



## Aethiopica 18 (2015)

International Journal of Ethiopian and  
Eritrean Studies

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### Article

*Regularity and Uniformity in the Ethiopian Hagiographical Tradition:  
A Particular Focus on Narrating the Childhood of Saints*

Aethiopica 18 (2015), 145–162

ISSN: 2194–4024

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Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut  
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik  
der Universität Hamburg  
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

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Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig

## Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
- ÄthFor* Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995).
- AethFor* Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG (*ibid.*, 2011f.); 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI (*ibid.*, 2012ff.).
- AION* *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'*, Napoli: Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale' (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (London, 1917ff.).
- CSCO* Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
- EAE* S. UHLIG, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; in cooperation with A. BAUSI, eds, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010); A. BAUSI in cooperation with S. UHLIG, eds, V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).
- EMML* Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
- JAH* *The Journal of African History*, Cambridge 1960ff.
- JES* *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
- OrChr* *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
- PdP* *La Parola del Passato. Rivista di studi classici*, Napoli 1946ff.
- PICES 8* TADDESE BEYENE, ed., *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, University of Addis Ababa (26–30 November) 1984*, I–II (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies–Frankfurt am Main: Frobenius Institut, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, 1988–1989).
- PICES 10* C. LEPAGE and É. DELAGE, eds, *Études éthiopiennes: Actes de la X<sup>e</sup> Conférence internationale des études éthiopiennes, Paris, 24–28 août 1988* (Paris: Société française pour les études éthiopiennes, 1994).
- PO* *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1903ff.
- RIÉ* É. BERNAND, A.J. DREWES, and R. SCHNEIDER, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, I: *Les documents*, II: *Les planches* (Paris: (Académie des inscriptions et belle-lettres) Diffusion de Boccard, 1991).
- RRALm* *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, Roma, 1892ff.
- RSE* *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma, 1941–1981, Roma–Napoli, 1983ff.
- SAe* *Scriptores Aethiopici*.

# Regularity and Uniformity in the Ethiopian Hagiographical Tradition: A Particular Focus on Narrating the Childhood of Saints

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## 1. Introduction

Over the course of the two millennia of Christian history, the scope of hagiographic writings has been breathtakingly wide. This includes such genres as the lives of saints, collections of miracle stories, ‘accounts of the discovery or movement of relics, bulls of canonization, inquests held into the lives of a candidate for canonization, liturgical books, sermons, visions’ and the like.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the Christian Orient, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwāḥədo Church has a rich tradition of documenting the lives and deeds of its saints through the literary genre known as *gädl*.<sup>2</sup> According to Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke (1975),<sup>3</sup> are about 201 Ethiopian *gädlät* in number and, according to Aklilä Bərhan Wäldä Qirqos (1952/1953)<sup>4</sup>, there are 292. This body of literature has won the attention of scholars who studied them from their classification<sup>5</sup> through to publication. The subject of this paper has long attracted the attention of scholars of medieval Ethiopian history and literature.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bray 1992, 10–11.

<sup>2</sup> *Gädl*, pl. *gädlät*, meaning ‘strife, conflict, contending, spiritual fight, life (of a saint), vita’ (cf. Kidanä Wäld Kəfle 1954/1955, 301).

<sup>3</sup> Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke 1975, 55–102.

<sup>4</sup> Aklilä Bərhan Wäldä Qirqos 1952/1953.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding classification, and apart from the comments available in general works, the *EAE* as a reference work contains many of entries on hagiography (esp. as the body of literature on saints is concerned); some important articles republished (some for the first time in English translation) in Bausi 2012 are also useful. Moreover, contributions by Carlo Conti Rossini, Ignazio Guidi, Enrico Cerulli, Paolo Marrassini, Steven Kaplan, Gianfrancesco Lusini, Denis Nosnitsin, Antonella Brita etc. might be consulted. Note that only directly accessible text editions and unpublished sources were used for reference; these are listed in the bibliography at the end of the article. In cases when scholarly editions could not be accessed, accessible editions or even unpublished manuscripts are used. However, data on existing editions are provided for all the texts used and quoted.

<sup>6</sup> Marrassini’s ‘L’infanzia del santo nel cristianesimo orientale: il caso dell’Etiopia’ from 1991 is an important contribution; analytical elaborations are also presented in his editions. Steven Kaplan’s attempt (1994) to discuss the topic should also be acknowledged. He tried to examine the portrayal of children and childhood in medieval hagi-

Reading different *gädlät* of the saints, any interested student of hagiography will easily discover intriguing intertextual features. For example it is apparent that each hagiography clearly has a relationship with other Ethiopian hagiographies. The consciousness and familiarity between texts even crosses written and oral boundaries. Thus the act of adducing authorities and alluding to other oral retellings seems to be intentional, this in the sense that the hagiographers undoubtedly wished to mark continuity between narratives, and thus perhaps gain further credibility for their work. This uniformity and regularity in the country's ecclesiastical literary tradition in general and the hagiographic literature in particular, has rarely been studied and is a fruitful field for further investigation.<sup>7</sup>

Thus this paper, as part of a broader project, aims at understanding the way this uniformity and regularity is seen in the literary tradition, specifically in hagiographies. By analyzing the content of some selected hagiographies both published and unpublished, it will show how hagiographies absorb and transform the content of other hagiographies in the literary tradition. One of the areas where there is a visible uniformity and regularity between Ethiopian hagiographic literatures is the *childhood of saints*, which is the focus of this study.

## 2. Regularity and uniformity in the childhood of saints

In the Ethiopian hagiographic tradition, the childhood<sup>8</sup> of saints is characterized by uniformity. This is evidenced in different hagiographies whereby the saints' early life follows a set of patterns dominated by a few nearly universal conventions that are almost interchangeable between one saint and another. This might result from the notions that, overall, the saint's life is a heavenly construct, and grace has determined the supernatural destination, with slight variations in how the saint arrived there. Patterns of childhood, where uniformity and regularity come into play across different Ethiopic hagiographies, are discussed in the following.

### A. The infertility pattern

In the Ethiopic hagiographic tradition, the central theme is God's granting a couple a heavenly child; this contrasts with the worry typical of such a cou-

ographic texts, raising some of the issues involved in writing a history of childhood and children in medieval Ethiopia.

<sup>7</sup> See among others Marrassini 1980 and Lusini 1990, 151–152.

<sup>8</sup> Childhood is generally defined as a period in human development between birth and the first years of the child's second decade (c. between birth and 14 or 15 years of age).

ple in which the childless wife is seen as virtuous. Different *gädlät* present barren couples deprived of happy parenthood, where God finally answers the prayers of the childless couple by blessing them with an angelic child who puts an end to their uncertainty and brings joy to their household. This, of course, might be perceived as a result of the writer's adoption of biblical stereotypes<sup>9</sup> and of his need to establish the divine election of the saint; however we ought not to underestimate the realities of both the saintly lives and the sincerity and authenticity of the hagiographers, however uniform.

Furthermore, like the biblical figures who were barren and then became fertile, hagiographic composers tend to value giving birth late in life, rather than at the locally accepted and normal time of most marriages.<sup>10</sup> It is because, on the one hand, they need to equate that very marriage with their Biblical antecedents and to show the intervention of God in due time. The parents of Ethiopian saints, reach an advanced age without the longed-for child. For instance, in the words of Ἐνδρῃας, the father of Samu'el of Däbrä Wägäg, his wife has stopped menstruating and he is getting old. The same is true of Iyäsus Mo'ä's<sup>11</sup> and of Ewostatewos' parents. However the prayers of certain parents do illustrate the torment of being childless. The case is well presented in *Gädlä Samu'el of Däbrä Wägäg*'s introduction: **አእግዚአብሔር ፡ ዘትሁብ ፡ ለኩሉ ፡ ፍጥረት ፡ ውሉደ ፡ ወለኩሉ ፡ ዕፀወ ፡ ገዳም ፡ ዘታወጽዕ ፡ ፍሬ ፡ እም ፡ አዕፁ ቂሆሙ ፡ ወለእንስሳኒ ፡ ዘትሁቦሙ ፡ ፍሬ ፡ ወለአዕዋፍኒ ፡ ዘትሁቦሙ ፡ ፍሬ ፡ ወለነ ኒ ፡ ሀበነ ፡ ውሉደ ።** O God, (You) Who give offspring for all creatures and Who bring forth branches of wild trees; (You) Who give fruit of their womb both to animals and birds, give an offspring to us as well.<sup>12</sup>

Täklä Haymanot's parents, ሻጸገገገ Zä'ab and ሻጸገገገ ሻጸገገገ ሻጸገገገ, are past the age of having a first child when they start to feel uncomfortable with the

<sup>9</sup> Abraham and Sara (Genesis 15:1); Elkanah and Hanna (1 Samuel 1:2); and Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1: 5–80).

<sup>10</sup> Young boys and girls start married life quite early. This is still traditional in many rural areas of the country; see for this 'Marriage: V Early marriage', *EAE*, V (2014), 418a–421a (A. Brita).

<sup>11</sup> **ወኩሎ ፡ አሚረ ፡ ይገደሱ ፡ ጎበ ፡ ቤተ ፡ እግዚአብሔር ፡ ወይስአልዎ ፡ ለአምላኩሙ ፡ ከመ ፡ የሀ ቦሙ ፡ ፍሬ ፡ ሠናየ ፡ ወቡሩክ ፡ ወልደ ፡ ዘያስተፌሥሐሙ ፡ ወይገብር ፡ ተዝካሮሙ ፡ ወይገኒ ፡ ለ አምላክ ፡ እስራኤል ፡ ወይበጽዑ ፡ ብፅዓተ ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር ።** They used to go to Church always and pray unto their God to give them a handsome fruit and blessed son; they used to vow to God to give them a son who pleases them and make their commemoration and abide to the God of Israel and bless the blessing of God' (*Gädlä Iyyäsus Mo'ä*, 7).

<sup>12</sup> *Gädlä Samu'el of Däbrä Wägäg*, 2; cf. *Gädlä Iyyäsus Mo'ä*, 7; and *Gädlä Ewostatewos*, 3.

situation.<sup>13</sup> Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus' mother, Aqlesya,<sup>14</sup> or Laba and Wängelawit,<sup>15</sup> Fəqərtä Krəstos' parents, often weep before they receive consolation. An icon of the Virgin Mary replies to Aqlesya's request that she will have a God-fearing and blessed child. Likewise, an angel appears to Fəqərtä Krəstos' parents to respond to their prayers. He heralds the birth of a child 'ወናይት ፡ በምግባራ ፡ ወርትዕት ፡ በሃይማኖታ # ... Good in her deeds and orthodox in her faith'.<sup>16</sup>

In the same way, the death of her first husband and a childlessness in her second marriage shocks *abunä* 'Ezra's mother, Lə'ul Sämrä, that she torments herself until she receives three annunciations from the Archangel Mika'el.<sup>17</sup> The herald has followed her devoted and dedicated life. She virtuously prayed in the name of Archangel Mika'el and it resulted in the good news. Unlike other hagiographic composers, the writer of this *gädl* depicts what she did in addition to her prayers and supplications: going to Church, praying tearfully, sacrificing a sheep as entreaty, delivering a prayer of incense and asking for forgiveness in front of a priest.

Her deeds appear to be marked by Judaic Christian traditions, typical of the Ethiopian hagiographic tradition, thus perhaps preserving a belief among both laity and clergy in a very archaic form. In the above example, both the believer and the priest openly practice the ritual in the church; however, it may rather be considered rather as an offering of one's possessions which are in fact given by God, and not as an expiation of sin per se (as in the Old Testament). The same perceived open acceptance of Jewish ritual amongst hagiographical society is true of the story of Wälättä Peṭros. The saint's father rushed to see the newborn girl, despite the onlookers' opposition to entering *betä ḥaris*, a house where a woman was in childbirth, and disregarded

<sup>13</sup> '... ወባሕቱ ፡ ኮነት ፡ መካነ ፡ እግዚእ ፡ ሐረያ ፡ ወአልባቲ ፡ ውሉድ ፡ ... ወይቲክዝ ፡ ኩሉ ፡ ዘር እየ ፡ ኪያሆሙ ፡ ወዘሰምዓ ፡ ዜናሆሙ ፡ በእንተ ፡ ዘአልቦሙ ፡ ውሉድ ፡ ... ወእግዚእ ፡ ሐረያ ፡ ኮነት ፡ ሕምምተ ፡ ልብ ፡ በእንተ ፡ ዘኮነት ፡ መካነ ፡ ወባሕቱ ፡ አጥብዓት ፡ ልባ ፡ ኅበ ፡ እግዚአብሔር ፡ ከመ ፡ የሀባ ፡ ወልደ ፡ ... But Eḡzi? Ḥaräya became barren and she had no children. Everybody who saw and listened that they had no son, she/he used to feel bad for them. And Eḡzi? Ḥaräya became one with a broken heart for she became barren. But she intended her mind to God that He will give her a child' (*Gädlä Täklä Haymanot*, 27).

<sup>14</sup> 'ወነበረት ፡ አቅሌሲያ ፡ መካነ ፡ ፴ ፡ ዓመተ ፡ ዘእንበለ ፡ ውሉድ ፡ እንዘ ፡ ትበኪ ፡ በእንተ ፡ ዘኢረከበት ፡ ወልደ ፡ # Aqlesya was barren for 30 years without children and used to cry for she didn't get a child' (*Gädlä Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus*, 8–9).

<sup>15</sup> 'ወአልቦሙ ፡ ውሉድ ፡ በእንተ ፡ ዝንቱ ፡ የኅዝኑ ፡ ጥቀ ፡ ወይስእሉ ፡ ኅበ ፡ እግዚአብሔር ፡ ወትረ ፡ በእንተ ፡ ዘአልቦሙ ፡ ወልድ ፡ ወአዋልድ ፡ # ... And they had no children. Because of this they became very sad and prayed to God for they didn't have a son or a daughter' (*Gädlä Fəqərtä Krəstos*, 7).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Gädlä 'Ezra*, 72.

his wife's disapproval of his kissing the blood-stained newborn for she was 'unclean'. He ignored all opposition in order to comply with the prophecy which otherwise would not have been fulfilled unacceptable.<sup>18</sup>

When the holy child is not the only offspring of a marriage, he would be depicted as a 'David', chosen among many brothers.<sup>19</sup> Wälättä Peṭros is an ideal example in this regard, although a girl. She was indeed the most loved in the family.<sup>20</sup> Abäkäräzun's brothers were not mentioned for their religious fervor, except that they received elementary church education. Their widowed mother reared them በሠናይ ፣ ግዕዝ (*bäsännay gə'əz*, 'with good character'), so that they 'serve God' (ይጎብኙ ፣ ለእግዚአብሔር 'yatqännäyū lä Ḫgzi'abher').<sup>21</sup> The same is true of *Abba* Arägawi and his brother. *Abba* Ḫstifanos' brothers even appear as impediments to the archetypal pattern of the saintly life and the heavenly plan.<sup>22</sup>

The pregnancy of a barren woman is a symbol of God's mercy and redemption, generating respect for the woman, confidence in her husband and joy for the entire family. In particular the fertility of an older woman is seen as one of God's miraculous deeds, sustaining hope. Neighbours and relatives, on the other hand, see the mother's barrenness to be due to some hidden sin, or at least to a lack of religious fervor. With endless variations, saints' lives present this powerful dialectic: a moral and spiritual judgement hangs upon the outcome of prayer; the successful suppliant is one who has found favour with God, while others are granted only a minor favour.

The exemplary story of Wälättä Peṭros' parents shows their unity in supplication. The woman's role is paramount from the outset, beginning with her bearing and nurturing of the saintly infant. Although the father participates in the supplication, he is less visible in the prenatal events than the mother. The stories strongly emphasize the maternal role as a reflection of biblical mothers. Moreover, authors of hagiographies do not explicitly deal with the tribulations the women endure because of their childlessness. However, one such direct reference is found in Filōppos of Däbrä Bizän's

<sup>18</sup> *Gädlä Wälättä Peṭros*, 6–7.

<sup>19</sup> 'Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward', 1 Samuel 16:13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 8–9.

<sup>21</sup> *Gädlä Abäkäräzun*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> The *gädl* does not elucidate whether the saint was a single child. His father died before he was born and he grew up in his uncle's house. His endurance of all the tribulations he received at the hands of 'his brothers and friends' confirmed his saintly nature from the very beginning. The hagiographic writer does not mention if his 'brothers' are his cousins or his real brothers; see Getatchew Haile 2011/2012, 57).

story.<sup>23</sup> The saint's mother says that she 'has no child and she became a mockery of women and her relatives'.<sup>24</sup> Reading between the lines, one can infer the scorn she was endured, which might be true of infertility in general.

On the other hand, Bāṣālotā Mika'el's parents were not only troubled by not getting a child, but also with the intervention of his mother's family, who demanded that his mother-to-be marry a man of noble origins.<sup>25</sup>

### B. The prophecy and vision pattern

Apart from the actual delivery, the birth of a child is a great event awaited with enthusiasm; in the hagiographic tradition, it is an important element in the narratives of God's merciful work and the confirmation of successful marriage.

In the hagiographic tradition, the birth of a holy child is far from the ordinary occurrence. In the words of the priests who baptized St Filappos of Däbrä Bizän, he is 'different from other children since the grace of the Holy Spirit resides on him'.<sup>26</sup> He is born with a definite sign, with an orally transmitted and foretold prophecy as well as a painless delivery. From the very beginning, signs and prophecies announce the child's sainthood. Wälättä Petros' birth was foretold when a monk beheld a sun dwelling in her mother's womb, prophesying her virtues to shine upon the world.<sup>27</sup> Her parents decided to ask God if the vision was true. The answer was given them after two weeks of dedicated prayer and God's revelation of the monks' vision to them as well. The suspicious father, however, needed additional substantiation to confirm the revelation. He did not seem to take anything for granted until he saw the newborn baby himself.

The number of visions and prophecies are directly proportional to the saint's renown. The more prominent the saint is, the more numerous the pre-birth prophecies are, as is the case with Täklä Haymanot. After the miraculous return of Täklä Haymanot's mother 'Ēgzi' Ḥaräya from captivity at the hands of Motälämi, the family was honoured with another revelation regarding their coming child, in addition to the previous apparition of an Angel. 'Ēgzi' Ḥaräya saw a 'pillar of light'<sup>28</sup> in her house reaching the sky, with the nobility and the clergy surrounding it, some sitting beneath and

<sup>23</sup> *Gädlä Filappos of Däbrä Bizän*, 72.

<sup>24</sup> This account parallels that of Hannah in the Bible (1 Samuel 1:2).

<sup>25</sup> *Gädlä Bāṣālotā Mika'el*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Gädlä Filappos of Däbrä Bizän*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> *Gädlä Wälättä Petros*, 5–6.

<sup>28</sup> Similar to other signs and prophecies, the light-theme recurs in the *gädl* tradition.



some prostrate before it; while her husband saw a light coming from beneath their bed. Archangel Mika<sup>3</sup>el interpreted the meaning of their dreams.

In another story, untypical of other hagiographical stereotypes, Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos' king-uncle's sorcerers prophesied his saintliness.<sup>29</sup> His parents' vision enhanced his greatness. He spoke from the womb about his kingship and, at his birth, his exclamations of praise confirmed his holiness. His father dreamed of him with his hands full of fruits and shepherding white sheep. The fruit represented his wealth, and herding the sheep his command over his people, both in the Church and at the royal court. The prophecy uses the archetype of sheep and shepherd, with their multifaceted meanings. The sheep is a much loved sacrificial animal in various religions; hence within the accepted Holy Scriptures, Christ is symbolized as the Lamb of God. The Old Testament sheep is a prophetic presentation of the Messiah. Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos, however, is not restricted to the sheep symbol, but rather becomes a herdsman. Although he suffers at the hands of his relatives. Christ's words to Peter, 'feed my lambs ... take care of my sheep ... feed my sheep', recreates itself in the life of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos. Christ, as *pastor bonus* (John 10:12), is the symbol that any saintly figure seeks to imitate, not only in priesthood, but also in sacrifice. Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos' hagiographic-composer, however, would prefer to relate him to David than to Jesus as per the symbolism he attaches to them. David is a shepherd, a saint and an ideal king. His origin and upbringing away from the royal family and the nobility does not prohibit his success. The same is true of Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos—according to his hagiographer—who grows up in the wilderness, yet God grants him success in both his clerical and royal offices. The 'hands full of fruits' is also a prophecy which emphasizes the first prophecy. Fruit symbolizes richness, fertility, and power. His kingship would be successful, his empire rich, his marriage fecund, and his followers many.<sup>30</sup>

In another sign and prophesy, we have the story of Habtä Maryam and Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus. When Habtä Maryam's mother went into the wilderness in search of a monastic life, a certain hermit, mistook her for a devil in woman's guise, but later realised her innocence, and announced to her that she would give birth to a holy child (i.e. Habtä Maryam).<sup>31</sup> In another instance, the Holy Trinity answered Aqlesya's (Ecclesia) prayers through its icon confirming that she would give birth to a child (i.e. Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus). The three persons depicted in the icon of the Trinity, nodding their heads, spoke unanimously: **ገሥዒ ፡ ወልደ ፡ ዘይትሌዓል ፡ ቀርኑ በሰማይ ፡**

<sup>29</sup> *Gädlä Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos*, 24–25.

<sup>30</sup> See however for these motifs Marrassini 1990.

<sup>31</sup> Raineri 1990, 15–16.

**ወበምድር**; Receive a child whose horn is extolled both in heaven and on earth'.<sup>32</sup>

A horn, as a defensive weapon of animals, deals with physical power and authority. In Mesopotamia and Syria, the horn was a divine symbol. The same is true of Persia. For the Greeks, their powerful leader, Alexander the Great, minted a coin decorated with a star and a horn. The Old Testament also mentions the horn as a symbol of authority.<sup>33</sup> The prophecy is that Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus' horn will be formidable both in heaven and on earth, i.e. his dignity will exceed that of the angels in heaven; his priesthood will surpass the saints on earth, such as Abel and Melchizedek (Gen 14:18), and his purity Elijah and John (the Baptist).<sup>34</sup>

The birth of Samu<sup>3</sup>el of Däbrä Wägäg was prophesied by Täklä Haymanot. The *gädl* summarizes the historical account as follows:<sup>35</sup> One day, Täklä Haymanot came to visit Samu<sup>3</sup>el of Däbrä Wägäg's parents. They welcomed the renowned saint, washed his feet and gave him a good meal. After that Samu<sup>3</sup>el's father opened his heart and shared his sorrows with the saint. Täklä Haymanot prophesied that they would be given a child as they wished. He went on to prophesy what the child was to do. In another instance, before the birth of the child, an angel came to meet the parents to announce the birth of a child. **ወበጽሐ ፡ ዕለት ፡ ወሊድታ ፡ ወአስተርአዮ ፡ መልአክ ፡ እግዚአብሔር ፡ ለአቡነ ፡ እንድርዖስ ፡ ወይቤሎ ፡ ... ብእሲትከ ፡ ትወልድ ፡ ለከ ፡ በሣቲ ፡ ዕለት** # It came the day of its birth and the angel of God appeared to *abunä* Endrəyas and said, 'on that day, your wife will bear [a baby] for you'.<sup>36</sup> The hagiographer deliberately gives precedence to the prophecy of Täklä Haymanot over that of the angel, to symbolize the dignity the saint enjoyed. Regarding this prophesy, the family received a blessed child, Samu<sup>3</sup>el of Däbrä Wägäg. His mother gave birth to him without any labor.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Marrassini 2003, 4. Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus was conceived on 29<sup>th</sup> *Mäggabit*, like Jesus Christ, and born on 29<sup>th</sup> *Təḥsas*, again like Christ. The same is true of Nä<sup>3</sup>akk<sup>w</sup>ətto Lä<sup>3</sup>ab, whose day of conception and birth are similar to those of Christ as well as of Fəqərtä Krəstos, who was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> of *Təḥsas* (*Gädlä Nä<sup>3</sup>akk<sup>w</sup>ətto Lä<sup>3</sup>ab*, 114–115 and *Gädlä Fəqərtä Krəstos*, 9). This motif of *imitatio Christi* in the Ethiopic hagiographic tradition needs further investigation.

<sup>33</sup> Psalm 148:14, Jeremiah 48:25, Psalm 18:3; A detailed analysis of horn and its biblical symbolism is explained in Bauer, Brakmann, Korol, and Schwarz 1994, 524–573.

<sup>34</sup> *Gädlä Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> See *Gädlä Samu<sup>3</sup>el of Däbrä Wägäg*, 2–3.

<sup>36</sup> *Gädlä Samu<sup>3</sup>el of Däbrä Wägäg*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> He seems to refer to Isaiah 66:7 which says 'Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man child'. Normally it is only for St Mary that the Church uses this verse. Besides, according to the Mariology of the

When there are no real prophecies in a saint's life, the hagiographer or even the copyist notes an extraordinary sign, in order not to diminish the saintly status. Lalibäla, for instance, was born without definite prophecies. His birth was marked by a distinctly heavenly sign when bees surround the newborn baby and settled on him as on a honeycomb, thus prophesying the future of the child.<sup>38</sup> For this reason, his mother gave him the name Lalibäla meaning: 'Bee knew (foretold) his (Lalibäla's) grace'.<sup>39</sup> The bee symbolized earthly soldiers and heavenly angels, because he would become king, and a virtuous saint surrounded by angelic grace.<sup>40</sup>

In another account, an archangel made an interesting prophecy about the birth of Ewostatewos. The annunciation chiefly deals with the birth of a holy child, as is well known, and goes on to the teachings of the future saint. The archangel warns that those who oppose his teachings will be 'like a dust blown by a wind, with his final place unknown' and those 'who repent by his teachings, I (the Angel) will guard them from evils'.<sup>41</sup> The hagiographic composer mentions the controversy relating to the teachings of Ewostatewos regarding the observance of the Sabbath. According to the *gädl*, those who oppose Ewostatewos' position on the Sabbath are against the will of God. Ewostatewos opposed the Coptic position on the Sabbath.<sup>42</sup> This controversy led to him leaving the country, and he travelled via the Holy Land to Cyprus and Armenia, where he died. His teaching was consolidated posthumously when his followers organized themselves to further their cause.

In another example of how signs and prophecies are evidence of uniformity and regularity as a dominant feature of the Ethiopian hagiographic tradition, we see, in the life of ʿĒzra, that he was born with a sign of the Cross on his forehead.<sup>43</sup> The hagiographic-composer uses the cross to attest his own position in the controversy that surrounds Ḥstifanos' disciples in general. In the hagiographic composer's mind, these words might have been uttered by arch-

Church, Virgin Mary is devoid of menstrual cycle. Similarly, Fəqərtä Krəstos' mother does not menstruate (*Gädlä Fəqərtä Krəstos*, 4).

<sup>38</sup> *Gädlä Lalibäla*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> ወበእንተ ፡ ዝንቱ ፡ ሰመየቶ ፡ ላሊበላ ፡ ንህብ ፡ አእመረ ፡ ጸጋሁ ፡ ብሂል ።, see *ibid*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*. 13.

<sup>41</sup> *Gädlä Ewostatewos*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ewostatewos and his followers honour both Saturday and Sunday, while the Coptic Church considered the Saturday to be like the other five days of the week. According to Zärʿa Yaʿqob, the Copts excommunicated those who celebrated the Sabbath 'like the Jews'.

<sup>43</sup> 'ወይትረከብ ፡ ትእምርተ ፡ በአምሳለ ፡ መስቀል ።, and a symbol in the likeness of the cross is found' (*Gädlä ʿĒzra*, 72).

angels.<sup>44</sup> I settling this way, the composer wishes to settle a disputed issue with the help of a miracle, which normally shows the will of God.

The other signs are mother-of-pearl (pearl) and horn. The parables of Christ and the patristic writings make the pearl familiar to the Ethiopian hagiographic composer.<sup>45</sup> It is an important symbol used with varying interpretations in the Ethiopian *Andämta* tradition.<sup>46</sup> The saint is thus a pearl, a precious heavenly gift, to both his family and to humanity. This is true not only of Filäppos of Däbrä Bizän but also of the general family of saints. The following table summarizes the signs and prophecies ascribed to various Ethiopian saints.

	Name	Sign and Prophecy
1	Lalibäla	Bee <sup>47</sup>
2	Nä <sup>o</sup> akk <sup>w</sup> ätto Lä <sup>o</sup> ab	Plant, brightness Pearl <sup>48</sup>
3	Yämrəḥannä Krəstos	Light <sup>49</sup> Hands full of fruits <sup>50</sup> Shepherding white sheep <sup>51</sup>
4	Täklä Haymanot	Pillar of light Light
5	Filäppos of Däbrä Bizän	Mother-of-Pearl <sup>52</sup>
6	Samu <sup>o</sup> el of Däbrä Halleluya	Mother-of-Pearl <sup>53</sup>
7	Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus	Horn <sup>54</sup>
8	Samu <sup>o</sup> el of Däbrä Wägäg	Light
9	Wälättä Pətros	Sun
10	Bäšälötä Mika <sup>o</sup> el	Light <sup>55</sup>
11	ʿEzra	Cross on his forehead

<sup>44</sup> After the death of Ewosṭatewos, his disciples returned home, apparently with stronger attitudes on the subject and a better organization. On the Ewosṭatian movement, see Taddesse Tamrat 1972, 206–211.

<sup>45</sup> According to oriental traditions, a pearl is made of heavenly light and earthly water. The New Testament refers to pearl in Matthew (13:45) and Revelations (21:21).

<sup>46</sup> On the interpretations of pearl, look at Matthew (13:45) and Revelations (21:21) and *Wəddase Maryam*, reading *zäsällus*.

<sup>47</sup> *Gädlä Lalibäla*, 91–92.

<sup>48</sup> *Gädlä Nä<sup>o</sup>akk<sup>w</sup>ätto Lä<sup>o</sup>ab*, 113.

<sup>49</sup> *Gädlä Yämrəḥannä Krəstos*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Gädlä Filäppos of Däbrä Bizän*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> *Gädlä Samu<sup>o</sup>el of Däbrä Halleluya*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Gädlä Gäbrä Mänfäs Qəddus*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Gädlä Bäšälötä Mika<sup>o</sup>el*, 6.

Due to the preordained fate of the saint, no obstacle can ever avert the birth of a holy child. The renowned Ethiopian saint, Täklä Haymanot, saved his father before he himself was even born. The saint's father ran for his life when the ferocious warrior, Motälämi, invaded the environs of Şəlaləş. A spear-throwing soldier, barely missing him, followed the running priest. The latter plunged into a river while the soldier waited until he would surface. That was the twelfth day of the month which is the monthly feast of St Mika'el the Archangel. The saint's father started to pray with 'hot tears' inside the river beseeching the Archangel. The angel replied while still beside him, protecting him from the enemy soldiers. The reason for the angel's deliverance was not only due to the fervor of the priest, but most importantly to the saintliness of the saint he was to beget. **አኮ ፡ በእንቲአከ ፡ ባሕቲቱ ፡ ዘአድኅነከ ፡ አላ ፡ በእንተ ፡ ወልደ ፡ ኅሩይ ፡ ዘሀሎ ፡ ውስተ ፡ ኅቋከ ፡ ... ወበእንቲአሁ ፡ ትድኅን ፡ እሞት ።** It is not only for your sake that I save you; but for the chosen child who is in your seed. ... for his sake you will be saved from death'.<sup>56</sup> The same was true with his imprisoned wife, who beseeched the archangel and Christ to rescue her. The archangel replied as he did with her husband: **አኮ ፡ በእንቲአከ ፡ ባሕቲቱ ፡ ዘትድኅነኒ ፡ እምንዳቤ ። አላ ፡ በእንተ ፡ ወልድ ፡ ዘሀሎ ፡ ይትወለድ ፡ እምኔኪ ፡ ...** It is not for your sake that you will be saved from affliction, but because of the son who will be born from you ...<sup>57</sup> The survival of the priest and his wife is necessary to fulfil the prophesy: the birth of the saint who is destined to be the archangel's exertion.<sup>58</sup>

### C. The 'old-child' pattern

In the Ethiopian hagiographical tradition, as in other hagiographical traditions, the holy child is designated to be an 'old child'. Hagiographers usually depict such children behaving very differently from ordinary children. Their life is marked by an extraordinary seriousness of speech and manner, by gravity of countenance, and by adult-like devoutness. They have the grave manner of old age that prefers solitude to the company of other children. They do not indulge in the common physicality of ordinary children.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *Gädlä Täklä Haymanot*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Hagiographers seem to have adopted this motif from the childhood of Jesus where we see him 'discovered by his Mother Mary and Joseph at the temple, listening to and asking questions of the teachers' (Luke 2:41–52). Yet this theme of the 'old child' ('wise child', or *puer senex*, the child who does not behave like a child) is very common in many hagiographic traditions. In Western Christianity it appears to have become particularly prominent as early as the eleventh century, as seen in accounts from

Leading a peaceful and quiet life during childhood is one of the recurring motifs in the *gädlät*. The holy child (in this case Giyorgis zäGasəčča) grows peacefully avoiding disputes, ‘and he frequents the Church often’.<sup>60</sup> Ewostatewos leads a ‘quiet life aloof from friends and relatives’.<sup>61</sup> Nä<sup>ə</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>ətto Lä<sup>ə</sup>ab enjoys the companionship of the heavenly angels. He befriends the heavenly creatures more than the worldly ones for he leads an angelic life in the sinful world. Angels accompany him throughout his life and feed him both the ‘bread of the heavens and water of the heavens’.<sup>62</sup> When the child turns three years of age, an Archangel comes and carries him on his shoulders to the heavens. The holy child talks with Archangel Gabriel as with a friend.

Another aspect of his peaceful and quiet life is when his companions mistreat him, and he, the holy child, never ‘complains to the elders’. Bäṣälotä Mika<sup>ə</sup>el endures every tribulation at the hands of his colleagues and family members. The holy child practices carrying the cross at a young age, because he focuses on the heavenly existence than rather on the earthly life. He ‘does not amuse himself by childish games and brawls’,<sup>63</sup> but yearns for the grace of God, while tending his sheep in the field.<sup>64</sup> He prays regularly and attends Church<sup>65</sup> gladly to ‘take holy Eucharist’ and to learn to ‘keep quiet and to be patient’.<sup>66</sup>

The young Filəppos of Däbrä Libanos studied the nature of the Holy Trinity. His namesake, the young Filəppos of Däbrä Bizän, comforted his mother with a mature advice. The former asked his teacher how the three bodies in Trinity live in their complex three-in-one nature, and where God resides. The latter asked his mother not to worry about him since God is his mother and father.<sup>67</sup>

Fəqərtä Krəstos requested her parents to take her to a teacher so that she could learn the ‘psalms and prayers’.<sup>68</sup> This thirst for heavenly knowledge is a

Germany, France, and Italy (see Goodich 2005, 285–309); see in general Curtius 1956, 122–125; Festugière 1960, 137–139; Carp 1980.

<sup>60</sup> አኮ ፡ ከመ ፡ ደቂቅ ፡ ዘይትሐወክ ፡ ወእኮ ፡ ምስለ ፡ ማሐዲሁ ፡ ዘይዛዋዕ ፡ አላ ፡ ይተሉ ፡ ዐሠረ ፡ ጠቢባን ። ወይገይሥ ፡ ኀበ ፡ ቤተ ፡ ክርስቲያን ። (*Gädlä Giyorgis zäGasəčča*, 26).

<sup>61</sup> *Gädlä Ewostatewos*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Gädlä Nä<sup>ə</sup>ak<sup>w</sup>ətto Lä<sup>ə</sup>ab*, p. 122.

<sup>63</sup> Getatchew Haile 2004, 57, *Gädlä Giyorgis zäGasəčča*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Getatchew Haile 2004, 58.

<sup>65</sup> *Gädlä Giyorgis zäGasəčča*, 26.

<sup>66</sup> *Gädlä Samu<sup>ə</sup>el of Däbrä Halleluya*, 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Gädlä Filəpp os of Däbrä Bizän*, 75.

<sup>68</sup> ስዳኒ ፡ ኀበ ፡ መምህር ፡ ከመ ፡ እትመሀር ፡ መዝሙር ፡ ወጸሎተ ፡ ኦሎቶ ፡ ወእምየ ። (*Gädlä Fəqərtä Krəstos*, 13).

distinct motif in the life of the holy child.<sup>69</sup> Bāṣālotä Mikaʼel defies the urge of his father to stop fasting because he is very young. His father even assaulted him so that he would stop fasting. Finally, he forces food in the child's mouth to stop his fasting. After forcefully feeding his child, he tried to rationalize his deed. He asked the holy child to eat well since his fasting had already been defiled. The holy child, however, defended his stand. 'If I take the food willingly, I defile my fasting. If, however, you force me to eat, then my fasting will not be defiled'. Then his father let him fast as he wished.<sup>70</sup>

The motif of 'loving ascetic life at the very young age' is also exemplified in the life of Ewoṣtatewos. He 'looks up to heaven in prayer and praises God while he sucks his mother's breast'.<sup>71</sup> Many Ethiopian saints, Yared and Bāṣālotä Mikaʼel in particular, endure physical assaults before they can enjoy the fruits of their tolerance.<sup>72</sup>

In another 'old-child' motif, the holy child sings out at birth, to bless God in a remarkably mature voice. All the attendants are awestruck, except the parents, who already know his identity and take this as an extra proof of saintliness. The essence of the holy child's 'birth hymns' is no different to the common praise of the everyday prayers. Täklä Haymanot recites: አሐዱ ፡ አብ ፡ ቅዱስ ፡ አሐዱ ፡ ወልድ ፡ ቅዱስ ፡ አሐዱ ፡ ውእቱ ፡ መንፈስ ፡ ቅዱስ # 'One is the Holy Father, One is the Holy Son, One is the Holy Spirit'. Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos 'opened his eyes, looked eastwards, praised the Lord of Heavens' immediately after he left his mother's womb. The room gleamed with the light radiating from his eyes. People wondered about his personality. Some said he would be a king and others a priest. Their prophetic presumption materialized when he attained both offices: priesthood and kingship.<sup>73</sup> A priest summoned to bless the newly born child confessed his sins when he saw a child gleaming like the sun. Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos continued to astonish the family. He declined his mother's breast on the day of his baptism.<sup>74</sup> Likewise, Fəqərtä Krəstos managed to stand up at her first birthday and praise the Lord, and prostrated himself three times. She again surprised the audience at her baptism by extolling God for gracing her with baptism.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Giyorgis of Gasəčča prefers 'following in the footsteps of the wise' to playing with his comrades (p. 5). The young Bāṣālotä Mikaʼel preferred to die of hunger than live a married life (*Gädlä Bāṣālotä Mikaʼel*, Conti Rossini 1905, 6).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>71</sup> *Gädlä Ewoṣtatewos*, 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Gädlä Yared*, 7–8; *Gädlä Bāṣālotä Mikaʼel*, 8.

<sup>73</sup> *Gädlä Yəmrəḥannä Krəstos*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Gädlä Fəqərtä Krəstos*, 10.

Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus waited only until the third day after his birth to stand up by himself. His prayer is similar to that of Fəqərtä Krəstos. Both of them say ‘Glory to the Father, glory to the Son, glory to the Holy Spirit; who brings me out of darkness into light’;<sup>76</sup> i.e. out of the darkness of the womb into the light of the world.

The holy children also prostrate before God during their prayers. Prostrations that normally require physical maturity to practice occasionally accompany their hymns. This matured-child motif is quite simply an allusion to Jeremiah’s ‘I knew thee, I sanctified thee and I ordained thee’.<sup>77</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

This paper has aimed at elucidating our comprehension of the uniformity and regularity that exist between different Ethiopic hagiographies. As a preliminary attempt, it was intentionally limited to a discussion of the childhood theme in the literary tradition as a point of comparison between hagiographies of different Ethiopian saints. As a point of departure, the patterns discussed are intended to show how uniformity and regularity are recurrent features in the childhood narratives of saints in the Ethiopian hagiographical tradition.

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<sup>76</sup> The similarity of their prayers is more than a mere resemblance of wordings and shows the free space hagiographic composers enjoy to copy and share ideas, concepts, and exact phrases. *Ibid.* 10, and *Gädlä Gäbrä Mämfäs Qəddus*, 6.

<sup>77</sup> The whole sentence reads: ‘Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations’. Jeremiah 1:5–6; *Gädlä Filəppos of Däbrä Bizän*, 175–178.



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**Summary**

The paper is an attempt to show how uniformity and regularity characterize the childhood of different Ethiopian saints as it is sketched in the Ethiopic hagiographic tradition. Presenting ample evidences from different hagiographies of Ethiopian saints, it tries to show how the saints' early life follows a set of standardized patterns which are seen nearly as universal convention that is almost interchangeable between one saint and another. The discussion is focused on three patterns (infertility, prophecy/vision and old-child) of childhood where uniformity and regularity in the tradition are evident.