

The Apostles Feast

SS. Matthew the Evangelist & Philip the Apostle

Founders of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Churches

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest and most traditional Christian denominations, as its history is deeply intertwined with the missionaries of both St. Matthew the Evangelist and St. Philip the Apostle. These apostles first introduced Christianity to the region, converting many from worshipping idols to accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior.

St. Matthew the Evangelist

St. Matthew, one of the 12 disciples and the Gospel writer, began his missionary journeys following Pentecost. He started his preaching in the lands of Palestine, Tyre, and Sidon. After completing his work in this region, he went to Ethiopia intending to turn the people from Paganism to Christianity.

Upon arriving in Ethiopia, a young man approached St. Matthew and told him, “You will not be able to go in unless you shave off the hair of your head and carry palm branches in your hand.” St. Matthew listened to the young man’s instructions and was allowed to enter the city.

Following this, our Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him as the young man—comforting and encouraging him to pursue his mission despite tribulations. St. Matthew then went to the high priest of the temple of Apollo, Hermes, to discuss Christianity with him. He told him how the idols they worship cannot speak, hear, or listen to their prayers. As he was discussing this with Hermes, a bright line shone from the sky and an altar appeared from the heavens. The High Priest asked St. Matthew who his God was, and St. Matthew proclaimed the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. After this, the Hermes believed in Christ and many of the people in the region followed Him.

When the governor heard about St. Matthew’s evangelism, he sought to kill him and those who were converted. During this time, the governor’s son passed away. St. Matthew prayed and made supplications to God, asking for the son to be raised. After the fervent prayers of St. Matthew, the governor’s son was raised from the dead. When the governor saw this, he praised our Lord Jesus Christ and was baptized along with many others in the city.

St. Philip the Apostle

St. Philip the Apostle’s role in spreading Christianity to Ethiopia is recounted in Acts 8:26-40. This passage describes Philip’s encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in the court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia.

While traveling on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, St. Philip was guided by the Holy Spirit to approach the chariot of an Ethiopian eunuch, who was reading the Book of Isaiah. The excerpt that he was reading was, “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.” Philip explained the scriptures to him, revealing how they were a prophecy pointing to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Moved by Philip’s teachings, the eunuch requested to be baptized. Philip baptized him on the spot, making this Ethiopian eunuch one of the first recorded African converts to Christianity. This event is seen as a pivotal moment in the spread of Christianity to Ethiopia, symbolizing the entry of the Gospel into Africa.

The Growth of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Although the works of St. Matthew and St. Philip were crucial for setting the foundation of Christianity in the region, Christianity did not become widespread in Ethiopia until the reign of Emperor Ezana in the 4th century, who established Christianity as the official religion of the state. Emperor Ezana was converted to Christianity through the work of a Syrian Greek missionary named St. Frumentius.

The Eritrean Orthodox Church was part of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church until 1993, when Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia. Initially, the Coptic Orthodox Church oversaw the Eritrean Orthodox Church; however, in 1994 Pope Shenouda III granted the Eritrean Orthodox Church autocephaly, meaning that they could appoint their own patriarch. The first patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Phillipos, was anointed in 1999.

Sources:

- Coptic Synxarium
- Bible, English Standard Version
- Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices, 2nd Edition