

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Elesbaan (Kaleb of Aksum)

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: October 27

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IN BRIEF

Saint Elesbaan (Kaleb of Aksum)

Christian king of Aksum, in Ethiopia, in the sixth century, who intervened in Yemen to defend persecuted Christians.

Feast day	October 27
Era	6th century

In this booklet

Life

Prayer to Saint Elesbaan for Persecuted Christians

Novena to Saint Elesbaan

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Elesbaan (Kaleb of Aksum)

Saint Elesbaan is the name by which the Latin tradition knows Kaleb, king of Aksum, the ancient Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, who reigned around 520. He is remembered for his expedition to Yemen, undertaken to put an end to the persecution of the Christians of the Arabian Peninsula. Entered in the Roman Martyrology in the sixteenth century by Cardinal Baronius, he is celebrated on October 27. He is one of the rare African kings honored as a saint in the Latin Church, and a witness to the deep roots of Christianity in Africa.

Who was Saint Elesbaan?

Kaleb is the best-documented of the kings of Aksum. His throne name, Ella Asbeha or Ella Atsbeha, was distorted in Greek and Latin: the Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea calls him Hellestheaios, from which the form Elesbaan comes, while other chroniclers of the time call him Andas or Aidog. On his coins, found at Aksum, and in Ethiopian sources, he is called the son of Tazena. According to the historian Jacqueline Pirenne, he may have reigned around 518-525.

This variety of names explains why English readers may meet him as Elesbaan, Ella Asbeha or Kaleb of Axum (an older spelling of Aksum). All these names refer to the same king, the one the Roman Martyrology calls Saint Elesbaan.

The kingdom of Aksum, on the highlands of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, had become Christian in the fourth century under the influence of Saint Frumentius. By Kaleb's time it was a powerful trading state on the Red Sea, minting its own coins and in contact with the Roman world of Byzantium.

Key dates

- **4th century**: The kingdom of Aksum becomes Christian under the influence of Saint Frumentius.
- **c. 518**: Kaleb, son of Tazena, probably begins his reign as king of Aksum.
- **Early 6th century**: King Yusuf of Himyar, known as Dhu Nuwas, persecutes the Christians of Yemen; the massacres of Najran shock the Christian world.
- **c. 520-525**: Kaleb crosses the Red Sea, defeats Yusuf and installs a Christian viceroy, Sumuafa' Ashawa'.
- **c. 525 and after**: Abraha seizes power in Yemen and Kaleb's attempts to restore his authority fail.
- **16th century**: Cardinal Baronius enters him in the Roman Martyrology under the name Saint Elesbaan.

What we know of his reign

- **c. 518**: probable beginning of his reign, according to some estimates.
- **c. 520-525**: expedition against the Himyarite kingdom of Yemen.
- **After his victory**: he installs a Christian viceroy, Sumuafa' Ashawa', who soon breaks away.
- **c. 525 and after**: Abraha takes power in Yemen; Kaleb's attempts to restore his authority fail.
- **Sixteenth century**: Cardinal Baronius enters him in the Roman Martyrology under the name Elesbaan.



Coin of King Kaleb of Aksum.

The expedition to Yemen

At the beginning of the sixth century, the Himyarite kingdom, in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, was ruled by Yusuf Asar Yathar, known in Arab tradition as Dhu Nuwas. This king, a follower of the Jewish religion, persecuted the Christians of his kingdom. The massacres in the city of Najran, whose victims are honored as martyrs by the Churches of East and West, made a great impression throughout the Christian world.

Procopius of Caesarea, John of Ephesus and other historians of the time report that Kaleb then crossed the Red Sea with his army, around 520. After hard fighting, his troops defeated those of Yusuf, who was killed. Kaleb appointed a local Christian, Sumuafa' Ashawa', as viceroy of Himyar. But the viceroy declared himself independent and was then overthrown by Abraha, who took the title of king. Kaleb's expeditions to restore his authority failed.

The story is not a simple tale of triumph. Kaleb's victory was real, but his political success was short-lived. What the Church remembered was not the conquest itself but the motive given for it: the defense of persecuted fellow Christians.

A saint between several traditions

It was because of his intervention on behalf of persecuted Christians that Cardinal Baronius added him, in the sixteenth century, to his edition of the Roman Martyrology, under the name Saint Elesbaan. This choice is remarkable, because Kaleb belonged to the Church of Ethiopia, which had not accepted the Council of Chalcedon. The sources vary on his feast day: October 27 in the Latin tradition, sometimes May 15, and October 24 in the Eastern Churches.

Tradition also relates that at the end of his life Kaleb gave up the throne to live as a monk, and that he sent his crown to Jerusalem. These hagiographical accounts are not confirmed by the historians of his time, and they should be read as pious tradition rather than established history.



The stelae of Aksum, capital of Kaleb's kingdom.

Why is Saint Elesbaan remembered today?

Saint Elesbaan has no traditional patronage. He is a distant figure, known mainly through foreign chroniclers and through his coins. The Latin Church has kept one deed from his life: a king who placed his power at the service of persecuted brothers and sisters beyond his own borders.

His memory also invites us to remember how ancient African Christianity is. Ethiopia was a Christian kingdom long before most of northern Europe received the Gospel. Today, Saint Elesbaan can be invoked for the Christians of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Yemen, for persecuted Christians in the Middle East and for those who hold power, that they may use it to protect the weak. For Catholics of African descent in the United States, Britain and elsewhere, he can be one of the early African saints who recall that the faith has deep roots on their continent.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Elesbaan in art

The most reliable images of Kaleb are not paintings but his own coins, which show the crowned bust of the king. In later devotional art, he may be shown as a crowned king, sometimes laying down his crown, in reference to the tradition that he ended his life as a monk.

Where to pray to Saint Elesbaan

Aksum, in the north of Ethiopia, the capital of his kingdom, remains the historic heart of Ethiopian Christianity, with its ancient stelae and the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion. It is the natural place to remember him. Wherever you are, his feast on October 27 is an occasion to pray for the Churches of the Horn of Africa and of the Arabian Peninsula.

To pray with him, see the prayer to Saint Elesbaan and the novena to Saint Elesbaan, from October 19 to 27.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Elesbaan for Persecuted Christians

No traditional prayer to Saint Elesbaan exists in Catholic devotion, and none of his own words has come down to us. What the Church has remembered of King Kaleb of Aksum is one deed: his concern for Christians persecuted beyond his borders, in the land of Najran and Himyar. We offer here an original prayer by Saintspedia, rooted in that memory.

Prayer to Saint Elesbaan for persecuted Christians

Saint Elesbaan, king of Aksum, you did not stay indifferent when your brothers and sisters in the faith were suffering across the sea. Pray for all Christians who are persecuted today, in the Middle East, in Africa and throughout the world. May they be strengthened in faith and protected from harm.

Pray for those who hold power, that they may use it not for their own glory but to defend the weak, to protect the innocent and to seek justice and peace.

Pray for the Churches of Ethiopia and Eritrea, heirs of an ancient faith, and for the people of Yemen, who have known so much suffering. May the God of peace console them.

Tradition tells that you laid down your crown to seek God alone: teach me to hold lightly the honors and possessions of this world, and to seek first the Kingdom of God.

I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence). Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Elesbaan is celebrated on October 27 in the Latin tradition, the same day the Roman Martyrology remembers Saint Frumentius, the apostle of Aksum. You can pray this prayer for persecuted Christians, for peace in the Horn of Africa and in Yemen, for political leaders and for Christians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origin around the world.

Remembering the martyrs of Najran

Saint Elesbaan's memory is inseparable from that of the Christians of Najran, killed for their faith in the sixth century and honored as martyrs by the Churches of East and West. You can add a short prayer for them:

> *Lord, you gave the martyrs of Najran the strength to remain faithful to the end. Through their intercession and that of Saint Elesbaan, support all who suffer today for the name of Jesus, and grant peace to the lands of Arabia and Africa. Amen.*

This short prayer is also an original text by Saintspedia.

For a longer time of prayer, follow the novena to Saint Elesbaan, and read the life of Saint Elesbaan.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Elesbaan

This novena is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what history and tradition tell of Saint Elesbaan, King Kaleb of Aksum. It is not an official liturgical text. To finish it on his feast day, October 27, begin it on October 19. It is above all a novena for persecuted Christians and for the ancient Churches of Africa and Arabia.

How to pray this novena

Each day, place your intention before God, read the short meditation and say the prayer of the day, followed by an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. The small act suggested for the day helps you carry the prayer into your daily life. Because we know little for certain about Kaleb's life, the meditations draw both on history and on the lessons the Church has seen in his memory.



Aksum, capital of the kingdom of Kaleb.

Day 1: An ancient faith

The kingdom of Aksum had received the Gospel in the fourth century through Saint Frumentius. When Kaleb reigned, Ethiopia had already been Christian for two centuries. African Christianity is among the oldest in the world, older than the faith of many European nations.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the faith that has been handed down through the centuries, in Africa and throughout the world.

Today: Learn something new about the history of the Church in Africa.

Day 2: A king who believed

Kaleb was a powerful ruler, minting coins and governing a trading kingdom on the Red Sea. Yet the Church remembers him not for his wealth but for his faith. Power is a responsibility before God, and every authority will one day

give an account of how it served.

Prayer: Lord, guide those who govern nations. Make them servants of the common good.

Today: Pray by name for the leaders of your country.

Day 3: Not indifferent

When news came of the persecution of Christians across the sea, Kaleb did not look away. Indifference is one of the great temptations of every age. It is easy to say that a distant tragedy is none of our business.

Prayer: Lord, keep my heart awake to the suffering of others, even those far away.

Today: Read news about a place where Christians are suffering, and pray for them.

Day 4: The martyrs of Najran

The Christians of Najran were killed for their faith. The Churches of East and West honor them as martyrs. Their courage still speaks to all who must choose between their faith and their safety.

Prayer: Lord, give your strength to those who are threatened for the name of Jesus.

Today: Support an organization that helps persecuted Christians, or pray a decade of the Rosary for them.

Day 5: Victory and its limits

Kaleb won his battle, but the peace he hoped to build did not last. Human power can only do so much, and force alone never builds a lasting peace. True peace is a gift of God, received in justice and reconciliation.

Prayer: Lord, when my plans fail, help me to trust in you and not lose heart.

Today: Entrust to God one project that has not turned out as you hoped.

Day 6: Peace for Yemen

The land where Kaleb fought has known much suffering, down to our own time. Let us pray for its people, of every faith, and for an end to war and hunger.

Prayer: God of peace, comfort the people of Yemen and of every land torn by war.

Today: Give, if you can, to a relief effort for people affected by war.

Day 7: The Churches of Ethiopia and Eritrea

Kaleb belonged to the ancient Church of Ethiopia, whose liturgy, monasteries and fasts have endured for centuries. Today the Christians of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Catholic and Orthodox, carry on that heritage, often amid hardship.

Prayer: Lord, bless the Christians of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and grant peace to their lands.

Today: Pray for Christians of Ethiopian or Eritrean origin in your city or country.

Day 8: Laying down the crown

Tradition says that Kaleb ended his life as a monk and sent his crown to Jerusalem. Historians cannot confirm it, but the story carries a truth: every earthly crown must one day be laid before God.

Prayer: Lord, free me from the desire for honor, and teach me to seek first your Kingdom.

Today: Give up, for one day, something you hold on to out of pride or comfort.

Day 9: Unity among Christians

Kaleb belonged to a Church that had not accepted the Council of Chalcedon, yet Cardinal Baronius entered him in the Roman Martyrology. His memory invites us to pray for unity among the Churches, which share so much in faith and in suffering.

Prayer: Lord, I place in your hands the intention of this novena. Through the intercession of Saint Elesbaan, protect persecuted Christians and bring your Church to unity. Amen.

Today: Pray for Christians of another Church, especially the ancient Churches of the East.

Closing prayer

Saint Elesbaan, king of Aksum, at the end of these nine days, I entrust to you the intention I have placed before you. Pray for persecuted Christians, for the peoples of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Yemen, and for all who hold power. Obtain for us hearts that are never indifferent to the suffering of others, and a faith that seeks first the Kingdom of God. Amen.

To go further: the life of Saint Elesbaan and the prayer to Saint Elesbaan.

CREDITS

Credits and sources

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