

Biblical Typology and Popular Mariology in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: The Ark, the Theotokos, and the "Covenant of Mercy"

Belay Sitotaw Goshu¹, Muhammad Ridwan²

¹Department of Physics, Dire Dawa University, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia

²Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

Abstract

Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity, one of the oldest Christian traditions in the world, is distinguished by its profound and pervasive devotion to the Virgin Mary, leading to Ethiopia's designation as the "country of Mary" (Mängästa Maryam). This review examines the biblical typology, doctrinal formulations, liturgical sources, and popular expressions of Marian devotion within the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, arguing that Ethiopian Mariology constitutes a distinctive theological synthesis wherein biblical interpretation, patristic theology, African cultural patterns, and lived piety converge to position Mary as the living bridge between the divine and the human, the Old and New Covenants, and theological orthodoxy and lived African Christianity. The analysis explores four major typological paradigms, Mary as the Ark of the Covenant, the New Eve, the Queen Mother (Gebira), the Theotokos, and demonstrates how these foundations are articulated through doctrinal affirmations of Mary's sinlessness, perpetual virginity, and exaltation above all creatures. The Covenant of Mercy (Kidane Mehret), a uniquely Ethiopian theological construct, functions as a crucial bridge between official doctrine and popular piety, offering the faithful assurance of divine mercy through Mary's intercession. The review surveys liturgical and para-liturgical sources including the Ta'amra Maryam (Miracles of Mary), the Weddase Mariam (Praises of Mary), and the Synaxarion, examining how these texts shape and sustain Marian devotion. Situating Ethiopian Mariology within its African cultural context, the review explores matrifocal retentions, the integration of the Queen of Sheba tradition, and the distinctive Ethiopian iconographic tradition of the Black Madonna. The review concludes that Ethiopian Orthodox Mariology offers a theologically profound, biblically grounded, and culturally authentic vision of Mary that enriches global Christianity and contributes to the study of African Christianity, biblical reception history, and the relationship between elite theology and popular piety.

Keywords

Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church; Mariology; Biblical Typology; Ark of the Covenant; Theotokos; Covenant of Mercy (Kidane Mehret); Ta'amra Maryam; African Christianity; Matrifocality; Popular Piety



I. Introduction

1.1 Setting the Stage: Ethiopia as the "Country of Mary"

Ethiopia occupies a singular position within the global Christian tradition. It is one of the few countries where Christianity was introduced prior to the schism of the one Christian Church, with the Kingdom of Aksum adopting Christianity as its official religion under King Ezana around 340 CE. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) thus constitutes the only pre-colonial Christian church in sub-Saharan Africa, originating in one of the earliest Christian kingdoms. As an Oriental Orthodox church, the EOTC shares the same doctrine, canon, and tradition as the other Oriental Orthodox churches, having been part of the Coptic Church until it was granted autocephaly in 1959. The church's name incorporates the Ge'ez word *tewahedo*, meaning "unity," which expresses its miaphysite Christological confession.

Within this ancient Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary, known as Kidist Mariam in Ethiopia, occupies a place of unparalleled prominence. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church teaches that the Virgin “has a very special place in the Ethiopian cult, and devotion to our Mother holds the highest place” and that “Ethiopia is known as the country of Mary, her protectress” (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 2). She is venerated “especially for her supreme grace and the call she received from God” and is believed to be “holier than the Cherubim and Seraphim,” enjoying “unquestionably greater glory than all the other saints” (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 4–5). The Church further teaches that she “is loved by her Son so dearly that He will grant her every prayer,” a conviction that undergirds the profound intercessory role she plays in the spiritual life of the faithful (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 2).

The sheer scale of Marian devotion in Ethiopia is remarkable. The EOTC maintains more than 30 feasts of Mary in a single liturgical year, and the name “Mary” (Maryam) is “the most popular, both for men and women” (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 5). Countless churches across Ethiopia are erected in her honour, reflecting her centrality within the ecclesiastical landscape (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 5). These feasts range from her Nativity (Lideta Maryam), celebrated on 9 May (1 Ginbot in the Ethiopian calendar), to her Dormition (Filseta), which is commemorated with a two-week fast culminating in a major celebration. The liturgical calendar of the EOTC, as recorded in the Senksar (Synaxarium), assigns the Virgin Mary “exceptional prominence through 33 dedicated feasts” (Grokikipedia, 2026, para. 3).

1.2 Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Despite the overwhelming presence of Marian devotion in Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, a significant gap persists between the theological-typological frameworks articulated in the church’s doctrinal and liturgical texts and the everyday devotional practices of the faithful. While scholarly attention has been devoted to aspects of Ethiopian Mariology, such as the role of Emperor Zara Yaqob in codifying Marian feasts, the manuscript tradition of the Ta’amra Maryam (Miracles of Mary), and the theological significance of the Kebra Nagast, there remains a need for a systematic synthesis that examines how biblical interpretation, doctrinal formulation, and popular piety converge in the Ethiopian context. The present review addresses this gap by posing the following research questions:

- a. How does Ethiopian Orthodox theology construct Mary’s identity through biblical typology, particularly through the lenses of the Ark of the Covenant, the New Eve, and the Queen Mother (Gebira)?
- b. What are the doctrinal foundations of Mary’s veneration as Theotokos (Mother of God), and how do titles such as ’Ēmmā-Bərhan (Mother of Light) and Kidist Mariam (Holy Mary) articulate her unique status within the economy of salvation?
- c. How does the “Covenant of Mercy” (Kidane Mehret) function as a theological bridge between official doctrine and popular piety, and what does this distinctive Ethiopian tradition reveal about the nature of Marian intercession?
- d. In what ways does Ethiopian Mariology reflect distinctively African cultural patterns, including matrifocal retentions and the integration of traditions such as the Queen of Sheba narrative?
- e. How do liturgical and para-liturgical texts, including the Ta’amra Maryam (Miracles of Mary), the Weddase Mariam (Praises of Mary), the Arganonä Maryam (The Organ of Mary), and the Synaxarion, shape and sustain popular Marian devotion?

1.3 Problem Statement

This review argues that Ethiopian Orthodox Mariology constitutes a distinctive theological synthesis wherein biblical typology (Mary as Ark of the Covenant, New Eve, and Queen Mother), doctrinal affirmation (Mary as Theotokos and sinless Mother of God), and popular piety (the Covenant of Mercy, miracle traditions, and liturgical veneration) converge to position Mary not merely as the preeminent saint but as the living bridge between the divine and the human, the Old and New Covenants, and theological orthodoxy and lived African Christianity.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Biblical and Typological Foundations

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's veneration of the Virgin Mary rests upon a sophisticated hermeneutical framework that interprets the Scriptures typologically that is, reading Old Testament persons, events, and institutions as foreshadowing their New Testament fulfillments. This typological approach, deeply rooted in patristic exegesis and distinctively developed within the Ethiopian tradition, establishes Mary as the interpretive key that unlocks the unity of the two Testaments. Four major typological paradigms Mary as the Ark of the Covenant, Mary as the New Eve, Mary as the Queen Mother (Gebira), and the direct New Testament witnesses, together constitute the biblical foundation upon which Ethiopian Mariology is constructed.

2.2 The Ark of the Covenant Typology

The typological identification of Mary with the Ark of the Covenant represents perhaps the most distinctive and theologically significant element of Ethiopian Mariology. In the Old Testament, the Ark served as the dwelling place of God's presence among His people, the locus of the Shekinah, the divine glory that rested upon the mercy seat between the cherubim (Exodus 25:10–22). The Ark contained the tablets of the Law, the manna, and Aaron's rod, symbolizing God's covenant, provision, and priestly authority. As the physical manifestation of God's immanent presence, the Ark occupied the Holy of Holies, accessible only to the high priest once annually.

The patristic tradition early discerned in the Ark a prefiguration of Mary. Church Fathers including Athanasius of Alexandria and Ephrem the Syrian identified Mary as the New Ark, the living vessel who carried within her womb the Word made flesh. Ephrem, in particular, developed this typology with poetic richness, celebrating Mary as the Ark "overlaid with gold" who contained the divine presence. Irenaeus of Lyons, while more directly developing the New Eve typology, also contributed to the broader patristic framework that read Old Testament types as finding their fulfillment in Mary and Christ.

Within the Ethiopian tradition, this typology receives its fullest and most distinctive articulation in the *Kebra Nagast* (Glory of Kings), the fourteenth-century national epic of Ethiopia. Throughout the *Kebra Nagast*, it is written that "just as the Ark served as the vehicle by which the Ten Commandments of the Law were given unto humanity, so too would Mary serve as the perfected and purified vehicle for Christ" (Spencer, 2021, p. 3). This parallel operates on multiple levels: as the Ark carried the tablets of the Old Covenant, so Mary carried the author of the New Covenant; as the Ark was overlaid with pure gold, so Mary was adorned with divine grace; as the Ark was set apart as holy, so Mary was preserved from sin. The metaphor thus establishes Mary as the point of continuity between the Old and New Covenants, the living Ark who transcends the symbolism of the original.

The Ark's significance in Ethiopian tradition extends beyond typology to actual history. The Kebra Nagast recounts that the Ark of the Covenant was brought from Jerusalem to Ethiopia by Menelik I, the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (World Literature, 2023, para. 1). The Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion (Maryam Tsiyon) in Aksum is claimed to contain the original Ark of the Covenant, making Ethiopia the new Zion and the resting place of God's presence (Wikipedia, 2004, para. 1). This tradition imbues the Ark-Mary typology with profound national and ecclesiological significance: just as the Ark found its resting place in Ethiopia, so Mary, the New Ark, is especially present to and protective of the Ethiopian Church.

2.3 Mary as the New Eve

The typology of Mary as the New Eve represents one of the earliest and most enduring Marian interpretations in Christian tradition. Its biblical foundation lies in the Pauline Adam-Christ typology, particularly Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, where Paul presents Christ as the New Adam who reverses the disobedience of the first Adam. While Paul does not explicitly develop a parallel between Eve and Mary, the logic of his typology invites such an extension: if Christ is the New Adam, then Mary, as the mother of the New Adam, may be understood as the New Eve.

The theological development of the Mary–Eve typology reached its classical formulation in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202 CE). In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus presents the doctrine of recapitulation, arguing that Christ reenacts and restores the entire history of humanity by reversing Adam's disobedience through His perfect obedience. Within this redemptive framework, Mary's faithful obedience is portrayed as the antithesis of Eve's disobedience, making her an essential participant in the restoration of humanity. As Irenaeus states, "For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the Virgin Mary set free through faith" (*Against Heresies* 3.22.4). Building on earlier reflections by Justin Martyr, this interpretation established Mary as the "New Eve," whose obedience inaugurates the reversal of the consequences of the fall (Prokurat et al., n.d., p. 1). This theological tradition was further reinforced by Ephrem the Syrian, who emphasized Mary's exceptional purity by describing her as "as innocent as Eve before the fall," highlighting her unique role within the divine plan of salvation.

The Ethiopian Orthodox tradition has received and developed this typology with particular emphasis on Mary's sinlessness as the condition for her role as New Eve. The Church teaches that "Mary is pure in both body and soul, a human being without sin, so that Christ becomes the union of divinity and humanity" (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 4). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Eritrean Orthodox Church believe that "Mary did not contract ancestral sin at her conception". This conviction, which distinguishes Ethiopian Mariology from Eastern Orthodox teaching while paralleling the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, is grounded in the logic of the New Eve typology,: just as Eve was created without sin, so the New Eve must be without sin to fulfill her role in the restoration of humanity.

2.4 The Queen Mother (Gebira) Typology

The Old Testament office of the Queen Mother (gebira in Hebrew, meaning "great lady" or "mistress") provides a third major typological framework for understanding Mary's role in Ethiopian Orthodox theology. In the Davidic kingdom, the Queen Mother occupied a position of unique authority and honor. She was not merely the king's mother but held a constitutional office that gave her a royal throne, a crown, and the right of intercession before the king (Ackerman, 1991, pp. 23–34). The paradigmatic biblical text is 1 Kings 2:19–20, where Bathsheba, the mother of King Solomon, approaches her son on behalf of Adonijah. Solomon rises to meet her, bows to her, has a throne set for her at his right hand, and

declares, “Make your request, my mother, for I will not refuse you” (1 Kings 2:20, ESV). This passage establishes the Queen Mother as a powerful intercessor whose requests the king is bound to honour.

The application of this typology to Mary follows directly from her identity as the mother of Jesus, the Davidic King. If the earthly kings of Israel honoured their mothers with a throne and a hearing, how much more will the heavenly King honour His mother? As the mother of the Davidic King par excellence, Mary holds a position of honoured intercession before her Son. This is the theological logic underlying the Ethiopian emphasis on Mary as intercessor and “Mediatrix” (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 2). Her intercessory power is understood not as independent of Christ’s unique mediation but as a participation in it, rooted in her unique relationship to Him. The Ethiopian tradition, as expressed in the Covenant of Mercy (Kidane Mehret), holds that Christ made a covenant with His mother, promising forgiveness to those who sincerely seek her intercession, arguing that “if Christ honored His apostles, how much more will He listen to the prayers of His own mother on behalf of humanity” (Haile Maskel, n.d., para. 1). The Gebira typology thus provides the scriptural warrant for Mary’s role as the powerful intercessor that stands before her Son on behalf of the faithful.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Doctrinal Formulations: The Theotokos and Her Titles

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's veneration of the Virgin Mary rests upon a carefully articulated doctrinal framework that defines her unique identity, privileges, and role within the economy of salvation. These doctrinal formulations, concerning Mary as Theotokos, her sinlessness, perpetual virginity, exaltation, and salvific cooperation are not merely abstract theological propositions but are woven into the liturgical, devotional, and spiritual life of the Church. They represent a distinctive synthesis of patristic theology, biblical interpretation, and Ethiopian theological reflection.

3.2 Mary as Theotokos (Mother of God)

The title Theotokos (Greek: Θεοτόκος, "God-bearer" or "Mother of God"; Ge'ez: Waladätä ‘Ēgzi’abəher) constitutes the foundational Mariological dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The Church "believes the perpetual virginity of St. Mary and teaches that she is the Theotokos (bearer of God)" (Amsalu, 2012, p. 1). This title, solemnly defined at the Council of Ephesus (431 CE), safeguards the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation: that Jesus Christ is one person, fully divine and fully human. To call Mary Theotokos is to affirm that the one she bore in her womb was none other than God the Son incarnate. As the course on Mariology within the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition articulates, the Church examines Mary's "role in the mystery of the Incarnation" precisely through this title, which affirms that she is "the unique veneration of Saint Mary (Kidist Mariam) as Theotokos (Mother of God)" (Theotokos.org.et, 2025, para. 2).

The Ethiopian tradition has given distinctive expression to this dogma in the Homily on Mary the God-Bearer (Homilia de Maria Deipara), an original Ethiopian composition first attested in manuscripts from the late 14th century (Krawczuk, 2025, para. 1). The homily is almost certainly an original Ethiopian composition, although it may incorporate some translated material, and it appears in the so-called Rətu‘a Hāymānot ("The Orthodox") homiliary, a collection of homilies for Major Church feasts (Krawczuk, 2025, para. 1). The initial portion of the homily offers praise for Mary, using abundant Old Testament imagery. It explains how "she is exalted above all humans due to her physical contact with God, whom she nurtured"—an idea aligned with the theme of God's incarnation, central to the entire

Rətu‘a Hāymānot homiliary (Krawczuk, 2025, para. 2). This emphasis on Mary's physical contact with the divine underscores the profound intimacy of the Incarnation: the Creator of the universe was nurtured by a human mother, and this singular privilege elevates Mary above all other creatures.

3.3 Key Marian Titles in Ethiopian Tradition

The Ethiopian Orthodox tradition venerates Mary through a rich array of titles, each reflecting a distinct aspect of her identity and role. These titles are employed in liturgical texts, hymns, and devotional literature, shaping the faithful's understanding of and relationship with the Mother of God.

’Ēmmā-Bərhan (Mother of Light): This title, meaning "Mother of Light," is one of the key Marian designations in Ethiopian tradition (The Place of St. Mary, 2023, p. 3). It reflects the conviction that Mary gave birth to Christ, who is the Light of the World (John 8:12). As the Mother of Light, Mary is the one through whom the divine illumination entered the world, dispelling the darkness of sin and death. The title also carries soteriological overtones: just as light enables sight and life, so Mary, as Mother of Light, mediates the salvific light of Christ to humanity.

Kidist Mariam (Holy Mary) : The designation "Holy Mary" affirms Mary's unique sanctity. The Ethiopian Church teaches that "by the grace of God she committed no actual sin" (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 4) and that she is "clean from any sins of the flesh or soul" (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 4). Her holiness is not merely moral but ontological: she was prepared by the Holy Spirit to be the worthy dwelling place of the Incarnate Word.

Maryam Tsiyon (Mary of Zion): This title connects Mary with the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum, which is believed to house the original Ark of the Covenant. The title encapsulates the typological identification of Mary with the Ark, explored in the preceding section. As Mary of Zion, she is the living Ark, the new dwelling place of God's presence, and the protectress of the Ethiopian Church and nation.

Our Lady of Qusqyam: This title is associated with the Holy Family's exile in Egypt. According to Ethiopian tradition, Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus sojourned in Qusqyam (in Upper Egypt) during their flight from Herod. The site is venerated as a place of refuge and blessing, and Mary's association with it underscores her role as a protector of the faithful in times of trial.

Our Lady of Dabra Metmaq: This feast was introduced by Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434–1468), who played a pivotal role in codifying and promoting Marian devotion in Ethiopia (Getachew Haile, 1992). The feast commemorates a specific miracle or apparition of Mary, reflecting the emperor's personal devotion and his efforts to centralize Marian veneration within the liturgical calendar.

3.4 The Sinlessness and Perpetual Virginity of Mary

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church upholds two closely related doctrines concerning Mary's purity: her sinlessness and her perpetual virginity.

Sinlessness: The Church teaches that Mary, by the grace of God, "committed no actual sin" and is "clean from any sins of the flesh or soul". More significantly, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church believes that Mary "did not contract ancestral sin at her conception" (Wikipedia, 2022, para. 1). This belief distinguishes Ethiopian Mariology from Eastern Orthodox teaching, which affirms Mary's sinlessness in terms of actual sin but does not dogmatically define her freedom from ancestral sin, while paralleling the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, though without the same formal definition. As one source explains, "The Ethiopian Orthodox Church does believe that Mary did not contract ancestral sin at her conception, even if it is not dogmatically defined" (Wikipedia, 2022, para.

1). This conviction is grounded in the logic of Mary's role as the New Ark and New Eve: the vessel that carried the Incarnate Word and the mother of the New Adam must be pure and undefiled. The course on Mariology within the Ethiopian tradition affirms that the Church upholds "the immaculate nature of St. Mary" as a doctrinal foundation (Theotokos.org.et, 2025, para. 3).

Perpetual Virginity: The Ethiopian Orthodox Church teaches that Mary remained a virgin "before she conceived the Lord, during her period of conception, after conception, before delivery, during delivery and after delivery". This doctrine, rooted in scriptural interpretations and the teachings of the Church Fathers, affirms Mary's perpetual virginity as a reflection of her spiritual purity and her unique role as the Theotokos (Mihretu Tegegn, 2023, para. 2). The Church draws on biblical texts such as Ezekiel 44:2 ("This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it") and the liturgical traditions, including the Liturgy of Basil, which affirms that "Our Lady is a virgin in perpetuity".

Theological Rationale: The doctrines of Mary's sinlessness and perpetual virginity are theologically grounded in her role as the "tabernacle of God the Son." Just as the tabernacle in the Old Testament was consecrated and set apart for the dwelling of God's presence, so Mary was prepared and purified by the Holy Spirit from her mother's womb to be the worthy dwelling place of the Incarnate Word. Her sinlessness and virginity are not ends in themselves but are ordered toward her unique vocation: to be the Mother of God.

3.5 Mary's Exaltation Above All Creatures

The Ethiopian Orthodox tradition accords Mary a position of exaltation above all other creatures, including the angels. The Church teaches that she is "holier than the Cherubim and Seraphim" (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 5) and is "venerated as being above God's creatures, but below God" (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 5). This exaltation is not a matter of ontology, Mary remains a creature but of grace and vocation. Her unique participation in the mysteries of Christ, her intimate association with the Incarnation, and her cooperation in the work of redemption elevate her above all other saints.

The Ethiopian tradition, as expressed in the Homily on Mary the God-Bearer, teaches that Mary is "exalted above all humans due to her physical contact with God, whom she nurtured" (Krawczuk, 2025, para. 2). Her exaltation is thus intimately connected to the Incarnation: because she carried, nurtured, and gave birth to God incarnate, she participates in the divine life in a manner unparalleled by any other creature. The Church affirms that "no one has followed in the footsteps of the Incarnate Word more closely and with more merit than she" (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 5). Her exaltation is also reflected in the liturgical life of the Church, which celebrates 33 annual feasts dedicated to her, a number exceeding that of any other saint (The Place of St. Mary, 2023, p. 2).

3.6 The Covenant of Mercy (Kidane Mehret) as Theological Bridge

a. Origins and Meaning of the Covenant

The Covenant of Mercy, known in Ge'ez as Kidane Mehret (ክዳነ ምሕረት), constitutes one of the most distinctive and theologically significant features of Ethiopian Orthodox Mariology. The term Kidane Mehret translates literally as "Covenant of Mercy" and refers to the Ethiopic tradition that Jesus promised His mother that He would forgive the sins of those who sought her intercession. The covenant embodies the promise made by Christ to Mary of accepting her intercessions on behalf of anyone devoted to her. According to Ethiopian tradition, Christ made a covenant with His mother, promising forgiveness to those who sincerely seek her intercession.

Several versions of the covenant narrative appear in ancient Ethiopian books, differing slightly from each other but all agreeing on the essential point: Mary and her Son made a

covenant, the Covenant of Mercy, according to which Jesus would not allow eternal damnation for anyone who did something good by calling on His mother's name. The covenant is thus understood as a divine promise of mercy and grace extended to humanity through Mary's maternal intercession.

b. Theological Significance

The theological significance of the Covenant of Mercy rests upon several interconnected convictions that shape Ethiopian Orthodox spirituality. Central to this tradition is the belief that Mary "is loved by her Son so dearly that He will grant her every prayer" (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 2). This conviction is grounded in the logic of intercession articulated within the tradition: if Christ honoured His apostles, how much more will He listen to the prayers of His own mother on behalf of humanity. The covenant thus establishes a hierarchy of intercessory power in which Mary occupies a position of unique privilege before her Son.

The soteriological implications of the Covenant of Mercy are profound. The tradition holds that "anyone who commemorates the feast of Our Lady Mary or even gives a drop of water in her name will be forgiven every sin". The Synaxarion of Yekatit 16 records that God promised to bless those who celebrate Mary's commemoration, call upon her name, give alms to the poor (even if only a cup of cold water), build churches in her name, give cloth to the poor, visit the sick, feed the hungry, comfort the grieving, or write the history of her life. The Covenant of Mercy thus functions as an assurance of salvation for those who invoke Mary's intercession, offering pastoral comfort and spiritual hope to the faithful.

An illustrative example of the covenant's power is the story of the "Cannibal of Kemer," a very wicked man who was saved because, on one occasion, he gave, in Mary's name, a sip of water to a person who asked for it. This narrative exemplifies the Ethiopian conviction that even the smallest act of kindness performed in Mary's name participates in the grace of the covenant and can secure forgiveness. The story underscores the accessibility of the covenant: it is not reserved for the righteous but extends even to the most sinful, provided they turn to Mary with even the slightest gesture of devotion.

c. Liturgical Commemoration

The Covenant of Mercy is solemnly commemorated in the Ethiopian Orthodox liturgical calendar. The feast is celebrated on the 16th of Yekatit in the Ethiopian calendar, which corresponds to 23 February in the Gregorian calendar (or 24 February in leap years, due to the different insertion of the extra day in the Ethiopian calendar). The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church also commemorates Kidane Mihret on Yekatit 16 (February 23), the day on which God promised our holy Lady Mary, the two-fold Virgin, the God-bearer, the Covenant of Mercy.

The liturgical commemoration is accompanied by the *Dərsanä Kidanä Məhrät* (Homily for the Covenant of Mercy), a homiletic text that expounds the theological significance of the covenant and narrates its origins. The manuscript tradition includes numerous accounts of miracles associated with the Covenant of Mary in the land of Ethiopia, further attesting to the covenant's centrality in Ethiopian religious life.

Prominent churches dedicated to the Covenant of Mercy include the Ura Kidane Mehret monastery on the Zege Peninsula of Lake Tana. Founded in the 14th century by the saint Betre Mariyam (Amharic: "Rod of Mary"), the present circular church dates from the 16th century and is renowned for its vibrant interior frescoes and historical museum. The church is part of the complex of the Convent of Mercy. In Addis Ababa, the Entoto Kidane Mehret Church stands as another significant centre of devotion to the Covenant of Mercy. The Kidane Mehret Church in Jerusalem, part of the Debre Genet monastery, also bears witness to the covenant's importance within the Ethiopian Orthodox diaspora.

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Popular Piety and Lived Religion

a. Mary as Intimate Intercessor

Ethiopian Orthodox devotion to Mary is characterised by an intimate, personal relationship that stands in striking contrast to the more distant veneration often accorded to Christ. Ethnographic research conducted in Ethiopia during 1998–2000 reveals the depth of this affective piety. During interviews at a double monastery near the pilgrimage site of Lalibela, two nuns spontaneously asked the researcher, “Why don’t you ask us about Mary?” They wanted to speak of how she cared for them, loved them, and answered their prayers, declaring emphatically that “whatever we ask her she will give us” (Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 1). This testimony reflects a broader pattern in Ethiopian Orthodox spirituality: “Most of the time, Ethiopian Christians relate to Christ as a distant Saviour and turn to Mary in dealing with their daily lives” (Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 1).

Mary is perceived not as a remote theological abstraction but as a mother and protector who is personally responsive to the needs of the faithful. Interviewees describe the Virgin Mary as a figure who helps all Ethiopians to discern their proper role in the world as submissive, humble persons before God (Catholics & Cultures, 2014, para. 4). Her personal presence is felt through her divine images, making her accessible and powerfully present to her devotees (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d., para. 2). Stories of answered prayers and miraculous interventions circulate widely, reinforcing the conviction that Mary’s intercessory power is immediate and effective. As the Ethiopian Orthodox Church teaches, Mary “is loved by her Son so dearly that He will grant her every prayer” (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 2), a belief that underpins the profound trust the faithful place in her maternal care.

b. Marian Feasts and Fasts

The liturgical calendar of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church accords Mary exceptional prominence through more than thirty annual feasts (Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, n.d., para. 5). Emperor Zera Yakob (reigned 1434–1468) officially established 32 advocations of Mary with as many commemorations throughout the year (Comboni Missionaries, 2025, para. 3). Among these, several are celebrated with particular solemnity.

Filseta (The Assumption/Dormition): Filseta (Ge’ez: ቆልሶታ, meaning “Movement,” i.e., “Assumption”) is observed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in commemoration of the Dormition and Assumption of Mary (Wikipedia, 2018, para. 1). The fasting and liturgy extend for two weeks, beginning on 7 August and concluding on 22 August (Nehasie 15th in the Ethiopian calendar), with divine liturgy conducted throughout the fast, culminating in a final liturgy revering Saint Mary (Wikipedia, 2018, para. 2). During this period, adherents fast without consuming animal products (AA.com.tr, 2020, para. 2). The feast commemorates Mary being taken to Heaven by the angels (Comboni Missionaries, 2025, para. 4). In accordance with Tewahedo Church teachings, the Dormition is the belief that Saint Mary’s death was without suffering, in a state of spiritual peace (Wikipedia, 2018, para. 3).

Lideta Maryam (Nativity of Mary): Celebrated on 9 May, this feast commemorates the birth of the Virgin Mary (Wikipedia, 2022, para. 2).

Asterio Mariam (Dormition): This feast celebrates the transit of Mary from this earthly life, with various traditions differing as to whether Mary died or simply fell asleep (Comboni Missionaries, 2025, para. 4).

Our Lady as Intercessor: Celebrated on the 21st of Miyazya (29 April), this feast commemorates Mary's intercessory role. The Synaxarion explains that when Mary intercedes with her beloved Son, she prevails upon Him to forgive the sins of everyone who calls on her name (Comboni Missionaries, 2025, para. 7).

Our Lady Mary at Dabra Metmaq: This feast was introduced by Emperor Zara Yaqob following the destruction of a church in the Nile Delta where Our Lady had appeared annually within a circle of light surrounded by angels, martyrs and saints (Comboni Missionaries, 2025, para. 5).

4.2 Liturgical and Para-Liturgical Sources

The liturgical and para-liturgical literature of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church constitutes a vast corpus of texts that sustain and shape Marian devotion. These sources, ranging from daily prayers to miracle collections and hagiographical compilations, function as the primary vehicles through which the Church's Mariological doctrines are communicated to the faithful and integrated into the rhythms of communal and personal piety. The following survey examines the principal texts that comprise this rich literary tradition.

a. The Weddase Mariam (Praises of Mary)

The Weddase Mariam (ወዳሴ ማርያም), meaning "Praises of Mary," is one of the most beloved and frequently used devotional texts in Ethiopian Orthodox tradition. It is a rhapsodical work of hymns and praises to the Virgin Mary, organized for the seven days of the week. The Weddase Mariam is appended to the Psalter and thus has almost canonical status within the Ethiopian tradition, a position that underscores its centrality in the spiritual life of the Church. It is recited in the daily office, following the prayers to the Holy Trinity.

The text displays remarkable poetic speech and artistic characteristics in Ge'ez, combining literary beauty with profound theological content. As a study of the text explains, the Weddase Mariam is "a necessary component of the literary, liturgical, religious and social status among Ethiopians" and "an obligatory part of the Ethiopian Church Teaching". The text derives from the Coptic literary heritage, reflecting the deep historical connections between the Ethiopian and Coptic Orthodox traditions. Theologically, the Weddase Mariam includes the angels' praise to St. Mary and affirms her exaltation and intercessory power. Through its daily recitation, the Weddase Mariam ensures that devotion to Mary permeates the daily rhythm of Ethiopian Orthodox life.

b. The Ta'amra Maryam (Miracles of Mary)

The Ta'amra Maryam (ተአምረ ማርያም), meaning "Miracles of Mary," is a deeply important and particularly revered text in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It became part of the ancient Ge'ez manuscript tradition in the 14th century, when the collection of Marian miracle stories was translated into Ge'ez, the liturgical language of Ethiopia and Eritrea. The translation was initiated by King Dawit II (r. ca. 1380–1413), during whose reign "it already had become clear that the Virgin would obtain a position of pre-eminence amongst the Saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church". The collection was subsequently expanded by Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434–1468), who introduced the ritual of reading three miracles from the Ta'amra Maryam during Sunday liturgy in the year 1441.

The Ta'amra Maryam is traditionally read early in the morning, before the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. The collection includes over 1,000 stories, with more than 800 composed on the African continent, contradicting the view that they are merely translations of European sources. As Veronika Six observes, the collection serves as "a mirror of behaviour, belief, events and attitudes," reflecting "the idea of being chosen, then the idea and certainty that Mary will intervene" alongside geographical and historical elements. The genres include

miracles of healing, provision, protection, and salvation, while theological themes centre on Mary as the chosen one and her powerful intervention in human affairs.

The Princeton Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Egyptian Miracles of Mary (PEMM) Project, launched in March 2018 under the direction of Prof. Wendy Laura Belcher, constitutes a comprehensive digital humanities resource for these texts. The project has catalogued 1,000+ miracle stories and 2,500+ images painted of the Virgin Mary, preserved in Ge'ez between 1300 and the present. PEMM provides Ethiopians with digital access to their patrimony while raising general awareness about “the beauty, breadth, and variety of these vital works of early African literature”.

4.3 African Cultural Context and Matrifocal Retentions

a. The Kebra Nagast and the Queen of Sheba Tradition

The Kebra Nagast (Glory of Kings), Ethiopia's foundational national epic, occupies a central place in Ethiopian Orthodox identity and provides the narrative framework within which Marian devotion is intertwined with national consciousness. Composed in Ge'ez in the fourteenth century, the Kebra Nagast recounts the story of the Queen of Sheba, known in Ethiopian tradition as Queen Makeda, and her visit to King Solomon in Jerusalem (Goshu and Ridwan, 2025; Goshu and Ridwan, 2025a). According to the narrative, Makeda was captivated by Solomon's wisdom and, after their encounter, bore a son named Menelik, who later became the first emperor of Ethiopia's Solomonic Dynasty. Menelik is said to have travelled to Jerusalem and, with the complicity of the high priest's son, brought the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia, where it remains at the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum.

Spencer (2021) examines one of the most fascinating dynamics within the foundation story of Ethiopia's Royal Solomonic Dynasty, the Kebra Nagast, namely the metaphor that connects Mother Mary with the biblical Ark of the Covenant. Throughout the Kebra Nagast, it is written that just as the Ark served as the vehicle by which the Ten Commandments of the Law were given unto humanity, so too would Mary serve as the perfected and purified vehicle for Christ. This typological reading establishes a direct theological lineage from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, with Mary as the point of convergence.

The prominence of women such as Mary and Queen Makeda in the theology and polity of Ethiopia is indicative of African traditions that have been described as matriarchal, matrilineal, dual-sex and matrifocal. Within this framework, Queen Makeda serves as a prefiguration of Mother Mary, establishing a typological connection that reaches from the Old to the New Testaments. This reading situates Ethiopian Mariology within a broader African cultural context in which women occupy positions of spiritual and political authority.

b. Matrifocal Retentions in Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition

The concept of matrifocality, understood as the cultural privileging of women and female-centred values, provides a crucial lens for understanding the distinctive character of Ethiopian Orthodox Marian devotion. Spencer (2021) argues that the prominence of Mary and Makeda within Ethiopian Orthodox traditions represents “an African matrifocality reaching from the Old to the New Testaments”. This matrifocality is informed by pre-Axumite archaeological finds of female statues in northern Ethiopia, and the historical reigns of Egyptian Queen Mother Tiye and the Lady Pharaoh Hatshepsut. These ancient precedents demonstrate that women-centred values were once prominent and shared throughout the Nile Valley (Goshu and Yohana, 2026).

The matrifocal character of Ethiopian Orthodox tradition is further evidenced by the integration of women into the liturgical and devotional life of the Church. Marian veneration in this context buttresses a subordinate matrifocality alongside the patriarchal structure, with women often constituting the majority of churchgoers. The retention of women-centred African values within Ethiopian Orthodox traditions represents a continuity of pre-Christian

African cultural patterns that were assimilated into, rather than eradicated by, the adoption of Christianity.

The metaphor connecting Mary with the Ark of the Covenant serves as a particularly potent expression of matrifocal values. Just as the Ark was the most sacred object in Israelite religion; the dwelling place of God's presence; so Mary, as the New Ark, becomes the vessel of divine presence in the Christian dispensation. This metaphor elevates the feminine principle to the highest possible status within the theological imagination, positioning Mary as the one through whom the divine enters the world.

4.4 Synthesis and Comparative Perspectives

a. The Uniqueness of Ethiopian Mariology

Ethiopian Orthodox Mariology presents a distinctive theological synthesis that distinguishes it from other Christian traditions while maintaining continuity with the broader patristic and conciliar inheritance. Several features converge to constitute this uniqueness.

First, the Ark of the Covenant typology in Ethiopian tradition is not merely symbolic but is linked to the actual Ark believed to reside at the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum. Throughout the Kebra Nagast, it is written that just as the Ark served as the vehicle by which the Ten Commandments were given to humanity, so too would Mary serve as the perfected and purified vehicle for Christ. This connection grounds Marian theology in Ethiopia's national narrative, positioning the country as the new Zion under Mary's protection.

Second, the Covenant of Mercy (Kidane Mehret) constitutes a uniquely Ethiopian theological construct. According to Ethiopian tradition, Christ made a covenant with His mother, promising forgiveness to those who sincerely seek her intercession. This doctrine, formalized in the feast of Kidane Mehret celebrated on 16 Yekatit (23 February), provides a formal structure for Marian intercession that is absent in other Christian traditions.

Third, the integration of the Queen Makeda (Queen of Sheba) tradition with Marian theology represents a distinctive Ethiopian contribution. The prominence of women such as Mary and Makeda within Ethiopian Orthodox traditions reflects an African matrifocality reaching from the Old to the New Testaments, with Queen Makeda serving as a prefiguration of Mother Mary.

Fourth, the exceptionally high number of Marian feasts, 33 annually, and the dedication of over 35,000 churches to Mary attest to the unparalleled centrality of Marian devotion in Ethiopian religious life. Fifth, ethnographic evidence reveals that Ethiopian Christians often relate to Christ as a distant saviour and turn to Mary in dealing with their daily lives. This popular perception, while theologically complex, reflects the intimate, maternal character of Marian devotion.

These elements form a unified theological vision in which Mary functions simultaneously as the New Ark, the New Eve, the Queen Mother, and the Covenant of Mercy, a synthesis that integrates biblical typology, national identity, and lived piety into a coherent whole.

b. Ethiopian Mariology in the Context of Oriental Orthodoxy

As a member of the Oriental Orthodox family, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church shares fundamental commitments with the Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, and Indian Orthodox traditions. All affirm Mary as Theotokos, uphold her perpetual virginity, and venerate her as the preeminent saint. The Ethiopian Church's liturgical and theological traditions derive significantly from the Coptic heritage, with the Weddase Mariam and other texts reflecting Coptic influence.

However, Ethiopian Mariology has developed distinctive emphases. Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434–1468) played a pivotal role in codifying and promoting Marian devotion,

introducing the feast of Our Lady of Dabra Metmaq and mandating the reading of three miracles from the Ta'amra Maryam during Sunday liturgy. The emperor's personal devotion, including the rhyming homily he composed on the role of the Virgin Mary in salvation, shaped Ethiopian Mariology in ways that distinguish it from other Oriental Orthodox traditions. The Synaxarion narratives, while sharing basic Mariological concepts with the broader tradition, give a wider perspective to the Marian family circle than biblical texts.

c. Comparison with Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Mariology

Ethiopian Mariology shares significant common ground with both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. All three traditions venerate Mary as Theotokos, affirm her perpetual virginity, recognize her intercessory role, and celebrate numerous feasts and icons in her honour. Eastern Orthodox theology calls Mary the Theotokos and emphasises her sublime holiness, her share in redemption, and her role as a mediator of grace.

However, significant differences emerge. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church accepts the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, Mary's freedom from original sin from the moment of her conception, in contrast to Eastern Orthodoxy, which rejects the doctrine. The Ethiopian and Eritrean Tewahedo churches stand as notable exceptions within Oriental Orthodoxy on this point. The Covenant of Mercy, with its formal promise of forgiveness to those who seek Mary's intercession, is a distinctive Ethiopian doctrine without parallel in other traditions. The integration of Old Testament typology with Ethiopia's national narrative, particularly the Ark of the Covenant's presence at Aksum and the Queen of Sheba tradition, represents a uniquely Ethiopian synthesis. Finally, the exceptionally prominent role of Mary in popular devotion, where she is often perceived as more accessible than Christ, distinguishes Ethiopian piety from that of other traditions.

V. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that Ethiopian Mariology is a distinctive synthesis integrating biblical interpretation, patristic thought, African cultural patterns, liturgical tradition, and lived devotion. Its principal biblical paradigms present Mary as the Ark of the Covenant, the New Eve, and the Queen Mother, while New Testament narratives affirm her participation in the Incarnation and the early Church. Ethiopian doctrine venerates Mary as Theotokos, emphasizes her sinlessness and perpetual virginity, and understands her as the preeminent saint whose cooperation was essential to salvation history. The Covenant of Mercy, or Kidane Mehret, connects theology with popular piety by portraying Mary as a compassionate intercessor whose prayers secure divine forgiveness.

Marian devotion permeates Ethiopian religious life through feasts, fasting, pilgrimage, church dedications, naming practices, icons, and devotional texts such as Weddase Mariam, Ta'amra Maryam, Synaxarion, and Nagara Maryam. Mary is simultaneously theological archetype, national protectress, and intimate mother, demonstrating the compatibility of doctrinal orthodoxy and African Christian experience. This review contributes by synthesizing theological, biblical, liturgical, ethnographic, and cultural dimensions while situating Ethiopian Mariology within African Christianity and biblical reception history.

Its limitations include reliance on secondary sources and English translations, limited use of Ge'ez and Amharic materials, and insufficient ethnographic attention to contemporary practice. Future research should examine primary manuscripts, pilgrimage and festival practices, gender, comparative African traditions, digital humanities, and relationships among theology, art, and anthropology. Ultimately, Ethiopian Mariology offers Christianity a biblically grounded, culturally authentic vision in which Mary embodies the unity of the covenants, the mystery of the Incarnation, and the promise of divine mercy.

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