LALIBELA

There are two main groups of churches – to the north of the river Jordan: Biete Medhani Alem  (House of the Saviour of the World), Biete  Mariam (House of Mary), Biete  Maskal (House of the Cross), Biete Denagel (House of Virgins), Biete Golgotha Mikael (House of Golgotha Mikael); and to the south of the river, Biete Amanuel (House of Emmanuel), Biete Qeddus Mercoreus (House of St. Mercoreos), Biete Abba Libanos (House of Abbot Libanos), Biete Gabriel Raphael (House of Gabriel Raphael), and Biete Lehem (House of Holy Bread). The eleventh church, Biete Ghiorgis (House of St. George), is isolated from the others, but connected by a system of trenches.

The churches were not constructed in a traditional way but rather were hewn from the living rock of monolithic blocks. These blocks were further chiselled out, forming doors, windows, columns, various floors, roofs etc. This gigantic work was further completed with an extensive system of drainage ditches, trenches and ceremonial passages, some with openings to hermit caves and catacombs.

Biete Medhani Alem, with its five aisles, is believed to be the largest monolithic church in the world, while Biete Ghiorgis has a remarkable cruciform plan. Most were probably used as churches from the outset, but Biete Mercoreos and Biete Gabriel Rafael may formerly have been royal residences. Several of the interiors are decorated with mural paintings.

Near the churches, the village of Lalibela has two storey round houses, constructed of local red stone, and known as the Lasta Tukuls. These exceptional churches have been the focus of pilgrimage for Coptic Christians since the 12th century.

**Criterion (i):** All the eleven churches represent a unique artistic achievement, in their execution, size and the variety and boldness of their form.

**Criterion (ii):**The King of Lalibela set out to build a symbol of the holy land, when pilgrimages to it were rendered impossible by the historical situation. In the Church of Biet Golgotha, are replicas of the tomb of Christ, and of Adam, and the crib of the Nativity. The holy city of Lalibela became a substitute for the holy places of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and as such has had considerable influence on Ethiopian Christianity