



The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Cathedral

## RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS AND CALENDAR

### THE LITURGICAL YEAR

#### 1. The calendar

The calendar of the Ethiopian church came from Egypt and as to methods and dates agrees with the calendar of the Coptic Church. But the two calendars differ with regard to the saints' days and the time of observing them. The year of the Ethiopian calendar contains 365 days to which is added every fourth year an extra day. Each year in this four-year period is dedicated to one of the four Evangelists who come in the following order: Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. The year of Luke is the Ethiopian Leap year and is the year which precedes the western leap year.

Each year is divided into 12 months of 30 days. The extra 5 days are placed at the end of the year and known as Pagumen. In the leap year the extra day is added to these five days making the Pagumen of this year a period of 6 days.

#### Names of months are as follows:

- (1) Meskerem (September-October)
- (2) Teqemt (October- November)
- (3) Hedar (November- December)
- (4) Tahsas (December- January)
- (5) Ter (January- February)
- (6) Yekatit (February- March)
- (7) Megabit (March- April)
- (8) Miyazia (April - May)
- (9) Ginbot (May - June)
- (10) Sene ( June -July)
- (11) Hamle (July-August)
- (12) Nehase (August- September)

As in Julian and Gregorian calendars days are grouped into weeks and are named in order.

#### DAYS OF THE WEEK

Sunday Ehad, Senbete Krestian  
 Monday Sagno [Tuesday Maksagno  
 Wednesday Rabue [Thursday  
 Hamus Friday Sodus, Arb  
 Saturday Qadamit Sanbat

The chronology of the Ethiopian church follows the Era of Incarnation that is it dates from our Lord's birth; there is a difference of 7 or 8 years between the western and Ethiopian systems. Because the Ethiopian church holds that our Lord was born 5500 years after the creation of the world this gives the 7 or 8 years difference between the Gregorian and Ethiopian Chronologies.

The church also uses other systems of chronology. There is the Era of the world which dates from 5493 B.C, which also differs from the western chronology by 7 or 8 years. Then there is a system of chronology called "the years of Mercy or Grace," a system which follows the great lunar cycle.

The *MOVABLE FEASTS* are these of Easter and the days which depends upon it. The reckoning of Easter is based upon the system of Ammonius. The dates of Easter and the feast which depends upon it are determined by the Fast of Nineveh which precedes the Easter Lent and in turn the date of the fast of Nineveh has been found according to the given principles, the date of Easter and the dates of the movable feast can easily be calculated.

The Easter Lent always begins on a Monday and can not come before the 1st of Yekatit nor after the 5th of Megabit. The festival of the Mount of Olives always begins upon Sunday and cannot come before the 28th of Yekatit nor after the 2nd of Miyazia.

Palm Sunday cannot come before the 19th of Megabit 01 after the 23rd of Miyazia. Easter is on a Sunday and cannot come before the 26th of Megabit nor after 30th of Miyazia. The congress of priests always begins on Wednesday and cannot come before the 20th of Miyazia nor after the 24th of Ginbot. Ascension always begins on Thursday and cannot come before the 5th of Ginbot nor after the 9th of Sene. The Feast of Pentecost always begins on Sunday and cannot come before the 15th of Ginbot nor after the 19th of Sene.

## **2. FESTIVAL**

Saints' days and other festivals have not been imposed by any law of God, they were established by the church herself. Some go back to apostolic times and others are later origin. There is a prodigious number of feasts in the Ethiopian Church. The principal feasts of the church are nine feasts of the Lord, thirty three feasts of our Lady, the feasts of the Apostles, Sunday, Saturday, the feasts of the Angels, the feasts of the righteous (saints) and the feasts of the martyrs.

**The feasts of our Lord are divided into 9 major and 9 minor feasts. Major feasts are:**

1. His conception
2. Christmas
3. Epiphany
4. Transfiguration
5. Palm Sunday or hosanna
6. Good Friday
7. Easter
8. Ascension
9. Pentecost

**Minor feasts are:**

1. Sibket, the feast to commemorate the preaching of the prophets that Messiah will come to redeem His people from bondage;
2. Brahan, the feast to commemorate the fact of our Lord having come into the world for its enlightenment;
3. Nolwae, the feast of our Lord as "Good shepherd";
4. Gena, the feast to commemorate the reality that our Lord was actually born, not a mythical phenomenon;
5. Gizret, circumcision;
6. Kana ze Galilee, (feast of Kana of Galilee) when the Lord turned water into wine;
7. Debra zeit, it is held that the Second Advent will take place on the Mount of Olives. A day is kept on which the faithful offer special prayers that they may be righteous on that solemn event and on the right side of the Supreme Judge;
8. Megabit Meskel;
9. Ledete Simon, this is the feast to commemorate the event when a woman sinner (Mary Magdalene) washed the feet of the Lord with her tears and anointed them with ointment. Simon who had invited Jesus complained but the Lord made things clear to him.

**The 33 feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary are as follows:**

1. The day in which she was conceived.
2. Her Nativity.
3. The day when she was taken to the temple there to stay for some time (Her presentation).
4. The feast on which she conceived Christ.
5. Flight to Egypt.
6. Commemoration of the day when she was thirsty, her son commanded the rock and water came forth with which she quenched her thirst.
7. The day of promise on which her son assured her that for her sake He would in future have mercy upon sinners.

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9. Assumption (Filseta), which is celebrated for 6 days, counted each as a separate feast.
10. The day when after her death she was revealed to all appeared to all for the first time.
11. Second time appearance to others.
12. Third time appearance.
13. Fourth time appearance.
14. Fifth time appearance.
15. We have twelve feasts a year when once a month on 21st day we commemorate her death or birth in heaven and this makes it 31 feasts in all up to now.
16. The 32nd feast is that of the day when a result of infidel with a blow hitting the icon, the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, blood flew copiously from the image.
17. The 33rd feast is that of the purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The death of our Lady is commemorated on January 21, Ethiopic Calendar, 16 Jan. in Western reckoning and apparently by reason of this the 21st of each Ethiopian month is dedicated to the Virgin. Nativity is on May 1 (April 26 in Western) Reckoning and September 10 (7 in West. Reckoning); her burial on August 15 (8 in West. Reckoning); Assumption on August 16 (9 west reckoning); her Presentation on December 3 (Nov.29 in West reckoning); her Conception on December 16(12 December in West, reckoning). )

We thus have the following as our Lady's major feasts:

- Conception
- Nativity
- Presentation
- Conceived of the Lord
- Flight into Egypt
- Death of our Lady
- Assumption
- Appearance

The feast of Kidane Mehret (Covenant of Mercy) is a day which honours the merciful power of St. Mary the blessed Mother. It is kept on Yekatit 16 in Ethiopian Calendar (Feb.24 Gregorian calendar).

The feasts which come each month during the are: Trinity, the 7th of each month; Michael the Archangel, the 12th of each month; the Covenant of Mercy, the 16th of each month; the Holy Virgin Assumption, the 21st of each month; the Death of Our Lord, the 27th of each month; and the birth of Christ, the 29th of each month.

Every Christian has a patron saint and each family has its patron saint whose anniversary is commemorated from father to son. The patron most in vogue are: St. Michael the Archangel, St. Gabriel, St. George, the Virgin Mary, St. John the Baptist, Tekla Haimanot, Gebre Menfese Kidus, St. Petros etc.

The book Senksar is the calendar which contains a list of saints to be commemorated daily and their brief history. There are many holy martyrs and confessors who are remembered. The angels hold a high place in the church. They protect homes, Churches, palaces and all places of importance. Chiefs among them are St. Michael and St. Gabriel.

### **Some feasts are national and religious at the same time. These are:**

- Christmas - Tahsas 29th E.C (7th January)
- Epiphany - Ter 11th E.C (19th January)
- St. Michael- Ter 12th E.C (20th January)
- Good Friday
- Easter
- Feast of Assumption—Nehassie 16th E.C (22nd August)
- Finding of the truth Cross- Maskaram 17th E.C (27th September)

### **3. FASTING AND ABSTINENCE**

The Church, in her earliest days, recognized the necessity for her children to "chastise the body and bring it under subjection", as St. Paul advises. The body is ever striving for mastery over the spirit; besides the external sources of temptation, "the world", we have always another source with us which is a part of our nature. This is the reason for mortification. Self denial in lawful things enables us to turn with great earnestness to spiritual things. It is on these grounds that the Ethiopian church has strictly adhered to the injunctions of the Didascalia and enjoyed on the faithful the longest and most austere fasts in the world.

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Fasting implies abstention from food and drink. Special days are appointed for fasting. Every Wednesday and Friday are days of fasting because on Wednesday the Jews held a council in which they rejected and condemned our Lord and on Friday they crucified him. The fasts are ordained in the Fetha Negest are:

1. Fast for Hudadi or Abiye Tsome (Lent), 56 days.
2. Fast of the Apostles, 10-40 days, which the Apostles kept after they had received the Holy Spirit. It begins after Pentecost.
3. The fast of Assumption, 16 days.
4. The gahad of Christmas (on the eve of Christmas).
5. The fast preceding Christmas, 40 days. It begins with Sibket on 15th Hedar and ends on Christmas eve with the feast of Gena and the 28th of Tahsas.
6. The fast of Nineveh, commemorating the preaching of Jonah. It comes on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the third week before Lent.
7. The gahad of Epiphany, fast on the eve of Epiphany.

In addition to these, there is the fast of repentance which a man keeps after committing sin, it being imposed as a penance by the priest for seven days, forty days or one year. There is a fast which a bishop keeps at the time he is consecrated. There is a fast of desire which a man keeps if he thinks he will increase his value in the sight of God or that he will subdue his body by extra good works. Monks and nuns observe additional fast days not required of the laity. All persons above the age of 13 observe the church fasts. The priest rarely grants dispensations. The man who ignores or neglects any injunction of the church is not considered good Christian.

The total number of fasting days amounts to about 250 a year, of which about 180 are obligatory for all, and the rest are only for priests, monks, nuns and other special groups in the church. The longest periods of fasting are those of Lent.

Advent and Kweskwam (forty days preceding the fast of the flight to Egypt). Fast generally implies one meal a day to be taken either in the evening or after 2.45 p.m. with total abstention from meat, fats, eggs and dairy products. Instead they use cereals, vegetables and other type of food devoid of fats. Smoking is a breach of the fast.

There is no fasting while Christmas, Epiphany, and the feast of fifty days are being kept. From Easter to Pentecost a man may eat and drink what he likes on Wednesday and Friday. There is no fast if the Christmas and Epiphany fall on a Wednesday or Friday. On Saturday and Sunday people may take breakfast at 9 or 9:30.

Special prayers are conducted during the fasting seasons. In all the churches we have daily services held from morning to 2:45 p.m.. Priests regularly attend night services and they perform the canon, they remain in the churches praying incessantly, and in sadness ponder and read their Psalter from cock-crow by light of a taper, and throughout the day eat dry grain and drink water.

### **4. ADVENT**

The aim of the church is to cause her children to reflect. During the year she sets apart two seasons in which she imbues the faithful with a spirit of penitential fervor. One of these seasons, which is called Advent, from the Latin word *adventus*, (arrival), embraces about five Sundays.

The Law and practice of the church is observed strictly, though not so much as in Lent. It is a time for devout and penitential preparation of the soul for the proper and worthy celebration of the great feast of Christmas.

In advent (Sibket, in Amharic) a fast is kept, the Christmas fast of 40 days beginning on 15 Hedar and ending on Christmas eve with the Feast of Gena on the 28 of Tahsas.

### **5. CHRISTMAS**

Year after year the Christmas season brings to the minds of all Christians the story of the Child in the manger, the shepherds on the Judean hills, the Celestial songs "Glory to God in the highest", and the Angel's message, telling that the Long expected one had come.

Liddet or Gena is the Ethiopian name for Christmas which is marked by special ceremonies. The origin is basically the same as is universally accepted. It is celebrated on 7th January (Tahsas 29 E.C) preceded by a fast of 40 days. The difference of date is due to a calendar of discrepancy since the Ethiopian calendar is based on the year of Grace 7 or 8 years after Anno Domini. The Ethiopian Christmas coincides with the date of this observance in the Eastern Orthodox dispensation.

Qiddus Bale Wold is another name for Christmas in addition to Liddet or Gena. Gena is also a name for a Christmas game; played by boys and grown up men (like hokey).

### **6. LENT AND HOLY WEEK - HUDADI AND HIMAMAT**

forty days fast of our Blessed Lord in the desert and as a means of sanctification for her children.

To the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Lent means a period of fasting when the faithful undergo a rigorous schedule of prayers and penitence. This fast is observed with greater rigor than any other fast and it is a test of one's Christianity. One who fails to keep it is not considered a good Christian. Properly observed in nullifies the sins committed during the rest of the year. The faithful should abstain from all food except bread, water and salt. It consists of 56 days. All kinds of meat is forbidden, and also dairy products. On all the fasting days only one meal is allowed and this is to be taken in the afternoon, at 3 p.m. or in the evening. On Saturdays and Sundays people are allowed to eat in the morning.

Daily Services are conducted in all the churches. Each day services are held from morning to 2.45p.m. Priests regularly attend night services starting at midnight up to 7 a.m.

Qibela is the Sunday — before the opening of Lent, Monday -when the people eat their fill. In lent many grown tired and thin.

## **7. HOLY WEEK**

In accordance with the chronology of the Gospel account of the last days of our Lord's mortal life it is natural that the sacred Triduum of Thursday, Friday and Saturday developed. A special "Holy Week" became established in which all the faithful re-lived and received graces from the fundamental mysterious of redemption.

Palm Sunday or Hosanna is celebrated with proper ceremonies with palm, processions and special services. Then follows Holy Week, the week of Pains, the Himamat. For some, from Thursday afternoon until Easter morning no morsel of food nor a drop of water enters the mouth and three days are known as "Qanona". The priests neither eat nor drink but remain in the churches singing and praying incessantly. No absolution is given.

**MA UNDY THURSDAY** is a special day on which in the Mass unleavened bread is used. For those who can, it is spent out of doors. When the fast is broken late in the afternoon no one eats ordinary bread, a mixture of special flour is compounded and boiled. A solemn Mass is celebrated on that day. The ceremony of washing the feet is conducted the same day in imitation of what our Lord did to the twelve Apostles at the Last Supper. All the faithful with clean souls should communicate on Holy Thursday.

**GOOD FRIDAY.** The solemn liturgical service of Good Friday is attended by thousands of believers. There is a sense of sorrow and desolation. All the symbols, images and instruments used in the passion of the Saviour are publicly exhibited in the church. Men and women go to church to prostrate themselves, remaining there from early morning till 3 p.m. the hour of the death of Jesus Christ. Believers confess their greater and lesser offenses to the confessor or sit reading their Psalter. It is believed that on Good Friday blood fell from Christ on the cross and dripped into the grave of Adam beneath and there rose up from the dead about 500 people; the thief on the left was sent into darkness but the one on the right went before Adam into Paradise. On this Friday the Devil was bound with cords and Christ descending to purgatory (seol) sent forth to paradise all the souls that were in darkness (Seol). Good Friday is a special day for confession.

**HOLY SATURDAY** is Qidame shur on which the good news went forth. Everyone who fasts passes the day and night in expectation. On this night before Easter many go to the Church and pass the night in making prayers and in prostration on clenched hands. Confession is heard on that day.

**MASTER**, the feast of feasts, is celebrated with special solemnity. The church is filled with fragrance of incense and myriad's of lights. The clergy are arrayed in their best vestments. All the people hold lighted tapers. Greetings are Exchanged, drums are beaten, hands are clapped and singing is heard everywhere: "our resurrection has come, hosanna." Men are heard saying "O Lord Christ have mercy upon us." They pray for a blessing "O God make it to be a festival of our good fortune and of our well being! Let us have another threshing floor and another year if thou wilt." Letters or messages are exchanged between friends and the whole day is one of spiritual and physical feasting, a commemoration of the holiest occasion of all history - a truly blessed time when Christ rose from the dead.