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**Lalibela: Konjowa ketema be-ityopia**  
**(Lalibela: A Beautiful City in Ethiopia)**

Lahra Smith

Like many who have lived in or visited parts of Africa, I have struggled to educate and inform family and friends who have little understanding of life in Africa. I often find that what my stories cannot tell, sometimes my pictures can. Through pictures I have been able to share the vitality and diversity of different African countries I have visited—Zimbabwe, Kenya, Djibouti, Tanzania and Ethiopia. But one place has defied my ability to give words to feelings and my pictures have done little to assist me—that place is Lalibela, an important ancient city in northern Ethiopia. While Ethiopia may be portrayed in popular images as the scene of famine and poverty, for many Africans and Americans of African descent, Ethiopia is a source of great pride, the site of ancient civilizations and a symbol of successful resistance to European colonial expansion. The pictures shown here were taken by a friend and myself during a visit to Lalibela in May of 1998.

Located in Northern Ethiopia, in Wollo province, the town is named after King Lalibela, a member of the Zagwe ethnic group, who is said to have ordered the construction of the churches after receiving a vision from God. King Lalibela and his people were Christians, part of a venerable Christian tradition in Ethiopia. His reign marks a brief period wherein the Amhara-Tigrean Christian highlander rule of Ethiopia was interrupted. The Zagwe, claiming descent from Moses (rather than Solomonic descent as their rivals did), ruled for about 130 years.

Lalibela is home to eleven monolithic and semi-monolithic or underground stone churches dating from the twelfth century. It is the pinnacle of Zagwe rule. These amazing churches, each cut from solid rock and hollowed out, have distinct architectural features and decorative additions. They are feats of architecture and engineering, complete with trenches and sloping roofs that carry the heavy *krempt* rains of summer away from the churches, thus ensuring their preservation through the centuries. The rock bottom of all the pits slopes slightly and modern restoration efforts have often only had to

restore the original conditions to ensure sufficient drainage (Gerster, 88).

Infrastructure in Ethiopia is very poor. Most of the holy sites and tourist attractions are on the route of Ethiopian Airlines and for about \$US 50 one can fly from Addis Ababa, the capital city, to Lalibela, Axum, Bahir Dar, Harar and other important cities. I traveled with K.W., an Ethiopian friend and a native of Gonder, who told wonderful stories of traveling by bus for weeks from Gonder to Addis or elsewhere while participating in the literary campaigns held in the early days of the Socialist government of the 1970s.

Lalibela is located in Wollo province, home to many of the famines experienced in Ethiopia. The half-hour drive from the airport to the town covers miles of dry hills where one sees farmers struggling to make the land produce food to feed their families. After living in Kenya for a year, I was immediately struck by how un-touristy Lalibela feels compared to cities like Nairobi or Mombasa. There is only one flight in and out of Lalibela per day and on our plane, there were no more than thirty or so tourists and travelers. K.W. and I, being "hearty travelers," opted not to stay in the only real tourist hotel outside of town and ventured into Lalibela itself for the most modest accommodations we could find.

The churches are not immediately visible since they are below ground. I found it easy to forget we were there to see the churches because I enjoyed walking around the hilly town so much, meeting children and practicing my crude attempts at greeting in Amharic, the language of the region. Since we arrived too late, we were unable to do any touring the first day and decided to get dinner. While eating in a local restaurant attached to the owner's home, we met a wonderful young man, S. H., who agreed to be our guide through Lalibela. He and K.W. began a lively exchange about the legends of King Lalibela. He even promised to take us by donkey to some of the remote monasteries and smaller churches around the town which are located in caves and often very difficult to get to.

There are competing legends surrounding the building of these churches. Some early travelers wanted to insist on external influences. The main oral tradition, and the one K.H. and S.H. were taught growing up, was that when King Lalibela was a child, a swarm of bees surrounded him without harming him. This was believed to be a sign of his greatness and a symbol of royalty, and hence he was given the name Lalibela, meaning "the bees have recognized his

sovereignty” in the Agaw language (of the Zagwe peoples). Later, his elder brother, who knew of the predictions and feared losing his place as king, is said to have plotted against him. He was poisoned, but survived and fled the country into the wilderness. Later he returned and succeeded his brother to the throne. He had a vision in which God showed him ten churches made from a single rock and this was the genesis of these amazing monuments. Written chronicles of the time tell us that it took only 23 years to build the churches, which were to serve as a holy pilgrimage sight for devout Ethiopian Christians who were unable to visit Jerusalem in their lifetime.

I was only able to visit one of the two main groups of churches and Beta Giorgis in my time in Lalibela. Nor did I get to make the trek by donkey to the monasteries and churches outside of the town. One of the amazing things about visiting such an historic and beautiful ancient city with my Ethiopian friend was to hear the stories about this place which children are taught by older relatives. K.W. grew up learning about Lalibela but had never visited it. We both marveled at the beauty and technical superiority of these buildings. It is more than an architectural accomplishment that they were built buried below ground— this must certainly have protected them through the centuries of wars, including the northern invasions of the Muslim conqueror Ahmed Gran, as well as the Italian invasion of 1936 and the liberation war fought against the military dictatorship of the *Derg* in the 1960s and 70s. Most significant, however, was to think that K.H.’s grandmother walked by foot to Lalibela from Gonder before her death. Lalibela is a holy city on par with Jerusalem for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and an important pilgrimage site. Imagining what it must have meant for her to visit this city in her old age added an important personal dimension to our visit.

The beauty and creativity of these buildings, and the hospitality and pride of the Ethiopian people cannot be understood by either words or pictures. As I often tell my family and friends, you just have to visit there yourself. There are few places in the world which represent such a high level of artistry and architectural engineering as Lalibela.

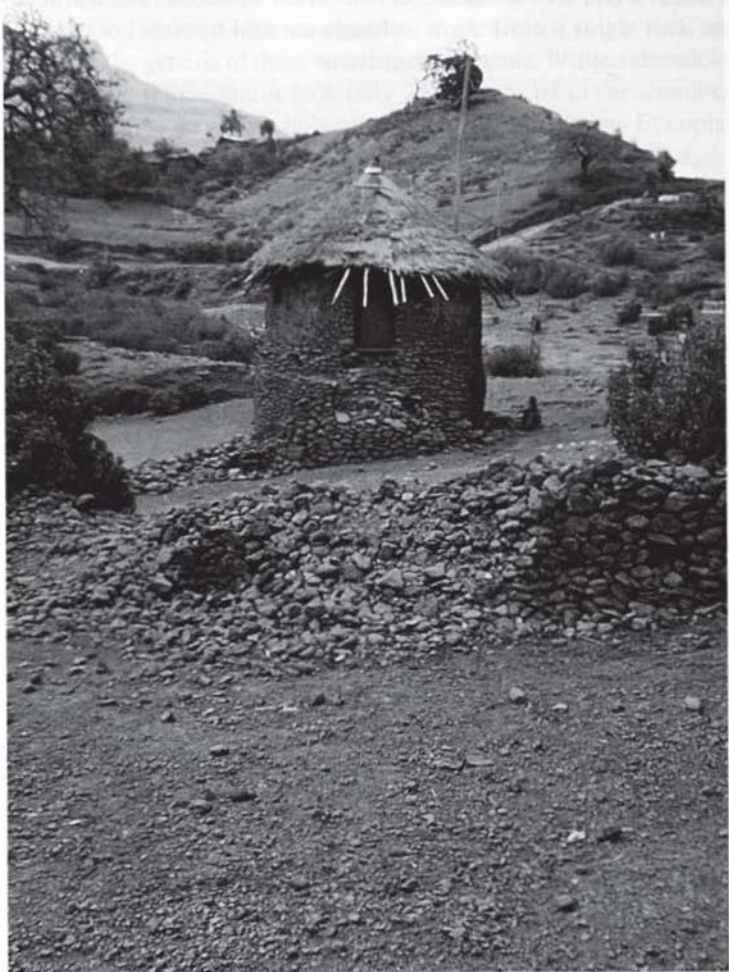




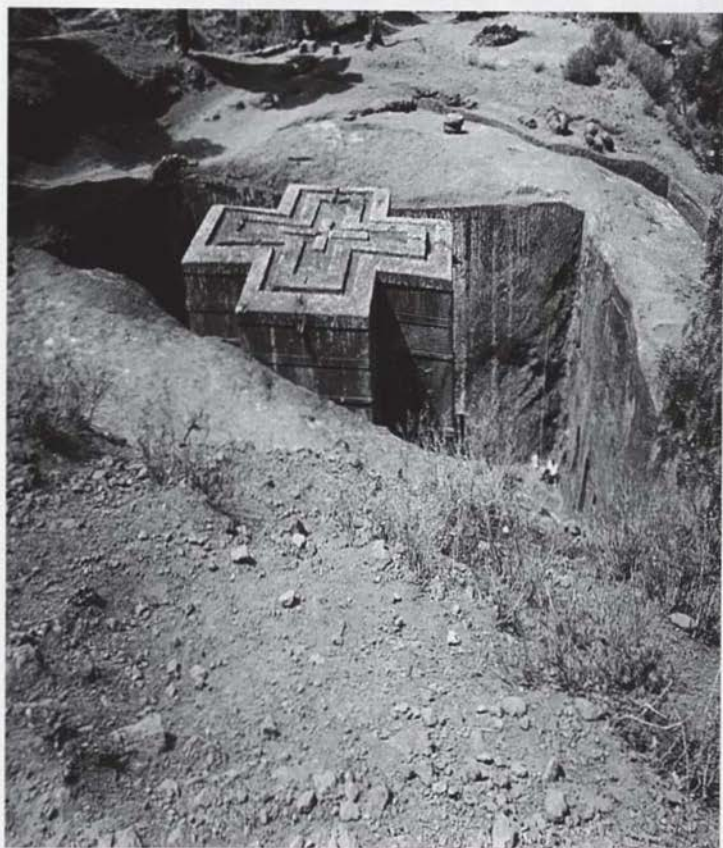
Top of Zion Church

**Mount Tabor in the distance**

"secretary" to the Arawakan of the Zafra people. Later the older brother, who knew of the preliminary and hurried testing place as just a simple hexagonal square hut. He was convinced not to proceed and find the quantity and the widthness. Later he returned and succeeded in building the hut. He had a vision of a sharp-tiled roof which was a single rack and one of these things, was the Walthamstow. It was built on a hillside.

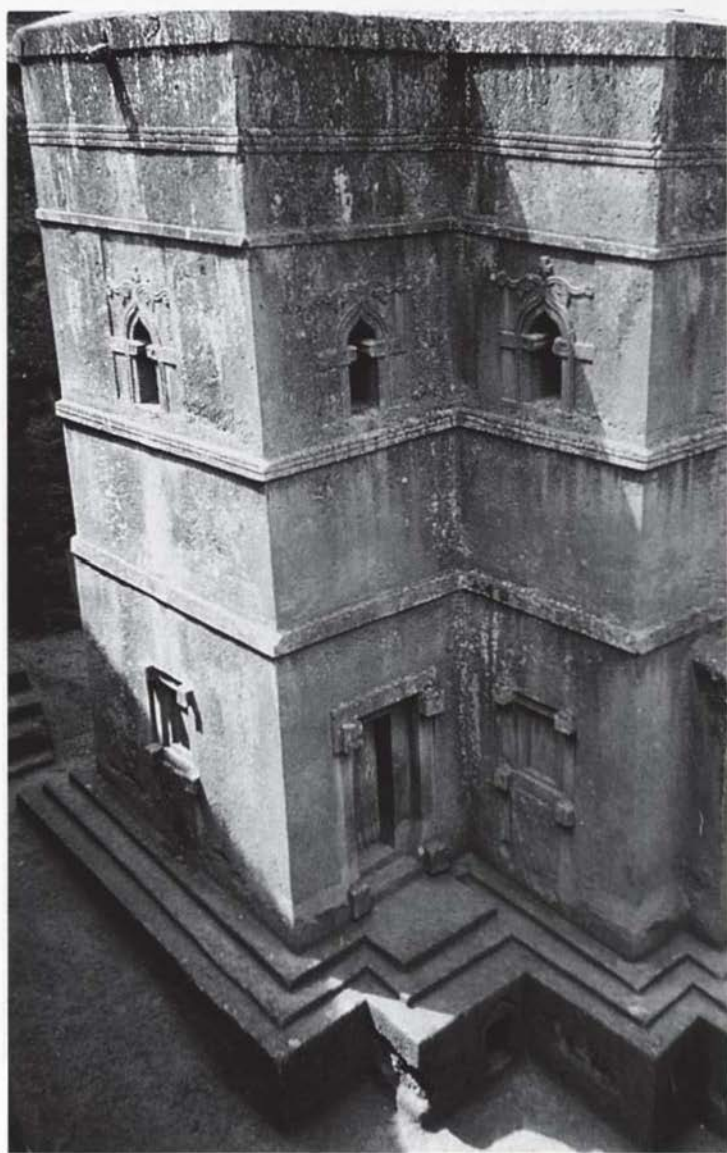


Two-story hut



*Top of Beta Gyorgis*

Front entrance to Beta Gyorgis  
church and its ruins



Side view of *Beta Gyorgis*





Front entrance to *Beta Gyorgis*



Doorway to *Beta Medhane Alem*

Descriptions of the photographs.



Courtyard entrance to *Beta Maryam*



Window inside *Beta Medhane Alem*

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## Descriptions of the photographs

**Two-story hut:** This is one of the two-story huts in Lalibela town, with one of its residents seated outside to the right. According to UNESCO, most of the population of 10,000 inhabitants lives below the poverty line, and 97 percent suffers from malnutrition. The infant mortality rate is 153 per thousand and 68 percent are illiterate. There is no way to generate income aside from the churches, and most support their families by subsistence farming.

**Mount Tabor in the distance:** View of Mount Tabor standing in Lalibela town, near the Yordanos River (River Jordan).

**Three views of *Beta Gyorgis* (the House of St. George):** *Beta Gyorgis* is an entire stone building cut from solid rock in the shape of a Greek cross. This beautiful church is reached through a narrow trench which winds around the church, slowly taking you lower and lower until you find yourself at its front entrance. Along the trench, there are markings in the rock that look like hoof-prints. Legend says that St. George appeared to King Lalibela after the construction was completed on the other churches and complained that no church had been built for him. The hoof-prints are said to be those of St. George, inspecting his church. The walls around the church are full of burial niches and small cells cut from the rock. Various monks and nuns live in the cells. As a Holy Land second only in importance to Jerusalem for Ethiopian Christians, Lalibela is an important pilgrimage site, particularly during the Christian holidays. It is said that between 20,000-50,000 worshipers come on foot to visit during the peak times of Christmas, Epiphany and Easter season. *Beta Gyorgis* is an important church during these festivals.

**Doorway to *Beta Medhane Alem* (the Church of the Redeemer of the World):** *Beta Medhane Alem* is the largest of the monolithic churches. It was hewn from a 33.7 x 23.7 x 11.5 meter block cut free from the surrounding rock. Restoration efforts were undertaken under the rule of Emperor

Haile Selassie in the 1960s. Although there is little active restoration evident at this time, the *Beta Medhane Alem* now has a permanent tin roof over it to protect its exterior from wear. This is the largest of the churches at Lalibela, cut from a solid block of rock below ground and surrounded by a colonnade on the outside.

***Beta Maryam Courtyard:*** This is a courtyard entrance to *Beta Maryam* (the House of St. Mary), one of the most beloved of the Lalibela churches and my personal favorite. It is said that this was King Lalibela's particular favorite, and that he attended mass here daily. The church is located next to *Beta Medhane Alem* and accessed through a narrow corridor of rock. It is decorated with a number of different styles of crosses, including Greek crosses, swastikas, stars and rosettes, as well as animals. Inside are the most exquisite frescoes of scenes from the Gospels, mainly of Jesus and Mary. Bible stories are written above and below the paintings, written in *Ge'ez*, the language of the Ethiopian Church. These beautiful representations of famous Christian stories, with Jesus and his followers depicted as Africans, immediately made me think of Malcolm X's autobiography when he talks about being in prison and challenging the white priest as to the color of Jesus. I wished he could have seen these amazing paintings drawn by Africans in the twelfth or fifteenth century, portraying Bible stories with the most beautiful black faces and in Ethiopian settings. Next to *Beta Maryam* is a pool which is believed to heal infertility in women. Outside of this church, and most of the others, are monks and nuns who have come here to devote their life to God. They live off the generosity of the town, and it is said that 350 priests, 250 deacons, 450 monks and 400 students work, study and worship here in Lalibela. They seemed quite undisturbed by the few tourists walking through the churches, and quietly continued reading their manuscripts and praying.

**A window inside *Beta Medhane Alem:*** Inside Ethiopian Orthodox Churches, one never wears shoes, and the faithful even remove their shoes when praying outside of the churches.

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