

# Christianity, Ethiopian

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## HISTORY

The early history of Ethiopian Christianity was intimately linked with the expansion of the Aksumite kingdom and its Christian successor dynasties. The Kingdom of Aksum takes its name from its capital city of Aksum, located in what is now the northern highlands of Ethiopia near the Ethiopian–Eritrean border. Aksum profited from a position on the crossroads of trade between the Red Sea – primarily through the kingdom’s seaport of Adulis (*see* HARBOURS, RED SEA) – and the inland African territories. Adulis was the main commercial center of exchange between the Byzantine Empire and the countries of the Indian Ocean, enabling Aksumite kings to exercise considerable influence on the region. Greek-language coins and bilingual inscriptions in three scripts (Old Ethiopic or Ge‘ez, Sabea, and pseudo-Sabea, as well as Greek) on monumental stone structures attest to the close ties of Aksumite monarchs with Red Sea rulers and the Hellenistic Mediterranean; it is possible that Christian merchants were active in the area from the early second century CE.

Tradition holds that Christianity was brought to Aksum by shipwrecked Syrian Christians in the first half of the fourth century CE. According to the historian Rufinus of Aquileia and modern research, two Christian boys – Aedesius and Frumentius of Tyre – were taken as slaves to the court of the Aksumite king Ousanas, acting as cupbearer and tutor to the king’s son Ezana. By 340 CE, numismatic and epigraphic sources attest the conversion of Ezana, who had by then succeeded Ousanas as Aksumite king, to Christianity. By 346, Patriarch Athanasius of Alexandria (*see* RELIGION, GRECO-ROMAN EGYPT) had ordained and consecrated Frumentius (also known as Abba Salama in Ethiopia) as the first

“Bishop of the Aksumites” (Munro-Hay 1991, 2003a). Although the presence of Christianity in Ethiopia was first tied to a conversion of the Aksumite court, archaeological finds, including crosses on items of everyday use such as pottery, indicate that Christianity had permeated the whole kingdom by the sixth century (Harrower *et al.* 2019). The city of Aksum and the church of Aksum Seyon remain among the most important centers of Ethiopian Christianity to this day.

In the late fifth or early sixth century, Aksumite emperors had begun to portray themselves as the protectors of Christianity, allowing persecuted refugees to enter and proselytize in the country. Thus, Christianity in Ethiopia received a new impetus through the arrival of foreigners from the Eastern Roman Empire who established themselves in the Aksumite hinterland. These Byzantine missionaries, possibly fleeing persecution after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, locally preached the Gospel and translated the Bible, as well as other important religious texts. They also introduced ideas of asceticism and traditions on martyrs, as well as the religious rules of monasticism following the religious rules of Anthony and Pachomius of Egypt. In Ethiopia, these missionaries are sometimes held to be of either “Roman” (meaning Byzantine) or “Syrian” origin and are usually referred to as the “Nine Saints” and the “Righteous Ones.” The establishment of numerous important monastic centers and churches, primarily in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray, is attributed to them. This second wave of Christianization coincides chronologically with important Christianization efforts (*see* CHRISTIANITY, NUBIAN) in neighboring Nubia (*see* NUBIA, HISTORY OF).

While coinage and archaeological evidence indicate that Christianity flourished with royal support in Ethiopia from the fourth century onwards, Aksum had become a major Christian power by the early sixth century. When the local southern Arabian chief Dhu Nuwas of Himyar in modern-day Yemen converted to

Judaism and embarked on a policy of expulsion of local Christians in the 520s, culminating in the massacre of the major Christian community and Ethiopian garrison in Najran, Aksumite king Kaleb invaded and annexed Himyar in 525 at the request of Byzantine Emperor Justin I (Bowersock 2013). The event was written about enthusiastically by contemporary Syrian and other ecclesiastics. It is mentioned in the writings of the Greek merchant, traveler, and ascetic known as Cosmas Indicopleustes in his “Christian Topography” (Cosmas Indicopleustes 2010) and also alluded to in the Qurʾān (Surah 105).

A hundred years later, the power of Aksum had weakened considerably. Aksum’s role in Red Sea trade was long held to have suffered from political shifts caused by the expansion of the Muslim empire in Arabia, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt in the 640s CE. Recent archaeological research also suggests that the primary Aksumite port of Adulis was destroyed by a cataclysmic flood in the seventh century (Zazzaro *et al.* 2015). Archaeological records indicate that a Christian state or states persisted in the Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands after the decline of Aksum. Churches dated between the ninth and twelfth centuries were both built and carved out of the rock. Yet, written sources remain scarce until the twelfth century. Fragmentary written records are preserved largely outside the country. In the late tenth century, a king of Ethiopia sent a letter via king George II of Nubia (*see* NUBIA, MEDIEVAL) to Patriarch Philotheus in Egypt begging for assistance and the dispatch of a new metropolitan. The letter reports that a non-Christian queen of the “Banu l-Ham(u)wiya” had mounted a devastating attack against the Christian kingdom, resulting in the destruction of numerous churches and the deaths of clergy. Two other sources also allude to a non-Christian queen governing Ethiopia between 950 and 970 CE. Known as Gudit or Esato, this queen is often identified as Jewish in the oral Ethiopian religious tradition. By the mid-eleventh century, regular

religious exchanges had been reestablished between Ethiopia and Egypt: at least seven metropolitans were appointed by the patriarchs of Alexandria for the Church of Ethiopia between the end of the eleventh century and the early thirteenth century (Derat 2020).

By the mid-eleventh to early twelfth century, the Zag<sup>w</sup>e Dynasty had established itself as a major power in the Ethiopian highlands. Christianity retained its position as the official religion and important Aksumite religious centers in the north were maintained by the Zag<sup>w</sup>e rulers. Recent research has shown a clear desire of Zag<sup>w</sup>e rulers to embrace Aksumite heritage and religious identity. New religious sites – such as the famous rock-hewn churches of Lalibala, monumental structures carved from the living rock by the early thirteenth century – were established hundreds of kilometers to the south of Aksum. Beyond their impressive architectural legacy, written sources on the Zag<sup>w</sup>e are severely limited, possibly as a result of intentional *damnatio memoriae* practices pursued by the succeeding so-called Solomonic Dynasty, which came to power under king Yekunno Amlak in 1270. The Solomonic Dynasty, which ruled the Ethiopian Kingdom until 1974, actively propagated itself as descended from the biblical king Solomon and linked itself to the ancient Aksumite kings. Solomonic rulers portrayed the Zag<sup>w</sup>e rulers as usurpers, yet a number of Zag<sup>w</sup>e kings and one queen were sanctified and celebrated in hagiographical texts written under Solomonic patronage from the fifteenth century onwards, possibly to restore their honor as Christian kings of Ethiopia while reducing their importance from kings to saints (Derat 2018). The reign of Solomonic king ʾAmda Seyon (1314–44), in particular, saw the aggressive territorial expansion of the Christian kingdom in the central highland plateau, as well as the integration of a number of Muslim sultanates as vassals into the realm (Kropp 1994). These newly integrated and Christianized territories became the heartland of Solomonic rulership,

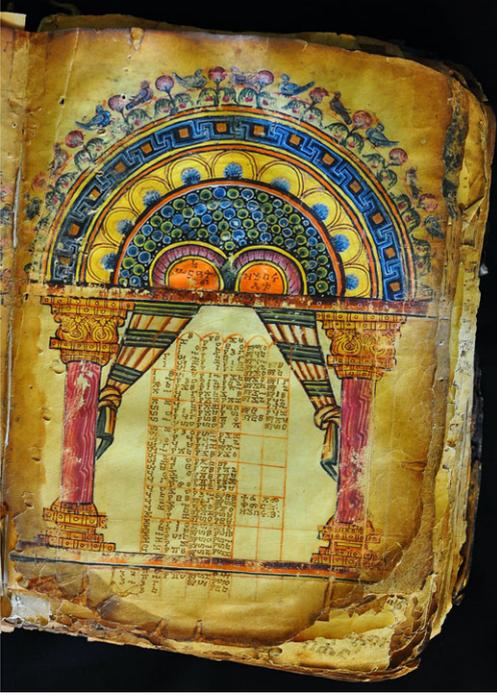
home to significant religious foundations, in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (Derat 2003). The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also saw the emergence of popular religious movements such as that of the Ewostateans and Stephanites (Kelly 2016). From the mid-1520s onwards, Solomonic Ethiopia was engaged in an escalating series of wars with the neighboring Muslim Sultanate of ‘Adal, which ended in the temporary conquest and near-total collapse of the Christian kingdom from 1530 to 1543, when the ‘Adali forces were ultimately beaten back by the Christian Solomonic forces with the help of Portuguese troops (Muth 2005; Stenhouse and Pankhurst 2005).

#### RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE

From the appointment of Frumentius as first bishop in the mid-fourth century CE, Christianity in Ethiopia was under the spiritual authority of the patriarch of Alexandria, which would subsequently become the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria in Egypt in the fifth century. Set up as a single bishopric under the sovereignty of the Coptic Church (see COPTIC CHURCH), only the patriarch of Alexandria was able to appoint the bishop – or rather, metropolitan – serving as head of the Ethiopian Church (Munro-Hay 2003b). This metropolitan, locally called *abun* or *pappas*, was nearly always a Coptic monk. He alone had the right to ordain priests and consecrate churches in the country. The metropolitan was explicitly forbidden from consecrating bishops or possible successors in Ethiopia itself; only very rarely – such as in the mid-fifteenth century – was more than one metropolitan sent from Egypt at the same time. This rather unusual setup necessarily impacted Ethiopian politics: as requests for the dispatch of a new metropolitan from the Patriarch of Alexandria had to go through the rulers of Egypt, the Christian kings of Ethiopia had to main-

tain largely amicable diplomatic ties with the various Muslim rulers of Egypt after the Islamic conquest of 640 CE. As a bishopric of the Coptic Church, Christianity in Ethiopia followed the miaphysite religious doctrine on the nature of Christ, which is also at the heart of the Syrian and Armenian Church. Moreover, although the Ethiopian Church was a daughter church of the Coptic Church and headed by a Copt, it developed its own characteristics, occasionally in variance with or even opposition to Coptic norms, such as in language and calendar use. The Bible and other Christian texts were first translated to the local language – Ge‘ez – from Greek, the language of Late Antique Egypt (see GREEK IN AFRICA). Occasionally called Classical or Old Ethiopic in scholarship, Ge‘ez is a Semitic language that makes use of a vocalized script. It has served as the literary and liturgical language of the Ethiopian Church from the adoption of Christianity in the fourth century. The tongue of ancient Aksum, it ceased to be a spoken language from the turn of the second millennium CE. To this day, it survives as the language of classical scholarly education and religious practice (Bausi 2012, 2020). An impressive example of such early written Aksumite Christian culture is found in the form of the Garima Gospels, located in the Ethiopian monastery of Abba Garima in Tigray (see Figure 1). These two manuscripts, written in Ge‘ez, are the earliest complete copies of the Four Gospels, as well as the earliest surviving complete illuminated Christian manuscripts still extant in the world. Recent radiocarbon analysis of the gospels dated both manuscripts to the fifth–seventh century CE at the latest, and thus to the height of Aksumite Christian power in the region (McKenzie and Watson 2016).

Numerous later waves of translations into Ge‘ez are also discernable, influenced both by the close ties to Egypt and to the Ethiopian community in Jerusalem, which dates back to at least the thirteenth century. Significant translations were undertaken in the fourteenth century, shortly after the expansion of the realm through ‘Amda Seyon: the



**Figure 1** Cannon table, illuminated page from the Abba Garima Gospels, fifth–seventh century CE, Abba Garima monastery, Tigray, Ethiopia. Source: copyright © Verena Krebs 2012.

*Kebra Nagast* or “Nobility of the Kings,” the foundational myth of the Solomonic Dynasty which tied their lineage directly to the son of King Solomon with the Queen of Sheba (Marrassini 2017), as well as a substantial corpus of hagiographic and homiletic texts and a revision of the Bible, translated under the impulse of metropolitan Salama (1348–88) from Coptic-Arabic and Syriac-based Arabic into Ge‘ez (no evidence of direct translations from Hebrew or Syriac exists). The fifteenth century saw the translation and local composition of numerous hagiographies, monastic *Lives* and rules, service and liturgical books, and apocrypha, as well as popular religious texts such as the *Miracles of Mary*, which was enriched with hundreds of unique Ethiopian compositions after its translation from Arabic (Brita 2020).

Monastic centers such as Dabra Damo, a Late Antique foundation, or Dabra Hayq Estifanos were intimately tied to Solomonic sovereignty from the dynasty’s accession to power in the thirteenth century. The evangelizer and saint Iyasus Mo’a is described as a significant player in helping Yekunno Amlak establish the new royal dynasty in 1270 CE. After the territorial expansion of the Christian kingdom under ‘Amda Seyon, numerous monasteries exerted crucial influence over local, recently Christianized populations on the frontiers of the Christian kingdom (Kaplan 1984; Taddesse 1970). Meanwhile, the newly appointed metropolitan Ya‘eqob (1337–47) set about major efforts to reform the Ethiopian church. Particularly in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, numerous Ethiopian rulers dispatched missions to Latin Europe, hoping to acquire relics and other precious religious material culture for their simultaneously built, high-prestige royal monastic foundations (Krebs 2021).

SEE ALSO: Christianity, Nubian; Coinage of Greco-Roman Egypt; Coptic Church; Greek in Africa; Harbours, Red Sea; Monasticism, Nile Valley; Nubia, history of; Nubia, medieval; Religion, Greco-Roman Egypt.

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