

Dear friends,



My usual after-the-fact greetings, from Ethiopia this time (flag at left) and Rome, from which I am now safely home. I left for Addis Ababa on September 29, via Washington and Rome, and arrived on October 1, ten time zones to the east, an exhausting 28 (or does that make it 38?) hours later.

Addis Ababa is a dreary Third World capital, with very little of beauty or interest. It is quite spread out along wide avenues, which has the Los Angeles-like effect of making distances between points of interest too great to walk. The public transport is mostly a system of private minivans, which you have to hail on the street at unmarked points and inquire in Amharic where they are going, unworkable for foreigners, and some similarly unworkable buses. So I engaged a driver named Wossen, who picked me up at my hotel most days and took me where I wanted to go in his car. I had him drive around quite a bit so I could get to know the city.



The more I saw of Addis Ababa, the less I liked it. Streets are choked with cars in the Third World manner, and air pollution is sickening to Calcutta levels. The broad avenues got to be so broad when the government knocked down the homes and shops, or parts of them, that lay on either side of the road. People who had some parts left of their buildings covered the holes with corrugated iron in the *favela* manner (right), which transformed slums into even worse eyesore shanty towns.



Boring ugly boxy towers rise along the boulevards (above); the plan seems to be to knock down whatever humble habitations stand in the way of building even more towers. Filthy water runs down the rocky unpaved lanes between the boulevards, African villages without a countryside (below). There were a few parks, but all I saw were locked except one that was only open for a fee too high for ordinary people to afford; it too was empty, because people who could afford admission didn't need to use it.



Among the things I wanted to see in Addis Ababa were relics of the Ethiopian Empire, extinguished when the Communists deposed Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 with predictably disastrous results, and Italian buildings surviving from Mussolini's brief (1936-42) occupation of the country. There *are* a few Italian structures left, especially in a district called the Piazza (not actually a *piazza* at all), and occasionally elsewhere. Here's one (left). They are worn and shabby now, 70 or so years later, but still have the exuberant lines of the Italian Art Deco. They stand out among the relentlessly banal structures around them. Asmara, in Eritrea, which was Italian far longer than Ethiopia was, has whole neighborhoods of prime Italian Deco buildings. I wanted to go there to see them, but because of feuding between the two countries Eritrea cannot be reached from Ethiopia. There were also a *very* few isolated pre-Italian buildings, spacious breezy fragile wooden structures with jettied second-story galleries.



There is even less left of the Empire than of the Italians. Two city palaces are now highly restricted government installations under heavy guard – the sentries wouldn't



even let my driver slow down near them. A few statues and monuments remain, mostly inaccessible inside traffic circles. The National Museum had some crowns and robes and an elaborate throne made for the Emperor by the Indian community of Harar. I did visit the imperial tombs in the Kiddist Selassie church



(left), and said the Kali mantra there. The highly carved imperial pew was still in place, inside the chancel in the Orthodox fashion (right) – note the lion armrests. And some fine imperial flags hung from the walls. But mostly in Ethiopia it was as if that time had never been, erased by the thuggish vandalism of the Communist period (1974-1991). My hope of finding imperial-era relics in antiquarian bookstores was doomed because there are no such bookstores in Ethiopia, and believe me I looked. The only old books for sale are used paperbacks, a few odd volumes of Ethiopian history, and bound religious manuscripts in curio shops.



The people in Ethiopia are beautiful to look at, and as far as I could tell (which was not far) seem cheerful and resilient despite awful living conditions and really bad government. Wide smiles everywhere, and deep bred-in-the-bone courtesy. A surprising number of people speak at least some English – it is taught in the schools and people really learn it. Amharic is a Semitic language written in a syllabic script of fearsome complexity – even if I could read the script it wouldn't help, because the words would still be in Amharic. Here's a sample.

ቴዎድሮስ ኃይለ ሥላሴን ጋራ፡፡
 ሀቴታህ ሀጠቱን ስገራ ያገራቸው ሥላሴ ሃይለ ሥላሴ
 ቀድሞ ሠራ ሀገራችንን ያገለግላል ስለሆነው ስለሆነው ስለሆነው
 ስለሆነው ያገራቸው ሥላሴ ሃይለ ሥላሴ ስለሆነው ስለሆነው ስለሆነው

Some of the sights of the town were inaccessible (to me anyway), up long steep stairways and/or rocky hillsides which defeated me in my first days there because of the altitude [7546 feet]. Clambering to the tomb of the Emperor Menelik (up endless stairs, then down into a crypt under the floor) nearly wiped me out. Seeing me gasping, Wossen

recommended against trying for Menelik's palace, up an *additional* 2000 feet in the mountain district of Entoto. After about a week I got used to the altitude, but the steep grades were still a barrier.

A lot of the sights which *were* accessible were not very interesting. The National Museum had a few good things, including some imperial relics, and the Postal Museum had a well-mounted exhibit of early postal issues. But although the Addis Ababa



Museum (city history) was set in a picturesque decaying pre-Italian wooden building, its exhibits were mainly fuzzy old photographs pinned to the wall, which it was too dark even to see without the pocket flashlight I had the foresight to bring along.

One place I really liked was St. George's Cathedral (left). Like many Ethiopian churches it is an octagon, and closed most of the

time – services begin at four in the morning, or sometimes midnight, and are over by eight. I managed to get in anyway by finding the sexton, and there were some nice murals of historic scenes (replacing those destroyed by General Graziani, who didn't like one showing the Battle of Adowa in 1896, where Ethiopian spearmen defeated the Italian army). Since the church is closed during the day, people pray outside, touching the walls. My favorite thing about this place was not the cathedral itself but the spacious, peaceful churchyard, where doves cooed and people sat quietly on benches, reading or praying. Enormous tortoises roamed the grounds, *very* slowly, eating leaves and grass. It was an island of calm, restful energy in the frantic noisy city. I went back several times and told Wossen to leave me there until I called him (by cell phone).

Knowing from India how relaxing it can be in a Third World (or even First World) city to have a green area to retreat to, I arranged to stay at the Ghion Hotel, flagship of the government hotel chain, set in its own park (connected to the grounds of the former Imperial Palace) and supposedly the best hotel in town except for the outrageously priced Sheraton and Hilton. It was still pretty expensive for Ethiopia, but cheaper than a Best Western in Springfield, Missouri. And the rooms were bright and wide and comfortable enough once some problems were fixed. But the food was wretched beyond belief, horrible overcooked meat in greasy sauces, dead insects in the butter. The nearly (and sometimes actually) inedible meals were served in high European style, with thick napkins and covered dishes and service always to the left. I could have done with a little less elegance and a little more attention to the food. But I put up with it because Addis distances put me too far away from anywhere else to look for alternatives, and even if I

found an appealing local restaurant I could not count on not getting food poisoning. So I ate a lot of bananas and cookies, as I do in India, and the Ethiopian-style breakfast buffets were pretty good. The dining room was always full of European couples and the Ethiopian orphans they had come to adopt.

Surreal piped-in music (for example a *faux*-jazz Montovani-style version of “Blowin’ in the Wind”) played relentlessly in the Ghion during the day, and Ethiopian drums (supposedly entertainment for the guests) went late into the night, clearly audible in my sealed third-floor room in the next building. The *adhan* (Moslem call to prayer) sang out five times a day; Christian liturgical songs in Amharic or Ge’ez continued all night from a nearby church. The Arabs say “prayer is better than sleep”; I guess the Ethiopians feel the same way. I wore earplugs to blot most of it out.

Flocks of tiny goats the size of dogs run apparently free in the streets. Peasants six days from their home meadows lead single cows to the abattoir. There is *qat* for sale – I regretted having given up drugs before I got my chance to try some. Carrion birds always glide overhead, waiting for something to die. I saw logos and decorations everywhere in the green-yellow-red colors of the national flag (actually the basic background for Ethiopian paintings centuries before the flag was first created). At the National Library, where I was received with courtesy and indeed deference, I found a handsome manuscript of Emperor Menelik’s flag law of 1906, which I am going to try to publish.



Twice I asked Wossen to take me out of the city. The countryside started at the city limits where we entered the province of Oromia (flag at left). They use Amharic there, but also Oromo, a Cushitic language written in Roman letters. Here’s a sample: **Qubeelee armaan olitti barreeffaman alattis Qubeen Afaan Oromoo qubee guguddaa warra qubee dachaa ta’a of keessaa qaba.** (That’s easy for *you* to say.)

Loose donkeys on the roads. More goats and cattle – children maybe five years old ruled the herds with sticks. Men rode ponies. I saw a shepherd talking on a cell phone.

Fields are divided with jagged lines like shards of glass, very striking from the air. I saw farmers digging furrows with a single-stick



plows pulled by oxen (two in the picture, but I saw many farmers using only one). Women winnow grain, tossing it in the air at roadside threshing floors and catching it in wicker baskets (the lighter chaff blows away). Then they line up at a mill to process it; the grinding wheel runs on a belt connected to a small gasoline engine.



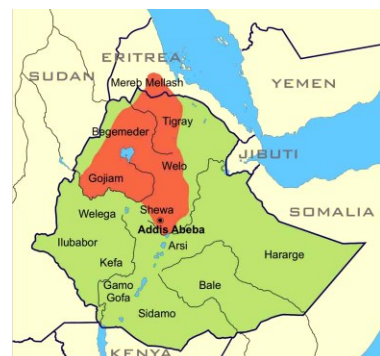
Wheat, barley and *teff* (used for *injera*, the special spongy Ethiopian bread) grow in weedy fields dusted with yellow and red flowers. Light green and dark green; yellow and brown; accents of orange and purple. Brown hills and rough open land, like western Nebraska (but with mountains), higher dark hills beyond. Structures of daub and wattle. Round thatched huts with sides made of sticks. But just off the road, in an open field, a complete Chinese factory!

We left the paved road and stopped at a crossing over a stream. Schoolchildren trooped to and from school (split sessions). Schoolchildren in Ethiopia wear T-shirts or overblouses in a single bright color, which varies by school – a whole river of red T-shirts crossed past me on the bridge. Animals everywhere; women at the stream washing clothes and filling jerry-cans (for making bricks, it turned out, not for drinking). A scene from Breughel except for the T-shirts. Foreigners are not ordinarily seen in those parts – children gathered around me asking where I was from. I told them I had come all the way from America just to see them, which in a way was sort of true.

At a rural church I met a woman who was waiting for a deacon to cure her daughter of the Evil Eye. I told her I could cure the Evil Eye, laid my hands on the child's head, and said the Ganesh mantra. I'm sure this worked at least as well as anything the deacon could have done. "What new doctrine is this? For with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him." Mark 1:27.



Finally I left Addis Ababa and flew to Lalibela. I had wanted to drive, but the guidebooks advised that would mean several bone-shattering days on rocky unpaved roads and not to try it, so I didn't. Lalibela is in Amhara Province (flag at left), and so was my next stop Gonder. Both, like Addis, are in the highlands, which has a mild and equable climate year round, unlike the searing



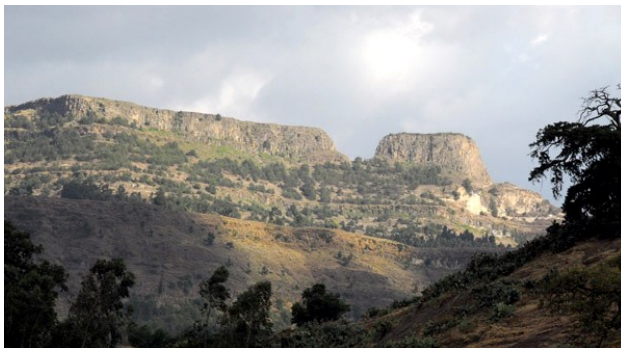
heat at sea level. The map above shows the extent of the highlands.

Lalibela looks like it was landscaped by Dr. Seuss. Mesas and knobs look like the American Southwest, except they are green all the way up. An agricultural valley lies far below, villages of huts on brown earth, surrounded by fields of green and yellow. People and animals plod along the dirt tracks connecting the villages, and up the mountainside



on narrow switchback paths to the distant town.

Heavy erosion has left bizarre pinnacles and precipices; hillsides are terraced to contain the mudslides. Flowers, birds, buzz of insects; smell of dust, wood smoke, and dung. A constant ululation of animal cries and people's voices rises from the valley floor.



The Tukul Village Hotel is a compound of buildings in the round style of the local huts, but *much* larger and of solid construction rather than rough sticks and mud, with balconies and picture windows, and electricity and running water and television. I had a lovely New Mexico-style view from my balcony (left). Meals in the dining room were barely edible, but

a lot better than at the Ghion. Tiny speckled eggs for breakfast, fresh from the chicken.

In the town, little urban villages crowd at every level and angle. Roosters crow. My driver Abraham escorts me so I won't seem too intrusive a presence. A can on a pole means a *shebeen* (outlet for home-made beer) – I am invited to visit but decline, with regret, because there is no polite way to do that without sampling the beer, certainly made with contaminated water and served in a cup rinsed, if at all, in more of the same. Can't risk it. No to *qat* also, but thanks anyway.

The reason to go to Lalibela is the so-called rock-hewn churches. These structures, some from the 12th century, are quite amazing; the monolithic churches themselves *and* the spaces between them have been carved whole out of solid rock. Here's one (below) – the church, plinth, plaza and surrounding walls are all one continuous substance.

Samuel Johnson famously said about a dog walking on its hind legs that “It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.” The same may be said of the rock-hewn churches. Astounding though it is that



they were created, when you actually get inside they are (understandably) very dark, gloomy and cramped. The wall paintings



are usually so covered with soot from candles that they could not be seen even if there were adequate light. My pocket flashlight didn't help much. Occasional fluorescent fixtures provide glare without much brightening. At left is a picture

of the grim inside of one of the churches, and even this was flash-illuminated.



Moreover, the churches are very difficult to get to, down long flights of dangerous, rocky, crumbling uneven stairs. This stairway (left) has only a few steps, but many (I couldn't find a picture) are much longer and more perilous. I held on to Abraham like Gandhi leaning on his niece. I'm not quite sure why the stairs are kept so forbiddingly rough after 800 years as a pilgrimage center. Even beyond the stairs, every surface is treacherous. I didn't visit all 13 churches in the Lalibela complex – with such depressing interiors and dangerous access a few seemed like enough.

As in Addis, I asked Abraham to take me into the countryside, and we drove down a winding road into the magical sunlit valley I had seen from the heights above. It was a quiet world

of round huts and goats picking at shrubs; children guarding herds; firewood carried on bent backs; men breaking up rocks in the stream. The same crops as in Oromia – barley, *teff*, wheat, beans, hay, weeds. All very ancient-feeling, and dusty, and primitive. This deep in the country, women no longer dress in the western style. The pavement stopped at the edge of town. As we picked our way along the rocky gravel road, Abraham pointed proudly to a sign which said there would be a brand new road in three years (at a cost of \$24 million). So what that the sign was dated 2007, three years *ago*, and the project which should have been completed by now hadn't even started? Progress was coming!

Although the goal was just to see some country, our nominal destination was a group of churches and monasteries about 30 km north of Lalibela. But to get even to the “easiest” of these sites required crossing a stream on a trail of loose stones and then scrambling up a sheer rock face even to get to the stairs! Not for me, I decided. You can afford to break your leg when you’re young. But not at 66, in an icy stream *way* beyond the gravel road itself 30 km from a provincial town in rural Ethiopia. If I’m going to break my leg, I’m going to do it where I can get to a decent hospital in a proper ambulance.

After a few days in Lalibela I moved on, again by air, to the more substantial city of Gonder. It had a genuine downtown, built around a square (again called the Piazza) with some Italian buildings.

The main attraction is a group of half-ruined 17th century castles, built when Gonder was a royal capital. This complex, called the Royal Enclosure (partial view, right), is of mild interest, good for a couple of hours if you do it slowly, but not worth going all the way to Gonder to see.



The best thing I saw in Ethiopia was in Gonder, though – the Debre Birhan Selassie church, where the paintings are accessible, visible and worth seeing. The building itself is rather primitive – walls of mud and straw and dung, doors and windows of rough planking. But the paintings (see below) are prime stuff. See the example below – the



three identical old men in white beards are the Trinity (*Selassie*). The seraphic faces below are painted on the beamed ceiling. This is one church I'm glad I did not miss.



Among the Gondar sites was a bathing pavilion they were doing some work on. Here's how it's done: one man mixes mortar, another hammers down a brick with a mallet, a third watches. Stones are moved by hand in a two-person wooden hod. Scaffolding is made of sticks; ladders are made on the spot with sticks and nails. Even if I were really young, and thin, and supple and athletic, I wouldn't climb one of those ladders.



As in the other cities, I arranged with my driver to take me out of town. Hilltops and terraces; planted valleys and grazing animals. Women gather eucalyptus leaves to sell for fuel. The deforestation I had seen elsewhere in Ethiopia is especially noticeable near Gondar. Hillsides are clear-cut, every tree a stump. Old women walk doubled up under huge bundles of sticks, some still bearing green leaves, which means they were just cut. People spend all day going further and further out looking for wood and hauling it back, with incalculable numbing labor and loss of productivity. And of course

there is erosion everywhere, and mudslides in the rainy season. Government-issue propane cookers, much cheaper in the long run, could solve this problem.

I spent three weeks in Ethiopia, *much* more time than I needed to see the interesting parts of the highlands. The jungle and the Rift Valley and the Simien Mountains (where the *Iliad* records Zeus went on vacation) and the Afar pastoral areas may have more to offer. But still I was glad to have seen the rock-hewn churches, and the castles of Gonder, and the Debre Birhan Selassie church, and *really* glad to have seen the hills and valleys, and the round thatched huts, and the goats, and the flowers, and even the deforestation, which I had read about but never seen up close.

After three weeks, though, despite the smiling faces around me, I was seriously tired of filth and squalor and bad food, and past ready for Europe. So a little after midnight on October 21 (why do planes out of exotic countries always leave in the middle of the night?) I flew to Rome (because of old colonial links the European hub of Ethiopian Airlines) and arrived at the convenient time of quarter to six in the morning.

I had rented an apartment in an ordinary neighborhood just outside the historic center (near the Piazza dei Re di Roma). I got a good deal on it, and thought it might be nice to stay in a quieter neighborhood. But Re di Roma was drab and grotty, and once home in the afternoon there was not much reason to go out again (as there would have been downtown). This just in: always go for the *centro storico*. Live and learn. I ate picnic dinners at home, bread and olives and gorgonzola and *prosciutto crudo* from the genial corner grocer, and went to bed early. The view above: *not* Re di Roma.

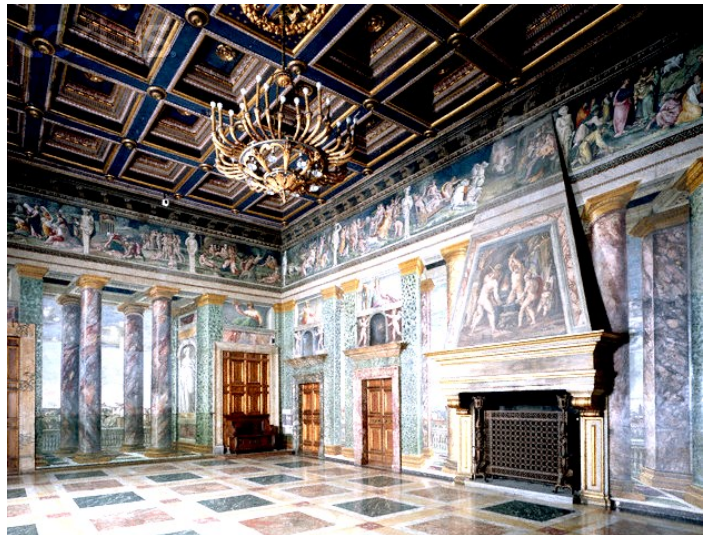


Piazza dei Re di Roma did have a few amenities, though. There was a café right there for my morning *cornetto* (croissant); there was a newsstand that reserved a daily *Herald Tribune* for me; there was a Metro station where I set off each day with my weekly transit pass and rode quickly and easily to some other *piazza* (Repubblica, Barberini, Spagna) near the sight of the day, or where I could catch the necessary bus.

I rode a lot of buses, using my handy complicated bus map, sometimes to get somewhere I planned to go, and sometimes just to ride and look out the window. What a change from Ethiopia! My plan was not to do a full-dress tour of Rome, as I had already seen most of the major sights, but just to revisit a few favorite places, and see the Pope, and

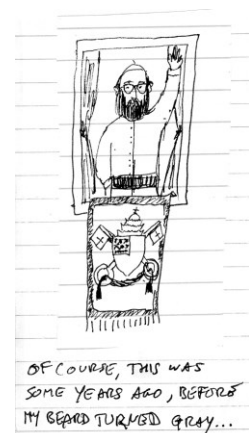
buy some Italian heraldic books, and eat Italian food, and enjoy being in Italy. And so it worked out.

I had not been to Rome for many years, and the place I had thought about most since was the Villa Farnesina, a small but opulent suburban retreat across the Tiber in Trastevere. It was built about 500 years ago by the banker Agostino Chigi, and every room is painted from floor to ceiling by Raphael and others. It was just as devastatingly beautiful as I had remembered it. Here's a sample (right; the marble pillars on the far wall are actually painted on a flat surface).



St. Peter's Basilica was another place I had dreamed about and wanted to see again. It is one of the greatest interior spaces in the world (left). Bramante and Michelangelo knew a thing or two our modern architects could learn from. When I visited museums and palaces I always said: *Per piacere, signor, vorrei un' biglietto ridotto, perchè io sono assai vecchio* [please, sir, I'd like a reduced price ticket because I am so old]. In theory a *biglietto ridotto* is available only to citizens of the European Union, so they asked me for *documenti*. I brought my hand up to my gray beard and said: *Ecco i miei documenti* [behold my documents]. It worked every time, and sometimes they let me in free.

I had a reservation at the Pope's general audience on October 27. I had seen Pope JP2 at a general audience and shaken his hand, and wanted to do the same with Papa Ratz. But the day I had to pick up my ticket I was immobilized with gout, so I couldn't go. I did, however, see the Pope at the mass blessing in St. Peter's Square, where he appears every Sunday at a window marked with a tapestry of his



arms. I had seen this often on television, and wanted to experience it in person. I stood in the shade of the obelisk in the round square and waited for him to appear. A few minutes before noon minions put out the tapestry, so we all knew where to look. Then at the stroke of noon he appeared, to the cheers of the crowd which filled the square, and gave the same slightly overlong speech in Italian, French, Spanish, English, German and Polish. I had not realized just how far away that window was – the Pope appeared very tiny at that distance. But there he was, just the same.

Rome is a fabulously beautiful city, even if it *is* crowded and noisy and crammed with tourists. I love the encyclopedic mixture of architectural styles, the odd angles and jumbled profusion, the stately rooflines, the exuberant ornament, the lovely soft yellows and pinks and browns, and that special Roman kaleidoscope feeling. Below is a picture my friend Rudolf Wiegmann painted on our first visit there in 1834. Except for paved streets along the riverbank, it looks very similar today. I took a boat ride on the river and then climbed the 60 steps to the street, and after that all the way up to the top of the Castel Sant'Angelo (the great pile at the right of the picture, higher today than it was then, built by the Popes above Hadrian's tomb). There is a fabulous view of the whole city from the top, plus magnificent painted rooms inside. The climb seemed relatively easy now that I had oxygen again.



I had plotted more than 80 antiquarian bookstores on a map, and I walked all over the old city going from one to the other. I didn't reach them all, but I got to a lot of them, and called dozens more on my shiny new European cell phone. I ended up bringing back 22 heraldic books. Most of them were new, in Italian and unobtainable in the United States, but I also managed to find a copy of the official Italian Navy flag book from 1942, which I had wanted for years but never seen. This quest gave me a route to wander, so I was not walking aimlessly. If you look carefully, and can recognize them, you can see Fascist and Savoyard decorative details on buildings and public structures all over Rome, and the arms of nearly all the popes of the past six hundred years.

My friend Brother Bill Short, O.F.M., a Franciscan friar, happened to be in Rome at the same time I was, and we spent some pleasant times together. He invited me to tea, and later to lunch, at the Irish Franciscan house in Rome, a place called St. Isidore's College just above the highly fashionable Via Veneto. It is a rambling but deliciously homey building, with cozy nooks and cloisters, just visible here in orange behind the palm tree, in its own enclosure next to St. Isidore's church. The Franciscans have been here since the early 17th century, and it has a lived-in feel. Lunch with the friendly friars and scholars and librarians was the highlight of my visit to Rome, better even than the Pope – it felt like a scene from a Catholic novel by J. F. Powers.



After two weeks in Rome, five weeks in all on the road, I finally flew home on November 3 (22 hours *en route*), glad to have made the trip, but glad it was over, too. I'm not entirely certain why I do all this traveling, which while instructive and broadening is also stressful and exhausting and expensive and time-consuming. Itchy feet? Whatever. I plan to keep doing it anyway.

David

November 2010

St. George
and the Dragon,
from
Debre Birhan Selassie
church, Gondar.
Note the tricolor
background.

