The Life and Visions of Krəstos Śämra, a Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Woman Saint

By Wendy Laura Belcher
(translations with Michael Kleiner)

Three thousand years of writing in Africa has yielded perhaps ten known biographies of African women written by Africans before the nineteenth century.[1] Autobiographies by premodern African women are even rarer; an early hagiography about an Ethiopian woman, however, may constitute such a text. *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* (The Life-Struggles of Krəstos Śämra [Christ Delights in Her]), written in an Ethiopian monastery sometime between 1450 and 1508, is about a saintly woman who lived in the fifteenth century (no exact dates of her birth or death appear in her hagiography).[2] The text gives a short overview of Krəstos Śämra's life in the third person, but then proceeds in the first person as Krəstos Śämra describes a series of her religious visions, including one in which she attempts to reconcile Christ and Satan. Although the text contains a few biographical details about her, it is more of an intellectual autobiography, the narrative of one woman's philosophy and her belief in the possibilities for healing a broken world. As such, this text expands our understanding of the global female

[1]. Perhaps the earliest book-length biography of an African woman is *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* (Life-Struggles of Wälättä Peṭros [Daughter of (St) Peter]), a hagiography of an Ethiopian woman who led a nonviolent religious movement against European incursions in the 1600s. See Gälawdewos, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman*, trans. and ed. Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015). Earlier editions of this work include *Vitae sanctorum indigenarum*, 1, *Acta S. Walatta Petros*, ed. Carlo Conti Rossini, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 68; Scriptores Aethiopici 30 (Rome: Karolus de Luigi; Paris: Carolus Poussielgue Bibliopola; Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1912; repr., 1954). *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros* is filled with major and minor historical figures, events, and places as well as having been written by her followers just thirty years after Wälättä Peṭros's death. It constitutes an oral history with many anecdotes by those who knew her and proceeds largely as the narrative of an entire particular life, with almost no miraculous events.

[2]. Filəṗṗos, *Atti di Krestos Samra*, ed. Enrico Cerulli, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium (Leuven: L. Durbecq, 1956). Krəstos Śämra's name is also spelled in Latin letters as Christos Samra, Kirstos Semra, Krestos Samra, Kristos Samra, and Kristos Semra, all attempts to transcribe her proper name as it appears in the characters (called *fidäl*) of the ancient language of Gəˢəz: ክርስቶስ፡ሠምራ.

visionary tradition, which tends to be oriented more toward reconciliation than damnation. Krəstos Śämra must be placed alongside such visionary medieval women saints as the English Christians Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, the Muslims Rabia of Basri and Lalla Aziza, and the Hindu Mirabai. Despite its value, her hagiography has been translated only into Amharic and Italian; in this chapter portions appear in English for the first time.[3]

Today, Krəstos Śämra is Ethiopia's most popular female saint. Thousands attend her annual festival at the wealthy monastery she founded, at Gʷangʷət, on southeastern Lake Ṭana, in the Ethiopian highlands. Her festival day is August 30; many online videos record the pilgrimages, hymns, and celebrations in her honor.[4] Churches and monasteries in Ethiopia are named after her and devoted to her. She holds a special place in women's hearts as the saint most likely to help women conceive, give birth to a healthy child, and survive childbirth.

The Text as Autobiography

Before turning to the content of this fascinating text and a translation of two of its most interesting sections, let us consider whether this text should be called an autobiography, specifically, an African woman's autobiography. Researchers can never know for sure if *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* represents the actual words of a particular woman, faithfully recorded. Several elements of the text militate against such a conclusion; several other elements support the conclusion. Having considered both options, I see no compelling reason to dispute *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra*'s own claim that it represents the autobiography of an African woman.

One element militating against calling the work an autobiography is that the saint did not handwrite it herself. That is, the text's scribe is a monk named Filəṗṗos, who claims that he was Krəstos Śämra's amanuensis, hearing directly from her the true story of her life and thought and writing it down. Quite a few hagiographies of women are as-told-to documents with male amanuenses, and scholars must always be concerned about what role the male scribe had in

---

[3]. *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* (Addis Ababa: Täsfa Gäbrä Śəllase, 1983); *Atti di Krestos Samra*, trans. Enrico Cerulli.

[4]. For instance, 1bulgew, "Ethiopia: Kristos Semra (ቅድስት ክርስቶስ ሰምራ)," accessed October 24, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=27Z6ZT6Gtdc; Tewahdo Haymanot, "New Eritrean Orthodox Bekal Kidanki Kristos Semra," accessed October 24, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIvmsx2xIIc; Lonely Planet, "Ethiopia's Kristos Samra Festival—Lonely Planet Travel Video," accessed October 24, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sttEEkb4K5c.

distorting or shaping the female saint's narrative due to sexist conventional views of women. Many scholars assert the value of such texts, while noting the need to read between their lines.[5] I think it is fair to assume, with these scholars, that the male scribe Filəṗṗos may have gotten certain details wrong or may have occasionally crafted the text in ways not directly authorized by Krəstos Śämra. At the same time, he may also have corrected certain details that Krəstos Śämra got wrong, or included true material that she left out. A scribe may drive a text away from the lived truth of a life or toward it. Also, women are not exempt from conventional views about women that cause them to present their own lives in certain lights. In the end, however, a text handwritten directly by the saint herself would not be open to questions about its authenticity as an autobiography.

Another element weighing against concluding that *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* is an autobiography is that it is a hagiography, a life genre biased toward the celebratory and with an unstable relation to the real. Scholars often dismiss hagiographies as antihistorical falsehoods that invent the miraculous in order to manufacture a saint. *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* does manifest some of the common fantastical tropes of hagiography; for instance, a woman is raised from the dead, and the saint prays for years without food and while standing in water. Otherwise, however, *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* firmly relegates the fantastical to the realm of vision. Yes, the saint flies, but only in her visions, not in her regular life. Furthermore, scholarship has repeatedly shown that historical truth claims in Gəʿəz texts have validity.[6] *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* contains historical information not found elsewhere about the progression of diseases such as the bubonic plague, the rise of new cities, the development of travel routes among regions, and the ownership and treatment of slaves. If Krəstos Śämra chose to tell her own life story as miraculous, that cannot be seen as vitiating its status as autobiography. No memoir is entirely true; no person remembers her or his life precisely. We

---

[5]. See, for example, Sue E. Houchins and Baltasar Fra-Molinero, *Black Bride of Christ: Chicaba, an African Nun in Eighteenth-Century Spain* (Nashville: Vanderbilt Univ. Press, 2016); ibid., "The Saint's Life of Sister Chicaba, c. 1676–1748: An As-Told-To Slave Narrative," in *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World, 1550–1812*, ed. Kathryn Joy McKnight and Leo J. Garofalo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 214–39; Christine Rapp Dombrowski, "The Making of a Romantic Female Hagiography" (PhD diss., Univ. of Pennsylvania, 2008); June Mecham, "Reading between the Lines: Compilation, Variation, and the Recovery of an Authentic Female Voice in the *Dornenkron* Prayer Books from Wienhausen," *Journal of Medieval History* 29, no. 2 (2003), 109–28.

[6]. For one example, see Gälawdewos, *Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*, 26–30.

may say that it is an unreliable autobiography, but we cannot say it is not an autobiography.

Elements supporting a conclusion that *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* is an autobiography include the fact that the work does not fit the profile of a text that is either fraudulently invented or the ravings of a lunatic. As to the first possibility, a monk's motive for a wholesale invention of a woman's autobiography is difficult to imagine. It is true that some premodern Christian authors attributed their works to others; for instance, the unknown seventh-century author of *Pseudo-Methodius* falsely claimed it was written by the famous fourth-century church father Methodius.[7] His purpose was clear: to accrue prestige to the text. Attributing one's work to a woman would have had the opposite effect, however, making it less prestigious. A monk would be unlikely to invent a female author, who would be, by definition, more abject and less trustworthy. Indeed, it would have been more likely for a woman author to have invented a male scribe to frame and set up her own text, thus lending it the authority of a male narrator. Even if a monk were motivated to invent a hagiography, the very fact that *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* claims to be an autobiography is evidence that it is. That is, a monk bent on inventing a believable hagiography would choose a more traditional form. *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* is the only one of the hundreds of Ethiopian hagiographies to represent itself as a first-person account. If, for example, a monk heard about a famous woman who had died fifty years before and whom many considered a saint, and he decided to invent a text, he would choose the usual biographical mode of hagiography. He would be unlikely to invent a brand-new style, an autobiographical mode. Many Ethiopian hagiographies were written long after their saintly subjects died; a direct account by the saint was not remotely necessary to sainthood.

The second possibility—assuming that the monk was not fraudulently inventing, but was a mentally ill person who honestly believed that the voices in his head were real—is not supported by the text; it does not read as such. Certainly, persons can have delusions that are internally consistent and even logical, but in general, their thinking is disordered. By contrast, *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* is carefully structured and written, without dire warnings, digressions, or peculiar language. Encounters with the supernatural happen only in visions, often told with humor. If the author was simply confusing with reality his own visions of a woman telling him her visions, then one would expect the text to be more

[7]. *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius. An Alexandrian World Chronicle*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Garstad, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012).

dreamy and mystical and to be more insistent about its truth claims. In contrast, Krəstos Śämra's visions of the divine are remarkably embodied and non-fanciful.

For all these reasons, given what I know at this point, I see no reason to dispute *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra*'s own claim that it represents the autobiography of an African woman. As such, it represents one of the earliest autobiographies by an African woman.

Historical Context

The fifteenth century has long been seen as a bridge, connecting periods (the medieval and the early modern) and continents (as European exploration opened up Africa and the New World). This characterization is particularly true for Ethiopia, which converted to Christianity in the fourth century, early developed an elaborate monastic system complete with scriptoriums, and began to send delegations to European nations in the 1400s, where it had a strong impact on European history by appearing in force at the Council of Florence (1431–49). There, they claimed that the Christian king, Prester John (oft heard of but never seen), was in their land and eager for contact with Europe. Partly as a result, the Portuguese began to explore Africa, laying the groundwork for colonialism. Within several decades, the first Europeans arrived in Ethiopia; not long after, Ethiopians sent missives demanding assistance against the Islamic incursions that had destroyed the neighboring Christian states over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Cristóvão (or Christopher) da Gama arrived with Portuguese troops in the mid-1500s to turn the tide, enabling the Christian kingdom to survive another five hundred years. Jesuit missionaries soon followed.

Thus, Ethiopian literature of the fifteenth century is a literature of contact, whether documenting the highland state's constant warfare with the medieval multiethnic Islamic states on its eastern border or Ethiopia's increasing interaction with European military and religious groups. Perhaps owing to this increased contact with multiple states, Ethiopia began a period of rising literary production in the fourteenth century, with poetry, hagiographies, and historical chronicles proliferating. Although seventeenth-century Ethiopia tends to garner more attention from scholars—due to the Jesuit presence in Ethiopia—that century cannot properly be understood without understanding its gestation in the military and cultural conflicts of the fifteenth century as well as the fifteenth century's literary and religious transformations.

The towering figure of fifteenth-century Ethiopia is Emperor Zärʾä Yaʾeqob, who ruled for three and a half decades during Krəstos Śämra's lifetime, from 1434 to 1469. He was a powerful military leader who instituted a mountain

prison for all male heirs of recent monarchs, an innovation that entered Milton's *Paradise Lost* and informed Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*.[8] He was also an important religious and literary figure due to his role in reforming the church and solidifying Ethiopians' reverence for the Virgin Mary. In the 1440s, he galvanized the cult of Mary in Ethiopia by sponsoring the translation from Arabic of a number of folktales about the Virgin Mary, some of which had originated in Europe. They became the vast compendium known as *Täʾammərä Maryam* (Miracles of Mary).[9] He also wrote many original works in praise of her, in one of which he inveighs against female genital cutting, and he founded a monastery in her honor.[10] Soon many other Ethiopians were writing original hymns and poems in praise of Mary. They translated Arabic Christian texts, particularly Egyptian hagiographies of the early Church Fathers, and thereby expanded literary boundaries. *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* arose in this fertile context, one of the earliest original hagiographies in the Ethiopian tradition.

Genre of the Text and African Women Saints

Gädlä Krəstos Śämra is an example of a distinctive Ethiopian genre called a *gädl* (spiritual struggle; plural: *gädlat*), used to tell the inspirational story of a saint's life. This genre began to be written in the fourteenth century and flourished until the end of the seventeenth century. Though *gädlat* constitute the most common form of original text in Gəʿəz and are a vital archive of African literature, they have been almost entirely unexplored. Selamawit Mecca, a foremost authority on Ethiopian saints, calculates that of the hundreds of Ethiopian saints at least 108 have *gädlat*.[11] Yet, despite the importance of these texts, only four Ethiopian saints have had their *gädl* translated into English. Those saints are the male founders of the two different Ethiopian monastic houses—Saint Ǝsṭifanos and

---

[8]. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Early English Books Online (London: printed, and are to be sold by Peter Parker, . . . Robert Boulter, . . . and Matthias Walker, 1667); Samuel Johnson, *The Prince* [Rasselas] *of Abissinia: A Tale in Two Volumes*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online: Range 237 (Dublin, Ireland: printed for G. and A. Ewing, and H. Bradley, 1759).

[9]. Ewa Balicka-Witakowska and Alessandro Bausi, "Täʾammərä Maryam," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 4:789–93.

[10]. Teodros Kiros, "Zara Yacob: A Seventeenth Century Ethiopian Founder of Modernity in Africa," in *Explorations in African Political Thought: Identity, Community, Ethics*, ed. Teodros Kiros (London: Routledge, 2001), 69–79.

[11]. Selamawit Mecca, "Bound Bodies: Representation of Ethiopian Women Saints in Gəʿəz Hagiographies" (PhD diss., Addis Ababa University, 2015).

Saint Täkla Haymanot—as well as the male saint Mäbaʾa Ṣəyon and the woman saint Wälättä Peṭros.[12] Unfortunately, Wallis Budge's translation of *Gädlä Täkla Haymanot,* perhaps the most influential hagiography in Ethiopia, is not available online and is to be found in very few libraries.

After compiling information from a variety of sources in Amharic, English, and Italian, Selamawit Mecca believes there are no fewer than twenty-one Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church women saints.[13] To put this in context, the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* documents 243 African Christian women from various denominations (about 35 from Madagascar, 29 from South Africa, 27 from Ethiopia, 18 each from Uganda and Nigeria, 16 from Swaziland, and so on). The Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church women saints are, from the thirteenth century, Mäsqäl Kəbra; from the fourteenth century, Zena Maryam; from the fifteenth century, Krəstos Śämra and Sälome; from the sixteenth century, Mägdälawit, Maryam Kəbra, and Ǝleni; from the seventeenth century, Wälättä Ṗeṭros, Ǝḫətä Krəstos, Ǝmmä Śänkor, Ǝmmä Wätät, Fəqərtä Krəstos, Wälättä Maryam, and Wälättä Ṗawlos; from unknown centuries, Ǝhətä Petros, Maryam Ǝntä Ǝfrät, Ṣäbälä Maryam, Wälättä Sämayat, Wälättä Ṣəyon, Ṣəge Səllase, and Tsäbälä Maryam. Although more hagiographies

---

[12]. Täwäldä Mädḫən, *The Gəʿəz Acts of Abba Ǝsṭifanos of Gʷəndagʷənde*, trans. and ed. Getatchew Haile, 2 vols., Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 620 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006); Anonymous, *The Lives of Maba' Seyon and Gabra Krestos*, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge, Lady Meux Manuscript, vol. 1 (London: W. Griggs, 1898); Täklä Ṣəyon, *The Life of Takla Haymanot in the Version of Dabra Libanos and the Miracles of Takla Haymanot in the Version of Dabra Libanos, and the Book of the Riches of Kings*, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge, Lady Meux (London: W. Griggs, 1906); Gälawdewos, *Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*.

[13]. Aklilä Bərḥän, *Märḥa ləbuna* [Following wisdom] (Addis Ababa: n.p., 1951); Ḫəruy Wäldä Śəllase, *Bäʾityoṗya yännuggäññu bägəʿəzənna bamarəñña qʷanqʷa yätäṣafu yämäṣaḥəft kətur* [A catalog of the books written in Gəʿəz and Amharic which can be found in Ethiopia] (Addis Ababa: Goha Ṣäbah Printing Press, 1928); Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke, "Bibliography of the Ethiopic Hagiographic Traditions," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 13, no. 2 (1975): 57–102; George Wynn Brereton Huntingford, "Saints of Mediaeval Ethiopia," *Abba Salama* 10 (1979): 257–341; Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Yä-Amarəñña yä-Bətä Krəstiyan mäzgäbä qalat* [Amharic Church dictionary], 6 vols. (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Culture, 1989–90); Osvaldo Raineri, "Santi della chiesa Etiopica," in *Bibliotheca sanctorum orientalium: Enciclopedia dei santi: Le chiese orientali*, ed. Juan Nadal Cañellas, Stefano Virgulin, and Giovanni Guaita (Rome: Città nuova, 1999); Kefyalew Merahi [Käfyaläw Märaḥi], *Saints and Monasteries in Ethiopia*, vol. 2 (Addis Ababa: Commercial Printing Press, 2003); Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, 5 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003–2015).

may be discovered, Selamawit Mecca's extensive archival and field research has identified only eight Ethiopian women saints with hagiographies: Mäsqäl Kəbra, Zena Maryam, Krəstos Śämra, Ǝleni, Wälättä Ṗeṭros, Fəqərtä Krəstos, Wälättä Maryam, and Maryam Ǝntä Ǝfrät. The rest of the women saints are known partly from oral traditions and partly through entries in local synaxariums, a type of source needing more scholarship.[14] Previous to the translation of *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*, none of the women's hagiographies had been translated into English, and it alone had been translated into any European language.[15]

To cast a wider net, with few exceptions the hagiographies of women saints of Africa or of African descent in general have not been well served with translations. One of the exceptions is the publication in English translation of the life of Chicaba, a seventeenth-century Afro-Spanish saint, also called Sor Teresa de Santo Domingo.[16] Chicaba was born around 1676 off the coast of Mina in West Africa, captured and enslaved at the age of nine, transported to Spain, and purchased by the wife of a marquis. Upon the death of her owner in 1703, Chicaba entered a Dominican convent where she was not allowed to become a nun but forced to become a *donada orbeata* (servant to the other nuns). She soon, however, became well known as a faith healer and mystic. Chicaba's hagiography, titled *Compendio de la Vida Ejemplar de la Venerable Madre Sor Teresa Juliana de Santo Domingo,* was written in 1752 in Salamanca by Father Paniagua, a Spanish man, but using her autobiographical writings. Another scholar is working on editing and translating short works about men and women saints of African descent in Colonial Spanish America, including Úrsula de Jesús, Estefanía de San José, and Juana Esperanza de San Alberto.[17] For instance, Juana Esperanza de San Alberto was a seventeenth-century Afro-Mexican saint, born in West Africa in the Bran ethnic group in the late 1500s, but captured as a child and sold as a slave to work in Mexico. She served in a convent for sixty-eight years and died on

---

[14]. The Ethiopian Synaxarium (called *Sənkəssar* in Gəʿəz) includes tales about foreign and local saints, organized by feast day, so that the relevant tales can be read aloud in church on the correct day. Although the core was translated from Arabic in the 1400s, tales of many Ethiopian saints have been added to the compilation since. Further, each church's synaxarium may be slightly different from others because it includes tales on very local saints, those from the parish or district.

[15]. Gälawdewos, *Vita di Walatta Piēṭros*, trans. Lanfranco Ricci, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 316; Scriptores Aethiopici 61 (Leuven: Secrétariat du CSCO, 1970).

[16]. Houchins and Fra-Molinero, *Black Bride of Christ*.

[17]. Larissa Brewer-García, *Saints' Lives of the Early Black Atlantic: An Anthology of Hagiographies Edited and Translated from Spanish* (forthcoming).

October 10, 1679, healing many devotees after her death. More needs to be done to bring these works by and about black women saints to light.

The Text's Female Subject

The saint featured in *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* was not a meek and virginal holy woman, but a woman fierce in all aspects of life. Born into a wealthy and pious family from a frontier province in the Christian Ethiopian empire, she was married to the son of the emperor's own priest (priests can be married in the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church). The emperor looked upon Krəstos Śämra as a daughter and showered her with revenue and servants. A strong woman, she gave birth to nine sons and two daughters (see Appendix 1, an English translation of the beginning of *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra*).[18]

The changing point in her life arose from the temptations of class, probably when she was about forty years old. Having become enraged with a maidservant, probably a slave, she thrust a firebrand down her throat. When the maidservant died, a horrified Krəstos Śämra promised God that she would devote her life to him should he resurrect the maidservant. When he did, Krəstos Śämra promptly left for Däbrä Libanos, Ethiopia's most famous monastic community, to become a nun. She took her youngest child with her, but when she arrived she was told that no males were allowed into the nunnery. Committed to fulfilling her promise, she abandoned the child on the side of the road (fortunately, another nun saved him and, disobeying the same rule, raised him).

As is typical, Krəstos Śämra spent two years as a novice before becoming a nun, and the text provides important historical and religious information about Ethiopian monasticism during this period. She then left for Lake Ṭana, a place known for its many monasteries with devoted ascetic monks and nuns, to live the life of a hermit (Ethiopian monasticism has both cenobitic [communal] and eremitic [individual] forms). As her first remarkable act, she spent twelve years praying several hours a day in the waters of the lake, an act popular among devout Ethiopians. Living in solitude, she moved around the lake, staying at famous monasteries such as Narga Śəllase and Ṭana Qirqos. During this period, she had many visions, in which she spoke with the angels and saints as well as Christ and his mother.

Then the biblical patriarchs came to her in a dream and told her to settle at G^{w}angut, also on Lake Ṭana, for they told her that the entire world would come there to prostrate themselves at her feet. So she gave up the life of a hermit

[18]. The text clearly states that she had nine sons, pace other sources.

and founded a monastery, even though living in community was something she, and many other Ethiopian saints, saw as more difficult than being a hermit. A monk named Yəsḥaq helped her by building a church, training female novices, and celebrating the liturgy. Afterward she withdrew once again into solitude, standing in a pit for three years and in the lake for another three years. When death was near, she told a scribe named Filəṗṗos her life story and thirty of her visions. Later at the monastery of Däbrä Libanos he wrote both down, recording her visions in a vivid and lively first-person account. She was buried at G^{w}angut, where her monastery is today.

Her visions are not presented in abstract mystical language but are quite concrete, including clear stories about repentant magicians, fragments of consecrated bread that fly, abjecting the body by sucking Christ's wounds, and meeting Satan in his guise as head of the church. In one, she demands that Christ forgive all the damned and then travels to hell to plead with Satan to accept Christ's pardon so that human beings will no longer suffer due to their enmity (see Appendix 2 for an English translation of this section).

Krəstos Śämra was a nun dedicated to extreme asceticism who founded an important monastic community in the ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church. Through her hagiography, readers gain a better understanding of how medieval Ethiopian texts represent gender roles and theology, thereby enabling complication of received understandings of Christian texts in general. Krəstos Śämra is not a sentimental figure, not someone who nurtures through affectionate kindness and sweet indulgence, but someone who puts God before family and who is willing to leave her own child to die in order to fulfill her obligations to the divine. She is sovereign over an everyday African world where a sneezing child is not adorable but a cold hand reaching from the grave, where eating only once a day is the norm, not a diet, and where happening down the wrong road at the wrong time can lead to a life of slavery in a land far from anyone who speaks your language.

For her, God and Satan, Mary and the saints, angels and demons are not abstractions living on high, but neighbors to be importuned and chastised for their complacency regarding human suffering. Krəstos Śämra even debates with Christ, pressing him like a disobedient son to forgive humanity. In one of her miracles, a man was using a plant for magical protection. When Krəstos Śämra prayed to Christ that the man be forgiven for practicing magic, Christ responded that he would not forgive him because the man had used the plant demonically. In a typical moment, she responded by arguing with Christ, pointing out, "You created the plants!" Christ bowed to this argument and forgave the man. It is for tactics like this that the scholar Ephraim Isaac has reportedly called her "the

mother of peace" and an Ethiopian female philosopher.[19]

That Krəstos Śämra is considered a folk hero despite murdering her maid and abandoning her son, receiving the devotion of many women in Ethiopia over the centuries, makes her representative of the small but important stream in Christian sainthood of women who defied the norms of femininity. Krəstos Śämra is an important model for Ethiopian women of putting the life of individual spiritual reflection before the comforts and obligations of family.

Krəstos Śämra both aligns with and differs from other women saints such as the visionaries Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe (whose lives were roughly contemporaneous with her own, spanning from the fourteenth century into the fifteenth); the penitent sinners Saint Mary of Egypt (a prostitute), Saint Pelagia of Antioch (a courtesan convert), and Saint Mary/Marinos (one of the so-called transvestite nuns); the non-Chalcedonian female religious leaders Saint Euphemia and Saint Susanna; and, as mentioned earlier, the Sufi female mystics Rabia Basri and Lalla Aziza as well as the later Hindu mystic poet Mirabai. Further comparison might be made with early Christian saints such as Augustine's mother, Saint Monica (Algeria, 331–87) and Efigênia (a first-century "Ethiopian" saint revered in eighteenth-century Brazil), or with much later diasporic saints such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth (nineteenth-century African American saints). Others include Josephine Bakhita (1869–1947), a Sudanese slave who became a Roman Catholic nun, living and ministering in Italy for forty-five years, and now being considered for canonization, and Mokhola, the twentieth-century Moroccan saint.

Almost nothing is known about the lives of medieval African women. In the absence of information, many assume they all lived short, brutish lives. *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* gives a glimpse of the agency of such women—the control some had over their destinies, the vital role some played in the church, and the way some women's thought shaped church theology.

Further, hagiographies aid scholars of Africa's religious, literary, and social history by providing a clearer view of the mystical streak in African Christianity and its association with women saints. Clarified as well are the distinctive views of the human body present among those churches that rejected the Council of Chalcedon's stance on the dual nature of Christ. As the forms and

---

[19]. Solomon Gebre-Medhin, "Ethiopia: Ethiopian Herald Interview with Prof Ephraim Issac" (March 4, 2015), accessed October 24, 2016, http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2015/03/04/ethiopia-ethiopian-herald-interview-with; T, Blogger of De Birahn Blogspot, "Saint Kirstos Semra: The First Ethiopian/International Female Philosopher" (June 8, 2011), accessed October 24, 2016, http://debirhan.com/?p=530.

topoi of Ethiopian hagiography develop, they foreground additional topics of interest such as the genre's poems praising saints from the head to the toe; historical changes of the period, including medicinal responses to disease; racial views of slaves; trade relations with Muslims; an increase in pilgrimages; and the rise of towns near monastic centers. *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* represents an expressive look into the mind of the medieval Ethiopian characterized by colorful stories, a focus on women's lives, and an unusual generic structure.

Scholarship on the Text

Krəstos Śämra is mentioned in passing in various travel guides, manuscript catalogs, articles, and even one US young adult novel.[20] Some encyclopedia entries have appeared in English about the saint.[21] But only two works have appeared outside of Ethiopia that treat the saint at any length.

The first article to be devoted to the topic is Selamawit Mecca's discussion of Ethiopian women saints.[22] In the article she focuses on *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* in particular but also discusses how Ethiopian women's hagiographies represent women more generally. She concludes that the role of women in these texts is not one of breaking out of traditional models of femininity; instead they maintain social order by providing "emergency solutions" to a variety of cultural crises. Mecca argues that the women's hagiographies are not feminist tracts, but rather depict the women saints as without wisdom or autonomy. As proof, she points out that Krəstos Śämra is pictured as capable of the arrogant foolishness of killing a servant, a violent act no male saint is depicted as having committed. Also, the saint describes herself as a "weak woman" in need of male assistance and many of "her" miracles are

---

[20]. Philip Briggs, *Ethiopia*, 7th ed. (Bucks, Eng.: Bradt Travel Guides, 2015); Elizabeth Wein, *Black Dove, White Raven* (Los Angeles: Hyperion, 2015); Steven Kaplan, "Seen but Not Heard: Children and Childhood in Medieval Ethiopian Hagiographies," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 30, no. 3 (1997): 539–53; Richard Pankhurst, "The History of Famine and Pestilence in Ethiopia Prior to the Founding of Gondär," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 10, no. 2 (1972): 37–64; Steven Kaplan, "Hagiographies and the History of Medieval Ethiopia," *History in Africa* 8 (1981): 107–23; Christine Chaillot, "The Ancient Oriental Churches," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield-Tucker (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 131–69.

[21]. Denis Nosnitsin, "Krəstos Śämra," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*; Wendy Laura Belcher, "Kristos Samra," Wikipedia, accessed October 24, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristos_Samra.

[22]. Mecca, "Hagiographies of Ethiopian Female Saints."

actually performed by the Archangel Michael.[23] Although I see the women's hagiographies as providing stronger depictions of female agency, Mecca offers powerful arguments for seeing the hagiographies as invidiously sexist.

In her book on slavery, the historian of medieval Ethiopia Marie-Laure Derat makes use of representations of slavery in *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra*, giving a close reading of the anecdote about the saint killing her servant, a slave.[24] As she points out, no other Ethiopian saint kills someone. But the death is perhaps tolerated in this case because the person killed is a slave, and a female slave at that. While the saint is distraught about the sin she has brought on herself, she does not seem to be distraught about the life of the slave herself. Further, Krəstos Śämra does not seem to face any murder charges. "This episode demonstrates the power of life and death that a master had over a slave in Ethiopia; otherwise, such a story would never be credited to a saint. It is only because the victim is a slave that the murder is of little importance."[25]

Translations, Editions, and Manuscripts

Gädlä Krəstos Śämra has received previous attention; the Italian scholar Enrico Cerulli published a two-volume Gəʿəz edition and Italian translation in 1956. It contains a fifteen-page introduction in Italian that focuses on dating the manuscript, rather than historicizing or contextualizing the text. Cerulli's translation has some peculiarities; he translated poetry as prose, failed to correct or comment on grammatical mistakes, and worked with just two manuscripts. As a result, he omitted over a dozen miracles found in at least three other manuscripts and did not include alternate ending stanzas to the hagiography's poem. Together the omissions are substantial, constituting 25 percent of the full text. Like other early Gəʿəz texts, *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* is repeatedly elliptical, with words and phrases seemingly missing—a phenomenon of Gəʿəz manuscripts that bears greater attention.

Not many copies of *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* exist. The important 1960s and 1970s microfilming project titled the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) is archived at the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML), Collegeville, Minnesota. It claims to have three manuscripts of *Gädlä*

[23]. Mecca, "Hagiographies of Ethiopian Female Saints," 164.

[24]. Marie-Laure Derat, "Chrétiens et musulmans d'Éthiopie face à la traite et à l'esclavage aux XVe et XVIe siècles," in *Traites et esclavages en Afrique orientale et dans l'océan Indien*, ed. Thomas Vernet et al. (Paris: Centre d'Etudes des Mondes Africains, 2012)," 126–40.

[25]. Derat, "Chrétiens et musulmans d'Éthiopie," p. 126; my translation.

Krəstos Śämra, but inspection shows them to be Amharic-Gəʿəz paraphrases of the text, not the original. A priority should be placed on preserving more of the copies of *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* to be found in Ethiopia, especially at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana. On a previous translation project, Michael Kleiner and I found that manuscripts digitized in Ethiopia had fewer errors and provided more historical material than did manuscripts located in Europe. Following is a list of all currently known manuscripts, whether digital facsimiles or original parchment manuscripts, and their availability. When dates are known, they are given in both the Ethiopian calendar (EC) year and the Western calendar year (which is seven or eight years ahead of the Ethiopian one, depending on the time of year).

1. MS A. Cerulli manuscript: undated manuscript that the Italian consulate had transcribed at Ǝsṭifanos Monastery of Ḥayq in Ethiopia in the 1940s; the transcript is now in the Vatican Library (Cerulli collection, Etiopico 176 and Etiopico 277). Lacks the two poems and some miracles.
2. MS B. Aeth. E. 4: nineteenth-century manuscript (made between 1813 and 1847) now at Oxford University's Bodleian Library. Ullendorff catalog no. 78 states that it consists of 98 folios and 3 illuminations.[26] Lacks the two poems and some miracles. (Documented in Cerulli's print edition, called MS B there.)
3. MS C. EMML 8582: seventeenth-century manuscript microfilmed at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana.[27] (Although this manuscript is not available from HMML, because the microfilm made in the 1970s was done poorly and is now too light to digitize, it remains at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana, according to report.)
4. MS D. EMML 8573: eighteenth-century manuscript microfilmed at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana. (Although this manuscript is not available from HMML, because this series of microfilms never left Ethiopia and can be viewed only at the National Archive and Library of Ethiopia, which does not make digital copies and is frequently closed,

[26]. Edward Ullendorff, *Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library*, vol. 2, Catalogi Codd. Mss. Bibliothecae Bodleianae, pars vii (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951).

[27]. William F. Macomber and Getatchew Haile, eds., *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts Microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa, and for the Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library, Collegeville*, 10 vols. (Collegeville, MN: Monastic Manuscript Microfilm Library, St. John's Abbey and University, 1975–1993).

it remains at the saint's monastery on Lake Ṭana, according to report.)

5. MS E. EMDL 147: twenty-first-century manuscript (1994 EC; 2001–2 CE) at Mäkanä Ḥəywät Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus church in Mäqäle, Təgray. 67 folios, no illuminations. Lacks the two poems and some miracles. Available from HMML.
6. MS F. EMDL 627: twentieth-century manuscript digitized at Däbrä Sälamä Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus ʿAddi Gudom in Təgray. 71 folios, no illuminations. Lacks one poem. Available from HMML.
7. MS G. EMDL 663: twenty-first-century manuscript (1996 EC; 2003–4 CE) digitized at Šəgʷala Maryam in Təgray. 46 folios, one illumination. Lacks one poem. Available from HMML.
8. MS H. EMML 1211: twentieth-century paper manuscript (1963 EC; 1970–1 CE) microfilmed at Holy Trinity Church Library in Addis Ababa. It has sections in Gəʿəz that paraphrase *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra* and then sections in Amharic that translate the paraphrase, so it is not the text we call *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra*. Although listed in the catalog as "Dirsane Kirstos Samera," its title is *Zəkrä wəddaseha lä-əmmənä Krəstos Śämra* (A record of our Mother Kristos Samra's praise).
9. MS I. EMIP 00650: twentieth-century parchment manuscript digitized at Mäkanä Iyäsus Seminary Library in Addis Ababa. Same text as MS H. Three images.[28]
10. MS J. EMML 2949: twentieth-century parchment manuscript microfilmed in the private library of "Qēs Asfāw Walda Śellāsē" in Enṭoṭṭo, Addis Ababa. In Amharic.
11. MS K. Däbrä Libanos Monastery is reputed to have a copy; since the original text was made in this monastery, it is perhaps even the urtext.
12. MS L. Däbrä Tabor Monastery is reputed to have a copy.

Conclusion

Gädlä Krəstos Śämra is just one example of Ethiopia's thousands of original texts, less than 5 percent of which are available in any European language though all are invaluable to the fields of African history, literature, and religion. This hagiography of an Ethiopian woman offers insights into the lives and thought of medieval African women, the development of the forms and tropes of

[28]. For a description, see Kesis Melaku Terefe et al., *Catalogue of the Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project*, vol. 7, *Codices 601–654: The Meseret Sebhat Le-Ab Collection of Mekane Yesus Seminary, Addis Ababa* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

hagiography as a genre, medieval African Christian theology, and the non-Chalcedonian doctrine of the Ethiopian, Egyptian, Syrian, Armenian, and Indian churches. To date, however, Selamawit Mecca's article is the only scholarly text to address this saint or her hagiography at length.[29] Clearly, more work is needed to interpret, analyze, and translate this extraordinary text. It is my hope that this article lays out some fruitful directions for that work.

Wendy Laura Belcher is associate professor of African literature at Princeton University with a joint appointment in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Department of African American Studies. She is the author of *Abyssinia's Samuel Johnson: Ethiopian Thought in the Making of an English Author* (Oxford, 2012), a finalist for the Bethwell A. Ogot Award for best book on East Africa. With Michael Kleiner she translated *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* (Princeton, 2015).

Appendix 1: Beginning of *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra*
English translation by Michael Kleiner and Wendy Laura Belcher

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, one God.

The birthplace of our mother Kristos Samra[30] was a town from among the towns of Shawa.[31] There was a man in that town, extremely rich in gold, silver, and fine garments; in manservants and maidservants;[32] in horses and in

29. Selamawit Mecca, "Hagiographies of Ethiopian Female Saints: With Special Reference to *Gädlä Krestos Sämra* and *Gädlä Feqertä Krestos*," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 153–67.

30. *Krəstos Śämra* (Christ delights in her).

31. *Šäwa* is the region in central Ethiopia where today's capital Addis Ababa, a late-nineteenth-century foundation, is located. In the fifteenth century, Ethiopia did not extend as far south as it does today, so during Krəstos Śämra's time Šäwa was a southern frontier province. The itinerant royal court frequently stayed there.

32. Lit., *agbərt wä-aʾəmat* (male-servants and female-servants). It is quite likely these men and women were slaves.

mules. That man's name was Dargoni;[33] his wife's name was Iléni,[34] [named after that] God-fearing woman whose fame had spread to[35] the remotest parts of the world. Together Dargoni and Illéni conceived this woman, our wise and humble mother Kristos Samra. They raised her in keeping with the family's lofty status[36] and were glad about her beauty.

When Kristos Samra had grown up and reached puberty,[37] her parents married her[38] to a man called Samra Giyorgis,[39] a son of Iyasus Moʾa,[40] Chaplain

---

33. MS A: *Därgʷäni*; MS B: *Därsägʷäni*. Neither variant has a clear meaning in Gəˢəz or Amharic. The father's name in MS A (pronounced *Därgoni*) may be connected with Amharic *dərgoññña* (one who receives a stipend or allowance; see Thomas Leiper Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary* [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990], 1758). By contrast, if MS B's variant is taken to be the original form, an interpretation on the basis of Amharic becomes even more elusive (*Därsägʷäni* < *Där*[*rä*]*sä* gʷ*än*[*n*]*e* = He came to my side / He supported me) and a Gəˢəz interpretation definitely can be excluded. Against this background, the name might come from one of the Cushitic languages of Ethiopia, which could imply that the saint's father's ancestors were not from one of the dominant groups of Ethiopia. A different, later manuscript about the saint gives his name as *Ṣäräsəhani*, a distortion corroborating the thesis that the original name did not have meaning in Amharic or Gəˢəz.

34. *Ǝleni* (Helen, from an original Greek *Helénē*). Since Krəstos Śämra's mother was not famous around the world, it is likely that she was named after the fourth-century Saint Helen, who claimed to have excavated remnants of Christ's original cross in Jerusalem and was the mother of Constantine the Great, who established Christianity in the Roman Empire. She could not have been named after Ǝleni, the famous medieval Ethiopian queen, who lived from around 1431 to 1522, but who was still living when this text was written. That queen was reputedly childless, married to an emperor, and not yet famous when Krəstos Śämra's mother was born and being named.

35. Lit., *zä-səmuˤ zenaha wəstä* (whose story had been heard in).

36. Lit., *bä-kʷəllu kəbr* (with all dignity).

37. Lit., *bäṣḥa* (to reach *or* arrive). The use of Gəˢəz *bäṣḥa* appears to be modeled upon the parallel Amharic term *därräsä,* which not only means "to arrive, to reach," but also "to reach maturity, to become sexually mature" (Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary*, 1736). Enrico Cerulli translates differently: *quando fu cresciuta ed adulta* (when she was grown up and an adult). The age of puberty in Ethiopia was generally sixteen or seventeen (Desalegn Zegeye, Berihun Megabiaw, and Abay Mulu, "Age at Menarche and the Menstrual Pattern of Secondary School Adolescents in Northwest Ethiopia," *BMC Women's Health* 9, no. 1 [2009]: 29).

38. Lit., *astäwasäbəwwa*, which Cerulli incorrectly renders as *la promisero* (they promised her).

39. *Śämrä Giyorgis* ([St.] George delights [in him]). He was a priest.

40. *Iyäsus Moʾa* (Christ has vanquished).

of His Majesty.[41] Samra Giyorgis, whose lineage began from the family of Itsa Sargwah,[42] was a companion of the king, wealthy in the possessions of this transient world, but also surrounded by the grace of the Holy Spirit. [43] When he saw the beauty of his bride, our mother Kristos Samra, he loved her very much. The spirit of strength and of wisdom was abundant in her,[44] [as was] the spirit of intelligence and insight.[45] Her entire appearance was pleasing; down to her feet, there was nothing ugly about her. Her cheeks were as red[46] as the rind of a pomegranate, her eyes were like the morning star. Furthermore, her fingers were even,[47] her lips luscious,[48] and her nose straight.[49] Her replies were sweetly worded; her tongue was eloquent,[50] her speech pleasant and clever. The grace of God, the assistance of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit the Helper[51] attended her. Everybody who saw her marveled and rejoiced over her beauty.

Her father-in-law, [Iyasus Moʾa], even prophesied about her, saying: "This is an exalted woman," and he honored her as if she was his lady.[52]

Then Kristos Samra bore her husband Samra Giyorgis children: nine boys and two girls. She raised them and taught them all God's Law.

The king also loved and honored Kristos Samra. He gave her

---

41. Lit., *qesä ḥaḍe* (priest of His Majesty). Since Śämrä Giyorgis is still a young unmarried man here, he is not the *qesä ḥaḍe;* rather, his father is. In the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwaḥədo Church, priests are allowed to marry.

42. *ʿƎḍa Särgwa* (The wood [of the Holy Cross] is her adornment). The name's feminine possessive element makes it clear that this person is a female ancestor, renowned at the time the scribe wrote. Nothing, however, is known about ʿƎḍa Särgwa now.

43. B: *wä-ʿadi kəllul bä-ṣägga mänfäs qəddus*; A omits *kəllul* (surrounded).

44. Lit., *wä-məluʾ laʿleha* (full upon her).

45. Lit., *məkrä* [acc.], which Cerulli should have amended to the required nominative *məkr;* Filəṗṗos, *Gadla Krestos Samra (Ethiopic)*.

46. The highland peoples of Ethiopia considered themselves red, not black.

47. Lit., *zäwg* (alike). Cerulli: *erano accostate* (lay next to each other); Filəṗṗos, *Gadla Krestos Samra* (Italian).

48. Lit., *qəssumat* (seasoned or tasty).

49. Lit., *qäwwam* (tall or erect).

50. Lit., *awśəʾotä qala ṭəʿum śaʾśaʾ afuha* (the response of her words sweet, eloquent her mouth).

51. Lit., *ṗäraqliṭos* (from the Greek *Paraclete* [Helper or Advocate]), as in John 14:16, 26.

52. Lit., *əgzəʾt* (lady, mistress), which is devoid of erotic overtones. Rather, it is evocative of the Holy Virgin, who in Gəʿəz is regularly addressed as *əgzəʾtənä* (Our Lady).

maidservants from among his palatial attendants,[53] marked[54] with the royal mark, to escort her. They walked with her in their set orders, eighty-six on her right and eighty-six on her left, so all of them together numbered 172.[55]

Kristos Samra's mule was from beyond the sea; her veil[56]—that is, her facial veil[57]—as well as [her] garments were as fine as the royal women's garments. The King of Ethiopia, the Anointed of God, favored her with much gold and silver, with shoes of gold, and with all these honors so that her name should be exalted. Truly,[58] he loved her very much, just like a daughter who had sprung from his loins. All this was granted[59] to Kristos Samra because it so pleased God, her creator.

---

53. Lit., *əmənnä däqqä ṣərḥu* (from the servants of his palace *or* bedchamber). Cerulli: *di quelle della Corte* (from among those of the Court). The word *däqq* can also mean disciples or children and, as part of the standard phrase "children of the house," slaves. Since the next phrase describes them as having a royal mark, presumably a permanent brand or tattoo, they are almost certainly slaves. The Romans were the first to brand slaves.

54. AB: *ḫətuman* (masc. pl.), which Cerulli should have changed to the required *ḫətumat* (fem. pl.) because the reference is to the maidservants (*aʾəmat*).

55. For a discussion of this passage, see Derat, "Chrétiens et musulmans d'Éthiopie," 129.

56. Lit., *gəlbabi*, where the dictionaries only document *gəlbab* and *gəlbabe* (August Dillmann, *Lexicon linguae Aethiopicae, cum indice Latino* [Leipzig: Weigel, 1865], 1139; Wolf Leslau, *Concise Dictionary of Gəʿəz (Classical Ethiopic)* [Wisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989], 201). Regarding Ethiopian women wearing veils when they travelled, see Pedro Páez, *Pedro Páez's History of Ethiopia, 1622*, ed. Isabel Boavida, Hervé Pennec, and Manuel João Ramos, trans. Christopher J. Tribe (Burlington, VT: Ashgate for the Hakluyt Society, 2011), 2.274, 405.

57. A: *məstəkar*, B: *mästäkar*. The term is undocumented in the Gəʿəz dictionaries (Dillmann, *Lexicon linguae Aethiopicae, cum indice Latino*, 177, 570; Leslau, *Concise Dictionary of Gəʿəz (Classical Ethiopic)*, 35, 109). Cerulli convincingly suggests that the term corresponds to Amharic *mästänkariya* (long veil women use to cover the face); see Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary*, 214, 19.

58. Lit., *əsmä* (truly *or* because). Therefore, this word could be interpreted as the end of the previous sentence, changing the clauses' meaning to "so that her name should be exalted because he loved her very much."

59. Lit., *yətgäbbär lati* (was done to her).

Appendix 2: Anecdote about Satan in *Gädlä Krəstos Śämra*
English translation by Michael Kleiner and Wendy Laura Belcher

[p. 44] Then my lord[60] Jesus Christ came to me, in great glory. When I saw him, I fell at my Lord God's[61] feet. Immediately, however, he raised me up with his holy and blessed hands without blemish.

Then he said to me, "Don't be afraid, my dear Kristos Samra. Rather, tell me your heart's desire."

I replied, "If you permit your maidservant [to ask], tell me why you created our father Adam in your image and likeness,[62] and why you were crucified on the wood of the cross. Was it not for the sake of Adam and his offspring?"

Christ replied, "Yes, I was crucified for their sake."

So I said to him, "If your crucifixion happened for their sake, pardon [all] those who have died, from Abel up to now and in eternity, O Lord! Truly, you are merciful, slow to be angered, given to compassion, and righteous. There is no other God than you, you are all-powerful, and nothing is impossible for you; the entire earth does not [even] fill your hands."

Now Christ replied to me with these words, "Please judge [for yourself], my dear Kristos Samra. [Weigh] the sins that Adam and his offspring have committed [against] the cross that I, your creator, carried in the court of Caiaphas and Annas with Pontius Pilate as their superior: [63] If they are weighed on the scales, which one is heavier? Does not my suffering [in human hands], which I received on [Good] Friday, weigh heavier?"

When Christ said this to me, I trembled and fell to the ground. Immediately, he raised me up again with his holy hands and asked me, "All the tribulation that I suffered, for whom do you think it was? [p. 45] As the prophet Isaiah says, 'He came to be slaughtered like a sheep, and like a sheep that does not give a sound[64] before him who shears it, he too did not open his mouth despite his suffering.'[65] As scripture said, I was crucified on a wooden cross—a wicked servant slapped my face, impure people spat on me, and Pilate, sitting on his throne, ordered me to be whipped. Thus was I treated: Shall I show humanity

---

[60]. Lit., *əgzi'* (master or lord), which can be used for God or for a worldly ruler, owner, or chief.

[61]. Lit., *amlak* (Lord or God), which can be used only for a heavenly ruler.

[62]. Note that she addresses Christ the Son as the Creator, even though he is not God the Father.

[63]. Lit., Qäyafa . . . Ḥanna . . . Ṗilaṭos Ṗenṭenawi. See John 18:12–14.

[64]. Lit., [fidäl] (does not speak).

[65]. Isaiah 53:7, with slight differences from the Protestant Bible. See the Septuagint.

mercy or shall I punish them? Please judge [for yourself], my dear Kristos Samra."

When Christ had said these things to me, I fell on my face and said to him, "Why do you tell me all the time: 'Judge [for yourself]?' You judge, please! Can a servant pass judgment together with his master, or a maidservant together with her mistress? Don't treat me in this way, O lord! [I merely ask,] Is there any wood that doesn't smoke [when burned], are there humans who don't sin? So, pardon them, without questions."

So Christ replied, "Please tell me your heart's desire, my dear Kristos Samra, that which is in your heart."

At that point I replied to him as follows, "My lord, I would like you to pardon the devil,[66] and for all humanity[67] to be saved from being condemned to [eternal] suffering. Truly, you don't desire the sinner's death, but rather his turning back [from sin]![68] This is why I say to you: 'Pardon the devil!' Don't think that I like to say all these things to you. Rather, [I do it] for the sake of Adam and his offspring, because their flesh is my flesh."

After I had said these things to Christ, our Lord replied with a laugh, "You're asking me for a difficult thing, my dear Kristos Samra! Many saints who were before you have not asked me for this." [p. 46]

After saying this, Christ summoned Saint Michael, the head of the angels. He said to him, "Go and take her to Sheol,[69] because she has asked me to liberate the devil from the [realm of] punishment with [eternal] suffering."

Immediately, Saint Michael, the head of the angels, took me with him to Sheol. As we were on our way, I said to Saint Michael, head of the angels, "From now on, all humanity shall find rest because I believe that the devil wants to be pardoned and not to be Lord God."

Then we arrived in hell.[70] My brothers, what can I tell you about the suffering that is found there? I saw people biting each other as if they were dogs.

Then Saint Michael, the head of the angels, said to me, "Summon the devil [and find out] if he wants to be saved."

So I called out for him, in the language of the angels, "Satan!"[71]

Instantly, Satan shouted [back], in a loud voice, "Who calls out for me, in the place where I am Lord God of many hosts?"

After Satan had said this, he came to me and told me, "I've been looking

---

[66]. Lit., *Diyabəlos*.

[67]. Lit, [fidäl] (children of Eve). And below.

[68]. Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11.

[69]. Lit, *Siʾol*, from Hebrew שְׁאוֹל, the place of the dead, the nether world.

[70]. Lit., *gähännäm* (hell).

[71]. Lit, *Saṭənaʾel*.

for you for a long time. Today you have finally come to my home."

At this point, I replied to him, "Come out quickly! Our Lord has pardoned you, as well as those who are yours."

When I said this to him, he became enraged.[72] He seized my left hand and dragged me down to the lowest level of She'ol. However, Saint Michael came to my [aid], following me with his sword of fire in his hands. [With it,] he then struck that abominable [creature] who knows no mercy.

My brothers, what can I tell you about the wailing that arose in that hour! All the [captive] souls [p. 47] swarmed me like bees. [Fortunately], the number of souls who escaped from [hell] on the wings of Saint Michael and on my own wings was something like 100,000. I was delighted when I saw how happy those souls were. I frolicked among them just like a young calf; I was like a horse that races in the king's presence.

After that, I went to [Christ] my creator, and prostrated myself to the glory of his rule. I said to him, "Is this how you have judged, O Lord?"

He replied, "Have you taken some booty from the hands of the devil?"

I replied, "Yes, my lord, I have, through your power."

Now he summoned Saint Michael, the head of the angels, and said to him, "Go, take those souls to the home of my dear Kristos Samra."

At that point I asked him, "Where is that home of mine, my lord?"

He replied, "Your home shall be with my mother [in heaven]. I hereby give you the name of Batra Maryam[73] and commission you as my mother's shoes[74] and adorn you with great grace and majesty. Blessed are all who love you." [p. 47]

---

[72]. Lit., [fidäl] (his heart burnt like fire).

[73]. *Bäträ Maryam* (Staff of Mary).

[74]. To be subservient to the divine is a great honor.