VERONIKA SIX

Article

Water — The Nile — And the Tä’ämrä Maryam. Miracles of the Virgin Mary in the Ethiopian Version
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The Nile had been and still is a connecting tie between the two countries, Ethiopia and Egypt. Each country is aware of the importance of the Nile water and also aware of its respective dependency. When for example in the second half of the 11th century, for nearly seven years (1066-72 A.D.) a famine caused by the failure of the annual flood of the Nile struck Egypt, the Khalif sent an embassy equipped with valuable gifts to the Ethiopian king who, he thought, was withholding the water. The Ethiopians accepted the gifts, they did not clarify the error, and also received in future years tribute (the Egyptians in response charged the Ethiopians for sending the Abunā). For centuries they had kept alive the idea of diverting the Nile and this is also a topic in one miracle of the corpus of the Tä'ämrá Maryam [= Miracles of Mary]

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church observes 32 annual feasts which are dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and a special commemoration is made to her by reading from the Tä'ämrá Maryam three miracles during Sunday liturgy. This ritual was introduced by emperor Zär'a Ya'qob (1434-68 A.D.) in the year 1441 A.D.

During the reign of his father Dawit II (1380-1412 A.D.), it already had become clear that the Virgin would obtain a position of pre-eminence amongst the Saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, because he initiated the translation of the miracles of the Virgin from Arabic into Ga'az. His action is mentioned...

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4 See CLEt p. 82 and CLMM p. 3.
and incorporated as a story in the Ta'āmārā Maryam reporting of the preparation of golden ink to write the miracles.\footnote{CLMM p. 87f. EMML vol. 5 (no. 1606.259) p. 107.}

The origin of the nucleus of the legends of the Virgin lies in France. In the beginning of the 12th century — from 1128-29 A.D. — a serious epidemic raged in France and vast areas were devastated and depopulated. On pilgrim sites which were consecrated to her name, legends about the aid of the Virgin sprang up and became very popular.\footnote{See CLEt p. 81-83.} They were soon spread all over Europe and due to the narrative and entertaining character of these stories poets and minstrels felt encouraged to compose new ones according to what they had heard and the environment where they lived. The tales were rendered into the languages and idioms of the respective countries and therefore it happened that by the route of the Crusaders, the stories eventually reached Palestine. And from the Holy Land it was then just a short way to Egypt, where the Arabic version which later was taken as the „Vorlage“ for the Gaṣaz text, was produced.

In his unmatched analysis, Il libro etiopico dei miracoli di Maria\footnote{Roma 1943.} ENRICO CERULLI has described in detail the different sources and cycles which led to the creation of the Ethiopic version of the collection of miracles, for example, stories concerning the miraculous events in the monasteries or secular places in France and Italy, the numerous miracles which happened in the famous and for Ethiopia important sites of Egypt: Dābrā Matmaq (as it is called in Ethiopic) or Dābrā Qwasqam\footnote{The importance lies first of all in hierarchical considerations involving the Coptic and the Ethiopian Orthodox Churches and the election of the Abunā. But it was also very common for Ethiopian monks to visit monasteries in Egypt, for example in the Scete, as witnessed by remarks in manuscripts. Cf. M. COHEN in: Mêlanges René Basset (1923) X = vol. I p. 144. C. CONTI ROSSINI, Notice sur les manuscrits éthiopiens de la collection d’Abbadie = Extrait du Journal Asiatique (1912-1914) (Paris 1914) p. 70f. See CLMM p. 80-128.}, and others in the Holy Land, to name just a few. And there is of course a significant corpus of the miracles which have an Ethiopian background.

As already stated it was emperor Zār’a Yaṣqob who promoted the cult and veneration of Mary. This was not accepted by the entirety of the Ethiopian clergy. In fact it almost led to a schism in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which
is also recorded in the *Ta'amrā Maryam*. The veneration of the Virgin became more and more significant and consequently – beside the production of icons for the cult – there emerged a literary activity with the corpus of miracles being enlarged with the time to a total of 316 miracles.

So the miracles underwent the same procedure in Ethiopia as in the Mediterranean area in the centuries before as additional stories in Gōsz were composed and included. These tales are in many ways an authentic source for local, historical or ethnographic information, even though they are written to document first of all the supporting intervention of the Virgin. The certainty about Mary’s help for those who invoke her name is the topic of the so-called *Kidanā mahrāt* [= treaty of mercy] which was concluded between the Virgin and her son; it is also embodied in the *Ta'amrā Maryam*. A second confirmation for this fulfilment lies in the belief and conviction that the Holy Family stayed a while in Ethiopia after they escaped from Herod. And therefore the Ethiopians regard themselves and their country as a chosen nation. The stay of the Holy Family in Ethiopia is recounted in numbers 32-47 of the collection of 270 miracles (first part) which was compiled and edited by TASFA GĀBRĀ ŠILLASE from Bulga in Nāḥase 1963 A.Mis. = 1971 A.D.

In number 41 one finds an enumeration of places which the Virgin saw when flying over Ethiopia on a cloud and an abbreviated description of the Christian country, including lakes and rivers, for example the Tākazze crossing the northern part of Ethiopia. This river plays a role in miracles when people are hindered from traversing it. And there is mentioned a big river, fālāg abiy, later called fālāgā Geyon, i. e. the river Geyon, which is the Nile. The Ethiopic name Geyon (the Amharic equivalent is Abbay) is a reminiscence of the Old Testament book Genesis 2,13 which describes Paradise and the source of the

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10 For example CLMM p. 18f. EMML vol. 5 (no. 1606.208f.) p. 103; vol. 6 (no. 2058.73f.) p. 76f.
11 CLEt p. 83-85. CLMM p. 26. It is said that nowadays there exist more than 600 miracles; cf. *African Zion* ... p. 51.
12 For the 16th of Yākkatit; see no. 72 (p. 271-275) of TASFA GĀBRĀ ŠILLASE’s edition or EMML vol. 5 (no. 1606.298) p. 111. C. CONTI ROSSINI, Il convento di Tsana in Abissinia e le sue laudi alla Vergine = *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche* vol. XIX, ser. 5: Ferie accademiche. Luglio-ottobre 1910 (Roma) p. 581-621.
13 In Gōsz and Amharic. Wether the second volume has been edited is unknown to me.
four rivers, one of these being the Geyon, which flows round the land of Kush.\textsuperscript{15} Here we have another underlining of Ethiopia’s image being elected among the nations.

When the Holy Family received the order to return to the Holy Land via Egypt they left Ethiopia on an overland route, followed by camels and horses loaded with precious gifts received from the Ethiopian people, as described in number 46.\textsuperscript{16} They then had to cross the Täkazze\textsuperscript{17} and reached Elephantine, the southernmost village of Egypt situated on the banks of the Nile.\textsuperscript{18} It seems that this route corresponds approximately to one of the trade routes the pilgrims followed to get to Egypt and further on to Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{19} Another route had been by sea, a perilous venture, which too has references in the \textit{Tā’ammārā Maryam}.\textsuperscript{20}

Alongside the course of the Nile which has its source in Lake Tana, an area where the Holy Family is explicitly said to have stayed and therefore is considered as exceptionally holy (even today the water of the Gaš Abbay is used for healing\textsuperscript{21}) there was another route leaving the country in a westerly direction.\textsuperscript{22} As on a string of pearls important monastic sites are situated in this

\textsuperscript{15} See IOBUS LUDOLFUS, \textit{Ad suam Historiam Aethiopicam antebac editam Commentarius} (Francofurti ad Moenum 1691) p. 119f.
\textsuperscript{16} p. 181 (verse 30) of TASFĀ GABRA ŠILLASE’s edition: ... \textbf{ŋtсь unpacked ֓} \textbf{әhь; ֓} \textbf{ӈь}s. ... [... having left the land of Ethiopia they then reached the land of Egypt on the dry land ...]; and here it is added that the Queen of Sheba has used this route too: ... \textbf{ӈь}s. ... \textbf{ӈь}s. ... \textbf{ӈь}s. ...\textsuperscript{17} Described in no. 47 of TASFĀ GABRA ŠILLASE’s edition, p. 182-184.
\textsuperscript{18} See \textit{Der Kleine Pauly. Lexikon der Antike} vol. I-V (Stuttgart-München 1979); vol. II p. 242f.
\textsuperscript{19} Cf. for example EMML vol. 6 (no. 2058.25) p. 73: Story of an Ethiopian monk who first went to Egypt and then continued to Jerusalem. Or the route used by \textit{汜ra} of the monastery of Gunda Gunde which is described in detail in his \textit{gādīl}; see A. CAQUOT, \textit{Les Actes d’Ezra de Gunda-Gunde = Annales d’Éthiopie} vol. 4 (1961) p. 69-121; particularly p. 75-79 (= Text) and p. 98-103 (= translation).
\textsuperscript{22} Cf. also TTCh p. 81.
large area, for example Mārtulā Maryam, Dābra Wārq, Dābrā Dima and Dābrā Marqos. 23 Monks on their itinerary could either stay there or spend time in the wilderness of the gorges where they would practise the ascetic part of their life 24 and then move on to fulfil the pilgrimage.

It should have become evident that the collection of the miracles of Mary, Ṭaʿammārā Maryam, is a mirror of behaviour, belief, events and attitudes. There is on the one hand the idea of being chosen, then the idea and certainty that Mary will intervene and there are finally the geographical and historical elements.

And there is particularly one miracle which makes evident all the above mentioned elements. The summarised content of the miracle which has the number 268 25 in the edition of Tāsfā Gābrā Šāllāsē, is as follows:

The Christians whom the Muslims are threatening ask Emperor Dawit for help. After reading their letter he goes into a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and there he takes refuge with her. During night-time the Virgin appears and gives him the advice to fight against the Muslims, also saying that God has given him wisdom to divert the Nile. So he leaves his country, accompanied by many soldiers and meets the Muslims in Sennar. The Muslims, being scared because they cannot harvest without water from the Nile, send a letter to the Christians, declaring that they no longer will be their enemies and therefore they would request Dawit to return the water. When Dawit hears the news about the peaceful co-operation between Muslims and Christians, he praises the Virgin and returns into his country according to their petition.

Though the sentences of the text are vague, they nevertheless reveal several facts:

There is mentioned a mutual correspondence about Christian–Muslim concerns. During the reign of Emperor Dawit II Ethiopia was involved in a conflict between Christian Europe and the Muslims. Christian rulers of Europe tried to reconquer the Holy Land which had been lost with the fall of Jerusalem in the year 1187 A.D. Looking for allies they had the idea that the legendary Prester John, who was thought to rule Ethiopia, might be the right partner.

Ethiopian pilgrims in Egypt and the Holy Land were transmitters of the news about Ethiopia spreading in the Mediterranean world. When Dawit’s campaign

against the Mamelukes, which he successfully undertook in the year 1381 A.D., became known, the information about Prester John became more reliable and the king was considered to be the representative of a powerful and extraordinary nation. And for a second reason the Ethiopians had a good reputation and started to play a role in the strategic reflections. After the fall of Jerusalem the Muslim ruler Salah ad-Din granted them parts of the Holy Places in Palestine and they were allowed to stay there, unlike the treatment accorded to the Templers and their followers who lost their residence permit and had to leave.

In the year 1400 A.D. King Henry IV of England, searching for an ally, sent a letter to the Ethiopian King in which he asked for support in the Crusade to liberate the Holy Places.

A letter was dispatched from the Muslim side when Dawit started his above-mentioned offensive against Egypt in Aswan. The Coptic Patriarch Matthias I (1378-1408 A.D.) had been forced by the Egyptian ruler to intervene and write a letter.

It seems that the author of the miracle was not particularly interested in the precise historical data. For his purpose it is only important that there exists a conflict between Christians and Muslims, and the Ethiopian side is the one which is able to solve the problem. Consequently he merges many events, i.e., the Crusade, the situation of the Coptic Patriarchate under Islamic rule, Dawit’s campaign into Sennar (which is not at all a consequence of the Crusader idea, but a need to strengthen the Ethiopian empire) into one story: the menace to the Christian nations and their call for help, and as reaction happens Dawit’s campaign into Sennar blessed by the Virgin, who informs him about his wisdom in diverting the Nile.

Since that time it was commonly accepted, not only by the Egyptians but also by European rulers, that the Ethiopians were the masters of the Nile.

Moreover, in the Tāʿāmrā Maryam there are additional stories about influencing the course of water. To cite just one, we have the washerman who is

26 Cf. TTCh p. 255.
27 Cf. CEtP vol. I p. 31-37. For miracles which happened at these places see for example CLMM p. 130-147.
28 See the essay in TTCh p. 257.
29 See TTCh p. 255. During the time of the said patriarch Egypt had to suffer from a famine as is reported in the Tāʿāmrā Maryam.
30 Cf. for example CEtP vol. I p. 118f.
praying to the Virgin so that the flow of the river goes in another direction.\textsuperscript{31} Ethiopian imagination therefore takes for granted that fiction may turn into reality, because it is established in the \textit{Tä'ämrå Maryam}.

At this point it must be said that the miracle concerning Dawit and diverting the Nile exists — so far as I know — in just two copies. One is the printed version of \textit{Täsfa Gābrā Šillase} which was at my disposal, and the other one is part of a \textit{Tä'ämrå Maryam} from the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century which seems to offer a slightly different version.\textsuperscript{32} (Older manuscripts, for example from the Tana collection, containing the complete corpus of 316 miracles do not include the story\textsuperscript{33}).

Now, the question arises why at this time, i.e. the second half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, there was a need for such a tendentious story.

Roughly it can be said that the political situation of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century is comparable to that of the 14\textsuperscript{th}-15\textsuperscript{th} century, namely the Egyptian victory over the Funğ Kingdom in Sennar (1821 A.D.) and Egypt’s reinforcement to gain influence in the bordering area and which became a severe threat when Maṣṣawa was occupied in 1841 A.D.\textsuperscript{34}

Then, Kasa Ḥaylu, who later became Tewodros II had to face the Egyptians in 1848 A.D. and he — like Dawit II — dreamed the dream of liberating Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{35} He had always to include in his strategic considerations the Ethiopian dependency on the Coptic Patriarchate, which itself was dependent on the favour of the Muslim ruler.

Finally, as a last example of a parallel situation Khedive Ismael of Egypt should be mentioned. When he announced his interest in the resources of the Nile waters, the Western colonial states were asked to declare their solidarity with the Ethiopian King Yohânnâs IV.\textsuperscript{36} So one may talk again of the idea of a

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[31]{See EMML vol. 5 (no. 1606.57) p. 91.}
\footnotetext[32]{EMML vol. 6 (no. 2337.93) p. 392: 1869-76 A.D.}
\footnotetext[33]{Cf. for example TS 16 = Kabran 16: 17\textsuperscript{th}/18\textsuperscript{th} century = E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, \textit{Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland} vol. XX 1 (Wiesbaden 1973) p. 126; TS 127 = Dağa 3tifanos 16: 17\textsuperscript{th} century = V. SIX, \textit{Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland} vol. XX 3 (forthcoming).}
\footnotetext[34]{See BAHRU ZEWDE, \textit{A Modern History} ... p. 26.}
\footnotetext[35]{See BAHRU ZEWDE, \textit{A Modern History} ... p. 28 and 36.}
\footnotetext[36]{A similar situation occurred again during Manilsk’s time; cf. for example BAHRU ZAWDE, \textit{A Modern History} ... p. 50 and 82f.}
\end{footnotes}
Christian alliance, this time initiated by the Ethiopians, which was challenged by the Muslims.

These events may have inspired the anonymous author to compose the story of King Dawit, which obviously was not recorded before the 19th century. As remarked in the introduction this literary genre was always used as a suitable means to react to current events. And therefore the miracle concerning Dawit can be seen as a parable, fitting the actual situation. It may have strengthened the Ethiopian belief that the Nile is Ethiopia’s rightful property, sanctioned by heavenly power. Their security and superiority were laid down by events in the past which were supervised and protected by the Virgin Mary.

Edition

37 This is Täsfa Gábrá Sillase’s text.
Miracle 268.
Concerning Dawit, King of Ethiopia

1. Miracle of Our Lady Mary, the holy twofold Virgin, bearer of God. May her prayer and her blessing be with us in eternity — Amen.

2. And in those days, the Muslims in the land of Egypt were numerous and the distress against the Christians became severe, particularly those [Christians] from Constantinople and in Jerusalem and from Syria.

3. And when the people of the Franks saw this oppression, being assembled jointly they decided and advised unanimously and wrote a letter with a message and sent to the good and righteous King of Ethiopia, Dawit.

4. And they said: O King, beloved of the Virgin Mary and beloved of her son Jesus Christ, come quickly for our salvation from the conflict, because the Muslim people rose against us and subverted us not to invoke the name of Jesus Christ and not to pay homage to the Cross on which the Redeemer of the world was crucified and [not to invoke the name] of His mother, the holy Virgin Mary. (See TTCh p. 257, note 3).

5. And may this letter with a message gain benevolence in front of you and in front of all your brothers of the people of Ethiopia, that you will hasten coming to us and that you will help us and liberate us from the hand of our wicked enemies.

6. Because you know that we are associated with and companions of the people of Ethiopia for the sake of the love of Our Lady Mary, the twofold Virgin, bearer of God.

7. And when Dawit, King of Ethiopia heard this, he was sad and deeply distressed and the spiritual ardour filled him and at the time of the evening prayer he went into one church of Our Lady Mary, the bearer of God, which was nearby his royal palace (lit.: palace of his kingship).

8. And then he prostrated himself on his knees in front of the image of Our Lady Mary, the holy twofold Virgin, bearer of God, and he took refuge with her and said: And so, what shall I do on behalf of these Christians, believers in you, because they have sent to me because the Muslims distressed them?
9. And furthermore he prayed and said: O my Lady, mother of the Creator, glorification of the Christians, grace of kings and crown of the martyrs, pray to your son that He will give me power to go into the land of Egypt and make war against the Muslims on behalf of the flock of sheep of your beloved son, and give me, your servant, power and victory.

10. And after he had prayed thus and something like this (lit.: what is similar) he returned and entered the royal palace (see above no. 7).

11. And on this day at midnight Our Lady Mary, the holy twofold Virgin, bearer of God, appeared to the King of Ethiopia Dawit and she said to him: O my beloved and beloved of my son Jesus Christ, and now I have asked my son on behalf of you that you will go and rescue my nation, the Christians, and thus He has granted and made even for you your way. Get up and go. And He will perform through your hand many miracles.

12. And when Dawit, King of Ethiopia, woke up from his sleep, he was very pleased about what she had told to him, and the power of God filled him. And when it became daybreak he sent around a herald and he assembled (! for: ኔንትሳን) all his warriors of his army from all the provinces of Ethiopia and he went to make war against the Muslims of Egypt and he arrived in Snnar.

13. And God gave him wisdom and he stopped [cf. W. LESLAU, Concise Dictionary of Ge’ez: Classical Ethiopic: Ge’ez-English. (Wiesbaden 1989) p. 154b] the river Gyon (see above p. 55f.), so that it did not descend into the land of Egypt, because there are no rains in the land of the people of Egypt; unless the water of the Gyon, which flows from Ethiopia, reaches them, they do not plough, they do not sow seed and they do not get water at all.

14. And afterwards Dawit, King of Ethiopia, sent to those who were in Jerusalem and the Franks, saying: O my beloved, the king with his soldiers has reached you and I stopped the river Gyon, so that it does not descend to the land of Egypt. Was it not said once: To restrain the water is like beginning a war, but the will of God, the Lord of the Christians, may come about.

15. And when the faithful who lived in Jerusalem and the Franks heard this, they were pleased with great joy and said: God will help and give power and victory to the orthodox King of Ethiopia, Dawit, and He may straighten all his paths for him who rescues us from the hand of our enemies and there they observe the rule.
16. Then the Muslims of Egypt realised the coming of the King of Ethiopia, Dawit, in great majesty by the will of God and with the assistance of Our Lady Mary and he approached with many of his soldiers, who were countless, while riders on horses and camels followed, and he arrived suddenly in Sinnar. Immediately they came together and devised on behalf of them a plan which would be better and appropriate.

17. And then they sent a message to the faithful of Jerusalem saying: Thus from now on we will not fight against you [corrupt for: ḥแยกח חכמה יומת.] compared with the Amharic version] again to touch your order and we have no war with you and we do not disdain your faith which exists since ancient times with your fathers, but we appeal to you for protection that the King of Ethiopia may go back to his country.

18. And because of this the faithful of Jerusalem and the Franks praised God with great glory because He made visible his guarantee for Dawit, and in presence of the nations He revealed His Covenant.

19. And they praised Our Lady, the holy twofold Virgin, bearer of God, saying: Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb (Lk 1,42) because you became for us the harbour of life from desolation [= echo of ] because you became for us the harbour of life from desolation [Amharic version] again to touch your order and we have no war with you and we do not disdain your faith which exists since ancient times with your fathers, but we appeal to you for protection that the King of Ethiopia may go back to his country.

20. And then the faithful of Jerusalem and the people of the Franks sent a message to Dawit, King of [Ethiopia], and the message of this was: The trumpet for our salvation raised up for us from the house of Dawit His servant, that he will save us from the hand of our enemy and from the hand of all who are hating (Amharic version has: , therefore Gē’ez: ) us, because He remembered the holy covenant of His oath which He swore to Abraham, our father. He will save us so that we worship Him in justice and righteousness and you Dawit, King of Ethiopia, will be called the Orthodox.

21. And now we beg you and beseech you that you may abandon the attack and the warfare with the Muslims, because they have abandoned their evil things. And return back for them the water of the Gayon as [it was] before and return into your country in peace.

22. And when Dawit, King of Ethiopia, read this message, he was glad and happy and said: Blessed be God, Lord of Israel, who alone has performed great and wonder.
23. And blessed be the Virgin, perfect in all thinking by her prayer and her petition.
24. And afterwards he entered his country in peace.
25. And the faithful of Jerusalem and the Franks were able to live in peace.
26. Her prayer and her blessing be with us in eternity – Amen.

Abbreviations

CetP  ENRICO CERULLI, Etiopi in Palestina. Storia della comunità etiopica di Gerusalemme vol. I-II (Roma 1943-47)
CLEt  ENRICO CERULLI, La letteratura etiopica. Terza edizione ampliata. Con un saggio: L’oriente cristiano nell’unità delle sue tradizioni (Firenze-Milano 1968)
CLMM ENRICO CERULLI, Il libro etiopico dei Miracoli di Maria e le sue fonti nelle letterature del medio evo latino (Roma 1943)
TTCh TADDESE TAMRAT, Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527 (Oxford 1972)

Summary

Starting with the biblical Gayon (= the Go’aaz name for the Nile) the river Nile plays an important role in Ethiopian perception. The corpus of the miracles of Mary [Tii’amà Maryam] particularly during the reign of emperor Zir’a Ya’qob (1434-68 A.D.) was enlarged with stories reflecting a local background and Ethiopian history. And suddenly in the 19th century the ‘idea of diverting the Nile’ which since early times was a challenging topic in the relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia, again turned up in a miracle of the Virgin Mary, referring to the time of the Crusaders and the resulting diplomatic activities. This article wants to evaluate how far the Ethiopians regard themselves as masters of the Nile waters and to what extent they derive their legitimacy from divine sources.