

The Teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church on Easter

Believing in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God; believing in the intercession of the twofold virginity of Saint Mary, the God-bearer, let us begin reading this article.

When God created the universe, He created us for everlasting life; not for death to overcome us. After God created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden, he ordered him to keep the first commandment, which is the foundation beneath all other commandments: “And the Lord God commanded the man saying, 'Of every tree in the garden you may freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it. For on the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die.’” (Genesis; 2:16-17). And, as James wrote in his Epistle, “Let no man say when he is tempted. I am tempted of God. For God cannot be tempted of evil, neither tempts He any man. But every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust and thereby enticed. Then when lust has conceived, it brings forth sin. And the sin, when it is finished, brings forth death.’ (St. James 1:13-15).

Thus, our first parents, Adam and Eve, driven by their own lust and by the deceit of Satan, using the serpent as his mouthpiece, disobeyed God and committed sin. Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commandment and ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of wisdom. Hence, man was condemned to die. We Inherited death through our parents, Adam and Eve. “Wherefore. as by one man (Adam) sin entered into the world; and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men... “{Romans; 5:12).

To save us from death, God came into the world: In this was manifested the love of God toward us because God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.” (St John 3:16). God took the flesh and soul of the twofold Virgin Mary; without alteration of His divinity, God became man and man became God. This is what we refer to as Tewahido: In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, explains why we say Jesus Christ is perfect man and perfect God. The word is Christ (St. John 1:14) who is the creator (St. John 1:1) and The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made.’ (St John 1:2-3) For, by Him were all things created. (Col 1:16-17. Hebrews 11:3; Rev:4:11) Moreover, regarding the belief that Jesus is God, reference can be made to (St John 6:29, 10:30; 14:1, Acts20:21, Isaiah 9:6) Refer to “The Praise of the Virgin Mariam” - Monday paragraphs 4, 7 and Sunday paragraph 1.)

On Christ's mission to save and free us from the bondage of death, He became in His Humanity_ except sin _what human nature is capable of becoming. Because of His love for us, and to save us the Almighty became vulnerable. By vulnerability, we mean that in His humanity He suffered persecution, became a refugee in Africa, grew little by little,

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suffered from hunger and thirst, while He fed the multitude (St. Matt; 21:18, John; 19:28), he was sorrowful (St. Matt; 26:37-38), and like any one of us, He wept (St John 11:35); he also lived In poverty: "the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head" (St. Matthew 930). "He was in the world and the world was made by Him and the world knew Him not" (St John 1:10) This is a huge mystery... ..Jesus Christ was baptized and fasted and commanded us to do likewise. He was tempted by Satan and conquered Satan by the power of his divinity (Godhead) and has also reinitiated for us the power to conquer Satan. For when God created us, He created us with the capacity to be lead into perfection. However, it is according to our own choice, to do good or evil. That is why God gave us free will (refer to the Epistle of St. James 1:13-15). God sacrificed His own flesh and blood to give us everlasting life, i.e. Holy Communion. Jesus Christ said, "I am the bread of life;" (St. John 6:35) and, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day." (St. John 6:51-59; also refer to St Matthew 26:26-28).

Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ suffered much persecution. He was kept in captivity as though he was a common criminal. For as it reads in St John 18:12, "Then the....captain and the officers of the Jews took Jesus and bound him'. Furthermore, he was humiliated and mocked '....the men that held Jesus mocked him and smote him. And when they had blindfolded him, they struck him on the face, and asked him saying, prophecy, who is it that smote thee? And many other things blasphemous spoke they against him' (St. Luke 22:63-65). Everybody, even those he cured shouted at him and turned their backs against him, finally condemning him to death, '....and they all condemned him to be guilty of death' (St. Mark 14:64) and 'What think ye? They answered and said he is guilty of death' (St. Matthew 26:66). When he was accused and persecuted he did not plead innocence, but instead took the taunts and insults humbly (St. Matthew 27:12); 'He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearer is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.' (Isaiah 53:7); And 'He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear a voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break and smoking flax shall he not govern, till he send forth judgment unto victory.' (St. Matthew 12:19-20); for it was his desire to save us from eternal damnation '...Behold the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world'. (St. John 1:29). In his humanity, Jesus Christ suffered from all types of human weaknesses and suffered for us. 'But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed' (Isaiah 53:5) He came to save us who are sinners. "I do not come to call the righteous but the sinners to repentance" (Mark:2 v17)

On suffering Friday, the Holy Saviour of the world was crucified and died in the flesh on the cross. In reference to St. John 10:17-18, it is noted that Christ's life wasn't taken away

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from him, rather, he lay it down: `Therefore, doth my father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again'. He is the only one who was a sacrificed for the sins of the world and for that He gave His life as a ransom for the salvation of many. (St. Matthew:20 v28). It is written in the Holy bible `....God commandeth his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8) on the cross.

Hence from that day onwards, the cross became the symbol of life and salvation for Christians.

Thus, as it is written, `But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by whom is the world crucified unto me, and I unto the world'. (Galatians 6:14). Also, 'For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish is foolishness but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.' (1Corinthians 1:18 and Philippians 3:18).

On the third day, which is known as Easter (Tinsae), by his divine power Christ rose from the dead. 'For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead...' (1Corinthians: 5 v20-22). This once again reinforces the fact that God came to save us. This point is further emphasized in 'The Anaphora of St. Dioscorus,' 'The immortal died, died to destroy death, died to quicken the dead as he promised them with the word of the covenant' (p.160 v.35). Jesus who was crucified has risen as He said, "He is not here but risen: remember how He spoke unto you saying the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and on the third say rise again." (St. Mark: 16 v6, St Matthew: 28 v6, St. Luke:24 v6-7 & St. John:20 v19-20) The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the strength of Christianity (Hebrew: 11 v1-3) As it is written, "If Christ is not risen your faith is futile: you are still in your sins" (1st Cor:15 v17, Hosea:6 v2)

This is one of the reasons why Easter is sun an important religious festival in the eyes of Orthodox Christians throughout the world perhaps even the most important. For Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido followers, Easter symbolizes victory and freedom, thus, it is celebrated with the highest spiritual regard, in comparison to all other religious ceremonies. (Abba Gorgorious – Archbishop, The History of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church (June 1982) p. 132)

When analyzing specifically the concept of resurrection and who it applies to; we discover that first and foremost it does not apply to angels, since they can never died in the first place. Hence, out of all the remaining creatures, only man has been given (by the grace of God) the ability to resurrect (rise from death). We die in flesh but our soul is for eternity. Refer to Psalm 31:5 'Into thine hand I commit my spirit.' Psalm 31:5; Genesis 2:7 '....and man became a living soul', Acts 7:59; 1 Peter 3:18-19 'For Christ also has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the

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flesh, but quickened by the spirit. By which also he went and preached unto the spirit in prison.’ & Revelations 6:9 ‘And when he had opened that fifth seal, I saw under the alter the souls of them that were slain for the word of God and the testimony which he held.’ The above readings will give us a much better understanding of this. Also, long after the death of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God said ‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ (Exodus 3:15 & Acts 7:32). Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ confirmed this by saying’....For he is not a God of the dead but of the living: for all live unto him’ (St. Luke 20:36-38 and St. Matthew 22:29-32).

Brothers and sisters in Christ we must always contemplate death; since death is certain and it will come to everyone. We just don’t know when it will come. Since death is an inevitable part of life, we must prepare to meet God. Hence, Judgment Day will also come; ‘And as it is appointed unto men to die, but after this the judgment’ (Hebrews 9:27).

According to the word of God, we must inevitably spend eternity in one of two places: either, heaven or hell. In reference to Daniel 12:2; ‘And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.’ And St. John 5:28-29; ‘Marvel not at this; for the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.’ Also Psalm 9:17; ‘The wicked shall be turned into hell and all the nations that forget God.’ Therefore, we must not worry needlessly regarding earthly issues, which will come to pass, sooner or later. We must vow to remember God and his commandments. We must love and fear him; ‘And fear not them which kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him which is able to destroy both should and body in hell.’ (St. Matthew 10:28, Phili:2 v12).

Now, the essential question is ‘How can we inherit the everlasting kingdom of God?’ We will be able to become part of the kingdom of God through two ways. First, and foremost, through believing in the Holy Trinity and getting baptized; and secondly, through following the commandments of God. For neither is complete without the other.

However, we cannot only be saved by joining the church, getting baptized and by keeping the law: ‘...by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.’ (Galatians; 2:16). In our heart and our whole being we must repent our former sins. We have to admit that we have sinned. ‘There is none that doeth good, no, not one.’ (Romans; 3:12). We can be saved if we repent and receive God into our life; ‘...except ye repent, ye shall be likewise perish.’ (St. Luke; 13:3) “For salvation one has to believe with his heart for righteousness and confess with the mouth” (Romans: 10 v10) As St. Luke; 15:10 reads ‘There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth’, we are commanded to repent before God. ‘...thou are fallen and repent and do the first works; or else I will come

unto those quickly and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.' (Revelations 2:5). By repentance through the Holy Spirit we will be of a clean heart and a changed mind, which will aid us to turn from our sins and help us keep to the path of God. Once one has repented, then we can start thinking about taking Holy Communion.

The mystery of Christ's resurrecting revolves around God's revelation of love towards us. Christ became vulnerable due to His love for us. Christ's resurrection is a combination of his vulnerability (his humanitarian aspect) and his mighty power (his divinity to overcome death and give us everlasting life). Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ asked us to eat his flesh and drink his blood so that we are able to attain eternal life.

The flesh and blood Christ took from the Virgin Mary also rose on the third day. This is the greatest mystery of Christ's resurrection. It clearly shows that God became man and man became God and glorified through Tewahido. In every liturgical reading, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the lamb who, is sacrificed in the hold of holies and given as Holy Communion to the faithful (St. John; 1:29; 6:51-59 and St. Matthew 26:26-28). Moreover, it is written '....These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.' (Revelation; 7:13-14).

As the present day skeptics contemplated whether or not to fully believe the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, he deliberately manifested and said to his disciples, '....Why are you troubled? And why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he showed them his hands and feet... and he said unto them, Have you here any meat? And they gave him a piece of broiled fish and of an honeycomb. And he took it and did eat before them.' (St. Luke; 24:32-43). Since Thomas was not with the other disciples, he did not believe them when they told him that they saw Jesus Christ and he said I don't believe except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails and put my finger in. After eight days when all the disciples were gathered together with St. Thomas being among them, Jesus Christ appeared. 'Then saith he to Thomas, reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him my Lord and my God. Jesus said unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed; blessed are they that have not seen and yet believed.' (St. John; 20:27-29).

Once we have been resurrected from death on the day of judgment, we will have no need for food and drink because we shall live like the angels. However, Jesus Christ ate and drank after his resurrection (before his ascension into heaven) in order to ascertain his humanity, and not because he required food or drink. If he hadn't eaten or drank anything, perhaps people would have claimed his actions to be those of a ghostly apparition. Everything that Christ did and thought was not written in the Holy Gospel. (St. John: 21 v25) Even after His resurrection He stayed for forty days and gave the apostles spiritual

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guidance. He taught them about the church, its structure, its administration and doctrine, which we inherited through our forefathers. That is the tradition of our apostolic orthodox church which is not written in the Holy Gospel but passed on by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

“Being with them (apostles) during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” (Acts: 1 v2-3). Then He was ascended into Heaven.....He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight. (Acts:1 v9-11) “God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of trumpet.” (Psalm 45 v5)

Since our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’s ascension into heaven, we must prepare ourselves for his second coming: the day of final judgment. ‘Our God shall come and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him and it shall be very tempestuous round about him.’ (Psalm; 50:3) As it is also spoken by Christ himself, “The Stars of Heaven shall be shaken.....And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send His angels with great sound of trumpet, and they shall gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of Heaven to the other.” (St. Matthew:24 v24-28 and St. Luke:24 v27-28) Revelation 1:7, “Behold he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him and they also which pierced him; and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him.’ Also Acts:1 v11.

Praise and glory be to God who gave us the courage to being this article and help to complete it.
Amen

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