

A second Jerusalem: Lalibela, Ethiopia

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

Lalibela, in Ethiopia, should be high on anyone's list of contenders for the title of most astonishing site in the history of Christian art and architecture. Imagine coming over a hill and seeing what looks like a low stone blockhouse sticking slightly out of the ground. As you get closer, you see that it has a kind of wide moat—and only then do you realize that what you are seeing at ground level is the roof of a huge tower church that extends some 40 feet below the surface.

The church was carved out of solid granite by armies of laborers working over many years using only hammers and chisels. The building retains the rich colors of the rock, which seem to transmute as the day progresses.

Lalibela is home to 11 such churches, including the largest monolithic (single stone) church in existence anywhere. Few Ethiopians doubt that angels played a role in this vast construction project.

The site's origins are mysterious. It takes its name from a celebrated king, Gebre Mesqel Lalibela, who ruled about 1200, and who supposedly wanted to give Christians an alternative pilgrim destination to Jerusalem. Certainly Lalibela aspires to be a second Jerusalem, reproducing many names of famous sites and buildings, but we really don't know its exact date of origin. Some of its churches might well be centuries older than the time of King Lalibela.

However old it is, the site has been astounding travelers for centuries. When the first European visitor described it in about 1520, he wrestled to find the words. He did not want to hold back his enthusiasm, but he knew that nobody would believe his account of Lalibela's details and dimensions. And readers would be amazed that this miraculous Christian place was in Africa!

Lalibela is only one of Ethiopia's many evocative churches and pilgrim shrines—and it ranks second in holiness and prestige to Ethiopia's Aksum, the reputed site of the

Ark of the Covenant. Like its counterparts, Lalibela has been known and loved for centuries. Ethiopians have a deep sense of the religious roots of their country. All the great centers—the rock-hewn churches, the monasteries, the miracle sites—attract mass pilgrimages at key times of the year, such as at Timqat (Epiphany).

Modern scholars have been striving to overcome the limited Western European perspective that was for so long constrained the writing of church history, but even the best-intentioned efforts rarely give much sense of the passionate and complex faith of Africans at the time of what Europeans call the Middle Ages and the early modern period (or, indeed, right up to the present). How is it still possible to write books about the history of Christian architecture without including pages on Lalibela? When historians record the savage Italian invasion of Ethiopia during the 1930s, they recall it as an instance of Fascist brutality and not as a devastating campaign against a Christian heartland, an onslaught marked by the mass slaughter of Ethiopian monks and priests.

Scholars still tend to write as if African Christianity is something new and experimental rather than a resumption of an ancient reality. Some newer African churches are struggling to overcome this myth. One of the turning points in modern African church history was the Ethiopian victory over invading Italian forces at the battle of Adwa in 1896, a rare instance of reversing the seemingly unstoppable expansion of European supremacy. That was the point at which black churches in southern Africa started calling themselves Ethiopian in order to assert that they could accept the faith as an African phenomenon not bound by prepackaged European norms.

Ethiopian Christianity matters today, and not just for its history. The nation has one of the world's highest fertility rates; its population swelled from 33 million in 1975 to 85 million today, and it could be 180 million by 2050. Today there are 50 million Christians in Ethiopia; by 2050 there may be 100 million, which would make Ethiopia the home of one of the world's largest Christian communities. Increasingly, these believers migrate around the world, especially to Europe and the U.S. Far from fading into historical irrelevance, the heirs of Lalibela will constitute a significant share of the world's Christian population.