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# Sweet Sacrament: Where Myth Meets Story in Ethiopian Christianity

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SWEET SACRAMENT:  
WHERE MYTH MEETS STORY IN ETHIOPIAN CHRISTIANITY,  
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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### **ABSTRACT**

Tell me your favorite sports team is the Cinderella story of the century, and I understand they come from humble origins, the odds were stacked against them, and—in a serendipitous turn of events—they achieved victory. In this way, humans use the structure and vocabulary of cultural stories to make sense of their lives and describe their experience. Through three creative nonfiction short stories, this project aims to capture the synthesis of myth and personal story in the narratives of Ethiopian evangelical Christians. Gathered in Ethiopia in summer 2014, the narratives of torture, persecution, and conversion are each paired with an Ethiopian folktale and analyzed for their connections. The stories are preceded by an introductory literature review and followed by a discussion of the role of religious experience in the future of Ethiopian evangelical Christianity and Christianity at large.

*“Our own church is as ancient as our faith, and her history is replete with accounts of the unswerving faith of our people, the inspiring heroism of our martyrs, the Holiness of our Saints. The history of our nations has always been closely related to the history of our church, and the church has been both the rallying point and the inspirer of our national unity. Christianity has flourished in our country, keeping its original features and character through the centuries. As a nation we have a great debt to the church for our cultural heritage.”*

—His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I

*“Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”*

—Psalm 68:31, King James Version

## INTRODUCTION

“Whether we like it or not,” Alemayehu Mekonnen writes in his book on cultural change in Ethiopia, “whether we believe it or deny it, God has an interest in the lives of Ethiopians.”<sup>1</sup> This is an interest that began in early Judaism, is well-documented in the Bible, and is evident today in the lives and stories of his people. I share this interest as well, having been mesmerized by Ethiopia from a young age, and continue to seek, listen, and study the stories of its people, particularly as they talk about their faith. In all of human storytelling, where myth meets story is a delicate yet dynamic moment. Seeking to understand a painful, lovely, or transcendent experience, humans turn to the myths they know to structure and make sense of their encounters. The masterplots and vocabulary of the myths shape their understanding of the experience, infusing it with mythic and spiritual power.

I believe such a synthesis occurs in the narratives Ethiopian evangelical Christians tell about their faith. A passing study of the world’s religions “shows that narrative traditions...are important to the inception, maintenance, and continuation of religious thought and practice.”<sup>2</sup> It is no different for the evangelical branch of Ethiopian Christianity. As Amare Girma notes, the traditional mindset of the Ethiopians “has its roots deep in the past, and the modern mind is authenticated

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<sup>1</sup> Mekonnen, Alemayehu, *Cultural Change in Ethiopia: An Evangelical Perspective* (Oxford, 2013): 91

<sup>2</sup> Kalu, Anthonia, C., “Women, Narrative Traditions, and African Religious Thought,” in Afeosemime Unuose Adogame, Extra Chitando and Bolaji Bateye (eds.), *African Traditions in the Study of Religion: Emerging Trends, Indigenous Spirituality and the Interface with other World Religions* (Farnham, 2012): 97.

from the old.”<sup>3</sup> This “underlying hidden level of culture”—so deeply supernatural in Ethiopians—defines the way they “view the world, determines their values and establishes the basic tempo and rhythm of life.”<sup>4</sup> Myth, which has greater allowances for the miraculous, the sacred, and the unconventional, contains vocabulary for encountering the divine that is absent in everyday language. In myths, preservation from torture, rescue from death, and salvation from sin are told to be believed. In this way, their structure and vocabulary are ideal for making sense of religion.

The purpose of this project is several-fold. First, it aims to capture the reliance of contemporary narratives of Christian faith on indigenous myths as they were observed in the field, while preserving the narrative voices of Ethiopians. Concurrently, it hopes to give witness and voice to the stories of extraordinary Christians practicing a religion distinct from the average Western reader’s understanding of Christianity. It intends to imitate anthropological investigation of sacred myth in African narrative and religious thought. Finally, the project attempts to communicate the otherworldly-ness and mysticism still present in some branches of Christianity that have become largely discounted or demystified by Western practitioners and observers of religion. Ultimately, it aims to fulfill a promise to communicate faithfully and without embellishment the stories entrusted to me that have transformed and animated my own faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Girma, Amare, “Education and the Conflict of Values in Ethiopia: A Study of Socio-Moral Problems arising out of the introduction of Modern Education in Ethiopia” (1964), in Alemayehu Mekonnen, *Cultural Change in Ethiopia: An Evangelical Perspective* (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Hall, Edward, *The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time* (New York, 1896).

The project begins with a literature review of anthropological work on myth and narrative. Next is a collection of short stories, each beginning with an adapted Ethiopian myth chosen for its similarity in structure and themes to the contemporary narrative that follows. Each combination is followed by a short discussion of the connections between the myth and the narrative. While not exhaustive, these explanations are intended to facilitate reader comprehension and provide nuance for a second reading. The project concludes with a discussion of the future of Ethiopian Christianity in a rapidly developing country eager to join the global community.

### **Background**

My interest in Ethiopia began during a visit to the country at the age of fourteen and has grown through self-initiated research and continuing friendships. In my undergraduate career studying literature and political science, I have used every opportunity to enrich my knowledge of Ethiopia through research in everything from the globalization of women's suffrage to maternal health-seeking practices. In summer 2014, I returned to East Africa on behalf of Partners International.

Travelling alone, I lived with missionaries and local families for two months in South Sudan, Kenya, and Ethiopia. While in Ethiopia, I stayed with Alemayehu and Etenesh Goshu and their family for three weeks in Addis Ababa. I listened to stories about their lives, their past, and their faith; they also deepened my understanding of Ethiopian culture, history, politics, faith, and desire for political and economic development. In addition, I interviewed indigenous missionaries and church leaders working in Ethiopia about their experiences, difficulties, and vision.

Upon my return to the United States, I transcribed the interviews and began noticing recurring themes, narratives, and story structures. Again and again, I listened to narratives that relied on similar images, symbols, and explanations to describe mystical experiences of faith. Anthropologist Liisa Malkki describes a similar experience listening to the stories of Hutu refugees in Tanzania:

To be told and retold such similar, almost formulaic[...]accounts, and to see stories of people's own lives melt into the general themes of a collective narrative, was a compelling experience[...]The most startling feature was precisely the recurrence and uniformity of utterances, and it was this feature that demanded attention.<sup>5</sup>

The narratives were compelling not only because of their recurring features, but also because those features were almost always present in the stories' more mystical moments. In Ethiopia and upon my return, I was exposed to a wealth of Ethiopian mythology and folk literature extensively collected and documented by several of the nation's storytellers.<sup>6</sup> I was surprised to discover some of the themes, motifs, and explanations of my participants' narratives in the folk literature: the words and actions of deity, certain animals or weather, even personal characteristics shared with mythical characters.

These observations led to a hypothesis: the way Ethiopian evangelical Christians talked about their faith was connected to the myths of their culture. Proper understanding and appreciation of Ethiopian evangelical Christianity would

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<sup>5</sup> Malkki, Liisa H., *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago, 1995): 56, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Laird, Elizabeth et al, "Ethiopian Folktales," <<http://www.ethiopianfolktales.com>> [accessed 12 May 2015].



therefore require an understanding of Ethiopian myth. While Western Christians might dismiss an Ethiopian's mythic explanation of the miraculous in favor of medicine, psychology, economics, or any number of other quantifiable factors, the similarity and recurrence of mythic tropes in Ethiopian narrative cannot be ignored. It is the aim of this project to establish grounds for this connection in scholarly literature and present examples of it in creative nonfiction. I propose that reading narratives of Ethiopian Christianity alongside indigenous myths helps readers understand both, and particularly the ways narrative might be informed by mythic structure and language. Ideally, this reading alongside will allow for Ethiopian evangelical Christianity to be taken seriously and for revitalization in the value of religious experience in Christianity at large.

### **About Ethiopia**

Perhaps more than any other African country, Ethiopia possesses the richest, most receptive, and ecumenical relationship with Christianity. Never colonized by Western powers, the country today extends from almost the Equator to the Tropic of Cancer.<sup>7</sup> With an area of over one million square kilometers and a population of over 95 million people, Ethiopia is the heart of what is commonly known as the Horn of Africa.<sup>8</sup> The national language is Amharic, a Semitic language spoken by the Amhara people group and the majority of Ethiopians, though there are other Semitic and Cushitic languages as well.<sup>9</sup> Because of its position near the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Ethiopia has enjoyed economic and cultural contact with other cultures for

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<sup>7</sup> Pankhurst, Richard, *The Ethiopians: A History* (Oxford, 2001): 6.

<sup>8</sup> "Ethiopia," 2015 <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>> [accessed 24 April 2015].

<sup>9</sup> Pankhurst 8.

centuries. According to Richard Pankhurst, “the region’s relations with Egypt and the Nile Valley began as early as the time of the Pharaohs.”<sup>10</sup>

Ethiopia was well known among ancient and biblical writers. In the *Odyssey*, Homer describes Ethiopians as *eschatoi andron*, “the most distant of men,” who lived “at earth’s two verges, in sunset lands and lands of the rising sun.”<sup>11</sup> Later, Aeschylus writes in *Prometheus Bound* that Ethiopia is a “land far off, a nation of black men [who lived...] hard by the fountain of the sun.”<sup>12</sup> Ethiopia and its people were similarly well regarded in the Bible, where they are typically referred to as Cushites. Isaiah and Zephaniah agree with the Greeks that Ethiopia is a far off place, and Moses is said to have married an Ethiopian woman against God’s command.<sup>13</sup> The most commonly cited verse about Ethiopia, Psalm 68:31, is also the Orthodox Church’s motto: “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.”<sup>14</sup>

Tradition holds that Christianity first reached the nation during the time of the Apostles.<sup>15</sup> Some trace its origins to Philip’s meeting with an Ethiopian eunuch recorded in Acts 8, while others believe the first conversions occurred at Pentecost, when Ethiopian Jewish pilgrims heard Peter speaking their language in the crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 2).<sup>16</sup> Still others suggest the disciple Matthew travelled to Axum, then-capital of the Ethiopian dynasty, and the gospel spread through his teaching.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the true originations, in the mid 300s Athanasius consecrated the first

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Isaac, Ephraim, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahido Church* (Trenton, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Isaac 17; Pankhurst 34.

<sup>16</sup> Isaac 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 17.

Christian bishop for Ethiopia at Alexandria, Frumentius, who built the first Christian church in Axum. Dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary of Seyon, Mariam Seyon Church reflected the Ethiopian belief that Axum was the second Jerusalem and the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, brought to Ethiopia by the Queen of Sheba and Solomon's son.<sup>18</sup> The theology of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church today is "the theology of the first three major councils of Christendom—all of which took place before 451."<sup>19</sup>

While Christianity is the state religion, Ethiopians have lived in peace with Muslim believers for centuries. Because of its proximity to Arabia, Ethiopia encountered Islam within Mohammed's lifetime.<sup>20</sup> Persecuted in Mecca, the Prophet instructed his followers that in Ethiopia "you will find a king under whom none are persecuted...It is a land of righteousness where God will give you relief from what you are suffering."<sup>21</sup> The king of Ethiopia gave refuge to the prophet's disciples, and as a result Mohammed issued a "special decree that there should be no holy war against the Ethiopians."<sup>22</sup> Islam later spread through jihad and migration, but according to Ephraim Isaac, the subsequent backlash from Christian ruling regimes had less to do with religious relations than political drama.<sup>23</sup> There are 100 percent Muslim regions in Ethiopia, such as Afar, and religious tension grows as the number

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 191.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 191.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 190.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 199.

of Islamic believers in the country expands.<sup>24</sup> This has resulted in political demonstrations but few instances of violence, so far.

Western Christian missions to Ethiopia began in the early fourteenth century, and the first interactions were with the Portuguese.<sup>25</sup> Protestant missions, which entered Ethiopia in the early twentieth century only to be expelled during the Italian occupation in the late 1930s, are gradually making progress, especially in the south and east.<sup>26</sup> Today, Ethiopian government policy emphasizes that “missions should concentrate their work in non-Christian areas and among non-Christians, but should only do educational and medical work in Ethiopian Church areas...without aims of proselytizing.”<sup>27</sup> Denominational loyalty is to be avoided in favor of ecumenism.<sup>28</sup> Ethiopian theologians believe that missionaries who “understand and appreciate the Ethiopian ethos and tradition” are best able to contribute to and enrich this tradition while also introducing their theological views.<sup>29</sup> My project hopes to contribute to this understanding and appreciation, exploring particularly how evangelical Ethiopian Christians rely on myths to articulate their faith.

### **Myth**

Ethiopian storytelling relies on the masterplots and vocabulary of cultural myth to structure and make meaning of experiences, including religious ones. It is important to distinguish between folktales, legends, and myths at this stage. In contrast to the more fictional folktales and legends, myths are defined as prose narratives “which,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 199.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 203, 204.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 212.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 212.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 217.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 217.

in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past.”<sup>30</sup> The characters of myths are not usually human but often have human characteristics; “they are animals, deities, or culture heroes, whose actions are set in an earlier world [...] or in another world such as the sky or underworld.”<sup>31</sup> They are what William Bascom calls “the embodiment of dogma,” and they are typically sacred, “often associated with theology and ritual.”<sup>32</sup> The Grimm Brothers, the fathers of modern folklore, write that ancient myth “combines to some extent the qualities of folktale and legend; untrammelled in its flight, it can yet settle down in a local home.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus there are several defining characteristics of myth: it is universally transcendent yet particular, and usually religious. Myth is universal because it is born beyond reason, history, logic, and definitions of right and wrong.<sup>34</sup> Mythic images are “externalization[s] of the inner stirring, the emotion of man as he meets the world.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the myth reveals through gestures, forms, and words the internality of human experience that “lives on in man’s heart century after century.”<sup>36</sup> At the same time, it captures the rupture between the real and the unreal, between that which we experience and that which we know to be larger than

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<sup>30</sup> Bascom, William, “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,” in Alan Dundes (ed.), *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley, 1984): 9.

<sup>31</sup> Bascom 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Dardel, Eric, “The Mythic,” in Alan Dundes (ed.), *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley, 1984): 229.

<sup>35</sup> Dardel 229.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 230.

us.<sup>37</sup> In this way, myths are helpful in conversations about religion. The religious person preserves, follows, and copies mythic examples of the “sacred form of behavior” to articulate his or her religious experience.<sup>38</sup>

Universal and religious, myth helps humans make meaning. Peter Brooks writes that “our very definition as human beings is very much bound up with the stories we tell about our own lives and the world in which we live.”<sup>39</sup> An integral part of being human is talking in narrative, structuring an event or series of events as a story.<sup>40</sup> Humans do this, according to H. Porter Abbott, because “without understanding the narrative, we often feel we don’t understand what we see.”<sup>41</sup> When humans struggle to understand or explain their experiences, they rely on masterplots and vocabulary in myths to make meaning. Malkki, studying the experience of Hutu refugees in Mishamo Refugee Settlement in western Tanzania, documents this habit.<sup>42</sup> The Hutu recast and reinterpreted their myths to explain their violent resettlement “in a fundamental, cosmological sense.”<sup>43</sup> I suggest that Ethiopian Christians use myth in a similar way, using mythic masterplots and vocabulary to articulate and make meaning of “the inner stirring” of their religious experience.<sup>44</sup>

### **Purpose & Methodology**

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 229.

<sup>38</sup> Honko, Lauri, “The Problem of Defining Myth,” in Alan Dundes (ed.), *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley, 1984): 51.

<sup>39</sup> Brooks, Peter, “The Law as Narrative and Rhetoric,” in Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz (eds.), *Law’s Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law* (New Haven, 1996): 19.

<sup>40</sup> Abbott, H. Porter, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge, 2012): 13.

<sup>41</sup> Abbott 10.

<sup>42</sup> Malkki 3.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 55, 54.

<sup>44</sup> Dardel 229.

It should be noted here that using myth to structure and make sense of religious experience does not discount or diminish the veracity of the experience. One cannot say that the mythic elements in play turn the entire narrative into fiction. The Hutu's conscription of mythic elements into their mythico-history did not negate the fact they were refugees nor that their narratives were important and worth listening to. In the same way, the mythical elements of Ethiopian evangelical Christianity should not cast doubt on the nature of the faith. If anything, it is Westerners' unfamiliarity with these myths that causes out-of-hand rejection and shows precisely why greater awareness is needed.

This project seeks to address Western ignorance of African myth and religion. Indeed, most "narratives of African religious belief systems entered the contemporary global arena through colonialists' perspectives" and are dominated by stereotypes of "superstition, magic, and witchcraft."<sup>45</sup> While this is harmful for African nations across the continent, it is especially damaging for Ethiopians. Ethiopia is proud of its heritage as the only African nation not colonized by the West, and they claim their first encounter with Christianity at the time of the Apostles.<sup>46</sup> The stereotypical clash between Christianity and superstition, magic, and witchcraft is largely absent in Ethiopia, where Orthodox leaders pursue a "live and let live" approach and avoid zealous evangelism.<sup>47</sup> This is particularly important to keep in mind when reading the narratives included in this project; reliance on myth should not be written off as pagan or quaint Africanism.

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<sup>45</sup> Kalu 104.

<sup>46</sup> Pankhurst 34.

<sup>47</sup> Isaac 217.

It is the goal of this project, then, to present Ethiopian narratives of religion that do not fit the stereotypes so commonly applied to African stories—what it means to be, look, talk, and think African. As Mogobe Ramose writes, “it is still necessary to assert and uphold the right of Africans to define the meaning of experience and truth in their own right...[to] construct an authentic and truly African discourse about Africa.”<sup>48</sup> This author, though not African, has committed to convey the narratives of Ethiopian Christianity with special attention to recurring themes, images, and ideas. The responsibility of capturing that voice, the myths it relies on, and the conviction with which it speaks is daunting. How to do so faithfully, without losing the tellers’ distinctive voice and editing with a Western eye? Following Malkki’s example of narrative panels, the short stories below are at times a record of one person’s words and experience, at other times composites of several accounts on a similar theme.<sup>49</sup>

My intent is to capture not only the narrative construction of Ethiopian stories, but also their mythical masterplots and powerful sense of a shared voice. The first story in the collection begins with an Oromo courtship myth followed by a narrative of a contemporary Ethiopian wedding intermixed with the narrator’s memories of imprisonment during the Communist revolution. The second begins with an Afar myth about pregnancy and birth, then proceeds to a narrative of religious conversion and persecution in a Muslim-dominated region of Ethiopia. The third begins with the Ethiopian version of the Solomon and Queen of Sheba myth

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<sup>48</sup> Ramose, Mogobe, in Afeosemimo Unuose Adogame, Exra Chitando and Bolaji Bateye (eds.), *African Traditions in the Study of Religion: Emerging Trends, Indigenous Spirituality and the Interface with other World Religions* (Farnham, 2012): 19.

<sup>49</sup> Malkki 56.



and is followed by a contemporary romance between young Christian believers. The project is best understood by reading each paired myth and narrative first as a personal story, enjoyed as if being told in person. Next, the reader should consult the following appendix, which discusses literary structures, themes, images, and ideas present in the myth and the narrative and offers an interpretation of their importance and meaning. The myth and narrative should then be read again with these similarities in mind. Ideally, this process will illuminate the connections between narrative and myth and the interplay between the two.

The project culminates by discussing the future of evangelical Christianity in a country on the verge of joining the global community. If Ethiopians rely heavily on local myth for their vocabulary of faith, as I suggest, how will this reliance be affected by their entrance into the global system of ideas, markets, and systems? Can the mythic elements of Ethiopian evangelical Christianity, used to make sense of otherwise inexplicable religious experience, survive in the face of globalization? What is the future of Ethiopian Christianity, and what, if anything, does it have to offer the corporate body of Christ?

## **One** **A Hand in Marriage**

*This is a story about rats. There was an entire colony of rats who believed they were superior to all animals on earth. Arrogant and ambitious, they had a king who was the worst of them all and thought he was above them.*

*Now the king had a son, and he said, "Look, my son is the greatest being on earth. I need to find him a wife of the same standard and status."*

*None of the miserable animals on earth could be a good wife, so naturally the son had to marry the Creator's daughter.*

*The king gathered the elders, and he said, "Go and ask the Creator for his daughter's hand in marriage."*

*So they went to the Creator, and they said, "We have an excellent son. He's handsome, intelligent and exceptional. We want you to give us your daughter as a bride for our son."*

*And the Creator said, "I can see from what you say that your son really is something special. I think that, in fact, he's so special he should marry somebody even greater than my daughter."*

*But the elders said, "Look, we think you're the greatest being."*

*He said, "No, I'm God. I live in the sky. Fog comes and wraps itself around me, and I can't do anything about it. I think you should go and ask for the fog's daughter instead. She is very beautiful."*

*So the elders went to the fog's palace, and they said, "Look, we have this great son, and we hear you have a beautiful daughter. Can she marry him?"*

*The fog said, "Tell me about him."*

*The elders said, "He's handsome, intelligent, and exceptional."*

*The fog said, "If that's the case, my daughter is below him. He should marry someone even greater."*

*The elders said, "Who can be greater than the fog? Even God admitted that you can suffocate him."*

*The fog said, "Oh, the wind. It comes and scatters me to pieces. I'm no match for the wind. He has a daughter, so go ask him."*

*The elders went to the wind and explained about the king's son.*

*The wind said, "Well, it seems as though he's really something above my daughter. Why don't you ask one greater than the wind?"*

*"But who's greater than the wind? You can scatter the fog."*

*The wind said, "Go and ask the mountain who just slaps me and makes me fall back."*

*So they agreed and then they went to the mountain.*

*The elders told the mountain their problems, and the mountain said, "That's a good idea, but you know my daughter isn't fit to be married to him. There's someone greater than me."*

*The elders said, "Who's that?"*

*And the mountain said, "There is someone who can burrow straight through my insides and break me down to pieces. That's the bush rat."*

*So the elders went back to the king and said, "Well, the mountain said the bush rat was greater. Can we ask him?"*

*The king said, "What a good idea. We're cousins and get along fine."*

*—Adapted from "The Rat King," Oromo folktale<sup>50</sup>*

*Bekolo tibs* stands perch on the cracked wet cement of the sidewalk and spew smoke at his pant cuffs in the rain. The precariousness of the charcoal braziers charring ears of green corn annoys him, the way they stick out in his path like scabbed-over and steaming sores, waiting to be dumped in the street.

He remembers Mimi loves the Ethiopian street delicacy, would always beg him to stop with the windows of the car fogged up and her straining into the front seat, up too close to the stick and the exposed gears. The corn is tasty only when it's hot, but later he would find half-chewed stubs rolling in the backseat amid sticky husks and silk.

He's never had a taste for it himself, but he likes the braziers for the heat they sneak up his pant legs and through his wet socks on rainy Addis Ababa days. Not today,

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<sup>50</sup> Laird.

though. Today they are too hot and he is worried he will kick them. Today there should be a barrier keeping him safe.

He is headed to the wedding, but he is meeting Etenesh there because he met a friend in his favorite café in the Merkato for a pastry and she wanted to get her hair done.

Mimi is his niece, his sister's daughter. He first heard about her wedding when she was seven, to an old Oromo farmer who was a friend of his father's. In a panic, he and Etenesh had offered her a lavish wedding present—come to Addis where her aunt could make her wedding dress, shop in the city with her cousins, stay in his house with its tile floors and a room all her own with a lime green satin bedspread and a mirror.

When he arrives at the church, the gates to the compound, olive green with wrought iron curls and a black knob, are closed. Expectant guests mill in the street outside, hard-packed red dirt cracked from the rain. His mother-in-law wears heels, the ones she wore to his wedding, but now the cheap leather is split along the sides and one of the heels sags.

The church runs up against an abandoned lot in what used to a thriving neighborhood in the old city. He remembers walking to church as a child with his aunt, collecting stones for his slingshot. He would peer into lavish compounds with their two-story houses and separate cooking huts and lazy guard dogs chewing their flees in the sun.

Of course that was before people in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital city and the home of its emperor Haile Selassie, became wary of having their compounds open, before they hired guards or sent their wives and children to visit relatives—relatives you'd never heard of—in places like Kenya or Sudan or the United States. That was before olive green became the color of the shadows, before it had a smell like cigarettes and gun residue and unwashed sweat.

Today he can't think why he never noticed the gate, the gate he looked at as a child and a young man and a father, is such a mute and vile color.

To be fair, he thinks now as he shakes the hands of relatives and friends—Etenesh follows him with her eyes as they move through the crowd, two parts of the same person, his tie matching the blue teal of her dress—he did not actually spend much time here as a young adult.

It was in my dreams, he reminds himself—*welcome Tekelel, greetings Ruth*—it was the dreams of this place and the music on Sundays that haunted my nights and tortured my days. Every time I was sick at the memory, sick enough to grit my teeth in the wet lonely darkness, grind my forehead into the concrete walls that oozed the smell of urine.

When the roundups started, after the revolutionaries from the north had deposed the Emperor and killed sixty officials on what Ethiopians now called Bloody Sunday, you never knew if you were going to be next. University professors, lawyers, priests, even him—an accountant.

Mimi and her future husband are almost here, he thinks. He can hear the car horns down the street and then he sees the nose of the first white town car swinging around the corner with the wreath of green foliage on its hood.

The guests line the concrete driveway and trickle out into the dirt road, wobbling on piles of stones and avoiding the trash piles of discarded water bottles and black and white plastic sacks. A group of teenage boys runs at the gate, splitting it open like an olive so the wedding party can drive inside.

Mimi's face, he glimpses it reflected the window of the town car, is serene, intelligent, composed, but he can see the giddiness in her eyes. Marcus, he can tell, is sweating into the seat cushions.

The first time she came home from clinicals in the Gondar Hospital and told them about the young doctor who always fell asleep in the break room, it was the same giddiness. It was just a passing comment, she'd wanted to tell Etenesh about how ill-stitched her scrubs were and a restaurant called The Fancy Chicken where she and her friends had helped create the menu, but he saw it.

He'd wondered over the years whether he'd done the right thing, stealing her out from underneath his sister. When he saw her usually calm hands in his kitchen—dexterous and smooth from months of latex gloves and scalpels—stuttering and fidgety with excitement as she mixed berbere and whisked eggs, he was sure.

It'd taken several years before everything panned out with the doctor, of course. There were, he imagined, lots of dinners at The Fancy Chicken and mango juice and chocolate cake and walks through town late at night. Mimi said they prayed together

on those walks, over the people in the corrugated shelters they passed, the *bajaj* drivers, over themselves and their families, over him.

The officiate is praying now over the ceremony, her hair in ropes thick as snakes and her eyes kohled with rings of black. She spits into the red foam microphone with an emphasis that makes him jumpy. She's one of the new crowd at the church, one who wants to shake things up.

He was jumpy too, he remembers, at the sizzling sound of spit on his bare feet, flipped up in the air and flared with flame. All the blood would rush to your head when they did that, in a bright room with too much light after the long darkness of the cell. *Good soldier, tell us what you know.*

No matter how quickly you saw it coming, for some reason you couldn't tell your fluids to stay put. They came out in different and dehumanizing directions as your back slid on the chair and your fingers grasped for a floor you couldn't reach. *Good soldier, come now, we know you have things to tell us.*

When they'd been taken, there'd been no instructions or time to pack a suitcase. For that reason, their families were optimistic. The ones the Derg meant to keep, they told—ironically he realizes now—to pack clothes, clothes that were later thrown out or confiscated by guards with an eye for dodgy professorial coats or the white button-up shirts of public officials.

He'd been picked up on the way to the church, which had been officially closed down but was still in operation as a school. The first ones to go had been those in the Emperor's ministries, the ones who clothed him in the morning and drove his private Volkswagen Bug and wrote his ignorant speeches about famine and democracy. They'd all expected that.

Even when the church had been shut down, with threats scrawled on the compound walls and olive-clothed Derg guards patrolling the street out front, they'd seen it as just a cover.

Leaders of the new regime needed someplace to send their children and the church had the best school in Addis. It was a double standard, perhaps, but it was one that kept them safe. Hadn't Paul approved when others cast out demons?

Though they'd done more casting in, he thinks now. We taught their children in our sanctuary and we thought it made us safe. We were taken in for questioning and we thought it was to save face, make it look like we were not exempt.

Instead, they were taken through a back gate to the Central Prison compound. They must not have wanted to parade the group of young Christians through the front. One by one, they went filed into a grey administrative office with a clanking ceiling fan spraying the sweat streaming from the official's forehead onto the walls. No more wedding bands, no more watches, no shoes, no toothpicks even. No dignity.

At first, he remembers, darkness was nothing more than the wet swirl of oozing concrete walls. It was the mist of his own smell, the stink of his fear, and the swirl of tears he couldn't wipe away. His eyes stayed blurry and he thought maybe he was going blind, that he'd developed cataracts like a prematurely aging grandfather. There was no way to measure time, no sliver of light to be walked past or moon to wax and wane.

Up on the stage at the wedding—he's sitting now, Etenesh beside him—Marcus lifts Mimi's veil and kisses her forehead. In the old days, he remembers, that might have been the first time your lips touched the face of your future wife.

But times have changed, he thinks, and largely for the better. He cannot imagine Mimi's forehead being touched by the wrinkled lips of his father's best friend.

He can't imagine the smooth childish girl she'd come as cooking breakfast and sweeping house for an old man. At first she couldn't even make *chichitsub* without Etenesh's help, she was too short to reach the counter, and there was dirt in the corners of his closet for months.

On the stage behind the couple, LED stars twinkle in a dark navy background. The darkness hadn't always stayed damp for him. After the first time they took him out, after his eyes had recovered from stabbings of pale light in the corridor and then the needles in the interrogation room, he could not get the pinpricks out of his head.

Instead of cloying fog, the darkness was hard now, like cold mountain slate or an unresponsive sky studded with diamonds. Now he had something to count, something to wonder about when one went out, like the bottom third of the constellations on the stage. He thought maybe when he forgot things they disappeared. Or was it the other way around?

Mimi and Marcus have turned to face the crowd now, each holding a long taper. This is a Western tradition taken from movies or some such thing. Mimi's candle dips as she reaches toward the large round candle on the stand, but he sees it, he recognizes the hesitation.

It was the worst part, he thinks, of the torture. The hesitation that meant they were unsure, didn't know what they wanted from him, what questions to ask. *Good, soldier, you know what we want to hear. Tell us the names.* The others said the same, later, when they discussed it.

None of them had ever admitted anything. They had nothing to admit, he thinks, but that is what struck their interrogators, eventually. They did not make things up and they did not scream.

Mimi and Marcus's candles meet in the middle. The round candle, symbolizing unity, flares.

"Why don't you scream?" they had asked him.

"Why don't you yell?" they had cried, looking down at his blood-bloated face while blue flamed on the edge of the torch.

There seemed no sense in hiding the truth. It seemed normal at the time but he didn't feel the pain. There was a barrier.

"It is the hand of the Lord Jesus Christ that protects my foot from your flame," he said.

Of course they hadn't believed him at first, had laughed in his face then spit on his feet and torched him again. The spit sizzled and his toes curled, but his flesh stayed soft. *Good soldier, can you feel it now?*

It hadn't been remarkable on its own, but notes started piling up on the supervisor's desk. Apparently, unbeknownst to each other, they had all been saying the same thing. None of them had felt the torch.

He can't remember what he thought hobbling back to his room after those sessions, his body shaking but his feet smooth on the rough floor. Going back to his solitary room with its pinpricks of stars, his dreams of the church and Etenesh's face when he used to walk with her on Sundays, before.



He does remember wondering why the sessions stopped, where his personal torturer and his hesitant questions had gone, why he spent months and months in silence.

He is still unsure why they called him into an office one day, the same grey office with the same clanking ceiling fan but a different official in the green uniform with the red star. He is unsure why they handed him someone's else suitcase with nothing inside.

When he staggered out the front gate, he didn't know where he was. Outside the prison, carcasses lay in the red dirt ditch and flung their limbs into the street. He thought they were dogs or maybe goats until he saw hands, toes, ribs. Later, his family would tell him the people, even the Christians, were too frightened to retrieve the bodies of their dead.

Walking home, he pretended he was a businessman returning from work with a briefcase, forgetting where home was, staggering against fences in his own neighborhood. Bile rose in his throat, coated his tongue.

It was the same bile that rose when he stood in church next to Etenesh that first Sunday back, clutching her hand and a gold-topped cane. It slicked his throat, choked him, when he saw his torturer stand and take the olive green microphone with hands that twisted, greet the congregation with a voice that threatened. *Good people, your Redeemer lives.*

Mimi and Marcus have knelt against cushioned pews on the stage, facing each other. The minister, his former torturer, places a hand on each of their heads, bows his head to bless them. Mimi is crying.

He is crying.

"I have come to ask for forgiveness at the hands of the one I beat," the minister had answered when he'd confronted him, couldn't take it anymore how his worlds were colliding—the darkness and the light, the old and the new.

Mimi and Marcus have risen, the guests file out of the church and line the path to the car. There is cheering; inside his head, pounding. The minister shakes his hand at the door; his niece turned daughter is married.

Together with the guests they throw corn kernels at the departing couple. He and the minister grasp hands, shaky with age, emotion, past pain. They get along fine now.

## Appendix One

The content and structure of the Oromo myth communicate the same message: coming full circle and finding one's place. In addition, the characters the elders visit—the fog, the wind, and the mountain—are personified inanimate objects. In the myth, they are given voice, personality, and wisdom. Because the first suitor the elders visit is God, it also seems as if each part of nature is a little bit divine; the fog has power over God, the wind over fog, and so on. Each personification of nature is also a partial deification. This is a common trope in myth. In the end, the rats come full circle, reconciling themselves to the proper match and the way the universe works, perhaps unaware their path had been orchestrated all along.

The Christian narrative borrows the myth's structure, themes, and imagery. It too is the story a wedding—that of the narrator's niece—and possesses characters who come full circle. The narrator begins his life in the church and returns to it after similar encounters with God, fog, and mountain slate (in the prison cell). More poignantly, the torturer also finds his true place, from afflicting the bodies of his subjects to asking for mercy from their protector (Christ) and finally joining their religious community. He joins the hands and blesses the marriage of the narrator's niece, so that both men come full circle in a journey of redemption. In addition, the sensations the narrator experiences in the solitude of his cell—fogginess of vision, darkness hard as mountain slate—mirror the personifications in the myth. Of course, for the narrator, none of these can eliminate his conviction of the presence and power of God. All contribute to his religious experience and help articulate his mystical and supernatural salvation from torture.

## Two Baptism by Birth

*Once upon a time there was an ostrich who had a cow and a lion who had a bull. The lion said to the ostrich, "Why don't we take our cow and bull grazing together? That way, instead of both of us being herdsmen, one day you can take care of them and one day I will?"*

*So they continued living in their happy way for a couple of months, and the cow became pregnant.*

*When the cow was about to deliver, the lion noticed, and he said, "It's OK, ostrich, you can rest. I'll go and look after the cow and the bull today."*

*Then the cow gave birth and the lion said, "Look, your cow gave birth to a big grindstone, and my bull gave birth to a calf."*

*And the ostrich said, "This is ridiculous."*

*The lion said, "It's not." So they had a big quarrel and decided to call all the animals and make them decide.*

*So a big gathering was called, but none of the animals dared to say that the lion's bull could not give birth.*

*A cunning fox said, "I won't come to the gathering, but as I go rushing by, you can ask me to pronounce judgment."*

*As he went running by, everyone at the gathering said, "Mr. Fox! Mr. Fox! Can you please stop for us?"*

*And he said, "No, I'm in a hurry. I'm carrying a knife because my father is in labor and, besides, the sun is setting and it's about to rain, so I've got to run and help them help deliver my father who is in labor."*

*The lion said, "What rubbish! How can your father be in labor? Isn't he a male?"*

*The fox said, "Would you like me to tell you some other rubbish? That a bull gave birth to a calf?"*

*And he ran away. The angry lion ran after him and the ostrich was left with the cow and the calf.*

—Adapted from “The Cunning Fox,” Afar folktale<sup>51</sup>

You know I’ll tell you, it is hard to tell. Just recently there were disagreements and they wanted to do jihad on me because they say I am trying to convert people.

This was in the Afar region, of course, in the northeast corner of Ethiopia, with the regional authorities. They are 100 percent Muslim, not like it is here in Addis Ababa. For them, really, religion is the culture and there is nothing you decide for yourself. The individualism is not acceptable.

They look at my clothes, you know, and they don’t approve of the bright colors, the blue and the purple. Really we are a colorful people, the Afars. You should know this about us. The women wear red headdresses and there is beading and gold, it is very beautiful. But not much blue.

For them, there is some confusion about Mary, who wears blue. The Quran, you know, it talks about what Jesus did, and they believe he has the spirit of God. But they are confused too, some of them think that God married Mary and she had a baby who is Jesus. So the expectations are strange.

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I grew up in the rural area, as you probably know. I was a camel herder with my family. There are huts, grass huts, but usually they are for the women and children to stay. The camels are in the bush, so you stay in the bush together. Where they sleep, you sleep too. Actually I still have my camels, do you believe it?

When I first left the village I was fourteen. I was wandering and I came to this village. There is this old lady there with a baby and she tells me about a place where they have music, instruments and things.

In Afar, you know, we don’t really have instruments. There is just a lot of sand and camels and some bush for grazing. It was very interesting because I didn’t know

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<sup>51</sup> Laird.

what was a guitar, what was a choir, but I just went and I enjoyed it. I've never seen that kind of thing in my life.

After four services, my family, you know, they found out where I was going.

They took me to the river, and you know, they tie your hands and legs by rope. They were telling me, just deny what I believed.

It is funny now because at the time, I was just going to hear the instruments and nobody ever talked to me about Jesus.

I didn't know what to say and so they actually just threw me in the water. Someone sits on your back, it was my uncle.

I remember there was so much blue in my eyes. In Afar, we don't have fish really but it felt like everywhere there were scales and blue fish and everything was, you know, swirling in my mind. I think probably I was underground, underwater, for a long time. Probably I was hallucinating.

Finally, it was like I was diving, you know, and then coming up on the other side. This was interesting too because I did not know how to swim. Water is, you know, a punishment for the Afars. But everything, all the water, was pouring off of me and everything was blue. My skin, I could see it had like the scales of fish and they were blue and purple and shimmering on my body.

So I passed through that experience, as you can tell, but I did not know really what it meant.

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The Muslims in Ethiopia, you know, they are very interesting. If you are Afar here, you have to be Muslim. There is no choice.

And there are two camps you could say. You know I know this because I went to school in Afar and then to Addis Ababa actually. I took theological training in Islam because I had a real mind for, you know, the supernatural.

Some of them tell you Mohammed's earliest followers, when they were persecuted in Mecca, fled to Ethiopia. The Prophet told them to seek asylum with the king, Najashi Ashama he was at the time. And he, the *najashi*, saw that Mohammed's

followers believed in one god and he gave them shelter and allowed them to prosper.

It even says in the Quran, do you believe it, that the Prophet ordered his followers to leave the Ethiopians alone, because of their welcome. Ethiopia is protected from jihad because of this, they say.

But actually there is a different story too. The other ones, they say the *najashi* was actually converted to Islam, and actually there is some evidence for this. So they argue when he accepted, Ethiopia became a part of the land of Islam.

And the Ethiopian ruler, during the occupation of Yemen, wrecked the Ka'ba shrine in Mecca in the same year Mohammed was born. He tried to bring the people to a church he had built in San'a, which is the capital in Yemen, as you know.

In truth he was driven out by some birds, but from this, you see Ethiopians talked about as the worst enemies of Islam. The "lean-legged" from Ethiopia, they say, really will destroy the Ka'ba of Islam someday.

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The mosque where I taught was blue and white. It is the biggest mosque in Addis and many people come there to pray because it is near the Merkato. Along the front, there are scallops like the white frosting on pastries in the cafes, and the minaret is tall, the tallest in Addis I think. In the mornings you hear it and you know the people are praying.

It is strange, but I think even the mosque is my favorite because of the color. The tiles, you know, were always clean and rounded and they would reflect with the white from the shawls, like scales on fish. It was very beautiful.

I was reading the Arabic Bible for my studies. The purpose was to argue with the Christians and I thought, you know, I will never get any benefit from this but maybe I can get some things to accuse.

But I started hearing these voices in my sleep, saying Jesus is alive, that Mohammed is dead. Three times I hear this.

At the same time, I have not stopped reading the Bible. And one day I decided to go to the mosque and to do as usual the prayer. But it was strange, I wanted to do it in a different way.

I was bowed, and the blue carpet was in my face, but I was not praying in the name of Mohammed. I was praying in the name of Jesus Christ, and also I quoted some verses from the Bible that I remembered.

Why I did that in the mosque, I thought if it's not from God, God will punish me or I might be paralyzed or something like that, so it will be a sign to go back to Islam.

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You know, I never told anyone I converted or anything. If you quote from the Bible or the Quran, people will just argue with you, but nobody will argue with your life testimony.

It's not about changing the culture. You know, I still like my camels and I still like the mosque and really the people you are not going to change. But their hearts, I think there is something there you can change.

For a long time, my wife was in Sudan and then in Saudi Arabia. For ten years, we did not live in the same place, and finally when God brought her, I could not tell her about my faith.

She is a very smart woman. I think that is the thing I respect the most about her. The day she came back, I went to the airport, it was raining. You know, it is always raining in Ethiopia.

In Afar there is a word, for you I don't know the exact translation. For us, it means the gathering of people who arrived safely. Sometimes actually we use it when we are talking about the church.

But originally, for the women, it is when they give birth. We use this word when the baby is born and they have survived. They have arrived safely.

I am there, at the airport in Bole and it is raining. I haven't seen my wife in ten years. But when I see her, even though I know she is not a believer, that is the word that comes into my head: the one who has arrived safely.



She had, you know, all of these plastic-wrapped suitcases. Because of the storm the sky was very dark blue, and I knew, I knew in my head but I couldn't tell her.

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She is very smart, I told you that. So I asked her, I said I just really need the four gospels for something for work. Can you copy them on the paper?

So she thought it was for work, and I gave her a big exercise book and a pen. And everyday, she is just copying, copying, and I am waiting.

When almost she is done, it is at the end of John I think, she becomes very disturbed in her mind. And at the same time, she is sick because she becomes paralyzed on one half.

One night she has a dream. She has a dream and she attended a big mosque prayer and she was praying.

I said I know that mosque, so I took her, she is still paralyzed, to a big church here. A church instead of a mosque.

She can't speak Amharic or anything, she couldn't understand the service, but still she was touched by the Holy Spirit. And she had been reading the gospels, you know, and she became a believer in her mind. God delivered her in an amazing way.

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She asked me later, after she made her decision, she said are we becoming Christian?

I said no, Jesus is not a Christian at all. He's not a Christian, he's not a Muslim, he's a god.

Sometimes I think, you know, God blesses us with good news not because of our goodness. But God's given us this blessing and he's expecting from us to pass it to others, to our families, to our clan, and so on and so on.

I think about that a lot these days, especially when I think about my family. It is the hardest thing, you know, to leave your family. I would not wish it on you or anyone, my worst enemy even.

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Probably you want to know about the disagreements. You know, that is painful too because it is my family, actually one of my brothers is my accuser. Some of them are my best friends. It is painful.

At the time, there was a meeting and it was ten, eleven hours. These guys, they start coming to the community saying, you know, I was nominated in a worldwide meeting, the white people nominated me to give me a lot of money to convert the Afars. There were witnesses who saw us praying and disciplining people in the bush.

Everyone has a gun. You know when you think of Afars, everyone has an AK47, everybody has except me. Do you believe it, the meeting was to kill me actually. There was a sheikh, he said just do jihad on him.

My uncle is a clan leader so he stood up and said what he taught me, I didn't know that it was the Christian teaching. But if you assure me that it is so, he said, I like these teachings. From now on, I declare myself as a Christian.

That is a big thing because he is a clan leader, but also he is my family. And he tried to kill me once, you remember.

But after he stood up and talked for me, the accusers went away. They did not have the support and they did not want to oppose the clan leader. But still it is not safe for me there.

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I think I told you before, we're not presenting ourselves as Christians because we know what it means. I mean the way that they understand Christianity is different from the way we understand. They have different expectations.

So for someone coming from there, I think this is true not just for myself, to understand Jesus will take much longer. Especially the baptism.

How do you convince this person? He will think, maybe he did something wrong.

For my uncle, you know, we went to the river. This was after the meeting, of course, a couple of weeks ago. There are not many rivers in Afar, so it was a challenge. I think it was the same one, you know, as it was for me.

When we baptized him, actually it was raining. There was my wife there, you know she is not paralyzed anymore, and a few others and we had to do it in secret and in a hurry.

He said when he came up, it was like there were scales on his eyes, but they had been removed. He felt he had arrived safely.

## Appendix Two

Structurally, the Afar myth follows a progression of deception, conflict, and resolution. A female cow becomes pregnant and gives birth, but the baby is claimed by the male bull; the conflict is resolved by a clever arbitrator respected by society. It incorporates themes of alleged deception, how conflict is resolved in group settings, and the fate of those speaking the truth in the face of persecution. The myth also describes the nomadic herder lifestyle of the Afar, though the characters are personified animals. The most powerful images employed in the myth are pregnancy and birth, particularly who gives birth and can claim the child.

These structures, themes, and images are incorporated in the narrative of an Afar evangelical Christian man who has been persecuted by his family and community. Just as the ostrich's account of the birth is challenged by his society, so the narrator's born again faith is also challenged. The narrator is just as confident in who "gave birth" to him as the fox and ostrich are about the calf. He also mentions birth in connection with his wife, using the Afar word for after childbirth which means "arrived safely." The uncle uses these same words to describe his conversion. There are two conflicts in the pattern of the myth: the initial persecution and the current threats against the narrator's life. The first is resolved by the mysterious experience in the river. The second is resolved, at least for the moment, by the very man who first tried to drown him. That the narrator's uncle is an elder corresponds to the myth; the uncle plays the role of the fox, using his authority and cleverness to save his nephew's life and suggesting that the future spread of Christianity in Afar may best be achieved by gaining the trust of clan leaders. While not present in the myth, baptism images in the narrative should also be noted. One of the Christian sacraments most difficult for the Afar to understand and embrace, baptism is employed to explain the experiences in the river and takes on its own mythic power.

### Three Covenant Cup

*In the old days, the people of Ethiopia worshipped a serpent to whom they fed a young girl as tribute each year. One day, a stranger named Angabo came to them and offered to get rid of the snake if the people agree to make him king. Being greatly distressed, they agreed. Angobo fed a poisoned goat to the snake, then cut off its head.*

*He was crowned king and after he died, his daughter Makeda succeeded him on the throne. She was called the Queen of Sheba.*

*Now the queen was very wealthy, because her traders had access to the sea, and they brought her all sorts of treasures: ivory, tortoise-shell, rhinoceros-horn, and obsidian. Her head trader was named Tamarin. He travelled as far as the Near East, where he visited King Solomon's court in Jerusalem.*

*So impressed was he by the king's wisdom, might, and riches, he told the queen about them on his return, and Makeda decided she should see this greatness herself.*

*She travelled to Solomon's kingdom and was entertained with banquets, contests of wisdom, and the king's menagerie of birds.*

*One night, Solomon gave a banquet especially in the queen's honor and had the meat seasoned especially for her. Then he asked her to spend the night in his chambers. She consented, on the condition that he swore not to take her by force.*

*Solomon agreed but added a condition of his own: Makeda must promise to take nothing from his house. Then he placed a bowl of water near her side of the bed and they both went to sleep.*

*In the middle of the night, the queen awoke with a terrible thirst. She found and drank the water, but Solomon seized her hand and accused her of breaking her promise. Then he took her to bed as he wished.*

*Afterwards, the king fell into a deep sleep and dreamed that a great light had left its resting place over Israel and moved to Ethiopia.*

*The queen departed for her own country, where exactly nine months and five days later she gave birth to a son. She named him Menelik.*

*When Menelik had grown, he went to visit his father in Jerusalem. Solomon received him in splendor and showered him with riches. When Menelik decided to return home, Solomon ordered the elders of Israel to send their firstborn sons with him in order to form an Israelite colony.*

*The young men, terrified to depart for this distant country without divine protection, abducted the Ark of the Covenant from the temple and took it with them. When Menelik learned of the abduction, he declared it must be God's wish that the Ark be taken to Ethiopia.*

*Today, the people claim the Ark of the Covenant resides in Aksum, the royal seat of Makeda's dynasty. It is hidden in Aksum's great church, St. Mary of Seyon.*

—Adapted from the *Kebra Nagast*, “Glory of Kings,” Ethiopia’s national epic<sup>52</sup>

Mariam’s first memory is drinking sweet chai for breakfast from a saucer tipped into her mouth. The blue and white china with the birds in flight is still somewhere in her mother’s closet, she supposes, among stacks of dishes accumulated over the years. The blue and white was her favorite, she remembers, and the feeling of someone treating her tenderly, bending over to catch the drips from her pudgy baby chin with the plate.

Mariam knows all the best bakeries in Addis. It is a matter of pride. When she was in secondary, she and Tesfaye would finish their assignments early and sneak out of class through a rusted old gate that opened onto a side street in Arat Kilo. From there it was a short taxi ride to the Sheraton, where they sat in red upholstered chairs in the Fountain Court, sipped tea, and ate cake from silver plates dusted with sugar. The black-suited waiters called them madam and brought them hot white clothes to squeeze around their hands.

In an ever-increasing radius from school, they sauntered up the steps of Addis’s prestigious hotels and into cafés, cocktail bars, and tearooms. When they started reading Marx and the history of Mengistu in school, they switched abruptly—from a sense of duty—to run-down bakeries around the Merkato and gas station cafes, where the smell of petrol rose from the pavement and settled in a sheen on top of their cappuccinos. It made them feel gritty, rebellious

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<sup>52</sup> Ullendorff, Edward, *Ethiopia and the Bible: The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy* (Oxford, 1968); Pankhurst (2001).

It was on one these jaunts they discovered Bilo's Pastry. With high ceilings, walls papered in velvety fleur-de-lis, and glittering chandeliers, it indulged their softer sensibilities. But it was sandwiched between a butcher—his lean cuts of meat hung from white ladders and lit by bald bulbs—and an auto repair shop run by Kenyans, so it was sufficiently proletarian as well.

There she and Tesfaye studied for their placement exams, looked at travel brochures, and ate Black Forest cake with silver forks. Tesfaye hoped for medicine and Mariam for literature, though she'd listed engineering as her top preference to please her parents.

It was at Bilo's that Mariam saw Kaleb for the first time. He came in, still dressed in his pilot's uniform, for an ice cream from the painter's palette of flavors under glass, cinnamon she remembers. She followed him with her eyes: dark hair cut short like a second skin, the pearls of his back plain through a crisp shirt, khaki pants ending in polished loafers.

Tesfaye saw her watching, smirked into her tea cup. She waited three days to tell Mariam she knew the boy, and then Mariam couldn't stop asking questions. Who was his family? Where did he study? Could Tesfaye arrange a meeting?

Mariam had never been religious—she attended church school because the teachers were better than in the government-funded schools—but at Tesfaye's church, she was welcomed by elderly grandmothers and children and church elders. She felt out of place singing the songs she'd grown up hearing in school but never bothered to memorize. In front of the congregation, Kaleb led worship, swaying before a celestial-blue wall in his snagged purple choir robe.

He asked to walk with her after the service. The streets outside the church were cobbled, girded on either side by high compound walls and gates with gold knockers and security systems. Her heels stuck in the holes in the stones and she jumped at the sound of dogs behind the gates. It was the first time she'd felt ashamed in her life.

He asked her about herself and school and when he discovered her love of philosophy, about Solomon, Tewodros, and Zara Yaquob. She had read Jaquob on her own, tucked inside the covers of her school books. Ethiopia's greatest philosopher believed reason could lead to sufficient conditions for belief in diety, but he had rejected morals that could not be rationalized.

“Ah,” Kaleb countered, squinting in the sun, “but Zara Jaquob also says God has given reason to everyone so they can search for the truth and avoid falsehood. And the falsehood is these practices we create for ourselves—fasting and pologamy and prohibition of luxury. That is not Christianity.”

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They took to walking in the afternoons after church and in the evenings when she finished engineering classes at university. They walked to Bole, following the LED palm trees lining the center barrier, and in the back streets behind the big hotels. They threaded through the cantines with their yellow St. George’s beer banners, the single bulbs rippling light on corrugated tin walls, the empty storefronts where thirteen-year-old boys lounged with cigarettes and needles, gingerly touching each other’s wrists.

He described his flight training, and she sketched her projects in the air. Sometimes they put their names in raffles for free Kaldi’s or Ambo or hot air balloon trips in Gondar. Sometimes they talked about religion, and he lapsed into silence for long stretches. When she asked, he said he was praying and she wondered if he wouldn’t do it aloud. Before she knew it, she was silently following along as she heard his voice, clutching his hand.

On the verdant grounds on the university, sun glinted off the gold Lion of Judah before the museum. A hoopoe, one of those ancient menagerie birds she’d studied in school, landed in front of them on the path, its feathers striped like a zebra and its red head flicking.

“Do you know what the great philosopher has to say about Christian love?” Kaleb asked her with a smirk.

“Love is a requisite of faith,” she replied. “It is the one value we can all agree on.”

He turned to look at her in the hot sunlight. “And it is not God’s fault we do not know the truth that leads to love. Zara Jaquob says it’s ours, our desire to drive away and be ignorant of the things around us, which prevents us from loving God deeply. And each other too.”

She was unable to meet his eyes. The hoopoe dug in front of them with its open beak, rooting deep in the soil.



"I'm in love with you, Mariam," he said. He gestured at the hoopoe, kicked at stones. "I've flown everywhere in the world, but there is nothing like you. I have found the one my heart loves."

She met his eyes before sinking in a crumple to the ground. Perturbed, the hoopoe fluttered away, soaring until he was nothing but a silhouette of wings before the sun.

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A month before the wedding, Kaleb was promoted in the airline and awarded complementary passenger tickets. A week before, a woman called Mariam with news she'd won a raffle—one of the many they'd entered—to an exotic resort in Mombasa.

After a morning of *injera* and pictures, an afternoon ceremony in the church, and a rush to make their flight, they sat at dinner in a foreign place. There was spicy lamb and soft cheese, greens, a bottle of champagne, and a waiter who ignored them. Kaleb ordered her Black Forest cake and they ate it with spoons of gold.

After dinner, unsure of themselves, they went to the pool. On an open terrace, torches guttered in the breeze. The water was lit with aquamarine and gold, and at the end of its oval a wall had been removed so it seemed to fall effortlessly, thoughtlessly, into the sea. She imagined at the other end was Arabia, the Far East.

Under the lights, her skin glowed a warm, dark gold. They walked to the horizon of falling water and dark night and stood at the edge, staring at the lights from rigs arranged like constellations on the Red Sea.

"This is the opposite of Zara Jaquob's moderation," Kaleb glanced at her with a smile. "We are as luxurious as Solomon."

The Israelite king's poetry sounded in her head, *I am my lover's and my lover is mine*. Kaleb's hand, dripping with pool water, slid along her bare back, tangled with the ties of her bath suit.

"Mariam, you must promise me something, you know," he said. "You must let me take nothing of you that you do not wish to give."

She drew her hands through the water, creating rivulets on the surface. She could still taste the spices from dinner, the sweetness of the cake, the smokiness of his cologne. She cupped her hands to make a bowl of water, poured it over her face.

Later she asked him, "Will you pray?"

Words and presence came around her like tender fog. *Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me.* Behind her eyelids, strong white light and small black silhouettes, birds flying before the sun.

She was cradled, enveloped, lost in light. *I am little and poor in your sight, O Lord. Make me understand what I should know about you.* In a moment, she was known.

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Last week, Mariam held Tesfaye's baby. With full lashes and lips stained dark purple, he has inherited his mother's sweet tooth.

Kaleb flies three weeks at a time, so she keeps company with Tesfaye and the hoopoe who greets her each morning on the window ledge outside their apartment.

In the café, Mariam pours lukewarm tea into a saucer and holds it to the baby's mouth. Her body cradles him—tenderly, closely—like a mother or a lover. *I have found the one my soul loves.* She's felt this feeling before.

### Appendix Three

The Queen of Sheba is recognizable to most Christian readers, but the story in the *Kebra Nagast* and its several variations is one of the most valued Ethiopian myths. It legitimized the Solomonic dynasty and inspired pilgrimage sites at Axum and elsewhere. Even today, it makes Ethiopia a spiritual homeland and connects Ethiopians to Israel and the Jews. Many claim the Queen was converted during her visit and on her return spread Judaism in Ethiopia. Others cite Solomon's dream as evidence that Ethiopians are God's new chosen people. The myth is perhaps the Ethiopian equivalent to the Western Cinderella, commonly employed as a narrative structure for conversion and romance stories. For our purposes, the myth establishes a structure of meeting, intellectual dialogue, romantic encounter, departure, and the beginning of faith. Immense wealth, well-educated conversation, romance, and conversion are evident in Solomon and the Queen's interactions. Solomon's dream introduces the supernatural element to the conversion experience and the idea of a blessed people.

All of these are present in the narrative of the young Christian romance. The name of the main character, Mariam, is taken from the church in Axum said to house the Ark of the Covenant, and Sheba's immense wealth is evident in Mariam's lifestyle with Tesfaye. The intellectual conversations so famed in the Solomon and Sheba story are mirrored in Kaleb and Mariam's philosophic discussions, and italics denote lines from Zara Jaquob or Song of Solomon. The romance follows the traditional Ethiopian custom of minimal contact before marriage. The narrative also replicates the Solomon and Sheba consummation scene, even including the spicy food and permission communicated (debatably in the myth) through water. In this version, the male rather than the female departs, though not permanently. The recurring images of the hoopoe, flying birds, and Kaleb's job as a pilot evoke Solomon's menagerie and suggest the divine presence, appearing in Mariam's intense emotional and spiritual moments and symbolic of God's provision of love, a raffle honeymoon, and faith.

## CONCLUSION

Several months ago, I received news that one of my Ethiopian Christian friends had been left by his wife. Gifted in finances and accounting, this man had been pressured for years to work in the public sector or move to America. Instead, he chose to remain at a religious microfinance bank, making less than he would elsewhere but feeling as though he was serving both God's purpose and his country. Convinced he was throwing away a better life on account of his faith, this man's wife left him and his four children and had gone to live with her brother in America.

This story is not an uncommon one. In a village in southern Ethiopia, the owner of a restaurant and butcher shop told me a similar story. An elder in the local evangelical church, the butcher had begun his enterprise to get better deals on meat for church celebrations. Discovering his business skill, he expanded and then partnered with his wife's restaurant, where members of the church are employed as servers and cooks. When I visited, we ate meat minced moments before and cooked in a clay brazier with spices and hot *wassa* cakes, a starch made from false banana root. Thanks to his success, the owner told me, he chose not to be employed any longer by the church. But despite his continued service to his congregation, his faith was questioned. He had left church work for a career in the secular sphere. He was liable to fall into temptation, to be consumed with making money, to think he was successful on his own terms.

Economic growth in Ethiopia in the last decade has skyrocketed, hitting between eight and ten percent a year according to most estimates.<sup>53</sup> More than sixty percent of the national budget is allocated to sectors of the economy; this is augmented by a steady growth of foreign investment, self-funded infrastructure projects, and diversified exports.<sup>54</sup> Economists estimate Ethiopia could attain middle-income country status within the next ten years.<sup>55</sup> The men in both stories anticipate and are working for this transformation. They see it as Ethiopia's ticket out of poverty and into the global arena.

Ethiopians are taking ownership of their country's development—for example, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile and Olympic medalist Haile Gebreselassie's shopping malls—rather than leaving it in foreign hands. This is a tremendous step in a positive direction. Yet joining the global community—of markets, governments, cultures, politics, entertainment, and religion—brings more than economic benefits. Ethiopians will be exposed to new people and new ideas at a frequency, velocity, and persuasiveness they have not yet experienced. Globalization will change the country, in many ways for the better. But it is also likely to bring a pluralism that in Western countries has led to greater religious tolerance and Christians struggling to articulate the relevance of their faith in the secular sphere. As a result, church doctrine has been slowly but certainly culled of its most powerful myths.

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<sup>53</sup> Dori, Dereje Feyissa, "Ethiopia's 'African Tiger' leaps towards middle income," 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/oct/22/ethiopia-african-tiger-middle-income>> [accessed 13 April 2015].

<sup>54</sup> Dori.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

In his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Thomas Merton wonders what Christian life will become if Christianity is turned into a mere worldview, one of a plurality of perspectives.<sup>56</sup> Revelation, he suggests, will no longer “be the living theological experience of the presence of God in the world and in mankind through the mystery of Christ.”<sup>57</sup> Instead, experience of revelation “will necessarily be distorted and diminished in such a theological setting.”<sup>58</sup> Perhaps more than most, I am willing to recognize the value of religious experience thanks to my Free Methodist background. One of the corners of John Wesley’s famous quadrilateral is experience, and while qualifying that experience is subject to the weight of Scripture, he nonetheless carves an enormous space for the work of the Holy Spirit in personal conviction.<sup>59</sup> On my trip last summer, I reveled in the beautiful imagery and mystical qualities of Ethiopian Christianity, including the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. I witnessed what others have long observed: that “Abyssinians [Ethiopians] view God above all as mystery.”<sup>60</sup> For Merton, however, with pluralism comes a risk that Christianity will lose its agency to declare otherworldly truths about God and how the universe works, adopting instead a code of correctness and normal behavior that excludes some forms of religious experience.<sup>61</sup> In other words, the Ethiopian Christian’s ability to make meaning—through myth, narrative, and story—may lose its relevance.

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<sup>56</sup> Merton, Thomas, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York, 1968): 40.

<sup>57</sup> Merton 40.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>59</sup> Watson, Kevin, “Experience in the so-called ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral,’” 2013 <<http://vitalpiety.com/2013/05/13/experience-in-the-so-called-wesleyan-quadrilateral/>> [accessed 13 April 2015].

<sup>60</sup> Levine, Donald N., *Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopia* (Chicago, 1965).

<sup>61</sup> Merton 40.

With such a warning in mind, it has been rewarding but also deeply troubling and painful to work on this project for the last year. As I listened to tape recordings and transcribed notes, consulted religious texts, and watched the news, I grew increasingly invested in the future of these stories of faith. In the face of globalization, I am concerned for my Ethiopian Christian friends. I wonder whether they can be taken seriously by a culture where myth is relegated to commercial advertising, children's movies, and museums and where the advances of modern society can explain away divine intervention through medicine, technology, and other contemporary conveniences. While I am confident in the strength of their faith, I am anxious to witness how the Ethiopian reliance on myth and unique acceptance of spiritual realities will survive in the new world they are so ready to embrace.

I do have hope, however. Each story in this collection contains a small mention of pastries—a bakery in the Merkato, details on a mosque scalloped like sugar, an obsession with Black Forest cake. These were not intentional additions and became apparent only afterward, but I believe they unconsciously symbolize one of the messages of this project: stories are sweet and sacramental. It would be easy, perhaps especially for a Western reader, to write these narratives of faith off as quaint, antiquated, or unenlightened—sweet, but little else.

Such an interpretation is not only offensive to Ethiopian Christians but detrimental to the future of Christianity as a whole. The sharing of personal experience with others through story connects humanity, and in the same way, the sharing of religious experience with other believers affirms, strengthens, and

nuances faith. This communal sharing of the mystery of Christ and our relationship with him within the collective life of the church is itself a form of sacrament, a recognition of the power of the mystical to be expressed in everyday objects—bread and wine, baptism, and personal story.

That we are sometimes uncomfortable with the forms this mysticism takes is no justification for ignoring it, placating it, or categorizing it as merely African. According to Wesley, the role of experience is to “energize the heart so as to enable the believer to speak and do the truth in love.”<sup>62</sup> Western Christians have a responsibility to their African brothers and sisters to take their experiences of faith seriously, to share them communally in ways that acknowledge their reality, their mystery, and their reliance on myth. Only there does myth meet story in sweet sacrament: in the shared acknowledgement of the mystery of faith and the rich fulfillment of having listened, experienced, and feasted together.

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<sup>62</sup> Outler, Albert Cook, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler* (Grand Rapids, 1991).



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