

ETHIOPIAN PRELATES: MIKA'EL I (fl. early twelfth century)

It is possible (though not certain) that he was the direct successor of Abuna Giyorgis I. Christened Habib al-Atfihi, he assumed the name Mika'el (Mkha'il in Arabic) upon his elevation to the seat of Ethiopia by MACARIUS II (1102-1128).

According to the *History of the Patriarchs*, Mika'el's [episcopate](#) was marked by two episodes important in the history of Ethiopia. The first occurred during the pontificate of GABRIEL II (1131-1145), when the king of Ethiopia (unnamed in the Arabic text) asked the [Metropolitan](#) Mika'el to consecrate some bishops as coadjutors in numbers larger than that permitted by canon law. In the margin of the Arabic text, a note of doubtful value adds that at the time, the number allowed in the [Coptic church](#) was seven. However, the [metropolitan](#) replied to the king that he did not have the power to accede to this request without the patriarch's authorization, whereupon the king made his request directly both to the [patriarch](#) and to the [Fatimid](#) caliph al-Hafiz (1130-1149), who likewise attempted to influence the [patriarch](#) in this matter.

The latter adroitly defended himself by explaining to the caliph that if the number of bishops in Abyssinia surpassed the canonical limit, these bishops could then elect their own [metropolitan](#) on site, which would risk removing Christian Ethiopia from all influence coming from Egypt. The caliph accepted this argument and did not insist further. For his part, the [patriarch](#) took care to write to the Ethiopian ruler, exhorting him to desist from his request. Meanwhile, since Ethiopia had been struck by diverse disasters, such as drought, famine, and epidemics, the king hastened to renounce his request, and renewed his allegiance to the patriarch. Gabriel II then sent his blessing to the Ethiopian king, and all calamities came to an end.

Mika'el I continued his episcopal reign in Ethiopia during the brief pontificates of both MICHAEL V (1145-1146) and JOHN V (1147-1167).

It was during John's pontificate that the second episode related in the *History of the Patriarchs* occurred. The king of Ethiopia (unnamed in the Arabic text) wrote a letter to the powerful vizier al-'Adil, that is, 'Ali ibn al-Salar, vizier to the [Fatimid](#) caliph al-Zafir (1149-1154). In this letter, which was no doubt accompanied by an important gift, the king asked the vizier to order [Patriarch](#) John V to name a new [metropolitan](#) to replace Mika'el, who had grown too old. However, John was able to ascertain the true reason for this request: the Ethiopian king had illegally seized the throne, and because Mika'el continued to condemn the usurpation, the king wished to rid himself of the venerable prelate. Therefore, the [patriarch](#) replied that a new metropolitan could not be named so long as Mika'el was alive. Furious, 'Ali ibn al-Salar had John cast into prison, where he remained until the vizier's death.

'Ali ibn al-Salar was assassinated in 1153. Historically, this episode is difficult to interpret. According to C. Rossini (1928, pp. 289-90, 303), the usurpation opposed by Mika'el was the one perpetrated by the first sovereign of the Zagwe dynasty, who seized power around 1137. This thesis is based on certain legends, which claim that this dynasty remained in power for 133 years before relinquishing its rule in 1270 to Yekunno Amlak, first ruler of the so-called Solomonic dynasty.

The date of Abuna Mika'el's death and the names of his immediate successors are unknown. Nevertheless, it is certain that there was at least one [metropolitan](#) who ruled after him and before Abuna Mika'el II, for it is known that the latter was named near the beginning of the thirteenth century at the request of King Lalibala to replace a metropolitan who had just died.

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