Vision of Mary ( loggedIn as Mary ) Under Attack

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A friend—a devout Christian of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, but who is less informed in its teachings—asked me if, as some Oromo Muslims claim, the book titled Vision of Mary states that “Christians who have sex with the Galla and Muslims will be condemned.” He was also either informed or has read that this statement has been removed from the new edition. This kind of question should be answered by a spiritual teacher. However, an Ethiopicist historian, such as I, can also address it. But while the historian and the spiritual teacher could agree on the facts, they might differ in their interpretations and understanding of them.

Let me try to answer the question in a few words. I am not unfamiliar with the accusations when I write the following lines. The same friend has alerted me of the accusative article in question because it was based on an Amharic comment I made some time ago when I wrote on reconciliation. I read the piece as much as my patience of the innuendo could bear. The recognition of the Church having removed expressions that seem offensive from the second edition must have been mentioned in the part I did not read. And now, if I say anything about the issue, as I soon will, none of it should be construed as the position of the Church. The Church has its people who are capable of answering or ignoring.

Three classes can be discerned in the Ge’ez literature. The first two belong to Ge’ez literature as well as to the Church heritage. The third class belongs only to Ge’ez; the Church has nothing to do with it other than trying to destroy it. It is a sinful literature. People consider the books in this third class as part of the sources of the Church’s teachings, simply because they happen to be in Ge’ez, the language the Church uses. The Church’s only authority is the first class. It is the class in which the canonical Scriptures are listed. They are called “The Eighty-One Canonical Books” ( ለተሶስት ለጫለት ከታሷሽ : ከማ ). The list includes Scriptures that other Churches, especially Protestants, reject. Biblical teachers’ justifications for and against their inclusion/rejection is interesting. But this is not the place to discuss them. I will only add that the Universal Church scholars are indebted to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for giving safe haven to some Holy Scriptures persecuted and destroyed by other Churches.

The second class contains supportive literature derived from the spirit of the first class. It is called Apocrypha. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church calls it the class of Derivatives or ኣዋልድ፡ ክስ. The books of this class were written by zealous Christians to highlight the spiritual messages in the Canonical Scriptures and to defend the membership of the faithful from ravening wolves. This is not particular to the Ethiopian Church. All religions do that; they want their faithful not to go to another faith. There are so
many unhappy incidents where people who convert to another faith are violently attacked and their properties confiscated.

This class, to which the የኢርያም የርእዩ and the ሳርያም የርእዩ belong, has no authority whatsoever in dogmatic matters. If any of them is quoted, it is for events that took place after composition and acceptance of the Scriptures of the first class were closed. I will say more about this class, and in particular about the attacked የኢርያም የርእዩ, after I briefly introduce the third class.

This third class contains prayers for healing all ailments, both known and unknown. Its base is primarily James 5:13-14: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.”

Following this promise of healing, the church has instituted the Rite of the Unction of the Sick in strictly defined texts. But some naughty people who have the rudimentary knowledge of Ge’ez compose or translate from other languages prayers against illnesses and for warding off evil spirits, which are said to be the cause of illnesses much like germs and viruses. Some of these prayers are recited, some are carried, some are prayed on water to be drank or sprinkled, and some are prayed over certain herbs to be chewed. Interestingly, one finds among these prayers a few for healing what Viagra is supposed to heal.

The prayers contain strange names that are supposed to have the power to do for what they are invoked. The Church is against turning to them under the threat of excommunication. Emperor Zer’a Ya’iqob (1434-1468) wrote a great deal, including one whole book, condemning this practice. He executed many, including members of his own family, who were found violating his orders. He wrote in that book that he found in the palace, when he ascended the throne, a huge book of secret names (asmat) that the clergy used to read for his predecessor when the latter went to war. Zer’a Ya’iqob died without his efforts to eradicate the practice of consulting magicians and diviners making any dent.

There seems to be no way for the Church to win the fight against this underground literature in our illiterate society where there is no easy access to education or modern medical care, and where belief in the unknown is strong and the clergy themselves are the culprits. Copies have invaded the souvenir shops in the form of scrolls. I had the occasion recently of studying and describing over one hundred scrolls of the so-called spiritual or magic healing, as other Ethiopicists have done before me. I have to confess that they are extremely interesting from the point of view of social history and linguistic studies. They are mirrors of the fact that our social and medical problems have been with us through the ages. A great number of these magical texts originate from Islamic Arabic. Words such as እናሽ ከሆኔ ከጠይቀ የፋዳ好きな
There are also some Aramaic words such as እዳተሓ፤ቁሚ፤ላማሰበክታኒ. Tracing the origin of the so many such words and the occasion for, and the time they made their way to the Ge’ez underground literature is an interesting challenge. In one of his treatises, Zer’a Ya’iqob tells us that when he defeated the rebel Walasma Ahmad Badlay of Ifat in 1445, he found a huge scroll of magical writings that the rebel had carried with him when he raided the Christian region.

I have read a few books written to attack the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, accusing her of using magical sources as part of its literature. But they have no evidence for this serious accusation other than the fact that these sources are in Ge’ez. That is as evil as if one would think that Arabic magic texts found with Ahmad Badlay were a part of the teaching of Islam just because they were in the language of al-Qur’an al-Kareem. It is also as evil as alleging that the illiterate monks roaming in the streets, some drunk, are part of the clergy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

My Ge’ez copy of the የክርስትያንኔ የሆስ የሆስ means “Vision or Revelation of Mary,” cast after የክርስትያንኔ ይስ ከሆስ “Revelation of John,” bound at the end of the Christian Bible. It narrates the imaginary visit the Blessed Virgin made to Heaven and Hell in her dream, not in person. The book tells us who she saw in heaven and who she saw in Hell. It is an interesting and effective way of reminding the faithful of the rewarding and punishable deeds referred to in the Canonical Scriptures. In hell, she saw a monk who sought glory, a bishop who violated the Church’s order, people who were not baptized in Christian baptism, etc. I recommend every Christian who believe in life after death to read.

Illicit sex is sin in all religions I know of. The religious books advise even avoiding temptations. That is why women and men were required to enter church through different doors, stand there far from each other, and why women had to cover their hair while in church. We hear of adulterous women being beheaded in some Islamic countries even in these modern times.

The rule is stricter with Ethiopian Christians. Sex offence is a cardinal sin. People take the monastic habit and live in deserts and mountains (ገዳማት and አድባራት) to avoid the risk, a tradition unknown in some religions. The laity and, of course, the priests are forbidden to have more than one wife; close relatives are not allowed to marry each other; divorce is not free. The faithful are advised not to associate with non-Christians: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this (Christian) teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him greeting.” (መጽሐፈ ኪብርር ከሆስ ከሆስ፣ 2 John 1:10) A book called መጽሐፈ ኪብርር ከሆስ ከሆስ was translated from the Arabic literature of the Coptic Church for “baptizing” Christians who...
eventually polluted their body by intimacy with non-Christian Aremis and Muslims. The የለማርያም has a long list of sinners whose souls are in hell. I do not see any problem, if having sex with a Galla or a Muslim is one of the sins, especially if the word “Galla” is used here in the meaning the Oromo do not like, that is Aremi. Does it mean having sex with a Christian Oromo is sin? Absolutely not. Many of us are products of such an association. To give it an interpretation that is not the intent of the book is evil. But most importantly, why should non-Christians complain if Christians are not allowed to have sex with their women, especially if they refuse to eat with Christians?

As I said, sex is a serious matter with many religions, probably even more so with Christianity. For example, coitus interruptus, (or ‘azl عزل in Arabic) which is withdrawing during intercourse, is a major sin in Christianity and Judaism. In fact, talking about it is obscene even among the laity, but apparently not in Islam. The quotation below (google coitus interruptus) shows that it was discussed with the Prophet and has been sanctioned by him, especially, when the intercourse is with a slave woman:

With regard to ‘azl (coitus interruptus), or withdrawing during intercourse, the correct scholarly view is that there is nothing wrong with it, because of the hadeeth of Jaabir (may Allaah be pleased with him): “We used to practice ‘azl at the time when the Qur’aan was being revealed” – i.e., at the time of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him). If that action had been haraam, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) would have forbidden it. But the scholars say that one should not engage in ‘azl with a free woman except with her permission, because she has the right to have children. Moreover, withdrawing without her permission diminishes her pleasure, because the woman’s pleasure can only be completed after ejaculation. So not asking her permission causes her to lose out on pleasure and on the possibility of having children. Hence we state the condition that this may only be done with her permission.

From Fataawa al-Shaykh Muhammad ibn ‘Uthaymeen.

From Fataawa Islamiyyah, vol. 3, p. 190.

Thirdly: the reason why the Sahaabah engaged in ‘azl was because they did not want the woman – especially a slave woman – to get pregnant, so that they could continue to enjoy a physical relationship with them and the woman would still be able to do their work. Abu Dawood narrated that a man said, “O Messenger of Allaah, I have a slave woman and I engage in ‘azl with her, because I do not want her to get pregnant, but I want what men want. But the Jews say that ‘azl is a lesser form of infanticide.” He said, “The Jews are lying. If
Allaah wants to create (a child) you cannot prevent that.” (Narrated by Abu Dawood, *Kitaab al-Nikaah*, 1856; classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in *Saheeh Abi Dawood*, 1903).

I believe that a religion that does not keep up with the time is in danger. But change is not easy because the Church will have difficulty in convincing its conservative members to accept any change, failing to see the difference between faith and order. The Catholic Church does it in Councils. This may not be easily done in Ethiopia. But to the Church’s credit, a comparative of its literature of different times shows that a silent change is in progress. The edited version of ከማርያም is an example. My only hope is that a distinction should be made between books and versions sanctioned by the Church and those published by greedy money makers who care less of the implication for the Church of their unauthorized version of religious books.

My continued advice to leaders of all religions is to stay away from criticizing each other and throwing stones at each other’s sources of religion. We must know that the Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment, and the modern scientific progress have all collaborated to claim that we are all in glass houses. We will end up destroying each other if we do not respect each other’s holy books, because the books of all religions are open for all. They cannot hide behind the languages they are written in, whether Ge’ez or Arabic.

*Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.*