# THE BEAUTY OF THE ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIAN TRADITION: AN APPROPRIATION FOR MODERN BLACK SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract: Ethiopian Christianity stands as a distinctive manifestation of the Christian faith, uniquely shaped by its integration of Jewish traditions and theological perspectives that diverge from Hellenized Christianity. This study explores the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), highlighting its profound historical roots and its distinctive approach to biblical interpretation and religious practice. The Church's enduring connection to Judaism is evident in its adherence to ritual purity laws, dietary regulations, and architectural elements reminiscent of the ancient Jewish Temple. By examining these aspects, the study reveals how Ethiopian Christianity represents a vibrant continuation of early Christian traditions, enriched by its assimilation of Judaic practices and its adaptation to the Ethiopian cultural and religious milieu. This unique synthesis underscores Ethiopian Christianity's role in preserving and transforming early Christian and Jewish heritage within a distinct Ethiopian context.

## INTRODUCTION

The feature that distinguishes the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) from other Christian expressions is its preservation of the Old Testament Jewish rituals in Liturgy and theology, more so than any other Christian group.[1] The Church has effectively integrated the various symbol systems of Judaism into its own religious system. While other African Churches assimilated multiple forms and traditions of Christianity that had been brought to the continent from the West,[2] the Abyssinians have always considered themselves the lawful successors of Israel and maintained uniformity and consistency by embracing the parts of Judaism that remained integral to the expression of Abyssinian Christianity. The EOTC takes pride in its religious heritage and Judaic roots, which showcase a unique form of non-Hellenized Christianity and highlight Ethiopia's exceptional assimilation of Jewish traditions. The evolution of the faith and its incorporation of various cultures throughout history is truly inspiring.

To fully comprehend how Jewish customs have been integrated into Ethiopian Christianity's distinct form of worship, I first provide a brief historical background that links Judaism to Ethiopian history and religion. It is then crucial to examine how current scholarship assesses the impact of Judaism on Abyssinian Christianity. As we shall see soon, while some argue that the assimilation of Judaism in Ethiopian Christianity is an example of a unique interpenetration of Judaism and Christianity, others have dismissed such ritualized avoidance behavior as an 'irrational' and 'pointless' duplication, considering it a rather primitive and mechanical observance of old-fashioned ancient rites and laws of Judaism. Ultimately, I examine specific Jewish rituals that have shaped the concept of purity. According to the EOTC, careful observance of the rituals determines and defines one's Christian identity.

[1] John T. Pawlikowski, "The Judaic Spirit of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: A Case Study in Religious Acculturation," *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church: A Study in Indigenization. Journal of Religion in Africa* 4, no. 3 (January 1, 1972): 178−99; see Edward Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinian (Monophysite) Christianity," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, no. 3 (July 1, 1956): 216−56.

[2] Tibebe Eshete, "Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Djibouti." in *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2020), 147−49.

## CHRISTIANITY IN ANCIENT ETHIOPIA

To gain a thorough understanding of Ethiopian Christianity, it is essential to begin with a concise historical overview. This will eliminate any misunderstandings and establish a solid basis for further investigation. Furthermore, a deeper exploration of the pre-Christian ancient empire of Aksum[3] and its association with Old Testament practices and codes of holiness, as depicted in the story of Queen Sheba, can provide valuable insights into the evolution of Ethiopian Christianity.

The introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia and the Greco-Roman world took different paths. In the Greco-Roman world, it initially attracted the lower classes and took three centuries to gain acceptance by the elite. In contrast, Christianity originated among the royal families in northern Ethiopia and spread throughout the country, eventually reaching even the lower levels of society.[4] The impact of religion on its spread and uptake in different parts of the world is an intriguing phenomenon.

Exploring the origins of Christianity in Ethiopia, especially during the initial three centuries following Christ's birth, presents a considerable challenge when seeking a comprehensive historical account. Only a handful of historical writings exist about the origin of Christianity in Ethiopia that give us any adequate insight into the matter. Nonetheless, the scarcity of detailed historical records does not diminish the significance of the few ancient and trustworthy sources and witnesses available in Scripture and the writings of early Church Fathers and historians. These sources affirm the early presence of Christianity in Ethiopia.

Despite this, many European scholars have attempted to deconstruct the ancient history of Christianity in Ethiopia, arguing that the mid-fourth century marked a new beginning for Christianity in the country. However, according to some early Church historians and the EOTC tradition, Christianity may have actually begun in Ethiopia through various routes in the mid-first century. For instance, the early Church historian Rufinus of Aquileia recounted that the Apostle Matthew received the Lord's mandate and traveled to Ethiopia after casting lots and dividing up different parts of the world among the Apostles.[5]

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, along with the Roman Catholic Church, upholds the belief in Apostle Matthew's mission and martyrdom in Ethiopia.[6] Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Ethiopians were present in Jerusalem during Pentecost and subsequently returned to Ethiopia alongside Jewish migrants.[7] The connection between Judaism and Christianity has been maintained for over two millennia. Despite the presence of hostile Islamic nations surrounding the country, Judaism continues to hold significance within Ethiopian Church theology.[8]

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[3] The Aksumite Kingdom was a formidable empire located in the northern regions of Ethiopia, and its influence has had a profound and enduring impact on the area. In contemporary times, both Ethiopians and Eritreans can trace their shared ancestry back to the Aksumite civilization, highlighting the deep historical and cultural connections between these two neighboring nations. See more on this George Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1−24.

[4] Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University Press, 1972), 104.

[5] Rufinus of Aquileia, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia*, Books 10 and 11, trans. Philip R. Amidon, S. J. (New York: Oxford University, 1997), 18. Rufinus notes, "In the division of the earth which the apostles made by lot for the preaching of God's word, when the different provisions fell to one or the other of them, Parthia, it is said, went by lot to Thomas, to Matthew fell Ethiopia, and Hither India, which adjoins it, went to Bartholomew." It is plausible that St. Matthew's choice to engage in mission work in Ethiopia was influenced by the increasing presence of Ethiopian Jews, particularly the *Felasha* community, residing in the northern region of the country. This demographic may have served as a motivating factor for St. Matthew to become involved in missionary activities.

[6] The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spirituality* (Addis Ababa: The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1970), 3.

[7] *Church of Ethiopia*, 3; see also Keon-Sang An, *An Ethiopian Reading of the Bible: Biblical Interpretation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 86.

[8] Daniel J. Brege, *Eating God's Sacrifice: The Lord's Supper Portrayed in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Decatur, IN: Daniel J. Brege, 2009), 37.

Additional insights into the introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia can be gleaned from the biblical account in Acts 8:26−39. This passage recounts the journey to Jerusalem and the conversion of an Ethiopian Eunuch, who subsequently played a pivotal role in introducing Christianity to the Ethiopian people upon his return to the country.[9] According to Church historian Eusebius, the Eunuch stands as the very first person to embrace the gospel and become a dedicated disciple. It is an indisputable fact that he journeyed back to his homeland and preached the gospel, thereby fulfilling the prophecy of Ethiopia's spiritual pursuit.[10] Further, Paulos Mikias affirms that it was due to Judaic influences and the Old Testament teaching introduced to Ethiopia long before the advent of Christianity that the Ethiopian Eunuch traveled to Jerusalem, reading the Book of Isaiah.[11]

Therefore, the oral tradition in Ethiopia had been influenced by Christianity long before its official establishment in the fourth century. The presence of Christian Red Sea Traders in Ethiopia had a vital role in preaching the Gospel, which later led to the official establishment of a Christian Church around the middle of the fourth century.[12] Berga accurately observes that Apostles and Christian merchants played a significant role in the subsequent expansion of Christianity in Ethiopia under the first patriarch, Abba Selama (Frumentius), during the period when Christianity attained the status of a state religion.[13] Consequently, I conclude that the Gospel message reached Ethiopia as early as the middle of the first century, ultimately laying the foundation for the formal establishment of the EOTC, which occurred in the middle of the fourth century.

## HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ETHIOPIA AND ISRAEL

The ancient Oriental Churches initially embraced Jewish-oriented customs and traditions. However, over time, most of these churches have abandoned the retention of Judaic elements in their contemporary Christian history and practice. On the contrary, Ethiopian Christianity expresses itself through careful adherence to Jewish customs and traditions, preserving them steadfastly.

Ethiopia, referenced often in the biblical tradition, was a geographical term encompassing various countries, including Nubia (present-day northern Sudan and southern Egypt), Somalia, Djibouti, the Red Sea coast of Eritrea, and South Sudan.[14] It is somewhat confusing for modern-day readers because the Greco-Roman world referred to Nubia as Ethiopia, and it was not until the reign of the Ethiopian king Ezana, around the middle of the fourth century A.D., that the Aksumites adopted the name Ethiopians for themselves.[15] In fact, according to Gay Byron, although both Homer and Herodotus acknowledged

[9] Giday Belai, *Ethiopian Civilization* (Addis Ababa: B. Giday, 1992), 93; see also Paulos Mikias, *Ethiopia: Africa in Focus Series* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC−CLIO, 2011), 180.

[10] Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, J. E. L. Oulton, and Hugh Jackson Lawlor (London: W. Heinemann, 1927), 109−10.

[11] Mikias, *Ethiopia,* 170.

[12] Ethiopia has a rich oral tradition that dates back centuries. Before the advent of written records, many cultures relied on oral traditions to preserve their history, culture, and religious beliefs. The oral tradition in Ethiopia played a crucial role in the early propagation of Christianity in the region, with Christian Red Sea Traders contributing to the spread of the Gospel. This eventually led to the formal establishment of a Christian Church in Ethiopia, solidifying Christianity's presence and influence in the country's history and culture.

[13] Petros S. Berga, *What Happened to the Original Christian Unity in Ethiopia? Towards the Restoration of Our Original Unity in Christ* (St. Ottilien: EOS, 2006), 34.

[14] There are numerous references to the name Ethiopia or Cush in the Old Testament. For example, Gen. 2:13, 10:6−8; Esther 1:1; 2 Chr. 12:3; 16:8; Ezek. 29:10; 30: 9; Isa. 20:3−5; 43:3; 46:9; Dan. 11:43, and so on. However, three texts are of importance in Ethiopian history. First, Num. 12:1 talks about Moses' marriage with an Ethiopian slave-girl against whom Miriam and Aaron spoke. See more on this in Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 8−9. Second, Amos 9:7 implies that God did not just bring up Israel out of Egypt, but equally, God had concern for other migrants such as the Ethiopians. Finally, the most popular and favorite text for Ethiopians, frequently cited, Ps. 68:32 says, "Ethiopia shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God."

[15] For further descriptions about the widespread confusion concerning the ancient Ethiopia(ns) geographical location, Pease see George Hatke, *Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1−35; and see James S. Romm, *The Edge of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 45−60.

Ethiopia as a region in the southern part of the Greco-Roman world, they (the ancient Ethiopians) were also found in the East and the West.[16] Thus, any reference to Ethiopia(ns) before the middle of the fourth century refers to a transregional people, including those from Nubia (Sudan), Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti, and even parts of Yemen.[17]

Ethiopia boasts a remarkable history that spans over four thousand years. Its civilization has withstood the test of time and ranks alongside other distinguished nations such as Egypt, China, and Greece. Ethiopia and Egypt are among the few African countries that invented an alphabet and developed a written language.[18] Furthermore, Ethiopia is among the oldest Christian nations.

Ethiopian secular and religious history lays claim to a long history that is indigenous and has been well-documented in the most reliable indigenous sources. Charles Ray asserts that Ethiopia adopted Judaism roughly a millennium before the Common Era [sic], while the legendary beliefs of Greece were introduced during the time of Jesus' birth. However, it is worth noting that these Greek beliefs failed to diminish the predominance of the Jewish faith.[19] Although some historians may locate the history of Queen Sheba in Yemen,[20] two ancient and primary documents known as *Kebra Nagast* (the Glory of the Kings)[21] and the *Fetha Nagast* (the Legislation of Kings)[22] claim that the Queen resided in Aksum, a

[16] Gay L. Byron, *Symbolic Blackness and Ethnic Difference in Early Christian Literature* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 29−51.

[17] Christine Chaillot, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition: A Brief Introduction to Its Life and Spirituality* (Paris: Inter-Orthodox Dialogue, 2002), 26. Christine Chaillot notes, "The culture of present northern Ethiopia had its origin in an influx of Semitic tribes from Southern Arabia to the Abyssinian highlands, in the kingdom of Da'amat (in the area of Yeha, near Adwa), around the 7th century B.C., who mixed with local people they found there." Enrico Molnar notes, "Homer knew this isolated land which tended to spurn contact with the outside world until recent centuries; he called it *Aithiopia* (Αιθιοπία), the "land of Sun-burned faces," and referred to its inhabitants as a "blameless race" and Herodotus called them "the Most Just Men." See also Enrico S. Molnar, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church: A Contribution to the Ecumenical Study of Less Known Eastern Churches* (Pasadena: Bloy House Theological School, 1969), 2−3. Speaking of the country's pre-history, Ethiopia is the oldest nation home to the ancestor of humanity, Lucy, Australopithecus Afarensis (one of the longest-lived and best-known early human species). This skeleton, locally named *Denknesh* is 3.2 million years old, was discovered in 1974 by an American Professor, Donald Johanson, in the low Awash Valley. See Chaillot, *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition*, 26.

[18] The two more African countries that invented their own alphabets are Libico-Punic in North Africa and Nsibidi in Nigeria, (and Eritrea, which was part of Ethiopia 30 years ago).

[19] Charles F. Rey, *The Real Abyssinia* (Philadelphia: J.B., Lippincott, 1935), 175.

[20] Scholars continue to engage in an ongoing debate concerning the Queen of Sheba's origins. As previously mentioned, the utilization of the term 'Ethiopia' introduces ambiguity regarding whether it pertains to transregional populations. The Bible characterizes her as the Queen of the East but does not specify the particular country. (1 Kings 10:1−13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1−12). Read more on this in Harry St. John Bridger Philby, *The Queen of Sheba* (London Melbourn, New York: Quarter Books, 1981), and Nicholas Clapp, *Sheba: Through the Desert in Search of the Legendary Queen* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001).

[21] The *Kebra Negast* is thought to have originated in the sixth century A.D. and was written in *Ge'ez* by a Coptic priest. Over the years, the text has been revised and translated into many languages, such as Arabic, Amharic, English, German, and French. Its rich historical background and multiple translations demonstrate its significance and continued relevance even today. See for example, the edited version of *Kebra Negast* in German language by Carl Bezold, *Kebra Nagast, die Kerrlichkeit der Konige: Nach den Handschriften in Berlin, London, Oxford und Paris* (Munich: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1905). *Kebra Negast* consists of several traditions, some historical and some folkloristic character, being influenced by the Old Testament and rabbinic writings and Egyptian, Syrian, Arabian, and Ethiopian sources. See Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church* (New Jersey: The Red Sea, 2013), 244−45; and Gerald Hausman, *The Kebra Nagast: The Lost Bible of Rastafarian Wisdom and Faith from Ethiopia and Jamaica* (New York: St. Martin, 1997), 15−16. This manuscript of *Kebra Nagast* was taken to England by the Napier expedition in 1868 but returned to Ethiopia at the request of Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes, who wrote a fascinating letter to Earl Graville, the British Foreign Secretary. Finally, the "manuscript was returned to the King of Ethiopia by order of the Trustees on Dec. 14th, 1872." See the letter's content and how the emperor explained the manuscript's value for Ethiopian politics and religion. See Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 74−75; and see in Wallis E. A. Budge, *Amulets and Talismans* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 197−99. Edward Ullendorff further notes that *Kebra Negast* is "the truest and most genuine expression of Abyssinian Christianity." See Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements," 226. He also witnessed in his other writing that *Kebre Negast* is both a literary work and the core of Ethiopian national and religious feelings and genuine expressions of Ethiopian Christianity. Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 144.

[22] Justice in Abyssinian culture and politics had been regulated by the *Fetha Nagast* code of laws, to which Ethiopian tradition assigns a heavenly origin. More discussion regarding *Fetha Nagast* is found in the next chapters.

great city built by Ebria Hakim, who was the son of King Solomon of Jerusalem and the Ethiopian Queen.[23] She was known locally as Queen Makeda.[24] It is said that Hakim visited his father, King Solomon in Jerusalem with the proof of a ring that King Solomon had given to his mother, Queen Makeda.[25] When Solomon was unable to persuade the young man to remain in Jerusalem, he issued a command for the leaders of Dan and Levi, as well as Azariah, the son of Zadok (the priest), to accompany Hakim on a mission to Ethiopia to establish a robust dynasty in the name of Solomon. Hakim ascended to the throne under the royal name Menelik I and played a pivotal role in instituting a Judaistic religion in Ethiopia.[26]

The loftiest claim of all is that of the ታቦት [True Ark of the Covenant] that is the heart of the *Kebra Nagast.*[27] Following the arrival of the True Ark of the Covenant, referred to as the *Tabot*, the Jewish royalty in Ethiopia has asserted their direct lineage from King Solomon, asserting a divine ancestry that elevates them to a godlike status.[28] The Ethiopians have their own local reproduction of Jerusalem, known as a new Zion, established by the Zagwe King Lalibela around the twelfth century.[29] These places comprise a complex of eleven rock-hewn Churches in Lalibela and are still in use today. The rock-hewn Churches are unique structures found nowhere else in the world, often perceived as a New Jerusalem for Ethiopian pilgrims.[30]

Other writers, such as Paulos Mikias, Carlo Rossini, and others, affirm the historical travel of the Ethiopian Queen to visit King Solomon of Jerusalem.[31] For example, Paulos Mikias notes that the remarkable connections between Ethiopians and Jewish people, both socially and religiously, are noteworthy, with Judaism having a long-standing history in Ethiopia that dates back to pre-Christian times.[32] It is essential to note that the Queen's visit to Jerusalem is mentioned in the Bible (1 Kings 10 and 1 Chronicles 9), indicating a profound socio-religious connection between Israel and Ethiopia. This connection has led to the assimilation of certain Jewish religious practices in Ethiopia, such as dietary laws, circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. Furthermore, aspects of Liturgy, ecclesiastical music and dance, religion and magic, and language have also been impacted by this cultural interchange.[33]

According to tradition, the visit of Queen Makeda had religious consequences that gave her a chance to learn about Solomon's God, which led the Queen to abandon her pagan beliefs (such as the

[23] Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 19−33.

[24] One fascinating historical account tells of an Ethiopian Queen who embarked on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, bearing a treasure trove of valuable gifts, including gold, in order to test King Solomon's wisdom. See more on Ernest A. Wallis Budge, *The Kebra Nagast* (New York: Cosimo Books, 2004), 19−33. Ethiopia has a rich cultural heritage that can be traced back to the powerful state of Aksum, situated between the Roman Empire and Persia. Aksum was renowned for its artistic prowess, producing a wealth of creative works that date back to ancient times. The architectural marvels of the monuments, palaces, and intricate tombs, constructed from massive rocks, are truly remarkable examples of artistic excellence.

[25] Rey, *Real Abyssinia,* 184−86; and see Hausman, *Kebra Nagast*, 95.

[26] Budge, *Kebra Nagast*, 43−72.

[27] The *Ge'ez* term ታቦት (*Tabot*) translates to the Ark of the Covenant. The names for the Ark of the Covenant in Hebrew, Arabic, and *Ge'ez* are *Tebhah*, *Tabut*, and *Tabot*, respectively. These names share similar sounds, underscoring the strong cultural and semantic connections among the three languages. Azariah transported the *Tabot* to Ethiopia to secure safety, power, and a warm reception in Ethiopian lands. The Kebra Nagast further justifies the relocation of the *Tabot* from Jerusalem to Ethiopia as an action aligned with God's will. See Budge, *Queen of Sheba*, iv.

[28] Rey, *Real Abyssinia*, 122−26; Budge, *Queen of Sheba*, iv−vi; and see Henry A. Stern, *Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia, Together with a Description of the Country and Its Various Inhabitants.* (London: Cass, 1968), xxxiii.

[29] See Kristen Pedersen, "Jerusalem," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: He-N* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 273−77; and see Amsalu Tefera, "Colophonic Reflections on Dersana Ṣeyon and Kebra Nagast," *Aethiopica. International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 78−89.

[30] See Sylvia Pankhurst, *Ethiopia: A Cultural History* (Essex: Lalibela House, 1955), 151; and see Marie- Laure Derat, "Lalibela," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica: He-N* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 479.

[31] Besides the primary and secondary written sources, oral traditions are an integral part when reconstructing the history and doctrine of the EOTC.

[32] Paulos Mikias, *Ethiopia: Africa in Focus* (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, 2011), 169.

[33] Isaac, *Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, 27.

worship of the Sun, trees, snakes, and other idols) and convert to the faith of the God of Israel.[34] Along with the *Tabot*, the Pentateuch was brought to Aksum together with a cohort of Jewish priests and nobles around the tenth century B.C.[35] After receiving the Holy *Tabot* and the Commandments, the Queen declared that she would abandon the worship of the Sun; instead, she determined to worship the creator of the Sun, the true God of Israel.[36] It is also worth mentioning that Menelik I, the son of King Solomon, acquired knowledge about the religion of Israel while he was in Jerusalem. Zadok, a priest of Israel, anointed him and left Jerusalem with Hakim at the request of King Solomon.[37] Over time, the people of northern Ethiopia incorporated Jewish practices into their traditional religion and converted to the Jewish faith. This occurrence is similar to King Solomon's vision, where he saw the Sun leaving Israel and shining on Ethiopia instead.[38]

Although it is appropriate to consider the close ties between Judaism and Ethiopian history and religion after the Queen visited King Solomon, the account of the Queen of Sheba is not the only story that suggests such a strong connection between the two countries. Several events and records indicate the existence of a religious pilgrimage to Israel that became a standard practice, alongside the presence of a substantial Jewish migrant population in Ethiopia. To mention a few instances of how this came to be, when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C., many Israelites were captured by the Babylonians. However, others fled to Egypt and Ethiopia.[39] The prophet Zephaniah, around the seventh century B.C., said, "From beyond the rivers of Cush or Ethiopia my worshipers, the daughters of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering" (Zeph. 3:10). Thus, those Jewish migrants began to expand their religion initially in the northern part of Abyssinia.[40]

The account of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26−40 may also suggest that pilgrimage to Jerusalem was practiced, at least by the elite.[41] Reading the Book of Isaiah and examining the pilgrimage of the Ethiopian eunuch to Jerusalem, one can infer that Judaism was introduced to Ethiopia long before the encounter with Christianity.[42] Furthermore, Ogbu Kalu notes that the three magi from the East, who visited Jesus when he was a baby, were all Ethiopians. At the same time, some argue that only one of them was an Ethiopian King, while the remaining two kings were from Afghanistan and Persia.[43] Abba Gorgorios, the pope of Shewa in Ethiopia, asserts that the Old Testament was translated into the Ge'ez language before the introduction of Christianity, and this suggests that it is most likely to have assumed

[34] Bunge, *Kebra Negast*, 28−31 and 54.

[35] Budge, *The Queen of Sheba*, 43−72.

[36] Budge, *Queen of Sheba*, 29; Bunge notes, "From this moment I [the Queen] will not worship the Sun, but I shall worship the creator of the Sun, the God of Israel. And that Tabernacle of the God of Israel shall be unto me my Lady, and unto my seed after me, and unto all my kingdoms that are under my dominion. And because of this I have found favor before thee, and before the God of Israel my Creator, Who hath brought me unto thee, and hath made me to hear thy voice, and has shown me thy face, and hath made to me understand thy commandment." See also Gerald Hausman, *Kebra Nagast*, 91.

[37] Budge, *Queen of Sheba*, 53−55.

[38] As per Budge's account, King Solomon had a dream in which he conveyed to Zadok that he had witnessed the Sun shifting its position from Judah to Ethiopia. This dream symbolically suggested the transfer of God's glory to the newly emerging region referred to as Abyssinia or Ethiopia. See more on this in Budge, *Queen of Sheba*, 31, and 71−72.

[39] Aba Goergoryos, *የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሀዶ ቤተክርስቲያን ታሪክ*: *The History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church* (Addis Ababa: EOTC, 2012), 6−7. አባ ጎርጎርዮስ (Aba Goergoryos), an EOTC pope of Shewa, notes how the culture and way of life of the Ethiopians express the old Semitic civilization. For example, a celebration of feasts, funerals, and weddings, the custom of women's and children's dress, including jewelry, follows Old Testament laws. See Aba Goergoryos, *የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሀዶ ቤተክርስቲያን ታሪክ*: 8−9.

[40] See more about this in Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 15−30.

[41] The historical tie between Israel and Ethiopia facilitated the earlier arrival of Christianity in Ethiopia around the First Century through the ministry of Apostle Matthew. Rufinus, a well-known fourth-century Church historian, witnessed that Apostle Matthew went to Ethiopia to preach the Gospel to fulfill the Great Commission of Jesus Christ and eventually suffered martyrdom there. Please see Rufinus of Aquileia, *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia. Books 10 and 11*. Trans. by Philip R. Amidon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18; and see The Ethiopian Orthodox Church. *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spirituality* (Addis Ababa: The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1970), 3.

[42] Mikias, *Ethiopia*, 170.

[43] Ogbu Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 106.

some form of solid monotheistic belief that had existed in Abyssinia before the arrival of Christianity in Ethiopia.[44]

The appearance of the name Ethiopia (also known as Cush) indicates that Ethiopians were present in the biblical stories. If Christianity is thought to be the continuation of Judaism in some form, this link can be vividly located in Ethiopian history and practices. For example, the EOTC calls its religious leaders priests, and the garments worn by the Ethiopian priests are identical to those of Jewish priests. They wear the priestly belt, the skull cap, and the scapular. Several Hebrew terms that are associated with the service of the Old Testament temple have also been found in Ethiopian Christianity.[45] As we shall soon see, the Pentateuchal legal code is a further example of the presence of Jewish tradition in the life of the EOTC. The Mosaic food laws have been and continue to be carefully practiced and followed. Most customs related to ritual cleanliness in Judaism are likewise strongly reminiscent of Hebraic customs accepted by Ethiopian Christianity since its earliest days.

In sum, one can see the strong influence Judaism has had on Ethiopia ever since it received the *Tabot* and its placement in the new Zion in Aksum. These facts have led the Ethiopians to claim that God mainly chose the country of Ethiopia to be the tabernacle of the new covenant and the new home of the spiritual and heavenly Zion, just as they also believed that God chose the Ethiopians to be his chosen people after the Jews became unworthy. For this reason, the EOTC and the whole nation value the *Kebra Nagast* as a literary work and the core of Ethiopian national and religious identity—the genuine expression of non-Hellenized Christianity in Ethiopia.

## ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX *TEWAHEDO* CHURCH

A significant milestone in the history of Christianity in Ethiopia unfolded during the fourth century when St. Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, consecrated St. Frumentius as the inaugural Patriarch of Ethiopia. This historic event not only granted official prominence to the Christian faith in the region but also earned early international recognition for Christianity in Ethiopia within the annals of the Church's history. This ancient Christian tradition played a pivotal role in shaping the national identity of the Ethiopian people and has exerted influence through its orthodox religious orientation.

The EOTC is one of the ancient Orthodox Churches and the only African, indigenous Christian Church in Sub-Saharan Africa. It originated far before the European colonization of Africa. The Church belongs to the faithful and apostolic Church founded upon the teaching of Jesus Christ and His Apostles.[46] The EOTC history is not just the nation's history; instead, historical studies have shown that the EOTC is the oldest Christian Church in Africa.[47] The Church became closely tied to the historical development of the country due to its strong relationship with the empire. The unity of the two granted the nation and the authentic Church sources of power and authority that are appreciated by world leaders.

The Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria maintained administrative oversight of the EOTC until the mid-twentieth century. The Council of Chalcedon, convened in A.D. 451, was a pivotal council that led to the separation of the Oriental Orthodox Churches from the broader Christian community. The other Non-Chalcedonian members of the Orthodox Churches are the Coptic, Eritrean, Armenian, Syrian, and Indian Orthodox Churches. Although the EOTC is part of the five Oriental Orthodox Churches, it also shares a faith-related creed with other Eastern Orthodox Churches. Likewise, the Church is unique in

[44] Abba Gorgorios Ye Shewa Papas, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church History: Ye Etyopiya Orthodox Tewahido BeteKirstiyan Tarik* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 1974), 15.

[45] Terms like *Kurban* (*Korban*) and *Kahen* (*Kohen*) have similar traditions and functions in both Judaism and EOTC religions.

[46] See the entire documents of The Oriental Orthodox Churches Addis Ababa Conference, ed., *The Interim Secretariat Oriental Orthodox Conference* (Addis Ababa: Artistic Printers, 1965); and see Alemayehu Desta, *Introduction to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Faith* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2012).

[47] John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History, 62−1992* (Kenya: Nairobi, Paulines, 1994), 39−40; and see Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: British Academy, 1968), 15.

its engagement with practical religious observances, such as rituals and festivals, including the Feast of መስቀል [the Commemoration of the True Cross of Christ] and ጥምቀት [Epiphany].

At present, the EOTC is numerically the largest of the five non-Chalcedonian Eastern Orthodox Churches. These Churches are known as the Oriental Orthodox Churches, a terminology chosen to distinguish them from other Byzantine Orthodox Churches. One of the main differences between the two is their theology concerning the two natures of Christ. The Oriental Orthodox Churches do not use the controversial formula regarding the relationship of the two natures *in* Christ, and how the two natures exist and function in one person. They instead teach about the one incarnate nature of God, the *logos*. The Byzantine Orthodox Churches finally characterized the Oriental Orthodox Churches as a heretical group known as *Monophysitism*. The *Monophysite* doctrine of the Church has been vigorously and avidly maintained in Ethiopia since the beginning until today because it is seen to adhere closer to the concepts of the Old Testament teaching concerning monotheism.[48] And traces of Semitic culture and civilization, which have influenced Ethiopian Christianity as well as the lives of the Ethiopian people.

However, it is essential to provide clarification. The EOTC is often inaccurately labeled as a *Monophysite* Church. The accurate terminology for addressing the Church is as a 'Non-Chalcedonian' Orthodox Church.[49] This terminology is employed because the EOTC consistently uses the term *miaphysis*, as opposed to *monophysis*, in describing the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ, thus signaling its divergence from the Chalcedonian position. In the former term, the prefix *μία* signifies a *composite unity* of the two natures in Christ. In contrast, in the latter term, the prefix *mono* signifies an elemental unity of the two natures in Christ.[50] As such, the *Ge'ez* term *Tewahedo* conveys the concept of "being made one," and it serves as the most appropriate expression to articulate the inseparable composite unity of the divine and human nature within the Person of Jesus Christ.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church steadfastly maintains its belief that in Christ, only one nature endures—a distinctive divine-human nature. This single nature encompasses two *aspects*, the divine and the human, and it preserves all the characteristic attributes of both natures following their union. However, the Church rejected the allegation that the Divine absorbed the human or vice versa. Therefore, the EOTC Christology is neither Gnostic nor *Monophysite*; rather, it is *Tewahedo*, signifying that Christ is simultaneously and inseparably both fully divine and fully human, without any confusion. Ephraim Isaac accurately observes that the EOTC diverges from Eutychianism. Instead, the Church adheres to the "true man, true God" doctrine, signifying the *Tewahedo* Christological doctrine.[51]

## SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVE ON JEWISH-ORIENTED ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIANITY

Current scholars have examined the relationship between Judaism and Ethiopian Christianity, with many arguing for or against the influence of Judaism on Ethiopian Christianity. To name a few, Edward Ullendorff, Getatchew Haile, Henry Stern, Charles Rey, and John Pawlikowski[52] are among many who have also written extensively on this subject matter. For example, Ullendorff, a contemporary historian and scholar, disregards the practice of Judaism in the EOTC; however, he does not deny the fact that Ethiopian Christianity is combined with Judaism and ancient Semitic practices, which he calls "Hebraic-

[48] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 87 and 115.

[49] Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970), 3; and see Ayalew Tamiru, *YeEtiopia Emnet Be Sostu Hegegat: The Faith of Ethiopia According to the Three Laws* (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam, 1960), 205−6; and see also Baur, *Christianity in Africa*, 37−41.

[50] Mebratu Kiros Gebru, *Miaphysite Christology: An Ethiopian Perspective* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2010), 18−23.

[51] Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2013), 20.

[52] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 73−130; see also Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in Abyssinia (Monophysite) Christianity." *Journal of Semantic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1956): 216−56; Getachew Haile, "The 49 Hour Sabbath of the Ethiopian Church," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23, no. 2 (1988): 233−54; Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas*; Rey, *Real Abyssinia*; and see John T. Pawlikowski, "The Judaic Spirit of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: A Case Study in Religious Acculturation." *Journal of Religion in Africa,* vol. 4, no. 4 (1972): 178−99.

Jewish Elements."[53] Henry Stern accused the Abyssinian Church of departing from the Gospel and genuine Christian faith. According to him, the observance of the purity laws, the worship of St. Mary, the role of saints as mediators, circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath, and other Mosaic constraints become the dominant factor and central teaching of the Church.[54]

Charles Rey also criticized Abyssinian Christianity for embracing superstition within the religion. For example, Rey makes the EOTC priests and *debteras*[55] accountable for syncretism due to their mixing of the truth of the Gospel with superstition. He further associated the Ethiopian priests with the South African witch doctors, admiring the latter over the former.[56] Ephraim Isaac notes that King Solomon's legacy as a wise philosopher became a source of his influence in Ethiopian magic, which was practiced by the EOTC priests and *debetras*.[57] Furthermore, Ullendorff referred to superstition as one of the most notable practices or beliefs within Ethiopian Christianity.[58] He notes, "Amulets and Tefillin, the shield of David, and seal and net of Solomon are accompanied, among both Hebrews and Ethiopians, by spells to scatter demons (שדים–አጋንንት, [the Devil]) and to avert disease."[59] According to Bunge, key biblical figures such as Moses, Solomon, Christ, and His apostles or disciples are perceived by the Ethiopians as magicians. Consequently, the Books of the Old and New Testaments, as well as copies of them, were frequently seen as protective charms or amulets.[60] Bunge further explains the influence of the Hebrew, Coptic, and Egyptian amulets on the Ethiopian (Abyssinian) amulets.[61]

Furthermore, the sixteen-century Jesuit missionaries who came to Ethiopia were aware of the dominant nature of Judaism in Ethiopian Christianity; however, most of them attempted to abolish it as an irrelevant and primitive practice.[62] Instead of respecting and reforming the teaching of Judaism and the customs that were well established in Ethiopia for centuries, the Jesuit missionaries in Ethiopia were passionate about refuting the influence of Judaism and its customs upon Ethiopian Christianity and culture as practices that needed to be regarded as primitive and irrelevant in the new dispensation.[63]

Moreover, while the EOTC venerates the *Kebra Nagast* as a cornerstone of its historical and theological identity, critical scholarship offers alternative perspectives that challenge the historical veracity of these narratives. For instance, Alessandro Bausi scrutinizes the Kebra Nagast's historiography, arguing that the text should be viewed as a theological and ideological document rather than a factual

[53] Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements," 216. Ullendorff notes that "They [the Ethiopians] are stubborn adherents to fossilized Hebrew Jewish beliefs, practices and customs." See Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements," 256.

[54] Stern, *Wanderings among the Falashas*, 304.

[55] According to Ullendorff, "The *debtra* occupies an 'intermediate' position 'between the clergy and layman in the Ethiopian Church.' 'Though the *debtra* are not ordained, no service can adequately be held without their presence." See Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 92.

[56] Rey, *Real Abyssinia*, 196−97. Rey notes, "Their religion is overlaid with a thick layer of superstition, some of which is merely curious, but some apt to have dangerous result … So that in point of fact the Abyssinian priest does not appear to differ very much from the South African witch-doctor, and indeed of the two I should be inclined to give pride of place to the latter, so far as medical practice is concerned at all events."

[57] Isaac, *Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church*, 27. The Scripture says, "so that King Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30). Furthermore, there was a time when Solomon used the devils to obey him by his wisdom which the Ethiopian priests and *debetras* did the same. See more on this from Steven Kaplan, "Solomon," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 687−88.

[58] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 79−82.

[59] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 79.

[60] Budge, *Amulets and Talismans*, 197; and see Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 82.

[61] Budge, *Amulets and Talismans*, 177−211. The entire book thoroughly investigates the widespread utilization of amulets and the inscriptions found on them, providing detailed descriptions and translations of these amuletic texts.

[62] Rey, *Real Abyssinia*, 177 and 184.

[63] Portugal's primary objectives in establishing contact with Ethiopia were to gain control over the Indian Ocean, promote the conversion of Ethiopians to Roman Catholicism, and achieve complete dominion and union between the EOTC and Roman Christendom. However, this effort led to a religious conflict between the two groups, ultimately resulting in the expulsion of all foreign missionaries from the country during the 1630s. This conflict also engendered a sense of hostility among Ethiopians towards foreign Christian practices and Europeans. These factors contributed to Ethiopia's isolation from the outside world until the mid-nineteenth century. Please see more in Eshete, "Ethiopia," 147−51.

historical account.[64] His examination of the manuscript tradition reveals discrepancies and textual variants that highlight the mythological elements interwoven with the historical content. Similarly, George Hatke, provides a critical analysis of the Kebra Nagast's claims regarding Jewish presence and influence in Ethiopia. He argues that these narratives were later constructions aimed at serving specific political and religious agendas. His exploration of archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the traditional view upheld by the EOTC may be more reflective of ideological constructs than actual historical events.[65]

Despite such critiques against the unique form of Ethiopian Christianity and culture, the EOTC existed for centuries with stability and continued to worship the God of Israel. Later, when Christianity came to Ethiopia, the influence of Judaism was evident through the maintenance of certain rituals such as fasting and almsgiving, dietary laws, the practice of circumcision, the observance of the Jewish Sabbath, and all of the Mosaic restrictions that pertained to clean and unclean people, animals, and even sacred spaces—essential teachings of the Church up until today.

Some scholars, such as David Levine and James Bruce, challenged such conventional generalizations about the role of Judaism in Ethiopian Christianity.[66] For these scholars, the expression of Judaism and Christianity in Ethiopia is an example of the unique interpenetration of Judaism and Christianity. For example, David Levine has observed the vivid commonality of Jewish tradition within the Semitic Church in Ethiopia. He then challenged the conventional overview of Jewish-Ethiopian Christianity. For him, the expression of Judaism and Christianity in Ethiopia is an example of a unique interpenetration of Judaism and Christianity that is unlike anywhere else in the world.[67] Throughout his book, *Wax and Gold*, David Levine describes the Ethiopian Church as the most systematically Africanized of any Christian Church on the continent, which is a real example of African culture assimilation by Christianity. These scholars are critical of those who, from a Western perspective, disparage the practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. When the first Christian missionaries, Frumentius and Aedesius, arrived in Ethiopia during the fourth century, they found that the local people were already following some Jewish traditions. Instead of rejecting these traditions, they decided to respect and incorporate them into the new Christian religion. As a result, customs like circumcision, eating only clean meats, and other Jewish practices continue to be an essential part of the Abyssinian religion even today.[68]

Scholars who have acknowledged the uniqueness of Abyssinian Christianity have observed the unique centrality of the ቅዱስ ታቦት [Holy Ark of the Covenant] in Ethiopian Christianity.[69] The theme of the Holy Ark of the Covenant is one of great importance throughout the *Kebra Nagast.* It serves as a focal point for Ethiopian Christian worship and spirituality, aligning the practices with the Old Testament forms of worship.[70] Unlike other Christian groups, what defines a Church as a Church in the EOTC is the presence of the Ark of the Covenant in it. According to the canon of the Church, the Holy Ark of the Covenant confers sanctity upon the Church, enabling it to exist as a true Church. The presence of a Holy

[64] Alessandro Bausi, "The Book of Kings (Kebra Nagast)" in *The Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*. Vol. 3: He-N, ed., by Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 409−12.

[65] George Hatke*, Aksum and Nubia: Warfare, Commerce, and Political Fictions in Ancient Northeast Africa* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 141.

[66] Bruce, *Sources of the Nile*, and see David Levine, *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

[67] David Levine, *Wax and Gold*, 25−36.

[68] Bruce, *Sources of the Nile*, 13.

[69] Aziz S. Atiya, *History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church: Known as the History of the Holy Church* (Le Caire: Societe Darcheologie Copte, 1948), 58−61; Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II* (Addis Ababa: Red Sea Press, 1992), 37−39; and Harry Hayatt, *The Church of Abyssinia* (London: Luzac and Co., 1928), 121−22.

[70] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 82.

Ark of the Covenant is obligatory in every Church; without it, a Holy Communion service cannot be held.[71]

The relocation of the Holy *Tabot* from Jerusalem to St. Mary Church in Aksum symbolized the belief that the God of Israel had shifted His divine presence from Jerusalem to Aksum. In this context, Ethiopians came to be regarded as the chosen people, signifying a profound spiritual connection between their land and the divine. This belief was founded on the understanding that, unlike the Israelites, Ethiopians did not betray and hand over the Son of God to His death when He was present during His earthly ministry.[72] The Church of Aksum Seyon was a holy Church built by Negus Kaleb (King Kaleb) of Aksum in the 4th century and dedicated to St. Mary, the Mother of Jesus.[73] This unique building takes its name from the Zion Church in Jerusalem, which was built by Maximus, Bishop of Jerusalem, around A.D. 340 on Mount Zion. According to the EOTC, therefore, the construction of the old Aksum Seyon Church demonstrates that the original symbolism of this Church was related to a venerated prototype, the Church of Zion in Jerusalem.[74] The rationale behind placing the true *Tabot* in the Church of St. Mary in Aksum is that the Ethiopians see St. Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant. The celebration of the famous Ethiopian feast known as Seyon Maryam in Aksum annually signifies that the Arks of the Old and New Testaments are uniquely celebrated simultaneously, combining the two Testaments into one.

Moreover, the Holy *Tabot* is central to the worship of the EOTC. The way it is carried in procession around Ethiopian Churches during annual Christian celebrations, such as ጥምቀት [the Epiphany], is similar to Jewish forms of worship, which are not found in any other religion except the EOTC. The Jewish practice of the carrying of the Torah or the Ark of the Covenant in a procession accompanied by spiritual song and dance, especially during the feast of Simhath Torah, where David and the people of Israel dance around the *Tabot* (see 2 Sam. 6:1−23), gives evidence for the indigenous spiritual and Christian songs and dances during the annual celebration of ጥምቀት [the Epiphany] in Ethiopia.[75]

Although from the religious aspect, members of the EOTC are the main actors of the ጥምቀት [the Epiphany] festival, from the traditional and social perspective, it is a holiday for all Ethiopians. According to the local calendar, this holiday is celebrated from January 18 to January 21, which is the first month of the year. This holiday commemorates the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. The feast of ጥምቀት [the Epiphany] resembles the ritual re-enactment of baptism, similar to re-enactments carried out by Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land when they visit the Jordan. On the first day of the celebration, the Holy *Tabots*, wrapped with ornamental cloth, are carried to a central area. Since it is rare to see several *Tabots* together on a single day, such as ጥምቀት [the Epiphany], an enormous crowd of people flocks from different areas, escorting every Holy *Tabot*, chanting sacred songs, ringing bells, ululating (joyful sounds), and blowing horns. They then spend the nights in tents pitched near a river or a stream. Accompanied by a religious ceremony, priests bless the water for the evening in an annual liturgical assembly called *Ketera*. Surrounding the river or the stream, they chant the night mass known as የሌሊት ቅዳሴ [the Night Liturgy], and the Divine Liturgy starts at about 3:00 am.

It is customary for EOTC congregants to also spend the nights, either in self-brought tents or in the open air, with picnics around the Holy *Tabots*, singing and praising God throughout the night.[76] Liturgical prayers continue on the morning of the next day, where የጠዋት ቅዳሴ [the Morning Liturgy] is

[71] Aymro Wondmagegnehu and Joachim Motovu, eds. *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Orthodox Mission, 1970), 46. Wondmagegnehu and Motovu note, "It is the Tabot which gives sanctity to the Church in which it is placed [...]. The consecration of a Church is a solemn and impressive ceremony with rites symbolic of the sacred uses to which the edifice is dedicated... The Tabot, or Ark, previously consecrated by the Patriarch, is installed with grandeur and is the chief feature of the ceremony." Please see also Hyatt, *Church of Abyssinia*, 121.

[72] Hausman, *Kebra Nagast*, 13.

[73] Budge, *Queen of Sheba*, 50−74. The term Zion in this context refers to the commonly used term to refer to the city of the eschatological age of salvation.

[74] Marilyn E. Heldman, "Architectural symbolism, Sacred Geography, and the Ethiopian Church," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22, no. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1992): 224−29.

[75] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 2−3 and 85; and see also Hyatt, *Church of Abyssinia*, 169−74.

[76] Rey, *Real Abyssinia*, 191−94.

held, which ends with the blessing of the water. This occasion reaches its peak when the rite of sprinkling the congregation with holy water begins. With this, adherents renew their baptismal vows and receive blessings for the remission of their sins. Religious chants accompany the entire ritual process. After the ceremony ends, the *Tabots* are carried back to their Churches. Attendees sing spiritual songs along the way home and sometimes slaughter an Ox, shedding its blood at a specific location.[77]

Another feature that current scholars have observed as being unique to Ethiopian Christianity is the celebration of two Sabbaths. It is a historical peculiarity of the EOTC that both Saturday and Sunday are observed as Sabbaths, in recognition of both Jewish and Christian traditions. This has been the official practice since approximately the fifteenth century, during the reign of King Zer'a Ya'iqob.[78] While there is no exact documentation pinpointing the precise origin of this tradition, the debate surrounding whether the Old Testament Sabbath should be observed was a significant issue, likely persisting throughout the history of the local Church. This matter was particularly pronounced during the period spanning from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century.[79]

In the EOTC, the Divine Service and the celebration of the Eucharist are observed on both Sabbath days as a remembrance of what God did for His people on Saturday, according to the Old Testament tradition, and on Sunday, according to the New Testament tradition. This fact is often cited as illustrating the continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments in the EOTC.[80] St. Gregory of Nyssa's teaching significantly influences the EOTC Liturgy[81] and affirms the need to observe both Sabbath days. St. Gregory emphasizes the profound theological significance of both the Sabbath (traditionally observed on Saturday) and the Lord's Day (Sunday) within Christian doctrine. He posits an intrinsic connection between these two days and accentuates the significance of how they are regarded. In particular, he asserts that any act of desecration committed on the Sabbath carries repercussions or theological ramifications that extend to the observance of the Lord's Day.[82] This underscores the theological concept of the intertwined relationship between these sacred days within Christian tradition. All work restrictions on the Sabbath days are listed in Mashafa Berhan (the Book of Light) with remarkable similarity to the Mishna and the Talmud of the Jews.[83] Thus, as Steven Kaplan notes, I also conclude that Judaism's strong influence on Ethiopian Christianity shaped its tradition, doctrine, and practice.[84]

Outside of the EOTC's context, Mary Douglas argued that, in defense of Jewish rituals, purity rights as practices should no longer be dismissed as inherently primitive, because every ancient culture constitutes its own distinct realm. It is only after understanding the full spectrum of abilities and threats acknowledged within primitive societies that we can begin to draw comparisons between their respective religions. Within the heart of its universe, every primitive society represents a dynamic and vital

[77] At times, the priests and monks of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tewahedo* Church (EOTC), who are responsible for carrying the *Tabot*, report that the *Tabots* suddenly become exceedingly heavy for them to bear and proceed with. In such situations, a good-looking ox must be sacrificed, and its blood is spilled. This ritual is performed to allow the priests to then proceed to the specific Church building where the *Tabot* is housed.

[78] According to Herman Norden, St. Gregory of Nyssa supports the idea of observing both Sabbath days. See more on Herman Norden, *Africa's Last Empire: Through Abyssinia to Lake Tana and the Country of the Falasha* (London: Witherby, 1930), 201.

[79] Haile, "The 49 Hour Sabbath," 233−34.

[80] John Binns, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30−35. The *Fetha Nagast* gives further order to celebrate the Eucharist more days in a week. It says, the "Eucharist shall be offered every week on Sunday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, and on feast days if they fall on Weekdays." Paulos Tzadua, *The Fetḥa Nagast: The Law of the Kings* (Addis Ababa: Haile Sellassie University, 1968), 85.

[81] Daoud, *Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, 120−27.

[82] Norden, *Africa's Last Empire*, 201. St. Gregory notes, "With what eyes do you regard the Lord's Day, you who have desecrated the Sabbath? Do you know that these two days [Saturday and Sunday] are related, that if you wrong one of them, you will stumble against the other?"

[83] Ernest Hammerschmidt, "Jewish Elements in the Cult of the Ethiopian Church," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 3, no. 2 (Unknown Binding, 1965): 1−12; and Tovey, *Exploring the Eucharist*, 56−78.

[84] Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press. 1992), 17−20.

structure.[85] In her book *Purity and Danger*, Douglas identifies the concern for purity as a key theme at the heart of every society. For her, purity refers to the general principle of categorizing and structuring every society. Therefore, the ritualized avoidance of any religious tradition must be treated systematically or structurally within its rites, as rituals draw external boundaries and control certain undesirable behaviors within a given society and context.

The analysis of impurity is a matter of social perception and an interpretation of one’s actions based on what is deemed to be acceptable or unacceptable to God. In other words, the concept of purity in each society can be defined in a general sense as a system of ordering things and classifying them as pure or impure. It may also refer to specific rules and regulations that categorize persons, objects, and spaces as pure or impure within a particular social group. Understanding the significant role culture plays in shaping a community’s beliefs and customs is crucial. As Douglas emphasizes, shared values and patterns provide individuals with a framework for experiencing and comprehending their world. By acknowledging the importance of culture, we can gain a deeper understanding of the unique practices and beliefs that shape different societies. For her, dismissing these differences as primitive or inferior is unacceptable, and it is essential to respect and appreciate them.[86]

The Jews had taken the sense of purity and impurity from the Scripture. In Leviticus, God commanded Israel to speak to the entire congregation of the people of Israel and to say to them, "You shall be holy, for the Lord your God is holy" (Lev. 19:2).[87] The central replication of the idea of order and purity was established from the temple system. In other words, the concept of holiness and purity was primarily conveyed to the Jewish people through the specific rules governing participation in the Temple service. More specifically, they specified the type of animals that should be sacrificed, the method and timing of the sacrifices, and who was eligible to participate in the Temple's holy sacrifice (Lev. 21:16−20). Priests observed specific purity rules, and just as the Temple and the priests were considered holy, the whole people of Israel observed the purity laws so that they, too, would be deemed holy.

## Fasting and Dietary Laws

According to the current teachings of the EOTC, fasting is regarded as a ritual practice and a necessary liturgical preparation that every member of the Church is expected to observe before participating in the Holy Eucharist.[88] The importance of fasting can hardly be overstated if one is to understand the Church. In other words, understanding fasting as a ritual practice is necessary for a valid account of its importance in the EOTC’s understanding of worthiness required for Church members to be admitted to the Eucharist. The conventional fasting regulations encompass the observance of two weekly fasting days: Wednesdays (in commemoration of Christ's trial) and Fridays (in observance of the Passion of Christ). Additionally, the period leading up to Easter, known as the Great Fast, extends for a duration of fifty-five days.

Concerning the order of fasting, there are several Judaic elements in the present-day EOTC’s food and dietary laws. The compulsory dietary restrictions, dating back to the fourth century A.D., have remained unaltered. During periods of fasting, such as Lent, certain foods—including meat, milk, eggs, fish, and cheese—are proscribed. Moreover, these dietary prohibitions extend to Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the entire year, encompassing various fasting seasons and days. Consequently, adherents often abstain from consuming meat and animal products during fasting periods, even when facing physical weakness or illness, due to the rigor of these abstinence regulations.[89] Violating these fasting guidelines results in the faithful’s ineligibility to participate in the Eucharist and renders them ritually impure,

[85] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), 14.

[86] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 38−39.

[87] For a comprehensive exploration of the historical genesis and evolution of purity and impurity concepts in the Old Testament, one may refer to the scholarly contributions of Mary Douglas. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 41−57.

[88] Certain scholars, including Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, offer critical assessments of the ritualistic nature of fasting. See Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 65−68.

[89] Rey, *Real Abyssinia*, 188−89.

necessitating the observance of specific cleansing rituals.[90] Nonetheless, maintaining compliance with these fasting requirements may pose challenges for particular members.

There are seven significant fasts in total, each tied to specific events in biblical history. However, many Church members may lack awareness of the historical significance and contextual relevance of these fasting observances during particular periods of the year.[91] Priests, monks, and clergy are required to observe all seven fasts and thoroughly adhere to any fasts that span over 250 days in a year, refraining from meat consumption during these periods. For lay individuals, the basic fasting requirement includes adherence to Lenten fasting, Wednesday and Friday fasts throughout the year, and a three-day intensive fast leading up to Lent known as the *Neneiveh* (Nineveh) fast, which serves to prepare the faithful.[92] The pinnacle of the most significant fasting period commences on Good Friday, extends through Easter Saturday and the vigil (*gehadt*), and continues until the conclusion of the fast during Easter Sunday's celebratory feast. During these pivotal three days, abstaining from both food and drink is mandated, with the additional prohibition against swallowing saliva and refraining from customary greetings, such as handshakes.[93] Upon the directive of the priest or spiritual mentor, additional fasting days may be prescribed for purposes of penance or individual motivations. In particular, a mandatory fasting duration of at least fifteen to eighteen hours is stipulated before attending the Liturgy and receiving Holy Communion. This involves abstaining from all food and water from midnight until 3:00pm. Additionally, on Easter Saturday, preceding the commencement of the vigil and the reception of Holy Communion, individuals are prohibited from swallowing saliva or engaging in vocal communication.

Moreover, the EOTC today still strictly adheres to the Food Laws in Leviticus 11:1-47. Reverend Daoud observes that modern Ethiopians comply with the practice of washing hands both before and after meals, as well as abstaining from consuming meat from animals prohibited in Leviticus Chapter 11, much like their ancient Hebrew counterparts did.[94] Animals possessing uncloven hooves and/or lacking the capacity to chew cud are considered ርኩስ [unclean]. Faithful members of the Church are prohibited from consuming these animals throughout their entire lives.[95] During the severe famine of 1985, numerous Ethiopian adherents of the EOTC tragically perished while upholding their commitment to abstain from consuming animals with uncloven hooves, as dictated by their religious beliefs. Prohibited animals include, but are not limited to, pigs, horses, camels, donkeys, dogs, frogs, and others. In the avian realm, clean birds are distinguished by fully separated talons that exhibit no interconnection.

Further, the EOTC prohibits its members from consuming animal blood based on the scriptural principle that the life of a creature resides in its blood. According to the Scriptures, God ordained the shedding of animal blood as a means of making atonement on the altar, thereby reconciling humans for their committed sins. This concept is articulated in Leviticus 17:11 and 17:14, as well as Deuteronomy 12:23, where it is emphasized that it is the blood that facilitates atonement for one's life. Thus, from the perspective of the Church, the consumption of blood is considered impure, as blood is symbolically associated with life, and it is the blood of the animal that possesses the exclusive capacity to facilitate purification.

The dietary law in the EOTC is directly linked to the purity concerns observed in early rabbinic food law. Failure to observe this law disqualifies faithful members from entering the Church and partaking of the Eucharist. For example, besides permanent abstinence from the so-called "unclean food," the EOTC members must abstain from eating clean meat and dairy products during Lent, Wednesday, and

[90] Tom Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Meditation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Church Community* (Berkley: University of California, 2018).

[91] Isaac Ephraim, "The Significance of Food in Hebraic–African Thought and the Role of Fasting in the Ethiopian Church," in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richards Valantasis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 338.

[92] The fasting and prayer on Nineveh is a three-day lent recognized by the EOTC and conducted two weeks before the beginning of the Great Lent. The fast is ritualistically similar to Lent and is performed in commemoration of the three days that the Prophet Jonah spent inside the belly of the great fish and the subsequent fast and repentance of the Ninevites.

[93] According to oral tradition, refraining from handshaking during the last week of Lent serves as a symbolic remembrance of the betrayal of Christ by Judas, who, in an act of treachery, betrayed Jesus with a kiss during their greeting.

[94] Daoud, *Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, 3.

[95] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 103−5.

Friday to get forgiveness of the sins that they have committed during the entire year. Further, they must undergo a rigorous schedule of fasting and prayers to ensure their worthiness for the Eucharist. The dietary restrictions include considerations like who eats with whom, who slaughters the clean animal and how, and where the food is eaten, which determine whether one can approach the Divine Service and the Holy Sacrament.

As I have stated previously, the Old Testament Temple sacrifice finds its parallel in the celebration of the Eucharist in the EOTC. For example, the purity system in Leviticus is a codified commandment that results in punishments attached to many of the offenses. Those who fail to observe the laws become guilty and experience several punishments (Lev. 26:14−46). Likewise, just as all forms of bodily discharges defiled and disqualified the Jewish believer from approaching the Temple, members who failed to observe the means of purification in the EOTC are considered unclean and unworthy to partake of the Eucharist. Sometimes, the concept of cleanliness and purification among members takes on a more magical meaning. Members also tend to seek purification in a mechanical and/or instrumental way by drinking and being sprinkled with ጠበል [holy water] by a *Soul Father*.[96]

The EOTC continues to be influenced by Jewish laws of purity and holiness codes, evident in the criteria for worthiness to partake in the Eucharist. The historical significance of dietary rules in the context of Temple sacrifices, including the presentation of blameless animals and the purification of attendees, parallels the contemporary pursuit of physical perfection through dietary law and fasting within the EOTC. This connection highlights the importance of ritual cleanliness before approaching the Eucharist, echoing Judaism's emphasis on purity through fasting and dietary laws preceding religious festivals. It is a call for worthiness before Communion, underscoring the necessity of concrete actions, such as performing good works, by faithful individuals intending to partake of the Eucharist.

## Sexuality and Worthiness

Another contemporary aspect of purity within the EOTC pertains to sexual abstinence between couples. This practice mandates abstaining from sexual relations for three days before and two days after partaking in Holy Communion. Furthermore, it includes attending the evening prayer service on the eve of receiving the Sacrament, as prescribed in the Church's Eucharistic teachings.[97] The *Fetha Nagast* references Leviticus 20:18, which addresses sexual relations, in relation to the Eucharistic teaching of the Church. Within the EOTC, Christian couples are forbidden from engaging in bodily contact and the exchange of bodily fluids during fasting periods. This practice is rooted in the Mosaic Law, which prohibits sexual relations during fasting and temple service. In adherence to these principles, EOTC couples are even discouraged from sharing the same bed on days when they participate in the congregational Sacrament. Merahi highlights that the underlying rationale for this practice is rooted in the belief that on that particular day, the human soul should abstain from engaging in animalistic behaviors and instead strive to exhibit angelic virtues and deeds.[98]

Thus, each participant should control the physical senses or desire for sex so that no sin can enter the heart and make the heart perfect and pure. According to the EOTC, couples in a traditional marriage—which is known as በተክሊል [with crown]—cannot partake of the Holy Communion separately. Marriage is regarded as a sacrament within the EOTC, entailing specific liturgical rituals and blessings. However, if one member of the couple cannot fulfill the necessary conditions or is unwilling to partake in

[96] According to EOTC beliefs, the use of Holy Water serves a practical purpose as a non-Eucharistic medium for sacred contact. Drinking or being sprinkled with holy water by a priest provides a means for individuals who may not possess the highest levels of purity to receive blessings and healing. When members move to a new house, they often summon an EOTC priest to bless the dwelling with holy water before occupying it. Additionally, houses are blessed again after childbirth, involving both the mother and the baby. Priests and monks commonly sprinkle holy water, especially during significant occasions like the Epiphany and other important Saints' days.

[97] Kefyalew Merahi, *The Order of Marriage and Social Ethics* (Addis Ababa: OSSA, 1990); and see also Emmanuel Fritsch, *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig, vols. 3−4 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 271.

[98] Merahi, *Order of Marriage*, 88.

Communion, the other spouse is also considered unworthy by default. Consequently, in the absence of the other spouse, one cannot receive Communion alone. Due to such a strong sense of the requirement of worthiness, many people conclude that "receiving Holy Communion is unattainable since such an awesome sacrament deserves the utmost preparation and is tantamount to dying."[99]

According to the EOTC, marital fasting offers an opportunity to resist one's fleshly desires and redirect one's energies towards worshiping God, just as one fasts from the desire for food. Tzadua suggests that the prohibition of sexual activity on fasting days serves the purpose of facilitating the fulfillment of a desire achieved through fasting: the restraint of the animalistic urges of the soul. This restraint honors the rational soul, which shares a spiritual connection with it.[100] Sexual impurity violates fasting rules, and those who transgress must undergo complete physical purification before being eligible to receive Communion within the Church. Until this purification is achieved, they are barred from entering the Church premises. For example, if an individual experiences impurity due to bodily discharge, whether through a nocturnal emission or other means, they must refrain from participating in the Eucharist.

Additionally, the EOTC rules concerning impurity disproportionately restrict women's participation in the Eucharist.[101] Within Judaism, women were historically excluded from religious engagements, and they were not permitted to enter the Temple, particularly during menstruation, which was considered a state of ritual impurity (Lev. 15:19−30). Similarly, within the Sanctuary of the EOTC, women in menstruation are barred from participating in religious activities—a practice inherited from the traditions of Judaism. According to Leviticus, a menstruating woman is considered unclean for seven days. Anything she sits or lies upon becomes unclean, as do those who touch her, her bedding, or what she sat upon—they remain unclean until evening. Additionally, anyone who engages in intercourse with her is also unclean for seven days. This restriction prevents the spread of uncleanness to other individuals, including objects within the Temple. It is important to note that this restriction applies equally to both women and men experiencing genital discharges (Lev. 15:31−33).[102]

In the EOTC, menstruation is perceived as a manifestation of God's curse, as articulated in Genesis 3:16, where God foretells increased sorrow and conception for Eve. Consequently, menstruation is viewed as a consequence of sin, resulting in restrictions on sexual intercourse until the woman has undergone purification.[103] Tzadua further explains that sexual activity during menstruation and childbirth is prohibited due to the belief that it negatively affects the genital organs and may result in health issues for offspring conceived during menstruation.[104]

The practice of isolating menstruating women in the EOTC symbolizes the detachment of the individual from prescribed religious norms. This separation and exclusion from participation in the Eucharist commence immediately upon the appearance of a bloodstain. Moreover, women in a state of menstruation are prohibited from attending the Church until they have undergone ritual purification. The duration of ritual impurity for a menstruating woman spans seven days. Following this period, she is required to purify herself through immersion in water within her home before resuming public activities. Additionally, a priest administers the sprinkling of holy water prior to her entry into the Sanctuary for participation in the Divine Service and the Sacrament.

The *Fetha Nagast* stipulates the danger of admitting a menstruating woman to the Eucharist and notes, "If a priest or a deacon fails in his duties of control by allowing a woman who is menstruating to

[99] Fritsch, *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, 869.

[100] Tzadua, *Fetha Nagast*, 146.

[101] Getachew Terefe, *ተፋልሶ (te-fal-so): Contradicted* (Addis Ababe: Ethiopia, Selame Matemia, 2015), 264−74.

[102] Menstruation represents a natural bodily process beyond the control of women, whereas ejaculation is associated with sexual desire. However, both occurrences render the individual ritually unclean, a concept supported by the teachings of the Book of Leviticus and the EOTC's doctrine concerning holiness.

[103] In accordance with the Torah, menstruating Jewish women are considered ritually impure, and during this state, they are required to observe a period of seclusion. See more on this Arnold Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. Trans., Monica Vizedom and Gabrielle Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 58−59.

[104] Tzadua, *Fetha Nagast*, 146.

enter into the Church, or give her the Eucharist during the days of her menstruation, he shall be deposed even if the woman is from the royal family."[105] Therefore, akin to the role of menstrual impurity in the exclusion of women from sacred spaces in Judaism, the EOTC imposes restrictions on menstruating women, barring them from approaching the Church building and participating in Holy Communion.

Childbirth represents another aspect contributing to the exclusion of women from participation in Church rituals, including the Eucharist. The EOTC maintains the traditional belief in the ritual impurity of women who have recently given birth. Following Leviticus 12:1−7, neither the mother nor the newborn may enter the Church until the child's christening has occurred. Both individuals are deemed impure owing to postpartum bleeding, and this state persists until the child receives baptism and the mother undergoes her own christening. Furthermore, should the baby's father enter the birthing chamber, he too is regarded as ritually unclean by default.[106]

While in Leviticus, purity is achieved via sacrifice, the EOTC adopts a distinct approach to attaining ritual purity. In the EOTC tradition, purity is achieved through a two-step process: first, the mother is purified through a sprinkling of ጠበል [holy water], and second, the child undergoes baptism, typically occurring on the fortieth day for boys and the eightieth day for girls after birth. During this period, a priest conducts a special purification ceremony at the Church entrance, symbolizing the mother's return to the Church and her reintegration into the Service of the Sacrament following her period of ritual uncleanness. This practice reflects a broader understanding of the human body, not merely as an individual entity but also as shaped by the socio-cultural context of the Ethiopian community.

In both scenarios, namely menstruation and childbirth, it is essential to note that the concept of physical impurity lacks a moral dimension. Nevertheless, it results in impurity for women, rendering them ineligible to partake in the Eucharist. Analogous to the way various bodily discharges render a Jewish believer ritually impure and hence unfit to approach the Holy Temple, members of the EOTC who engage in sexual activity during menstruation or childbirth, and subsequently experience bodily discharges, are considered unworthy to enter the Church premises or participate in the Eucharist.

## PURITY AND LAWS

Although the laws concerning *purity* vary from society to society, the concept, as expressed in the EOTC today, can be traced back to the Jewish temple system and its understanding of the entire order of creation.[107] In the EOTC, the concept of purity and impurity as binary opposites is rooted in ancient Judaism and the book of Leviticus. Indeed, the purity issues addressed in the entire Book of Leviticus such as touching impure objects, eating fat and blood, food that is acceptable or unacceptable based on the species of animal, skin diseases, genital discharges both normal and/or abnormal, issues related to the Sanctuary, sacrificial animals, sexual partners, profaning the divine name, and so on are observed in the EOTC as well.

The purity system in Leviticus is not limited to sacrifices and the Sanctuary; instead, the purity code was extended to the entire social system, depicting that the whole of Israelite life is organized in terms of purity rules. In Judaism, only priests are required to observe the specific rules of purity; however, all faithful members should follow the law of purity so that all members may be holy, just as the Temple, the sacrifices, and the priests are holy.[108] Likewise, today, the EOTC's definition of specific purity rules whereby persons, objects, and/or places are labeled pure or impure is influenced by Jewish law.

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[105] Strauss, *Fetha Nagast*, 46.

[106] Hayatt, *Church of Abyssinia*, 185.

[107] Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 43−58. Mary Douglas, a renowned British anthropologist and scholar, is recognized for her unique interpretation of the Book of Leviticus. In Chapter 3 of her book, she offers an alternative approach to examining the overarching concepts of 'clean' and 'unclean,' along with their specific manifestations in Jewish and Christian literature.

[108] Moshe Bildstein, *Purity, Community, and Ritual in Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Kenneth. C. Hanson, "Blood and Purity in Leviticus and Revelation," *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture,* 28, no 3 (Oxford, Oxford Press, 1993): 215−30.

The concept of uncleanness in the EOTC includes animals slaughtered by Muslims or Protestants and utensils used by Muslims and/or Protestants. An EOTC member must eat an animal slaughtered by a man who belongs to the EOTC and must be a man who fully kept the rule of fasting. While slaughtering a clean animal, the butcher must confess the name of the Triune God, saying, “In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Eating the meat of an animal that is slaughtered without confessing the Trinity makes the meat and the eater unclean. For this reason, an EOTC member is prohibited from eating an animal slaughtered by a man of a different faith or eating meat slaughtered by a woman. In Ethiopia, members of the Orthodox Church never eat meat offered by a Muslim or a protestant friend or neighbors when they have feasts in common. When people from either group hold a feast for a wedding or other kind of feast, they must be sure to serve vegetables in hospitality to friends and neighbors of the other religions.

## K'IDUSANE, OBJECTS, AND MATERIALS

In the EOTC today, Christ as God—despite his humanity, which is made available to believers in his body and blood—is too pure and sacred for the ዓለማዊ ሰዎች [secular people] to approach without an intermediary. Members of the Church must seek other *K'idusane.*[109] And sacred materials that are believed to be purer and cleaner due to their lesser contact with the secular world. While the EOTC seems to be dualistic at times, its focus is on how it can bridge the gap between the Triune God (who is separated from the world) and humanity (which is profane) through the careful management of rituals regulated by the clergy, saints, and sacred materials and spaces.

The purity of priests, monks, and clergy in the EOTC is essential for establishing and maintaining the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. They also facilitate and mediate contact between humans and God, taking on the responsibility of ensuring that such contact is achieved in accordance with the Church’s teaching and tradition. Steve Kaplan notes, “Repeatedly the holy men intervened between men and demonic, divine, or natural forces [...]. They intervened with a distant God on behalf of their followers and disciples [...]. Born into human society, they attained and maintained a position somewhat outside and above it, which enables them to fulfill a variety of vital mediatory functions.”[110] In Ethiopia, devout Christians often seek a connection with the divine through intermediary figures like angels, Mary, or holy men. These individuals, who lead virtuous lives, are likened to angels themselves—divine messengers with the capacity to communicate and impact God’s will. This mediating role holds significant importance within the Ethiopian religious context, where believers are more focused on gaining the favor of such intermediaries than on attempting to connect with a distant and seemingly inaccessible God.[111]

According to the EOTC, the chief priest, who also holds a significant role in local society and the Church, is the primary mediator between Church members and God, as he presents Jesus through the bread and wine. According to Kaplan, being both a monk and an ascetic, the idea of the holy man, particularly in the role of a priest, was intricately linked to that of an angel. In certain instances, the boundary between the realm of angels and the holy figure, such as a priest, appeared notably indistinct.[112] Therefore, means for interacting with the divine entity, as presented through the bread and wine, are

[109] The word *K'idusane* means ‘saints.’ Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia understand their relationship with the saints, angels, and St. Mary as definitive of their religion instead of Protestant members. The Amharic word comprehended all those figureheads with the broad term *K'idusane* (holy beings).

[110] Steven Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1984), 70.

[111] Kaplan, *Monastic Holy Man*, 82.

[112] Kaplan, *Monastic Holy Man*, 81.

mediated through priests, monks, and material offerings, ranging from smoke and incense to the exchange of offerings and financial gifts in the form of a religious vow.[113]

Lastly, understanding the EOTC’s religious system and rituals fully requires an exploration of the EOTC’s temple architecture, because even the Church space itself is structured to ensure ritual purity is maintained. The EOTC, being influenced by Semitic culture and civilization, has preserved its unique Church architecture up to the present day, placing the Holy *Tabot* at the center of the Church building. This architecture is similar to the Jewish Temple but is different from the Western Basilica model.[114]

The Hebrew sanctuary, whose threefold division was structured towards maintaining ritual purity, has continued to be the main style used in Ethiopia, ever since the country adopted Christianity. Every Orthodox Church building in Ethiopia is designed using the threefold division of the Old Testament Temple. The center of the Church is called the መቅደስ [holies], representing the קודש הקודשים of the Jewish Temple. This part of the Church is the innermost or central section of the Church, like the Jewish Temple where the Holy *Tabot* is placed.[115] The holiness of this place is viewed using the Old Testament analogy of the Sanctuary of the Church representing the Holy of Holies. The unleavened bread and the unfermented wine are also placed in this section of the Church building when the chief priest starts the action of consecration. The EOTC priests are the only people who have access to this place. Further, they can only enter this place barefoot, and after they have gone through purification orders or ascetic forms. That is because this place signifies the holiest part of the Temple (Exod. 3:5). The laity is forbidden from entering the *holies* and from ever seeing or touching the *Tabot*. The Holy *Tabot* leaves the Church in procession, covered with an ornate cloth, only twice a year during the celebration of *Timket* and on annual saints’ days, such as St. Gabriel and St. Michael.

The second part of the Church is called the ቅድስት [inner court], which represents the קָדוֹשׁ of the Jewish Temple. It is the place where the priests carry out the *Qeddassé* and distribute the Eucharist to the members. This particular place is reserved for those who are worthy, clean, and ready to receive the Eucharist. The rest of the people who feel unworthy to receive the Eucharist stand in the outer ring of the inner court. From the outer ring of the inner court, those considered unworthy are sent away from the Sanctuary right before the distribution of the Sacrament. All who enter this place must remove their shoes, and women and men are not permitted to stand or sit together. Instead, women stand or sit on the right side, while men stand or sit on the left side.

The third section of the Church is called the ቅኔ ማህሌት [outer gallery]. This section is reserved for the *debteras*, priests, and chanters who perform spiritual songs known as ‘Zema’ [‘music’ or ‘melody’]

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[113] To enter into a transactional relationship with the saints, to whom the supplicant gives some kind of gifts such as money or material goods in exchange for intercession, is expected in the EOTC. It is believed that priests possess mysterious knowledge, not available through any kind of public institution, for which clients must pay. All priests receive payment in the form of cash, food, or drink for the private rituals and services they provide, such as officiating at funerals, weddings, christenings, private confession, and absolution.

[114] The shape and type of the EOTC building can be categorized into three different shapes throughout history. The seating arrangements in the Church signify the level of hierarchy and purity. The oldest Churches built in Debre Damo and Aksum Zion exhibit rectangular structures and a wood-and-stone sandwich-style of construction. The second type, which comprises most of the recently constructed buildings, are Churches built in either circular or octagonal shapes. These are the most and common forms of EOTC buildings in most parts of Ethiopia. They are primarily found in the countryside, and they are usually built on elevations and thatched roofs. The final shape of the EOTC Church buildings is an old and historic rock-hewn type which was built during the Zagwe Dynasty in the twelfth and thirteenth Century in Lalibela. See more on Ullendorff, *Ethiopian and the Bible*, 87−89; and see Hailemariam Shemelis, *ኦርቶዶክሳዊ ቅዱሳት ሥዕላት። ታሪክ፤ መንፈሳዊ ትርጉም፤ የሊቃውንት አስተምህሮ እና ሌሎችም። Orthodox Saintly Paintings: History, Spiritual Meaning, Teachings of Religious Intellectuals and Others* (Addis Ababa: Mahibere Qidusan, 2007). Interestingly, the later book clarifies how the Ethiopian Church building and art profoundly impact the style and use of sacred paintings in Eastern Orthodox Churches, Latin Christian Churches, and Oriental Churches.

[115] According to the rites of the EOTC, መቅደስ [the holies] has three main doors and one door to the east towards Bethlehem. In the west, glory to God is recited and the Eucharist is shared. In the north, we see the faithful men attending Liturgy and the priests who perform horology. Furthermore, in the south, we see women members of the Church attending Liturgy and praying from there. See also Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 82. Ullendorff notes, “The concept and function of the *Tabot* represents one of the most remarkable areas of agreement with Old Testament forms of worship.”

before and after the Eucharist. Rev. Daoud says that the outer gallery "corresponds to the *naser* of the Tabernacle of Solomon's Temple."[116] In the EOTC's music, St. Yared's Zema has been much used for the spiritual services that have a spiritual and Jewish character.[117] Edward Ullendorff also argued for the spiritual and Old Testament nature of the EOTC's Zema. He witnesses how various cultures in the East place importance on music, song, and dance. Nevertheless, according to him, the religious music of the Ethiopians contains distinctive elements that mirror the traditions of the Old Testament.[118] He further notes, "Antiphonal singing as part of the worship was an established form of the Hebrew Liturgy since the earliest times and was taken over by the Christian Churches [...]. It is unlikely that the Hebraic forms were anywhere more faithfully preserved than in the Ethiopian service with its emphasis on chant and antiphony."[119] For example, the unique musical instruments, such as the *bagana* (a type of harp) and the *kabaro* (a traditional drum), and the two categories of clergymen, the *kahen* and the *dabtara,* have parallels with Jewish spiritual musical instruments that are part of the twofold categories of the priesthood in Israel.[120]

Large numbers of people, who for various reasons consider themselves impure and thus not able to enter the Church building, gather in the courtyard outside the outer gallery. Furthermore, every Church must have a small house to the eastern side, known as ቤተልሄም [Bethlehem], which is built within the courtyard of the Church. The Eucharistic elements are prepared in this house, representing the Bethlehem of Jerusalem where Jesus Christ was born.[121] The EOTC's deacon prepares the bread from the best wheat only after he takes off his shoes, washes his hands (three times), and puts on a special vestment with a prayer offered to St. Mary.[122] The deacon prepares several loaves of bread, just as the Old Testament animal sacrifice must be without blemish, and only those loaves of bread without blemish are used in the Liturgy,[123] meaning the loaves must not have cracks and stains.[124]

The concept of achieving purity and cleanness is closely tied to the Sanctuary, and the materials used for the Eucharistic celebration must be consecrated beforehand. For example, such a distinction is evident from the prayers held over all vessels of the Church: the coverings, the cross-spoon, the Paten, the *Masob*, and the Chalice.[125] One of the prayers on the Preparatory Service II says: "And make this Church and this Ark, chosen vessels, clean, and pure refined seven times from all spot and stain and uncleanness and transgressions like the cleansing of silver from the earth, refined, purified and tested."[126]

In sum, by example of the aforementioned witnesses and documents, the presence and influence of Judaism in Ethiopian history, tradition, and religion seems established beyond doubt. In today's EOTC, the sharing of the Eucharist represents the meeting of God and humanity in an encounter where the nature of Christ is most clearly seen and experienced. The total fasting and bodily rituals required before partaking of the Eucharist epitomize the sacred nature of the Eucharist, which must be mediated by the EOTC priests, saints, and sacred materials to make the attendees eligible for the Eucharist. Thus, Judaic

[116] Daoud, *Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, 10.

[117] Kifle Assefa, *The Significance of St. Yared's Music in the Age of Globalization, Orthodox Archdeacon* (Columbus: University of Ohio, 2009), 167−68. In the EOTC, St. Yared's Zema is considered God's heavenly gift given to St. Yared through his miraculous experience in the sixth century A.D. He taught for more than eleven years as an ordained high priest of the EOTC. His chants have established a classic Zema, known as Zema-Mahlet tradition, usually performed in the outer section of the Church's interior.

[118] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 90.

[119] Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 68.

[120] See more on this in Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 91−92.

[121] Daoud, *Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, 10.

[122] Phillip Tovey, *Inculturation of Christian Worship: Exploring the Eucharist* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2004), 64.

[123] Tovey, *Christian Worship*, 64. The term 'blemish' in this sense is to refer to the good-looking unleavened bread made by the EOTC deacons.

[124] Tzadua, *Fetha Nagast*, 86. The western side of the Church has a hall called the ደጀሰላም [the gate of peace], which is an additional confirmation of the Old Testament textuality of the EOTC's Christianity.

[125] Daoud, *Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, 9−16.

[126] Daoud, *Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, 15.

practices in Ethiopia remain integral to the expression of Christianity in Ethiopia, as they re-appropriate the need to observe certain rituals and purity codes to qualify for the Eucharistic Sacrifice at the Altar.

## CONCLUSION

The EOTC remarkably fuses the Jewish and Christian traditions into an indissoluble whole and has enjoyed a long-standing presence as a national Church. The integration of Judaism and Christianity in the EOTC represents a unique experience of non-Hellenized Christianity, characterized by the distinct Jewish influence on Ethiopian religious assimilation. This is uncommon elsewhere in the world. Since the encounter with Christianity does not abandon all Jewish forms of spiritual practices and traditions, some elements are unique to EOTC Christianity that can be celebrated for their distinct contribution to the Ethiopian way of life. These elements have also contributed to the church’s piety, which is, in many ways, tied to her continuation of various Jewish rituals that cement a living connection between the people of the Old Covenant and those of the New.