

## Prince Rasselas, Fact of Fiction?

### A Glimpse at our History

Unlike most ancient kings and queens of the west, traditional Ethiopian kings and queens were known for the thorough knowledge of their history and of erudite scholarship in Christian Theology. Some, like Atse Zera Yaekob, Atse Naod, and Nigst Eleni, are known to have authored books. One king, Tsadiku Yohannes, seeking truth, justice, and Christian charity, had even abdicated his throne to live out his life as a monk.

Who was Prince Rasselas? We are told: "...Rasselas was the fourth son of the mighty emperor, in whose dominions the Father of Waters begins his course; whose bounty pours down the streams of plenty, and scatters over half the world the harvest of Egypt... According to the custom which has descended from age to age among the monarchs of the torrid zone, Rasselas was confined in a private palace, with other sons and daughters of Abyssinian royalty, till the order of succession should call him to the throne... the place, which the wisdom or policy of antiquity had destined for the residence of the Abyssinian princes, was a spacious valley in the kingdom of Amhara, surrounded on every side by mountains, of which the summits overhang the middle part..."<sup>(1)</sup>

That is from Dr. Samuel Johnson's famous book, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*. It narrates of a bygone era in Ethiopian history, and is a book many educated Ethiopians might have read or at least, heard about. Dr. Johnson, however, never set foot in Ethiopia, but that uncanny philosophical story, a mixture of fact and fantasy, comes from hearsay and, of course, his own vivid imagination of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Ethiopia.

Prince Rasselas, the story goes on, "...looked round about him, he saw himself confined by the bars of nature which had never yet been broken, and by the gate, through which none that once had passed it were ever able to return. He was now impatient as an eagle in a grate. He passed week after week in clambering the mountains, to see if there was any aperture which the bushes might conceal, but found all the summits inaccessible by their prominence. The iron gate he despaired to open; for it was not only secured with all the power of art, but was always watched by successive sentinels, and was by its position exposed to the perpetual observation of all the inhabitants..."<sup>(2)</sup>

The famous Scottish traveler, James Bruce, who visited and spent six years in Ethiopia during Zemene Mesafint, (era of Princes and Principalities) when Ras Michael Sehul was the ruler, had traveled to various parts of the country. One of his missions was to explore the source of the Nile, but James Bruce seems to have explored much more. Ras Michael Sehul, an old man in his eighties, was becoming frail, while his consort, W/ro Aster, was still in her late thirties or early forties. Michael Sehul turned a blind eye and Bruce soon became W/ro Aster's secret lover. They even had a child, a baby that died at birth.

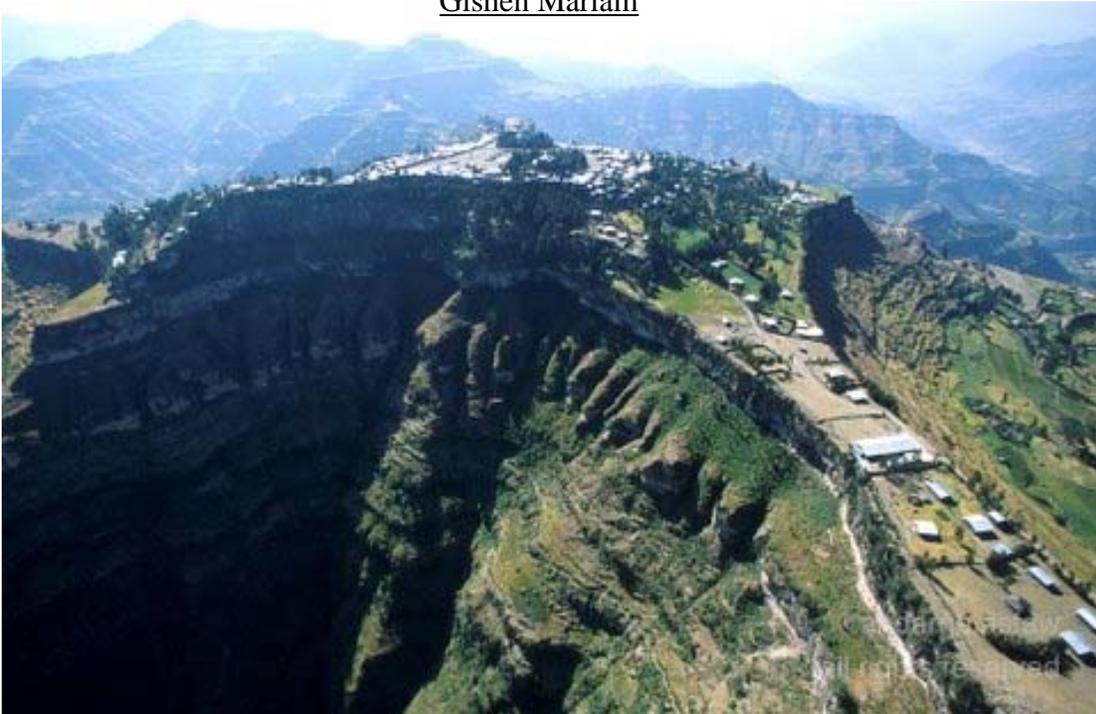
It was James Bruce who, on returning to Europe, had brought with him, among many other things, the Book of Enoch, a part of the Ethiopian Bible, but missing from the rest of the world. It had become a subject of much doubt and speculation among scholars and bible theologians. Dr. Samuel Johnson was a friend of James Bruce, and it was he who had told him of the source of The River Nile as well as of Wohni Amba, the prison where young Ethiopian princes were kept to prevent them from usurping the throne.

Wohni Amba had no criminals, and in many ways, was not a real prison. Young princes, raised from infancy not by their own mothers but by a mogzit, (a royal maid), would hardly miss their natural parents. The mogzit often stayed with them in their confinement to make sure they were well taken care of, and accorded the appropriate royal treatment.

Furthermore, prisoners were given the best education in the land, taught by the best sages and scholars, learning Ethiopian history, custom and tradition, Geez and Amharic gene, and ecclesiastical books of the Church. Wohni Amba, to all intents and purposes, was a boarding school for breeding future kings. So, Prince Rasselas really, never existed.

That then is why traditional kings and queens of Ethiopia were highly educated people. Atse Libne Dingel had assumed the throne as a young boy with his mother, Queen Eleni, as Reagent and Caretaker of government. His army, we are told, used to spear Mount Bokan near Dukem, begging and praying for war. He never saw Wohni Amba, and had a poor grasp of his own history or tradition. This, some historians say, was the main reason why he lost his throne to Ahmed Grag, who defeated him, chased him, and besieged him for several years on Mount Debre Damo, in Tigray, until his death by thirst and hunger.

Gishen Mariam<sup>(3)</sup>



Gishen Mariam, a monastery on the top of a cross shaped mountain, claims to possess a piece of the True Cross of Christ, and was one of the sites that served as Wohni Amba for many years. Atse Tewodros established his Wohni Amba at Mount Mekdella. Until his escape from Whoni Amba, the young boy Menelik, the future king of Ethiopia, was one of the royal prisoners of Atse Tewodros in Mekdella.

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**Notes:**

- 1) <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/rasselas.html#5>
- 2) Ibid
- 3) Aerial photo by Andargé Asfaw