

# ethiopian orthodox church calendar

Ethiopian Orthodox Church Calendar: A Comprehensive Guide to Feasts, Fasts, and Traditions

## Understanding the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Calendar

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar, also known as the Ge'ez calendar, is a unique and deeply significant system that governs the spiritual life of millions. Unlike the Gregorian calendar widely used in the West, the Ethiopian calendar follows a Julian-based reckoning with distinct variations in its starting point and the numbering of years. This intricate system dictates the celebration of religious feasts, observance of fasts, and the daily liturgical cycle, deeply embedding faith into the fabric of Ethiopian life. This article will delve into the intricacies of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar, exploring its historical roots, its unique structure, the major feasts and fasts, and its profound impact on Ethiopian culture and spirituality. Understanding this calendar is key to appreciating the rich heritage and devotional practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

The Ethiopian calendar is not merely a temporal measure; it is a living testament to centuries of faith, tradition, and a unique spiritual worldview. Its structure, while seemingly complex to the uninitiated, is a meticulously organized framework that guides the faithful through a year filled with commemoration, reflection, and joyous celebration. From the profound solemnity of fasting periods to the exuberant festivities marking pivotal events in the lives of Christ, Mary, and the saints, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar provides a roadmap for spiritual growth and communal worship.

## The Genesis and Structure of the Ethiopian Calendar

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar has its origins in the ancient Coptic calendar, which itself is derived from the Egyptian civil calendar. This calendar's foundation is rooted in antiquity, predating the Julian reform and later the Gregorian reform. The Ethiopian Church, maintaining its distinct lineage, has preserved many of the older calendrical traditions. The Julian calendar, to which it is closely aligned, was the standard in the Roman Empire before the introduction of the Gregorian calendar in 1582. The Ethiopian calendar, however, differs in its starting point for the year and its method of calculating leap years.

A fundamental characteristic of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar is its unique numbering of years. It follows an eight-year cycle, known as the "cycle of the seven," which relates to the ancient seven-day creation week and the Sabbath. While this cycle is part of the intricate structure, the most immediately noticeable difference from the Western calendar is the commencement of the year. The Ethiopian New

Year, known as Enkutatash, is celebrated on September 11th in the Gregorian calendar, or September 12th in the year preceding a Gregorian leap year. This marks the beginning of the eighth and final year of the ancient Egyptian calendar's cycle, which was adopted by the Coptic Church and subsequently by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

## **The Ethiopian Year: Enkutatash and the 13th Month**

The Ethiopian year consists of twelve months of thirty days each, totaling 360 days. However, this leaves a shortfall of five to six days compared to the solar year. To compensate for this, an additional month, called Pagume, is added at the end of the year. Pagume typically consists of five days, but it expands to six days in a leap year. This thirteen-month structure is a distinctive feature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar. Enkutatash, the New Year celebration, falls on the first day of the month of Meskerem, which corresponds to September 11th (or 12th). This festival is a time of joyous celebration, marked by special church services, the singing of traditional songs, and the exchange of gifts, often flowers, symbolizing the arrival of spring and the renewal of life.

The concept of the "leap year" in the Ethiopian calendar is also based on the Julian system. A leap year occurs every four years, adding an extra day to the month of Pagume. This aligns with the Julian calendar's practice of adding a day every four years. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar does not observe the Gregorian calendar's exceptions to the leap year rule (years divisible by 100 but not by 400). Consequently, the Ethiopian calendar is currently about seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar. For instance, when the Gregorian calendar marks 2024, the Ethiopian calendar is in the year 2016 or 2017, depending on the specific date within the Ethiopian year.

## **The Ge'ez Reckoning and the Seven-Year Cycle**

The term "Ge'ez" refers to the ancient Semitic language of Ethiopia, which is still used in liturgical contexts. The calendar's system of reckoning years is intrinsically linked to this ancient language and the historical development of Christianity in Ethiopia. The concept of the "cycle of the seven" or the "seven-year cycle" is a more complex aspect of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar that relates to the calculation of Easter and other movable feasts. It is believed to be a remnant of an older system of reckoning that influenced early Christian calendrical practices. While the exact theological underpinnings and historical evolution of this cycle are subjects of scholarly debate, its presence underscores the deep historical and theological roots of the Ethiopian Church.

The Ethiopian calendar's relationship with the Coptic calendar is crucial for understanding its structure. Both calendars are derived from the Alexandrian calendar, which was a reform of the ancient Egyptian calendar. The Coptic Orthodox Church, originating from Egypt, shares many calendrical features with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church due to their shared early Christian history. This shared heritage explains the

similarities in the month names, the length of months, and the concept of the intercalary month. However, subtle differences exist, primarily in the dating of certain feasts and the specific reckoning of years.

## **Major Feasts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church**

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar is replete with a rich tapestry of feasts, each commemorating significant events in salvation history and honoring important figures within the Church. These celebrations are central to the spiritual life of the faithful, providing opportunities for communal worship, prayer, and reflection. The feasts are observed with great solemnity and joy, often involving elaborate liturgical services, processions, and fasting periods leading up to the celebration itself. The calendar is divided into immovable feasts, which fall on the same date each year, and movable feasts, whose dates change annually based on the calculation of Easter.

The observance of these feasts is not merely a historical commemoration but a living encounter with the divine. The faithful believe that by participating in these celebrations, they are actively engaging with the spiritual realities that the feasts represent. The deep theological significance of each feast is expounded upon in the sermons and teachings, reinforcing the doctrines of the Church and inspiring devotion among the congregation. The visual splendor of church decorations, the chanting of hymns in Ge'ez, and the participation of clergy in their ornate vestments all contribute to the profound spiritual atmosphere surrounding these holy days.

## **The Twelve Liturgical Months and Their Significance**

Each of the twelve months in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar is associated with specific commemorations and saints. The liturgical year begins with Meskerem, the month of the New Year, which holds particular importance. Subsequent months feature a variety of feasts dedicated to Christ, the Virgin Mary, the apostles, martyrs, and other revered saints. For instance, Tahsas is a month that includes the Feast of Gena (Christmas), while Tir is known for the Feast of Timkat (Epiphany). Hidar is the month of the Feast of the Covenant of Mercy, and Yekatit is associated with the commemoration of saints who suffered persecution.

The detailed observance of each month's feasts ensures that the faithful are constantly reminded of the continuum of God's work in history and the lives of those who have faithfully followed Him. The cycle of feasts provides a structured way to engage with different aspects of Christian theology and practice throughout the year, fostering a deep and abiding faith. The richness of these commemorations contributes to the vibrant spiritual life of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

## **Key Celebrations: Gena, Timkat, and Easter**

Among the most significant celebrations in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar are Gena, Timkat, and Easter (Fasika). Gena, celebrated on January 7th (corresponding to the 29th of Tahsas), commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. It is a joyous festival marked by special midnight services, liturgical hymns, and the traditional Ethiopian Christmas meal. The Feast of Gena is a time of great spiritual and communal significance, bringing families and communities together in celebration.

Timkat, the Feast of the Epiphany, is celebrated on January 19th (or January 20th in the year preceding a Gregorian leap year, corresponding to the 11th of Tir). This feast commemorates the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River. Timkat is characterized by elaborate processions, with the Tabot (a replica of the Ark of the Covenant) being carried from the church to a water source, where it is blessed. The faithful then participate in a symbolic reenactment of Christ's baptism, with many taking a ritual bath. This is a visually stunning and deeply spiritual event that draws large crowds.

Easter, or Fasika, is the most important feast in the Christian year, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The date of Fasika is determined by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar's complex system of calculating the vernal equinox and lunar cycles. It is preceded by a period of intense fasting, known as the Lenten fast. The celebration of Fasika itself is a culmination of this period of spiritual discipline, marked by joyous services and feasting, signifying victory over death and the promise of eternal life. The observance of Fasika involves a vigil service on Saturday night, followed by a festive breaking of the fast on Sunday morning.

## **The Feast of the Ascension and the Dormition of Mary**

Other important feasts include the Feast of the Ascension (Tensae), which commemorates Jesus Christ's ascension into heaven, and the Feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary (Fekare Semmat), which honors the passing of Mother Mary. The Feast of the Ascension is celebrated forty days after Easter, and its observance is marked by solemn liturgical services that reflect on Christ's final earthly mission and his return to the Father. The theological implications of the Ascension are central to Christian belief, signifying Christ's victory and his ongoing intercession for humanity.

The Feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, observed on August 16th (corresponding to the 10th of Nahase), is a significant Marian feast. It celebrates Mary's peaceful passing from earthly life and her assumption into heaven. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church holds a profound veneration for the Virgin Mary, often referring to her as "Sodom" (Mother of God). The services for this feast are characterized by deep reverence and prayers invoking her intercession. The feast is a reminder of her unique role in salvation history and her significance as a model of faith and humility.

# **Fasting in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church**

Fasting is an integral and highly emphasized aspect of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar. The Church prescribes numerous fasting periods throughout the year, which are meticulously observed by the faithful. These fasts are not merely abstentions from food but are considered acts of spiritual discipline aimed at purifying the body and soul, drawing closer to God, and strengthening one's spiritual resolve. The fasting rules are often strict, typically involving abstaining from all animal products, including meat, dairy, and eggs. Some fasts also restrict the consumption of oil and vegetables, with adherents subsisting on grains and water.

The discipline of fasting is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition, with Jesus Christ himself fasting for forty days in the wilderness. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church sees fasting as a means of emulating Christ's sacrifice and of spiritual preparation. It is a time for increased prayer, meditation, and self-examination. The communal observance of fasting also fosters a sense of unity and shared spiritual purpose among the congregation. The rigorous nature of these fasts highlights the deep commitment of the faithful to their religious practices.

## **The Great Fast (Abiy Tsom) and Other Significant Fasts**

The most prominent fasting period is the Great Fast, or Abiy Tsom, which precedes Easter. This fast lasts for 55 days, with the final week being particularly rigorous. During Abiy Tsom, adherents strictly adhere to a vegan diet, abstaining from all animal products. The observance of this fast is a profound spiritual undertaking, often involving daily church services and a heightened focus on prayer and repentance. The culmination of the Great Fast in the joyous celebration of Fasika underscores the spiritual transformation that the fasting period aims to achieve.

Besides the Great Fast, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar also includes other significant fasting periods. These include the Fast of the Prophets (Ledat), which precedes Christmas, the Fast of the Apostles, observed after Pentecost, and various minor fasts dedicated to the Virgin Mary and other saints. The Fast of the Prophets, for example, is a period of fasting and prayer leading up to the birth of Christ, focusing on the prophecies foretelling His coming. Each of these fasts has its own specific duration and observance rules, contributing to the comprehensive spiritual discipline of the Church.

## **Rules and Practices of Ethiopian Fasting**

The rules of fasting in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are detailed and can vary slightly in interpretation and practice among different regions and traditions. However, the general principle is the abstention from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. The fasting diet is predominantly plant-based, consisting of grains

like lentils, peas, beans, and vegetables, often prepared without oil. Some days during fasting periods may be considered "days of no oil" (wotet), meaning no cooking oil is used, making the meals even simpler and more austere.

Children, the elderly, and the infirm are generally exempted from the strictest fasting rules, though they are encouraged to participate as their health allows. The spiritual understanding of fasting emphasizes that it is an act of love and devotion to God, not merely a dietary regimen. The focus is on cultivating humility, self-control, and an increased awareness of God's presence. The communal aspect of fasting, where many members of the community observe these practices together, reinforces the shared spiritual journey and mutual support within the Church.

## **The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Calendar in Daily Life**

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar is not confined to the church walls; it permeates the daily lives and cultural practices of Ethiopians. From the rhythm of daily prayers to the timing of significant life events and agricultural cycles, the calendar serves as a fundamental organizing principle. The observance of feast days often dictates social gatherings, family reunions, and community celebrations. The distinctiveness of the Ethiopian calendar also contributes to Ethiopia's unique cultural identity, setting it apart from many other nations.

The influence of the calendar extends to the visual arts, music, and literature of Ethiopia, with many traditional works reflecting the themes and narratives of the Church's liturgical cycle. The hymns sung in Ge'ez, the traditional chants, and the iconic religious paintings all draw inspiration from the commemorations and teachings embedded within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar. This deep integration ensures that the faith is not only a personal belief but a pervasive cultural expression.

## **Liturgical Practices and Daily Prayer**

The daily liturgical services in Ethiopian Orthodox churches are structured according to the dictates of the calendar. Specific prayers, readings, and hymns are designated for each day and for particular feast days. The Divine Liturgy, the central act of worship, follows a prescribed order that has been maintained for centuries. The use of Ge'ez in these services, while a challenge for modern understanding, connects the present-day faithful to their ancient spiritual heritage.

The practice of prayer is not limited to communal services. Individuals are encouraged to observe personal prayer routines, often guided by the liturgical seasons and feasts. The calendar provides a framework for this personal devotion, inspiring regular engagement with scripture and meditation. The consistent observance of these practices fosters a deep and enduring relationship with God, shaping the spiritual

character of the faithful.

## **Cultural Significance and Social Customs**

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar plays a vital role in shaping Ethiopian social customs and traditions. Major feast days are often public holidays, providing opportunities for widespread participation in religious ceremonies and social gatherings. These occasions are times for families to reunite, for communities to come together, and for the reinforcement of social bonds. The generosity and hospitality extended during these times are deeply ingrained cultural values.

The calendar also influences agricultural practices, with certain fasts and feasts aligning with the planting and harvesting seasons. The spiritual discipline of fasting, for instance, can be seen as a period of reflection and preparation, mirroring the natural cycles of growth and renewal. The rich tapestry of Ethiopian culture is thus intricately interwoven with the spiritual rhythm dictated by its unique church calendar, creating a harmonious blend of faith and daily life.

## **The Ethiopian Calendar in the Modern World**

In the modern, globalized world, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar continues to be a vibrant and essential part of Ethiopian identity. While many Ethiopians are familiar with and use the Gregorian calendar for international and secular purposes, the Ge'ez calendar remains the primary guide for spiritual life and cultural observance. The Church actively works to educate younger generations about the calendar's intricacies and its profound significance, ensuring its continuity.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, with its ancient traditions and unique calendrical system, offers a compelling example of how faith can shape a civilization. The meticulous observance of feasts and fasts, guided by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar, reflects a deep commitment to spiritual discipline and a profound connection to history and tradition. This enduring legacy continues to inspire and guide the faithful, embodying a rich spiritual heritage that has been preserved for millennia.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **What is the primary difference between the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church calendar and the Gregorian calendar?**

The main difference lies in the starting point of the year. The Ethiopian calendar begins on September 11th

(or September 12th in the year preceding a leap year) in the Gregorian calendar, marking the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. It also has a different system for leap years and a different calculation for Easter.

## **How many months are in the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar, and what are their names?**

The Ethiopian calendar has 13 months. The first twelve months have 30 days each, and the thirteenth month, known as Pagume, has 5 days (or 6 days in a leap year).

## **What is the significance of the 13th month, Pagume?**

Pagume is a short, intercalary month that serves to synchronize the Ethiopian calendar with the solar year. It follows the regular 12 months and its length varies depending on whether it's a leap year.

## **How does the Ethiopian Orthodox Church determine the date of Easter?**

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church follows its own calculations for determining Easter, which are based on Alexandrian Paschal calculations, not the Gregorian or Julian calculations used by many other Christian denominations. This often results in the Ethiopian Easter falling on a different date.

## **Why is the Ethiopian calendar sometimes referred to as the 'Tewahedo Calendar'?**

The term 'Tewahedo' refers to the Christological doctrine of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, meaning 'united' or 'one'. While the calendar is an integral part of the Church's practice and identity, the calendar itself is often simply called the Ethiopian calendar.

## **Are there any major feasts that are particularly important in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and tied to its calendar?**

Yes, several major feasts are central to the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition and are observed according to their calendar. These include Hidar Tselot (Feast of the Nativity), Gena (Christmas), Timkat (Epiphany), and Meskel (Feast of the True Cross).

## **What is the Ethiopian year number, and how does it relate to the Gregorian calendar year?**

The Ethiopian year is approximately 7 to 8 years behind the Gregorian calendar. For example, when the Gregorian calendar is in the year 2024, the Ethiopian calendar would be in the year 2016 or 2017, depending on the specific date and whether the Ethiopian New Year has passed.

## Does the Ethiopian Orthodox Church observe Lent, and how does its duration align with other Christian traditions?

Yes, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church observes a strict Lenten fast. The duration of their Great Lent is significantly longer than in many Western traditions, typically lasting 50 days leading up to Easter, compared to the 40 days of the Gregorian Lenten period.

## What are the implications of having a different calendar for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in daily life and religious observance?

The different calendar impacts the timing of all religious observances, fasting periods, and feast days. It also influences the date of important life events such as weddings and community gatherings, requiring a separate awareness and understanding of their religious cycle.

## Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar, each beginning with :

### *1. Illuminated Feasts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church*

*This book provides a visually stunning exploration of the major feasts observed throughout the year in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. It delves into the theological significance of each celebration, often accompanied by exquisite reproductions of historical manuscripts and art. Readers will gain an understanding of how the liturgical year structures the faith and practices of the Church, highlighting key saints and events.*

### *2. The Rhythms of Lent: Fasting and Prayer in Ethiopian Orthodoxy*

*Focusing on the significant period of Lent, this title examines the spiritual disciplines of fasting and prayer as practiced by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. It outlines the types of fasting, the dietary restrictions, and the penitential prayers observed during this time. The book aims to guide readers in understanding the transformative power of these practices for spiritual renewal.*

### *3. Echoes of the Paschal Cycle: Resurrection and Celebration in Ethiopia*

*This book explores the central mystery of the Christian faith – the resurrection of Christ – as it is celebrated within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It details the specific observances, services, and theological reflections associated with Easter (Tensae) and the preparatory periods leading up to it. The title emphasizes the vibrant and communal nature of these celebrations.*

### *4. Seasons of the Saints: Ethiopian Orthodox Commemorations*

*Dedicated to the veneration of saints, this work details the numerous feast days throughout the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar that honor holy men and women. It explains the hagiographical traditions and the importance of saints as intercessors and exemplars of faith. The book serves as a guide to understanding the*

*diverse cast of spiritual heroes who enrich the liturgical year.*

*5. The Advent of the Incarnation: Ethiopian Orthodox Preparations for Christmas*

*This title focuses on the period of Advent leading up to the celebration of the Nativity (Gena) in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It describes the specific prayers, fasting customs, and theological meditations observed during this time of anticipation. The book illuminates the unique Ethiopian approach to celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ.*

*6. The Revelation of the Epiphany: Ethiopian Orthodox Traditions of Baptism*

*Examining the Feast of the Epiphany (Timkat), this book highlights its profound significance in the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, particularly its connection to the baptism of Jesus. It details the ceremonial processions with tabots (sacred replicas of the Ark of the Covenant), the blessing of the waters, and the spiritual meaning of baptism. The title offers insight into this visually spectacular and spiritually rich celebration.*

*7. The Ark of the Liturgical Year: Ethiopian Orthodox Worship Cycles*

*This comprehensive work delves into the fundamental structure and cyclical nature of worship within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It explains how the calendar dictates the daily, weekly, and annual services, including the divine liturgy and the office of hours. The book provides an overview of the liturgical framework that guides the spiritual life of the faithful.*

*8. Martyrdom and Monasticism: Feasts of Steadfastness in Ethiopia*

*This title explores the significant feast days dedicated to martyrs and the monastic tradition within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It recounts the stories of those who remained steadfast in their faith, often unto death, and examines the enduring influence of monasticism. The book sheds light on the spirit of perseverance and devotion central to the Church's history.*

*9. The Prophetic Vision: Readings and Reflections for the Ethiopian Orthodox Year*

*This book offers a collection of scriptural readings, theological reflections, and homilies specifically chosen to align with the unfolding themes of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church calendar. It aims to provide spiritual food and guidance for individuals seeking a deeper understanding of the liturgical seasons and their prophetic messages. The title encourages personal engagement with the spiritual journey of the Church year.*

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