

Icons and religious painting are an important part of Christian Ethiopian culture. The images reflect the spirituality of the Ethiopians and help tell the centrality of devotion in their personal piety. The purpose of this paper is to trace the history and development of Ethiopian religious art, including icons, murals, and crosses.

Ethiopia has been a Christian nation since 324 AD, when King Ezana in Axum converted to Christianity and began minting coins with the Byzantium Cross, replacing the disc and crescent.<sup>i</sup> Two of the monks who evangelized Axum, Frumentius returned to Alexandria and persuaded patriarch Athanasius to help spread Christianity throughout Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church considers itself as belonging to the One, Holy, Universal and Apostolic Church.<sup>ii</sup> The Ethiopians prefer to call themselves “Non-Chalcedonian” and not the term “Monophysite.” Ethiopian scholars believe the difference in the Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian churches is a question of difference in vocabulary. “It is a question of error in vocabulary, the concept of Nature and Person not being clear and there being obscurity in philosophical terms such as physis, hypostasis, ausia, prosopon, atreptos, mia, mono, etc. As to the two natures of Christ the Dyophysites and non-Chalcedonian are one, it is a matter of interpretation after the union of the two natures. Happily the Dyophysites are currently realizing the position.” In more recent times, it is important to note that the Armenians, who are in communion with the Ethiopian and other Oriental Churches, continue to have conversations with the Eastern Orthodox Churches regarding that the differences between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches is indeed language. In 1961, there was a Pan-Orthodox meeting in Rhodes considering the relationship between the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The Russian Orthodox, Ecumenical Patriarch, Church of Greece, and Oriental Orthodox attended. “An extraordinary clear

agreement was reached concerning the essence of the Christological dogma, something of the greatest importance for the meetings and negotiations between these churches.”<sup>iii</sup> The Rev. Archpriest Vitaly Borovoy remarked that it is strongly believed that real *benosis dogmatike* (love for the truth) will be realized and that there can be common participation in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church without prejudice, keeping their historical national characteristics.<sup>iv</sup>

Ethiopia’s neighbor, Egypt, has been credited by some scholars as the birthplace of icons. The icon tradition dates from the region of the Nile Delta of the Upper Nile. According to Fr. J. Robert Wright, there existed objects in Egypt “painted in wax encaustic on wood caskets to represent the faces of mummies contained within them.”<sup>v</sup> There are mummy portraits or icons from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD that still remain. The images do not have spatial depth, but have large two dimensional eyes, frozen facial expresses that seem to be suspended in time. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, these images became less frozen and more stylized. There are also funeral paintings on wood board in Rome from the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest icons in this tradition are from the late 5<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries from Mount Sinai in Egypt.<sup>vi</sup>

“The veneration of images (icons) is a part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition.”<sup>vii</sup> According to the theological teaching of the Ethiopian Church, the veneration is directed not to the images but to the holy persons whom they represent. Ethiopian Orthodox icons are flat, two-dimensional images. Three-dimensional statues are not part of the Ethiopian tradition since “these representations may be too realistic and may become in themselves idols of veneration.”<sup>viii</sup> The Ethiopians are strict in drawing the distinction between worship and veneration. “Images (icons) of our Blessed Virgin Mother, Her Son Jesus Christ, the Apostles, the angels and saints are not worshipped at all. The Orthodox

adore no one but God.”<sup>xix</sup> These saints are honored because of their holiness. The Ethiopians believe that these saints pray for them to God. The icons venerated are honored simply as a means for directing and increasing homage of that person and through him or her to God. The Ethiopians remember that it is by God’s grace that the person venerated became who he or she was. “Our Church believes in the ancient custom of honoring the heroic servants of God but it does not offer them the adoration which befits God.”<sup>x</sup>

If the Ethiopians do not believe in venerating three-dimensional objects or statues, how do they feel about the cross? As for the Cross, the Ethiopians do not adore its figure. Rather, the cross is honored. Incense is offered and lights are given to the figures of the cross, holy books of the gospel, and other sacred objects in order to honor them so that this honor passes not to the object but to the person represented.<sup>xi</sup> Veneration is shown by kissing, touching, or uncovering the heads to the images of the sacred persons. Adoration is shown to Christ and honor to his Mother, saints, and angels. The distinction between the two-dimensional icons and the three dimensional images such as crosses, gospel books, or other sacred objects appears to be that God and God only is worshiped or adored, the images are veneration with the honor passing through to the person represented, and images are honored.

The 15<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopian Emperor Zara Yaeqob described how an image (icon) comes to life. Yaeqob’s quote comes from the Ethiopian work, *The Lives of the Saint*, written in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and contains an account about miraculously speaking paintings.<sup>xii</sup> “This icon is clothed with a (human) body. It moves and talks. The Spirit of God dwells in it. You should not think that it is a mere picture. She is, indeed, Our Lady the Virgin (herself) and he is Jesus, the only begotten Son (himself). Michael and Gabriel too are as themselves, as that icon [has spoken] to a certain monk.” Emperor Yaeqob’s testimony show that some

Ethiopians did not view the icons as simply images or paintings but had great spiritual significance.

Not only are images venerated but also relics. Relics, in the Ethiopian tradition, are bodies of the departed saints, fragments of their bodies or the like. “Through their bodies, benefits are bestowed by God on men.”<sup>xiii</sup> Since the bodies of the saints suffered and labored on earth whose souls are departed into Paradise, it is appropriate to honor their bodies or remains of their bodies that lie on earth. This is done in the hope of the Resurrection where God will give these bodies glory. The Ethiopians also honor things closely connected with a saint’s earthly life. One example is the 14<sup>th</sup> century saint, Tekla Haimanot. The Ethiopians revere some of his utensils such as his blessing crosses, water container, and prayer book.<sup>xiv</sup> The Ethiopians believe sometimes God allows miracles to happen or God shows favor to those who venerate relics or sacred objects.<sup>xv</sup> Ethiopians believe that a fragment of the True Cross is at the Church of Eghziber Ab in the Monastery of Gishen.<sup>xvi</sup> Records in Venice show that Ethiopia did receive a relic of the Cross as a gift the Republic of Venice.<sup>xvii</sup> As tradition has it, Queen Helena divided the true cross into four fragments, each sent to the patriarchs in Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, and Antioch. A fragment of the Alexandrian cross was brought to Ethiopia.<sup>xviii</sup> Ethiopians continue to make pilgrimages to the Church of Eghziber Ab.

Ethiopia is known for its elaborate crosses. The lacing as seen in many Ethiopian crosses originated in the designs of the manuscripts. Some believe the interlace patterns were interpreted a foliage from the Tree of Life or as the brazen serpent from the rod of Moses.<sup>xix</sup> The Ethiopians call this style *wanfît* or *sieve*. One the chief promoters of this type of sieve work in the cross as the daughter of King Dawit of the Zagwe dynasty in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xx</sup>

The Ethiopian Church retains many Judaic elements, more so than any other Christian Church.<sup>xxi</sup> The *tabot* (Ark of the Covenant), hospitality to the stranger, clean and unclean meat, circumcision of a boy on the eighth day, priestly dances with drums, and a Saturday Sabbath are all Judaic elements. Ethiopian scholars point to the writings of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and St. Clement showing that Eucharist services in their time was similar to a Jewish formula. Ethiopians assert that the Axumite clergy are Aaronite, the original Ark of Covenant resides in Axum, and that that Ethiopians have been referred to as Children of Israel.

The *tabot* or *silat* is a term that may mean according to the context (a) The Ark of the Covenant in the sanctuary or (b) the Ark of the Covenant itself. It is the *silat* or *tabot* that consecrate a church and give sanctity to the church in which it is placed.<sup>xxii</sup> It is the Patriarch who consecrates the *tabot*. At consecration, the *tabot* takes the gender of the person to which it is dedicated.<sup>xxiii</sup> If it is dedicated to St. Mary, the *tabot* is female. The *tabot* itself is placed under the altar in order to sanctify the altar. This is similar to the Coptic altar stone that sanctifies the holy altar. By building churches named by certain saints and consecrating *tabots* in their name, the Church, according to the Ethiopians, are not depriving God of adoration but are actually adoring God more since they are honoring the result of God's work.<sup>xxiv</sup> Some *tabotat* also contain images of saints.<sup>xxv</sup> A *tabot* resides in a chest or coffer called the *Manbara Tabot*.

Icons hold a special place in the lives of the Christian Ethiopian faithful. Several popular saints are St. George on his horse, Michael with his wings, Mary and Her Babe, and Christ hanging from the cross. St. George became popular in Ethiopia in 1442 when emperor Zara Yaeqob defeated sultan Badlay of Adal on Christmas Day, crediting St. George. A story about Mary was composed during the time of this emperor stating that St.

George follows Mary always and that she sends him all places for help.<sup>xxvi</sup> Icons are typically in the homes of Ethiopians and reverently kissed. Many churches have the images of Adam and Eve and during the time when Ethiopia had emperors, an image of the emperor or empress.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The follow is a list of saints most celebrated throughout Ethiopia. St George, Tekla Haimanot, Gabra Manfas Qiddus, John the Baptist, the Apostles, Frumentius, Yared, Pantalewon, Basalota Mikael, Anorewos (Honorius), St. Aron, Filiops, St. Stefanos, St. Ewostatewos (Eustathius), St. Marqorewos, SS. Fere Mikael and Zara Abraham, St. Alba Kerzun, St. Takla Hawaryat, St. Walatta Petros, the Nine Saints, St. Qiros, St. Aragawi, King Kaleb, St. Lalibea, St. Tweodros, St. Amba Mikawl, St. Mabaa Seyon, St. Helena, St. Martha, St. Esther, St. Judith, St Elizabeth, St. Anna, St. Magdalawit, and St. Maryam.<sup>xxviii</sup> Some important saints' feast days according to the Ethiopia calendar are St. John on January 4, St. Stephen on January 1, St. George on April 23, the Day of Baptism on January 11, the 318 Nicean Fathers on September 21, Dioscorus on September 7, Abraham, Isaac and Yacob on the 28<sup>th</sup> of each month, and Cyril of Alexandria on February 14.<sup>xxix</sup>

Not only saints, but angels are part of the Ethiopian iconographic tradition. *The Homilies of the Angles* is a text in the Ethiopian Holy Book. This book gives accounts of how Angels are sent by God and come down from Heaven to help and guard the faithful and destroy the wicked.<sup>xxx</sup> It is believed that angels guard the priests. When the priest departs from a church, one or more angels remain in the church to guard it. There are nine orders of angels in the Ethiopian tradition. These are angels, archangels, pryncedoms, authorities, powers, dominions, thrones, cherubim and seraphim.<sup>xxxi</sup> The angelic feast days are All Angles, St. Mikael, St. Gabriel, and St. Rufael. The feast of Archangel Mikael is celebrated on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of each month.

The Ethiopians venerate the Holy Virgin Mary most of all.<sup>xxxii</sup> She is venerated because of her supreme grace and the call she received from God. Because of God's grace, the Ethiopians believe Mary committed no actual sin. Mary has a special place in the Ethiopian cult. The country of Ethiopia is known as the Country of Mary and she is Ethiopia's protectress.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Since she has such a special position among the faithful, Mary is venerated in a special way. Mary is so loved by her Son that he will grant Mary's every prayer. There is no one more linked with the mysteries of Jesus and no one has followed the footsteps of Jesus more than Mary. "Holier than the Cherubim and Seraphim she enjoyed unquestionably greater glory than all the other saints for she is full of grace, she is the Mother of God, who happily gave birth to the Redeemer for us."<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Mary has the highest honor a creature can attain in heaven. Therefore, she is worthy of the highest praise since she was chosen by God to be Mother, the grace God bestowed on her, and her faith in responding to God's grace. Mary even has a special place in the liturgy. The Hail Mary is recited before the Lectons. Here is part of one prayer recited before the reading of Acts of the Apostles. "Rejoice, O thou of whom we ask healing, O holy, full of honor, ever-virgin, parent of God, mother of Christ, offer up our prayer on high to thy beloved Son that he may forgive us our sins. Rejoice, O thou who didst bear for us the very Light of Righteousness, even Christ our God. O Virgin pure, plead for us unto our Lord that he may have mercy upon our souls and forgive our sins."<sup>xxxv</sup> The feast of St. Mary is commemorated every month and there are more than thirty actual feast days dedicated to her. The name of Mary is so popular that it is give to both men and women.

Not only are their icons and feasts days of Mary, there are many texts dedicated to Mary and her life. Some of these texts include the *History of Mary*, the *Wonders of Mary*, *Homilies in the Festival of the Virgin*, *Praises of Mary*, *the Organ of the Virgin* or the *Organ of Praises*.

Even one of the Anaphora is called Of Our Lady Mary. Ethiopia is seen as the daughter of Mary. They also believe Mary was taken body and soul into heaven.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Ethiopian religious art, including icons, tabots, crosses, and murals, can be divided into several periods. The first major category is the Axumite and Post-Axumite periods, ranging from the 4<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This era is also known as Late Antiquity. The second is the Zagwe Dynasty, from the 1137-1270. The next major period is the Early Solomonic Period, stretching from 1270 to 1530. This period can be subdivided into several eras. The first is next the Era of Amda Seyon (1270-1382) followed by the Era of Dawit (1382-1478), and the Era of Opposites: Stephanite and Venetian Art (1480-1530). The next major period is the Late Solomonic Period, stretching from 1540-1769. During this time, there was Muslim and Jesuit Turmoil, ranging from 1530 to 1632. The Renaissance in Ethiopia was from 1660-1682, and there was Stylistic Regeneration from 1690-1730. This regeneration was characterized by geometric patterns and contrasting colors. There also was the concern for realism during this time.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Iconographic Regeneration came from 1706-1720. With the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century came the Transition to Modernity.

Very little art remains from the late Axumite period in Ethiopian history of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>xxxix</sup> Church marble panels have been found on the Ethiopian/Eritrean Red Sea coast that are similar to those found in Constantinople, Ravenna, and early Byzantine churches in Negev. The Ethiopian churches ruins show not only Axumite materials and technique but imported fragments of prefabricated marble furnishings carved from Mediterranean quarries.

It is believed that the 6<sup>th</sup> century was the time when Christian iconography was introduced into Ethiopia. There is evidence of this in the Gospel manuscripts that exist from this time.<sup>xl</sup> However there is also evidence in church ruins as well. There are wooden ceiling

panels from the Church of Mary at Asmara carved with animal figures. These show a rhinoceros and an ox or bull with a snake. Heldman notes that these images are part of the terrestrial world known as “the Lord’s estate.” This was a common theme of Byzantium art of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>xli</sup> Scholars have compared the Ethiopian paintings with those at Justinian’s Church at Mount Sinai. The images of plants and animals show the possibility of exchange between the Mediterranean centers. One Gospel book found in Tegray at the monastery of Abba Garima is from the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xlii</sup> Similar art has been found Nubia, Egypt, Syria, and Armenia. It is possible that during the wealthy Axumite dynasty where Ethiopia controlled the Red Sea trade that Ethiopia produced art and coins, disseminating them throughout Christians in the Near East. Perhaps Axumite kings founded workshops abroad where Ethiopian students copied or illustrated texts.<sup>xliii</sup>

It was during the Axumite period that the Greek Gospel texts arrived in Ethiopia and were translated into Ge’ez. This brought with it the technique of gospel manuscript transmission, known as the Late Antiquity book tradition. The Gospel Canon table method was invented by Eusebius of Caesarea, bishop of Caesarea developed this method in early 4<sup>th</sup> century. Ethiopian Canon tables copied before 1500 show this Greek transcription method. Fourteenth century prologues from Gospels quote the Eusebian prologue explaining how the Gospel tables should be constructed. These Gospel manuscripts show Late Antique and Early Byzantium iconography. Heldman points to miniature panels that are stylistically close to ones showing the Crucifixion on ampullae from the sixth and early seventh centuries, on which pilgrims from Jerusalem took home sanctified oil from holy places.<sup>xliv</sup> The most popular sites mentioned and painted were Golgotha, the tomb of Christ, the site of the Resurrection, the Mount of Olives, the traditional site of the Ascension, and the Church of the Apostles on Mount Zion.

It is also in the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries that Ethiopia received art depicting the Holy City of Jerusalem. King Kaleb (525 AD) of Ethiopia received gifts from the Constantinopolitan court. It is possible in these gifts were images of the Holy City. King Kaleb received embassies from Constantinople, motivated by Justinian's universalist theories of a world Christian empire. Well preserved Gospel images in the early part the 14<sup>th</sup> century show a decorated front piece and imagery inspired by the early Byzantine cult of holy places in Jerusalem.<sup>xlv</sup> Scholars believe that this early 14<sup>th</sup> century Gospel table shows a type of imagery introduced in Ethiopia during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. One example of the late Axumite period is in Zarema. It is a square shaped church and dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>xlvi</sup> The church is decorated in false window carvings, popular throughout Ethiopia. The interior is carved with plant motif.

One of the best examples of icons and paintings from the post-Axumite periods is the nave of Church of Debre Salam in Tegray, dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>xlvii</sup> This church has some of the oldest murals surviving in Ethiopia. There is no image of the Crucifixion. The scenes that are depicted are from the life of Christ are solely triumphal images. These are the Entry into Jerusalem and Christ in Majesty.

It is beginning in the Zagwe Dynasty, 1137-1270 AD, that more icons and images remain. To date, few manuscripts survive prior to 1270. Two Gospel books with canon tables and evangelist portraits exist at the Monastery of Abba Garima. These are examples from the Late Antique canon table and show early Byzantine iconography.<sup>xlviii</sup> It is in the ancient city of Lalibela, named for one of the Zagwe kings, where churches were carved from living rock that we find many images from the Zagwe Dynasty. The exact dates are not certain for Lalibela. However, one Coptic source states that he reigned in 1210 AD. The

city's original name was Roha, sounding close to the Arabic for the city of Edessa which was a holy Syrian Christian city.

*The Life of Yemrehanna Kretos*, one of the Zagwe kings of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century started the tradition of carving churches from living rock in Lalibela. However, evidence shows that the tradition of rock hewn churches and structures is older than the 12<sup>th</sup> century. One example are the rock stela in the Axum region of Ethiopia. King Kaleb's tomb of the 6<sup>th</sup> century is carved underground from live stone. Some link these rock carved churches in Lalibela with the rock carved churches and monuments of Axum. Some believe that the Church of the Redeemer in Lalibela is a replica of the original Cathedral of May of Zion in Axum.<sup>xlix</sup>

The murals in the Church of St. Mary at Lalibela show saints and scenes from the life of Christ. Scholars believe that the series of animals, humped cattle, birds, and fowl follow the iconography of the "Lord's estate," which is of Late Antique theme introduced to Ethiopia during the Axumite period. In fact, many of the churches in Lalibela have the same infilling designs as the stela in Axum, which date before the year 400.

Another source of holy images from the Zagwe dynasty are the holy tabotat. Several images remain from the Manbara Tabot, the coffer that holds the holy tabot. Many of the Manbara Tabotat have intricate carvings and wordings. One Manbara Tabot has the name of the Zagwe ruler, Lalibela. Ten of these coffers exist, nine of them bare the name of Lalibela. The last has not dedicator. There is a prayer on one coffer addressed to Hananiah, Azariah, and Misael, the Three Holy Children who were rescued from King Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace by an angel of God.<sup>1</sup> What makes Lalibela's prayer unusual since it makes no direct reference to the deliverance of the Three Children but asks only for their prayers. "O three youths, Hananiah, Azariah, and Misael, martyrs of Christ, pray for

me before God the Father, before Christ the Son, and before the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, so that your prayers may obtain clemency and mercy for the servant of God, Lalibela, forever, Amen.”

Another Manbara Tabot from this time period is unusual since it has carved figures. Most coffers have cruciform designs. This particular coffer, believed to be from 12<sup>th</sup> century in Lastra, has the figure of the Crucified Christ. Christ is in the Christus Rex position, reigning from the tree. The cross itself on which Jesus is crucified is a cruciform rosette. Jesus is standing on a platform, in reverse perspective making him project from the cross. Jesus’ nimbus has the circumscribed cruciform. Jesus is wearing only a loin cloth. The cross is equidistance, and circumscribed by four concentric circles. The four concentric circles have the words “four beasts” carved in it. These are the four beasts that have no bodies and are the “Wheels of God that bear His Divine throne.”<sup>li</sup> One another face of the Manbara Tabot shows archangels standing inside an arcade.

The images on the Manbara Tabot visually show what physically happens on the Manbara. The coffer or chest functions as the altar table during the Eucharist. Within the chest is the consecrated tabor or replica Ark of the Covenant. It is the tabot that makes the church consecrated. The church building is considered consecrated only while the tabot is inside the church. In the Manbara Tabot from the Church of St. Mary, the paten and chalice would sit directly on the crucified image of Christ. The Eucharist is the *anamnesis* of the Crucified Christ. The four concentric circles represent the Four Beasts that bear God’s divine throne. The consecrated bread and wine sit upon the Manbara Tabot, serving as Christ’s throne.<sup>lii</sup> The images of the seraphim around the Manbara Tabot, physically sit below the throne of God, much like the Isaiah 6 imagery. In the Eucharist, these angels sit

below the Consecrated Elements, Christ, who himself sits on the Manbara Tabot as his throne.

The icon fan or processional fan is a liturgical piece unique to Ethiopia. On a processional fan, icons are painted on 5 pieces of parchment with 38 identical size figures on each panel. These panels are first folded, then the four outer edges brought together forming a circle or wheel. These fans or wheels measure nearly four feet in diameter. In essence, it is folding processional icon. The folding processional icon in the shape of a fan are extremely rare, found only in Ethiopia at Lake Tana and Debra Seyon.<sup>liii</sup>

Many more works remain from the Early Solomonic Period, 1270-1527. Even though there is a large volume of work, much of it has not be categorized and the artistic or workshop practices need to determined.<sup>liv</sup> The Ethiopian documents that remain from this period showing royal chronicles and show land grants can be helpful in determining icon dating. There are some incidental information about the training of artists and workshop practices as written in *Lives of saints*.<sup>lv</sup> *The Life of Iyyasus Moa* states that one scribe received his training from a scribe in Debra Damo. This scribe later founded Debra Hayq Estifanos, constructing 24 lamps for the monastic church of St. Estifano. Abbot Moa commissioned a manuscript for this monastery. His Gospel book, dating to 1280, was the oldest dated Ethiopian illuminated manuscript as of 1993. The style goes back to late Antiquity, using the form of a *tholos*. It is also the earliest example of revised Gospel recension.<sup>lvi</sup> One of the images includes several scenes from the Hebrew Bible. These two images fit in the paradigm of salvation: Daniel in the Lion's Den with Habakkuk and the Three Holy Children in the Fiery Furnace.

Several images of Mary exist from the Early Solomonic period. Many show Mary standing between two angels, each angel stretching one wing over her head. One image is

from the *Four Gospels* of Kretos Tasfana from 1280 AD. This specific image shows the entrance of Mary into the Temple. Scholars believe this particular image could be a reference to St. Mary of Zion's Church in Axum. There is another 14<sup>th</sup> century Marian image from Northern Ethiopia showing Christ in Glory with Mary in her role as Mother Church, Mary of Zion.<sup>lvii</sup> This image shows Mary in orans position, with angels' wings over her head. The angels themselves have raised right hands. Another image of the Ascension from the same *Four Gospels* book shows Mary under angels' wings while the Four Beasts carry a mandorla of Jesus as he ascends into Heaven. A metal processional cross from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century shows Mary and Christ Child with angels' wings over their head protecting them.<sup>lviii</sup>

The image of angels' wings over Mary is interesting. One sees this represented throughout Ethiopian icons. The 14<sup>th</sup> century image of Mary in Heaven with Mikael and Gabriel arching their wings over her head is associated with Mary and Holy of Holies of the Temple. These images perhaps are thematically close to Eastern iconography of the Virgin Protection. According to Fr. J. Robert Wright, there is a variation of iconography of Mary in orans position in the Russian tradition. One particular is from the late 14<sup>th</sup> century called the Icon of the Holy Virgin's Protection.<sup>lix</sup> In this Russian icon, angels hold a veil (Pokrov) over Mary. In other icons, Mary holds a veil of protection over the world. There is also a 16<sup>th</sup> century Russian icon of Holy Virgin Protection based on the 911 AD appearance of Mary at Blachernae church in Constantinople. The tradition states that two saints saw Mary remove her veil from the sanctuary and spread it over the worshippers as a sign of protection. This showed Mary's care for all people, especially her protection over Constantinople that was currently threatened by Saracen invasion. A processional cross from the 14<sup>th</sup> century has the Holy Trinity above a representation of the Mary and Christ Child. This image of the Holy Trinity shows when God visited Abraham, also known as the Old Testament Trinity.<sup>lx</sup> It

appears that two angels in the panel are holding a veil draped over Mary and Christ.<sup>lxi</sup> This representation seems closer to the Russian Pokrov.

The Ethiopian images of the angels' wings over Mary hold some similarities and differences when compared to the Russian or Constantinopolitan images. The angels' wings do appear to protect Mary. In a visual survey of images, the two angels' wings do not overlap. There seems to be a small space between their wings touching when associated with Mary. In other images not associated with Mary, the angels' wings overlap as if separating the heavenly realm from the earthly realm. Perhaps the space exists between the angels' wings since Mary is the human chosen to bear the Incarnation, being the bridge between heaven and earth. There is another image from the *Four Gospels* written in 1320 AD. This shows Mark's account of the Baptism of Christ. The icon shows two angels standing on either bank of the River Jordan, with their wings over the baptismal scene. Their wing tips overlap, as if forming a canopy dividing the earth and heavens. The space above the angels' wings are dark blue as if showing the waters above the heavens while the space below the angels wings are sky blue, showing earth. John and Jesus are naked in the water. At the apex of the angels' wings are the Hand of God the Father and the image of the Holy Spirit descending.<sup>lxii</sup> Another 14<sup>th</sup> century image from Debra Hayq Estifanos is of the Nativity. Mary and the Christ Child have one angel flying over them, with his right wing extending over Mary and Jesus.<sup>lxiii</sup> In some images with the mandorla, the wings of the Four Beasts cover the end of the mandorla. One such image appears on an incised wood cross, resembling a processional cross. The image shows the Ancient of Days from Daniel 7:9 in the center, the Four Beasts and their wings tracing the outline of the mandorla, and the twenty-four priests surrounding the Ancient of Days.<sup>lxiv</sup> In a 15<sup>th</sup> century image of the Annunciation from the *Miracles of Mary*, the angel Gabriel is shown with his left wing over

Mary and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove partially “descending” from heaven through the wing.<sup>lxv</sup> There is another icon from the Late Solomonic period of the Ascension with the mandorla constructed from angel’s wings.<sup>lxvi</sup> On a processional wheel icon fan, the figure of Mary stands beside Archangel Michael with one wing over Mary whose hands are in orans position.<sup>lxvii</sup> Overall, the angels’ wings seem to represent the separation from the heavenly and earthly things rather than a sign of protection.

There are Ethiopian icons of Mary from the Fasilada rule, 1632-67 that shows Mary tenderly embracing the Christ Child in her left hand. This type of icon is similar to Byzantine icons known as the Mother of God of Tenderness.<sup>lxviii</sup> In Ethiopian tradition, this specific iconography is typically used to depict Mary traveling to Qwesqwam.<sup>lxix</sup> Qwesqwam is a village in Upper Egypt where a monastery and church exist at al-Muharraka. This monastery marks the sight where the Holy Family is said to have dwelled during their exile in Egypt. It is well known that Ethiopian monks lived at Qwesqwam during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>lxx</sup> These images typically show Mary’s face resting on Jesus’ cheek, showing Mary’s concern for her son. A 17<sup>th</sup> century dyptic shows Mother of God of Tenderness on one panel and the Crucifixion on another panel. This shows the painful flight into Egypt alluding to the sorrow Mary will feel when Jesus dies.<sup>lxxi</sup> During this time, there was much contact between Ethiopia and the rest of Christianity. One example of the artistic influence is icons showing Mary with long hair. One is the Image of Our Lady Mary Journeying to Qwesqwam from the *Miracles of Mary*.<sup>lxxii</sup>

In 1270, Yekunno Amlak overthrew the reigning Zagwe dynasty and founded the Solomonic dynasty. The proper title of the dynasty is the Tagwelat dynasty since Yekunno Amlak is from Shoa. The reason Yekunno took the Solomonic name as dynasty is that Yekunno traced his lineage to Menelek in Axum. In the Ethiopian tradition, Menelek is the

son of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. With the new ruler came a religious and cultural revolution. New translations of religious texts came and many records from the past did not remain.<sup>lxxiii</sup> The emperor began strongly supporting the monastery of Debra Hayq Estifanos in Amhara. The monastery was founded before Yekunno Amlak took the throne in 1248. Debra Hayq Estifanos quickly became a learning center and place of great wealth. It was known as a strong learning center that was maintained through the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Scholars believe this particular monastery's scriptorium produced some of the finest illuminated words during that time. Emperor Yekunno Amlak built his dynastic palace church, with a portrait of Amlak flanked by two monastery abbots. This inscription shows how secular and religious leaders worked together to establish authority and enhance their prestige.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

Debra Asbo monastery in Shoa was founded in 1284 by Tekla Haymanot. In 1445, the monastery was renamed Debra Libranos (Mount of Lebanon). It was that year that emperor Zara Yacqob endowed it financially and renamed it. With the new name and financial endowment, Debra Libranos began to rival the Debra Hayq Estifanos monastery. In one hundred years, Debra Libranos became a significant player in supporting the arts. Under the leadership of Abbot Marha Krestos, a new church was built dedicated to Our Lady Mary. It was decorated with murals and portraits of the prophets, apostles, and martyrs. Much of the treasure was lost when the monastery was looted in 1532 and its churches and monastery destroyed by Ahmad Grañ. Muslims occupied the highlands of Ethiopia during the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>lxxv</sup> Some texts survived, including *The Ritual for Passion Week* which was commissioned by Marha Krestos.

Emperor Zara Yaeqob who renamed Debra Libranos believed in the power of using visual images for public communication. He introduced mandatory Marian devotion in

1441. He sponsored panel paintings for veneration. Emperor Yaeqob's influence helped develop programs to put forth his belief of the centrality of Our Lady Mary in the Christian theme of salvation. One example of this mandatory veneration was the appearance of Mary on processional painted fans as well as on processional crosses.<sup>lxxvi</sup> One monk, Fere Seyon, was the primary painter in one workshop. There was also a female monastic, St. Krestos Samra, who established a female monastery at Take Tana during the reign of Zara Yaeqob. The account of her life in the book of *Life* describes a devotional image she held while she prayer, much like a priest's manual cross.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Fere Seyon helped develop distinctive styles that influenced Ethiopian Marian icons during the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Seyon's images show the theological treatises written by Zara Yaeqob in explaining the role of Mary in the events of the Incarnation. One of Fere Seyon's members, Abuna Mabaa Seyon, introduced the visual type of iconography of the Crucifixion.<sup>lxxviii</sup> Abuna Mabaa Seyon dwelled in a monastery in central Ethiopia at Endagabtan. It is believed he composed the *Book of the Passion of Our Lord*, which is a homily on the Passion and Crucifixion. It is he, perhaps, who introduced the image of Jesus dying or dead on the Christ. This is in contrast to the Christus Rex image on the 13<sup>th</sup> century Manbara Tabot. The commemoration of the Crucifixion on the 27<sup>th</sup> of each month in the Ethiopian calendar.

Enough information exists to formulate the careers of some of the icon painters. Rulers under the Solomonic dynasty built churches in Amhara and Shoa. These churches had elaborate murals, furnishings, fabric, and decorations. Three emperors, Dawit, Yeshaq, and Zara Yaeqob, tried to recruit European artisans to work for them. Scholars think European artisans might have introduced the custom of signing works of art, especially the Ethiopian monks Mabaa Seyon and Dere Seyon. The best-known European to work as an artist in Ethiopia was Nicoló Branceleon who painted murals for emperor Lebna Dengel,

wrote illuminated manuscripts, and painted devotional images. The network and system of artisans collapsed after the Muslim invasion in 1527.<sup>lxxxix</sup> The chief artist before Branceleon was an Ethiopian monk who traveled to Egypt and Jerusalem. He went to Egypt to seek ordination since his religious order had been excommunicated in Ethiopia. The monk's name was Ezra and he was a disciple from Estifanos, a great iconographer.<sup>lxxx</sup> Nicolás Branceleon introduced a Western European representation of the Hallowing of Hell with the raising of Adam and Eve. In the Ethiopian raising of Adam and Eve, the two are naked. This starts a new theme in Ethiopian iconography.<sup>lxxxi</sup>

Today, Lake Tana holds many icons, crosses, and manuscripts of the Ethiopian Church. Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile River, has thirty-seven islands. There are monasteries and churches on twenty of these islands. Lake Tana itself is large, measuring 45 miles by 47 miles. However, the residents of Lake Tana were very hostile to evangelism and Christianization. Christianity did not take deep roots until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first monastery came to Lake Tana in 1250. It was Debra Tana Qirqos and was received in imperial favors during the reign of Amda Seyon (1314-44 AD). Lake Tana proved to be a perfect site for individual hermits or entire monastic communities. Many wall paintings remain in monasteries on Lake Tana. The work of one painter remains, since he signed his name on the back of a large painting he did for Church of St. Estifanos on Daga Island. The particular painter lived on Debra Daga Estifanos and Debra Gwegweben.

Church lamps, hand and processional crosses, chalices, and patens were made by monastic craftsmen. The monasteries were also places where chanting, singing, and painting were done. Most of the painting was done by monks. Illuminators were at many different monastic centers. This is perhaps one reason that different styles of illuminating and painting developed simultaneously. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century, two large centers developed: the

house of Ewostatewos and the house of Estifanos. It is from these two houses that it is possible to view various styles that survived today. The Ewostatewosite workshop located at Debra Maryam Qwahayn produced beautifully decorated manuscripts of the Psalm, Canticles, and Marian prayers for a governor of North Ethiopia.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

The Late Solomonic Period extended from 1540-1769 AD. Many of the manuscripts and religious material were destroyed from 1527 to 1543 with the Muslim invasion led by Ahmad Grañ. Libraries, monasteries, and churches were burned.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> All material was not lost. Monks took material to more safe locations throughout the country. One such location was Lake Tana. After the Muslim defeat, the Ethiopia Oromo from southern Ethiopia began invading the Christian north. With them came the wake of disorder and destruction.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Currently, it is difficult to date material from 1550 to 1665. During this time, devotional materials were produced for personal Marian veneration. However few icons or illuminated texts exist for this 100 year period. The manuscripts that are assigned to this period are calligraphy manuscripts.<sup>lxxxv</sup> One example is the Ethiopian *Synaxary*, dating from December 16, 1581. The emperor Sarza Dengel supported the revival of Ethiopian literature and learning. With the limited amount of icons from this time, it is possible the emperor did not support the making of images. No icons can be found from the emperor's court. Emperor Sarza supported literary revival and established a group of scholars associated with his court. Perhaps it was the influence of Islam that inspired this rise in calligraphy manuscripts and the decline in icons.

Some icons dating from 1550 to 1665 are imported from Western Europe, being both engravings and prints, replacing the Ethiopian pictorial models.<sup>lxxxvi</sup> This shows the increase in European art in Ethiopia. Some believe that even without the devastation of the icons under Ahmad Grañ, Ethiopians would be receptive to European art. During this time,

there appears to be a fusion in style of devotional images and icons for public veneration.

This is even true of illuminated manuscripts. The icons made for the aristocracy and those for the general population are artistically the same, as seen in the *Miracles of Mary*, done for an aristocratic patron.<sup>lxxxvii</sup> The distinction between the works placed in churches and those in homes were few.

In the last part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopia received copies of the venerated Virgin of Santa Maria Maggiore from Rome. Portuguese Jesuits brought these images to places all over the world, including Ethiopia. Emperor Fasiladas expelled the Jesuits in 1632, but the influence of Santa Maria Maggiore remained. This influence can be seen in icons produced after this time. One sees an emphasis on the Passion of Christ, his Death, and Raising of Adam and Eve are most common during the late Solomonic period.

There also seems to be an Indian influence from this time. Some Ethiopian icons show an Indian influence from the icons of the Raising of Adam and Eve. The book *Chronicle of the Emperor Sazra Dengel* state that Indian garments were worn by the Ethiopian aristocracy during this period. Chief of the garments worn because of Indian influence is the qaftan which is a long-sleeved outer garment similar to those seen in Christ's Resurrection depiction in the icons.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Icon writers uses these elaborate garments in their icons.

The Ethiopian Christian empire shifted to the northwest from the region of Shoa and Amhara to Lake Tana after 1550. One of the most famous emperors during this time was Fasiladas, 1632-1667 who built a stone castle and seven churches at Gondar. Gondar became the capital, known for its manuscripts and scriptoria. This let the capital be known as creating the First and Second Gondarine styles. The Gondarine kings made as their imperial palladium in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the European painting of Christ covered in thorns. Ethiopians know this image as *Kwerata Reesu* or the Striking of his Head referencing the

Gospel accounts of the humiliation and beating of Christ before the Crucifixion.<sup>lxxxix</sup> The image of *Kwerata Reesu* has the crown of thorns in *wanfit* or sieve design, representing the foliage from the Tree of Life.<sup>xc</sup> It was the belief that through this suffering that Christ achieved victory over evil. Scholars believe this image embodied the emperor's right to rule particularly since the emperor's loyalty was sworn on this icon. It was common practice for *Kwerata Reesu* and the tabot to be taken in battle.

Gondar was the site that produced icons and illuminated manuscripts when it became the artistic and political center of the empire.<sup>xc</sup> This artistic style seemed to be used through much of Christian Ethiopia. Images at Lake Tana are artistically close to those in Gondar. Icons from the Second Gondarine are influenced by the patronage of empress Mentewwab and her son, emperor Iyyaus II (1730-1755). The distinctions from this style are heavy modeling of flesh, careful rendering of patterns from imported fabric, and shaded backgrounds changing from yellow, red, or green, the colors of the present day Ethiopian flag.<sup>xcii</sup> In this style, there are realistic detailed images of clothing, furniture, hair styles, and genre scenes. The icons also show an interest in aristocratic lay persons. The icon writers were not influenced by the Western European light source and shadow or the three-dimensional spatial relations. An example of the Second Gondarine period comes from Lake Tana. In the illustrated *Lije* of Saint Walatta Petros, who was a nun from Lake Tana, shows nuns at work. There are several images of Empresses Mentewwab in several murals, crowned on horseback and as a suppliant before Our Lady Mary.<sup>xciii</sup>

One of the most famous churches from this time is Church of Debra Berhan Sellase in Gondar. The church was originally built in 1694. A later church was built and decorated between 1815 and 1818. Most notably are the 88 cherubim faces on the ceiling, with their eyes pointing in 88 different directions.<sup>xciv</sup>

The image of Christ from Tekla Maryam, central Ethiopia during the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century resembles Christ of Mt. Sinai. This icon shows Christ, Peter, and Paul above the image of St. George.<sup>xcv</sup> The image appears to have the Vignon characteristics, with three concentric circles.<sup>xcvi</sup> Jesus has a forked beard and long hair, curled around his shoulders. The particular style of this icon is from Fere Seyon. The image of Jesus has some of the same characteristics seen at Christ of Mt. Sinai. This is Christ with the Pantocrator face.<sup>xcvii</sup> Some believe Christ of Mt. Sinai was possibly a gift to the monastery from its founder, the Emperor Justinian in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century. Another example is the mosaic of Christ Pantocrator from late 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century Deesis in the southern gallery of Church of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople.<sup>xcviii</sup>

There are interesting panels from the Gondarine period. In the images of the Crucifixion during the Gondarine period, one observes three angels holding blue chalices collecting the blood from the dead Christ. This is from his two hands and from his pierced side. The blood from his feet are flowing into the mouth of Adam's skull below the foot of the cross. Adam receiving Christ's blood is a sign of redemption. In the Mary and Christ Child panel beside that of the crucifixion, there are angles above flying above Mary with blue patens.<sup>xcix</sup> These panels are significant given the Ethiopian prayers during the Eucharist. "In the Prayer of the Consecration of the Paten, the priest says: 'Bless this Paten so that it may be a Paten of Salvation, the holy body of Thy only-begotten Son Jesus Christ being laid upon it for the remission of sin.' And in the Prayer of Consecration of the Chalice, he prays: 'Bless this Chalice and fill it with pure blood so that it may be a spring of life, even of the holy blood that ran from the side of Thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ for us, because He was crucified to prepare for us the remission with His blood.'"<sup>c</sup>

It is interesting looking at the how Mary and John mourn at the foot of the cross. One image of the Crucifixion shows Mary and John with tears streaming down their faces. The posture of Mary and John is not in the Greek tradition with the bent posture of respect. The Ethiopian representation has Mary and John with their arms folded around their chest as if holding themselves. In other images, they hold their head as if holding their hair back with one hand while placing their right hand over their heart.<sup>ci</sup> Some interpreters think that Mary and John are contemplating the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.<sup>cii</sup> In the Deesis in the European tradition, Mary and John are elongated, slightly bowed before Jesus in prayer.<sup>ciii</sup>

With the 18<sup>th</sup> century came the transition of Ethiopia into modernity as it relates to icon painting.<sup>civ</sup> Icon writers moved from disseminating icons to writing their own icons. Donors or people who commissioned the work are shown as suppliants lying below the image. One example shows God the Father blessing while a suppliant donor's image lies below.<sup>cv</sup> It is during this Late Solomonic period that icons begin showing festivals from Ethiopia. One notices round monastery churches, with priests playing drums and sistra.<sup>cvi</sup> Interlaced art came back into style during the Late Solomonic period. This is also the time secular paintings came into being due to de-canonization of religious paintings and illustrations of the Holy Family. It became popular to paint military exploits, some being in church murals. It is also during this time one finds the rise in popularity of paintings of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.<sup>cvii</sup>

The evolution of Ethiopian religious works is fascinating. These icons and religious painting are still an important part of Christian Ethiopian culture. They reflect the spirituality of the Ethiopians and help tell the centrality of devotion in their personal piety. One can only imagine what new innovations the Ethiopian faithful will inspire in the years to come.

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Figures



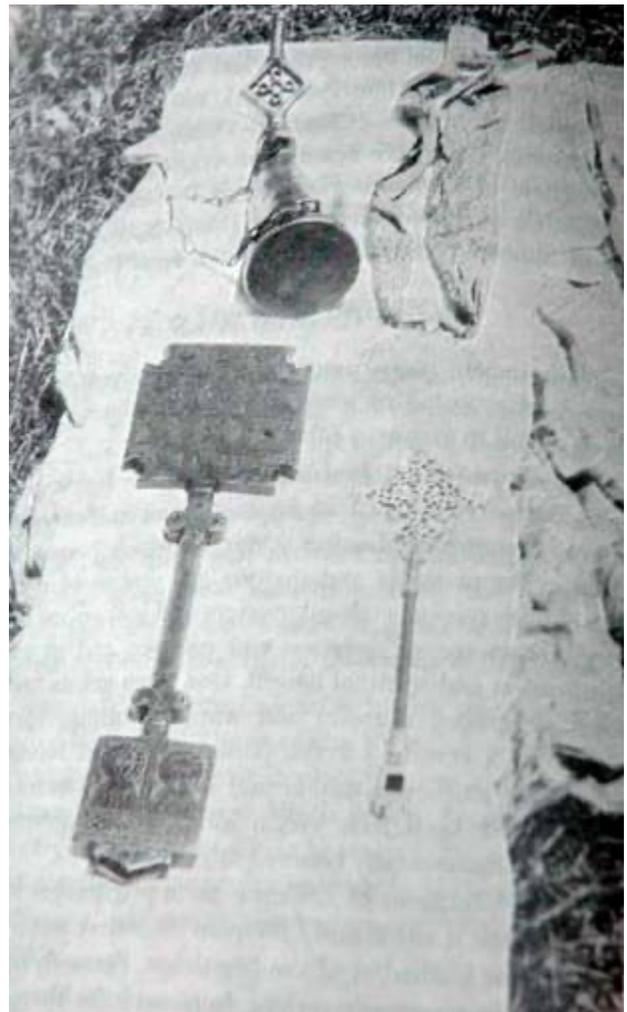
“The Lord’s Estate” Wall Painting  
 Images from the Terrestrial World  
 St. Mary of Zion Church, Lalibela, 12<sup>th</sup> Century  
 Jemonde Taylor Photography, 2007



Silver Coin  
 Middle to Late 4<sup>th</sup> Century  
 Inscription: “May this [cross] please the country.”  
 Heldman, page 108



Canon Table, in Eusebius of Caesarea Style  
 Early 15<sup>th</sup> Century  
 Birds inscribed with “Tir” which means “to fly.”  
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Hand Crosses and Holy Water container of Takla  
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 14<sup>th</sup> Century  
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Manbara Tabot with Swastika Crosses  
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Heldman, page 137



Our Lady Mary with Child and Ancient of Days  
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15<sup>th</sup> Century, Shoa  
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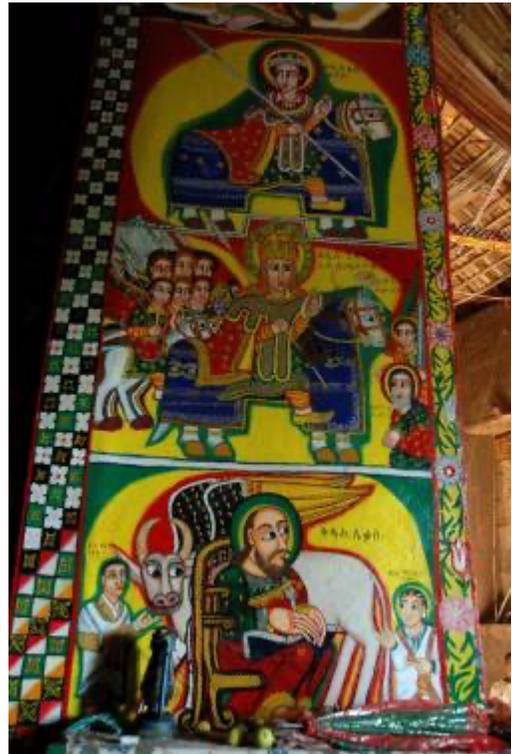
Manbara Tabot  
St. Mary of Zion, Lalibela  
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Manbara Tabot  
12<sup>th</sup> Century, Telasfari Estifanos, Lasta  
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Three Holy Children in the Fiery Furnace  
Adadi Mariam Rock Hewn Church, Addis Ababa  
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Church Wall Paintings  
Betre Mariam Church, Lake Tana Island  
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Three Holy Children in the Fiery Furnace  
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The Raising of Adam and Eve/  
The Crucifixion  
16<sup>th</sup> Century  
Heldman, 239



The Raising of Adam and Eve  
Gondar  
18<sup>th</sup> Century  
Heldman, 248



The Raising of Adam and Eve  
Nicoló Branceleon, Ethiopia  
16<sup>th</sup> Century  
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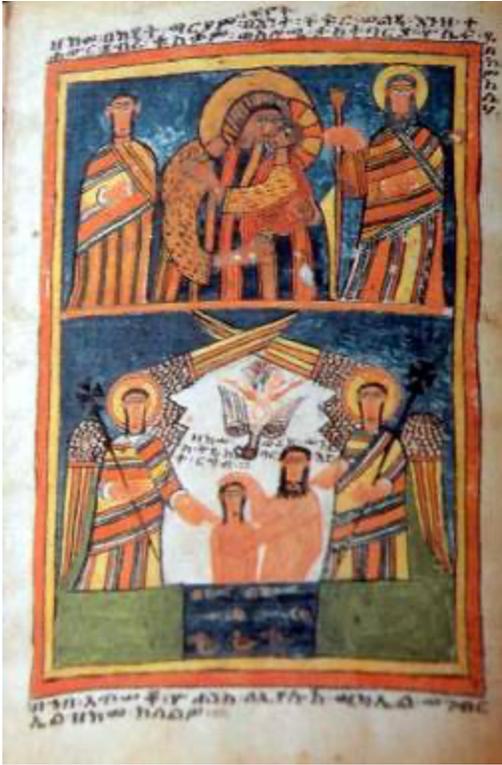
Our Lady and Child  
Gondar, 17<sup>th</sup> Century  
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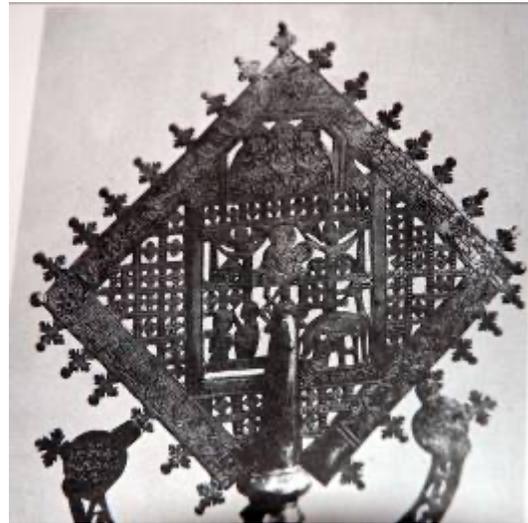
Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome  
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Our Lady and Child  
17<sup>th</sup> Century  
Horowitz, 59



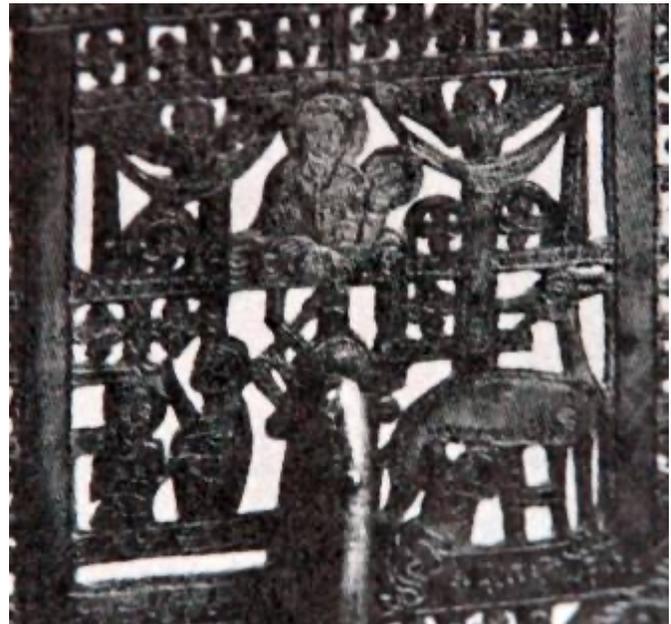
Baptism of Christ  
Debra Hayq Estifanos, 1320  
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Rhomboidal Cross (Veil of Mary)  
14<sup>th</sup> Century  
Korabiewicz, 115.



Mary's Entrance in Temple  
Debra Hayq Estifanos, 1320  
Heldman, 176



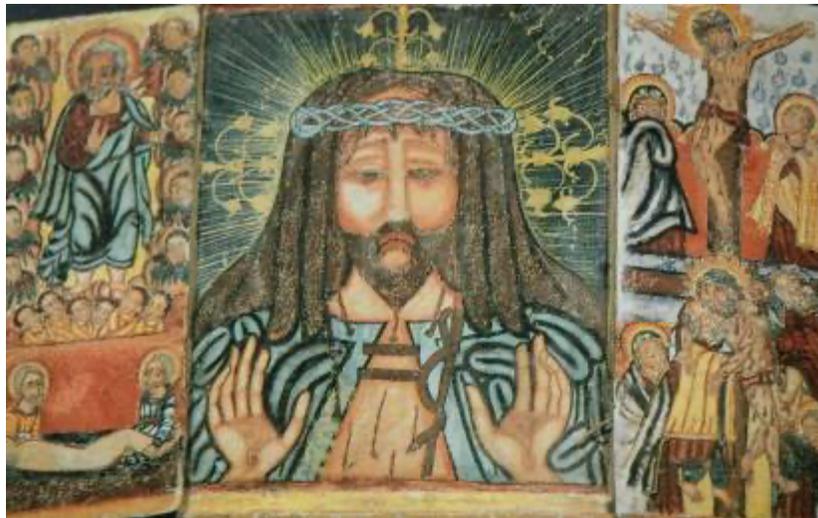
[Detail]: Rhomboidal Cross (Veil of Mary)  
14<sup>th</sup> Century  
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St. George and Bust of Christ, Peter and Paul  
15<sup>th</sup> Century, Takla Maryam  
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Christ (Detail)  
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Kwerata Reesu (Christ with Crown of Thorns)  
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Kernegege (Horns of Ram) Cross  
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Processional Cross (Mary and Christ in Center)  
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The Ancient of Days  
Fere Seyon, Central Ethiopia, 1445  
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Processional Cross  
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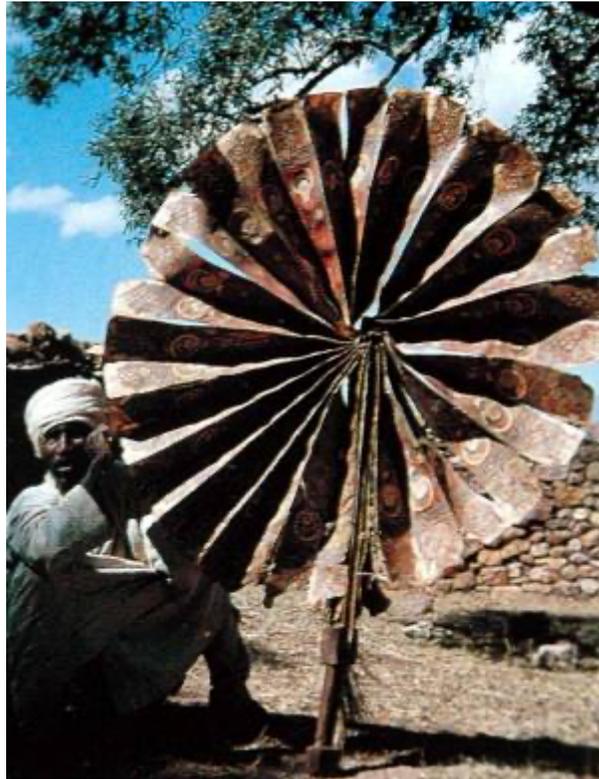
Our Lady Mary Journeying to Qwesqwan  
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Our Lady Mary (Lady of Tenderness)  
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Processional Fan  
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Processional Fan  
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88 Angels Face  
Church of Debra Berhan Sellase, Gondar  
18<sup>th</sup> Century  
Jemonde Taylor Photography 2007



The Queen of Sheba Meeting Solomon

## End notes

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- <sup>v</sup> J. Robert Wright. The Meaning of Icons Course Packet. Compact Disc. Easter 2008, JesusSli.rft, 14.
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- <sup>ix</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 91.
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- <sup>xi</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 91.
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- <sup>xvii</sup> Heldman, 74.
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- <sup>xxv</sup> Horowitz, 54.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Heldman, 96.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 91.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 82.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 82.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 85.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 85.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 105.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 106.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 106.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 107.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Wondmagegnehu, 108.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Horowitz, 46.
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- <sup>xl</sup> Heldman, 118.
- <sup>xli</sup> Heldman, 119.
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- <sup>xliv</sup> Heldman, 131.
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lxxvii Heldman, 184.  
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lxxxi Heldman, 238.  
lxxxii Heldman, 142.  
lxxxiii Heldman, 193.  
lxxxiv Heldman, 193.  
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lxxxix Heldman, 194.  
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xci Heldman, 195.  
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