

The Medieval Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Its Liturgy

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Liturgy refers to the organized and public worship of the Church, indeed it is the Church at prayer, an act essential to the very existence and relevance of each and all Christians. Repeated according to different rhythms, even daily, it is “the church” as it is experienced by its members and perceived by others insofar as its development in historical societies brought about various social, artistic, architectural, dietary, and other features. Historical reconstruction of the liturgy requires recourse to texts, of course, but also to spaces: archeological research and architectural analysis reveal the layout of ecclesiastical structures that were designed to facilitate the liturgy and that reflect its form. With regard to the medieval Ethiopian church, rooted in and with parallels to other Christian communities (especially of Egypt and the whole Christian East), the field of comparative liturgical studies is also essential for understanding these texts and structures. If these various sources shed light on the liturgy, it may be said conversely that study of the liturgy provides a key to the history of the Church, and indeed of the society in which it is found.

Some essential features of the Ethiopian church are related to the circumstances of its origins, and must be briefly mentioned to understand its medieval incarnation. The origins of Christianity in what is now Ethiopia and Eritrea date to the mid-fourth century, when Frumentius of Tyre, known in Ethiopia and Eritrea as Abba Sälama, succeeded in converting the Aksumite king ‘Ezana and was subsequently named by Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria, as the kingdom’s first bishop. Based on this precedent, the successors of Frumentius/Sälama were always appointed by the patriarch of Alexandria. In virtue of a pseudo-canon (the 42nd) ascribed to the council of Nicaea,¹ there were

1 See the nomocanon compiled in Arabic around 1240 by Al-Šafi‘i abū l-Faḍāl ibn al ‘Assāl: William A. Hanna, trans., *Magmou Al-Safawy Ibn Al-Assal* (St. Louis, 1996), chap. 4, 6. This has been kept in the later Ethiopian version of the *Fəṭhā nāgāšt*: see Paulos Tzadua, trans., *The Fetha nagast. The Law of the Kings* (Addis Ababa, 1968), Ch. 4, 18, § 42 and n. 9: “As for the Ethiopians, a patriarch shall not be appointed from among their learned men, nor can they appoint one by their own will. Their metropolitan is subject to the holder of the see of Alexandria, who is entitled to appoint over them a chief who hails from his region and

never a sufficient number to allow them to form their own synod, and thus to elect Ethiopian bishops from within and take their independence from Alexandria. That may have been in the hope that Ethiopia, in remaining attached to the Mother Church of Alexandria, would exercise some pressure on the Egyptian Muslim authorities in case of need; the decision might also have been made under pressure from Muslim Egyptian authorities, whose assent the Ethiopians had to obtain, facilitated with gifts, every time they sent an embassy to request a new bishop.² In any case, the results were several. First, the bishop who was ordained for Ethiopia was virtually always an Egyptian, called *pāppas*, like the archbishops of Alexandria or Rome and many others at the time.³ However, because of the limitations imposed on him – his dignity ranked eighth in the hierarchical order of the universal church,⁴ and he could not appoint other bishops – his title is usually rendered as “metropolitan,” *mutran* in Arabic. If it happened, as in the fifteenth century, that two or more *pāppasat* were sent, each retained the same title and served in their separate territories. The simple mention of an *eppis qoppōs*, “bishop,” would refer either to the episcopal character received by any bishop of any rank at the episcopal ordination, or else to an auxiliary bishop: this was considered contrary to church regulations,⁵ but M.-L. Derat and A. Bausi now agree on practical and philological grounds that chorbishops, i.e. “country bishops,” were ministering. Second, the responsibility of the metropolitan (as we shall henceforth call him) was to ensure the proper observance of the faith by his charges according to Egyptian norms, which were not always identical to current practices

is under his jurisdiction. And when the said metropolitan is appointed, with the title given to the chief, he is not permitted to consecrate other metropolitans as the other patriarchs do. He shall only be honored with the name of patriarch, without enjoying the power of a patriarch. And if it becomes necessary to hold a council in Roman territory and if the metropolitan of Ethiopia takes part, he shall be seated eighth, next to the titular of Seleucia, which is one of the cities within the boundaries in which Babylon, Iraq and the kingdom of Sabur are found. [The metropolitan of Ethiopia comes in rank after that of Seleucia] because the latter is permitted to consecrate bishops for his own country, but neither is permitted to be appointed by the will of the bishops [under his jurisdiction].”

2 Joseph Cuq, *L'Islam en Éthiopie des origines au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1981), 94 n. 1 with references.

3 *Pāppas* is the Hellenized contraction of Coptic article *pi* and substantive *apa*, “the father.”

4 See note 1 above.

5 This is the case of King Lalibala's brother-in-law: see Marie-Laure Derat, *L'énigme d'une dynastie sainte et usurpatrice dans le royaume chrétien d'Éthiopie du XI^e au XIII^e siècle* (Turnhout, 2018), 181, and her essay “Before the Solomonids” in this volume. In the contemporary era, the *eppis qoppōs* may on occasion not be an ordained bishop but a monk given special responsibility towards evangelization by the monarch: see Stéphane Ancel, “Épiscopat et encadrement des pratiques religieuses en Éthiopie chrétienne contemporaine” (Ph.D diss., INALCO: Paris, 2006), 24–35.