

The Miracle of the Rising Anvil

We all know of the hammer that descends on the anvil, but who ever heard of an anvil that rises up to strike the hammer? That indeed, is a strange phenomenon. Dear reader, bear with me as I am about to recount my encounter with this amazing and incredible event for which I have no other explanation, except to say that it is indeed, a miracle.

It was in the middle of winter so cold that while walking, one can often hear the chatter of the teeth of the person walking next to one. In fact, that was how I met Abba Gebre-Yohannes, a monk from Abune Gebre-Menfes-Kidus Monastery. We met as both of us were standing on the side of the street one late afternoon, waiting for the bus, when he casually said, "It is really cold, isn't it?"

In between the words he uttered, I can hear the chattering of his teeth. As I replied, "Yes, it is terrible. I hope the bus comes soon." I too, can hear the slurring of my words due to the chattering of my own teeth. Fortunately, we stood there for only about fifteen or twenty minutes at most when the bus came and rescued us. I am not sure how much longer I could have withstood the cold without collapsing.

Abba Gebre-Yohannes was dressed in a white long shawl with a necklace of large wooden beads and a wooden cross hanging from his neck. He had a long metal staff with a cross on the top, that he held in one hand. He had a full black beard, and the hair on his head was matted in the fashion that Rasta people have come to adopt lately. Ethiopian monks have been wearing that hair style for more than a thousand years. Abba Gebre-Yohannes' chattering teeth were white and evenly set, as if he had worn braces growing up. But that was highly unlikely. If I have to guess his age, he must have been in his early forties.

Even though there were not too many people in the bus and there were many empty seats, we sat next to each other and started exchanging some trivial conversation on the weather and similar tidbits when somehow the subject of miracles came up. I must have said: "It is a miracle I did not freeze to death, since I wasn't wearing a heavy coat." Or something of that sort when Abba Gebre-Yohannes asked,

"Have you ever seen anything you cannot explain rationally, something totally out of this world? That, which cannot be explained rationally, is what we call a mystery, a miracle."

I started to think, but there was nothing in my life that I could not explain rationally and I said, "I have never seen anything that is out of the ordinary to deserve being called a miracle or a mystery. I have not even seen a ghost that so many people say they have. I don't think miracles are real."

He quietly and firmly said, "Oh, yes." And continued slowly and firmly: "I have seen many miracles." And nodded his head several times as if to indicate he was really serious. And this time, as we had warmed up sufficiently thanks to the bus, his teeth did not chatter.

"Listen." I said, "I am an engineer, a man of science. So many things that might have been considered miracles in the past, thanks to science and technology, have become common everyday things." And after a pause, I added: "Take the telephone, the radio, TV, airplane flight... they might have been thought miracles in the distant past, but all can be explained. I don't know of any miracle in real life."

Abba Gebre-Yohannes looked at me from the corners of his eyes and smiled. "When you are ready to see a miracle, come and I will take you there..." With that he got up to get off the bus and added, "I live in the Abune Gebre-Menfes-Kidus Monastery", and he disappeared into the cold night.

When I got to my destination the cold air slapped me in the face and I totally forgot the conversation about Abba Gebre-Yohannes, and about that cold night for good. I was more interested to walk home fast and get out of the cold. As I went about my daily life, I never gave much thought to whatever miracle the monk wanted to show me and I never bothered to visit the Monastery of Abune Gebre-Menfes-Kidus.

Six years were to pass before we crossed paths with Aba Gebre-Yohannes again, and this time, I did not even recognize him. I had sat next to a cleanly shaven and well groomed person of the cloth as I headed home in the bus.

“Aren’t you that engineer who does not believe in miracles?” He addressed me, and I immediately recognized the voice but I just could not remember his name. I said, “Yes, and I remember you from that cold day as we waited for the bus. But you have totally changed. How are you?”

After we exchanged the usual greetings I said, “It has been a long time, and I have forgotten your name.” He said, “My name is “Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos. What is yours?”

I did not remember him by that name, and I said so. He explained how he used to be called Abba Gebre-Yohannes, but that he now belonged to another order within the clergy, and has moved up in title to that of Like Siltanat, which translates to “Master of Authorities” or something like that. He had really been transformed into a totally different person. His shabby clothing, his long and unkempt beard, and his general attire, was all changed. He has been totally transformed, but his voice was the same. I thought he must have turned into a Protestant Pastor, or a Catholic Father, or something of that sort, but I was wrong. He told me that he still belonged to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. I was amazed with the change.

To cut a long story short, he asked me, “Are you still a doubter? Do you still not believe in miracles?”

“If anything, I am older and wiser now, and I cannot be taken in by any trick or the mumbo-jumbo of miracles.” I answered.

“Well, are you ready to see the miracle?” He asked me with eyebrows raised. I thought he was going to do some magic trick right on the spot and try to convert me, and I said, “Sure, I am ready. Go ahead. Show me the miracle.”

He gazed at me with a smile and total silence for quite a long time and finally said, “Well, not so fast. When you are ready to see the miracle, come to the Monastery of Abune Gebre-Menfes-Kidus.” With that he got off his seat, said “Goodnight!” and got off the bus.

When I got home it began to bother me. During dinner I started to think aloud... ‘If there is anything to see, why don’t I go and see it? The first time I met Abba... whatever his name is, it was all casual, and I did not give it much thought. I had put it off for this many years. But now for a second time, an opportunity is offering itself for me to see some miracle. What have I got to lose? Abba did not ask for money. If indeed there is anything worth calling a miracle, why don’t I go and see it first hand? If it is real, so be it. I will witness something real. Will I become a believer? We will see about that. If it is some kind of a trick, I hope I can catch it, and name it for what it is, – a fraud. And, of course, I will expose it...’ These religious fanatics should not be allowed to go on preaching falsehood and deceiving the unwary...’

These kinds of thoughts filled my mind all through that evening and late into the night. I could not sleep with any comfort and instead, I kept tossing and turning in my bed most of that night. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamt and found myself fighting with a huge and evil monster that morphs, first into Abba Gebre Yohannes, and then into Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos, and finally into a fire and smoke breathing dragon. It kept changing from one to the other and as we grappled, it tried to choke me. It was difficult to make any sense of the dream, or nightmare, or whatever it was. I woke up screaming and drenched in sweat. Did that monk put a spell on me? Why am I in such a state? Why can’t I forget about all that nonsense and get some sleep? But much as I tried, I hardly slept the rest of the night.

The following morning I decided to call the monastery and talk to Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos. The person who answered put me on hold for a long time and said: “Sorry but you cannot talk to Like Siltanat now. He is in the middle of morning service and meditation. You can try calling later.”

I waited for a couple of hours and called again, but it was the same answer: “You cannot talk to Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos now... etc.” This time however, I said, “Can I leave a message with you?”

“Yes, of course! You can leave a message.”

So, I gave my name and said I would like to come to the monastery and asked when would be a good time. The voice on the other end said, “I will deliver your message to Like Siltanat.” And hang up.

I waited about a week but I did not hear from Like Siltanat even though I had given my number for him to call me back. After the second week I decided to call again and find out what happened to my message. When I called and the voice on the other end immediately recognized me and said: “Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos would like you to come to the monastery on Saint Gebre-Menfes-Kidus’ Festival Day and go up the mountain on a pilgrimage with him. He says you should come prepared to spend the night up there and dress appropriately, as it can get pretty cold.”

Saint Gebre-Menfes-Kidus’ Festival Day? That was some three months away. That meant I have plenty of time to prepare and get ready. But, what is this about climbing up to the top of the mountain? And why do I need to spend the night there? Can’t I just visit for a couple of hours and come back? Hhhmmmm... What did I get myself into? Does one need to climb up the mountain and spend the night there to see the miracle, whatever miracle it was? Is this Mount Sinai? Does the Abba think he is Moses or what? As for the cold, I am sure I can handle it. I have a heavy long coat that I can take with me, or even add a thick gabi under it. Well, I have three months to think about it. After all, I did not give any promise that I was going to go. And if I change my mind, I will change my mind and just forget about it.

As the day of Saint Gebre-Menfes-Kidus’ Festival approached, I started to think of the trip to the monastery, and the long hike up the mountain. I asked myself, am I physically strong enough and fit to climb the mountain? What about the cold? Unconsciously, I started packing my things for a couple of day’s trip. When the day arrived, I felt that I was ready. What excuse is there not to go?

The district bus took me out of town and dropped me as close to the monastery as possible, but there was some twelve to fifteen miles distance walk to get to the foot of the mountain. Some sixteen people got off the bus all headed to the monastery for the Festival of Saint Gebre-Menfes-Kidus. As we walked, the sun beat on us and it turned out to be a hot and sweaty day. Towards sunset we saw the Monastery of Saint Gebre-Menfes-Kidus from far away. It was situated about two thirds up the mountain which meant there was another hour of hard climbing up the trek. We arrived at 7 PM totally exhausted, hungry, and thirsty.

The monks saw the tired pilgrims and welcomed us into a large white tent. They brought water and washed our feet, our head, our face, and our hands. Cold water never felt so good and refreshing. When we wanted to drink from the water, they told us to only drink just a sip, as dinner was going to be served shortly, and we needed to save room for the real drink: Tej (honey-wine) and Tela (a beer of barley or wheat) brewed by the monks. The dinner, which contained cooked dishes, and big slabs of raw-beef, and the excellent drinks, made this a memorable feast. This was Ethiopian traditional hospitality at its best.

I gave my name to the monks and kept asking to see Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos, but everyone gave me the same answer: ‘You will have a chance to meet him shortly...’ until I finally learned a valuable lesson: just be patient, hold your peace, and wait to see how things would unfold. The hustle and bustle of city life does not exist here, and things seemed to move quietly and smoothly on their own pace.

After dinner they led us out of the tent and into the Church of Abba Gebre-Menfes-Kidus, a large and imposing edifice in the middle of the monastery. As we entered we could hear the minstrels and clergy singing, interspersed with chanting, and accompanied with the rhythmic beating of the negarit, or church

drum. The place was big and dimly lit with many tuaffs, yellow candles made from bees' wax. It was a somber atmosphere, and the heavy smoke of frankincense filled the whole place.

Standing and performing the liturgy with all the clergymen was none other than the Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos. As our eyes met, he bowed and acknowledged my presence. I too bowed back. Now I felt at ease. I have finally come to this place to witness a miracle. I wondered to myself what it was going to be. In the past I have attended many similar liturgies which drag on for hours on end. I wanted to stay alert so I do not miss anything, but after the tiring walk all day, the large dinner, the Tej and Tela, it was impossible to stay up. As I began to feel drowsy, I pushed out from the crowd, found a dark corner of the church, and slumped down on a bench. I found the liturgy quite lethargic and fell into a deep sleep.

In my sleep I again dreamt that same dream which I dreamt so many times in the last few months. I was fighting with a huge and evil monster that morphs, first into Abba Gebre Yohannes, and then into Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos, and finally into a fire and smoke breathing dragon. It morphed from one monster to the other and tried to choke and muffle me. I woke up with a scream, but fortunately, it was drowned by the beat of the church drums and the singing of the clergy, and no one heard my scream.

At around midnight the worshippers and the clergy moved out of the church and started a procession up to the top of the mountain. The Monastery of Saint Gebre-Menfes-Kidus is found in an ancient volcanic mountain with a crater in the top. Bu the crater is now a small lake, or a pond. Having rested and slept for at least an hour, I found plenty of energy to climb, and the cold night air was quite refreshing.



Midnight Procession with the Ark of the Covenant – from a painting by Asfaw Tamrat

There were some clouds in the sky and as a partially crescent moon lit the night, we did not need any flashlights or lanterns to find our way. Leading the procession was a young boy of about fifteen, who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Church of Saint Gebre-Menfes-Kidus. Following him and around

him were the many clergy who sang, and two young men who carried and beat the negarit, or drums. There were trees on both sides of the wide road and in the night the drums echoed back from the woods. "The miracle is not always seen. But there is a good chance that it will tonight, especially if you believe." I looked back and it was the Like Siltanat. I greeted him and said. "I will believe when I see it." He did not seem to be in a mood to argue, so he just walked fast, overtook me, and joined the group of clergy ahead. One can hear thunder and lightening from far away, but there was no rain.

We reached the top of the mountain and started to descend down the crater to the shore of the pond. As we did, as if from nowhere, there suddenly came a gust of wind and started to whip up the water in the lake. There was a tempest and the waters were heaving up and down and it was becoming rather stormy. I thought to myself, is it this storm the miracle that the Like Siltanat is talking about? I am sure it can easily be explained. But I was wrong. There was more, much more to come.

Once the procession led by the young boy carrying the Arc of the Covenant arrived at the shore of the lake, all the people started a solemn prayer followed by loud chants of: "Egzio Meharene Kiristos!" which means: 'Lord, save us Oh Christ!' Meanwhile the lightening continued to split the sky and the tempest tossed waters were being heaved up and down, and it became very stormy. The young boy stood still for well over an hour while all this was going on. Finally, followed by about a dozen of the clergy, the boy walked straight into the water and waded all the way up to his waist, and slowly put down the Arc of the Covenant on the water. Then the boy and the clergy left the Arc there and came ashore.

After about an hour an amazing spectacle started to take place, a funnel cloud came down from the sky and struck the water, creating a water spout. As the funnel cloud touched the water there was a flash of lightening and the sky lit up. The Arc of the Covenant was being tossed right and left, bobbing up and down, as it floated in the lake. Every now and again, we saw a pillar of water like a geyser rising up into the sky. The funnel cloud came down again and again and touched the lake, and many devotees were kneeling, with their faces to the ground, not daring to look up, except me and a few dare devils. I was not going to miss a single moment, but was taking in everything, and trying to make sense of it all.

Finally the miracle happened. The Arc of the Covenant rose up riding on a pillar of water about a hundred feet or more into the air and met with the funnel cloud. As the pillar of water and the funnel cloud met, at that instant, there was a flash of lightening and a deafening thunder. A hot steam sprayed covering the whole area, and we were literally 'baptized' with boiling water, fire, and smoke. This indeed, is a miracle.

This spectacle did not happen just once. No, it was repeated over and over again at least a dozen times. As the pillar of water continued to rise up, every now and again, it would pick the Arc of the Covenant up into the air to meet the funnel cloud and crash down with lightning and thunder. There was no doubt in my mind there must be some rational explanation for what was taking place, but I was too shaken by the event and was not in a mind set to reason or rationalize now. I was awe struck and felt the deafening thunder deep inside me and I was trembling, afraid I would be burnt by the steam. I was busy covering my face and the rest of my body. I fell on my knees and bowed down with my face to the ground like everyone else. That was a good way not to get one's face burnt by the steam. So, this was the dream of a fire and smoke breathing dragon that I have been dreaming of for so long.

After we spent at least three or more hours by the side of the lake the tempest and the lightening calmed down. The young boy and the clergy walked forward and waded into the water all the way up to their waists, retrieved the Arc of the Covenant, and came back ashore. The whole procession then started on a jubilant song and dance, and accompanied by the beating of the drums, we all started our journey back.

I have never seen or heard anything of the sort and was amazed. What does this mean? How does one explain this? Who would believe that the anvil rises up to strike the hammer? I have to ask the Like Siltanat first and see what he would have to say.

I must have slept only an hour or so, but this time it was a peaceful and restful sleep. The dream, the nightmare, the fire and smoke breathing dragon, were all finally gone. My curiosity and imagination must have taken the best of me to have brought about those terrifying dreams. The sun came up shortly thereafter, and the people who walked with me the other day, entreated me to leave so that we can catch the next bus back to the city.



I asked about Like Siltanat Abba Gebre-Tatyos and wanted to see him for some explanation, but he was nowhere to be found. He was up all night on his feet and must be exhausted and sleeping. So, I had to leave the place in a hurry. Now that I have seen that miracles do exist, someday I hope to meet him again, perhaps in the same bus stop, to ask him to explain what it is that I witnessed...

G. E. Gorfu