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The *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* Revisited

Ever since copies of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* fell into the hands of western scholars and especially since Carl Bezold published his impressive edition and translation of the text in 1909,¹ research on the production of the book and its story has continued unabated. Among the recent studies, we find Robert Beylot's article, published in 2004,² as well as his French translation of the book in 2008³, Osvaldo Raineri's Italian translation, which also appeared in 2008,⁴ and Sergew Gelaw's Amharic translation which appeared in Addis Ababa in 1994 EC (= 2007/8).⁵ In addition, in 2001 E. A. Wallis Budge's 1922 English translation was reprinted for the third time.⁶ Its title, *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, was discussed in 1996 by Manfred Kropp.⁷

In brief, the story of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* is about how the designation as the chosen people of God passed from the Israelites to the Ethiopians as a result of King Solomon's violations of God's commandments. The transfer was divinely arranged in order to uphold the Lord's "sure oath" to David that one of his sons would always occupy his throne (Ps 132:11). The throne survives Solomon's sin through the establishment of a Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia headed by the son of King Solomon of Jerusalem and Queen Makədda of Ethiopia. This son was conceived when the queen went to Jerusalem to seek the wisdom for which King Solomon was famous.

There is no doubt that the story was originally composed in Arabic and later adapted, *not translated*, into Gə'əz by a committee of Ethiopian traditional scholars, chaired by *Nəburä ʾEd Yəṣḥaq*.⁸ How much this group added to the original will remain unknown until the original is discovered. But we must assume that sig-

1 Carl Bezold (ed.), *Kebra Nagast. Die Herrlichkeit der Könige*, Munich 1909.

2 Robert Beylot, "Du Kebra Nagast," *Aethiopica International Journal of Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies*, vol. 7 (2004), pp. 74-83.

3 Idem., *La Gloire des Rois ou l'Histoire de Salomon et de la reine de Saba*, Brepols 2008.

4 Osvaldo Raineri, *ክብሩ ነገሥት። La Gloria dei Re Salomone e la Regina di Saba*, Rome 2008.

5 ሥርገወ ገላው፡ ከብረ ነገሥት ግዕዝና ለማርኛ፡ (የኢትዮጵያ ቋንቋዎች ጥናትና ምርምር ማለከል) ለዲስ ለበባ 1994 ዓ. ም.

6 E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyilik (Kēbra Nagast)*, London 1922 and 2001.

7 Manfred Kropp, "Zur Deutung des Titels 'Kəbrä Nəgäšt'," *Orient Christianus*, vol. 80 (1996), pp. 108-115.

8 See the colophon in Bezold's edition, p. 172.

nificant changes were made in order to take a story that was probably vacillating between Nubia and Abyssinia and make it decidedly Ethiopian.

Theoretically, the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia would have been established at about 1000 BC. But we do not know much about it until after 1270 AD when a certain strong man, Yäkunno Amlak, forcefully overthrew the ruling House of the Zag^we and established his own Amhara-Shoan dynasty. The new dynasty is somehow viewed by tradition as a restoration of the Solomonic dynasty envisioned in the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*. However, there is no reliable evidence that there ever was any such lost dynasty to be restored. The historian Taddesse Tamrat rightly calls Yäkunno Amlak's military expedition a restoration of the dynasty that the presumed ancestors of this soldier, Yäkunno Amlak, had lost.⁹

The *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, the presumed source of the story, appeared in Gə'əz a few decades after Yäkunno Amlak had "restored" the dynasty of his forefathers. Very quickly, the book became the foundation on which the Ethiopian theocracy was based. Local tradition takes the story as unquestionably factual. Indeed, Article 2 of the 1955 Ethiopian Constitution states that, "The Imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line of Haile Sellassie I, descendant of King Sahle Sellassie, whose line descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen of Sheba, and King Solomon of Ethiopia."

Is the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* the source of the story of the relationship between the king of Jerusalem and the queen of Ethiopia as it is known in Ethiopia? It may well have been the source for the 1955 Ethiopian Constitution, but it was not, as some historians have assumed, composed to justify the overthrow of the ruling House of Zag^we or Zag^wa and the restoration of the so-called Solomonic Dynasty.

The assumption about the rationale for the story is based on a statement which the adapters of the Arabic original of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* into Gə'əz quoted from it for a purpose: "(An attempt) to rule (for) those who are not Israelites is a transgression of the (divine) law."¹⁰ But the reason for this quotation was not to explain why the story was written but to offer an explanation for why the book was not translated or adapted from Arabic to the local language, Gə'əz, as soon as it came to Ethiopia. It came to Ethiopia in 409 (=1224/5) when the rulers of the land happen to be the Zag^we who, indeed, were known not to be Israelites. The assumption seems plausible; the Zag^we would not have allowed the translation and dissemination in their kingdom of a book that claims divine disapproval of their rule. However, there is simply no evidence that this statement was originally written to address the illegitimacy of the Zag^we. Rather, to understand this statement we have to differentiate between when the book came to Ethiopia, which was indeed during the time of the Zag^we, and when the story was first composed, which seems to

9 Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270 – 1527*, Oxford 1972.

10 Carl Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, p. 30.

have been before the Zag^we. As we shall see, the target of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* was a pagan woman ruler, either the Candace of Nubia or ʿIslantāne of Damot.

Another point to be made about the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* is that while it does indeed narrate a story about contact between a queen of Ethiopia and King Solomon of Jerusalem and the son who was born from their union, that story seems to have been misunderstood. In other words, the event the book describes might be entirely different from what has been assumed by tradition as well as modern historians. Here is my reason:

To begin with, the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* never speaks of the Queen of Sheba or Mənilək (I). The 1955 Constitution, Wallis Budge's English translation and many other works on the book drag the Queen of Sheba and Mənilək (I) into the story without any basis for doing so. To the contrary, the names of these personalities are simply not found anywhere in the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*. Rather, the story in the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* is about King Solomon of Jerusalem, the Queen of the South, and their son Dawit (David). To be sure, there is, in the Yemenite tradition, a queen called **Queen of Sheba** (as in the Old Testament, I Kings 10 and 2 Chronicles 9) who visited King Solomon. The Yemenites call her **Bilqis**. The *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* neither recognizes this queen nor denies her historical existence; she was just not the subject of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*. In the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, the sovereign is a **Queen of the South** (as in the New Testament, Matthew 12 and Luke 11). The author gave her a name, **Makədda**, to make it clear, I suspect, that he was not writing about the **Queen of Sheba** called **Bilqis**. Why he chose this particular name is not known and irrelevant for this discussion. If the etymology is, indeed, the Arabic *mā kazā* "not so," as the book says,¹¹ the message could be "her name is not Bilqis."

Historians and biblical scholars assume that the Queen of the South mentioned in the New Testament is the same Queen of Sheba whose story is told in the Old Testament. They may well be right, but there is no evidence that that was the understanding of the author of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*. For him these two queens were two different rulers of two different countries, **Ethiopia** and **Sheba**. And of course, many rulers, including the Queen of Sheba (Bilqis) and the Queen of the South/Ethiopia (Makədda), visited King Solomon. How can one disprove this assumption?

The genesis of the name "Mənilək" has its own interesting story. It came about because the writers who adapted the Arabic legend into Gə'əz as *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* did not translate the words by which the king's and queen's son was described in Arabic, "*ibn al-ḥakīm*" ("son of the wise man") into *wāldä ṭābīb* ("son of the wise man"). Rather, they simply transliterated the Arabic expression with Gə'əz letters, as *bäynä alḥəkm*, making, presumably, the incorrect assumption that "*ibn al-ḥakīm*" was a proper name. From this *bäynä alḥəkm* we have now, by a long proc-

11 Carl Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, p. 123.

ess, the corrupt form “mənīlāk,” which might not be found as a proper name in the Arabic version of the legend. The long process has produced several forms, including *abnā ḥəlkəm*, preserved in the *Gädlä‘Ezra*.¹²

Who was this Queen of the South? We know that she was pagan and that she inspired the author of the original *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* to write about a queen called Makədda. In writing the book, the author drew upon a story widely known in Egypt, especially among the Copts, about the relationship between King Solomon of Jerusalem and an unnamed queen of Ethiopia. As said above, we do not know why he called the queen Makədda when he developed his version. However, the actual queen who inspired him might be found in some reliable sources. The *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* describes her as Queen of Ethiopia. We also know that the author of the short Arabic story, more or less similar to the story in the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*,¹³ which Bezold published within his introduction to his edition and translation of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, describes her as the Queen of al-Habashah, of the people of al-Habashah, and of the land of the al-Nejashi,¹⁴ refraining from giving her a name.

This short Arabic version, which has somehow eluded the scrutiny of modern historians, claims that in ancient times, the reign of the kingdom of al-Habashah (Ethiopia) belonged to daughters of rulers. The example he gave is the pagan mother of the pagan queen who visited King Solomon. This might sound like a story of another country, as Ethiopia was never ruled by queens. So what could be the basis for this claim? We have sources that could give us some clues to the answer, if we accept that the author wrote about an Ethiopian queen. One such source is Sawirus's *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, which clearly agrees with the short Arabic narrative.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, Sawirus, the author of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, and the author of the short Arabic text all agree on the story they tell because the latter two claim that their story was extracted from the history of the ancient Coptic fathers, that is, from the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, which makes a reference to a pagan queen of the *Bani al-Hamawiyah* who led her people against the Christians in the tenth century.

A second source, with extremely important information, is Ibn Haukal. This historian reports that the queen, who ruled from her center ‘in the south of Ethiopia,’ was “widely known as the most powerful ruler in the Ethiopian region for a long time. . . The queen and her pagan followers destroyed churches and killed

12 André Caquot, “Les Actes d’Ezra de Gunda-Gundē,” *Annales d’Éthiopie*, vol. 4 (1961), p. 72.

13 Carl Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, p. XLIV-LI.

14 The Arabic Vorlage of the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt*, too, must have called her so; the name “Ethiopia” which we find in the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* is undoubtedly the translators’ version of al-Habashah.

15 B. T. A. Evetts (ed. and tr.), *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol. V (1910), 145-6; Vol. X (1915), pp. 508-9.

Christians.”¹⁶ The news of her persecution of Christians “for a long time” must have reverberated throughout the Coptic community in Egypt, enough to depress the co-religionists and to create fertile ground for stories of her imaginary conquest and conversion. Moreover, that Ibn Haukal does not name the queen would seem to support the idea that the author of the short Arabic story did not name the queen because no source available to him contained her name.

If we compare the queen’s description in the short Arabic story with the claim in the *Kəbrä Nəgāst* that an attempt by non-Israelites to rule is a transgression of the (divine) law, we would suspect the existence of a non-Christian monarch as the target or inspiration of the story. The sources tell us that the monarch who violated this law was both a woman and a non-Israelite. The House of Zag^we was not Israelite, but it was not headed by a woman either. We can, therefore, conclude with certainty that the Zag^we were definitely not in the mind of the story’s author; rather, this non-Israelite dynasty was drawn into discussions because it just happened to be in power when the Arabic original was first brought to Ethiopia in 1224/5 A.D.

The *Kəbrä Nəgāst* was thus meant to push a pagan queen to abdicate her throne gracefully to a male who would be a Christian king and to help insure that in the future, women would not rule Ethiopia.

If this analysis is correct, it would locate the time of the composition of the original *Kəbrä Nəgāst* in the reign of this nameless pagan queen, that is, to the tenth century. The text could not have been composed any earlier because it mentions the City of Cairo, which was founded in 969 A.D. Furthermore, the tenth century was a time when the relationship between Ethiopia and the Alexandrian Patriarchate was at its lowest ebb.

Are the local sources really so silent on this Queen of the *Bani al-Hamawiyah* that historians found no reference to her? It seems strange that “evil deeds” of such magnitude could be totally ignored by local writers. Could it not be that this queen is hiding in the legendary *Ḥsato/Ḥslantāne*? It is common for legendary figures to be based on real historical people, such as Graññ for whom there are now legendary stories. She cannot be Gudit, even though the nation’s memory of the destruction she inflicted on the Christian kingdom is so widespread and old that even Zär’a Ya’əqob (1434-1468) reminded us of how she misled Christians into divinations.¹⁷ The spirit of *Abba* Elyas, a nephew of Zär’a Ya’əqob, who carried a message from the Virgin Mary to King Bā’ədä Maryam (1468-1478) that was related to the queen’s devastation that is instructive: “(Mary) says to you, go to the

16 See Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, p. 39.

17 “There are many (kinds) of divinations which the people of Ethiopia practice in their respective regions, that expel one from worshipping God, as G^wedit had taught them as she had learned (them) from Satan,” C. Conti Rossini and L. Ricci (ed), *Il Libro della Luce del Negus Zar’a Ya’qob* (Maṣḥafa Berhān) II, CSCO, 261, script. aeth., t. 51 (1965), p. 51.

land of Ənnäbse and renovate the building of my shrine (Märṭulä Maryam) which my enemy Gudit, the queen of Sayənt has put on fire. And this G^wədit, fire (Əsat), the queen of the sorcerers of the land of Suba has consumed. Therefore, build Märṭulä Maryam first because it has precedence over this Atronəsä Maryam.”¹⁸ This source suggests the existence of two queens--Gudit, the queen of Sayənt who set Märṭulä Maryam on fire, and Əsat (or “Fire”), the queen of the sorcerers of the land of Suba who in turn consumed G^wədit. The name Əsat could be Əsato, which in turn could have come from Əslantäne, the name tradition gives to the mother of Motäläme of Damot.¹⁹ Both mother and son were enemies of the Christian kingdom.

There may be additional historical facts to be learned about the history of Ethiopia from the description of the legend, especially from the short Arabic version. That version concludes with these interesting words:

Regarding the eunuch, the envoy of the Candace (Acts 8:26-39), it is reported that the reason for his coming to Jerusalem was to worship in it. As he was on his return, the Holy Spirit sent the Apostle Philip to him. The eunuch believed and was baptized. He went to his country and preached Christ therein. They all believed in his hands. Then, Parmenas, one of the seven (deacons, Acts 6:5) went to them. He baptized them and consecrated for them priests and deacons. He ordained that their father (i.e. “their metropolitan”) be from the See of Mark the Evangelist. The Orthodox faith held fast in the Abyssinian country. The kingdom remains steadfast for David to the end of time, forever. Glory, praise, magnitude, honor, and worship be to the Holy Trinity to all eternity. Amen.

This (story) is extracted from the chronicles of the former Coptic Patriarchs. Praise be to the giver of understanding and mind to his creatures; and may his compassion be on us forever. Amen.²⁰

This excerpt could give credence to the theory that the *Kəbrä Nəgäśt*'s Queen of the South could be a queen of the Nubians who were also called Ethiopians,²¹ especially in the face that Ethiopia never had a women sovereign as the Nubians had. Interestingly, the *Kəbrä Nəgäśt*, too, makes a reference to the eunuch and his queen, but there, Candace is Həndäke, another name of “India,” and the queen is “Queen of India (and Ethiopia)” not Queen, the Candace,²² as the book of Acts has it. But the title *nejashi*, in this short Arabic version, is Ethiopian. Only the author was not aware of the difference between the two countries, Nubia of the Candace and Abyssinia of the Nəgaśi or Najashi. That should not come as a sur-

18 Gädlä Elyas, EMMML 1126, f. 35a, Getatchew Haile, A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa and for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Collegeville, Vol. IV: Project Numbers 1101-1500, Collegeville, (Minnesota) 1979, p. 32.

19 E. A. Wallis Budge (tr.), The Life of Takla Hāymānot in the Version of Dabra Libānōs, and the Miracles of Takla Hāymānot in the Version of Dabra Libānōs, and the Book of the Riches of Kings, London (1906), p. 21. Agreeing with Zār'a Ya'əqob, the Life, calls G^wədit a sorcerer; *ibid.*, p. 190.

20 Bezold, Kebra Nagast, p. LI.

21 Note the inference of Beylot's article quoted above, and his exhaustive introduction (Présentation) to his French translation, also referred to above.

22 Bezold, Kebra Nagast, p. 29-30.

prise or be cause to suggest a new theory that excludes Ethiopia. Abu Salih, the Armenian, too, shows similar confusion.²³

But here is a puzzling point: why does this story, extracted from the history of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church, not base the relationship between the Coptic Church of Alexandria and that of Ethiopia on the efforts of Frumentius, the first bishop of Aksum/Ethiopia? Frumentius is not even included in the list of saints of the Coptic Church. His story is not known to the non-Chalcedonean (the Monophysite Coptic) Church which calls the Ethiopian Church a daughter, while it is well known to the Chalcedonean (the Melchite Coptic) Church.

Actually, the story of Frumentius which we have in the Ethiopian Synaxarium is not acquired from the Synaxarium of the Coptic Church, although the former is basically a translation from the latter, which means the Coptic Synaxarium does not recognize Frumentius. There must be some reason why his story is not found there or in the *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*. The entry is definitely not a local composition. According to an old manuscript from the Monastery of Däbrä Ḥayq Ḥṣṭifanos (EMML 1763, ff. 84b-86a), the Frumentius story was brought to Ethiopia by a certain *Abba Sälama*, possibly at the occasion when, or after, the Ethiopian Church was put under the jurisdiction of the Coptic (Monophysite) Orthodox Church. As I showed when publishing the document, the story was introduced (or reintroduced) at an unspecified time, with these words: "It is my pleasure to tell you how your land, the land of Ag'azi, became Christian, as we found (it) written, how all your lands became Christian."²⁴

The narrator goes on to tell the story as told by Rufinus--and later repeated by Greek historians--and concludes with a note that it is also found in a local source called *dibdiqon*, "diptych." The narrator, *Abba Sälama*, did not get the story from Coptic sources. He translated it from one of the Greek sources (Socrates); it is presented as a homily of *Abba Sälama*, *zä-Abba Sälama*. In this particular context, "*Abba Sälama*" must be the narrator of the story of Frumentius; he cannot be the Frumentius who is the story's subject, as the compiler(s) of the Synaxary had thought.

Who was this *Sälama*? To begin with, *salāma*, if used as a proper name is either Arabic or Syriac, meaning "peace." With this meaning in mind, the Synaxary (Ḥamle 26) identifies the prelate with Frumentius, with the wrong explanation that the name *Sälama* was given to him in Ethiopia when he arrived in Aksum as a bishop and "preached the *peace* of Christ." This explanation is not acceptable, because Arabic was not the language of the Aksumites nor was it known in Egypt in 330 AD when Frumentius was in Alexandria. If Frumentius received a name in

23 B. T. A. Evetts (ed. and tr.), *The Churches & Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighbouring Countries Attributed to Abū Šālih, the Armenian*, Oxford 1896, London 1969, p. 285-6.

24 Getatchew Haile (ed.), "The Homily in Honour of St. Frumentius, Bishop of Axum," *Analecta Bollandiana*, 97 (1979), pp. 309-18.

Ethiopia that reflected what he brought to Ethiopia, it would have been *Sälam* (Peace) or *Sälamawi* (A Man of Peace). The expression, "he was called *Abba* Sälama because he preached the *peace* of Christ," must have been appended to the end of the story to create a connection between this *Abba* Sälama and Frumentius.

As I have discussed elsewhere,²⁵ this *Abba* Sälama must be the one who came from Alexandria in the ninth century,²⁶ by which time Arabic had become the language of the Copts as well. He came centuries after the real first bishop, Frumentius, that is to say, after enough time had passed for the memory of the first bishop to have faded. The death of the fourth-century Frumentius (the Illuminator) is commemorated on 18 Taḥśās. The death of the ninth-century Sälama is commemorated on 26 Ḥamle, but, interestingly, with the Synaxary entry of the fourth-century Frumentius and his title, "The Illuminator" (*Käsate Bərhan*), wrongly transferred to him.

These facts lead one to the conclusion that the Ethiopian Church's relationship with the Coptic Church of Alexandria must be a later development, established after the Ethiopian Church had gone initially with the Melkites when the schism occurred in 451AD. The advent to Ethiopia of the Nine Saints from the Mediterranean/Byzantine world in the sixth-seventh century might have played a role in Ethiopian's coming to the fold of the Monophysites.

25 "Prologue" to the reprint of Tadesse Tamrat's, *Church and State*, Los Angeles, forthcoming.

26 Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State*, p. 36.