

A Comparative Analysis on the Striking Similarity Between the Ethiopic *Vitae* of Mercorius the Martyr and Mark the Evangelist

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Abstract

The African Mark the Evangelist and the Roman *Mercorius the Martyr* are both foreign Saints, who were born in the 1st and 3rd century respectively, and both are venerated Saints in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwāhədo Church (EOTC). This article aims at examining the narrative similarities and thematic parallels between the *Gə'əz Acts of these Saints, St. Mercorius the Martyr* and *St. Mark the Evangelist*. It shows how both narratives share remarkable similarities, such as the way the prayers are presented, the subjects that the divine interference takes place, and the manners how both Saints were martyred, with close comparative analysis. The sources of the data referred to the analysis were the texts of the *Gə'əz Manuscripts (Mss)*, which deal with the combat and martyrdom of each Saint. A special emphasis was given to the events that are narrated in both Acts with their historical sequences, which enable to draw that they could share a single literary tradition. The article sets the striking similarities of the two *Gə'əz Acts* within the broader context of *Gə'əz Christian literature*, determining the transmission of Coptic and Byzantine influences into Ethiopian Christianity. Hence, considering these similarities, the article contributes to a wide range of understanding of the *Gə'əz hagiographic development* with closer interconnectedness of the early Christian traditions.

Key words: Striking similarities; Hagiography; *Gə'əz acts*; Comparative analysis

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1. INTRODUCTION

Evidenced by the inscriptional texts, such as the unvocalized *Gə'əz* texts on the obelisks of Mātāra¹ and Axum, modern scholars² argue that the Ethiopic literature traces back to the 2nd-3rd century. Nevertheless, *Gə'əz* is estimated to be the spoken and written language of Ethiopia at least since the beginning of the Christian era (Getatchew Haile 2014, 736a). The vast Ethiopic literary treasure can be classified into three groups, namely: **direct translation**³, **adaptive works** and **original treatises**. The direct translation includes the literature of other Christian countries, such as Greece, Syria and Egypt⁴. Adaptive works on the other hand includes translated texts regarded that of a foreign source like that of the direct translation ones but adapted into Ethiopic milieu⁵. The

¹ A place found near Sānāfe, Eritrea (Ullendorff 1951, 228).

² In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church tradition, *Gə'əz* is considered to be a language through which Adam and the Angels of God talked.

³ The Bible, the Monastic Rule of Pachomius, the books of Enoch etc. are estimated to have been translated from Greek into *Gə'əz* after the Axumite Christianization in the 4th century (Andualem Ermias 2025, 96).

⁴ Copto-Arabic Texts, like Gädlä Hawarəyat and Gädlä Säma'atat are also said to be translated during the medieval period (Getatchew Haile 2014, 737a-737b; Tadesse Tamrat 1972, 108). The Metropolitan Sälama (1348-1388), known as “Mātārg”^{no}, the Translator”, is known to have translated many texts from Arabic into *Gə'əz*, such as Gäbrä Həməmat (Lectionary for Passion Week), the funeral ritual (Māshafä Gənzāt), *Filkəsyos* (one of the trilogy of the monastic book) are some of the translation works attributed to him (Getatchew Haile 2014, 737a-737b).

⁵ The Miracles of Mary (*Tä'ammərä Maryam*), which were translated from Arabic into *Gə'əz* during the 15th century, might be taken as an example as it contains several Miracles the settings of which are in Ethiopia.

‘original’⁶ texts are composed by the Ethiopian Church scholars, particularly the monastic clergy (Kaplan 2014, 642a-642b).⁷ The direct translation and the adaptive works include the translated lives of the foreign Saints. This study focuses on the striking similarity between the Gə‘əz Acts of Mercurius the Martyr and Mark the Evangelist both of whom signify foreign Saints whose Acts are translated from Greek into Gə‘əz.

Several studies have been undertaken on the Gə‘əz Acts of both Saints. For instance, Getatchew Haile (1981) edited and translated the text in the EMMML 1763, ff. 224r-227r⁸; Lusini (2009) edited and translated comparing the same Gə‘əz text with two Greek texts, i.e. *Patrologia Graeca*, CXV, coll. 164-169 (Vat. Gr. 881) and *Acta Sanctorum*, Aprilis, III, pp. XLVI-XLVIII (Vat. Gr. 866); Andualem Ermias (2021) carried out edition and translation on the Gə‘əz Acts preserved in separate Mss. As for the Gə‘əz Acts of Mercurius the Martyr, Conti Rossini edited under the title “Gadla Marqorewos (*Acta Sancti Mercurii*)”. However, as far as the researcher’s understanding, there is no study undertaken showing the striking similarity between the two texts. For the purpose of comparing the two texts, the researcher uses three and four Gə‘əz Mss of Mark the Evangelist and Mercurius the Martyr respectively, employing availability sampling.

2. SAINT MERCORIUS AND HIS ACTS

2.1 Saint Mercurius the Martyr

Saint Mercurius⁹ was born to a pagan and hunter family, who were moved from his father’s city called “Asletes (አስሊጥ, Aslit)”¹⁰ to Rome, in the 3rd century of the Common Era (CE), and he was martyred being a Roman army officer in Caesarea, Cappadocia. He was named ‘Philopator’, but later a local bishop who baptized the family named him ‘Mercurius’. As a twenty year-old soldier, Mercurius distinguished himself in the Roman war in Armenia. The emperor Decius made him a general, for he got victory by the help of an Angel. The Angel told him that his victory came from the Lord, the God of the Christians, of whom he had heard in his childhood from

this father Gordianus¹¹. However, the Emperor Decius subjected him to a serious of tortures, for he refuses to accompany him when he offered incense to the gods. He was nailed by his arms and legs over a fire until his blood extinguished the fire. Finally, he was taken back to Cappadocia and executed with the sword there by the order of the emperor (Esbroeck 1991, 1593).¹² As one of the most venerated foreign Saints in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwāhədo Church, his execution is commemorated on the 25th day of the Ethiopian Month Hədar.

2.2 The Gə‘əz Acts of Saint Mercurius

The Gə‘əz Acts of Saint Mercurius the Martyr is considered to be preserved in several manuscripts. Nevertheless, what the searcher found or collected from various locations are five manuscripts, which are displayed in the Table under:

2.3 Manuscript Description

As it is stated in above Table, there are five manuscripts containing the combat and martyrdom of Saint Mercurius the Martyr. The researcher selected the first three, Q, D, and P, manuscripts for this study, which is showing the striking similarity to the Acts of Saint Mark the Evangelist, with purposive sampling method. The manuscripts were selected based on the period, when they were copied, and readability. Each of the selected manuscripts have been described hereafter.

Manuscript A: Location = Private collection at Addis Ababa (‘Ēntotto district), heading = The Acts of Mercurius (ገድለ: መርቆሪዎስ, Gädlä Märəqorəyos), material = parchment bound with a wooden boards, and size = 19X 14.5 cm with 95 folios and two columns. Production Time = 20th century (F.95r: “በ፲፱፻፳፰ ዓመተ: ምሕረት: ተጻፈ: : It was written in 1928 E.C.”, content = Ff.1r-94v: the Combat, Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint Mercurius, incipit: በስመ: አብ: ... ገድለ: ወስምዕ: ዘብፁዕ: ወቅዱስ: መርቆሪዎስ ... In the name of the Father..., This is the Vita and testimony of blessed and Saint Mercurius ... and desinit: ... ወእለ: ርእዩ: ወሰምዑ: አንከሩ: ወአስተዓፀቡ: ኃይለ: ረድኤቱ: ይዕቀባ: እምፀብአ: ፀር: ወጸላኢ: ለንግሥትነ: ወለተ: ጊዮርጊስ: ለዓለመ: ዓለም: አሜን: : And those who observed and heard wondered and astonished. May the power of his support keep our Queen Wäläträ Giyorgis from the dispute of enemy forever. Amen.

Manuscript B: Location = Qäranäyō Mädhane ‘Alām (East Goğgām), heading = The Acts of Mercurius (ገድለ: መርቆሪዎስ, Gädlä Märəqorəyos), material = parchment with 5 quires bound with wooden boards, folio = 36

⁶ Scholars argue as if there is no original work since most texts are predominantly sourced, in one or other way, from the Old and New testaments or other Oriental literatures, but it is unlikely to deduce in such manner.

⁷ From the literary history point of view, the Axumite period could predominantly of the Greek one, whereas the period from 1270-1770 might be of the Arabic (Getatchew Haile 2014, 737a-737b).

⁸ The text is found in a multiple-text Ms titled: Gädlä Qəddusan (the Acts of the Saints).

⁹ His name is interpreted as “lover of the Father” and “the servant of Jesus Christ” (The Ethiopian Synaxarium), and “Abu Sayfayn” in Arabic, which means ‘the Saint with the two swords’; perhaps due to the weapons that always accompany his image that accounts his execution by Julian the Apostate (Esbroeck 1991, 1592).

¹⁰ The city he was born in is stated as ‘Macedonian’ in the Coptic tradition (Esbroeck 1991, 1593).

¹¹ The name ‘Gordianus’ in the Coptic one (Esbroeck 1991, 1592), is known as ‘Noah’ in the Ethiopic tradition, such as Gə‘əz Synaxary Entry of the 25th of the Ethiopian month Hədar.

¹² Cf. The Ethiopic Synaxary Entry of the 25th day of the Ethiopian Month Hədar (04 December); The Coptic Synaxarium Entry of the 25th day of the Coptic Month Hatour.

with two columns, and production Time = 20th century. Digitized by Mersha Alehegne, the content = Ff.1r.-35v: The Combat and Martyrdom of Saint Mercurius, *incipit*: በስመ: አብ: ... ዝንቱ: ገድል: ዘብፁ: መርቆሬዎስ ... *In the name of the Father...*, *This is the Vita of the blessed Mercurius ...* and *desinit*: እመቅዱሳን: አባልክ: እንተ: ውሳዘ: ደም: ኦርኢያ: ብዙኅ: ዝናም: ኣጥፍኦ: ለፍሕም ... *the blood that flew from your scourged body made the fire extinguished like a heavy rain.*

Manuscript C: Location = Däbrä Šāḥay St Mark Church (East Goḡgam), heading = The Story of Mark (ዜና: ማርቆስ, Zena Marəqos), material = parchment with 7 quires bound with a wooden, leathered and decorated boards, size = 30X26.5 cm with 60 folios and three columns, and production Time = 19th century (F.37r: ጸሎቱ: ወበረከቱ: የሃሉ: ምስለ: ንጉሥነ: ተክለ: ሃይማኖት: ... *May His prayer and blessing be with our King Tāklä Haymanot ...*”¹³. Comprises of two subjects:

Content 1:

Ff.1r.-38r: the Combat, Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint Mark, and

Incipit 1: በስመ: አብ: ... ንዌጥን: መጽሐፈ: ገድሉ: ለብፁ: ማርቆስ: ... *In the name of the Father... we start the book of the Acts of the blessed Mark...*

Desinit 1: ... ወእስተርኢያ: እምኔሁ: ተአምራት: ወመንክራት: ... *And miracles and wonders were revealed from it.*

Content 2:

Ff. 39r.-53v: the Combat, Martyrdom and Miracles of Saint Mercurius,

Incipit 2: በስመ: አብ: ... ዝንቱ: ገድል: ወስምፅ: ዘቅዱስ: መርቆሬዎስ ... *In the name of the Father..., This is the Vita and testimony of Saint Mercurius ...*

Desinit 2: ... ወነፍሰየሰ: ኀበ: አምላኪያ: ዘኢይማኑን: ለዓለም: ወኣዘዘ: ነጉሥ: ይ... *And my soul is to my God who cannot be vanished forever. And the King ordered to*¹⁴

3. SAINT MARK THE EVANGELIST AND HIS ACTS

3.1 Saint Mark the Evangelist

Saint Mark the Evangelist, the author to whom the second Gospel is traditionally ascribed, was born to his parents in Cyrene, the present day ‘Libya’ around the beginning of the 1st century CE (Malaty 1993). His mother ‘Mary’, one of the faithful women who used to follow Jesus, and his father ‘Aristopolus’ who is less known in the Ethiopic tradition, are belonged to the tribe of Levites of Jews. St

¹³ ተክለ: ሃይማኖት, Tāklä Haymanot was the king of Goḡgam in the second half of the 19th century, so the MS could be copied in this time (19th century)

¹⁴ The text is unlikely to be completed.

Mark preached the Gospel in the inner regions of Africa, particularly in Alexandria and the Five Western Cities, Pentapolis (Andualem Ermias 2023, 29).¹⁵ Hence, he was a very close companion of the Apostles Barnabas, Paul and Peter. He used to accompany Paul and Barnabas during their ministry, i.e. preaching the Gospel in different cities.¹⁶ In addition, it was St Mark’s mother house where several events took place, for it was opened for the faithful who congregated there for daily prayers.¹⁷ Since the house could be used as a center of mission and apostolic activities during the time of Jesus Christ, St Mark is said to have presented in the occurrences of the following events recorded in the New Testament.¹⁸ Having preached the Gospel in different parts of the world, particularly Africa, he executed by the heathen while he was celebrating the Easter in Alexandria on the 30th day of the Ethiopian Month Miyazya (08 May).¹⁹

3.2 The Gə‘əz Acts of Saint Mark

The Gə‘əz Acts of St Mark the Evangelist is preserved in three different recensions: **short**, **medium** and **long**. Getatchew Haile (1981, 117-118) asserts that the short recension is preserved in three different multiple-text manuscripts, specifically, (1) the Book of the Ethiopic Saints (Gə‘əz Synaxarium), (2) the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (Gädlä Ḥawarəyat), and (3) the Acts of the Saints (Gädlä Qəddusan). The text of the medium recension is preserved in seven single-text manuscripts, whereas the long one is in nine extant witnesses (Andualem Ermias 2025, 87). The manuscript text used to compare the striking similarity with the Martyrdom of Saint Mercurius the Martyr is the text included in the medium recension, the manuscripts through which the text is preserved are presented in the Table under:

3.3 Manuscript Description

As it is stated above, the manuscripts of which texts contain a striking similarity to the Acts of Saint Mercurius

¹⁵ Establishing a Church in Africa, he ordained clergy in different ranks for the office: ወሂመ: ቅዱስ: ማርቆስ: ወንጌላዊ: ምስለ: አንያኖስ: ኤጲስ: ቅዱስ: ፲ወ፪ተ: ቀሳውስተ: ወ፯: ዲያቆ ናተ: ወ፲ወ፬: ሰብኦ: ለመልእክተ: ቤተ: ክርስቲያን: ቅድስት። *And Saint Mark the Evangelist ordained with the bishop Anianus twelve presbyters, seven deacons and fourteen faithful for the service of the Holy Church* (Andualem Ermias 2023, 22).

¹⁶ Cf. Acts 12, 25; Col. 4, 10

¹⁷ Cf. Acts 12, 12

¹⁸ Some of the many events believed to take place in the house are the following: Jesus Christ washed the feet of his Disciples (Jn. 13, 4-15); the Lord’s Supper on Maundy Thursday (Mt. 26, 17-20; Mk. 14, 13-16; Lk. 22, 11- 14); the flight of Peter after the angel of God brought him out of prison (Acts 12, 12-17); Jesus’s appearance (after His Resurrection) to the Disciples when they were hidden there, (Jn. 20, 19); and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in the upper room (Acts 2, 1-4, Andualem Ermias 2023, 30).

¹⁹ Cf. The Ethiopic Synaxary Entry of the 30th day of the Ethiopian Month Miyazya (08 May); The Coptic Synaxarium Entry of the 30th day of the Coptic Month Baramoudah.

4.2 The Revelation and Conversation

Table 2
Revelation and Conversation

No.	The Acts of SME (Gädlä Marəqos)	The Acts of SMM (Gädlä Märqorewos)
2	ወሶቤሃ፡ ገሃደ፡ አስተርአዮ፡ እግዚእነ፡ ... ወይቤ፡ ሰላምየ፡ የሁሉ፡ ምስሌክ፡ እ፡ ማርቆስ፡ ፍቁር፡ ዘአነ፡ ጎረይኩክ፡ ... <i>clearly revealed to him and said, "O my chosen Mark, may my peace be with you ... him, "O the beloved one</i> [(C: (f. 23r), (D: f. 49v), (E: f. 43r), (F: f. 41v)].	ወእምድ፡ ጎረዝ፡ ነገር፡ አስተርአዮ፡ እግዚእነ፡ ... <i>And after that ..., our Lord appeared to him and said him, "O the beloved one whom I chose ..."</i> [(A: f. 34r), (B: f. 24v), (C: f. 44r)].

As shown in the table above, the couple of texts deal with two decisive points thematically. In the first case they deal with revelation, God appeared to both Saints: “ወሶቤሃ፡ ገሃደ፡ አስተርአዮ፡ እግዚእነ፡ *And then our Lord clearly revealed to him*” in the first, and: “ወእምድ፡ ጎረዝ፡ ነገር፡ አስተርአዮ፡ እግዚእነ፡ *And after that, our Lord appeared to him*” in the second. The second theme is salutation and the chosen status of the Saints: “ወይቤ፡ ሰላምየ፡ የሁሉ፡ ምስሌክ፡ እ፡ ማርቆስ፡ ጎረይኩክ፡ *and He said, "O my chosen Mark, may my peace be with you"* in the first case, and: “ወይቤ፡ ሰላም፡ ለክ፡ እ፡ ፍቁር፡ ዘአነ፡ ጎረይኩክ፡ *and He said him, "O the beloved one whom I chose"* in the second extract. As for the wordings, the former employs a direct form of possessive adjective: “እ፡ ጎረይኩክ፡ *my chosen*”, while the latter uses an adjective clause: “ዘአነ፡ ጎረይኩክ፡ *whom I Chosen you*”, but both are semantically alike.

4.3 The Suffering They Faced

Table 3
The Suffering

No.	The Acts of SME (Gädlä Marəqos)	The Acts of SMM (Gädlä Märqorewos)
3	ወአምጽኡ፡ አልህምተ፡ ጽውዳነ፡ ወአሠፍ፡ ሐብስ፡ ውስተ፡ ክግዳ፡ ... ወአስሐብዎ፡ ውስተ፡ ኩላ፡ ሀገር፡ ... <i>And they brought tied oxen and bound a cord on his neck ..., and dragged him throughout the city ...</i> [(C: (f. 24r), (D: f. 50v), (E: f. 43v), (F: f. 42v)].	ወአዘዘ፡ ንጉሥ፡ ይእሥርዎ፡ ጎበ፡ ፈረስ፡ ወይስሐብዎ፡ ውስተ፡ ኩላ፡ አህጉር፡ ... <i>And the King ordered to bind him with a horse and to drag him throughout all the cities ...</i> [(A: f. 14r), (B: f. 14r), (C: f. 44v)].

The above two expressions show not only strong thematic and structural similarity but also do in terms of **language and content**. Thematically, for instance, both expressions describe a **public execution or punishment** by dragging people binding with animals throughout a city. In terms of language as well, the expressions: “ወአስሐብዎ፡ ውስተ፡ ኩላ፡ ሀገር፡ *and they made him dragged throughout the city*” in the first column, and “ወይስሐብዎ፡ ውስተ፡ ኩላ፡ አህጉር፡ *And to drag him throughout all the cities*” in the second, are just one and the same regardless of the commander.

4.4 The Last Prayer

Table 4
The Last Prayer

No.	The Acts of SME (Gädlä Marəqos)	The Acts of SMM (Gädlä Märqorewos)
4	ወበተፍጻሜተ፡ መዓልት፡ ይቤ፡ እግዚእየ፡ ኢየሱስ፡ ክርስቶስ፡ ተመጠዋ፡ ለነፍስየ፡ እዲክ፡ ... <i>And at the end of the day, he said, "My Lord Jesus Christ, accept my soul in your hand"</i> [(C: (f. 24v), (D: f. 51r), (E: f. 44r), (F: f. 42v)].	ወጸለየ፡ ጎበ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ ወይቤ፡ ተመጠዋ፡ ለነፍስየ፡ ከመ፡ ዕጣን፡ ንጹሕ፡ ትዕርግ፡ በቅድሚክ፡ ... <i>And he prayed to Lord and said, "Accept my soul as clean incense to arise before you"</i> [(A: f. 14v), (B: f. 15r), (C: f. 45r)].

Thematically, both expressions: “ተመጠዋ፡ ለነፍስየ፡ ውስተ፡ እዲክ፡ *Christ, accept my soul in your hand*” of St. Mark and “ተመጠዋ፡ ለነፍስየ፡ ከመ፡ ዕጣን፡ ንጹሕ፡ *God, accept my soul as clean incense*” of St. Mercorius signify prayers of plead to the divine hoping that the soul will be received favorably by the divine presence, Hence, except the name ‘Christ’ in the first and ‘God’ in the second, the texts are one and the same, and this indicates the intersexuality of the hagiographical texts.

4.5 Cremation and Miracle

Table 5
Cremation

No.	The Acts of SME (Gädlä Marəqos)	The Acts of SMM (Gädlä Märqorewos)
5	ወአንደዱ፡ እሳተ፡ ዐቢየ፡ ... ከመ፡ ያውዕዩ፡ ሥጋሁ፡ ወሶቤሃ፡ አዘዘ፡ እግዚእነ፡ በሥምረቱ፡ ወኮነ፡ ጽልመት፡ ... <i>And they kindled a great fire ... to cremate his flesh. And at that time, our Lord commanded in His will, and there became darkness ...</i> [(C: (f. 24v), (D: f. 51v), (E: f. 44v), (F: f. 42v)].	ወአዘዘ፡ ንጉሥ፡ ያውዕኡ፡ አንዱ፡ ርእሱ፡ ወይግበሩ፡ አፍሐመ፡ እሳት፡ ዲቤሁ፡ ወወረደ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ሚካኤል፡ ወአጥፍኦ፡ ... <i>And the King ordered to remove his head's skin and put fire on it, but St Michael descended and extinguished it ...</i> [(A: f. 14v), (B: f. 15v), (C: f. 45r)].

As displayed in the table, the couple of texts deal with two crucial issues thematically. In the first case they deal with harsh sufferings, the act of cremation imposed upon both Saints: “ወአንደዱ፡ እሳተ፡ ከመ፡ ያውዕዩ፡ ሥጋሁ፡ *And they set fire to cremate his flesh*” in the first extraction, and “ወአዘዘ፡ ንጉሥ፡ ይግበሩ፡ አፍሐመ፡ እሳት፡ ዲቤሁ፡ *And the King ordered to put fire on him*” in the second one. Secondly, both extracts describe divine intervention: “ወአዘዘ፡ እግዚእነ፡ በሥምረቱ፡ ወኮነ፡ ጽልመት፡ *and our Lord commanded in His will, and there became darkness*” in the one and “ወወረደ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ሚካኤል፡ ወአጥፍኦ፡ *St Michael descended and extinguished it*”, on the other. As for the subject who intervened, reflecting the time when He was crucified, darkness falls by the will of Jesus Christ in the first case, whereas the Angel Mikael extinguished the flame, which mirrors what the Angel Gabriel did on the three children (Daniel 3, 28) in the second one.

5. CONCLUSION

The main objective of this article was make a comparative analysis between the Gə'əz Acts of Mercurius the Martyr and Mark the Evangelist to show their striking similarity. Hence, the analysis reveals not only similarity with the narrative techniques, which can transcend their individual historical contexts, but also with remarkable historical themes, even with wordings. Even though the texts are with quite distinct figures, they share amazing thematic, structural, and hagiographical elements, ranging from divine intervention and miraculous acts to their perseverance witness in their combat and martyrdom. The similarity of these Gə'əz Acts reflects not only the inter-textual nature of the hagiographic texts but also indicates the spiritual determinations that structured the composition and transmission of such texts in Christian tradition in general and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in particular. The striking similarity between the combat and martyrdom of these two saints needs additional consideration on how they could be portrayed as mutually reinforcing virtues to make further analysis on the Ethiopian hagiographical tradition.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CE = Common Era
- EOTC = Ethiopian Orthodox Təwāḥədo Church
- F = Folio
- Ms/s = Manuscript/s
- SME = Saint Mark the Evangelist
- SMM = Saint Mercurius the Martyr
- St. = Saint

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