

# To Kill a Matriarchy: Makødda, Queen of Ethiopia and Specters of Pauline Androprimacy in the *Købrä Nägäst*

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## <sup>1</sup>SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how the gendered language that is attributed to the apostle Paul, particularly what I call “androprimacy” (defined as male precedence however conceptualized and deployed), plays out in subtle ways in the narrative delegitimization of Makødda, the queen of Ethiopia, as recounted in the medieval Ethiopic *Købrä Nægäst* (*The Glory of Kings*). Accordingly, I bring gender-theoretical concepts and methods to bear on the objectives of this medieval text and argue that the major concern of its central section is to erode the right to rule of women as instantiated in the legendary figure of Makødda and not, as most scholars have suggested, to legitimate the Solomonic line following the overthrow of the Zag<sup>w</sup>e dynasty by Yek<sup>w</sup>enno 'Amlak in 1270.

## KEYWORDS

Kebrä Nagast, Queen of Sheba, Makeda, Solomon, Ethiopia, Gender Theory

## Introduction

The *Købrä Nægäst* (KN for short), or *The Glory of Kings*, is widely considered among the most important medieval Ethiopian texts and remains one of the most researched sources written in Gø'əz, the classical Ethiopic language.<sup>2</sup> After all, the work purports to recount the legendary

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<sup>2</sup> All references to the KN will give the paragraph number; explicit citations will give the paragraph number followed by the page number, both according to the critical edition of the text, for which see Carl Bezold, *Kebrä Nagast, Die Herrlichkeit der Könige: Nach den Handschriften in Berlin, Oxford und Paris* (Munich: K. B. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1905). All translations are mine, but English translations of the text are

events that transpired some three millennia ago, when Makëdda, queen of the south, heard of Solomon's wisdom and undertook an arduous journey to his court to learn from him. While there, the Israelite king lavishly bestowed his sapience on the Ethiopian queen, who was riveted by his understanding. Solomon's cunning comes into particularly sharp focus, however, as he devises a plot to seduce Makëdda in a sequence of events that will doubtless read to a modern audience as effectively rape - and that only by an overabundance of hermeneutical generosity that I strongly hesitate to extend.<sup>3,4</sup> The result is that Makëdda conceives and on her return homeward journey gives birth to her only son, whom she calls Bäynä Ləḥkəm (በይነ፡ ልሕክም), that is, "son of the wise man"<sup>5</sup>.

When Bäynä Ləḥkəm becomes a man, he travels to Israel to meet his father and as events unfold, Bäynä Ləḥkəm and a younger generation of Israelite notables travel to Ethiopia with the Israelite Ark of the Covenant, where it remains, we are told, to this day. In due course, Bäynä Ləḥkəm becomes the mythical king and founder of the Solomonic dynasty by accepting the throne his mother confers on him following her voluntary abdication.

Scholarly interest in this text has generally focused on questions of dating, sources, reliability, and on teasing out the historical figures that lie behind the sometimes bizarre names as transcribed into the received Gə'əz text.<sup>6</sup>

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readily available online for interested readers and they follow –numeration for ease in finding passages mentioned in the article.

<sup>3</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, *Ethiopia: A Cultural History* (Essex: Lalibela House, 1955), 98-107.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 139-140.

<sup>5</sup> Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, KN32, 28

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Beylot, "Du Kebra Nagast," in *Aethiopica* 7 (2004):74-83; Benjamin Hendrickx, "Political Theory and Ideology in the Kebra Nagast: Old Testament Judaism, Roman-Byzantine Politics, and Ethiopian Orthodoxy," in *Journal of Early Christian History* 2, no.2 (2012): 22-35; David Allan Hubbard, "The Literary Sources of the Kebra

This task is further complicated by the fact that the work is an apparently heavy-handed adaptation into Gə'əz from an Arabic translation of a Coptic original, though the originality of the Coptic text has been questioned.<sup>7</sup> Either way, there is good reason to believe that the *Vorlage*, translated and modified by an Ethiopian group of scholars led by a certain Yəṣṣḥak, was in fact Arabic. As evidence of this, the name Bāynā Ləḥkəm is distinctive in that all the consonants of the second name are in the sixth order,<sup>8</sup> which is to say, that the translators likely transcribed the Arabic as they saw it without vocalization, that is, *بين لحكم*, and did not even modify the letter *lāwe* from the sixth order (Δ) to the first order (Λ), to reflect a standard grammatical construct in Gə'əz that would designate, in this case, parental-filial relation.<sup>9</sup> An Arabic *Vorlage* is further confirmed by the fact that a different manuscript, designated by Bezold as manuscript A, writes his name as ሉብነ: እልሐኪም, that is, again an Arabic alternative, this time *ابن الحكيم* (Ibn al-Ḥakīm). No Coptic, Syriac, or Greek *Vorlage* could give both results. In brief, the *Kəbrä Nəgāšt* has an extremely complicated recension history, whose specifics continue to be debated and have especial bearing on whether the text was penned in the seventh, tenth, or thirteenth century, this last possibility as part of positive propaganda that accompanied the

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Nagast," (PhD diss. University of St. Andrews, 1957); Stuart Munro-Hay, *Quest for the Ark of the Covenant: The True History of the Tablets of Moses* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 16-26; Stuart Munro-Hay, "A Sixth-Century *Kebra Nagast*?" in *Annales d'Éthiopie* 17 (2001): 43-58; Gizachew Tiruneh, "The *Kebra Nagast*: Can Its Secrets Be Revealed?" in *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 8, no.1, 2 (2014): 51-72; and J. Vanderlinden, "An Introduction to the Sources of Ethiopian Law from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," in *Journal of Ethiopian Law* 3, no.1 (1966): 227-302.

<sup>7</sup> Getatchew Haile, "The *Kəbrä Nəgāšt* Revisited," in *Oriens christianus* 93 (2009): 127.

<sup>8</sup> *Classical* Ethiopic uses a syllabary, rather than an alphabet; the "sixth order" refers to the combination of consonants with the vowel of the sixth column, which corresponds either to a zero-vowel consonant or to the quasi-vowel often transcribed as "ə."

<sup>9</sup> Haile, "The *Kəbrä Nəgāšt* Revisited," 127-29.

“restoration” of the Solomonic dynasty by Yekwänno 'Amlak who deposed the Zagwe dynasty around 1270.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, these questions are not without their own merits, but they are hardly relevant to my objectives in this article. What is desperately missing from these scholarly analyses is an examination of the text's representational strategies concerning Makëdda as both a monarch and a woman, whose figure is all the more significant given that she was the last premodern sole-ruling queen of (part of) Ethiopia in her own right, if we take the text at its word. My point is that conspicuously absent from the scholarship on the *Këbrä Nägäšt* is a concerted effort to incorporate much-needed questions from the perspective of gender theory, and specifically with a feminist sensitivity. This lack of nuance and attention is painfully apparent, for instance, in the ways scholars have simply glossed over Solomon's “seduction” of Makëdda as an essentially innocent episode that is eclipsed by her conception of the (male) founder of the Solomonic dynasty, who will permanently supplant her - and all women - on the throne despite the conspicuous fact that Makëdda makes Solomon swear twice by the God of Israel that “you will not force me” (ኢትዮጵያዊያን, KN 29, Bezold 24). Doubtless, she is asking Solomon not to rape her.<sup>11</sup>

A notable exception to this lack of academic interest in the figure of Makëdda is a recent article by Getatchew Haile, who makes the extremely tantalizing proposition that the *Këbrä Nägäšt* might not be, as most scholars assume, anti-Zagwe Solomonic propaganda, but a frontal assault on a tenth-century pagan queen.<sup>12</sup> While I warmly welcome the possible turn in direction that Haile's proposition might signal, his argument remains

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<sup>10</sup> See Munro-Hay, “Sixth-Century *Kebra Nagast*,” 46-56 and Tiruneh, “The *Kebra Nagast*,” 57-70.

<sup>11</sup> No scholar has yet been willing to call this event rape; e.g., Pankhurst, *Ethiopia*, 104; Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 139-140.

<sup>12</sup> Haile, “*Këbrä Nägäšt* Revisited”, 128-29.

largely disinterested in questions of gender and has no appreciable feminist concerns. Accordingly, this article aims to contribute to the study of the intersection of religion and gender in medieval Ethiopian sources that focus on the discursive strategies via which the *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* disempowered monarchic womanhood through the symbolic figure of Makədda.

More specifically, I examine the neutralization of female power as it plays out in Makədda's figure through an integration of two theoretical approaches drawn from the intersection of feminist theory and religious studies. I owe the first approach to Benjamin Dunning, an eminent scholar of early Christianity and gender and women's studies. In his influential monograph, *Specters of Paul*, Dunning proposes that the gendered language used by the apostle Paul in his New Testament epistles continued to "haunt" subsequent Christian authors' articulations of theological anthropology, particularly concerning their conceptualization of sexual difference. Drawing on Derridean "hauntology," Dunning makes a compelling case that "the concept of Pauline 'spectrality' that I have in view renders a clean temporal separation untenable"<sup>13</sup> between Paul (or works attributed to Paul) and subsequent interpreters (including modern interpreters). That is, an anthropological problematic engendered by Pauline (as well as pseudo-Pauline)<sup>14</sup> discourse, continued to press against later Christian thinkers who ultimately proved incapable of resolving it in satisfactory ways. I concur with the points Dunning makes, but I want to take the notion of "Pauline spectrality" that he developed in a somewhat different direction here. I would like to suggest that the gradual

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<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Dunning, *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Here I largely use "Pauline" to refer to the seven authentic Pauline letters, but also to those attributed to them. The reason is that it hardly matters that modern scholars know the pseudepigraphical status of six of Paul's letters, because ancient readers believed that they were Pauline texts and accordingly attributed the same apostolic authority to those letters.

political neutralization of Makëdda in the *Këbrä Nägäšt* might be attributed, in substantial part, to a current of Pauline spectrality that undergirds the text's claims of male power and superiority over women.

That brings us to the second approach. Certainly, the *Këbrä Nägäšt* is at core a patriarchal and androcentric text; these two terms are understood as structures of sex-based discrimination that promote male rule and implicitly or explicitly adopt epistemic and representational angles articulated from a male perspective that precludes all other possibilities of enunciation as valid or relevant. But I would like to suggest that a further sexist structure at work here - one in all likelihood drawn from (pseudo)Pauline discourse - can be understood more fully through the analytical concept of what I call "androprimacy." Androprimacy, as I understand it, is male precedence, however conceptualized and deployed. That means it can take many different forms, from the kind of temporal and ontological androprimacy of Adam over Eve (Gen 1–3), to the Greco-Roman corporeal androprimacy that conceptualized womanhood as inferior instantiations of a male ideal as exemplified in certain texts by Aristotle and Galen, to the ethical and rational androprimacy visible in countless medieval sources, where women were categorically considered men's moral and intellectual inferiors.<sup>15</sup> Androprimacy differs from other analytical and theoretical concepts drawn from gender studies, such as androcentrism, in that it does not only locate the male vision as normative and determinative as the locus of enunciation, but also implies an ontological, political, and ethical hierarchy that cannot be fully explained as rooted in male perspectivism.

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<sup>15</sup> On the gender-theoretical literature on this point see W. Braun, "Body, Character and the Problem of Femeness in Early Christian Discourse," in *Religion and Theology* 9, no.1/2 (2002): 108-17; Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Dale Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 77-102; Robert von Thaden, Jr. *Sex, Christ, and Embodied Cognition: Paul's Wisdom for Corinth* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017); and Johnathan Jodamus, "Gendered Ideology and Power in 1 Corinthians," in *Journal of Early Christian History* 6, no.1 (2016): 29-58.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the structural difference between androprimacy and androcentrism, but one that would take us too far afield to explore in any depth here, is the fact that women might adopt gynocentric perspectives that nonetheless betray androprimal assumptions; one thinks of Anna Komnene, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Jane Austen, all of whom, at least in their published writings, still implicitly considered manhood in one way or another as superior to womanhood, despite their texts being decidedly focused on women.<sup>16</sup> And to be sure, androprimacy is not a solely premodern sexist structure, but remains an active system of sex-based discrimination to this day.

But my specific concern here is to examine how the *Kəbrä Nəgəšt* promotes the disempowerment of women as it plays out in the figure of Makədda. I do so by integrating Dunning's notion of "Pauline spectrality" and my analytical concept of "androprimacy," which in this text functions to legitimate an exclusively male monarchy, that is, political androprimacy, understood as the discriminatory structure that legitimates and undergirds patriarchy by positing the categorical male precedence over women in all things political. In taking this approach, I intend no anachronisms; rather, I want to render a complex and distinctive sexist structure in a premodern text intelligible for modern audiences. Framed this way, I argue that the prosopographical representation of Makədda's gradual loss of power in the *Kəbrä Nəgəšt*, is driven by the specter of Pauline androprimacy in the interest of neutralizing female power as instantiated by the figure of Makədda.

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<sup>16</sup> There is a strong possibility, however, that Sor Juana was being sarcastic (e.g., in *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*) when she made references to femininity as inferior to masculinity, solely to appease the (male) readership, while nevertheless finding ways to promote women's causes with varying degrees of overtness.

## Paul in the Background of the *Këbrä Nägäšt*

The author of the *Këbrä Nägäšt*, such as it has reached us, was thoroughly familiar with Pauline discourse. Not only is the name of Paul himself mentioned a half dozen times in the *Këbrä Nägäšt* (e.g., KN 28, 34, 74, 95, etc.), but quotes from his letters are used authoritatively throughout the text. None of this is surprising, given the eminent status Paul enjoys in virtually all Christian traditions. But my goal is not to determine whether the *Këbrä Nägäšt* used Paul, which is incontestable, but how, specifically, Pauline spectrality might have undergirded the androprimal logic that results in the deposition of Makëdda and, by extension, in the neutralization of female access to power.

This question is more difficult to address, in part because the *Këbrä Nägäšt* does not, in fact, cite any of the conventional Pauline clobber passages that demand female submission to men or that forbid women to teach and hold authority over them. But there is good evidence those texts would have been familiar to the author. For example, KN 74 cites a brief sentence from the *Didaskalia* (a second or third century document on ecclesiastical order and governance originally written in Greek), but it appears that the text used was not a translation of the Arabic but a verbatim quote from the native *Ethiopic Didəsqəlyä* (ED for short).<sup>17</sup> That the author of the original or the translators had the *Didaskalia* before them is fairly certain; but the reason this is significant is that the text cited is immediately preceded and followed by a paraphrase of one of Paul's most distinctively female-oppressing texts - 1 Cor 11:3: "Let a woman subordinate herself to her husband given that the head of woman is man" (ብእሲት፡ ትቴሐት፡ ለምታ፡ እስም፡ ርእሳ፡ ለብእሲት፡ ምታ) and immediately after "And you women, obey your husbands and be subject in lowliness and in fear of God" (ወኣንትንሂ፡

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<sup>17</sup> All references to the EC are from Thomas Pell Platt, *The Ethiopic Didaskalia; or, The Ethiopic Version of the Apostolical Constitutions, Received in the Church of Abyssinia with an English Translation* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1834). English translations are mine.



አንስት፡ ወተቀነያ፡ በትሕትና፡ ወበፈረሀ፡ እግዚአብሔር, ED 2).<sup>18</sup> Doubtless, the verbatim citation of a sentence between these two phrases strongly indicates the author's knowledge of the larger context from which it originated.<sup>19</sup>

But even if this connection can be contested, the absence of quotations from Paul's more misogynistic passages does not preclude the exact same logic of female submission they stipulate from being tacitly inscribed back into the world of the *Kəbrä Nägäşt* by an author who would have unreflexively assumed them - that is the point of spectrality. A contemporary reader of the text would hesitate to believe that Makədda was a submissive Christian wife because she was evidently neither a Christian nor a wife - and indeed, the text itself is to some degree self-conscious of the religious and moral differences between Christians, Israelites, and pre-Christian Ethiopians (e.g., KN 28). Yet that does not

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<sup>18</sup> I am aware of the contested status of this text, and the high likelihood that what was afoot here was Paul's rhetorical reproduction of a debate with the more oppressive Corinthian audience.

See further, Benjamin Merkle, "Paul's Arguments from Creation in 1 Corinthians 11:8-9 and 1 Timothy 2:13-14: An Apparent Inconsistency Answered," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 3 (2006): 527-48; Cynthia Kittredge, "Corinthian Women Prophets and Paul's Argumentation in 1 Corinthians," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation*, ed. R. A. (Horsley, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 103-9; T.W. Martin, "Paul's Argument from Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13-15: A Testicle Instead of a Head Covering," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, vol. 1 (2004): 75-84; James Thompson, "Creation, Shame and Nature in 1 Cor 11:2-16: The Background and Coherence of Paul's Argument" in *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, eds. John Fitzgerald, Thomas Olbricht, and Michael White (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 237-57; Alan Padgett, "Paul on Women in the Church: The Contradictions of Coiffure in 1 Corinthians 11.2-16," *JSNT* 20 (1984): 69-86; and Alan Padgett, "Feminism in First Corinthians: A Dialogue with Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza," *Evangelical Quarterly* 58, vol. 2 (1986): 121-32.

<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Methuen, "For Pagans Laugh to Hear Women Teach': Gender Stereotypes in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*," in *Studies in Church History* 34 (1998): 23-35; and Paul Bradshaw, "Women and Baptism in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*," in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20, no.4 (2012): 641-45.

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keep the author from portraying Makødda precisely as a submissive Christian wife when she comes under the masculine sway of Solomon (see below). Tellingly, the text misses no opportunity to affirm her waning monarchic authority in the face of Solomon's wisdom and power. That is to say, the text does not need to quote (pseudo-)Paul's words "And I do not allow a woman to teach or to be authoritative over a man" (διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω, οὐδὲ αὐθεντεῖν ἄνδρος, 1 Tim 2:12) for the text to portray the dynamics between Solomon and Makødda in exactly that way. My point is that the author anachronistically inscribes Pauline gender normativity and asymmetrical dynamics into the interactions between Makødda and Solomon, which is simply a function of the specter of Pauline androprimacy.

Another telling instantiation of this specter is how the *Kəbrä Nägäšt* handles Eve's figure in light of Paul's exegesis of Gen 1–3 in 1 Tim 2:14 (see below). In that New Testament passage, which seeks to justify why women cannot have authority over men or teach them (the same paradigm that the *Kəbrä Nägäšt* consistently portrays between Makødda and Solomon), (pseudo-)Paul legitimated androprimacy by interpreting the Adam-Eve mythology in an idiosyncratic way.<sup>20</sup> I would maintain that this distinctly (pseudo-)Pauline exegesis of the figure of Eve, again undergirds much of the neutralization of Makødda's power in the *Kəbrä Nägäšt*. The reason women ought not to have authority over men, in (pseudo-)Paul's account, is because Eve, as a symbol of women, had been deceived, while Adam, as a symbol of men, had not (1 Tim 2:14). Accordingly, the author of 1 Tim drew imaginary lines between Eve and all women, and between Adam and all men, that justified, as he supposed, anisometric relations between the sexes by promoting Adam's moral and intellectual precedence over Eve.

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<sup>20</sup> Dunning, *Specters of Paul*, 31-50.

In turn, the *Kəbrä Nəgəšt* replicates the same logic in that it invokes the curse of Eve to bear children as a rationale for why women have no business in ruling - especially when they have sons (KN 36). It refers in appallingly misogynistic ways to women who ruined “good” men by “seducing” them - including, tellingly, Eve’s “seduction” of Adam (KN 64), and finally alleges that Eve, a derivative being from Adam’s side (i.e., a being secondary to Adam’s ontological androprimacy), became his murderer when she caused him to eat from the tree of knowledge (KN 96). What all of these passages have in common is the attempt to cancel out female power or access to it by deploying (pseudo-)Pauline discourse directed at the symbolic imaginary of Eve, which in turn extends it to all women, including, significantly, Makədda. I note all this because I would hold that the specter of Pauline androprimacy still operates, albeit in often tacit ways, in the gendered underpinnings that discursively erode Makədda’s rule as the *Kəbrä Nəgəšt* narrative unfolds. This much becomes apparent in a set of key passages that exhibit a variety of discursive strategies of female disempowerment that are largely aimed at Makədda.

## **The Invisible History from Eve to Makədda**

The *Kəbrä Nəgəšt* spends little time in affirming patriarchal and patrilineal structures by an androcentric narrative erasure of women that is especially poignant with regard to Eve. I would suggest the tacit objective behind this positioning of characters is to establish a normative baseline or a presumed natural order that would implicitly be construed as out of whack during Makədda’s rule. For that reason, the account as early as KN 1–3 already centers on Adam and his male heirs, with no mention of the woman who gave them life (despite the fact that some women are included in various Biblical accounts of generations, including, e.g., Eve, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba). This subtly promotes the notion of androcentrism, patriarchy, and patrilineal descent - indeed, the next fifteen chapters are organized patrilineally. And while it may be supposed that this arrangement of data was simply the norm until modern times, it is

significant that the text hints at a system of matriarchal structures that are the norm in Ethiopia before the queen's encounter with Solomon.

In other words, patrilineal and patriarchal arrangements are not strategically innocent here. From this perspective, we predictably find in KN 1 that it is Adam who is made in the divine image and likeness, and further that it is the body of Adam that Christ will put on. Eve is nowhere mentioned.<sup>21</sup> In my estimation, this representation cannot simply be considered bald androcentrism. I would suggest that it is guided further by a distinct notion of androprimacy - Adam must come first in this account in order to downplay Eve as a subaltern other. This androprimal ordering of events is especially significant because KN 1 does not seem to follow the sequence of Genesis 1:26–27, where God makes humans, male and female, in the divine image. On the contrary, the sequence presented to us is that of Genesis 2:8–25, as defined by the specter of (pseudo-)Pauline androprimacy.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the positioning of Adam and his male heirs at the center (androcentrism) and origin (androprimacy) of this narrative cannot be attributed to a reading of the human origins account as it is retold in Genesis without the author already seeing it through a (pseudo-)Pauline prism. The sequence described in KN 1 hints early on at the ways in which (pseudo-)Paul's interpretative logic of Genesis will inflect the remainder of the narrative concerning gender dynamics.

The reason this matters for the figure of Makēdda is that Adam is not, in the *Kēbrä Nāgāšt*, just the first human; he is the first human monarch. The order instituted by God is an androprimal, patrilineal patriarchy embodied

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<sup>21</sup> Concerning the various interpretative traditions on this topic see Wayne Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religions* 13, no.3 (1974): 165-208; Dunning, *Specters of Paul*, 7-10; Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 77-90; and Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 194-95.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Patterson, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery, & Sexism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 121-53.

by Adam. In effect, his right to patriarchal rule is directly derived from an androprimal point of reference beyond which there can be no regression: a deity socially coded as masculine from whom all things are derived, which is a distinctive aspect of both the Hebrew Bible and (pseudo-)Pauline literature.<sup>23</sup> This dynamic is already distinctly articulated as early as KN 3: “God is king in truth . . . and beneath him he appointed Adam as king over everything that he created” (ንጉሥ: እግዚአብሔር: በአማን . . . ወእምታሕቴሁ: ሢም: ለአዳም: ንጉሥ: ላዕለ: ኩሉ: ዘፈጠረ፤ Bezold 2).<sup>24</sup> The power dynamics that legitimate male primacy as they are recreated here are fairly transparent. The right to rule inheres in some modality of primacy; here, that is the deity’s totalizing primacy. But because the deity is cast by the text as unambiguously masculine, that masculinizing logic then extends to the human being made in the divine image, who is predictably also a man, Adam.

Thus, divine androprimacy passes down further to human androprimacy, and that androprimacy is here cast politically in terms of kingship, that is, patriarchy. And finally, this patriarchy must be inherited by another male, thereby normalizing in addition to patriarchy the patrilineal transmission of power. So we find that when Abel is born (and again no mention is made of Eve), Adam authoritatively pronounces that: “This is my son, and the heir of my kingdom” (ዝንቱ: ወልድያ: ውራሴ: መንግሥት, KN 3, Bezold 2). A similar line of monarchic descent is then reiterated in the case of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (KN 14–15) that later points forward to Moses, the Davidic line, and Christ’s imminent incarnate rule. In brief, the political schematic presented from the outset of the work turns to (pseudo-)Pauline androprimacy to legitimate patriarchal rule and patrilineal transmission of

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<sup>23</sup> Compare with Allan Mohl, “Monotheism: Its Influence on Patriarchy and Misogyny,” in *The Journal of Psychohistory* 43, no.1 (2015): 2-20 and Valerie Saiving, “Androcentrism in Religious Studies,” in *Journal of Religion* 56, no.2 (1976): 177-97.

<sup>24</sup> I use male pronouns for God in my translation here to reflect the male gendering of the deity in the Ethiopic original.

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power by a discursive erasure of Eve, and through her, of all women, including, especially, Makødda.

The *Kəbrä Nägäšt* skips forward and tells us how the *Kəbrä Nägäšt* was itself found (KN 19). Doubtless, this portion of the text is entirely fictitious, as it maintains that the manuscript was found in Hagia Sophia (the Constantinopolitan cathedral) during the rule of Timotheos (r. 511–518), an obvious anachronism given that Hagia Sophia would not be built for another decade and a half. But what is significant are the author's affirmations that the *Kəbrä Nägäšt* gives half the earth to the king of Rome and half the earth to the king of Ethiopia. They are both entitled to these territories because they are descended from Shem, son of Noah, but more significantly, they are also both the sons of Solomon, even if the text emphasizes that the king of Ethiopia is the firstborn and eldest of Solomon's sons as part of its national self-promotion. The point again here is to affirm patrilineal right to rule in Ethiopia.

At precisely this point in the story we are introduced to Makødda, whose family (female) ascendancy is never given, in sharp contradistinction with the extended narrative of patrilineal generations that immediately precede her. Surely this amounts to a deliberate effort to cast her person and rule as out of order with nature and as entirely inconsistent with the patrilineal right to rule affirmed immediately before. For this reason, she remains an opaque, even unmoored, figure.

However, there may be a new and compelling proposition about her identity. Reversing a long scholarly trend, Getatchew Haile has noted that Makødda is nowhere called the queen of Sheba in the *Kəbrä Nägäšt* (an extremely common conflation among scholars, likely triggered by Budge's titling of the *Kəbrä Nägäšt* as *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son*

*Menyelek*).<sup>25</sup> Haile has convincingly argued, instead, that when the text refers to her as the “queen of the south” (ገግሥተ፡ እዙብ, KN 21, Bezold 11), that is precisely how the text means to portray her.<sup>26</sup> In fact, he has gone so far as to suggest that her name in Arabic, by his rendition *Mā kazā* (“not so”), is meant to differentiate her from Bilqis, the queen of Saba in Yemen.<sup>27</sup> His reasoning is that “the target of the *Kəbrä Nəgāšt* was a pagan woman ruler, either the Candace of Nubia or ʿĪslantāne of Damot.”<sup>28</sup> I find Haile’s case for Damot to be especially convincing, given the queendom’s geographical location directly south of the Ethiopian empire and given the fact that a tenth-century Christian author would have better reason to hold this queendom in enmity, which by all accounts had given military trouble to the southern regions of the Ethiopian empire. In contrast, by the tenth century “Nubia” (the southern Nubian kingdom of Alodia to the northwest of the Ethiopian empire), was committedly Christian and had long since foregone its matriarchal governmental structure.<sup>29</sup> Haile, however, did not disentangle at least two further questions that his article implicitly raises by suggesting this identification. First, what is the connection between ʿĪslantāne of Damot as a historical figure and Makədda as a narratively-constructed character? Second, how does the narrative in the *Kəbrä Nəgāšt* attempt to disempower ʿĪslantāne/Makədda?

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<sup>25</sup> E. A. Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek. A Complete Translation of the Kebra Nagast and Introduction*. (London: Medici Society, 1922).

<sup>26</sup> Haile, “*Kəbrä Nəgāšt* Revisited,” 129-32.

<sup>27</sup> I am not convinced by this explanation, which seems to be derived from her rejection of “pagan” customs in Ethiopia which must be done “not so.” This much is clarified in KN 91.

<sup>28</sup> Haile, “*Kəbrä Nəgāšt* Revisited,” 129.

<sup>29</sup> See further Ayda Bouanga, *Le Damot dans l'histoire de l'Éthiopie (XIIIe-XXe siècles: recompositions religieuses, politiques et historiographiques* (Paris: Université Panthéon-Sorbonn, 2013); Ayda Bouanga, “Le royaume du Damot: enquête sur une puissance politique et économique de la Corne de l’Afrique (XIIIe siècle),” *Annales d’Éthiopie* 29 (2014): 27-58; Jacke Phillips, “Women in Ancient Nubia,” in *Women in Antiquity: Real Women Across the Ancient World*, eds. Stephanie Lynn Budin and Jean Macintosh Turfa, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 280-97; Laurence Kirwan and Tomas Hägg, eds. *Studies on the History of Late Antiquity and Christian Nubia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

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I would have desired to see Haile say more concerning the first question, particularly because it is difficult to imagine that the author of the *Këbrä Nägäšt* was simply conflating two women who lived, ostensibly, two millennia apart. There are also several problems if we try to draw allegorical or symbolic lines between Makëdda and 'Ēslantäne. For example, it is difficult to suppose why the author would have chosen to portray a southern queen, whom the *Këbrä Nägäšt* spends extensive narrative resources trying to neutralize, in as positive a way as it does if she had indeed been a thorn in the Christian Ethiopians' side. That is, while the *Këbrä Nägäšt*, on my reading, does in fact attempt to wrest monarchic power from women, its portrayal of Makëdda is nonetheless remarkably aggrandizing, so much so that it would be difficult to find an analogue in all of premodern Christian literature even among the most eulogizing of hagiographies, with the perhaps predictable exception of the virgin Mary. Sylvia Pankhurst underlines this point when she observes: "We are impressed throughout the pages of this old book by the profound esteem expressed therein for the intellectual wisdom and ability of the Queen, which seems to be a reflection of the great authority traditionally wielded in Ethiopia by the Queen Mother during the minority of the Sovereign and of the high status of the Ethiopian woman in relation to property and matrimonial affairs."<sup>30</sup> I concur: at no point in the text is Makëdda represented as a cruel, impious, or foolish ruler; quite the opposite is true.

But this highly positive representation of Makëdda leaves us in a bind. My most honest assessment is that we probably do not possess sufficient evidence to propose a fully satisfactory answer. Nonetheless, I do want to propose two points that might at least shed some light on the matter. First, I concur with Haile, noted above, that the text of the *Këbrä Nägäšt* is driven in large part by an impulse to de-legitimate female rule. But I would argue further that Makëdda might in fact have been the best avenue to

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<sup>30</sup> Pankhurst, *Ethiopia*, 102-3.



disempower a female monarch (perhaps a contemporary one) that the author may have had in mind. Why do I say this? Because we do not need to conflate or somehow find point-by-point analogies between Makëdda and 'Eslantäne (or whatever other sole-ruling queen) for the discursive strategies of female disempowerment of the *Këbrä Nägäšt* to be effective.

The *Këbrä Nägäšt* only needs to make the point that women should not rule *in toto*. And is it therefore not reasonable that the *Këbrä Nägäšt* would choose precisely the best exemplar imaginable of female rule as the best case against it? In other words, if the *Këbrä Nägäšt* had chosen to focus its argument against women holding political power by picking a particularly hate-worthy queen, one could simply object that that particular woman was unsuitable to rule due to her uniquely terrible character or personality, but that would not effectively preclude the entire sex from ruling. Indeed, positive and negative portrayals of other medieval sole-ruling women elsewhere, as in the Roman Empire, can be found.<sup>31</sup> But on the other hand, the neutralization of the finest exemplar of a queen could indeed have been regarded as extending to the entire female sex. And that, I would suggest, might underpin the choice of Makëdda to delegitimize the less-than-palatable queen the author may have had in view. And this logic does not proceed with regard to character or qualifications, but again has a hint of the totalizing and categorically-exclusionary thinking of (pseudo-)Pauline androprimal discourse.

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<sup>31</sup> See for example Michael Psellus, *Chronographia*. trans. E.R.A. Sewter. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), 113-8. This section speaks fairly negatively about the rule of Theodora and Zoe, which is not directed at their ability to rule in their capacity as women, but as people with character flaws.

Other historians of women rulers look back with affection on the rule of sole-standing women monarchs, such as Eirene of the Roman Empire. For this example, see Mango, Cyril and Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophane the Confessor*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 650-59.

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Addressing the second question I posed above is as much a matter of reading what is expressly written in the *Këbrä Nägäšt* as it is of detecting the constitutive silences that tacitly legitimate the termination of Makëdda's rule. For example, it is surely significant that the text never says, in as many words, *why* women should not rule. That is, the text never tells us "women should not rule *because* . . ." And I would argue that what matters most, in a sense, is the absence of that "because." I say this because a reason is in fact given, but it is made up of a complex representative narrative; the reason as such is never articulated or affirmed as an express formula, but then again it does not need to be. After all, one can more easily dispute clearly enounced propositional content than the entire narrative arc that gradually erodes Makëdda's right to power. This latter mode of argumentation cannot easily be countered with a logical alternative, because it is not primarily driven by a syllogistic, but by a literary and representational structure that requires a stylistically-commensurate response. For these reasons, I begin with what the *Këbrä Nägäšt* does expressly affirm concerning the illegitimacy of sole women rulers and then examine the narrative underpinnings that attempt to justify those affirmations through delegitimizing representational devices.

The *Këbrä Nägäšt* states three times that after Makëdda women must never again rule in Ethiopia. The author perhaps attempted to enhance the authority of these pronouncements by putting them twice in the mouth of Makëdda herself and once in the mouth of one of her emissaries, a merchant who was simply conveying her wishes. The text that subverts for the first time the notion that women should rule seems to suppose that the reader is unaware of the fact that "there was an ordinance in the country of Ethiopia that a virgin woman (ብእሲት፡ ድንግል) reign who did not marry a man (ኢያውሰበት፡ ብእሴ),” but that is soon to end, as Makëdda allegedly adds immediately after that only a man of Solomon's seed “will reign from among your family (እምዘመድከ) and a woman will never reign (ወኢትንገሥኡ፡ ብእሲትክ)” (KN 33, Bezold 28). Soon after, an emissary of Makëdda

effectively repeats her injunction to Solomon to bless and anoint their son and tellingly adds: “and make him king of our country (ወአንግሥአ፡ ለብሔርን) and order him that a woman not rule (ኢትንገሥ፡ ብእሲት) forever and ever” (KN 36, Bezold 33). And finally, as the book nears its end, Makødda abdicates her throne to her son (now renamed Dawit or Dabit) and makes the nobles of Ethiopia take an oath by heavenly Zion that: “women will not reign on the throne of the empire of Ethiopia (ኢታንግሡ፡ አንስት፡ ውስተ፡ መንበረ፡ መንግሥተ፡ ኢትዮጵያ), but only the male seed of David, son of Solomon, forever (ዘእንበለ፡ ዘርኡ፡ ለዳዊት፡ ወልድ፡ ሰሎሞን፡ ንጉሥ፡ ትባዕተ፡ እስከ፡ ለዓለም); and women will not rule (ወኢታንግሡ፡ አንስተ) forever and ever” (KN 87, Bezold 112). Of course, the loyal nobles obey the last wish of their queen without question. These three texts are the bulk of positive affirmations that women ought not to rule in Ethiopia. But it is conspicuous that none of these passages gives an explanation for *why* women should never again rule in Ethiopia. This leads us to the subtle reasons embedded in the text that offer precisely that explanation, though with literary slant.

This narrative strategy begins, as I have already suggested, from the moment Adam is introduced, but it becomes all the more pronounced as Makødda herself is presented for the first time. As it is, she seems to appear out of nowhere, following nearly two dozen chapters that largely recount the patrilineal transmission of authority in an unbroken sequence that goes through Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, to Noah, to Adam, to God (KN 1–18). For that reason I hesitate to interpret the sudden introduction of Makødda without lineage as entirely incidental. Rather, this narrative isolation already indicates her alterity, her deviation from the androcentric, patrilineal norm. Indeed, this introduction is further complicated in light of KN 33, just overviewed, where we are told that only virgin women can be queens. But the upshot of this structure, as the text portrays it, is that the transmission of power before Makødda meets Solomon may not be strictly matrilineal - we are not even told how precisely a woman comes to power, but given the fact that a queen must be a virgin to remain a queen, there is

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a strong possibility that women become queens through a different avenue than matrilineal succession. And the *Købrä Nägäst* tellingly shows no interest in explaining how that works.

After the *Købrä Nägäst* introduces Makødda, it speaks of a merchant who regularly goes to Israel to trade, where he learns about Solomon and brings reports concerning his wisdom back to Makødda (KN 22-23). Makødda had already been portrayed as an impressively rich monarch when she was first introduced, but when she finishes hearing her merchant's news, she is struck dumb with wonder (KN 24-25). It is impossible to un-gender this moment, of course, particularly because the more she hears about Solomon, the more desirous she becomes to be taught by him, which already foreshadows the subordinate position she will take to his male wisdom, which in turn becomes the thread that weaves her political downfall together. In other words, this moment hints at his allegedly superior intellectual capacities that will gradually result in her loss of power.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the very first words that Makødda speaks to Solomon are self-abasing - the fact that they are rhetorical noise is irrelevant as far as the power dynamics go. Makødda maintains that she would be content with being Solomon's lowest female slave so that she could wash his feet while listening to his wisdom (KN 26). Little here aspires to place the female and male monarchs on equal footing, and little about their subsequent conversations changes that hierarchization. For example, in KN 28 Solomon convinces Makødda to abandon her religious practices and become, it appears, a monotheist like him (if he indeed was one). This change happens after he extensively teaches Makødda, in what is doubtless a narrative representation of androprimacy (pseudo)Pauline domestic dynamics, where the woman must ask her man to learn anything at all (e.g., 1 Cor 14:35). Tellingly, in KN 29 Makødda refers to herself as a fool before having met Solomon, but by his male influence she has become wise herself. But that is simply to say that power, instantiated as wisdom in this schema, only flows in one direction, and that is vertically from a male

androprimal point of higher origin downward to a woman who is literarily cast as his inferior.

These anisometric dynamics are far from inconsequential and ultimately prove to be Makødda's undoing. This much is painfully apparent in the fact that already in this same section (KN 29), Solomon has begun to plan how to trick Makødda so that he can rape her and, showing that little has changed over many centuries, transfer the blame onto her afterward. To that end, he asks her to stay with him for the night, to which she consents, but only if he makes an oath that he will not take her by force. Solomon agrees, but with the caveat that she must also swear not to take anything from his kingdom. At this, Makødda laughs, being certain that there is nothing in Solomon's kingdom that she would desire to take by force. But Solomon's agreement is just a trick, because he has already fed her meats that will parch her throat so that as the night continues, she wakes up desperate to drink. Conveniently, Solomon has had his servants put a basin full of *his* water near her so that as she attempts to drink from it, he can claim that she has violated their agreement and so demands to be released from his end of the bargain.<sup>32</sup> After he allows her to drink from the water, the text tells us: "And he did his will and they slept together (ገብረ: ፈቃድ: ወኖሙ: ጎብረ)" (KN 30, Bezold 25). While the story could have chosen any number of ways for Makødda to conceive for the sake of plot development (one thinks of consensual sex), this particular sequence of events humiliates Makødda: intellectually by turning her laugh at Solomon's earlier request around against herself, and psycho-somatically by raping her. Put simply, this entire episode amounts to a narrativization of Solomon's intellectual and physical superiority over Makødda through domination.

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<sup>32</sup> For some commentary, see Pankhurst, *Ethiopia*, 104; Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 138-41; Haile, "Kəbrä Nägäšt Revisited", 127. Absent from any of these sources is any kind of decrying of this sexual encounter as in any way violent.

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Solomon's rape of Makëdda is the turning point in the narrative that sets her downfall into irreversible motion. By raping her, he has effectively removed the legal conditions that allow her to rule, as we are told soon after that only virgin women can be queens in Ethiopia (KN 33). This particular note, only a few pages after Solomon has sexually assaulted her, is a not-so-subtle reminder that she has lost, even by the law of her own country, the right to rule. But as with numerous other hints at her unfitnes to rule that the *Këbrä Nägäšt* drops here and there, the text never explicitly makes this connection. Rather, it goes about asserting Solomon's androprimacy that symbolically is meant to extend to all men, while her subjection and subordination to Solomon is meant to reflect a relative normativity in gender dynamics - and this logic of hierarchization again goes back to (pseudo-)Pauline discourse.

Once the text has made these points, we increasingly see signs that her power is eroding, but these, once more, are written into the text in subtle ways that are, for that, all the more dangerous. For instance, once Makëdda's son has become an adult and travels to meet Solomon, we find a tiresome reiteration of how similar he is to his father - indeed, he is so similar that the king's servants confuse them (KN 34–39). What this amounts to, I would suggest, is another instantiation of androprimacy that intimates Solomon's biophysiological superiority over Makëdda. In effect, Solomon's male power is such that he has effectively erased any trace of Makëdda's body from her son's body, which is perhaps a symbol for her rapidly vanishing power and a way of signaling the impending patriarchy in Ethiopia.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> There is little evidence to know, one way or another, whether Ethiopian medical beliefs held to a two-seed or one-seed reproductive system and it is entirely possible that, as in the Greco-Roman world, both options might be conceptually available to an author depending on what point that author may have wanted to make.

A further example of the erosion of Makødda's authority in the aftermath of her rape emerges as Ethiopians and Israelites debate about which country is better. The Ethiopians mount a vehement defense, claiming that they have by far the better climate and food, but they imply that Israel's king is greater by virtue of his wisdom (KN 35). Put another way, Makødda's subjects are ready to defend their nice weather and superior culinary prowess, but affirming their own queen's greatness in the face of male power appears to be a bridge too far. In brief, many further examples of this kind can be found across the narrative until Makødda steps down in favor of her son (KN 86–88). And yet, her abdication at that stage in the narrative is only the culmination of a mounting case against her rule that is narrativized in subtle ways that deploy and redeploy (pseudo)Pauline androprimal language in the interest of delegitimizing her political authority until that is precisely what happens. The result is that by the end of the central section of the *Købrä Nägäšt* (i.e., KN 20–89), which tells the Makødda-Solomon story, the text has inscribed normative (pseudo-)Pauline gender dynamics into that ancient context and has effectively neutralized one of the most impressive female monarchical figures found in all of premodern literature.

## Conclusion

This essay has made a brief contribution to the study of the *Købrä Nägäšt* by bringing gender-theoretical approaches and analytical resources to bear on the narrative and representational strategies deployed to neutralize women's power as instantiated by the central female figure, Makødda, queen of the south. Although the text itself has enjoyed substantial scholarly attention, I believe I have identified a significant gap in secondary literature concerning the study of gender and particularly how Christian androprimal discourse, largely derived from the (pseudo-)Pauline corpus, came to dominate and subdue Makødda's literary persona in the face of Solomon. I especially drew attention to the absence of overt answers as to why women, such as Makødda, ought not to rule in Ethiopia and suggested

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that these answers are provided through subtle narrative events that gradually erode Makëdda's authority and standing.

If so, the narrative may perhaps be, as Getatchew Haile has suggested, an attempt to delegitimize women's rule in the Ethiopian environs in response, perhaps, to queen 'Eslantäne of Damot in the tenth century, and not a narrative of Solomonic legitimacy, which claim is highly problematic in the face of the dearth of historical or circumstantial evidence to indicate that Ethiopian rulers before Yek'wönno 'Amlak (r. 1270–1285) staked their right to rule on Solomon's figure.<sup>34</sup> Rather, I would like to conclude by noting that when scholarship does not replicate the androcentric and androprimal structures that already guide the *Këbrä Nägäšt* - and indeed most premodern texts - and accords women a central position in the retelling, new vantage points become possible, which in turn facilitate a more nuanced engagement with the text's cultural and social fabric that questions patriarchal discourse and the narrative structures deployed to legitimize it by female erasure.

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<sup>34</sup> Haile, "Këbrä Nägäšt Revisited," 128-31.



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