 44. This fast commemorates St. Peter and St. Paul.
6. The fast of the prophets of 43 days.
7. The fast of the assumption, 15 days in August.

Of these fasts, the fast of the apostles and the fast of the prophets are compulsory for clergy only, although they are also observed by many of the faithful. All the other fasts are considered obligatory for all devout Christians, except children under seven. During fasting periods, Christians abstain from meat and all animal products: meat, milk, butter and eggs. No food or drink is taken before noon, at the earliest: even then only a simple repast should be taken. Pregnant women, the seriously sick and travelers are exempted from fasting. In Holy Week no food is taken before 1 p.m. or later. The really devout fast completely from Good Friday till Easter Sunday, while others eat only the evening meal on these days. The Lenten fast is traditionally broken by a joyful feast that takes place after midnight mass, at about 3 a.m., or the first cock-crow or Easter Sunday morn.

7. Holidays or feasts

Nine major and nine minor holy days are observed in the church of Ethiopia. All are connected with events in the life of Christ.

MAJOR HOLY DAYS MINOR HOLY DAYS

1. The Incarnation 1. Sebkat (first Sunday in advent)
2. The Birth of Christ 2. Berhan (second Sunday in advent)
3. Epiphany 3. Nolawi (third Sunday in advent)
4. Hosanna (palm Sunday) 4. Christmas Eve
5. Crucifixion 5. Gizret (Circumcision)
6. Easter 6. Birth of Simon
7. Debra Tabor (feast of Mount Tabor, 7. Debra Zeit (Feast of the Mount of Olives) the transfiguration)
8. The Ascension 8. Kana Zegalila (The Miracle of Kana)
9. Pentecost 9. Maskal (The Invention of the True Cross)

Other feast days include one for each of the twelve Apostles. The martyrs, St. George, St. Stephen and St. John the Baptist are also commemorated. Other important holy days are those in commemoration of St. Michael and St. Mary and of the great religious reformer, the Emperor Zar'a Ya'iqob. No less than thirty-three holy days are devoted to St. Mary. An indication of the special veneration attached to the Blessed Virgin in Ethiopia. A feature of feast days in the Ethiopian Church is that many of them are commemorated monthly and not only annually. As in the rest of the Christian world Sunday is observed as a day of rest. In former times Saturday, the Biblical Sabbath, was also observed. On holy days believers are expected to refrain from heavy labor and manual tasks, such as farming, forging metal and weaving. Various transactions are permitted, however. On these days it is customary to carry out charitable and philanthropic acts, to visit the sick or those in prison and to arrange reconciliation between those who have quarreled. Sundays and other holy days are also occasions of social events, weddings, dancing and sport.

Sources

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