

The Translation of the Poem *Portrait of Walatta Petros*

(*Mälkäʿa Wälättä Petros*)

Mälkäʿ is a very old genre of Ethiopian Gəʿəz poetry in which the poet praises the Ethiopian Christian saint from head to toe, using the saint's body parts to create an allegory of the saint's virtues and life. Thus, many stanzas allude to some episode in the saint's life. Typical *mälkäʿ* poems have between twenty and fifty stanzas and mention the saint's name in every stanza, generally on the third line. The genre has five rhymed lines per stanza with the rhyme scheme AAAAA, BBBBB, and so on. Generally, the lines rhyme only the last syllable of the line (i.e., the last *fidäl* character), which always ends in a vowel. Even if it looks like the rhyme is slant (i.e., sharing just a consonant sound), in traditional recitation the singer adds a schwa sound to any sixth-form syllable at the end of a line (e.g., singing *amlak* as *amalkə*).

In the book itself, *The Life and Struggles of Our Mother Walatta Petros*, we aid the scholar or student who does not read Gəʿəz, but is interested in understanding the skill and elegance of the original poem as well as possible, by providing the poem in *fidäl*, in transliteration, and in word-for-word English translation, along with, on facing pages, a poetic English translation by Derek Gideon. We have provided Gideon's translation below on its own, in an easy-to-read version properly spaced, for use in the classroom. For all scholarship, please consult the book itself. To listen to the poem being recited in the original, please go to wendybelcher.com.

[1] In the name of God, who was when time was not,
(no moment before him, no wink of an eye):
Walatta Petros, may the priest Shenoute¹
brighten my heart with some small insight, that I
might voice for you these strings in holy song.

[2] Hail to your name's memory, which wears a crown² of grace,
and to your hair, poured over with the oil of Mass.³
Walatta Petros, our mother, we desire your help
to save us from the rise of the Enemies Three:⁴
for they are most bitter, most bitter indeed.

"The Portrait of Walatta Petros," translated by Derek Gideon. Excerpted from *THE LIFE AND STRUGGLES OF OUR MOTHER WALATTA PETROS: A Seventeenth-Century African Biography of an Ethiopian Woman* by Galawdewos. Translated and edited by Wendy Laura Belcher & Michael Kleiner. Copyright © 2015 by Princeton University Press. To learn more about this book, please visit <http://press.princeton.edu>. No part of this text may be distributed, posted, or reproduced in any form by digital or mechanical means without prior written permission of the publisher.

[3] Hail to your head and your face, that command
more praise than ethereal lights.
Saint Peter's Daughter,⁵ adorned in faith's garment:
at dusk and at dawn raise up our entreaties
to your Lord, who has freed us from Satan's shackles.

[4] Hail to your eyelashes, and the tears they have suffered,
and to eyes that have seen the beauty of the mother of God.
Walatta Petros, from the chains of sin set me free.
Direct my feet along repentance's path
before cruel-faced death appears to me.

[5] Hail to your ears, which heard the Good News,
and your cheeks, which felt the blows the Lord felt.
Walatta Petros, come to us when we cry out
and on the warring demons and spirits, make war
with the sword of your mouth, a seraph's slaughter.

[6] Hail to your nostrils, the houses of marvelous scents,
and to lips that provide your power of eloquence.
Daughter of Peter—that Peter whom John overtook on the path,⁶
from you to me may understanding pass—
my own lies buried beneath my foolishness.

[7] Hail to your mouth, which advanced a new order,
and your teeth, which deflected the laughs of those who scorn.
Your voice brings more joy than the wine of Cana.⁷
On the death-day decreed for the Daughter of Peter, John's son,⁸
the whole Church wrapped itself in mourning.

[8] Hail to your tongue, which has never ceased praying,
and your honey-sweet words, harp of praise and thanksgiving.
Walatta Petros, following Christ, Calvary's sacrifice,
you acquired no gold and pursued no silver,
and so the seducing servant fell sick with terror.⁹

[9] Hail to your breath, its fragrance incense,
and your throat, untouched by water or wine.
Walatta Petros, heaven's highest say of you:
"How excellent your blessedness, our sister,
and your reward unseen by mortal eye."

[10] Hail to your neck, which humility's leash dragged down,
and to shoulders that carried tribulation's yoke.
Walatta Petros, fill my heart with wisdom:
For if, lacking wisdom, I am like a pigeon,
your Lord will permit me no treasure in heaven.

[11] Hail to your back, which cast off luxurious cloaks,
and to your chest, a banquet-table for the wretched.
Walatta Petros, our mother, lover of fasting and prayer,
request forgiveness for our sins before the Lord:
Thus we implore you, we who are yours.

[12] Hail to your bosom, rich embrace of monastic life,
and your hands, outstretched with mercy for the stranger.
Walatta Petros, crown of the True Church,
the myriad hosts of heaven and earth praise you
with one voice of song and delightful hymns.

[13] Hail to your arms and your elbows, those buttresses¹⁰
that have never been captured by fetters of sin.
Walatta Petros, like Martha who loved Christ,¹¹
you shrouded in a garment of shame that angel
who made Adam fall from God's high dwelling.¹²

[14] Hail to your forearms, full of strength for works of right,
and your palms, surpassing sun and moon as they shine bright.
Walatta Petros, plead with Saint Mary, Galilee's dove,¹³
to ask her child, Savior of the World,
to keep us safe from Marcian the wolf.¹⁴

[15] Hail to your fingers, branches of their trunk, the hand,
and their tips, your nails, their color is snow and hail.
Walatta Petros, oh, you topaz and emerald stone,
your rebuke has given wisdom to the fool
and to many the gift of a return from heresy.

[16] Hail to your breasts, which gave forth the milk of grace:
their fullness for mercy has never diminished.
Daughter of the judge Saint Peter, when you,
our lamp, lay hidden in the basket that was death,
darkness then ruled on our right and our left.¹⁵

[17] Hail to your sides, adorned with verdant gold,
and your belly, treasury of the Gospel's pearl.¹⁶
Walatta Petros, loftier in your struggles than Sarah,
may your wings shade me, just as in the wilderness
God's cloud gave shade to the Tent of the Testimony.¹⁷

[18] Hail to your heart and your kidneys. Every moment,
they let sprout no iniquity and harbored no deceit.
Walatta Petros, break me blessing's bread
and I will give you the fruit of my lips,
a hymn to your boundless glory.

[19] Hail to your mind, which dwelt on the Crucifixion,
and your bowels, never knotted with even the least evil.
Walatta Petros, while my people listen, say to me:
“Truly, I have prepared a home for you in heaven
where we shall be together. Do not worry, my son.”

[20] Hail and hail again to your organs within,
and your navel without, the seal that stamps them.
Walatta Petros, like Elizabeth, the Baptist's mother,¹⁸
all the orders of the angels and of humankind,
fashioned of all four elements,¹⁹ proclaim you blessed.

[21] Hail to your womb, like a grape-bearing vine,
which has brought forth fruits of holiness and Law.
Daughter of Peter, that leader of leaders,
together with Shenoute and the Martyrs of Waseef,²⁰
pour the saffron of your blessing on us.

[22] Hail to your hips, grown thin through much fasting,
and your legs, paired pillars with a sturdy stance.
Walatta Petros, enlighten my heart's dim eye,
so I can see you standing there together
with the Firstborn's²¹ joyful community of Law.

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[23] Hail to your knees, always bent in genuflection,
and your feet, ever-swift on the ministry's path.²²

Walatta Petros, protect your children from disorder.
And as for Satan, who hates camaraderie and love,
tear his snares apart and uproot his thorn.

[24] Hail to your soles and the ground where they stood,
never nourished by rest's loaf that feeds the weary.

Walatta Petros, sound the prayer bell of our plea
for the Jacobites, believers in his name:
May Christ our sins through His blood redeem.

[25] Hail to your toes, twice five in their number,
and your ten toenails, that sit well there together.
Daughter of Peter our elder,²³ from your distance
draw near to the griever and fill his longing;
and consecrate the righteous for their righteousness.

[26] Hail to your stature, beautiful as choice cedar,
and hail to your figure, a sun that inspires joy.

Walatta Petros, instead of riches, give me
a morsel of blessing before the Great Gathering,²⁴
a taste of your blessing that is ever so sweet.

[27] Hail to your soul's departure, sung on its way by our hymns,
and the corpse of your flesh, more radiant than pearl.

Walatta Petros, so wise and upright, our morning star,
when your memory's rays shine forth,
worry vanishes from troubled hearts.

[28] Hail to your shroud, its glory beyond all glory,
and your tomb, a refuge for all who seek it there.
Walatta Petros, crystal vessel, bowl for faith's ointment,
pour clemency's fountain that your sheep may drink
when the heat of hellfire blazes near.

[29] To your cowl—like the thorns on Christ's brow
when the Jews crucified him that he might redeem the world—
and to your cloak woven of purity,
and to your habit, your belt, and your gown,
I say "Hail, hail." My poem I close with a seal.

[30] Praise unto Him, Lord of Lords, God of gods,
His essence a light that shines above all lights.
He has saved even me from the Entangler's snares
and has let your child finish, Walatta Petros,
the song in your memory I began for you.

Content Notes

- 1 *Sinoda* (Shenoute of Atripe) was a fifth-century Egyptian monk. He is a famous figure of Coptic monasticism and considered the greatest author of Coptic literature. He is venerated as an important saint in the Tāwahaḥedo Church, too. His commemoration takes place on the same day as WP's, 17 Hədar.
- 2 *Qäšäla* also means the silk head covering fringed in gold with which Tāwahaḥedo Church priests cover their heads during the Liturgy, and thus may be a reference to WP's quasi-priestly status.
- 3 *Qəddase* (holiness, sanctification) also became the technical term for the Divine Liturgy; the use of this term here implicitly elevates WP to priestly status.
- 4 It is unclear who or what the three enemies are; perhaps, as in other Christian traditions, they are the world, the flesh, and the devil; alternately perhaps they are bad thoughts, bad speech, and bad actions or anger, arrogance, and lust.
- 5 The first of several plays in the poem on the meaning of WP's name, Daughter of Saint Peter. In these cases, we translate it as Peter's Daughter, to communicate the double function, descriptive as well as appellative.
- 6 John 20:4 has Saint Peter being outraced in running toward Christ's tomb by "that other disciple, whom Jesus had loved." Traditionally, that disciple has been identified with Saint John the Evangelist.
- 7 John 2:1–12. An allusion to the first miracle of Christ, which was changing the water into wine at the wedding of Cana.
- 8 Matthew 16:17; John 1:42.
- 9 This is another *säm-ənnä wärq* line that can be understood in two ways. *Mäshati mäl'ak* can mean "seducing servant" or "deceitful angel." On the surface level (wax), the line alludes to WP's jailor in Žäbäy, who made sexual advances toward her until he saw her being defended by an angel and fell down in shock. At a deeper level (gold), it alludes to the archseducer Satan, the one driving WP's jailor to behave improperly.
- 10 Lit., *məsmak*. Figuratively, the term also refers to the biblical passages read during the service before the reading from the Gospels, usually Psalms. Both WP's arms and these readings are types of supports for the sacred.
- 11 Martha is a woman in the New Testament who hosted Christ in her home, witnessed his resurrection of her brother, and acknowledged Christ as the Messiah (John 11).
- 12 That is, Satan. Ricci says this alludes to a story told in the *Aksimaros* (the Greek *Hexaemeron*) and in the *Mäshaḥäftä Mänäkosat* (Books of the Monks). A Ethiopian gädlat topos is the background of these two lines, as many gädlat claim that their subject, a particular saint, could reverse, in their monastic communities, the corruption caused by the fall of the first human beings.
- 13 This appositive, "dove of Galilee," appears to be from the *Sənkəssar* (Budge 1928, 1:xlīii; 4:1200).
- 14 Lit., *Märqəyan*. The fifth-century Eastern Roman emperor Marcian approved the ecclesiastical condemnation of the non-Chalcedonian hero Dioscorus and had him exiled after the Council of Chalcedon in 451.
- 15 Matthew 5:15, "Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket." This is one of the most common New Testament quotations in Gəʿəz hagiobiographies, whose authors deployed the metaphor with tremendous skill. Here, the death of WP is compared to a basket that covers a shining lamp, which causes darkness to descend.

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- 16 *Bahrəyā wāngel* (Pearl or essence of the Gospel) is a common metaphor in the Tāwahədo Church for Christ, symbolizing a pure seed passed down through human bodies since Adam. See also Matthew 13:45–46.
- 17 The Tent of the Testimony was part of the temporary building that the Israelites set up for worship in the wilderness while on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. It contained the Ark of the Covenant and the Ten Commandments, which is why it was also called the Place of the Testimony or of the Law. Regarding the cloud covering it, see Numbers 9:15 and Jubilees 1:2. God lifted the cloud over the Tent of the Testimony when it was time to move on, and lowered it when the Israelites had reached the next camp spot, so it was a visible sign of God’s presence and protection.
- 18 That is, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, who heralded the coming of Christ in the New Testament.
- 19 Likely a reference to the four elements of Greek medicine: melancholic (bile, autumn, earth), choleric (bile, summer, fire), phlegmatic (phlegm, winter, water), and sanguine (blood, spring, air). Alternatively, it might be two elements for the angels (fire and air) and two for humans (earth and water), perhaps from such original Gəʿəz works as *Sennä Fətrāt* (Beauty of Creation).
- 20 WP shares her saint’s day with the two invoked here: the fifth-century Coptic saint Shenoute of Atripe and a group of Egyptian martyrs about whom very little is known, the *ṣadəqanā Wəṣif* (righteous ones of Waseef).
- 21 In the Bible, the firstborn son is consecrated to God and firstborn animals are used in holy sacrifice; see Deuteronomy 12:6. Regarding Christ as the firstborn, see Colossians 1:18.
- 22 This is another *sām-əmma wärq* line that can be understood in two ways. What here appears as “and your feet, ever-swift on ministry’s path” could also be translated as “and to the Apostles, [that is,] your feet on mission’s path.”
- 23 See 1 Peter 5:1.
- 24 See 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, regarding the reunion of all believers (living and dead) upon the Second Coming of Christ.
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