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Saint Thecla in Ge^cez Hagiographical Literature: From Confessor to Martyr

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Abstract

Though not as famous as in Coptic traditions, Saint Thecla is still an important figure in Ethiopic hagiography. In most Ethiopic texts, she is known under the honorific title of “Thecla the Apostolic” (Ṭeqalā ḥawāryāwit). Ethiopians venerate her amongst the major saintly Christian figures as her Life is told and commemorated in the Synaxarium, the official Ethiopic book of saints. Moreover, a whole book, entitled the Book of Thecla (Maṣḥafā Ṭeqalā), is devoted to her. An abridged version of The Acts of Paul and Thecla, it tells the story of Thecla's meeting with Paul, her conversion, her two trials, and the final healing of the governor who condemned her. This latter text is a noteworthy witness to the veneration and cult of Thecla in the Ethiopic realm. Thecla is also explicitly alluded to in other hagiographical texts, like the Epistle of Pelagia (BHO 890) and the Martyrdom of Abouqir, John, the Three Virgins, and Their Mother (Synaxarium, 6th of Yakkatit). Other Ethiopic Acts of saints also seem to refer implicitly to Thecla as a model for martyrs, especially female martyrs, such as the unedited martyrdom of her namesake, Thecla, and her four companions (BHO 1157 for the Syriac version).

[p. 61] Looking briefly at the index of E. A. Wallis Budge's translation of the *Senkessār* (*Synaxarium*),¹ the official Ethiopic book of saints, one notices many Theclas in Ge'ez (i.e. classical Ethiopic) hagiographical texts. At least eight different female saints bear that name:

1. Thecla of Iconium, Paul's disciple.²
2. Thecla and her four companions, martyred in Persia.³ The story of this martyrdom is known under the specific Ge'ez title of *Gadla Ṭeqalā* (*The Contending of Thecla*). This account is

¹ Budge (trans.), *The Book of Saints*, 1928.

² *Ibid.*: 94-95; 597; 1152-1154.

³ *Ibid.*: 566-567. See also Caraffa, “Tecla, Mariamne, Marta,” 1969.

also preserved in Greek and Syriac.⁴

3. Thecla, a martyr, described as a “virgin” and a “bride of Christ.”⁵
4. Thecla and her brother Abbā ʿĒsi of Ashmunayn.⁶
5. Thecla and Mugi of Qayrāqus (Qarāqos, in Lower Egypt), martyred in Alexandria.⁷
6. The nun Thecla and the soldier Agabus, martyred by the governor Lulianus (Julian?).⁸
7. Thecla, some martyr, commemorated with Paula.⁹
8. [p. 62] Another Thecla, about whom nothing is said, commemorated with Gabra ʿIyāsus.¹⁰

Despite this wealth of homonymous saints, Thecla of Iconium is easily recognizable as she is generally signaled by the honorary title “Thecla the Apostolic” (*Ṭēqalā ḥawāryāwit*) in most Geʿez texts that refer to her.¹¹ Though not as famous as in the Coptic tradition, Saint Thecla is still an important figure in Ethiopic hagiographical literature. Ethiopians cherish and venerate her amongst the major saintly Christian figures as her Life is told and commemorated in the *Synaxarium* and in one original Geʿez production, the *Maṣḥafa Ṭēqalā (Book of Thecla)*.

But, looking briefly at this list, one realizes that none of these Theclas is Ethiopian. It may seem paradoxical that such an extensive collection of saints’ Lives like the Ethiopic *Synaxarium* does not record, among all these different Theclas, a single Ethiopian saint bearing that name. More importantly, in the above list, most of the Theclas referred to are Egyptian saints, with the exception of Thecla and her four companions who are Persian martyrs. Consequently, a first problem that we are confronted with when studying Geʿez hagiographical literature is that it is mainly translated literature, at least, as far as antique and late antique saints are concerned. Indeed, a great proportion of saints’ Lives or Acts, as they are preserved in Ethiopic hagiographical collections, are translations of Greek and, above all, Arabic sources. Therefore, martyrdom stories in Geʿez literature concern mostly non-Ethiopian saints. A second issue lies in the fact that the

⁴ For the Syriac version (*BHO* 1157), see Assemani (ed. and trans.), *Acta martyrum*, 1748: 123-127 and Bedjan (ed.), *Acta martyrum*, 1892: 308-313. For an English translation of this Syriac account, see Brock and Ashbrook Harvey (trans.), *Holy Women*, 1998: 78-81. See Flavia Ruani’s article in this volume on the role of secondary characters in this text. For the Greek version (*BHG* 3417), see Delehayé (ed.), *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, 1902: 739-742.

⁵ Budge (trans.), *The Book of Saints*, 1928: 84. These attributes may refer to Thecla of Iconium, but it remains doubtful.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 344-348.

⁷ *Ibid.*: 1156-1157. See Sauget, “Tecla (Theclah),” 1969.

⁸ *Ibid.*: 1253.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 870. It is interesting to note that this Thecla is associated with a female saint named Paula. Would this be an altered recollection of Thecla of Iconium and Saint Paul? Unfortunately, we have no further information about these two female saints mentioned in the *Synaxarium*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 1138. The Thecla referred to might be Paul’s companion since, according to Guidi (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1911: 360-370, she is also commemorated together with Gabra ʿIyāsus on the 20th of the month of *Ḥamlē*.

¹¹ For example, see Guidi (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1911: 405.

Lives and Acts of genuine Ethiopian saints are limited to the story of medieval monks, such as ʾIyasus Moʾa (1214-1294) or Takla Hāymānot (b. 1215), whose biographies were written from the fourteenth century onwards.¹² This is due in part to the fact that there is no such thing as martyrdom stories narrating the sufferings and death of early Ethiopian saints since Ethiopian Christians never lived under the rule of a pagan monarch.¹³ Actually, Christianity was introduced in Ethiopia as soon as its [p. 63] ruler, ʿĒzānā (d. 356), converted.¹⁴ A third issue is that these Geʿez Lives of holy monks are only interested in male characters. Among all these monastic Lives, only three recount the story of holy nuns: Krestos Śemrā, who lived in the fifteenth century, and Walatta Pēṭros and Feqerta Krestos who both lived in the seventeenth century.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the Lives of these nuns are of little use for the study of the cult of Thecla in Ethiopia, especially when one is interested in earlier periods. To put it briefly, unlike the Armenian tradition that can boast noteworthy martyrs like Rhipsime (Arm. Hripʿsimē) or Sanduxt,¹⁶ there is no record of such female holy martyrs specifically in Ethiopian traditions and literature. As a consequence, it remains rather difficult to assess the impact of Thecla on Ethiopian sainthood in late antiquity.

From this point of view, the very nature and limited scope of Geʿez literature do not enable us to paint a reliable picture of the history of the reception of the figure of Saint Thecla in Ethiopia in late antiquity and the medieval period. Yet, by analyzing the few Geʿez texts that mention Thecla, we will try to delineate the main literary characteristics that are peculiar to this holy figure. We will especially focus on her characterization as a martyr in Geʿez hagiographical texts. In fact, Thecla appears as an ambiguous and elusive character as far as the theme of martyrdom is concerned. This ambiguity arises from the fact that, though she never died a martyr, she is generally viewed as a perfect martyr in Geʿez texts. This is typified in the *Book of Thecla*, in which Thecla is never designated as a martyr in the story, although it has been transmitted in a collection of martyrdom stories. How can we account for this state of affairs? In this study, we will try to highlight how this ambiguous status is dealt with in Geʿez literature and evaluate the importance

¹² See Cerulli, *Storia*, 1956: 93-100.

¹³ This assertion needs qualifying since some medieval monks, like Baṣalota Mikāʾēl (*fl.* fourteenth century), ʾEwoṣtātēwos or ʾAnorēwos (*fl.* fourteenth century), were depicted like martyrs in their biographies. Though they do not suffer death as martyrs, they are usually described as such since the king persecuted them on account of their unorthodox teaching. Having bravely endured the king's iniquitous rule, these monks were celebrated by their followers as martyrs. See Derat, *Le domaine*, 2003: 137-171.

¹⁴ On king ʿĒzānā, see Hahn, "Ezana," 2005.

¹⁵ See Böll, "Holy Women," 2003: 37-39 and Mecca, "Women in Ethiopic Hagiography," 2009.

¹⁶ See Calzolari, "The Legend of St. Thecla," 2017.

of this female saint in Ge‘ez hagiographical and, especially, martyrological literary *corpora*.

Thecla in the Ethiopic *Synaxarium*: The “Crown of Confessors”

The *Senkessār*, or Ethiopic *Synaxarium*, is a collection of hagiographical texts that commemorates saints and martyrs.¹⁷ It is specifically designed for liturgical reading. Consequently, the texts are generally short (mere notices as a matter of fact) and are ordered according to the liturgical [p. 64] calendar of the whole year. Known in two main recensions, the Ethiopic *Synaxarium* was translated from the Arabic *Synaxarium* of the Coptic Church in the fifteenth century at the earliest.¹⁸ One major innovation of the *Senkessār*, compared with older collections like the *Gadla samā‘tāt*, is the insertion of hagiographical notices dealing with Ethiopian saints.¹⁹

Thecla’s story is told in the notice of the 25th of the month of *Ḥamlē*.²⁰ On the whole, the story of “Thecla the Apostolic,” contained in the Ethiopic *Synaxarium*, appears as rather close to the Greek and Eastern versions of her Acts. Though extremely condensed, the account follows closely the general plot of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. For instance, like in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the action takes place in Iconium (*Qonyā* in Ge‘ez) where Paul teaches in prison; a love scene occurs in Antioch (with the minor difference, though, that it is the governor of Antioch who falls in love with Thecla rather than the nobleman Alexander²¹); and the female saint returns to Iconium and converts her parents to Christianity (here, too, with an important difference since in the Greek, Latin, and Eastern versions she tries, unsuccessfully, to convert her mother). Two features seem quite unique to the *Senkessār*. On the one hand, it is Thecla’s father (unnamed in the story) who denounces his own daughter to the governors of Iconium. The presence and role of Thecla’s father in the *Synaxarium* story are specific additions. Thus, it stands apart from both the

¹⁷ On the *Senkessār* or Ethiopic *Synaxarium*, see first Colin, “Le synaxaire éthiopien,” 1988. See also Colin and Bausi, “Sənkəssar,” 2010.

¹⁸ See the manuscripts listed by Colin, “Le synaxaire éthiopien,” 1988: 288-294. Because of its close ecclesiastical links with the patriarchate of Alexandria—the head of the Ethiopian Church was nominated by the bishop of Alexandria up to 1948—the Ethiopian Church adopted some of the liturgical usages and religious literature of the Coptic Church.

¹⁹ See *Ibid.*: 312. These Ethiopian saints’ Lives are attested only in the second recension, also known as the “Vulgate,” which was elaborated on in the second half of the sixteenth century.

²⁰ The eleventh month of the Ethiopian calendar. It runs from the 8th of July to the 6th of August. The text was edited and translated in French: Guidi (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1911: 405-408.

²¹ It should be noted though that the “governor” (*makʷannen*) of Antioch is not named in the *Synaxarium* and that he takes on the features of the nobleman Alexander mentioned in the other versions of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

Ge'ez *Book of Thecla* and the Greek, Latin, and Eastern versions of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, in which there is no mention of a father, and it is Thecla's mother who accuses her daughter. On the other, the governors of Iconium, who receive the father's complaint, are called Dimās (Demas) and 'Armogānos (Hermogenes). They are therefore identified with the two characters who collaborate with the governor of Iconium in view of arresting the apostle Paul.²²

[p. 65] Though the trial of Thecla in the *Senkessār* does not radically differ from the plot of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as it is known and transmitted in the other linguistic traditions, two features of the *Synaxarium* text deserve special notice. First, the text ends with an interesting remark regarding the sanctuary of Saint Thecla in Sengār in Lower Egypt.²³ According to the author of the *Senkessār*, Saint Thecla's relics are housed in this sanctuary and are renowned for their miraculous powers.²⁴ This short digression thus illustrates the prestige of this Egyptian *locus sanctus*, which the author praises as a major site of pilgrimage. Consequently, the purpose of the text is not only to remind readers and listeners of Thecla's saintly life but also to encourage devotional practices; in particular, going on a pilgrimage to the holy place of Sengār. Nevertheless, as one remembers that the Ethiopic *Synaxarium* is a translation of the Arabic *Synaxarium* of the Copts, the mention of this sanctuary is not a specific feature of the Ge'ez text but should be viewed in the context of Egyptian religious practices.

Secondly, what is noteworthy is the insertion of a *salām*, a short panegyric in verse praising the qualities and virtues of the saint, that is appended at the end of Thecla's story. The *salām* (meaning "peace" but usually used as a term of address to greet someone) always follows each commemorative notice of the Ethiopic *Synaxarium*. The *salām* is also especially frequent at the end of the saints' Lives, where all the virtuous deeds of the saint are summed up and praised in a poetic fashion. According to Denis Nosnitsin, the *salām* "summarizes the account and exposes, in poetic mode, the essence of the saint's spiritual deeds, stressing the most peculiar episodes of the saint's life."²⁵ In the case of Thecla, her *salām* insists on her miraculous survival through her trial

²² See Guidi (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1911: 405. The reasons why these changes were made are not at all clear. Be they deliberate or accidental, these kinds of rewritings are frequent in hagiographical texts. See Gouillet, *Écriture et réécriture*, 2005: 107-199.

²³ About this sanctuary, see Timm, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten*, 1991: 2359-2361. About the cult of Thecla in Egypt, see Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 2009: 83-194. This sanctuary of Sengār or Sinjār (Arabic *سِنجَار*, Coptic *Ⲡⲟⲩⲛⲕⲉⲣⲓ*) is also mentioned in the parallel text contained in the Copto-Arabic *Synaxarium*. See Basset (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire arabe jacobite*, 1923: 683.

²⁴ See Guidi (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1911: 405.

²⁵ Nosnitsin, "Sālam," 2010. See Caitriona Ó Dochartaigh's contribution in this volume for a discussion on Thecla in

and her absolute renunciation of earthly life. The whole text runs as follows:

I say hail to Thecla the Apostolic,
whom the Lord made powerful!
The lions did not injure her and the blazing fire did not burn her.
When she believed in the doctrine of righteousness as Paul told her,
She left her parents and cast aside her treasures.²⁶

[p. 66] Another *salām* in honor of the saint is to be found in the *Synaxarium* for the 20th of *Ḥamlē*.²⁷

This short poem, which does not depend on a preceding hagiographical narrative, also underlines the ascetic calling of Thecla and the miracles that surrounded her trial:

Hail to Thecla who, for the sake of righteousness, was not saddened
to have her hair, stretching from her head to toes, cut off,
for she accepted Paul's epistle as good news.
The governor failed, in both his attempts,
to have her torn apart by the lions' tooth and consumed by the flame.²⁸

The Ethiopic *Synaxarium* thus exemplifies how the life and trial of saint Thecla can be framed in a liturgical setting. The briefness of the account, specially designed for church reading at the occasion of the liturgical commemoration (*tazkār*)²⁹ of the saint, coupled with the recitation of the *salām*, gives a peculiarly Ethiopian flavor to this short version of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Indeed, these Ge'ez *salāms* represent one major Ethiopian innovation since they do not appear in the Arabo-Coptic *Synaxarium* and were incorporated in the Ge'ez *Synaxarium* in the process of translation. Moreover, the allusion to the sanctuary of Sengār in Egypt as a famous pilgrimage destination perfectly fits with the general purpose of this text, namely promoting the cult and veneration of saint Thecla.

More interestingly, however, Thecla is not designated as a “martyr” (*samā'et*) but as a “confessor” (*ta'amāni*) in the *Synaxarium*. Near the end of the story, it is thus written: “When her fight was over, she found rest in peace and received the crown of preachers and confessors in the Kingdom of heaven.”³⁰ According to the redactor of the *Synaxarium*, Thecla is not a martyr since she did not die because of ill-treatment; she died a natural death and reached the end of her life “in peace” (*ba-salām*). Nevertheless, because she survived many trials and tortures, she is rightly

versified notices in medieval Irish calendars.

²⁶ See Guidi (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1911: 407, l. 14-408, l. 3. In this paper, all translations are mine and are based on the Ge'ez original.

²⁷ See *Ibid.*: 368. A few other but unrelated saints, such as Theodore, Theoctistus, and Gabra 'Iyasus, are commemorated on this day.

²⁸ *Ibid.*: 368, l. 12-17.

²⁹ Regarding the *tazkār*, the commemorative feast for a dead person, see Alehegne, “Täzkar,” 2010.

³⁰ Guidi (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1911: 407, ll. 10-11.

honored as a confessor, that is someone who suffered persecution but survived throughout. Though not a martyr, Thecla has received the crown of confessors and accordingly deserves to be venerated as such. Thus, the Ethiopic *Synaxarium* unambiguously conveys the image of Thecla as a confessor. However, other Ge'ez texts, like the *Book of Thecla*, prove much more [p. 67] ambiguous and seem reluctant to present such a praiseworthy character as a mere confessor.

An Unlabeled Martyr: Thecla in the *Maṣḥafa Ṭēqalā* or *Book of Thecla*

Recounting the story of her life, companionship with Saint Paul, and final trial, the *Maṣḥafa Ṭēqalā* (*Book of Thecla*) is an abridged and modified version of the famous apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.³¹ Though the plot of the *Book of Thecla* follows, on the whole, that of the Greek *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, it evinces many noteworthy peculiarities that make it stand apart from all the other ancient versions.

The *Book of Thecla* has been transmitted within an Ethiopic medieval collection of Martyr Acts, the *Gadla samā' tāt* (*The Contendings of the Martyrs*).³² This vast hagiographical collection, preserved in at least 34 manuscripts,³³ contains about 140 texts, less than one third of which has been studied or edited to-date. Belonging to various literary genres (Lives, Acts, martyrdoms, collections of miracles, homilies...), these Ge'ez hagiographical texts deal mostly with biblical, Eastern, and Egyptian martyrs who are venerated and commemorated in the Ethiopian Church.³⁴ The oldest extant texts that are part of this collection were translated chiefly from Arabic and from the thirteenth century onwards.³⁵ The importance of the *Book of Thecla* cannot be understated since it is certainly the oldest witness of a Ge'ez translation of the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

In the various manuscripts of the *Gadla samā' tāt*, the *Book of Thecla* is read and commemorated on the 27th of *Maskaram*, the first month of the Ethiopian calendar.³⁶ The *Book of Thecla* is contained in the following manuscripts:

1. London, British Library, Or. 687-688 (eighteenth century), fol. 49r-51v³⁷

³¹ For a general introduction to this work, see Barrier, *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 2009: 1-62 and Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, 1989: 194-214 and 216-224. All references to the Greek *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*APT*) will be drawn from the Barrier edition unless otherwise stated.

³² On this collection, see Bausi, "Gädlä sāma'ətāt," 2005 and Bausi (ed. and trans.), *La versione etiopica*, 2002: 1-18.

³³ For a list, see Bausi (ed. and trans.), *La versione etiopica*, 2002: 3-7.

³⁴ A few examples that may be mentioned are: John the Baptist, Stephen the protomartyr, the martyrs of Najran, Pantaleon, Cyriacus and her mother Julitta, and Menas.

³⁵ See Cerulli, *Storia*, 1956: 68-70.

³⁶ From the 11th of September to the 10th of October.

³⁷ Number 258 in Wright, *Catalogue*, 1877: 169-170.

2. [p. 68] London, British Library, Or. 689 (fifteenth century), fol. 31r-34r³⁸
3. Monastery of Abbā Sayfa Mikā'ēl (Eritrea), Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML) microfilm 1479 (1459/1460), fol. 55v-59v³⁹
4. Monastery of Dabra Ḥayq 'Eṣṭifānos (Ethiopia), EMML mf. 1766 (fourteenth/fifteenth century), fol. 57r-63v⁴⁰
5. Wallo province (Ethiopia), EMML mf. 6951 (fifteenth century; not yet catalogued)⁴¹
6. The *Gadla samā 'tāt* of Dabra Libānos in Eritrea (fifteenth century; not yet catalogued)⁴²

In 1901, Edgar J. Goodspeed published an edition of the Ge'ez text based on the two London manuscripts mentioned above, namely BL Or. 687-688 and BL Or. 689.⁴³ More accurately he edited BL Or. 689 (called manuscript A) and collected the variant readings of the BL Or. 687-688 (called manuscript B) in the footnotes.⁴⁴ He also provided an English translation and detailed commentaries in his footnotes. He asserts cautiously, following Theodore Nöldeke's suggestion, that the *Book of Thecla* was translated from Arabic.⁴⁵

In the text edited by Goodspeed, the narrative opens with the preaching of Paul in Macedonia, which the author of the *Book of Thecla* seems to understand as a city.⁴⁶ There he meets a certain Tāmerēnos⁴⁷ who greets [p. 69] him and invites him to preach in his house. Paul then delivers a sermon full of biblical quotations and recollections.⁴⁸ The Gospel of Matthew seems to be of particular relevance for the *Book of Thecla*. Indeed, a negative form of the so-called Golden

³⁸ Number 253 in *Ibid.*: 159-161.

³⁹ Getatchew Haile, *A Catalogue*, 1979: 593-598.

⁴⁰ Getatchew Haile and Macomber, *A Catalogue*, 1981: 235-236.

⁴¹ Bausi, (ed. and trans.), *La versione etiopica*, 2002: 29.

⁴² On this manuscript and its contents, see Bausi, "Su alcuni manoscritti," 1997: 23-32.

⁴³ Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), "The Book of Thekla," 1901. The Ge'ez text is on pp. 71-85 and the English translation on pp. 86-95.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 69.

⁴⁵ Actually, this is the case with most of the Lives contained in the *Gadla samā 'tāt*. See Bausi, "Su alcuni manoscritti," 1997: 15-18. For an example of a Ge'ez hagiographical text of the *Gadla samā 'tāt* translated from Arabic, see Labadie (ed. and trans.), "Une version éthiopienne," 2015. An Arabic version of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was recently edited and translated by Davis (ed. and trans.), "An Arabic Acts," 2017. This Arabic version follows the plot lines of the Greek, Coptic, and Syriac accounts and differs markedly from the Ge'ez *Book of Thecla*. Though the *Book of Thecla* was certainly translated from Arabic, its *Vorlage* cannot be related to the version edited by Davis since it represents a wholly different recension. For a list of manuscripts preserving an Arabic version of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, see Graf, *Geschichte*, 1944: 514 and Davis (ed. and trans.), "An Arabic Acts," 2017: 108. On the Arabic tradition, see also Proverbio, "Apocrypha Arabica," 1997.

⁴⁶ As the other versions of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* locate the story in Asia Minor, the Ethiopic text unexpectedly locates it in ሞጁዶንያ: (Macedonia) and all the other places found in the other versions (Iconium, Lystra, Antioch...) have disappeared. The only other place mentioned in the Ge'ez text is Thessalonica (ተስሎንቄ).

⁴⁷ This Tāmerēnos (ታሞራኖስ) plays the same role as that of Onesiphorus in the other versions of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The Ethiopic name is obviously a corruption, through the Arabic, of the Greek Θάμυρις. The two figures of Onesiphorus and Thamyris have thus been merged in the Ge'ez tradition.

⁴⁸ Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), "The Book of Thekla," 1901: 71-75 (86-88 for his translation).

Rule (“Do to others what you want them to do to you” Matt 7:12) appears.⁴⁹ Significantly for our purposes, it is noteworthy that the first part of Paul’s homily is based on the Beatitudes of Matt 5:3-12.⁵⁰ Here, Paul delivers no less than thirteen Beatitudes on the model of the evangelical narrative, using the Ethiopic expression *beḏu ‘ān ’ella* (blessed are those who...):

Blessed are those who believe in their heart in the Son of God... Blessed are those who are now hungry and thirsty... Blessed are those who make peace and reconcile one with another... Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness...⁵¹

Paul’s sermon places particular emphasis on abstinence and inveighs against any sexual intercourse. This encratic tendency is visible in the thirteenth and last of Paul’s beatitude: “Blessed is the woman who does not marry and forsakes this world, and the virgin who does not marry and remains unmarried⁵² while she declares to the Lord that the one who marries is part of the Gehenna.”⁵³

Further on, Paul concludes his sermon by defending the superiority of celibacy and widowhood over marriage. This final and lengthy exhortation, largely based on 1 Corinthians 7, reveals how important this subject was in the eyes of the anonymous author:

[p. 70] Now, do not marry anyone you may find and do not covet another’s wife. If her husband happens to die, she shall remain unmarried and shall not get married. But if she cannot restrain herself without a husband, she shall marry one for it is better to marry than to fornicate. How could you possibly fornicate since you are the Lord’s body and the Lord’s body is yours? Therefore, do not make the Lord’s body like the body of a harlot because, when a man has intercourse with a woman, they become one flesh. So, do not have intercourse with a harlot and whoever marries a harlot, his judgement will be death in Gehenna. Hand your souls over to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for whoever commits his soul before the Lord will inherit the Kingdom of heaven.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ “And what you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others.” *Ibid.*: 74, l. 12-13: ወዘኢትፈቅዱ፡ ይግበሩ፡ ለክሙ፡ ሰብአ፡ አንትሙ፡ ኢትግበሩ፡ ለባዕድ፡። In an article published in 1935, George Brockwell King, “The ‘Negative’ Golden Rule,” 1935: 59-60, drew attention to this negative form of the Golden Rule in the *Book of Thekla*. Although we do not agree with his assumption that this is due to an Indian influence, we regard the parallel he found in the Laws of King Alfred the Great (849-899) as quite compelling.

⁵⁰ See *APT* § 3.6. The same pattern is found in the other versions of the *Acts of Paul and Thekla* but in a much shorter form, though the number of Beatitudes is roughly the same. See, for example, Vouaux (ed. and trans.), *Les Actes*, 1913: 154-159, for the Greek; von Gebhardt (ed.), *Die lateinische Übersetzungen*, 1902: 12-17, for the Latin; Wright (ed.), *Apocryphal Acts*, 1871: 131-133, for the Syriac; Calzolari (ed. and trans.), *Apocrypha Armeniaca I*, 2017: 246-257, for the Armenian; and Davis (ed. and trans.), “An Arabic *Acts*,” 2017: 116-117, for the Arabic.

⁵¹ Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), “The Book of Thekla,” 1901: 71, l. 4-72, l. 5: ብፁዓን፡ እለ፡ የአምነ፡ በልብሙ፡ በወልደ፡ አግቢአብሐር፡ [...] ብፁዓን፡ እለ፡ ይእዜ፡ ይርኅቡ፡ ወይጸምኡ፡ [...] ብፁዓን፡ እለ፡ ያስተሳልሙ፡ ወያስተኳንኑ፡ [...] ብፁዓን፡ እለ፡ ይሰደዱ፡ በአንተ፡ ጽድቅ፡። We reproduce exactly manuscript A, with its orthographical peculiarities, as edited by Goodspeed.

⁵² Cf. 1 Cor 7:38.

⁵³ Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), “The Book of Thekla,” 1901: 72, ll. 9-12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 74, ll. 14-75, l. 5.

Thecla, who is described as Tāmerēnos' beloved (*feqert*), is carefully listening to Paul's lecture from the window of her house, located opposite Paul's abode. Aroused by the apostle's preaching, she decides to meet him at night several times so as to listen to his teaching. But Thecla's mother, having found out that her daughter has had many secret interviews with the apostle, brings her back home and summons Tāmerēnos. She informs him that Thecla has converted to Paul's encratic teaching and will no longer marry him. Paul is then brought to the local governor (*mak^wannen*)⁵⁵ to whom Tāmerēnos declares:

This man who has come into our land has perverted our wives and many other women. After listening to his instructions, they divorced their spouses and the husbands even divorced their wives. Virgins, hearing his voice, also followed him and refused to marry.⁵⁶

The governor orders that Paul be tortured and burnt, but the apostle survives miraculously.⁵⁷ As for Thecla, she is also sent to the stake by the governor at the behest of Thecla's own mother who had previously cursed her daughter in a passionate speech.⁵⁸ But an unexpected miracle occurs when she throws herself into the blaze:

She entered this fire making the sign of Christ.⁵⁹ But at that moment the fire fled from her and rain fell from the sky and extinguished this fire. [p. 71] Thunder crashed and deafened the governor's ear because he had devised evils plans against the servants of God. His ear festered, putrefied and became deaf. Thecla went out from the middle of the fire while nobody stopped her.⁶⁰

As soon as Thecla emerges from the fire, she is rejected by her mother and is abandoned in a burial vault (?)⁶¹ in the city. There she meets a woman who owed her a thousand dinars.⁶² Thecla, in a compassionate move, cancels all her debts.⁶³ Following this short episode, the Ge'ez text narrates

⁵⁵ The word can also mean "judge."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 77, l. 17-78, l. 1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 78 (90 for his translation). This episode is unique to the Ge'ez version.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 79 (91 for his translation). This dialogue between Thecla and her mother before the first trial is not reported in the other versions. According to these other accounts, Saint Thecla is immediately brought to the judge after her visit to Paul. Compare especially Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), "The Book of Thekla," 1901: 76-77 and Vouaux (ed. and trans.), *Les Actes*, 1913: 182-187.

⁵⁹ Literally, "sealing (herself) with the sign of Christ" (ጥቲማ: [...] በማጥተመ: ክርስቶስ፤).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*: 80, l.3-9.

⁶¹ The Ge'ez word ገሞስ: in manuscript A (or ቆሞስ: in B) is uncertain. It is nowhere to be found in Ge'ez dictionaries. We follow Goodspeed's conjecture, which is probably based on a comparison with the other versions, in which it is told that Paul is hidden in a vault or tomb (*APT* § 3.23). See, for example, the Greek μνημεῖον, the Latin *monumentum*, or the Syriac *bēt ʿālmā* in Vouaux (ed. and trans.), *Les Actes*, 1913: 188-189; von Gebhardt (ed.), *Die lateinische Übersetzungen*, 1902: 60-61; and Wright (ed.), *Apocryphal Acts*, 1871: 146, respectively.

⁶² This passage is unique to the Ge'ez version. See Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), "The Book of Thekla," 1901: 80-81 and 92.

⁶³ *Ibid.*: 80-81 (92 for his translation).

the meeting of Thecla and one of Paul's disciples (*rade'*), whom Thecla meets by chance in the city. The disciple, whose name is not mentioned, leads Thecla to the place where Paul has been staying. As the two joyously meet, Thecla swears to Paul that she wants to become the handmaid of God (*'amata 'egzi'abhēr*) and to lead a life of abstinence and celibacy. As a token of her commitment, she begs Paul to cut her hair and gird her, which he does quite reluctantly.⁶⁴ Afterwards they both travel to Thessalonica. Thecla's mother, saddened by her daughter's conversion and full commitment to an apostolic life, goes to see another governor so as to ask him to judge and chastise her unruly daughter. Thecla is summoned by the governor who has her cast into a den of bears and lions:

They took her and threw her into a den of bears and lions.⁶⁵ When they came to the door of that den of bears and lions, she spread out her hands again as she was accustomed to doing and she signed herself⁶⁶ with the sign of the cross. In front of its door, she signed⁶⁷ in the name of Jesus, the Son of God: 'I will go in today with the help of the Holy Spirit.' Because of this, she was rejoicing. It seemed to those who brought her that those beasts were about to devour her. But when the beasts saw her, they stood up and bowed down. They started to lick her and to roll at her feet.⁶⁸

[p. 72] Thecla, while staying among the beasts, says a prayer in praise of God for the life and salvation he has granted her.⁶⁹ The governor, unaware of Thecla's miraculous survival, orders that her bones be buried in the hope that the mysterious plague that "torments him" (*yeqaśśefo*) might definitively cease. As the governor discovers that Thecla is safe and sound, he humbly beseeches her to cure his torment and the wounded ear of the other governor. Thecla, however, first requires the presence of Paul. The apostle Paul comes and cures the two governors of whom it is stated, "both lived by the might of Jesus-Christ" (*wa-ḥaywu kel' ēhomu ba-ḥayla 'Iyasus Kerestos*).⁷⁰

Compared with the Greek, Syriac, or Latin versions of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the *Book of Thecla* is noteworthy for its brevity. Of particular relevance is the absence of the story of Paul and Thecla in Antioch of Pisidia where Alexander becomes enamored of Paul's companion.⁷¹ The *Book of Thecla* simply notes that Paul and Thecla went to the city of Thessalonica, which here

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: 80-82 (92-93 for his translation).

⁶⁵ Contrary to the other versions of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the presence of ferocious seals is not mentioned in the Ge'ez account of this second trial.

⁶⁶ Literally, "she sealed herself" (ጎተመት: ርእሳ:).

⁶⁷ Literally, "she sealed" (ጎተመት:).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*: 83, ll. 5-13.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*: 83-84 (94-95 for his translation).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*: 84-85 (95 for his translation).

⁷¹ *APT* § 4.1.

seems to be a substitute for Antioch. Then, the story of the second trial of Thecla in the Ethiopic text loosely follows this short allusion, and it is not clear at all whether her trial happened in Thessalonica or not. Among the other abridgements, we should mention the reunion between Paul and Thecla after her first trial.⁷² Whereas the ancient versions describe a dramatic and joyful meeting followed by a meal, the *Book of Thecla* simply reports, in Thecla's own words, her escape from the fire. Furthermore, the place names are very few in the *Book of Thecla* (Macedonia and Thessalonica are the only places mentioned), and many characters are omitted as, for instance, Paul's traitors, namely Demas and Hermogenes.⁷³ Since the Antioch episode is omitted, the names of Tryphaena and Alexander are absent from the Ge'ez narrative. Closely related to this feature is the general paucity of proper names for the different characters mentioned in the Ethiopic narrative. As a matter of fact, Thecla's mother, the two governors, and Paul's disciple are anonymous. One possible reason for these omissions would lie in the scribe's inability to transcribe correctly the proper nouns. Indeed, all the proper nouns in the *Book of Thecla* are heavily corrupted and hardly recognizable.⁷⁴ We can assume that the scribe, faced with so many cumbersome [p. 73] nouns, would rather omit these words instead of transcribing them erroneously.

Finally, the Ethiopic *Book of Thecla* exhibits special features as far as the martyr status of Thecla is concerned. Indeed, the text seems to put great emphasis on the near-martyrological aspect of Thecla, and secondarily Paul, at the expense of her ascetic and apostolic calling. First, the lack of interest in her apostolic calling is striking; there is no indication that the female saint converted her family or the inhabitants of her native city on her return, which is in contrast to the *Synaxarium* (see above). The *Book of Thecla*, concluding with the account of her trial and salvation, thus presents this part of Thecla's life as the climax of her saintly destiny. Second, this Ge'ez version adds many more details about Paul's sufferings, thus enhancing the martyrological dimension of this text. Whereas the other ancient versions tersely indicate that Paul was flogged,⁷⁵ the Ge'ez text is unique in presenting a detailed account of the torture which Paul had to endure. Confronted with Paul's obstinacy, the governor declares:

⁷² Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), "The Book of Thekla," 1901: 80-81 (see 92-93 for his translation and especially 92, n. k).

⁷³ *Ibid.*: 171-175.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: 86, n. b and c.

⁷⁵ *APT* § 3.21. See, for example, Vouaux (ed. and trans.), *Les Actes*, 1913: 184-185 (φραγελλώσας); von Gebhardt (ed.), *Die lateinische Übersetzungen*, 1902: 54-55 (*flagellatum*); Wright (ed.), *Apocryphal Acts*, 1871: 145 (*naggdūhy*); Davis (ed. and trans.), "An Arabic *Acts*, 2017: 123 (*yujallidūhu*); and Calzolari (ed. and trans.), *Apocrypha Armeniaca I*, 2017: 305 (*harkanel*).

‘Take him and bind him upside down! Put a crown of brass on his head and burn him with pitch, sulphur and the chaff of the threshing floor!’ They did as they were told but they were not able to burn Paul with their fire because the Holy Spirit was upon him. The governor marveled and said: ‘That the fire cannot burn him is a miraculous thing! Cast him out of our city, take his remaining ashes and bring them forth, saying: These are the remaining ashes of Paul, whom we have burnt and utterly cast forth.’⁷⁶

Finally, it is worth remembering that the Ethiopic *Book of Thecla* has been transmitted in a collection of martyrdom stories, the *Gadla samā‘tāt* (*The Contendings of the Martyrs*). As a consequence, Thecla was viewed, among Ethiopian Christians, as a martyr figure. Read alongside the accounts of other famous martyrs, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was expected to be for its Ethiopian readers, first and foremost, a story of martyrdom and suffering. Yet, this martyrological dimension, sustained by both internal and external criteria, is somewhat counterbalanced by the fact that nowhere in the text is Thecla labeled a “martyr” (*samā‘et*). This discrepancy reveals how ambiguous the figure of Thecla is in Ge‘ez hagiography. Though never named a “martyr” in the *Book of Thecla*, she is presented as though she [p. 74] were a fully-fledged martyr, whose story was written and copied alongside other martyrdom stories, all included in the Ethiopic *Gadla samā‘tāt*. Thus, although the trials she went through could rightly grant her the status of a perfect martyr, she cannot be named that way since, technically, she did not die a martyr but ended her life peacefully as the Ethiopic *Synaxarium* asserts. Because of this paradoxical situation, Thecla appears in the *Book of Thecla* as a genuine female martyr without ever being called a “martyr.” She remains an unlabeled martyr.

The Epistle of Pelagia: Thecla as a Model for an Undying Martyr

Apart from the *Synaxarium* and the *Book of Thecla*, which deal directly with Saint Thecla, two other hagiographical Ge‘ez texts make reference to her. The first of these texts is the *Epistle of Pelagia* (BHO 890), an apocryphal text which is attested in Ge‘ez only.⁷⁷ According to this short text, preserved in some manuscripts of the *Gadla samā‘tāt*, the apostle Paul visits Caesarea in Palestine and preaches the Gospel. Expelled from the city because of his missionary activity, he flees to the surrounding mountains, where he meets a huge lion. The lion asks him to teach him

⁷⁶ Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), “The Book of Thekla,” 1901: 78, l. 8-15.

⁷⁷ Also *CANT* 211.IV. The text was edited and translated into English by Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), “The Epistle of Pelagia,” 1904. He used three London manuscripts: BL Or. 686 (fifteenth century), BL Or. 687-688 (eighteenth century), and BL Or. 689 (eighteenth century). His translation was reprinted in Schmidt (ed. and trans.), *Acta Pauli*, 1905: XXI-XXV.

the Gospel and to receive baptism. Paul then returns to Caesarea, brings a dead man to life and converts many people, including the king's daughter Pelagia. Following Paul's exhortation to renounce marriage and worldly pleasures, Pelagia is sentenced to death in the theater together with Paul. As Paul is led into the theater, a lion is unleashed. But this lion is the same as the one which he had baptized earlier in the mountains. Instead of devouring Paul, the lion prays with him and praises God. The astonished king decides to let Paul and the beast go. As for Pelagia, she is ordered to be cast into a burning brass cow. But, before she can enter it, a pouring rain suddenly extinguishes the fire. Nevertheless, Pelagia still decides to go in, and her husband, appalled by this, commits suicide. The story abruptly ends here and states nothing more about Pelagia.

This martyrdom story appears to be based on two sources. First, the *Passion of Pelagia of Tarsus* (BHG 1480) seems to be a possible source for the *Epistle of Pelagia* as Goodspeed correctly noted.⁷⁸ In the *Passion of [p. 75] Pelagia of Tarsus*, the female protagonist is baptized by the fugitive bishop Clinon. Then she dedicates herself to a life of poverty and celibacy. Her lover, Diocletian (244-311)'s son, commits suicide as soon as he learns what Pelagia has done. Diocletian, failing to force the young Christian woman to apostatize, has her thrown in a burning brazen bull. This story offers a few interesting parallels with the *Epistle of Pelagia*. First, Clinon is a wandering character like the apostle Paul who baptizes a young and noble pagan girl. Secondly, the female convert refuses to marry her fiancé who, in both martyrdom stories, commits suicide. Finally, the use of a scalding brazen bull, as an instrument of torture, is shared by both stories.

However, another probable source for the *Epistle of Pelagia* is a particular recension of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. As a matter of fact, both accounts share the same general plot.⁷⁹ The apostle Paul converts a young noble woman who then refuses to live a marital life. This sudden change leads to her conviction and final trial. More striking is the reference to, in both stories, a sudden rain that extinguishes a fire, which is used as a means of execution, and a burning bull. But, more importantly, the episode of the baptized lion, though absent in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, is directly drawn from a peculiar passage of the *Acts of Paul* in Ephesus that has been preserved in a Coptic papyrus deposited in the Staats und Universitäts-Bibliothek of Hamburg.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ See Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), "The Epistle of Pelagia," 1904: 96-97. On Pelagia of Tarsus, see Sauget, "Pelagia di Tarso," 1968; Delehaye, *Les légendes hagiographiques*, 1927: 191-192. For the Greek, see Usener (ed.), *Legenden*, 1879: 17-28 and Delehaye (ed.), *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, 1902: 118-119.

⁷⁹ See Schmidt (ed. and trans.), *Acta Pauli*, 1905: XXVI-XXIX, who draws many relevant parallels between the *Epistle of Pelagia* and the *Acts of Paul*.

⁸⁰ Schmidt and Schubart (ed. and trans.), *ΠΡΑΞΕΙΣ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ*, 1936: 22-45. A German translation of this episode is

In the fragmentary Coptic text, it is told that Paul, being condemned *ad bestias* in the stadium of Ephesus, recognizes the lion that he had baptized earlier. As other beasts are unleashed into the stadium so as to kill Paul and the talking lion, suddenly a hailstorm breaks out and frightens the beasts. Then, Paul leaves the stadium and embarks on a boat bound for Macedonia. As for the lion, it is said that he returns to the mountains where he lives. This last allusion provides a significant parallel to the *Epistle of Pelagia* since it is reported that Paul met the lion in the “mountain” (*dabr*) after fleeing from Caesarea. The dependency of the Ge‘ez text on this *Vorlage* could also be conjectured on the basis of a translation error. Indeed, the Ethiopic text does not explicitly state that the [p. 76] lion was baptized but was “received in the great⁸¹ of the Christians” (*westa ‘abiya kerestiyān*).⁸² Although it seems difficult to explain the enigmatic form of the Ge‘ez passage, the word “great” is probably to be understood as meaning here “baptism.” It could be either the result of a scribal corruption or a deliberate attempt by a later copyist to substitute “baptism” for the vague word “great” since he might have viewed this act of baptizing as highly unorthodox.⁸³ Whatever the reason for such a change might be, it remains certain that the Ge‘ez *Epistle of Pelagia* offers an invaluable parallel to the *Acts of Paul* in Ephesus. To sum up, the *Epistle of Pelagia* is probably dependent on three previous hagiographical and apocryphal works, that is the *Passion of Pelagia of Tarsus*, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and the Coptic *Acts of Paul* in Ephesus.

Additionally, three further pieces of literary evidence reveal not only that the *Epistle of Pelagia* was partly based on the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* but also that the character of Pelagia has been fashioned and modeled on the figure of Saint Thecla. In the *Epistle of Pelagia*, after the lion episode, Paul resurrects a dead man and addresses and teaches the crowd about the power of faith.⁸⁴ Recalling biblical *exempla*, such as Rahab, Daniel, Ezekiel, Elijah, or Joseph, Paul tells how these men and women were saved by God in perilous circumstances thanks to their unflinching faith. Among all these *exempla*, only one is not of biblical origin and concerns precisely Saint Thecla.

printed in Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, 1989: 230. For a useful and detailed commentary, see Schneemelcher, “Der getaufte Löwe,” 1964. This strange episode was already known to ancient authors like Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 7, Hippolytus, *In Daniel* 3.29, Commodian, *Carne Apologetico* 627-628, and Nicephorus Callistos, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.25.

⁸¹ The adjective “great” (*‘abiy*) is here used absolutely, without a dependent noun.

⁸² See Goodspeed (ed. and trans.), “The Epistle of Pelagia,” 1904, 100.

⁸³ Goodspeed assumes that the Arabic translator, reading the Coptic original, read ⲛⲟⲄ (*noč*, “great”) instead of ⲟⲙⲥ (*ōms*, “baptism”). This mistake might account for the strange Ethiopic rendering, which was based on a faulty Arabic original. See *Ibid.*: 105, n. 2. However, the two words do not look alike, and his explanation remains doubtful since we do not have a Coptic or Arabic parallel that could substantiate it.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*: 101-103 (106-107 for his translation).

And they brought also that cow of brass and they started to throw her into it. But at that moment rain fell and put it out. However, she was determined to go in. When the man⁸⁹ saw her determination to go in, he took a sword and let his face fall upon it and died for Pelagia's beauty was wonderful and she neither considered her beauty nor regarded this transient world.⁹⁰

The end of the text offers an enigmatic conclusion. Did Pelagia die or not? On the one hand, it seems so for it is told that she despises her beauty and [p. 78] this fleeting world. It is as though she were ready to leave this earthly life; it is the reason why she seems eager to go into the cow. On the other, is it really conceivable that she could suffer martyrdom and death in this brass cow, when the fire was extinguished by a heavy rain? We can conjecture that this ambiguous end might be a deliberate attempt to draw a parallel between Pelagia and Thecla since the latter's final trial includes two bulls whose genitalia are scorched to enrage them. Pelagia longs for death and, like Thecla, she survives her final trial. Though she earnestly wishes to die as a martyr, Pelagia, similarly to Thecla in the *Book of Thecla*, appears as an ambiguous martyr whose very death is not at all mentioned at the end of the story. Thus, Pelagia appears on the threshold of martyrdom; while she is characterized by all the attributes of a holy female martyr, she nevertheless escapes death and, consequently, cannot receive the crown of martyrdom. Therefore, it seems that Thecla was, in the Ethiopian literary tradition, famous enough so as to be the source and model for Pelagia and another female saint like her; one whose character and story appears as an original creation in the corpus of Ge'ez hagiographical literature.

An Inspiring Martyr: The Figure of Thecla in the Ge'ez *Martyrdom of Cyrus and John*

Whereas the *Synaxarium*, the *Book of Thecla*, and the *Epistle of Pelagia* do not openly assert that Thecla is a fully-fledged martyr, it is worth noting that the *Ge'ez Martyrdom of Cyrus, John, Their Mother, and Three Virgins* (BHG 469-471)⁹¹ claims Thecla as a genuine martyr. The story, preserved in Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Ge'ez sources, tells of the martyrdom of a group of Alexandrian Christians who were tortured at the time of Diocletian's imperial rule. Living in Antioch but hailing from Alexandria, these Christians are arrested by Diocletian who then sends

⁸⁹ Pelagia's fiancé.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*: 104, ll. 12-16.

⁹¹ See Caraffa, "Ciro e Giovanni," 1964. The story was probably written in the seventh century, at a time when the Coptic sanctuary of Menuthis reached international fame and prestige. See Delehayé, "Les saints d'Aboukir," 1911. Sophronius of Jerusalem (560-638) wrote a famous collection of miracle stories related to the relics of Cyrus and John in the sanctuary of Menuthis (BHG 477-479); see Gascou, *Sophrone de Jérusalem*, 2006.

them to Alexandria so that they may be judged and sentenced by the local governor. After their brutal deaths, their relics were kept hidden in Alexandria until Bishop Cyril (412-444) transferred the holy remains to a new sanctuary in Menuthis (today Abukir in northern Egypt). In one of [p. 79] the Ge'ez versions of the story, contained in the Ethiopic *Synaxarium*,⁹² saint Cyrus ('*Abāqir*') recalls Thecla's trial as a way of encouraging and strengthening the three Alexandrian virgins in the face of their impending deaths: "Likewise, saint Cyrus was revealing to them and telling them what torments befell saint Thecla the Apostolic."⁹³ However, this allusion to Thecla is not specific to this passage in Ge'ez. The Copto-Arabic *Synaxarium*, from which the Ethiopic *Synaxarium* was translated, also refers to Thecla when Cyrus addresses the young virgins and presents Paul's female companion as a model to follow. Actually, the Ge'ez is a faithful rendering of the Arabic.⁹⁴

The *Gadla samā' tāt* preserves a richer and longer form of the story, including saint Cyrus' energetic plea to the three virgins. Indeed, the Ge'ez *Acts of Cyrus and John*,⁹⁵ a translation from the Arabic that remains unedited, offers a more explicit reference to Thecla when it comes to Cyrus' address. This time, both Cyrus and John speak and remind their listeners of the heroic behavior of Saint Thecla who should be regarded as a model and an example in a time of persecution and torture. According to the London manuscript BL Or. 687-688,⁹⁶ Cyrus and John deliver the following message:

Cyrus and John were encouraging them and saying to them: 'Remember the might of our Lord, who says in the pure and holy Gospel: Do not fear those who will kill your body. They have no power over your souls.'⁹⁷ And he said: 'His name be blessed in the holy Gospel for the one who endures the ignominy of the wicked in this world will be saved and rescued. Be like saint Thecla who was led into martyrdom in the middle of virgins and who became a martyr for the name of our Lord Christ and found eternal rest for him.'⁹⁸

This exhortation is specially designed for virgins since Thecla, according to the above account,

⁹² Colin (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1992: 494-495. The Ge'ez account is based on the version transmitted in the Arabic *Synaxarium*. See Basset (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire arabe jacobite*, 1915: 796-797.

⁹³ Colin (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire éthiopien*, 1992: 494, l. 21-23.

⁹⁴ See Basset (ed. and trans.), *Le synaxaire arabe jacobite*, 1915: 797, for the Arabic text and his French translation.

⁹⁵ For the list of the seven manuscripts containing this martyrdom story, see Bausi (ed. and trans.), *La versione etiopica*, 2002: 10, n. 34. These are: London, BL Or. 687-688, fol. 225r-229r; Paris, BnF, d'Abbadie 179, fol. 28r-32r; Monastery of Dabra Hayq 'Estifānos (Ethiopia), EMMML mf. 1826, fol. 43v-49v; Church of Astit Kidāna Mehrat (Ethiopia), EMMML mf. 2514, fol. 134v-137r; Monastery of Dabra Zamaddo (Ethiopia), EMMML mf. 6834, fol. 30v-35r; Wallo province (Ethiopia), EMMML mf. 6951, fol. 150r-154r; Monastery of Dāgā Estifānos (Ethiopia), Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, mf. Ṭānāsee 122 = Dāgā Estifānos 11, fol. 9v-14v. According to some manuscripts, the text was translated from Arabic into Ge'ez by the metropolitan Abbā Salāma (1348-1388).

⁹⁶ Number 45 in Wright, *Catalogue*, 1877: 170.

⁹⁷ Matt 10:28.

⁹⁸ BL Or. 687-688, fol. 226r.

was martyred among other virgins. This passage is an allusion to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Indeed in the Greek *Acts*, when Thecla is sentenced to burning, the governor of Iconium demands that the other women, who were instructed by Paul, attend Thecla's trial in the [p. 80] theater so that they may be scared and, we may conjecture, renounce their abstemious way of life.⁹⁹ In some Latin recensions, the governor explicitly demands that the other virgins come and see Thecla's execution.¹⁰⁰ During her trial, Thecla is thus being looked at and encouraged by the other young virgins who are sitting in the theater. Therefore, according to the author of the Ethiopic *Acts of Cyrus and John*, as Thecla was a source of inspiration for the virgins who attended her trial in Iconium, she must also be contemplated as a model and a source of inspiration for the three Alexandrian virgins who were awaiting a fatal condemnation.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the *Acts of Cyrus and John*, both in the *Synaxarium* and the *Gadla Samā 'tāt*, is the only Ge'ez text that unambiguously presents Thecla as a "martyr" (*samā 'et*). Since both versions were translated from Arabic in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this mention of Thecla is certainly not an original addition belonging to the Ge'ez version but comes from Egyptian Arabic sources. The allusion to Thecla is not reflected in the final martyrdom of the three virgins. Indeed, Cyrus, John, and the virgins are all crucified and then beheaded without mention of Thecla either directly or indirectly.¹⁰¹ Neither is Paul alluded to as a model for male martyrs such as Cyrus and John. It seems, therefore, that this passing mention of Thecla is incidental and represents a rather vague memory of Thecla as a perfect martyr. Nevertheless, the *Acts of Cyrus and John* is a precious testimony since it clears up Thecla's ambiguous status by describing her as a genuine martyr.

Conclusion

This brief survey of the figure of Thecla the "Apostolic" has revealed that the saint was fairly famous in classical Ethiopic literature. Especially noteworthy is the *Book of Thecla* (*Maṣḥafa Tēqalā*), the Ge'ez version of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Transmitted as part of a collection of martyrdom stories, the *Book of Thecla* was read alongside other hagiographical texts and enjoyed wide circulation in Ethiopian monastic circles during the medieval period. Therefore, it was not

⁹⁹ Pervo (trans.), *The Acts of Paul*, 2014: § 3.20. See also Vouaux (ed. and trans.), *Les Actes*, 1913: 184-185.

¹⁰⁰ von Gebhardt (ed.), *Die lateinische Übersetzungen*, 1902: 53.

¹⁰¹ See BL Or. 687-688, fol. 226r-v.

considered as an apocryphal work but as a hagiographical text in its own right. It also indicates that Thecla's life was primarily understood and received as a martyrdom story in the [p. 81] Ethiopian tradition. This is confirmed by the literary testimonies of the liturgical *salāms*, the *Epistle of Pelagia* and the *Martyrdom of Cyrus and John*, in which Thecla is generally alluded to as a model of female martyrdom.

As we saw, however, Thecla's status as a martyr is fraught with ambiguity in Ge'ez hagiographical texts. The way she is described varies greatly from one text to another. Whereas the *Synaxarium* presents her as a "confessor" (*ta'amāni*), the *Book of Thecla*, transmitted as part of a collection of martyrdom stories, puts great emphasis on certain martyrological aspects without ever labeling her a "martyr." As for the *Epistle of Pelagia*, Thecla is taken as a model for the female protagonist, even in the description of her ultimate trial. Like Thecla, Pelagia appears as an ambivalent figure, presented as a fully-fledged martyr, but one who does not die during her trial. Finally, the Ge'ez *Acts of Cyrus and John*, unlike the other texts, explicitly states that Thecla is a perfect martyr who deserves to be imitated by three young virgins. Hence, in Ge'ez literature, Thecla appears to be a fluid and elusive figure whose status varies greatly from one text to another. This unsettled status results from her very own peculiar story, in which she weathers excruciating tortures but never dies as a martyr. This ambiguity is perfectly reflected in the Arabic version of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, in which the female saint is straightforwardly described as a "martyr-confessor" (*šahīda mu'tarifa*).¹⁰² Likewise, the Ethiopic literary tradition, wavering between "confessor" and "martyr," evinces the same ambiguity regarding this female saint and her dual role.

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¹⁰² See Davis (ed. and trans.), "An Arabic *Acts*," 2017: 136 and 151.

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