

CHAPTER III

THE FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY (FILSATA) IN ETHIOPIA

INTRODUCTION

The Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church teaches that our Lady, the Virgin Mary, was assumed into heaven in soul and body. Like the rest of humanity, she underwent physical death, but after her death, her body was taken up into heaven, and her tomb was found to be empty.⁴⁵⁸ Thus, for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, the blessed Virgin has passed beyond death and judgment and lives already in the age to come. Yet she is not utterly separated from the rest of humanity, for all humanity awaits and hopes to share that same bodily glory which Mary now enjoys. Even in her perfect state she intercedes for humanity until the final judgment.

The death of the Mother of God is an affirmation of the reality of the humanity of Mary and in this way attests also to the humanity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in the incarnation. It is through Mary that one beholds the human nature of her Son as the incarnate Son of God. Her death confirms that she is not a heavenly being but is truly our human sister. As our sister, she became a prototype of the Church, receiving from God a universal maternity over humanity as one who loves the whole world, longing for the perfect salvation of all.

⁴⁵⁸Arras, V., De Transitu Mariae Apocrypha Aethiopice I, p. 99.

The Assumption of the Virgin Mary is the most highly honored feast among all the feasts of the saints. It ranks second only to the feasts of the Lord. Observed on August 16, the Feast of the Assumption commemorates the entrance of St. Mary's corporeal body and soul into heaven as she preceded the faithful believers, taking her seat at the right hand of her bridegroom and Son. The feast is based on the conviction that the Lord did not permit the body in which He Himself had dwelt to fall prey to corruption and dissolution: though Mary as a human being underwent death, she was taken up into heaven. To Ethiopians, the celebration of this event bears a powerful witness to the eschatological truth of their faith. As members of the Church, they await the final consummation. On the Last Day, the righteous will rise from the grave and be united once more to a body--not a body such as we possess now, but one that is transfigured and "spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:40-42), a body in which inward sanctity is made outwardly manifest. The Ethiopian faithful, assured of their resurrection first and foremost by the resurrection of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, are being further assured by the Assumption of their sister, the Virgin Mary, and therefore observe the Feast of the Assumption with high honor and supreme joy.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁹Bulgakov, S. The Orthodox Church (London: The Centenary Press, 1935), p. 139; Florovsky, G. "The Ever-Virgin Mother of God," The Mother of God, edited by E. L. Mascall, (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1951), p. 63

ECCLESIASTICAL FEASTS

Since there is a large number of religious feasts in the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical year, the celebration of these feasts forms a regular, almost continuous chain in the life of the Church. The frequent feasts and holy days are not regarded lightly but are strictly observed by the members of the Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church.

There are four major categories of feasts: feasts of the Lord, feasts of the angels, feasts of the saints, and feasts of the martyrs. The feasts of the Lord are divided into major and minor occasions of celebration and worship. The major feasts are:⁴⁶⁰

- The Annunciation, known as the "Good News" (Beserat) and observed on 7 Megabit or March 17 (W.C.).
- Christmas (Ledat), observed on 29 Tahsas or January 7 (W.C.)
- Epiphany (Temkat), observed on 18 Ter or January 27 (W.C.)
- The Transfiguration (Dabra Tabor), observed on 13 Nehase or August 19 (W.C.)
- Palm Sunday (Hosanna)
- The Crucifixion (Seklet)
- The Resurrection, or Easter (Tensa'e)
- The Ascension (Ergat)

⁴⁶⁰The Ethiopian calendar is difficult to understand. The year has 12 months of 30 days each; the extra five days (or six in a leap year) form a special group at the end. The year begins with the first day of Maskaram which equals August 29 of the Julian calendar or September 11 (Sept. 12 in a leap year) of the modern Gregorian calendar used in the Western world. The names of the other months are: Tekemt (Julian October), Hedar (November), Tahsas (December), Ter (January), Yakatit (February), Megabit (March), Miyazya (April), Genbot (May), Sane (June), Hamle (July), and Nehase (August). In the following lists, I give the Ethiopian date and add the Gregorian or Western equivalent of it. See Budge, A History of Ethiopia, pp. 138-141, and Velat, Etudes sur le Me'eraf, pp. 21-26.

-Pentecost (Paraklitos)⁴⁶¹

Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost are moveable feasts. Christmas, Epiphany, and the Transfiguration are immoveable feasts.⁴⁶² The Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is of course also commemorated each Sunday.

In addition, nine secondary or minor feasts of the Lord are observed. They include:

-The Invention of the Holy Cross by St. Helen, the mother of Constantine, observed on 22 Maskaram (October 2 W.C.)

-Three simple liturgies, Preaching, Light, and Shepherd (Sebkat, Berhan, and Nolawe), held on the three Sundays before Christmas to thank God for the prophets who predicted the coming of the Son of God, the light of the world and shepherd of souls.

-The Circumcision (Gezeret) of the infant Jesus eight days after his birth in accordance with the law of Moses.

-The Feast of Simeon or the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple (Sim'on), observed forty days after our Lord's birth to commemorate the fulfillment of the law of Moses (Lev. 12:6-8; Lk. 2:22-24; Matt. 5:17).

-Cana in Galilee (Gelila) held in remembrance of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ's first miracle at the wedding in Cana.

-Mount of Olives (Dabra Zayte), a moveable feast, remembering the prophecy of the temple's destruction and the details associated with the end of human history (Matthew 24). In the countryside, it is customary for the people to prepare various foods to give as alms to the poor on this day.

-The Cross of March (Meskel Megabit), in remembrance of St. Helen's excavation of the cross (which began in the month of March and ended in September).

⁴⁶¹Abba Gorgorios, B., The History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (Addis Ababa: E.O.C. Apostolic Institution Press, 1974), pp. 127-133.

⁴⁶²Ibid., p. 135.

Besides these major and minor feasts of the Lord, ecclesiastical feasts also commemorate the angels and the major events in the lives of the saints such as their martyrdom, death and departure to paradise.

The Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church observes these feast days by annual celebrations as well as by monthly liturgical commemorations. While the monthly feasts are generally observed locally in the countryside parishes, the annual feasts unite worshippers from several provinces for a regional observance. Thus their celebration typically includes a pilgrimage of several days to regional sanctuaries bearing the name of the saint whom the feast day commemorates. At those occasions, the parishes hosting the feast day celebrations customarily extend hospitality and accommodations to the sojourner. Opening their homes to the pilgrims who seek God's blessings, they believe they share in the mercy of the blessings given on the holy day.

Among the feasts of the saints, the Marian feasts have a special place in the hearts of the faithful. It is to them that we now turn.

PRESCRIBED MARIAN FEASTS

A complete list of the prescribed Marian feasts is found in the introductory rules of the Taamera Maryam or Miracles of the

Blessed Virgin Mary.⁴⁶³ The celebration of these feasts entails the chanting of a variety of Marian hymns and readings from the Book of Miracles, which is also read every Sunday. All in all, there are thirty-three prescribed feasts of the Virgin Mary according to the Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church calendar.⁴⁶⁴ They include:

- 7 Nehase (August 13 W.C.), Mary's conception (Qoeserata)
- 16-21 Nehase (August 22-27 W.C.), the six-day festival of the Assumption of the Virgin (Filsata Kiddane Mehret)
- 10 Maskaram (September 20 W.C.), the "entry of the icon" (Ba'ata Seela) of our Lady into the Egyptian city of Sedenya where it became life-like, shedding tears and perspiring
- 21 Maskaram and 21 Tekemt (October 1 and 31 W.C.), monthly Marian commemorations
- 6 Hedar (November 16 W.C.), the "entry" (Ba'ata) of the Virgin Mary into the ancient monastery of Dabra Queskuam in Egypt
- 21 Hedar (November 30 W.C.), the manifestation of the Virgin to the prophet Zachariah (Zech. 4:2) in the form of a golden candlestick (Tekewama-Mahetot)
- 3 Tahsas (December 13 W.C.), the Presentation or "entry" (Ba'ata) of the three-year old Virgin Mary to the Temple
- 22 Tahsas (December 31 W.C.), the commemoration of Bishop Dexius (Ba'ala Dakseios)
- 28 Tahsas (January 6 W.C.), Christmas Eve, or the Feast of Immanuel (Gehna)
- 29 Tahsas (January 7 W.C.), Christmas or the Nativity

⁴⁶³Taamera Maryam, pp. 16-18; cf. Budge, One Hundred Ten Miracles, pp. xlvii-lii.

⁴⁶⁴Each day of a feast extending over several days as well as of the entire fifteen days fast before Filsata is counted separately to arrive at the number 33.

(Ledat) of the Redeemer

- 21 Ter (January 30 W.C.), the Feast of the Dormition, Mary's "Manifestation" (Astereo Maryam) or her "Rest" (Erefta)⁴⁶⁵
- 16 Yakatit (February 24 W.C.), Mary's reception from her Son of the "Covenant of Mercy" (Kiddane Mehret)
- 29 Megabit (April 7 W.C.), "When she conceived the Savior" (Baza-sansato le-modahanine)
- 1 Genbot (May 9 W.C.), Mary's Birth (Ledata)⁴⁶⁶
- 21 - 25 Genbot (May 29 - June 2 W.C.), Mary's coming to Egypt, celebrated with a huge gathering of pilgrims at Dabra Mitmaq; the last days, 25 Genbot commemorates the miracle "when her Son planted dry rods and turned them into trees" (Baza takale wolda abatra yebusene woreseyomou a'ewame)
- 8 Sene (June 15 W.C.), the day "when her Son split the rock and made water flow from it to bring healing to the sick" (Bazaanka'a wolda maye emgoqueh wokonomou fawese ledwoyan)
- 20 Sene (June 27 W.C.), the day "when the Apostles were assembled and her Son came down to build her house" (Baza tegabeu haworiat wo worda wolda lehens'tete beta)
- 21 Sene (June 28 W.C.), commemoration of the consecration of her house (Qeddase beta), that is, of the first church built in honor of Mary.

⁴⁶⁵According to Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, Mary died on 21 Ter. As we have seen, many different legends about her death and burial are in circulation. The commonly accepted version states that the Apostles, while taking the Virgin's body to be buried at Gethesemane, were met by angels who lifted it up to heaven where John laid it under the Tree of Life. Later, after the Apostles prayed and fasted, the Lord returned his mother's body to the Apostles for burial on 16 Nahase. Three days later she was raised to heaven.

⁴⁶⁶The introductory rules in the book of Miracles mention the birth date of the Virgin as 10 Maskaram; other traditions go with 1 Genbot (May 1 Julian C.). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church accepts the latter date in agreement with the patristic writers (Sa'atat or Horologium, p. 391).

- 21 Hamle, monthly commemoration.

It seems that the present order of Marian feasts has been a common tradition in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church ever since the reign of King Zara Yaqob. Four of them are particularly esteemed by the Ethiopian faithful: the Nativity of Mary, her Presentation in the Temple, her Dormition, and her Assumption.

Since antiquity the Ethiopian faithful have expressed their devotion in a number of ways both somber and joyful. Both fasting and feasting have been a traditional part of Ethiopian life to this day. It is through acts of good will such as feeding the hungry, clothing the needy, visiting the sick, and comforting the sorrowful during the Marian feasts that believers live out their love for the Virgin.

FASTING

In the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, every festal celebration is preceded by fasting and prayer as preparatory acts. In this respect, the Ethiopian practice is part of the larger Judeo-Christian tradition in which fasting has always played an important role as a moral and spiritual discipline. In the Judaic tradition, fasting was generally associated with times of mourning, calamities or crisis, and with urgent supplication. It was also practiced in connection with spontaneous private or

public observances.⁴⁶⁷

The Church inherited and preserved the practice of fasting from the Judaic tradition. Around the time of our Lord, fasting was also rigorously practiced by the disciples of John the Baptist (Mark 2:18). In Christian practice, fasting consists in refraining from food, drink and worldly things in order that one might pray more easily and be at peace with God.⁴⁶⁸ Thus, fasting means not only to fast with the body but also with the soul. It is regarded as a deed of virtue, an exercise to defeat the desires of the body and to strengthen the will, and a form of repentance. Fasting as an offering, a voluntary refraining from that which one is otherwise allowed, springs from the love and respect which one feels for God. It also serves as a means of taming the will of the body--a visible sign of our zeal and perseverance in the struggle to become more like God and the angels who do not need food. Moreover, fasting keeps the body healthy. "Do not have an insatiable appetite for any luxury, and do not give yourself up to food; for overeating brings sickness, and gluttony leads to nausea. Many have died of gluttony, but he who is careful to avoid it prolongs his life," says the wise Jesus, son of Sirach (Sirach 37:29-31).

Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ himself fasted forty days and forty nights in the wilderness before beginning to preach the

⁴⁶⁷The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. II, pp. 241-242, article on "Fast, fasting."

⁴⁶⁸Fetha Nagast, op. cit., pp. 219-220.

Gospel (Matthew 4:2; Luke 4:2). He taught his disciples how to fast (Matthew 6:16-18) and told them that demons cannot be driven out except by fasting and prayer (Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:29). The Apostles also fasted, as did their disciples (Acts 13:2-3; 2 Cor. 6:5), and set an example for all Christians. In the early church, regular weekly fast days were widely held on Wednesdays and Fridays, as indicated in the Didache: "Your fasts must not be identified with those of the hypocrites; they fast on Mondays and Thursdays, but you should fast on Wednesdays and on Fridays."⁴⁶⁹ The polemic here is against the practice of the Pharisees.

The Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church has affirmed this practice of spiritual discipline throughout the ages. The discipline usually includes strict observance of fasting, dedication to extended prayer, to alms-giving, reflection and meditation. Even worship itself serves as a kind of spiritual discipline in that it requires long periods of standing in the practice of the Ethiopian Church. While the exercise of spiritual discipline is customary in many churches throughout the world, nowhere is the ordinance of fasting so rigorously observed as in the Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church.⁴⁷⁰ From the age of seven, every child is required to participate fully in the fasts in preparation for the feasts. In fact, many families expect

⁴⁶⁹C. C. Richardson, tr. and ed., "Didache 8:1", Library of Christian Classic, Vol. I: Early Christian Fathers (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1970); Clement of Alexandria, Les Stromateis 75.2 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1951).

⁴⁷⁰Hyatt, The Church of Abyssinia, p. 157.

their children to practice all spiritual disciplines required of adults including confession, penance, and the abstinence from meat, eggs, and dairy products.

In the Ethiopian tradition, prescribed fasts regularly precede the major religious holidays in which feasts are observed. A definition and a list of all prescribed fasts is given in the Fetha Nagast, a venerable and important book of canon and civil law.⁴⁷¹ There are also unprescribed fasts which are not included in the Fetha Nagast but widely observed by monastic communities, devoted individuals, and those under the discipline of penance. It can be said without exaggeration that the Ethiopian church year with its numerous, often simultaneous periods of fasts of daily, weekly, or monthly duration literally moves from one fast to another. In fact, almost two-thirds of the days of the year are devoted to some form of fasting.⁴⁷²

For Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christians fasting is a serious obligation. The canon law defines fasting as "an abstinence from food, observed by the people at certain times

⁴⁷¹The Fetha Nagast ("law of the Kings") is an authoritative collection of canon law and civil law which is sometimes claimed in the Ethiopian tradition to be the work of the Fathers of Nicea. Its present form goes back to an Arabic original compiled for the Coptic Church under Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria (1235-1243) by Ibn al-Assal. In Ethiopia it was enforced since the reign of Emperor Zara Yaqob, revised under Yasu the Great (1682-1706), and honored by both spiritual and secular authorities. For a survey of the content see Hyatt, The Church of Abyssinia, pp. 225f. The great Italian scholar I. Guidi prepared a Western edition with an Italian translation: Il Fetha Nagast o Legislazione dei Re 2 vols. (Rome, 1897 and 1899).

⁴⁷²Hyatt, The Church of Abyssinia, p. 157.

determined by law in order to attain the forgiveness of sins and much reward, thus obeying the one who fixed the law. Fasting serves to weaken the forces of concupiscence so that the body may weaken the desire of the flesh and thus strengthen the spiritual good-will through obedience to the rational soul."⁴⁷³ God honors the fast of those who first empty themselves of all impurity, fasting with a clean heart and conscience.

Fasting then is more than mere abstinence from certain foods. It involves a certain kind of sensory deprivation which isolates the various parts of the body from disturbance or distraction so that a person may devote himself or herself in full attention to God. It also helps to strip away excesses and indulgences in order that one may stand before God in utter dependence and humility. Thus, eyes are to fast from seeing evil, hands from doing harm, tongues from gossip, and ears from rumor; feet are to be still, and the body should be wholly attentive to God.

The Fetha Nagast prescribes seven fasting periods throughout the year. In addition, the Church also observes some unprescribed fasts generally known as the forty days fasts of Queskuam which are held in the months of Tekemt and Hedar (October-November W.C.).⁴⁷⁴ The list of the prescribed fasts is as follows:

⁴⁷³Fetha Nagast, p. 216.

⁴⁷⁴Dabra Queskuam ("Mount of Queskuam") is the ancient monastery in Egypt where, according to tradition, the holy family took refuge during their flight from Herod.

- The forty-three day fast preceding the Nativity of Our Lord and lasting from 15 Hedar to 29 Tahsas (November 25-January 7, W.C.).⁴⁷⁵
- The eve of Christmas and the eve of Epiphany (Gehad) in honor of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ's birth.
- The fast of Jonah, also called Ninevah, which is observed two weeks before Lent for three days and recalls the repentance of the people of Ninevah as a result of Jonah's preaching.
- The fast of Holy Lent, lasting fifty-six days in preparation of Easter. It is the oldest, longest, and most important fast of the Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church.
- The fast of the Apostles, beginning on the Monday after Pentecost and concluding on 5 Hamle (July 12, W.C.) with the feast of St. Paul and St. Peter. It lasts for a maximum of forty-five days and a minimum of fifteen.
- Wednesday and Friday fasts observed every week except for the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost.
- The fifteen-day fast preceding the Feast of the Assumption of the blessed Virgin Mary. It begins on 1 Nehase (August 7, W.C.) and continues through 15 Nehase (August 22, W.C.), the day of preparation for the Feast.

We will look in more detail at this last period of fasting which is an integral part of the celebration of the most important Marian feast of the year.

⁴⁷⁵Also known as the "fast of Adam" and the prophets who faithfully fasted and prayed in order that God might fulfill His promise to save Adam and his children, this period commemorated Adam's repentance and thus the true spirit of fasting.

RITUAL DESCRIPTION OF THE ASSUMPTION (FILSATA):

THE PRE-FEAST DEVOTIONAL PERIOD

The Ethiopian tradition maintains that the fifteen-day pre-Assumption fast was instituted by the Apostles. As an apostolic fast, it is particularly revered by the clergy and the monastic communities. Although the entire church participates in the fast, the clergy experience a special historical connection with their apostolic predecessors.

The fifteen days are commonly referred to as "the little Lent"; it is a sober and earnest time in which people of all ages participate. Even small children under seven years of age, the sick, and the sojourner, who are normally exempt from the discipline, maintain the fast of the Assumption.⁴⁷⁶ The fast demands strict abstinence from all meat and eggs. As a rule, the staple diet consists of fruit, baked beans and uncooked food.

In the somber mood of this holy season, the abstinence from food extends to the abstinence from all worldly pleasure and merry-making as well. No joyful feasts, not even weddings, are permitted during this time, nor is any other kind of public merry-making. Some people subject themselves to additional discipline by leaving home and spending the fifteen days in isolation in order to devote themselves to undisturbed, solitary meditation. Some elect to abstain from conversation with anyone and to subsist for the fifteen days on as little as a handful of

⁴⁷⁶Fetha Nagast., p. 219.

beans. Such devotion is common in this season signifying the reverence and love of the faithful for every aspect of the life of the Virgin Mary.

The "positive" side of abstinence means attention to the disciplines of self-examination, meditation and attendance at public worship. These forms of fasting are not merely external performances but include attention to the true acts of justice, the active doing of good works. During the pre-Assumption fast days an atmosphere of good-will and a heightened sensitivity to the needs of others permeates the country. There is an acute awareness of one's own part in the problems and dilemmas of the day. A quiet soberness, even somberness, pervades the attitude of the people during this time.

Many congregations conclude each fast day with the celebration of the divine liturgy and the partaking of Holy Communion. No one may receive communion without having fulfilled the necessary disciplines, especially fasting. Fasting prior to the reception of the Holy Eucharist is a rule in the Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church which dates back to the early centuries. Canon law threatens with excommunication anyone who partakes without first fasting.⁴⁷⁷ In addition, certain rules are given concerning personal hygiene; it is expected that all believers concern themselves with physical as well as spiritual purity. Compliance with these disciplines is usually monitored by the family priest or "father confessor" who is responsible for the

⁴⁷⁷Fetha Nagast, p. 203

people of his parish.

THE VIGIL AND MAHELET

Each evening during the fifteen days preceding the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the faithful gather for worship. Across the land, one can hear the joyful ringing of the church bells inviting the people to join in the all-night prayer and praise to God. Beginning at midnight and lasting till dawn, these vigils are generally well-attended.

The vigil service itself is taken from the standard prayer book, Saatat-za lelit woza negeh or "Horologium of the Night and Day Hours," attributed to Abba Giyorgis of Gascha in the fourteenth century.⁴⁷⁸ Invocations for the dead, the sick, the sorrowful, as well as supplications for peace and rainfall, are found within its pages. In addition, there are many prayers and praises addressed to the Virgin Mary and to the angels and saints of heaven. Also included is a devotional lesson for every day of the year's holy days.

We have spoken already of the many different hymns in honor of Mary, most of which are chanted or recited in communal prayer during the vigils and at other times as well as in private meditation. Although the worshipper acknowledges at the beginning of each all-night vigil that "not even the tongues of the cherubim and seraphim in heaven can exhaust the telling of

⁴⁷⁸see above, (chapter 1), p. 65b.

the wonder of the blessed Virgin Mary, whose exaltation is higher than the highest mountain, whose womb is broader than the width of the sky, and whose face shines brighter than the light of the sun," the hymns present an exuberant tribute to her name.⁴⁷⁹ Like a harmony of love arising from the hearts of the faithful, the chorus of voices catches the worshipper in a state of ecstasy.

For fifteen consecutive evenings the voices of the worshipping community can be heard outside the churches of Ethiopia as one continuous song of praise, supplication and prayer. Some people choose to spend each evening alone in prayer and meditation on the grounds surrounding the church, although most participate in the communal worship. Each night the congregation remains standing throughout the entire service which lasts from six to nine hours and includes after the all-night vigil the full morning service.

Following the solemn fourteen-day period of fasting and self-examination, the faithful make a final preparation for the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption. On the fifteenth evening, the sequence of the all-night vigil, followed by the morning service and the service of the divine liturgy, is broken. At this time there is a new spirit of joy and excitement as families get ready to welcome the Feast. The solemnity of the previous fourteen days gives way to shopping for food and new clothing. The whole family co-operates and participates in the

⁴⁷⁹Sa'atat the Lelit Woza-Negeh, pp. 13-14.

preparation which includes cleaning the house and cooking the food. The preparation is also spiritual preparation; it includes cleaning and preparing the body for the reception of the Holy Eucharist. Those who have spent the past fourteen days in solitude and meditation come out from their isolation to mingle with the others, preparing themselves for the imminent Feast.

Around 5:00 p.m. on the eve of the Feast, church bells begin to alert the people that it is about time to gather for worship. It is customary to arrive early for the service which begins by 7:00 p.m.. Two services are held simultaneously, namely the all-night vigil or the Office, and the Mahelet, which is chanted by the debteras. The people can choose between these two: the vigil which is solemn in tone, or the Mahelet which is more joyful and full of emotion. In the Mahelet, every piece of equipment is used: prayer sticks, sistrums, drums. The musicians wear lively costumes including turbans. They also perform their rhythmic movements, a kind of sacred dance. At certain moments during the service the congregation joins in the spirit of celebration by clapping their hands and uttering high-pitched trills as acclamations of joy, thus adding to the excitement and vitality of the occasion. Each of these services continues until midnight, though many individuals still remain in solitude or seek the quiet corners of the church as they continue their private meditations.

THE MORNING SERVICE (READING OF THE BOOK OF MIRACLES)

The Morning Service during the pre-Assumption devotional days includes a great deal of reading from the Miracles, but also the Prayer of the Covenant and the recitation of the Weddassie Maryam. The reading of the Miracles is further divided into two parts, the introductory rite and the Miracles themselves.

As we have pointed out earlier, the introductory rite forms a prelude to the reading of the Miracles whose intent it is to prepare the hearts of the worshippers first by describing Mary's essence and second, by giving instruction concerning one's approach to the hearing of the Miracles. Apart from the introductory rite, the focus of the book of Miracles is less on a description of Mary's theological importance, but rather on specific acts and events--"miracles", as the title suggests, which are connected with her earthly life. The readings during this pre-feast period give special prominence to the stories of the conception of Mary, her birth, the annunciation, the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the flight into Egypt, her receiving of the Covenant of Mercy, and of course, her death and assumption.⁴⁸⁰

Prior to the reading of the Miracles, toward the end of the introductory rite, a highly ritualized ceremony occurs in order to prepare the hearts of the worshippers further. It begins with the highest presiding member of the clergy offering a blessing

⁴⁸⁰See above, pp., 49-52 (Chapter I)

over the congregation as he turns to the North, East, South and West. He then prostrates himself three times before the Ark of the Covenant and offers incense saying, "Glory and honor be unto the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, henceforth and forever more. Amen." He walks to the images of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the Holy Virgin Mary, His Mother, and censes their icons three times saying, "Glory, honor and worship is due to the Holy Trinity; rejoice, O thou who are full of grace, God is with thee! Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. Do make supplications and intercede with thy beloved Son, so that He may pardon our sins."

After the blessing of the four corners of the world by the priest, all the clergy together chant: "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! We worship the Father of Light, and His only Son, and the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, three persons in one," and then three times: "Salutation unto Mary, the Queen, the true vine, uncultivated and pure, on which thou shalt find blessed fruit. The Son of God indeed became man from her, and she has given birth to Him who saves and pardons us all our sins. Because the Son has come down and taken upon Himself her human nature she has found grace, and all speak highly of her great honor." It is only after this brief ritual that the book of the Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary is taken up and read. During the reading, the priest censes the Ark of the Covenant including the icons of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the Virgin and all the saints as well as the people, encircling the Holy of Holies in

the center of the sanctuary.

In a previous chapter we have already reviewed the sources of the rich store of traditional narratives and legends about the Virgin Mary and some of their content. Thus, we need to mention here only some highlights.

Especially beloved by the people are the stories of Mary's childhood. On 7 Nehase or August 13 (W.C.), the story of Mary's conception is read. It recounts how Mary's father Joachim and her mother Hanna, both righteous people, walked with God but had no offspring. Yet they persisted in hope, never doubting that one day God would give them a child. Both Joachim and Hanna withdrew and spent their time in continuous prayer and fasting, prostrating themselves with weeping and lamentation and entreating God to remove from them the shame of barrenness. Soon after, the angel of the Lord appeared and told Joachim and Hanna that God had heard their prayer. The grateful couple promised to offer its child to the service of the sanctuary. They rejoiced with great joy and gave thanks unto the Lord their God.

When Hanna had passed nine months, she brought forth a daughter. At the birth of Mary, miracles took place as many people afflicted by various diseases were brought to Hanna and healed by her touch. But there were others who were unhappy and murmured about this miraculous birth, trying to bring harm upon the family. However, the angel of the Lord protected Joachim and Hanna with their child, removing them from the reach of their enemies. The people marvelled, saying they had never seen a

child so full of grace. Joachim and Hanna named her Mary and continued to pray and fast, growing in their thankfulness for all the things God had done for them.

When the maiden was three years old, her parents brought her to the Temple of God, according to their promise. The priest and all those in the House of God came out to meet them and received Mary and blessed her saying, "God shall magnify her name in that day wherein He shall appear from her." Then he established her in the sanctuary, and all the priests and elders and the children of Israel blessed her, while God made great joy to come upon her. Then her kinfolk left and returned to their house in great joyfulness praising the Lord God because she had not clung to her parents when they brought her to the sanctuary. Mary dwelt in the House of the Lord like a pure dove, and the angel of the Lord visited her with food and drink continuously.

As we saw, the story of the Virgin's departure from this earthly life is recounted in several elaborate and colorful versions in the Ethiopian tradition. According to some, the Virgin is buried immediately following her death; in others, she is immediately taken into paradise and placed under the Tree of Life, an event witnessed by all the disciples. Yet in another version this immediate assumption is only witnessed by St. John; it is this version which has special significance for the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary because it is read on the first day of the Feast itself:

The Apostles were on their way to a place called Gethesemane with the body of the Holy Mother of God, to bury

her there. But they were confronted by the Jews who were unhappy with the Christians' claim that the Virgin's son had resurrected and ascended into heaven, and who worried that the Christians would claim that the Virgin also resurrected and ascended into heaven. So, they decided to burn the Virgin's body, and started toward the Apostles. And a strong man from among the Jews named Tawefania seized the bed on which the body of the Virgin was being carried. But, at that moment, an angel of the Lord punished Tawefania, cutting off both his hands.

After this, the angel of the Lord lifted up the body of the Virgin, together with the Apostle John, and placed the body in paradise at the foot of the Tree of Life. After John witnessed this event, he returned to the Apostles who asked him what had happened to the body of the Blessed Virgin, and he witnessed what he had seen. The Apostles, wishing to witness the same mystery, began fasting on the 1st of Nehase (or August 7--W.C.). The mystery they sought was revealed to them on the 14th of Nehase (or August 29--W.C.) when the Lord gave them the body of the Blessed Virgin which they buried the very same day. On the third day, she resurrected, and that is why it is said, "(Mary) resurrected in the same manner as her Son."⁴⁸¹

According to the Ethiopian Church, John's witness of this event remains the principal cause for the pre-Assumption fasting and praying which follows the disciples' example. For seven months after the Virgin's departure from this earthly life into heaven, on the first of Nehase, (August 7 W.C.) the disciples began fasting and praying that the Lord might allow them to see what John had seen. After fourteen days of fasting and praying, the Lord answered their prayer and gave them the body of the Holy Mother which they buried on the same day, a Sunday. The Lord, then, raised her on the third day, Tuesday, which is celebrated as the day of the Feast of the Assumption.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸¹Weddassie Maryam, (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press 1943), pp. 209-210. Budge, Legends, p. 165.

⁴⁸²Ibid.

Following the reading of these stories, the Morning Service continues with the worshippers chanting, "Blessings be upon this our Lady, the Holy Virgin Mary, who gave birth to our salvation; greetings to her who is the door of the East which brought forth eternal light; greetings to her who has given birth to the Creator and who resembles the rod of Aaron which blossomed with flowers and fruit, yet without being cultivated."⁴⁸³

PRAYER OF THE COVENANT

The hymn of blessing is followed by a final prayer known as the Prayer of the Covenant. The standard morning prayer for each day of the year is known as ልክላ ገረጺ ገጽ ገጽ : the Prayer of the Covenant; its text comes from the Ethiopian version of the "Testament of our Lord."⁴⁸⁴ In the liturgical practice it is divided into three parts, the recitation of each being prefaced by the same introductory prayer, and each part being assigned to a specific time of the day:

- Part I: midnight prayer of the Covenant
- Part II: morning prayer of the Covenant
- Part III: evening prayer of the Covenant

In the daily Morning Service during the Assumption fast, all three parts are recited together. When the service of the divine liturgy is held at midnight, only Part I of the prayer of the

⁴⁸³Budge, W. The Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Life of Hanna, pp. 10-11.

⁴⁸⁴Meshafa Kidassie ("The Book of the Liturgy"), p. 157.

Covenant is recited; in the morning, Part II is recited; and in the afternoon, Part III.

The Trisagion opens the introductory prayer. The priest turns his face toward the altar, facing eastward, and sings in a loud chant in the mode of Ararai: "Holy." The people follow with the traditional response:

God Holy Mighty, Holy Living, Immortal, who wast born from the Holy Virgin Mary; have mercy upon us Lord. Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Living, Immortal, who wast baptized in Jordan and crucified on the tree of the cross; have mercy upon us Lord.

Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Living, Immortal, who didst rise from the dead on the third day, ascended into heaven in glory, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father and wilt come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead; have mercy upon us, Lord.

Glory be to the Father, Glory be to the Son, Glory be to the Holy Spirit, both now and forever, world without end. Amen and amen, so be it, so be it. Holy Trinity, Living God, have mercy upon us.⁴⁸⁵

It is noteworthy that the Holy Virgin is mentioned already in the opening line. Because of her role in the divine mystery of the incarnation, she becomes worthy to be mentioned at this high point of worship and praise, for her name is inseparable from the mention of the Incarnation. Her humanity guarantees that the true humanity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is like ours.

THE WEDDASSIE MARYAM

In the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church,

⁴⁸⁵Daoud, M. The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church, p. 41.

each service of the all-night vigil during the fifteen days preceding the Feast of the Assumption is followed either by the service of the divine liturgy or by the recitation of the Weddassie Maryam. On Saturdays and Sundays the Weddassie Maryam follows the service of the divine liturgy; on other days it precedes it.

We mentioned earlier that the Weddassie Maryam is the most popular form of private prayer. During the fifteen pre-Assumption fasting days, however, and only at that time, the Weddassie Maryam is recited communally each day of the week. Clergy and congregation gather inside the church or outside, depending upon the size of the crowd. In their midst, a deacon sits at the feet of a learned scholar, (lin, or member) holding an open manuscript of the Weddassie Maryam. After the priest opens the occasion with prayer, the deacon begins to read, one verse at a time. Then the scholar recites from memory the meaning of the text as he has learned it from the Church's tradition. Absolute silence is maintained during his explanatory comments, and great attention is paid to him by the faithful as they seek to understand more of the traditional teaching on the prayer's inner meaning and relevance for their daily lives. The scholar is respected for his great responsibility. He does not speak from his own insight but from the honored tradition which has been entrusted to him, passed down through centuries of teaching and scholarship. The interpretation which he gives is full of touching analogies and stories which illustrate the

holiness, mercy and tender-heartedness of the Mother of God. Through his explanation, a deep love, devotion and knowledge is awakened and renewed in the hearts of the faithful listeners.

On the Feast day the Prayer of the Covenant is followed immediately by the divine liturgy, climaxing in the reception of the Holy Eucharist and the breaking of the fast. The worship celebration concludes around 5:00 or 6:00 a.m. at which time people return home. On their way home, however, most families invite any less fortunate or poor persons or any stranger they encounter to share their first meal with them. By hosting the poor and strangers they believe to receive grace in the eyes of God, remembering the Word of the Lord, "Whatever you do unto the least of these you do unto Me." (Matthew 25) In the same spirit it is customary that later in the morning the faithful also visit other less fortunate people, including the sick in the hospitals and those in prison, bringing food, clothing or whatever is needed. With this gesture they express their wish for the sick to get well, the imprisoned to be released, and the sorrowful to be comforted so that in the coming year they might celebrate together. Following another custom the family which has plenty prepares what is necessary for the feast and then goes to the home of another family which has less, considering it their honor to share this meal with them. Everyone experiences that on this day of the greatest Marian feast of the Ethiopian orthodox tewahedo church an atmosphere of love and compassion reigns, when people's hearts are open one to another.

IMPORTANCE OF THE FEAST FOR ETHIOPIAN BELIEVERS

Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have a striking loyalty to their faith which is easily observed during such seasons as the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. This devotion is expressed, as we have seen, through the rich and varied hymns and prayers dedicated to the Virgin, in addition to the splendid titles and the poetic imagery which are associated with her. Thus, Ethiopians have retained a sense of the mystery and miracle of the incarnation of God, God's relationship with humanity, the divine maternity of Mary, her favor with God, and her identity with the people of God throughout the ages. Almost every facet of the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgy and worship is an elaboration of the grace of God extended to humanity in the mystery of the incarnation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ through the holy Virgin Mary. In this respect, Ethiopian Christians see the election of the Virgin by God as the instrument for the work of salvation.

The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is important for Ethiopian Orthodox believers for several reasons. For one thing, much of the life of the Orthodox is spent in recitation of the prayers and of the devotional literature honoring the Virgin Mary. Throughout their lives, they listen time and again to the stories of the Virgin's life and hardships, joys and sorrows contained in the apocryphal gospels and The Book of the Miracles,

as well as others. These stories form a part of the Orthodox Christian's very consciousness; they strengthen his or her identity and experience in its similarity to the Virgin Mary. From the beginning of their Christian life, the Orthodox believers are assured that Mary, in so far as she is a human being, is their sister; and because she has suffered in a fallen world like all human beings, she is their Mother, well acquainted with the pain and agony of this world and ready to comfort and save. Finally, because the Virgin is above all the Mother of God, she is their hope, for through her our salvation has become accessible in her Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Thus, the celebration of the Feast of the Assumption is not merely an interlude between engagements; for the Ethiopian Christian, the annual Feast of the Virgin is the ever-repeated culmination of a life-time of teaching and learning, listening and believing. In this Feast, the believer celebrates all that the Virgin Mary has come to mean to him or her. It is here, in the context of her Assumption, that the faithful affirm the attributes of the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary. She is to them the intercessor, the virgin mother, the sister, the Lady of Sorrows, the queen--seated beside her Son, our Lord and Saviour, in heavenly glory.

In addition, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary emphasizes the nature of God, God's concern for the world which He created, His desire to redeem and save it through the willing participation of a humble woman, the two-fold Virgin Mary, who was pure in body and in soul. In this respect, the Feast of the

Virgin represents a celebration of God's love and charity. God gave His only Son to the world that the world might live through Him; the Virgin Mary willingly chose to participate in that salvation, and to bear to the world God Himself! Thus, the Feast of the Assumption is a time when the faithful express their gratitude to Mary through the works of charity, i.e., feeding the hungry, clothing the naked; visiting the sick; comforting the sorrowful, welcoming the stranger. In this way, they hope to express something of the unconditional love of God as expressed in the life of the Virgin Mary, His Mother. Indeed, the very name of Mary, understood within the context of the life of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, has come to be associated with the kindness, the tenderness, the love, and the mercy of God Himself.

The Feast of the Assumption is also a time when the faithful examine their lives in light of the purity, holiness, and obedience of the Virgin. Remembering her faithfulness to God and sacrificial love for her precious Son, the faithful are reminded of their own relationship to Him, or lack thereof. In this spirit one fasts, one prays, one dedicates anew his or her life to God. The Virgin Mary is associated with all of this. In her, the Orthodox see the purity of her virginity, and thus, the willingness and capacity for serving God. In the purity of her obedience to God expressed in her response to the angel's message, "Behold, I am thy handmaiden, let it be done to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38), they see her faithfulness;

and in the purity of her gratitude and love for God--"For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name!" (Luke 1:49)--they see the meaning of humility and thanksgiving. Mary is the expression of what God intends for them; she is the one, though human, who expresses the perfect will of God; she is humanity par excellence. One could say that like the Apostles before them the faithful fast in order to see and perceive the attributes, the holiness, the purity, the wonder of the Virgin Mary.

Finally, the celebration of the Feast of the Virgin is clearly a celebration of God's victory over death as expressed in the assumption of the Virgin Mary and of the eschatological assurance that what Mary now enjoys, eternal life in heaven's glory, is that to which we can look forward in the future. Because the Virgin Mary shares in our death and has assumed her place in God's kingdom, we have the sure hope that we will one day share her victory over a world of sin, decay, and corruption. She is the first-fruit of God's eternal kingdom. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has received her in the heavenly places; He has made a place for His blessed Mother. For this reason, we, too, await the day when we will be joined together with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Mary who is in every way a human being, like ourselves a daughter of Adam, assures us of our hope. In a sense, one could say that for the Ethiopian Christian, Mary is the guarantee of the promise of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.