

# *Deir Sultan, Ethiopia and the Black World*

by

**Negussay Ayele**

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## **Background to Deir Sultan at a glance**

Unknown by much of the world, monks and nuns of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, have for centuries quietly maintained the only presence by black people in one of Christianity's holiest sites – the Church of the Holy Sepulcher of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. Through the vagaries and vicissitudes of millennial history and landlord changes in Jerusalem and the Middle East region, Ethiopian monks have retained their monastic convent in what has come to be known as *Deir Sultan* or the Monastery of the Sultan for more than a thousand years. Likewise, others that have their respective presences in the area at different periods, include Armenian, Russian, Syrian, Egyptian and Greek Orthodox/Coptic Churches as well as the Holy See. As one writer put it recently, *"For more than 1500 years, the Church of Ethiopia survived in Jerusalem. Its survival has not, in the last resort, been dependent on politics, but on the faith of individual monks that we should look for the vindication of the Church's presence in Jerusalem....They are attracted in Jerusalem not by a hope for material gain or comfort, but by faith."* It is hoped that public discussion on this all-important subject will be joined by individuals and groups from all over the world, particularly the African Diaspora. At this time, I will confine myself to offering a brief profile of the Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem and its current state of turmoil. I hope that others with more detailed and/or first-hand knowledge about the subject will join in the discussion.



Accounts of Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem invoke the Bible to establish the origin of Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem.

Accordingly, some Ethiopians refer to the story of the encounter in Jerusalem between Queen of Sheba--believed to have been a ruler in Ethiopia and environs--and King Solomon, cited, for instance, in I Kings 10: 1-13. According to this version, Ethiopia's presence in the region was already established about 1000 B.C. possibly through land grant to the visiting Queen, and that later

transformation into Ethiopian Orthodox Christian monastery is an extension of that same property. Others refer to the New Testament account of Acts 8: 26-40 which relates the conversion to Christianity of the envoy of Ethiopia's Queen Candace (Hendeke) to Jerusalem in the first century A.D., thereby signalling the early phase of Ethiopia's

adoption of Christianity. This event may have led to the probable establishment of a center of worship in Jerusalem for Ethiopian pilgrims, priests, monks and nuns.

Keeping these renditions as a backdrop, what can be said for certain is the following. Ethiopian monastic activities in Jerusalem were observed and reported by contemporary residents and sojourners during the early years of the Christian era. By the time of the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem and the region (634-644 A.D.) khalif Omar is said to have confirmed Ethiopian physical presence in Jerusalem's Christian holy places, including the Church of St. Helena which encompasses the Holy Sepulcher of the Lord Jesus Christ. His *firman* or directive of 636 declared that "*the Iberian and Abyssinian communities remain there*" while also recognizing the rights of other Christian communities to make pilgrimages in the Christian holy places of Jerusalem. Because Jerusalem and the region around it, has been subjected to frequent invasions and changing landlords, stakes in the holy places were often part of the political whims of respective powers that be. Subsequently, upon their conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, the Crusaders, had kicked out Orthodox/Coptic monks from the monasteries and installed Augustine monks instead. However, when in 1187 Salaheddin wrested Jerusalem from the Crusaders, he restored the presence of the Ethiopian and other Orthodox/Coptic monks in the holy places. When political powers were not playing havoc with their claims to the holy places, the different Christian sects would often carry on their own internecine conflicts among themselves, at times with violent results.

Contemporary records and reports indicate that the Ethiopian presence in the holy places in Jerusalem was rather much more substantial throughout much of the period up to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. For example, an Italian pilgrim, Barbore Morsini, is cited as having written in 1614 that "*the Chapels of St. Mary of Golgotha and of St. Paul...the grotto of David on Mount Sion and an altar at Bethelheim...*" among others were in the possession of the Ethiopians. From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, virtually the whole of the Middle East was under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. When one of the Zagwe kings in Ethiopia, King Lalibela (1190-1225), had trouble maintaining unhampered contacts with the monks in Jerusalem, he decided to build a new Jerusalem in his land. In the process he left behind one of the true architectural wonders known as the Rock-hewn Churches of Lalibela. The Ottomans also controlled Egypt and much of the Red Sea littoral and thereby circumscribed Christian Ethiopia's communication with the outside world, including Jerusalem. Besides, they had also tried but failed to subdue Ethiopia altogether. Though Ethiopia's independent existence was continuously under duress not only from the Ottomans but also their colonial surrogate, Egypt as well as from the dervishes in the Sudan, the Ethiopian monastery somehow survived during this period. Whenever they could, Ethiopian rulers

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and other personages as well as church establishments sent subsidies and even bought plots of land where in time churches and residential buildings for Ethiopian pilgrims were built in and around Jerusalem. Church leaders in Jerusalem often represented the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in ecumenical councils and meetings in Florence and other fora.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the Ottoman rulers of the region including Palestine and, of course, Jerusalem, tried to stabilize the continuing clamor and bickering among the Christian sects claiming sites in the Christian holy places. To that effect, Ottoman rulers including Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) and Suleiman “the Magnificent” (1520-1566) as well as later ones in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, issued edicts or firmans regulating and detailing by name which group of monks would be housed where and the protocol governing their respective religious ceremonies. These edicts are called *firmans of the Status Quo* for all Christian claimants in Jerusalem’s holy places including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which came to be called *Deir Sultan* or the monastery (place) of the Sultan. Ethiopians referred to it endearingly as Debre Sultan. Most observers of the scene in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as well as honest spokesmen for some of the sects attest to the fact that from time immemorial the Ethiopian monks had pride of place in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Deir Sultan). Despite their meager existence and pressures from fellow monks from other countries, the Ethiopian monks survived through the difficult periods their country was going through such as the period of feudal autarchy (1769-1855). Still, in every document or reference since the opening of the Christian era, Ethiopia and Ethiopian monks have been mentioned in connection with Christian holy places in Jerusalem, by all alternating landlords and powers that be in the region.

As surrogates of the weakening Ottomans, the Egyptians were temporarily in control of Jerusalem (1831-1840). It was at this time, in 1838, that a plague is said to have occurred in the holy places which in some mysterious ways of Byzantine proportions, claimed the lives of all Ethiopian monks. The Ethiopians at this time were ensconced in a chapel of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher (Deir Sultan) as well as in other locales nearby. Immediately thereafter, the Egyptian authorities gave the keys of the Church to the Egyptian Coptic monks. The Egyptian ruler, Ibrahim Pasha, then ordered that all thousands of very precious Ethiopian holy books and documents, including historical and ecclesiastical materials related to property deeds and rights, be burned – alleging conveniently that the plague was spawned by the Ethiopian parchments. Monasteries are traditionally important hubs of learning and, given its location and its opportunity for interaction with the wider family of Christendom, the Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem was even more so than others. That is how Ethiopians lost their choice possession in Deir Sultan. By the time other monks arrived in Jerusalem, the Copts claimed their squatter’s rights, the new Ethiopian arrivals were eventually pushed off

onto the open rooftop of the church, thanks largely to the machinations of the Egyptian Coptic church.



Although efforts on behalf of Ethiopian monks in Jerusalem started in mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century with Ras Ali and Dejach Wube, it was the rise of Emperor Tewodros in 1855 in Ethiopia that put the Jerusalem monastery issue back onto international focus. When Ethiopian monks numbering a hundred or so congregated in Jerusalem at the time, the Armenians had assumed superiority in the holy places. The Anglican bishop in Jerusalem then, Bishop Samuel Gobat witnessed the unholy attitude and behavior of the Armenians and the Copts towards their fellow Christian Ethiopians who were trying to reclaim their rights to the holy places in Jerusalem. He wrote that the Ethiopian monks, nuns and pilgrims *"were both intelligent and respectable, yet they were treated like slaves, or rather like beasts by the Copts and the Armenians combined... (the Ethiopians) could never enter their own chapel but when it pleased the Armenians to open it. ... On one occasion, they could not get their chapel opened to perform funeral service for one of their members. The key to their convent being in the hands of their oppressors, they were locked up in their convent in the evening until it pleased their Coptic jailer to open it in the morning, so that in any severe attacks of illness, which are frequent there, they had no means of going out to call a physician."* It was awareness of such indignities suffered by Ethiopian monks in Jerusalem that is said to have impelled Emperor Tewodros to have visions of clearing the path between his domain and Jerusalem from Turkish/Egyptian control, and establishing something more than monastic presence there. In the event, one of the issues which contributed to the clash with British colonialists that consumed his life 1868, was the quest for adequate protection of the Ethiopian monks and their monastery in Jerusalem.

Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889), the priestly warrior king, used his relatively cordial relations with the British who were holding sway in the region then, to make representations on behalf of the Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem. He carried on regular pen-pal communications with the monks even before he became Emperor. He sent them money, he counseled them and he always asked them to pray for him and the country, saying, *"For the prayers of the righteous help and serve in all matters. By the prayers of the righteous a country is saved."* He used some war booty from his battles with Ottomans and their Egyptian surrogates, to buy land and started to build a church in Jerusalem. As he died fighting Sudanese/Dervish expansionists in 1889, his successor, Emperor Menelik completed the construction of the Church named Debre Gennet located on what was called "Ethiopian Street." During this period more monasteries, churches and residences were also built Empresses Tayitu, Zewditu, Menen as well as by several other personages including Afe Negus Nessibu, Dejzmach Balcha, Woizeros Amarech Walelu, Beyenech Gebru, Altayeworq. As of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the numbers of Ethiopian monks and nuns increased and so did overall Ethiopian pilgrimage and presence in Jerusalem. In 1903, Emperor Menelik put \$200, 000

thalers in a (Credileone?) Bank in the region and ordained that interests from that savings be used exclusively as subsidy for the sustenance of the Ethiopian monks and nuns and the upkeep of Deir Sultan. Emperor Menelik's 6-point edict also ordained that no one be allowed to draw from the capital in whole or in part. Land was also purchased at various localities and a number of personalities including Empress Tayitu, and later Empress Menen, built churches there. British authorities supported a study on the history of the issue since at least the time of kalifa (Calif) Omar ((636) and correspondences and firmans and reaffirmations of Ethiopian rights in 1852, in an effort to resolve the chronic problems of conflicting claims to the holy sites in Jerusalem. The 1925 study concluded that *"the Abyssinian (Ethiopian ) community in Palestine ought to be considered the only possessor of the convent Deir Es Sultan at Jerusalem with the Chapels which are there and the free and exclusive use of the doors which give entrance to the convent, the free use of the keys being understood."*

Until the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in the 1930's when Mussolini confiscated Ethiopian accounts and possessions everywhere, including in Jerusalem, the Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem had shown some semblance of stability and security, despite continuing intrigues by Copts, Armenians and their overlords in the region. This was a most difficult and trying time for the Ethiopian monks in Jerusalem who were confronted with a situation never experienced in the country's history, namely its occupation by a foreign power. And, just like some of their compatriots including Church leaders at home, some paid allegiance to the Fascist rulers albeit for the brief (1936-1941) interregnum. Emperor Haile Sellassie was also a notable patron of the monastery cause, and the only monarch to have made several trips to Jerusalem, including en route to his self-exile to London in May, 1936. Since at least the 1950s there was an Ethiopian Association for Jerusalem in Addis Ababa which coordinated annual Easter pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Hundreds of Ethiopians and other persons from Ethiopia and the Diaspora took advantage of its good offices to go there for absolution, supplication or felicitation, and the practice continues today. Against all odds, historical, ecclesiastical and cultural bonding between Ethiopia and Jerusalem waxed over the years. The Ethiopian presence expanded beyond Deir Sultan including also numerous Ethiopian Churches, chapels, convents and properties. This condition required that the Patriarchate of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church designate Jerusalem as a major diocese to be administered under its own Archbishop.

### **Contemporary developments related to *Deir Sultan***

The foregoing pages should give the reader some idea of the deeply rooted but checkered and sinewy Ethiopian tenure in Jerusalem's Deir Sultan. That the Ethiopian monastery has survived so far against all odds, is nothing short of a miracle. The different powers played havoc with the Ethiopian monks and nuns in Deir Sultan, taking away their key to their own chapel, changing locks on them, burning their precious

religious materials, beating and mistreating them and eventually pushing them out of their central holdings in the main chapel of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher onto the rooftop of the Church. Still, they remained there making their own thatched roofs, linoleum ceiling covers, plants for shades, water well and makeshift cookeries and bathrooms. There they stayed fasting, praying, singing hymnals in the style of David of old. They also carried on their religious rituals and ceremonies in accordance with the practices and requisites of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Throughout its history the Ethiopian monastery has been a political football for Egyptian Copts and Armenian Orthodox in particular and the Turks and other overlords of the region in general. Most of the time, the Ethiopian state, was not in a position to do much on behalf of the Deir Sultan Ethiopian monks, as it was itself struggling for its survival and sovereignty in a hostile environment. Only towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, did the Ethiopian state and the Metropolitan in Addis Ababa start making some difference in stabilizing whatever could be salvaged from centuries of Egyptian/Coptic usurpation sustained by the Ethiopian monastery.



Egyptian government/Coptic cabal against Ethiopian/black presence in Jerusalem became even more politicized and more pronounced after the 1950's when the Ethiopian Orthodox Church opted to be autocephalous, thereby ending the century's old tutelage of the Alexandrian Coptic Church, which had until then provided the Metropolitan or Patriarch for the Ethiopian Church. The Egyptian Copts never got over that act of self-determination by the Ethiopian Church, and they were quick to peg their petty or greedy quest for complete takeover of all Ethiopian properties and possessions in the holy places, especially the prized Church of the Holy Sepulcher. To that end, they have leaned on the Egyptian government to pressure different landlords of Jerusalem including the Jordanians until 1967 and the Israelis since then. In one form or another, therefore, the question of Deir Sultan has become intertwined with the larger issue of Arab/Palestinian an Israeli conflict in the region. Technically, the Status Quo firmans issued in earlier times, as adumbrated in foregoing pages, are supposed to govern possessions of the holy places in question and relations among the Christian claimants of same. These firmans are not only rigorous and stringent, but it is also incumbent on all landlords that be--such as Turks, British, Jordanian or Israeli – to enforce them strictly to the letter. A recent report points out, for example, that the Status Quo *"prohibits simple renovations, removal of fallen debris from the decaying ceiling, even sweeping has to be done in the dark or the Ethiopians risk being reported to the authorities by their Christian neighbors."* Despite such strict provisions, it is, as we have seen heretofore, the rights and footholds of the Ethiopian monks that have been continuously usurped, to benefit mainly the Egyptian Copts and then the Armenians and to some extent other groups as well. The Ethiopian monks are even victims of internecine rivalries and jockeying for advantages among the other Christian usual suspects.

When in 1948, the State of Israel came into existence in Palestine, Jerusalem was still part of the Kingdom of Jordan. The ever irksome Copts provoked a confrontation with Ethiopian monks in Deir Sultan which required Jordanian intervention or, more properly enforcement of the age-old Status Quo provisions. Given the somewhat frigid relations then between Egypt and Jordan on the one hand and the nascent cordiality between Emperor Haile Sellassie and King Hussein on the other at that moment, the Jordanian government ordered that the Egyptian Copts hand over the keys to Deir Sultan to the Ethiopians. When the Copts failed to comply with the order, the Jordanians went ahead and changed the locks and gave the new keys to the Ethiopians. This was, however, short lived as newfound courtship between Egyptian President Nasser and Jordanian king Hussein resulted in a Jordanian *volte-face* which reversed their earlier ruling and the keys were once again given to the Copts. As is well known, in its sweeping military victory over its Arab antagonists in the 1967 war, Israel occupied territories of Egypt, Syria and Jordan. More importantly, Israel wrested Jerusalem from Jordanian control and became henceforth the new landlord of the Christian holy places as well. And so, the problem of Deir Sultan was now squarely on Israel's shoulders. And, it did not take long for their judgment to be tested. The chronic tug-of-war between the Copts and Ethiopian Orthodox monks flared up again in 1970, when the Israeli government is said to have changed the locks and given the keys to the Ethiopians. The Copts, as expected, did not take this lying down. They decided to take the matter to the Israeli courts where they filed papers alleging that they were the sole owners of Deir Sultan and that at best the Ethiopians were only guests with no property rights to the holy places. In 1971, the Israeli High Court is said to have ruled in favour of the Coptic claim and ordered that the government turn over the keys to the Copts. It is reported that the Israeli government did not comply with the court order insisting that "its dispute with the Copts was political and not legal and that the judiciary should desist from pressuring the government to resolve the case in court." It is to be remembered that through all this, the Egyptian Copts have already usurped the main floor and chapel of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Ethiopians are pushed to the rooftop of the Church. What the Copts want is for the Ethiopians to disappear once and for all from the scene, from the last vestige of presence they have maintained for nearly two thousand years altogether. With such Christian charity who needs enemies.

Despite the fact that the government of Emperor Haile Selassie broke diplomatic relations with Israel in 1973, in solidarity with Egypt (an OAU member) which lost its Sinai territory, the Israeli government did not at this time retaliate by siding with the Egyptian Copts. To be sure, the Israelis were, and some say they still are, annoyed by Ethiopia's decision which they regard as 'betrayal' and which also spawned an avalanche of diplomatic break off of ties with Israel by several other African countries, they did not retaliate on Deir Sultan for several reasons. One reason was that in the larger Arab-Israeli scheme of things, Deir Sultan does not figure big either for Egypt, the Arabs or for Israel. Sinai, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, Red Sea littoral and most importantly, sovereignty over Jerusalem as a whole and, when all is said and done,

Palestinian/ Arab and Israeli peaceful coexistence in the region are the most important issues. At best, the Deir Sultan issue is a nuisance to them as it has been for all landlords of Jerusalem historically.

Another reason for the Israeli reluctance to tackle the Deir Sultan dispute between mainly the Copts and the Ethiopian monks has to do with yet a different factor in the mix embedded in millennial history of the region. For a very long time, it was recognized by Zionist elements that several thousands of Ethiopians referred to in Ethiopia as *falashas* and now named *bete Israelis* as being more or less Jews and in the early 1970's the rabbinical authorities had authenticated as Jews in exile from one of the lost tribes and therefore eligible for the right of return or *aliyah* to Israel. Thus, for several years Jewish groups in North America, Europe and Israel had been working painstakingly to safely facilitate the return of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel, and the Israeli government was well advised not to jeopardize this process by antagonizing the Ethiopian government(s) on the Deir Sultan issue. In the event, between the mid-1980's and 1991 more than 60, 000 Ethiopian Jews have arrived in Israel.

It appears that the Egyptian government and the Copts have left no stone unturned to divest the Ethiopian Church of its rightful heritage in Jerusalem which is as much, if not more, legitimate as that of the Copts and other Christian sects. It is to be recalled that in 1978, then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar Sadat were negotiating land for peace through the good offices of U.S. president Jimmy Carter at Camp David. It is believed that in the course of those negotiations, Sadat privately raised the Deir Sultan issue on behalf of the Copts under his suzerainty, and it is intimated that Begin made some kind of personal promise to him. Inasmuch as what transpired or what exactly was promised was all personal, private and unregistered or not declared publicly at the time, one wonders if any responsible state or government would deem to be duty bound to act upon such informal exchanges. The Egyptians are said to have also raised the matter of Deir Sultan at the Israeli-Egyptian Normalization talks in 1986. What is of interest to us here in all of the above litany of Egyptian/Coptic pleas and goadings, is how relentless and dogged the Egyptians/Copts have been in their hostility to Ethiopian/black Christian presence in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem.

This brings us to the latest physical clashes perpetrated by the Egyptian Coptic clerics in the Deir Sultan holy site in Jerusalem, which has been the subject of several reports by British, American, Israeli and Arab papers.



Unholy violence occurred in Christianity's holiest place in Jerusalem at the end of July 2002, when an Egyptian Coptic priest, Father Abdel Malek, decided to bring a chair, go up to the rooftop of the Church, which is the last remaining preserve of the Ethiopian monks, and proceeded to sit there under the shade of a tree in clear violation of the Status Quo. It is to be remembered that, the cleric and his colleagues would not allow Ethiopians to visit, sit or worship in the Coptic chapels. The details are sketchy in terms who did what and when. However, it appears that when Ethiopians naturally tried to resist this wanton violation of their rights to their space by the impudent Copt, violent clashes erupted involving also Israeli policemen. In the melee, nearly a dozen monks, mostly Ethiopians suffered injuries and lacerations. After all that, it is reported that, escorted by Israeli police daily, Coptic cleric Abdel Malek continued to perch at the Ethiopian property, presumably until the Ministry of Religious Affairs issues a ruling on the matter. A question that comes on loudly to an interested observer is, "Why did the Copts choose this particular time to force a confrontation on Deir Sultan?" It seems that, given the volatile and bloody situation in Palestinian and Israeli relations, the Egyptians/Copts may have assumed that the Israelis may at the moment be ready to cave in and Deir Sultan's rooftop may just be the kind of bone they can throw to them to elicit a possible or putative mediating role vis-à-vis the Palestinians. And the Egyptians/Copts continue to put pressure on Israel by inflaming Arab opinion. Egyptian President Mubarak is said to have boycotted an important regional meeting recently protesting the Deir Sultan affair. An Arab paper reported that earlier on, Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria lambasted Israeli Prime Minister Israel Sharon, calling on the Arab world to unite and put more effective pressure on Israel, inserting his pet agenda and saying, "the Israelis are occupying since 1970, the Deir Al Sultan church in east Jerusalem by force, and did not implement a ruling issued by the Jewish Supreme Court in favor of the (his Coptic) church."



Since these shameful events, several deputations and representations to the Israeli authorities have been made by a newly formed "Ethiopian Association for Jerusalem" in the United States. These deputations took the form of written communications to the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., and also in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Other concerned groups including the longstanding Association in Ethiopia and individuals of Ethiopian origin are, no doubt making efforts to let the authorities in Israel know their concern on the issue. It is also hoped that the black Jews from Ethiopia and elsewhere will also weigh in on the matter. Though the current regime in Addis Ababa is better known for its systematic destruction of Ethiopian history, culture, and integrity, it sent a delegation to Israel for perfunctory reasons and with no avail on behalf of the Ethiopian monks or the monastery. Given the split of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Addis

Ababa and in the Diaspora, the Church's effectiveness in successfully challenging the Egyptian Coptic pressures to eliminate Ethiopian, hence black presence in Jerusalem is a matter of serious concern.

### **Ethiopia and Black Heritage In Jerusalem**

For hundreds of years, the name or concept of Ethiopia has been a beacon for black/ African identity liberty and dignity throughout the Diaspora. The Biblical (Psalm 68:31) verse , “...*Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God*” has been universally taken to mean African people, black people at large, stretch out their hands to God (and only to God) in supplication, in felicitation or in absolution. As Daniel Thwaite put it, for the Black man Ethiopia was always “...an incarnation of African independence.” And today, Ethiopian monastic presence in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher or Deir Sultan in Jerusalem, is the only Black presence in the holiest place on earth for Christians. For much of its history, Ethiopian Christianity was largely hemmed in by alternating powers in the region. Likewise, Ethiopia used its own indigenous Ethiopic languages for liturgical and other purposes within its own territorial confines, instead of colonial or other lingua franca used in extended geographical spaces of the globe. For these and other reasons, Ethiopia was not able to communicate effectively with the wider Black world in the past. Given the fact that until recently, most of the Black world within Africa and in the Diaspora was also under colonial tutelage or under slavery, it was not easy to appreciate the significance of Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem. Consequently, even though Ethiopian/Black presence in Jerusalem has been maintained through untold sacrifices for centuries, the rest of the Black world outside of Ethiopia has not taken part in its blessings through pilgrimages to the holy sites and thereby develop concomitant bonding with the Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem. Apropos to this theme, there is an initiative afoot by a few individuals to launch a “**Forum for African Heritage in Jerusalem**” website that can serve as a forum for education, dialogue and/or action by any and all concerned on Deir Sultan and the sustenance of Black presence there.

For nearly two millennia now, the Ethiopian Church and its adherent monks and priests have miraculously maintained custodianship of Deir Sultan, suffering through and surviving all the struggles we have glanced at in these pages. In fact, the survival of Ethiopian/Black presence in Christianity's holy places in Jerusalem is matched only by the “Survival Ethiopian Independence” itself. Indeed, Ethiopian presence in Deir Sultan represents not just Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity but all African/black Christians of all denominations who value the sacred legacy that the holy places of Jerusalem represent for Christians everywhere. It represents also the affirmation of the fact that Jerusalem is the birthplace of Christianity, just as adherents of Judaism and Islam claim it also. The Ethiopian foothold at the rooftop of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the only form of Black presence in Christianity's holy places of Jerusalem. It ought to be secure, hallowed and sanctified ground by and for all Black folks everywhere who value

it. The saga of Deir Sultan also represents part of Ethiopian history and culture. And that too is part of African/black history and culture regardless of religious orientation.

When a few years ago, an Ethiopian monk was asked by a writer why he had come to Jerusalem to face all the daily vicissitudes and indignities, he answered, *"because it is Jerusalem."* And the writer makes the perceptive observation that *"The Ethiopian church in Jerusalem itself resembles a plant which in Jerusalem has found poor soil, but has continued to grow in defiance of the laws of probability and to survive the hardest winters and the hottest summers."* The number of Ethiopian monks and nuns domiciled in Deir Sultan today has shrank drastically from several hundred at the turn of the century to a few dozen today. And they are of the view that *"if they are forced to leave Deir as-Sultan Monastery, blacks will never again be represented in the sacred place."* It is hoped that henceforth not only Ethiopians but all other Black folks from every land in the African continent and in the Diaspora will embark on annual pilgrimages to the Ethiopian convent of Deir Sultan and assert their rights of representation in this holiest of holy Christian shrines in Jerusalem.

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