



The Apostolic Life of Walatta- Petros

By Bridget
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In the year 1591, in the east African empire of Ethiopia—a place that had practiced a form of Orthodox Christianity since antiquity (cf. Acts 8:26–40)—a monk approached the nobleman Bahir-Saggad to prophesy the birth of a daughter. The monk told him:

I have seen a great vision, with a bright sun dwelling in the womb of your wife Kristos-Ebayaa: A beautiful daughter who will shine like the sun to the ends of the world will be born to you. She will be a guide for the blind of heart, and the kings of the earth and the bishops will bow to her. From the four corners of the world, many people will assemble around her and become one community—people pleasing God.¹

The next year, a daughter was indeed born to Bahir-Saggad and Kristos-Ebayaa, a daughter who would grow up to lead a successful resistance against the attempted colonization and conversion of Ethiopia by Portuguese and Spanish Jesuits. Her story, recorded just thirty years after her death by her hagiographer Galawdewos, is one that powerfully addresses the challenges faced by women who set out to serve the Lord with their whole hearts. These challenges included imprisonment for the Gospel, sexual assault, friction between familial expectations and the call of God (Luke 14:26), and conflict with men in authority who refused to accept that God calls women. Her account is the earliest known biography of an African woman and the only one from this era to be written



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from an African perspective. Her name was Walatta-Petros (1592–1642), and this is her story.

The name “Walatta-Petros” means “daughter of Peter,” and as translator Wendy Laura Belcher explains, just as we would not shorten the name “Peterson” to “Peter” or “Son,” her name should not be abbreviated to “Walatta” or “Petros.”² Her hagiographer exulted, “She truly was worthy of this name of Walatta-Petros since the son of a king becomes a king and the son of a priest becomes a priest; and just as Peter became the head of the apostles, she likewise became the head of all religious teachers.”³ Elsewhere he surmised, “As the Lord said three times to Peter, ‘Tend my sheep,’ so to her likewise he conferred the tending of his sheep in the pasture of meritorious spiritual struggle.”⁴ These are just a few of the many places where Galawdewos likens Walatta-Petros to a prophet or apostle. Curiously, his comparisons are always to male prophets and apostles; female biblical figures in these roles such as Miriam, Deborah, and Junia are never invoked.⁵

Like many young noblewomen, Walatta-Petros had an arranged marriage in her teens to the king’s right-hand man, Malkiya-Kristos, with whom she had three children. But while many modern-day churches teach women that their primary spiritual calling in life is to become wives and bear and raise children, Walatta-Petros is one of many women in church history who expressed complicated feelings about maternity. However, her three children did not survive; as a result, Walatta-Petros accepted her maternal fate and pursued God’s further calling on her life through other means.

Around this time, King Susinyos, emperor of Ethiopia, converted to what Galawdewos repeatedly called “the filthy faith of the Europeans”—Roman Catholicism—and her husband, Malkiya-Kristos, converted with him. Belcher explains that while most Ethiopian court members converted to Catholicism for political reasons, their wives refused to submit to them and clung to Orthodox Christianity, so that Ethiopian resistance to European colonization was ultimately female-led.⁶ So it was that while Malkiya-Kristos was away on a military campaign, twenty-four-year-old Walatta-Petros ran away from home to become a nun. When he heard of her betrayal, Malkiya-Kristos pursued her.

Upon realizing that her husband would soon overtake her, Walatta-Petros used scriptural texts to liken her distressing situation to marital rape. She referred to Sarah’s false marriages to the kings of Egypt and Gerar,

as well as the apocryphal Susanna's plight before the lecherous elders. "God's will be done! He can save me; to him nothing is impossible. He who saved Sarah from the hands of Pharoah, the king of Egypt, and from the hands of Abimelech, king of Gerara, he will also save me. He who saved Susanna from the hands of the old men, he will also save me."⁷ Malkiya-Kristos treated Walatta-Petros abusively when he caught up to her, and she was forced to reconcile with him, but this did not last. After Malkiya-Kristos was involved in the murder of an Orthodox patriarch, Walatta-Petros left him to become a nun again. This time her husband relented and let her depart. This account certainly raises complicated questions about the appropriateness of separation and divorce in response to spousal abuse.



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In 1622, Susinyos made Roman Catholicism the official religion of the Ethiopian empire, and from this point in the narrative, Walatta-Petros effectively became a resistance leader, one who caused the king much consternation. Like other apostles, she received a visit from Jesus Christ, who foretold the imprisonment she was about to endure and the mighty works she would accomplish. Yet the suggestion of becoming a leader of others terrified the nun. "How will I be able to save others, I who cannot save myself?" she asked. "Am I not mud, and a pit of filthy sludge?" Jesus reportedly responded, "Even mud, when it is mixed with straw, becomes strong and enduring and can hold grain. You, too, I will make likewise strong."⁸

Before long, Walatta-Petros was captured and imprisoned by the king. While imprisoned, she suffered forced attempts at conversion. She was made to listen to the preaching and teaching of Jesuit theologians, but according to Galawdewos, "She argued with them, defeated them, and embarrassed them. . . Rather, she laughed and made fun of them."⁹ Elsewhere, her hagiographer explained that Walatta-Petros was beautiful, but "the outer beauty of her appearance was surpassed by the inner beauty of her mind."¹⁰ Refuting conventional expectations of feminine beauty, Galawdewos urged readers to seek out godliness rather than beauty. He pointed out that Rachel was beautiful while Leah was "ugly," but God chose Leah and favored her in the bearing of children and the "birth of Judah from whose seed Christ was born."¹¹ This female-empowering reading of the Jacob-Rachel-Leah triangle likely originates with the teaching of Walatta-Petros herself.

The jailer of Walatta-Petros also tortured her, attempted to seduce her, and made up his mind to sexually assault her after she rejected him. She was divinely protected from his advances and soon made him one of her converts. Between this account and Walatta-Petros's take on her convoluted marital situation, the story of Walatta-Petros is refreshingly frank about the prevalence of women's experiences with sexual assault, giving voice to that which many women throughout history have suffered in silence.

After her release, Walatta-Petros began to travel the lands of Ethiopia, founding monasteries for both monks and nuns and presiding over them. Galawdewos repeatedly records her confidently performing miracles and having her prayers answered, much like the biblical apostles. The king soon converted back to Ethiopian Orthodoxy and the European Catholic incursion was driven back.

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Throughout her life, male religious leaders repeatedly challenged Walatta-Petros's authority. On one such occasion, some "resentful theologians arose. . . giving vent to their resentment against our Holy Mother Walatta-Petros with satanic zeal when they saw that all the world followed her, that she was greater than and superior to them, and that they ranked below her. . . Therefore, they said to her, 'Is there a verse in the scriptures that states that a woman. . . can be a religious leader and teacher? This is something that scripture forbids to a woman [in 1 Tim 2:12].'"¹² Many modern women who are preachers, pastors, and teachers may empathize with such challenges to their ministries from "resentful theologians."

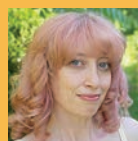
Surprisingly, Walatta-Petros was defended by Father Fatla-Sillasé, a great theologian described as "the teacher of the entire world." Father Fatla Sillasé said to them: "Did God not raise her up for our chastisement because we have become corrupt, so that God appointed her and gave our leadership role to her, while dismissing us?"¹³ This defense is similar to that which many male headship advocates offer for Deborah's leadership and authority (Judges 4:4): she was only called due to a lack of worthy and able men. Yet in this case, Father Fatla-Sillasé understood this explanation as supporting her ministry, rather than as being a reason to deter it.

At age fifty, sensing that she would pass away soon, Walatta-Petros appointed another woman—her friend and close confidante Eheta-Kristos—as her successor, an act that her hagiographer likened to Elijah appointing Elisha. Galawdewos recorded that twenty-seven miracles followed the approximately forty days from her death in November to the end of that year. Today, Ethiopia stands as one of the few non-European countries to have never been a colony of Europe, something that can be partially traced back to Walatta-Petros's leadership and resistance.

The hagiographical account of Walatta-Petros tells the story of an inspiring but complicated woman. Some may balk at her apparent callousness towards the deaths of her children or question whether it was biblical to abandon her marriage to become a nun. Yet her message is one that most Christians can grasp: our sinful flaws may make us mud and filth, but Jesus will mix straw with us and make us strong and enduring. In this way, may we all come to see Walatta-Petros as our mother.

Notes

1. Galawdewos, *The Life of Walatta-Petros: A Seventeenth Century Biography of an African Woman, Concise Edition*, translated and edited by Wendy Laura Belcher and Michael Kleiner, Kindle edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 6.
2. Wendy Laura Belcher, "Introduction," in Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, x.
3. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 9.
4. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 9.
5. Miriam is mentioned, but not in comparison to Walatta-Petros. Rather, a male leader who spoke out against Walatta-Petros is compared to Miriam and Aaron speaking out against Moses. See Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 83.
6. Belcher, "Introduction," ix.
7. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 17.
8. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 45–46.
9. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 53.
10. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 9.
11. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 10.
12. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 110.
13. Galawdewos, *Life of Walatta-Petros*, 110.



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