

Ethiopia

Christian Antiquity Under Majestic Skies



The northern province of Tigray.

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Ethiopia is situated in Africa's "cradle of humanity" in proximity to the equator. Numbered among the world's most impoverished nations, it hardly rates as a destination of choice for affluent tourists. Though decades old, haunting, apocalyptic images of a country of emaciated famine victims, devastated by searing droughts, still prevail in the minds of westerners. Its international reputation has been further scarred by both a protracted, brutal border war with its Eritrean neighbour and episodes of harsh, internal, political repression. At the same time, foreigners with humanitarian impulses seek to ameliorate the grim life of Ethiopia's destitute masses through a proliferation of aid agencies. Moreover, many Ethiopian children are continually served up for a better future through government supported export via adoption.

Others, however, have come to

see Ethiopia through different eyes. A myriad of TV viewers of an episode of "The Amazing Race" were surprised to see unheard-of, chanting, colourfully robed, Ethiopian Orthodox monks in the country's verdant, northern highlands written into the script of the program. Among the array of others drawn to the country are international church workers with missional objectives, travellers seeking new, exotic venues, naturalists who know of Ethiopia's botanical bonanza, and adventurers who regard its extreme topography as Africa's last playground. In her beautifully photographed book, *Vertical Ethiopia* (2007), rock climber Majka Burhardt describes herself as drawn to the "most sacred spaces" of the natural world. She lauds Ethiopia as having "some of the best undiscovered climbing in the world" which she hails as "a new Mecca for the vertically inclined."

Ethiopia also has its select, academic, devotees. Biblical scholars studying human beginnings assert that Cush, one of the sons of Ham and grandson of Noah, migrated from Mesopotamia to Ethiopia (known as the land of Cush in the Hebrew Scriptures). Some geneticists interested in the relationships between modern populations speculate that "Mitochondrial Eve" existed in a long ago epoch of geological time. She may, in fact, have resided in Ethiopia and contributed some of her genes to all humans who followed her, thereby making all human beings descendants of Africans.

Ecclesiastical historians have been intrigued by an ancient tradition of Ethiopian Christianity with a markedly

Judaic character, which makes the extraordinary claim to possess the Ark of the Covenant said to rest in the holy city of Axum. The national epic, the *Kebra Nagast* ("Glory of Kings"), originally written in Ge'ez, supports the claim. It recounts how the fabled Queen of Sheba (known to Ethiopians as Makeda) journeyed to Jerusalem to visit King Solomon. Seduced by the Jewish monarch, she conceived a son, Menelik, who later took the Ark from Jerusalem to Ethiopia without his father's permission. He established subsequently a Solomonic dynasty which, with only brief interruptions, ruled Ethiopia until 1974 when the Christian emperor, Haile Selassie was overthrown.

Another strand of historical lore tantalizes the imagination of western Christians seeking to unravel Ethiopia's secret and sacred mysteries. One of several versions of the medieval legend of a certain wealthy, Christian monarch, named Prester John, who had allegedly withstood the onslaught of Islam and ruled a vast empire somewhere in the East, links him to Ethiopia. As a priest-king figure shrouded in Melchizedekian mystique, he was thought to be a descendant of one of the Magi who visited the infant Christ. Ironically, the fascination with Prester John was one-sided as Ethiopian rulers (some of whom were named "John") were unaware that Europeans had bestowed on them such a title.

For the explorer of Christian antiquity, Ethiopia is a treasure trove making it one of the prized destinations of the Ambrose Down Ancient Paths Travel Study Program. Until the mid 1960s,



An ancient illuminated Ethiopian Orthodox manuscript.

the rock-hewn churches of the country's northernmost province of Tigray remained unknown to those outside the region, including Ethiopians. Many of the churches whose contents had been sealed for centuries, were either carved into sheer cliff faces or perched on mountain tops, to be scaled only by the skilled. Local priests and residents maintain that the churches date either to the time of the first, Christian, kings of Ethiopia, Saizana and Ezana (c.330-356 CE) or to the fifth and sixth centuries CE when nine Syrian saints propagated monasticism throughout Ethiopia. The indefatigable, monastic, quest for solitude most plausibly explains the secluded settings of many of these churches.

The most spectacular of the Tigraian churches, Abuna Yemata, can only be reached by a dramatic ascent (not for those prone to vertigo!) which climaxes with a precarious, wooden-railed walkway leading to a one meter wide ledge overlooking a 200 meter straight drop before entering the church. However, a sublime moment awaits those who undertake this daunting climb into the heavens. Once inside, one can retire to the rock floor for an extended gaze at rare ceiling paintings of the “Nine Syrian Saints” – Aragawi, Pantaleon, Garima, Aftse, Guba, Alef, Likanos, Yemata and Sehma – who came to Ethiopia from various parts of the Eastern Roman Empire. The colours of the artist are

stunning...red, blue, green, and black over white backgrounds, the saints' faces gently radiating the spiritual vibrancy with which they lived and missionized Ethiopia. The local priest, keeper of the key, nimbly makes the climb to the Church of Abuna Yemata twice a day!

A remote monastery in Tigray named after Garima (one of the nine saints) and situated near Adwa, among mountains 2000 meters in altitude, may well possess a Christian artifact of global significance – the Garima Gospels, recently carbon-dated to before 650 CE. This could mean that Ethiopia is the home of the oldest, illuminated Christian manuscript in the world which few have ever seen. According to tradition, Abba Garima, by divine enablement, copied the entire text of the gospels in one day.

The watery wilderness of Lake Tana, Ethiopia's largest (crater) lake, covering 3500 square kilometers at an altitude of 2000 meters, offers a sharp, geographical contrast to the sandstone towers of the Gheralta range in remote Tigray and is equally rich in Christian antiquity. It is the source of the Blue Nile and a pelican habitat. Monasteries dating to the 13th and 14th centuries which exist on some 20 of the lake's 37 islands are another alluring expression of Ethiopia's ancient tradition of “desert spirituality.” They showcase some of the best of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's brilliant iconography and also serve as sanctuaries for exotic birds in a country where ecology has been ravaged.

The lush, rockwalled island of Tana Kirkos, which is actually attached to the mainland, connects to the saga of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of Zion, as it is termed in Ethiopian texts, is said to have been sequestered here for 800 years. The monks readily show male-only visitors three hollowed pillars which they assert were used as Jewish sacrificial altars in the presence of the Ark during its sojourn on the island.

A well-timed visit to Ethiopia necessarily includes an up close and personal experience of its vibrant,

pageantry-filled Ethiopian Orthodox festivals which constitute national “holy days” in the calendar of a country where sacred time and memory are still valued. Timkat (Epiphany), celebrated on January 19th, is the most colorful of the eight major annual festivals. It commemorates the baptism of the Lord and features processions of replicas (tabots) of the Ark of the Covenant amidst much jubilant singing and dancing (like David and the Ark). In comparison with the West, Christmas (Genna), observed after 43 days of fasting, is of considerably lesser significance to Ethiopians. However, its celebration on January 6th to 7th in the cave churches of Lalibela, an isolated, high altitude locality with the aura of an eighth ancient wonder of the world, is a magnet for tourists and pilgrims. It sets the stage for an unforgettable, liturgically scripted and otherworldly, experience of sacred time travel as one joins in with the hosts of white-robed pilgrims who converge on the town for the festal occasion.

Ethiopia has left me with an indelible memory of its intensely blue and majestic, expansive skies. The timeless choreography of the country's geology and geography, as seen from the air, remains deeply embedded in my imagination. On the ground, I have felt as though I was visiting the “Galapagos Islands” of global Christianity where a rare, hybrid, species of Christian faith with mysterious origins and an esoteric view of time can still be observed. Ethiopia is a land of piety and poverty, legends and lava, manuscripts and mysteries, archaeology and anthropology. Ethiopians are convinced that they were one of the earliest countries to embrace Christianity and as such are not to be bypassed in the excavation of global, Christian antiquity. **E**

Dr Nienkirchen is the Creator/Director of the award winning Down Ancient Paths Travel Study Program. He will be leading an educational travel venture to Ethiopia – “Magnificent Ethiopia: Where Ancient Christian Voices Still Speak” – in January 2013.