

THE **BOOK**
OF **MYSTERY**

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Mäṣḥafä Məstir of Abba Giyorgis of Gaśəčča
1364 – 1425

ETHIOPIA'S MOST ICONIC THEOLOGICAL, EXEGETICAL,
HISTORICAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISE

Annotated Translation

ABBA HIRUIE ERMIAŠ



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For my late mother Almaz Alemu

Contents

Translator's Acknowledgment	i
Biblical Abbreviations	ii
Transliteration	iv
Foreword	vi
Short Introduction	x
<i>Chapter One</i>	
Reading of Advent	1
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Reading of <i>Børhan</i>	17
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
Reading of <i>Nolawi</i>	26
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
Reading of <i>Genna</i>	40
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
Reading of Nativity	56
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
Reading of Epiphany	78
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	
Reading of Cana of Galilee	84

Chapter Eight

Reading of the Third Day of Epiphany 90

Chapter Nine

Reading of the Day of Simon 93

Chapter Ten

Reading of *Däbrü-Zäyt* 99

Chapter Eleven

Reading of Conception 114

Chapter Twelve

Reading of Hosanna 119

Chapter Thirteen

Reading of the Last Supper 130

Chapter Fourteen

Reading of Good Friday Morning 137

Chapter Fifteen

Reading of Good Friday at the Third Hour 149

Chapter Sixteen

Reading of Good Friday at the Sixth Hour 155

Chapter Seventeen

Reading of Good Friday at the Nineth Hour 162

Chapter Eighteen

Reading of Good Friday Evening 178

Chapter Nineteen

Reading of Good Friday Night 184

Chapter Twenty

Reading of Easter 205

Chapter Twenty-One

Reading of Easter Monday 227

Chapter Twenty-Two

Reading of Easter Tuesday 234

Chapter Twenty-Three

Reading of Easter Wednesday 244

Chapter Twenty-Four

Reading of Easter Thursday 253

Chapter Twenty-Five

Reading of Easter Friday 265

Chapter Twenty-Six

Reading of the First Sabbath 280

Verses of Jubilees 297

Order of Peter and Paul 304

Instruction 305

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Reading of *Agbaotä Gəbr* 314

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Reading of Ascension 337

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Reading of Festivity of Paraclete 345

Chapter Thirty

Reading of *Däbrä Tabor* 365

References 378

Index 379

Translator's Acknowledgment

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Biblical Abbreviations

Act	The Acts of the Apostles
1 Chr	The first Book of the Chronicles
2 Chr	The second Book of the Chronicles
Col	The epistle of Paul to the Colossians
1 Cor	The first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians
2 Cor	The second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians
Dan	The Book of Daniel
Deut	Deuteronomy
Eph	The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians
Exod	Exodus
Ezek	The Book of Ezekiel
Isa	The Book of Isaiah
Gal	The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians
Gen	Genesis
Heb	The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews
Hos	The Book of Hosea
Jer	The Book of Jeremiah
Jn	The Gospel according to John
Jem	The Epistle of James
1 Jn	The first Epistle of John

2 Jn	The second Epistle of John
Joel	The Book of Joel
Josh	The Book of Joshua
Jud	The Epistle of Jude
Jub	The Book of Jubilees
1 King	The first Book of Kings
2 King	The second Book of Kings
Kuf	The Book of Kufāle
Lev	Leviticus
Luk	The Gospel according to Luke
Mal	The Book of Malachi
Mark	The Gospel according to Mark
Mic	The Book of Micah
Mt	The Gospel according to Matthew
Neh	The Book of Nehemiah
Num	Numbers
1 Pet	The first Epistle of Peter
2 Pet	The second Epistle of Peter
Phil	The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians
Prov	The Proverbs of Solomon
Ps	The Psalm of David
Rev	Revelation of John
Rom	The Epistle of Paul to the Romans
1 Sam	The first Book of Samuel
2 Sam	The second Book of Samuel
Song	The Book of Song of Songs of Solomon
Sut	The Book of Ezra Sutuel
1 Thess	The first Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians
2 Thess	The second Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians
Tim	The Epistle of Paul to Timothy
Wis	The Book of Wisdom
Zech	The Book of Zechariah

Transliteration

I. Consonants

ᠮ - h	ᠨ - ḥ	ᠮ - ʈ
ᠯ - l	ᠨ - n	ᠮ - ʈ̚
ᠰ - ḥ	ᠰ - 'a	ᠰ - p̚
ᠮ - m	ᠨ - k	ᠮ - ñ
ᠮ - ś	ᠮ - w	ᠰ - ʂ
ᠴ - r	ᠰ - 'a	ᠮ - ʂ̚
ᠰ - s	ᠮ - z	ᠴ - f
ᠰ - š	ᠮ - ž	ᠮ - p
ᠴ - q	ᠮ - y	ᠰ - v
ᠮ - b	ᠰ - d	ᠮ - g ^w
ᠮ - t	ᠰ - j	ᠮ - k ^w
ᠮ - č	ᠮ - g	ᠮ - q ^w

II. Vowels

first order	ä (ᠮ hᠠ, ᠮ lᠠ, ᠮ mᠠ ...)
second order	u (ᠮ hu, ᠮ lu, ᠮ mu ...)
third order	i (ᠮ hi, ᠮ li, ᠮ mi ...)
fourth order	a (ᠮ ha, ᠮ la, ᠮ ma ...)
fifth order	e (ᠮ he, ᠮ le, ᠮ me ...)
sixth order	ə (ᠮ hə, ᠮ lə, ᠮ mə ...)
seventh order	o (ᠮ ho, ᠮ lo, ᠮ mo ...)

FOREWORD

The English Translation of Giyorgis of Saglā's (Gaśəčča's) Mäṣḥafä Məśṭir (The Book of Mystery)

I have accepted with great pleasure to write this short foreword to the English translation of the Mäṣḥafä Məśṭir (Book of Mystery) by Saint 'Abbā Giyorgis of Saglā, on kind invitation of its author, Mamhər Dr Hiruie Ermias (Ḥəruy 'Ermyās). I am particularly happy to foreword this work for a number of reasons. The first reason is the debt of gratefulness towards Hiruie Ermias, whom I had the opportunity to supervise first as an MA and eventually as a PhD student in Ethiopian studies at Universität Hamburg, when he wrote a critical edition of the *Gadla Qawṣṭos* as a Master thesis, and a PhD dissertation on a complex subject of traditional Ethiopic (Gə'əz) grammar such as the 'aggabāb.¹ It is during those years, on the occasion of a seminar of Ethiopic philology, that we read portions from the Book of Mystery, comparing several passages in the edition published by Professor Yaqob Beyene in 1990–1993 along with an Italian

¹ See Ḥəruy 'Ermyās [Hiruie Ermias], *The Gādlä Qāwṣṭos. A fourteenth-century Ethiopian Saint (A new text-critical edition, translation and commentary)*, MA Thesis, Hamburg: Universität Hamburg (2014); Idem (Ḥəruy 'Ermyās [Hiruie Ermias]), *ገረሐ: ቀውሳጦስ: ፲፪፻፯–፲፫፻፳፭ ዓ/ም ግለዝና: አግርኛ ጎርጎም: በመጋቢ: ምሥጢር: ጥይ: ኤርምያስ* (*Gadla qawṣṭos 1207–1335 'ā/m gə'əzonnä 'amārənñā tərgum bamaggābe məśṭir, 'Life of Qawṣṭos 1207–1335 EC in Gə'əz and Amharic translation by Magābe Məśṭir Ḥəruy 'Ermyās*), tr. Idem ('Addis 'Ababā: 'Asattāmi 'Ītisā Dabra Šəlāləš 'Abuna Takla Haymānot Gadām, 2014–2015); Idem (Hiruie Ermias), *The Issues of 'Aggabāb (Classic Gə'əz Grammar) According to the Tradition of Qəne Schools*, A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities of Universität Hamburg in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Hamburg: Universität Hamburg (2018); Idem (Hiruie Ermias), *'Aggabāb According to the Qəne School Tradition: Adverbs, Conjunctions, Prepositions, Relative Pronouns, Interrogative Pronouns, Interjections and Particles in Gə'əz (Classical Ethiopic)*, Gorgias Handbooks, 48 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2020).

translation,² with the edition published by Hiruie Ermias himself along with an Amharic translation first in 2009 and lastly in 2018.³ I would have quite a few anecdotes to tell, and I remember those years, with seminars lively participated by Ethiopian students, as one of the most rewarding experiences from the over fourteen years I have spent at Universität Hamburg. What is of relevance here is the quality of the edition of the Book of Mystery prepared by Hiruie Ermias, which certainly complements the critical edition based upon a base manuscript prepared by Yaqob Beyene for the classical series of the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*; and from what I could see of the English translation published in this volume, the same applies to the rendering of the text, in terms of quality and accuracy.

My relationship, as a PhD student at the Istituto Orientale di Napoli and eventually as a colleague of his, to Yaqob Beyene, the first critical editor and translator of the whole Book of Mystery, into Italian is a second reason for me to draft this foreword. As I have already had the occasion of writing in the Festschrift volume for Yaqob Beyene, while studying some canonical-liturgical Ethiopic texts during my PhD years and even before, in my Master study and earliest publications,⁴ I came across the enigmatic collection mentioned by Giyorgis of Saglā in the last of the thirty homilies which comprises his Book of Mystery, accomplished in

² See Yaqob Beyene, *Giyorgis di Saglā: Il libro del mistero* (maṣḥafa mestīr). *Textus; Versio*, ed., tr. Yaqob Beyene, I–IV, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 515, 516, 532, 533, *Scriptores Aethiopici*, 89, 90, 97, 98 (Lovanii: In aedibus E. Peeters, 1990–1993); see also Idem, ‘La dottrina della chiesa etiopica e il «Libro del Mistero» di Giyorgis di Saglā’, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, 33 (1989), 35–88.

³ See Həruy ‘Ermyās [Hiruie Ermias], መጽሐፈ ምሥጢር ቅዱስ አባ ጊዮርጊስ ዘጋሥጫ አንደደረሱት (1357 ዓ/ም–1417 ዓ/ም) ግእዝና አማርኛ ትርጉም በመምህር ሕፋይ ኤርምያስ (Mäṣḥafä məṣṭir qəddus ‘abbä giyorgis zäḡasäḡḡä ‘əndadarrasut (1357 ‘ā/mə–1417 ‘ā/mə) gə’əzənnä ‘amārənñä tərgum bamambər həruy ‘ermyās), tr. Idem (Qəddus ‘Abbä Giyorgis zaGäsəččännä Qəddus ‘Abbä Baṣalota Mikā’el ‘Andənnat Gadām: Maḥbara manak’asātu, 2009) Idem, መጽሐፈ ምሥጢር ቅዱስ አባ ጊዮርጊስ ዘጋሥጫ አንደደረሱት (1357 ዓ/ም–1417 ዓ/ም) ግእዝና አማርኛ ትርጉም በመምህር ሕፋይ ኤርምያስ (Mäṣḥafä məṣṭir qəddus ‘abbä giyorgis zäḡasäḡḡä ‘əndadarrasut (1357 ‘ā/mə–1417 ‘ā/mə) gə’əzənnä ‘amārənñä tərgum bamambər həruy ‘ermyās), tr. Idem, 3rd edn (Qəddus ‘abbä Giyorgis zaGäsəččännä qəddus ‘abbä Baṣalota Mikā’el ‘andənnat gadām: Maḥbara manak’asātu, 2018).

⁴ See Alessandro Bausi, ‘Presenze clementine nella letteratura etiopica’, *Studi Classici e Orientali*, 40 (1990), 289–316, 305, n. 4; Idem, ‘Alcune considerazioni sul «Sēnodos» etiopico’, *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, 34 (1990, pub. 1992), 5–73: 62–63; Idem, *ጥሌምኸሰ: Il Qalēmentos etiopico. La rivelazione di Pietro a Clemente. I libri 3-7. Traduzione e introduzione*, Studi Africanistici, Serie Etiopica, 2 (Napoli: IUO, Dipartimento di Studi e Ricerche su Africa e Paesi Arabi, 1992), 36–37.

1424 CE, shortly before his death in 1425/1426 CE. Against the reasonable hypothesis advanced by Yaqob Beyene, that this collection had to be one with an arrangement of its own, I was very sceptical about this explanation.⁵ It is only after the discovery of the so-called Aksumite Collection in 1999, when I had become a colleague of Yaqob Beyene at the Università di Napoli ‘L’Orientale’, that it became apparent that the texts composing the peculiar collections mentioned by Giyorgis of Saglā—with, among others, a Baptismal Ritual and the unique and absolutely challenging treatise *On the One Judge*—were texts extant in Ethiopic, but not yet known from other sources.⁶ This has been a lesson of humility which I learnt from an elder and very humble colleague, with whom I collaborated intensively in quite difficult years at the same university in a number of tedious, but important, administrative matters, that is, not to disregard others’ opinions when they do not fit in our hypotheses, in the absence of solid evidence to do that.

As one can easily imagine, this has disclosed new avenues of research—and this is the third reason that connects me with the Book of Mystery. Giyorgis of Saglā and his own (virtual and non-virtual) library and extensive readings, as they are reflected and transpire in his Book of Mystery, to an extent that still remains to be investigated in detail, appear to be of enormous importance. Giyorgis of Saglā is not only an exceptional figure of writer, theologian, and intellectual of the Ethiopian Middle Ages, but his works are also pivotal for the general question of the transmission of the late antique heritage of Aksum in medieval Ethiopia.

⁵ See Alessandro Bausi, ‘Məšṭir: Məṣḥafā məšṭir’, in Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, III (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 941b–944a; Alessandro Bausi, ‘Gli scritti di Yaqob Beyene’, in Alessandro Bausi, Antonella Brita, Andrea Manzo, Carmela Baffioni, and Ersilia Francesca, eds, *Aethiopica et Orientalia. Studi in onore di Yaqob Beyene*, I, Studi Africanistici, Serie Etiopica, 9 (Napoli: Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo, 2012), iii–xi: vi.

⁶ See Alessandro Bausi, Antonella Brita, Marco Di Bella, Denis Nosnitsin, Nikolas Sarris, and Ira Rabin 2020. ‘The Aksumite Collection or codex Σ (*Sinodos of Qəfryā*, MS C₃-IV-71/C₃-IV-73, Ethio-SPaRe UM-039): Codicological and palaeographical observations. With a note on material analysis of inks’, *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin*, 6/2 (2020), 127–171; Alessandro Bausi, ‘Ethiopia and the Christian Ecumene: Cultural Transmission, Translation, and Reception’, in Samantha Kelly, ed., *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea* (Leiden–Boston, MA: Brill, 2020), 217–251: 239–251; Idem, ‘The Baptismal Ritual in the earliest Ethiopic canonical liturgical collection’, in Heinzgerd Brakmann, Tinatin Chronz, and Claudia Sode, eds, »*Neugeboren aus Wasser und Heiligem Geiste. Kölner Kolloquium zur Initiatio Christiana*, Jerusalem Theologisches Forum, 37 (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2020), 31–83; Idem, ‘The Treatise *On the One Judge* (CAe 6260) in the Aksumite Collection (CAe 1047)’, *Adamantius*, 27 (2021, pub. 2022), 215–256.

This heritage appears to be condensed and preserved, at a crucial moment, when the critical mass of new texts either autonomously created or translated from Arabic, imposed decisive choices and selections to the Ethiopian Church.

Giyorgis of Saglā and his Book of Mystery mark thus an essential chapter in the intellectual history of Christian Ethiopia.⁷ The Book of Mystery ranges among the most important works of Ethiopian literature. It is not only, probably, the most encompassing theological work. It also defines the Ethiopian orthodoxy by contrasting it with the heretical views and determines the role of Ethiopian Christianity in the religious history of the world. Yet, it is also a literary masterpiece, for its complex style, characterized by rhymes, anaphoric repetitions, similes, metaphors, and taste for rare and obscure terms, which demonstrate the profound culture and rhetorical excellence of its author.

To have made this work widely accessible through a transparent English translation, based upon a reliable text, is really a great merit of Hiruie Ermias, for which he has to be gratefully congratulated.

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⁷ See Gérard Colin, 'Giyorgis of Säglā', in Siegbert Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, II (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 812a-b, with reference to previous studies; see also Getatchew Haile, 'A Miracle of the Archangel Uriel Worked for Abba Giyorgis of Gaśōčča', in Svein Ege, Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferra, and Shiferaw Bekele, eds, *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, I (Trondheim: Department of Social Anthropology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology–NTNU-trykk, 2009), 23–35; Idem, 'A Miracle of the Archangel Uriel Worked for Abba Giyorgis of Gaśōčča', in Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferra, Shiferaw Bekele, and Svein Ege, eds, *Research in Ethiopian Studies: Selected papers of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Trondheim July 2007*, Aethiopistische Forschungen, 72 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 1–14; Marie-Laure Derat, 'Moines et scriptorium dans le royaume d'Éthiopie aux XIV^e et XV^e siècles', in Daniel Assefa, ed., *L'Éthiopie chrétienne. Histoire Liturgie Monachisme*, HMC Histoire & Missions Chrétiens, 24 (Décembre 2012) (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2012), 65–78; Getatchew Haile, 'Praises of the Cross, *Waddase Mäsqäl*, by Abba Giyorgis of Gaśōčča', *Aethiopica*, 14 (2013), 47–120; Idem, 'Prayer of the Seal with the Sign of the Cross (*Ṣālotā Maḥatām*) by Abba Giyorgis of Gaśōčča', *Oriens Christianus*, 98 (2015, pub. 2016), 76–92.

SHORT INTRODUCTION

Abba Giyorgis was a great and prolific Ethiopian author who lived from 1364-1425 AD. He is also one of the famous local saints canonized by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwahədo Church. The anniversary of his death is celebrated on July 14 in all monasteries and parishes of the Church, as many other canonical saints. It is celebrated in a particularly colorful way at Gaśəčča Monastery, which he himself founded during his lifetime.

His popularity is based not only on his spirituality or his combat for a hermetic life, but also on his marvelous literary achievements. The Church testifies that he composed twenty-two homilies, which are used extensively in various liturgical services. The excellence of his writings demonstrates his high linguistic proficiency, his profound biblical and calendrical knowledge, his ability to articulate themes and make compelling commentary on texts. Consequently, numerous scholars, familiar with the breadth of his erudition and literary output, dub him the ‘Ethiopian Cyril’, a designation also reflected in his vita.

Mäṣḥafä Məṣṭir (The Book of Mystery) is one of his compositions, perhaps even the most extensive. Within its pages, he discusses several complex dogmatic queries to refute various heretical doctrines and demonstrate the true Christian faith. The heretics he addressed in the text lived between the third and fifth centuries AD. The only local heretic he mentions is his contemporary Bitu, who tried to distort the eschatological teachings of the Church.

Through precise and concrete arguments, he staunchly defended the Christian faith. Furthermore, he extensively explored the Christianization of diverse regions in Europe, Asia, and Africa, and notably Ethiopia. In his perspective, Ethiopia embraced Christianity even in the absence of direct apostolic preaching or the martyrdom of believers. However, he did not deny that there was a time when Ethiopians practiced idolatry even though Judaism was practiced in the country. He claimed that the appointment of *Abunä Sälama* (330-350 AD) as the first bishop of Ethiopia was a turning point for the spread of Christianity and the official establishment of the Christian Church. He also underscored that the arrival of the Nine Saints, who came to Ethiopia from various ancient

states of the Roman Empire in the fourth quarter of the fifth century, was another opportunity for the firm establishment and advancement of the Church.

Regarding Bible translation, he confirmed that most of the Old Testament inscriptions were imported and translated into old Ethiopic before the birth of Jesus Christ. As argumentative evidence, he cited some Hebrew terms such as Adonay, El-Shaday, Sabaoth, etc., which were mentioned in the Gə'əz Bible.

His textual evidence and quotations predominantly stem from the Old and New Testament scriptures but are not limited to them. He also incorporates numerous quotations and textual evidence from various patristic literatures, liturgical and canonical, hagiographical and hymnic books, and even from the New Testament inscriptions that have not yet been included in the printed New Testament of the Church, such as Didache and Clement. He also deals with the categorizations of the Synod. The breadth and depth of his sources demonstrates yet again his profound expertise in the biblical tradition.

In addition to his remarkable biblical interpretations, theological intricacies, and historical narratives, the text also offers his golden advice and probing philosophical thoughts on various topics such as the rational and animal souls, human reproduction, justice, illiteracy, illusion, dreams, drunkenness, the nature of the sun, light, and fire, and more.

Moreover, the work showcases his adept use of metaphorical expressions to convey his messages or insights. For instance, his metaphor illustrating the unity of soul and flesh is very impressive. He also skillfully reflects on the responsibility that public leaders must fulfil in the service of their people.

Therefore, given its depth of analysis and substantive messages, *Mäṣḥafä Mäṣṭir* (The Book of Mystery) deserves to be regarded as one of the outstanding theological, historical, exegetical, and philosophical texts Ethiopia has ever produced.

This English version is the translation of the reconstructed Gə'əz text, which was published together with the Amharic translation in 2008. It was compiled by comparing several selected manuscripts such as the EMMML 6456, EMMML 2429, HMML 125 and Gaśəṣṣa manuscripts. The critical edition of Ya'qob Beyene was also consulted to expand the investigation with a larger number of manuscripts.

Short Introduction

It is worth mentioning that the original Gə'əz text lacks verses within its chapters and has no biblical references. It was simply divided into 30 chapters. To enhance its utility as a reference work, I have carefully divided it into verses. Nevertheless, the verses in this edition may not necessarily align with those in the Amharic version, as some improvements have been made. I have also incorporated biblical references for better understanding.

Dr. *Abba* Hiruie Ermias