

# ETHIOPIA

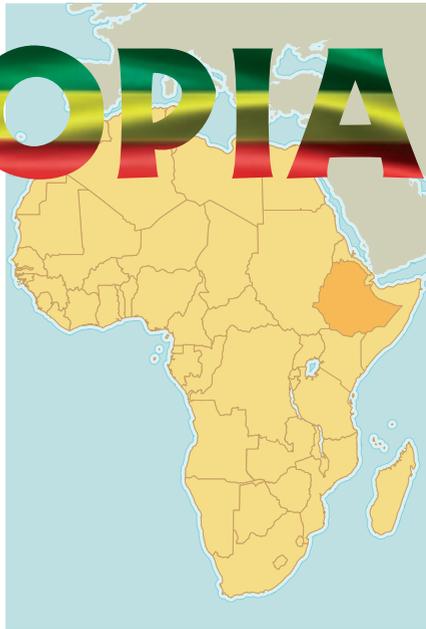
Part 1

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is the oldest independent country in sub-Saharan Africa; only Egypt has a more lengthy and continuous written tradition. The history of Ethiopia is rich, ancient, uncertain: interwoven with confusing and irreconcilable accounts of King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, the Ark of the Covenant, Black Jews and Prester John. There is much to excite the interest of Bible readers in the story of Ethiopia, and even more to kindle our prayers.

Linguists believe that the name Ethiopia derives from Greek, referring to a place or people of sunburned faces; the other ancient name, Abyssinia, is from the Arabic *'abishat*, referring to a 'mixed' population. The country lies 10° north of the equator, similar to Tamil Nadu or Costa Rica. At more than a million square kilometres, Ethiopia is nearly twice as large as Kenya or even Texas, and five times the area of the United Kingdom. A magnificent landscape ranges from desert to forested highlands. Mount Ras Dashan, 4,620m, is Ethiopia's highest point and Africa's fourth highest, but twenty Ethiopian peaks are over 4,000m. The Abay River (Blue Nile) feeds Lake Tana and flows on to join the White Nile in Sudan, accounting for most of the



Nile's water flow. Ethiopia is landlocked, tantalisingly separated from the Red Sea and from the Indian Ocean by Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. Sudan lies to the north and west, Kenya to the south. The modern capital is Addis Ababa.

Biblical references to Ethiopia (nineteen in the Old Testament, one in the New Testament)<sup>1</sup> are a translation of the Hebrew word 'Cush';<sup>2</sup> meaning 'black', and probably refer in a general sense to the whole Arabian peninsula and to the Horn of Africa south of Egypt. In any specific sense the reference seems to be to Nubia and/or the present region of Ethiopia/Eritrea. Sheba, Sabea, even Midian (see Numbers 12.1<sup>3</sup>) could fall within these usages. For any further discussion, please see your favourite Bible encyclopaedia, but do bear in mind this broad uncertainty when considering aspects of the religious history of Ethiopia.

## HISTORICAL OUTLINE

### • Axum

Ethiopia is the only sub-Saharan African nation with clear historical and cultural ties to the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean. Inscriptions and other records show that the earliest Egyptians clearly knew of Ethiopia's existence, perhaps because of their naval and trading explorations of 'Punt'—a coastal city on the Red Sea. The Egyptians believed that their forebears were Ethiopian, and an Ethiopian dynasty was established in Egypt in 720 B.C.

The first recorded kingdom in Ethiopia grew around Axum during the 4th century B.C., an extension of the Semitic Sabeen kingdoms of southern Arabia. Centred in the Tigray/Gonder region of the north, it became the greatest ivory market in north-east Africa. Over the next few centuries, Axum encroached more and more on

Meroë (Sudan) until the 4th century A.D., when Ethiopia conquered that kingdom.

*Periplus of the Ancient Sea*, a Greek chronicle written in the 1st century A.D., describes the Axumite Empire, as does the Persian author Manni two centuries later. He considered it one of the world's great empires, in company with Persia, China and Rome, trading with Arabia, India, Rome and Persia. Although Greek influence is certainly evident, Axum became a civilisation in its own right. You will find references to Axum as ruled by the Solomonid dynasty, claiming a son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as the originator. For reasons hinted at above, I leave all discussion of this aside, but accept the name as historic usage.

The Axumites spoke a language called Ge'ez, written with the Sabaean alphabet. Ge'ez is the foundation for modern Amharic, and the Ge'ez script is still read

The modern capital, Addis Ababa, as it is today



by Christian priests in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Axum's greatest architectural legacy lies in the distinctive monolithic stelae, each cut from a single block of granite and all facing south. These towers, dated early in the Christian era, are thought to have been funeral monuments for past rulers and doubtless proved places of worship for pre-Christian Axumites. By the 5th century A.D. the kingdom had become 'Christian'



'The bees recognise his  
sovereignty'

of the Coptic tradition, derived through Egypt. With the support of the Patriarch of Alexandria, the Axumite emperor Kaleb fought a war against Jewish traders and colonists in Yemen in A.D. 523 responding to the persecution of Christians there, and imposed an Ethiopian administration in Yemen for a time. Christian Axum flourished for some time, but beginning about the 7th century the kingdom declined as the Solomonids lost control of section after section of their realm. In the 10th century that dynasty was overthrown, replaced by the Zagwe dynasty, the ruling family of the central plateau known as Lasta.

#### • **After Axum**

Near the end of the 10th century the Zagwe leader Yodit (Judith) brought down the Axumite kingdom, conquering the last king and attempting to exterminate Christianity. By this time though, Axum had migrated south and diversified, creating separate military territories. This left a diffuse population from which Axumite ways, Semitic dialect, and Christianity, passed to

the Zagwe peoples. Lalibela (c.1185–1225) is the most well known and revered of all the Zagwe kings. He is credited with building the famous rock-hewn churches in his capital city, originally Roha but renamed Lalibela after his death. Lalibela's life is awash with legend. It is believed that at birth he was surrounded by a cloud of bees, hence the name Lalibela—'the bees recognise his sovereignty'. Also according to legend, he was commanded by God 'to build ten monolithic churches'. Numerous sites in the city Lalibela were given Biblical names in an effort to recreate Jerusalem, the Holy City. Jerusalem had been captured by Muslims and pilgrimage for Ethiopian Christians had become difficult. Not surprisingly, the site of Lalibela's burial was called 'Golgotha'.

Serious Muslim expansion across the Red Sea and into the Horn of Africa happened in the 12th century, but for quite some time before that Muslim involvement in Egypt had effectively cut off Ethiopia from Mediterranean trade and alliances. Even the Red Sea ports were under Muslim 'harbour-masters' to control the staple trade in gold, slaves and ivory. However, around 1260, the Solomonids gradually reasserted their authority over much of Ethiopia, although Muslims retained control of the coastal area and the south-east. The next three hundred years were marked by intermittent warfare between 'Christian' and 'Jewish' pretended kings, but I leave fuller mention of Beta Israel to a subsequent paragraph. This 'New Axum' Solomonid dynasty endured until 1765. Alongside it a political system emerged that lasted until the middle of the 20th century, characterised by absolutist monarchs who exacted military service in return for grants of land.

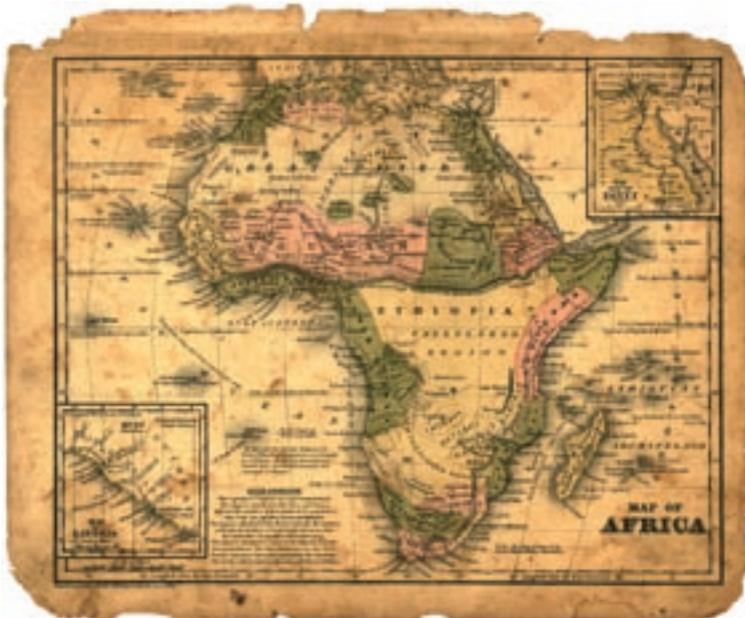
Meanwhile, Muslim pressure was sharpened when Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi

(Ahmad Gragn) 1506–43, Sultan of Adal, Somalia, declared a jihad against Christian Ethiopia. With Ottoman support he dominated Ethiopia until Emperor Galawdewos (Claudius), with Portuguese assistance, defeated and killed him at Lake Tana in 1543. Other pressures developed later as Egypt became free of Ottoman rule and resumed the ancient determination to expand to the south. French and British help, perhaps with an eye to the old trade in slaves and the new trade in coffee, enabled Ethiopia to resist Egyptian encroachment. These connections meant that Europe became aware of Ethiopia, and Europeans of various professions, interests and trades began to be seen there. Inevitably Protestant missionaries appeared also, and the heady confusion of Ethiopian religion, inseparable from politics and state, was vigorously stirred once more.

• **Haile Selassie**

The empire once again declined and fragmented, but in 1855 a successful local brigand, Kassa Hailu, declared himself Emperor at Axum, taking the name Tewodros II.

In 1862 he wrote to Queen Victoria asking for help against Turkish power in the Red Sea. There was a two-year delay in answering, in which time Tewodros poisoned or imprisoned some English diplomats in angry protest at the wait. He got his answer by a military expedition bent on punishing him. In 1864, rather than accept defeat, he shot himself and was succeeded by a British sympathiser, who took the name Yohannes IV. The year 1869 saw the opening of the Suez canal, increasing the strategic importance of Ethiopia, and bringing more 'interest' from European powers. Yohannes died fighting against Sudan in 1889, and Menelik II, 1844–1913,



19th-century map of Africa showing uncharted territory

became king. In his reign a deceitful alliance was made by Italy, wherein the Italian and Amharic versions of the treaty seemed to say different things.<sup>4</sup> Ethiopia granted what in modern jargon would be a 'sovereign territory' military base in return for policing of the Red Sea. Italy assumed a total colonial/protectorate attitude to the whole of Ethiopia, and the scene was set for one hundred years of turmoil between these nations.

Menelik, following a rather dangerous precedent, appealed to Queen Victoria, Germany and France for arbitration. In March 1896 Menelik defeated the Italians at Adwa, then defended and extended Ethiopia by force. He died in 1913, leaving his sixteen-year-old grandson in a constitutionally precarious situation. Tafari Makonnen (Ras—*prince or chief*—Tafari) was named heir to the throne, and acted as regent. In 1930 he was crowned as Emperor Haile Selassie, 225th successor to the Solomonid throne. The name means 'Power of the Trinity' in Amharic, alongside

his other styles as 'King of Kings' and 'Lion of Judah'. He brought the nation's first written constitution into being, and Ethiopia joined the League of Nations in 1932. With Benito Mussolini's rise to power in Italy, there was increased interest in Ethiopia, and in 1935 Italy invaded. Addis Ababa fell to Italian forces, and the Italian King Victor Emmanuel III was proclaimed Emperor of Ethiopia. Haile Selassie fled for refuge to England, being restored to his throne by British and Ethiopian forces in 1941.

Haile Selassie issued a revised constitution in 1955, a half-hearted attempt to move the nation into the 20th century. Progressive elements, however, felt that it was insufficient. There was an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Haile Selassie in December 1960, and the emperor increased efforts toward economic and social reform. He became increasingly involved in foreign affairs, and played a leading role in the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (1963), located at Addis Ababa.

**African women herding livestock in a canyon in Debre Libanos, Ethiopia.**



The following year a long-standing border dispute between Ethiopia and the Somali Republic erupted into armed warfare. A truce established a demilitarised zone along the border, but hostilities staggered on. There was trouble also with Sudan and an Eritrean independence movement. In 1967 seven thousand Eritreans fled to Sudan because of Ethiopian reprisals against the secessionists. Haile Selassie played a major role in international affairs, helping in disputes between Senegal and Guinea, Tanzania and Uganda, northern and southern Sudan; but he largely ignored urgent domestic problems. The great inequality in the distribution of wealth, rural underdevelopment and corruption in government, rampant inflation, unemployment and severe drought in the north, 1972–75, caused great unrest.

#### • **Mengistu and the Derg**

In 1974 a series of strikes and demonstrations culminated on September 12 with the deposition of Haile Selassie. Chief among the coup leaders was Major Mengistu Haile Mariam. A provisional military administrative council, the Derg, was established to run the country with Mengistu as chairman. In late 1974 the Derg programme saw the establishment of a state-controlled socialist economy, and in 1975 all agricultural land in Ethiopia was nationalised, the monarchy abolished and Ethiopia declared a republic. At the same time Haile Selassie died, in custody, in mysterious circumstances.<sup>5</sup> The creation of the republic suggested a new era of political openness, but with the liberalisation of politics ethnic groups stepped up their demands for self-determination. They questioned the legitimacy of the new state and created guerrilla forces to fight for independence. Various ideological political organisations appeared, each with its own view for new Ethiopia.

By 1975 it was clear that Mengistu intended to maintain his power, particularly after several top leaders of the Derg were killed on Mengistu's orders. The government unleashed its 'Red Terror' campaign, providing those thought loyal to the government with arms to help gov-



'In 1987 the People's  
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ernment forces root out enemies of the revolution. Between 1977 and 1978 an estimated 100,000 'enemies of the government' were killed or disappeared. This led to tension between Ethiopia and the United States, Ethiopia's modern superpower ally, culminating in a complete break of relations in 1977. The regime was weakened by the withdrawal of military aid, and opponents gained control of vast amounts of rural territory and destabilised life in the cities.

In early 1978 the Mengistu regime secured military assistance from the USSR and Cuba, regained control of lost territories and drove its opponents underground. Mengistu prepared a new constitution to make Ethiopia a Marxist-Leninist people's republic, and in 1987 the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was proclaimed, modelled after the Soviet system of government. The Derg was abolished and a new national assembly elected Mengistu as president of Ethiopia. The Mengistu government was still viewed by many as illegitimate, and opposition groups re-emerged.

Over the next few years the Ethiopian army suffered an increasing number of defeats and became demoralised, losing control of most of Eritrea and the entire Tigray region. A prolonged drought between 1984 and 1986 plunged the country into famine, and under an ill-planned programme, the government forcibly relocated about 600,000 northerners to the south. Protracted civil unrest (war?) coupled with mistrust of westerners ham-



‘In 1993 Eritrea declared its independence, and was so recognised by Ethiopia’

pered worldwide efforts to provide food and medical aid. During the 1980s an estimated one million Ethiopians died from starvation as a result of famine. By the late 1980s Ethiopia had lost the support of the Soviet Union. Faced with these economic and military shortages, the Ethiopian national assembly called for unconditional peace talks with dissident organisations. Even as talks progressed, opposition forces acquired more and more territory, and the Ethiopian army lost its will to fight. The country’s political leaders conceded defeat, and Mengistu fled the country.

In 1993 Eritrea declared its independence, and was so recognised by Ethiopia. In 1994 Ethiopian voters elected a Constituent Assembly, charged with writing a new democratic constitution. In 1995 the Constituent Assembly officially transferred power to a new legislature, and the country was renamed the Federal Democratic

Republic of Ethiopia. Meles Zenawi was elected as prime minister.

Ethiopian courts began criminal proceedings against members and supporters of Mengistu’s regime for offences committed during and after the years of the Red Terror. By 1997 more than five thousand suspects had been charged with war crimes such as torture, murder and genocide. Prosecution began in 1996 against seventy-three Derg members, twenty-three of whom, including Mengistu, were tried ‘in absentia’. The Ethiopian government has attempted to extradite Mengistu from Zimbabwe,<sup>6</sup> where he lives in exile. In 1998 clashes broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea, each accusing the other of seizing territory. By early 1999 hundreds of thousands of troops had been sent to the border, and the dispute had become bitter war. Tens of thousands of soldiers died in the fighting before a cease-fire was declared in June 2000. In December Eritrea and Ethiopia, under the auspices of the UN, signed a peace agreement that formally ended the war and established a commission to demarcate the border between the countries.

## RELIGION

If you have absorbed any overall sense of the history of Ethiopia from the preceding paragraphs, you will realise that religion—Jewish, Christian and Muslim—is embedded in the whole. But what strange confusion obtains, and how difficult to strain out the fact from the fable.

### • Early Christian

The pioneer missionary to Ethiopia was the Syrian Frumentius, 300–380. Greek and Roman sources recount his shipwreck whilst travelling from Tyre to India, and subsequent enslavement in Ethiopia around 330. He and his brother Ædesius made

such an impression in Axum that they were allowed freely to preach the Gospel. Ædesius soon returned home to Tyre, but Frumentius travelled only to Alexandria where Athanasius (yes, *that* Athanasius) appointed him Bishop and sent him back to Ethiopia as the first *Abuna*, Father, of the church there. The Ethiopian court, including the future emperor Ezana, embraced the Gospel, and from that time on Christianity grew at the heart of Ethiopian life and identity. There was already in Ethiopia a semi-mythic association with Solomonid Judaism through the Queen of Sheba (which is Greater Ethiopia, of course), which from Frumentius on was always in tension with the Christian tradition.

Without implicating either Frumentius or Athanasius, it is evident that Ethiopian 'mainstream Christianity' was, and is, of the Egyptian Coptic strain, and thus Monophysite.<sup>7</sup> This misconstruing of the nature of Christ tended to run in tandem with Nestorian sympathies, another misstate-



'What happened to the Ark of the Covenant?'

ment of the Person of Christ. One of the still resounding points in Ethiopian church history is the arrival of the Nine Saints who are said to have transformed Christianity from being a court religion to a grass roots national faith in the 5th century. But they were refugees from the Council of Chalcedon, which in 451 had declared Monophysitism a heresy. These nine, the Tsadkan (Righteous), were Monophysite monks from all over Byzantium—Cappadocia, Cilicia, Constantinople, as well as Rome

and Syria. Their 'saint's days' still form part of Ethiopian Orthodox ritual, and in their translating of the Scriptures they included such items as the Book of Jubilees, the Book of Enoch and other apocryphal portions (more on this later).

A form of Christianity, then, was early in Ethiopia, but claims of a primal simplicity and purity made by some modern writers cannot be entertained. It is said to have been the first 'Christian' nation, but that was Armenia, though Ethiopian Christianity was, if only just, pre-Constantinian. I have even read that it was never touched by Rome, yet in the 16th century the Ethiopian church and nation sought and received help of Portuguese Jesuits in Egypt. There was a long involvement, and even though Rome did not prevail it left its mark. Ethiopia was a Christian nation with Christian emperors and kings, but not in any way that would commend itself to Bible-reading believers. The legends of Prester (presbyter/priest) John, ruler of a great African (but maybe Indian) Christian nation seeking mutual help ties with Europe in general and Rome in particular, were identified with Ethiopia in the popular mind, and brought some awareness of the country to Protestant Europe, and to missionary interest.

• ***Kebra Nagast* – the 'Glory of Kings'**

What happened to the Ark of the Covenant? Conventional Jewish and Christian sources accept that there is no knowledge of it after the Captivity—a suggestion in the apocryphal 2 Maccabees 2.4–7 that Jeremiah hid it on Mt. Nebo is all we have.<sup>8</sup> However, in the ancient Ethiopian Ge'ez language is a book, the *Kebra Nagast*, with a different account. Scholars argue as to the dating of this composite document, ranging from the days of Solomon to the 4th–5th centuries A.D. Its core is the visit of the

Queen of Sheba—Queen Makeda of Ethiopia—to Solomon, and their begetting of a son, born on the Queen’s way home. The grown-up son, Menelik,<sup>9</sup> twenty-two years later visits his father and returns to Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant,<sup>10</sup> thus creating the rationale for the Ethiopian Solomonid dynasty down to Haile Selassie. In Axum the Christian church Maryam Seyon (Mary of Zion) is reputed still to contain the Ark of the Covenant, the very construct of Moses under Divine direction at Sinai. Being in Ge’ez, *Kebra Nagast* was not a ‘popular’ book until quite modern times. James Bruce of Kinnaird, 1730–94, returned from his travels in search of the sources of the Nile<sup>11</sup> with several valuable Ethiopian manuscripts, including the *Kebra Nagast*. Translations followed, and although Portuguese works of the late 16th–early 17th centuries gave account of the content of *Kebra Nagast*, it was the 19th-century work which seriously engaged general European interest.<sup>12</sup> *Kebra Nagast* reveals the ‘ethiopian-ness’ of Ethiopia: ancient, royal, Biblical, Jewish, Christian, and yet not quite; too much legend, too much secrecy, too much corruption.

In the next part we will continue under the ‘Religion’ heading to look at the Falashas—Ethiopian Jews calling themselves ‘Beta Israel’ (House of Israel)—Islam, Protestant mission, Rastafarianism, and then the language and the Bible in Ethiopia. ●

#### Endnotes

1. You may see numbers over forty quoted, but that is including ‘Ethiopian[s]’ people rather than territory, and they may, of course, be descendants of Cush, rather than inhabitants of a particular land.
2. In the Authorised Version, the Hebrew כוש is transliterated as Cush when referring to a person, e.g., Genesis 10.6, but rendered Ethiopia when referring to the country. The

Greek in Acts 8.27 is Αιθιοψ—*Aithiops*.

3. If any part of Miriam’s complaining was about Moses’s wife being black, then her chastisement in being made ‘white as snow’ (Numbers 12.10) is doubly awesome.
4. Remember Rhodes and the Matabele? In this case the Ethiopians were much more quickly aware of what was being attempted.
5. His remains were found under a toilet in the palace after Mengistu’s fall.
6. Where else?!
7. Unlike normal Biblical doctrine which teaches that the human and divine natures are united in the person of Christ (hypostatic union), Monophysites believe that Jesus had only one, divine nature and Nestorianism teaches that Jesus had distinct human and divine natures. Although the Council of Chalcedon in 451 acknowledged the validity of the hypostatic union, these three views (and others) were in great dispute during the 5th century, and Monophysitism remained the dominant view of the Coptic Church in Egypt and Ethiopia.

It is one of those foolish ‘what if’ speculations to wonder what might have come to pass if Mahomet had encountered some more robust testimony to Christ than the decayed Coptic variety that prevailed in the Peninsula of his time.

8. Interesting in connection with Jeremiah 3.16.
9. In *Kebra Nagast* he is called David; the name Menelik comes from later legend.
10. Whereupon, according to *Kebra Nagast*, Solomon falls for Pharaoh’s daughter and idolatry, and the Judean priesthood declines, a proto-‘I-chabod’.
11. His accounts seemed so extraordinary that they were viewed with suspicion until Richard Burton and other Victorian explorers brought confirmation.
12. The online Wikipedia is a very uneven resource, but the article on *Kebra Nagast* is short and useful. If you really want indigestion try the 2006 book *Quest for the Ark of the Covenant* by Stuart Munro-Hay.