

## **The Etymologies of Geyon, Abbawi and Nil: The Diverse Appellations of the Blue Nile from Time Immemorial up to the Present**

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**Abstract:** *The appellation Geyon was mentioned in association with an extant name of Ethiopia. Consequently, the source area of Geyon is irrefutable. Above all, for the ancient world, Geyon/Nile was the most attractive, the most important and hence the most written about in the world. To the contrary, unlike Turkish rivers of Euphrates and Tigris, the two rivers of Ethiopia that is to say Pison and Geyon, were misrepresented by later writers as both sacred and profane. What is more, some other writers had attempted to transfer the geographical location of these rivers to other parts of the world. This happened probably either by their ignorance or by the ulterior motives of these writers. This article attempted to examine sources both secular and religious exhaustively and concluded that Pison and Geyon rise in Ethiopia and the etymologies of Geyon, Abbawi and Nil are locally derived from the classical language of Ethiopia.*

**Keywords:** Etymologies, appellations, Geyon, Abbawi, Nil

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### **1. Introduction**

Geyon in general and its source in particular were the most attractive natural features that had captured the imagination of both scholars and rulers of the ancient world. It was a stimulus for exploration. This spectacular river is considered to be the longest river system in the world. This is only possible when we take into account the length of the river from its remotest source of Bahr-al-Abiad at Luvironza in Burundi to the Mediterranean Sea. On the other hand, Ludwig tells us that “On a view of the whole water-discharge, the Bahr-el-Jebel might be regarded as the source-river of the White, the Blue Nile as that of the whole.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, however, in 1862 Speke drastically changed the historic source of Nile in Ethiopia and as a result subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> Mary H. Lindsay(trans.), *The Nile: The Life-Story of a River*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1937), pp.281-282

writers changed Kagera into White Nile and Geyon into Blue Nile. This narrative disoriented and swayed many writers including Ethiopians.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem and Objectives**

There are two different issues to be addressed in this paper. For a variety of reasons, knowingly or unknowingly, the hydrological history of Geyon was altered by fame-seeking travellers. Up until 1862, it was an established belief that Geesh Abbay was the source of the Nile. But, after Speke had declared Lake Nyanza the source of the Nile,<sup>2</sup> subsequent writers considered Abbay as a tributary and Bahr el-Abiad as the main river. Regarding the latter, Birch asserts that “The White Nile is now found to be, not only the main, but the only true river.”<sup>3</sup> Actually, the White River is a tributary because its mean annual contribution is only 14%. Consequently, the etymological history of Nile/Geyon, was highly exposed to speculative errors. This paper has two main objectives, general and specific. The general objective is to show that: The etymologies of Geyon, Abbawi and Nil are derived from the Ge’ez word and signify the flow of the river, its greatness and colour respectively.

The specific objectives include:

- A) The appellation Geyon had been identified by different names at different places and times.
- B) Abbay is a corrupted form of Abbawi
- C) Names such as Blue Nile and White Nile are misnomers.

### ***Significance of the Study***

This paper is very important in revealing the natural history of the two rivers of Eden. More specifically, it provides useful information about where the three names of our great river namely Geyon, Abbawi and Nil originally derived and when the paper gets published, it will inspire researchers and serve as a source of information on addressing similar issues.

## **2. Literature Review**

Nile was the centrepiece of the discourse of politicians, historians, philosophers and other personalities of the ancient world, and even nowadays it is the topic of much research.

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<sup>2</sup> Zoe Marsh and G.W.Kingsnorth, *An Introduction to the History of East Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.55

<sup>3</sup> George Rawlinson (trans.), *A History of Ancient Egypt*, (New York: The Nottingham Society, Vol. I, 1880), p.12

Accordingly, many books, MA theses, PhD dissertations and research papers have been written on this river. However, the works of these writers vary greatly regarding the source, length and where the appellation Nile derived originally from. Regarding the source, some writers say that Lake Victoria is the source of Nile. Some others assert that there are two sources, i.e. Lake Victoria and Lake Tana. Still others claim that Luvironza is the main source of the Nile. Concerning the etymology of the Nile, western writes suggest differently. Some tacitly assert that the name Nile was derived from the Greek word Neilos and some others dare to say that no one knows where the name Nile ultimately originated. These different narratives perplexed the natural history of Geyon.

### 3. Methodology

The research design of this paper is qualitative. So it employs a qualitative methodological approach. Consequently, my focus area is gathering data at the libraries such as IES and Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency and from internet sources. In the process of data gathering, I used different sources written by Ethiopians and foreigners. Accordingly, I used the Holy Bible, dictionaries written in different languages, chronicles of Ethiopian Emperors and hagiographies of saints.

Before we go to the main topic of discussion, it is essential to say something about the two rivers of Eden. Among four rivers, the first two namely Phison and Geyon rise from the highlands of Ethiopia and flow towards the west. Nowadays, Phison and Geyon are known in Ethiopia as Tekezie and Abbay, respectively. In the Ge'ez version these rivers described as “ስሙ ለአሐዱ ፈለግ ፊሶን ውዕቱ ዘየዐውድ ውስተ ኩሉ ምድረ ኤውላጡን ወህዩ ንበ ሀሎ ወርቅ። ወወርቃ ለይእቲ ምድር ሠናይ ወህዩ ሀሎ ዕንቁ ዘየንቱ ወዕንቁ ንመልሚል። ወስሙ ለካልእ ፈለግ ግዮን ውዕቱ ዘየዐውድ ኩሎ ምድረ ኢትዮጵያ።

(The name of the one is Phison: that is it which compasseth all the land of Hevilath, where gold groweth. And the gold of that land is very good: there is found bdellium, and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gehon: the same is it that compasseth all the land of Ethiopia (Gen. 2:11-13)).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Holy Bible (DOUAY-RHEIMS VERSION), Translated from the Latin Vulgate Diligently compared with the Hebrew, Greek, and other divers languages, 1609, 1582.

Historically, the appellation Nile was associated with the Geyon of the Old Testament and its source was at Gesh Abbay in Ethiopia. Though the name Nile was historically associated with the Geyon of the Old Testament, John Speke blatantly transferred the appellation Nile to Uganda. Besides, some writers denied admitting the truth about Ethiopian rivers which originate in Eden. Regarding this, Drubbel contends that “Eden was created for Adam and Eve. It is described as being watered by the Euphrates, the Tigris and 2 lesser known streams, the Gihon and the Pishon, thus its location was probably in ancient Mesopotamia (modern Iraq).”<sup>5</sup> Regrettably, Chilton asserts that “The Flood drastically altered the geography of the world, and two of these rivers (the Pishon and the Gihon) no longer exist.”<sup>6</sup> According to Chilton, Geyon and Pison disappeared by deluge that occurred during the time of Noah. On the other hand, Smith contemplates that the origin of Pishon and Gihon is in Armenia. He claims that:

The Hiddekel, one of its rivers, is the modern Tigris; the Euphrates is the same as the modern Euphrates. With regard to Pishon and Gihon a great variety of opinions exist, but the best authorities are divided between (1) Eden as in northeast Arabia at the junction of the Euphrates and Tigris, and their separation again, making the four rivers of the different channels of these two, or (2), and most probably, Eden as situated in Armenia, near the origin of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, and in which same region rise the Araxes (Pishon of Genesis) and the Oxus (Gihon).<sup>7</sup>

The assertion of Smith is far-fetched and appears a deliberate distortion. The location of Geyon is indisputable. It is invariably associated with an extant name of Ethiopia.

Having said briefly about the location of Pishon and Geyon in Ethiopia, I will deal with the various kinds of appellations in detail. There is no river in the world that has many names as Abbay/Nile. River Geyon has been identified by different names at different places and times. Even in the Old Testament, the river has different appellations. In Genesis 15:18 it is identified as Egyptian River (𐤀𐤊𐤍 𐤓𐤏𐤍) while in Genesis 41: 1 and Exodus 1:22 Nile is just identified as merely a river. On the other hand, prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah identified Abbay as Sihor (Isa.23:3 & Jer. 2:18). Next to the Old Testament, Homer’s poems are the oldest extant

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<sup>5</sup> Bart Drubbel(ed.), *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Webster’s International Encyclopedia*, (Colombia: Trident Press International, 2003), p.358

<sup>6</sup> David Chilton, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion*, (Tyler, Texas: Dominion Press, 1994), p. 30

<sup>7</sup> William Smith, *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapid, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1884), p.173

works of the ancient world. In one of his works known as *Odyssey*, Homer tells us about “the waters of Aegyptus, the heaven fed river.”<sup>8</sup> For Homer there was no special name for Nile. Hesiod, another Greek poet and who considered being a contemporary of Homer used the name Neilos as a proper name for the first time in the world.<sup>9</sup> After him subsequent Greek writers followed suit and from Neilos the appellation Nile is derived and in Latin it is known as Nilus.<sup>10</sup>

In ancient Egypt, Abbay had been identified by the name Iteru, meaning the river, or Iteruaa, the great river.<sup>11</sup> It was also called Aur or Iaro, meaning black.<sup>12</sup> Today Abbay in Egypt and northern Sudan is known by the name Bahr al-Nil or al- Azraq.<sup>13</sup> With regard to various kinds of appellations of the Nile, Diodorus reports that “The river in the earliest period bore the name Oceané which in Greek is Oceanus; then because of this flood, they say, it was called Aëtus, and still later it was known as Aegyptus after a former king of the land ... and that which the river now bears it received from the former king Nileus.”<sup>14</sup> The claim to associate the origin of Nile with the so-called king Nileus is implausible. Firstly, in the list of Egyptian kings there is no a king by the name Nileus. Secondly, the appellation Nile is not an Egyptian word, and hence that name is not found in the hieroglyphics. Accordingly, the claim is criticized by Rawlison as “The Nile was said to have received its name from king Nilus, but this is doubtless a fable.”<sup>15</sup> In addition, Abbay and its tributaries were also known as Astapus, Astaboras and Astasobas.<sup>16</sup>

In Ethiopian literature the largest Ethiopian river was known as Geyon (ግዮን), Abbawi (አባዊ) and Nil (ኒል). Besides, in some other sources we find that the river had been identified as River Tekezie and River of Egypt. For instance, in *Tamrä Maryam* (Miracle of St. Mary) it has been stated as Bahrä Tekezi (ባህረ ተክሲ).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in the book of Giyorgis Wolde-Amid,

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<sup>8</sup> A. T. Murray(trans.), *Homer The Odyssey with an English Translation, in Two Volumes*,(Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, & London: William Heinemann Ltd, Vol.I, 1945), p. 141

<sup>9</sup> Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.1044

<sup>10</sup> *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*,(Chicago & London: Vol. 13, 2005, fifteenth edition), p. 104

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Quirke & Jeffrey Spencer(eds.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, (London: British Museum Press, 1992), p.12

<sup>12</sup> The New Encyclopedia Britannica, p.104

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> C.H. Oldfather(trans.), *Diodorus of Sicily with an English Translation, in Twelve Volumes*,(London: William Heinemann Ltd, Vol. I, 1946,rpt), p.61

<sup>15</sup> George Rawlison(trans.), *History of Herodotus with an English Translation, in Four Volumes*,(London: John Murray, 1862), p. 25, see the foot note

<sup>16</sup> W. H.Jones(trans.), *The Geography of Strabo with an English Translation, in Eight Volumes*, (London: Heinemann Ltd, Vol. VIII, 1967), p.5

<sup>17</sup> *Tamrä Maryam*(ብሔራዊ-465) Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency

Abbay had also been described as Mayä Tekezi (ማየ ተክሲ).<sup>18</sup> Referring to these sources, some western writers comment on our use of a single name for both Abbay and Tekezie.<sup>19</sup> To use Mayä Tekezi instead of Abbay is inaccurate. The word *May* (ማይ) and Tekezi have meanings of water and river, respectively. Together Mayä Tekezi means water of river.<sup>20</sup> In the book of Moses, Abbay merely stated as “ወወረደት ወለተ ፈርዖን ትትጎፀብ በውስተ ተክሲ (And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river (Exo.1:22). In the Psalm of David, the meaning of Tekezi is presented as “ዘይሬስያ ለባህር ዮብሳ ወበተክሲ ዮኅልፉ በእግር (He turned the sea into dry land: they went through the flood on foot (Psalm 66: 6). All the above narratives signify that the name Tekezi is not a proper name of a single river. Having surveyed its various appellations, hereafter the etymology of Geyon, Abbawi and Nil will continue.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1. The Etymology of Geyon

In the first book of Moses, the appellation Geyon is mentioned as one of the four rivers of Eden and its origin is associated with Ethiopia. “And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia (Gen. 2:13).” Besides, in the book of kings and chronicles, the name Gihon is mentioned in association with a certain spring in the Kidron Valley, East Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> When Sennachrib besieged Jerusalem, King Hezekiah of Israel had ordered the people to cut a tunnel and diverted the waters of Gihon to the pool of Siloam.<sup>22</sup> At first when King Hezekiah proposed to divert the stream the appellation Geyon was not mentioned in the chronicle. The chronicler states that “he took counsel with his princes and his mighty men to stop the waters of the fountains which were without the city: they did help him (2Chronicles 32:3).” So the name Gihon might have interpolated to this stream after Hezekiah had diverted its flow to Siloam to indicate that the stream is sacred as that of the Gihon of Eden.

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<sup>18</sup> Giyorgis Wolde-Amid (ገዢሙ -331), Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency

<sup>19</sup> O. G. S. Crawford(ed.), *Ethiopian Itineraries Circa 1400-1520*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958), p.90

<sup>20</sup> Siegbert Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, (Wiesbaden : Otto Harrassowitz, Vol. 3, 2007), p.1178

<sup>21</sup> Ceil Roth & Geoffrey Wigoder (eds.), *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1970), p.755

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

The name Geyon (ግዮን) is originated from the Ge'ez word, the classical language of Ethiopia and it is derived from the verb goyā (ጎዮ) meaning 'fled'.<sup>23</sup> Regarding this, Leykun states that “በመሰረቱ ግዮን የሚለው ቃል ከግእዝ የተገኘና የወጣ ነው። እርሱም ጎዮ ሸሽ አገር ጥሎ ሄደ፡ እውነተኛ የተግባር ስሙ ነው።”<sup>24</sup> (Basically, Geyon is originated and derived from the Ge'ez word goyā meaning 'fled' or 'left' the country. This is the appropriate name for its deed). In the Ge'ez Dictionary of Kidanewold, the name Geyon is defined as “ግዮን፤መሸሽ፤መከብለል፤መራቅ፤መሰደድ።”<sup>25</sup> (Geyon means 'flight', 'disappearance', 'runaway', 'migrate'). The Ge'ez Geyon and the Hebrew Gihon (גִּיחֹן) have the same meaning. Both of them indicate the flow of the river. Concerning this, Kidanewold tells us that “ጊሐን ማለት ግን ዘየሐውር በኃይል ወደርዕም ወድምፀ ማዩ ዐቢይ ወግሩም”<sup>26</sup> (Geyon means 'to burst forth with reverberation and the sound of the river is great and miraculous'). As opposed to the Ge'ez Geyon, there are attempts to associate the origin of Gihon with the word *giah*, meaning 'to burst forth' and used to describe the vivacious flow of the river.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Borgais defined Gihon as 'bursting forth' or 'gushing' so as to show the current and electromotive force of the river.<sup>28</sup>

The Greek Geon came into existence in third century BC when Ptolemy II (284-246 BC) was emperor. It was around 275 BC that the rendering of Geyon appears as Geon when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated by the Septuagint into Greek at Alexandria.<sup>29</sup> The Greek Geon is nearly akin to the Ge'ez Geyon than the Hebrew Gihon. On the other hand, some writers assume that the Hebrew Gihon might have been given by Jewish mercenaries who were at Elephantine around 650BC.<sup>30</sup> Actually, their assumption is wrong because the name Geyon appeared in about 1605 when the Exodus took place before the coming of the mercenaries to the area. Conversely, to me it seems that the Hebrew Gihon is the most recent compared to Geyon and Geon. I said so

<sup>23</sup> Yared Shiferaw, *Mätsehafä Säwasew Märeho Mätsahefet (A Book of Grammar and a Guide to Books)*, (Bahr Dar: St. George Printing Press, 1997 E. C.), p.284

<sup>24</sup> Leykun Berhanu, *Bähaymanot Kaba Yämisära Däba (An Intrigue in the name of Religion)*, (Addis Ababa: Trade Printing Enterprise, 2000 E. C.), p.30

<sup>25</sup> Kidanewold Kifle, *Mätsehafä Säwasew Wägs Wämäzgäbä Qalat Haddis (A Book of Grammar, Verb and Dictionary of the New Testament)*, (Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing Press, 1948 E. C.), p.312

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp.312-313

<sup>27</sup> *Meaning and Etymology of Gihon*, in <http://www.abarim.publications.com/Gihon.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Harley Davidson Borgais, *Meaning of Pison, Gihon Tigris and Euphrates*, in <http://www.freeornotbe.org/freeornotbe/articles/meaning>.

<sup>29</sup> *Gihon River*, in <http://www.bibleorigins.net/gihonrivermapwadiaqiqarabia.htm/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



because for Jewish writers who were in the first century CE, the name Gihon was unknown. In relation to this, Josephus states that "... Geon runs through Egypt and denotes what arises from the East, which the Greeks call Nile."<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Philo asserts that "Geon is courage beleaguering Ethiopia, which is lowness or cowardice."<sup>32</sup> Moses was born in Egypt and while he was forty years old he migrated towards Ethiopia and stayed there for another forty years (Acts 7: 23-30). Logically speaking, therefore, if Moses was in Ethiopia for about forty years, there is no doubt that Moses was familiar with the name Geyon. Above all, when the Exodus happened in about 1605, the state of Israel was not yet created and neither was the language of Hebrew. In relation to this, Bruce testifies that "it is very clear God did not invent letters, nor did Moses, who understood both characters before the promulgation of the law upon Mount Sinai, having learned in Egypt and during his long stay among the Cushites, and Shepherds in Arabia Petrea."<sup>33</sup> Bruce further elaborates as follows:

Though there is really little resemblance between the Ethiopic and the Hebrew letters, and not much more between that and the Samaritan, yet I have a very great suspicion the languages were once much nearer-akin than this disagreement of their alphabet promises, and for this reason, that a very great number of words are found throughout the Old Testament that have really no root, nor can be derived from any Hebrew origin, and yet all have, in Ethiopic, a plain, clear, unequivocal origin, to and from which they can be traced without force or difficulty.<sup>34</sup>

Although Ethiopia is geographically east of Egypt, the ancients mistakenly asserted that Geyon flows from south to north. Their errors reported that "The ancients tacitly assumed that the Nile flows from S. to N. But Alexandria was at the western side of the Delta and Meroe at the eastern side of the river."<sup>35</sup> Contrary to the existing reality, some Ethiopian writers err in asserting that Geyon rises out of Ethiopia and flows from south to the north. Regarding this,

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<sup>31</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Complete Works of Josephus, in Four Volumes*, (New York: Bigelow, Brown & Co., Inc. Vol. I, Nd), p.4

<sup>32</sup>F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (trans.), *Philo in Ten Volumes and Two Supplementary Volumes with an English Translation*, (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1981), p.143

<sup>33</sup>James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of Nile, in the Years 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772 and 1773, in Five Volumes*, (Edinburgh & London: J. Ruthven, for G. G. J. and J. Robinson-Paternoster-Row, Vol. I, 1790), p.421

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. pp.423-424

<sup>35</sup> William Deshorough Cooley, *Claudius Ptolemy and the Nile, Or an Inquiry into that Geographer's Real Merits and Speculative Errors His Knowledge of Eastern Africa and the Authenticity of the Mountain of the Moon*, (London: John W. Parker and Son Weststrand, 1854), p.50



Kidanewold claims that “ግዮን ስሙ ፈለግ ከአራቱ ዐበይት አፍላጋት ሁለተኛው ወንዝ፡ ነጭ ዐባይ ከአፍሪካ ደቡብ ተነስቶ ወደ ሰሜን፤ወደ ሱዳን አገር የሚፈስ።”<sup>36</sup> (Geyon, the name of a river, the second river among the four great rivers, White Nile that rises in the south and flows to the north, to the Sudan). Similarly, Desta tells us that “አባይ(ግዮን) በደቡብ አፍሪቃ ኒያንዛ ከሚባል ሐይቅ የሚወጣ ወንዝ፤ ከአራቱ ወንዞች ሁለተኛው፤ውሃው ነጭ የሆነ።”<sup>37</sup> (Abbay(Geyon), a river that rises in southern part of Africa from Lake Nyanza, is the second among the four rivers and its colour is white). The assertion of Kidanewold and Desta is very misleading. In the first place, the flow of Geyon is from east to west. In the second place, the name Geyon refers only to today’s Abbay and its source is at Gesh Abbay in Ethiopia.

For the ancients, it was pretty clear that Nile was another name of Geyon. Cosmas, for example, states that “Then the two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, flowing down from the northern parts, that is from Persarmenia to the south, have far more rapid currents than our river the Nile – that is the Geon.”<sup>38</sup> Cosmas adds “The Geon, again, which rises somewhere in Ethiopia passes through the whole of Ethiopia and Egypt, and discharges its water into our Gulf by several mouths.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, early church fathers also located the Gihon of Eden in Ethiopia.<sup>40</sup> In the first half of the fourteenth century, Jacob of Verona had qualified the Nile as Gihon, one of the four rivers of Eden.<sup>41</sup> In his chronicler of 1352, Giovanni da Marignolli, who was in Ethiopia as a missionary, reports the relationship between Geyon and Nile as:

Gyon is that which circlet the land of Ethiopia where are now the negroes, and which is called the land of Prester John. It is indeed believed to be the Nile, which descends into Egypt by a breach made in the place which is called ABASTY [Abyssinia]. The Christians of St. Matthew the Apostle are there, and the Soldan pays them tribute on account of the river, because they have it in their power to shut off the water, and then Egypt would perish.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Kidanewold, p.312

<sup>37</sup> Desta Teklewold, *Addis YāAmargna Māzgābā Qalat (A New Amharic Dictionary)*, (Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing Press, 1962), p.75

<sup>38</sup> J. W. McCrindle(trans.& ed.), *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, An Egyptian Monk*,(London: Hakluyt Society, 1897), p.41

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. , p.75

<sup>40</sup> Uhlig(ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vol. II, p.796

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Yule (trans. &ed.), *Cathay and the Way Thither : Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, Vol. II, 1916), p.348

Concerning the identification that Geyon is the Nile and the vice versa, Ullendorff aptly asserts that “there is no valid reason to doubt the essential accuracy of this identification ... Gihon appears in parallelism to the Nile.”<sup>43</sup> This was true for Paez, Lobo and Bruce until Speke unjustifiably associated the name Nile with Kagera, a river which joins Lake Nyanza. As Moses told us Eden was the first residence of man and its location is eastward. In Genesis 2:8 it is described as “ወተከለ እግዚአብሔር ውስተ ኤድም ገነተ ቅድመ መንገል ጽባሕ ወሄሞ ህየ ለእንላ እመሕያው ዘገብረ” (And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed). Considering the allusion of Moses as Eden was in Ethiopia, Milton attests:

Nor where Abassin kings their issue guard,  
Mount Amara, though this by some supposed  
True Paradise under the Ethiop-Line  
By Nilus’ head, enclosed with shinning rock  
A whole day’s journey high, but wide remote.<sup>44</sup>

Following Milton, Massey relates:

It is an ancient tradition that the home land of the human race was actual at the source of the Nile. Milton alludes to and repeats it is his ‘Paradise under the Ethiop Line by Nilus’ head.’ The Rabbis likewise affirm that ‘Paradise is localized under the middle line of the world, where the days are always equal length.’<sup>45</sup>

From the expression of Moses and other ancient writers, it is possible to deduce that Edem, which means beautiful in Ge’ez or Eden where Geyon rises allegorically denotes Ethiopia.

#### 4.2. The Etymology of Abbawi

The other name of River Geyon was Abbawi. Regarding this, Tekletsadiq states that “አባይ የቀድሞው የኛ የግእዝ ጽሑፍ አባዊ አንዳንድ ጊዜም ፈለገ ግዮን ሲለው ይገኛል”<sup>46</sup>(In former Ge’ez

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<sup>43</sup> Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, rpt), p.2

<sup>45</sup> Gerald Massey, *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World, a Work of Reclamation and Restitution in Twelve Books*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Adelphi Terrace, 1907), p.342

<sup>46</sup> Tekletsadiq Makuria, *YäItyopia Tarik, Nubia (Napata-Meroe), (A History of Ethiopia, Nubia(Napata-Meroe)*, (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1965 E. C.), p.76

literature, Abbay was called Abbawi and sometimes called river Geyon). The name Abbawi is derived from the Ge'ez word Abä, meaning 'being a father'. Abbawi is the adjective form of Ab meaning 'fatherly'.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, Belay claims that “በጥንቱ አጠራር በጋፋትኛ አባ፤ አባዊ ይባል ነበር፤አባት ማለት ነው።”<sup>48</sup> (In ancient Gafat language, Abbay was called Abba, Abbawi, which means 'father'). The claim of Belay is unconvincing. Abba as a name of a river is not available in Ethiopian literature and there is no evidence as Gafat was a written language. The meaning and geographical location of Abbawi expressed as “አባይ(ኤፌሶን) አባትያየወንዞች አባት፤ከአራቱ ወንዞች አንደኛው የመጀመሪያው ወንዝ፤ ታላቅ ዝማ በግእዝ አዋልድ ፈለገ አባዊ ይባላል። በዳሞት ሰከለ ሚካኤል ከሚባል አገር ከደንገዛ ሚካኤል ተራራ ሥር ፈልቆ ጎጃምን ይከባል።”<sup>49</sup>(Abbay (Pison), fatherly, the father of rivers, the first among the four rivers, great stream, in Ge'ez literature it was called Abbawi. It rises in the country of Damot Sekela Michael below at Mount Dengeza Michael and encircles Gojjam). The geographical location and meaning of Abbawi is appropriate but Desta has a problem of distinguishing Geyon from Pison or Abbay from Tekezie. Regarding its water volume Abbawi is the first among the four rivers but in the list of rivers of Eden, it is the second and it is another name of Geyon, not Pison. Likewise Kidanewold asserts that Abbawi was the name of two rivers. He contends that “አባዊ ስሙ ፈለግን፤ኤፌሶን አባይና ጥቁር አባይ፤ ታላቅ ፈሰሽ ጎርፍ ማለት ነው።”<sup>50</sup> (Abbawi, name of a river, White 'Nile' and 'Blue' Nile, big stream, flood). Words such as 'Tequr Abbay' and 'Nätch Abbay' are loan words borrowed from the westerners.<sup>51</sup> The attempt of Kidanewold to associate the name Abbawi with Nätch Abbay (Bahr al-Abyad) is completely wrong because Abbawi was an exclusive name of Geyon or Abbay. Moreover, the Pison of the Old Testament was associated with today's Tekezie, not with Bahr al-Abyad. Medieval Ethiopian scribes were well aware that Pison was another name of Tekezie. In relation to this, the scribe of Gedle Yared states that “ወእምዝ ወጽኦ እምቤተ ክርስቲያን ወሐረ እንዘ ያስተፋንውዎ ካህናተ ደብተራ እስከ ማየ ተከቤ 1Xእም 4አፍላጋት እለ ይሰቅይዎ ለገነት ዘተሰምየ ኤፌሶን

<sup>47</sup> Bairu Tafla, “*The Father of Rivers: The Nile in Ethiopian Literature*,” in Haggai Erlich and Israel Gershoni (eds.), *The Nile: Histories, Cultures, Myths*, (Boulder & London: Renne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2002), p.168

<sup>48</sup> Belay Makonnen, *Itege Taytu Bä Däbrä Mäwi : Meten Tenatawi Tarik (Empress Taytu in Dabra Mawi : A Short Historical Study)*, ( Addis Ababa: Tana Printing Press, 2003 E.C.), p.85

<sup>49</sup> Desta, p.75

<sup>50</sup> Kidanewold, p.185

<sup>51</sup> Zewdie G/Selassie (trans.), *The Blue Nile and its Basins: An Issue of International Concern*, (Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies, 2006), p.2

ወደሐውረ መንገል ምዕራብ።”<sup>52</sup> (Hereafter he came out from the church and went with priests up to river Tekezie which is one of the four rivers that waters Eden by the name Pison and flows towards the west). By the Greco-Roman writers Pison was also known as river of India. Concerning this, Cosmas reports that “the Pheison is the river of India, which some call Indus or Ganges.”<sup>53</sup> For the ancients the appellation India was associated either with Ethiopia in general or north of Tekezie in particular. In line with this, Malalas states that “In India, the Axumites and Homerites were ruled by Andas (Iadas), a Christian.”<sup>54</sup>

In Ethiopian literature the name Abbawi first appeared as another name of River Geyon in the Chronicle of Bāedā Maryam (1468-1478). The chronicler states that “ወወሰድዎ ምድረ ጎዣም ኩሎሙ ሸዋ ሐዳሪ ወአብጽህዎሙ እስከ አባዊ ወእም አባዊ ተቀበሎሙ ጎዣም ነጋሽ ምስለ ኩሎሙ ብተጎን ዔዋ ዘጎዣም ወሠርዕዎሙ ውስተ ምድረ ገምቦታ።”<sup>55</sup> (And they took to the land of Gojjam all Shewa settler soldiers and reached at Abbawi. From Abbawi king of Gojjam received all soldiers of Gojjam and resettled them in the place called Gāmbota). Though the name Abbawi appeared first in the chronicle of Baeda Maryam, it is uncertain by whom the name Abbawi was coined and the time when it was adopted. By taking into account the chronicle of Baeda Maryam, Bairu argues that the appellation Abbawi emerged in the fifteenth century.<sup>56</sup> On the contrary, Tekletsadiq asserts that Geyon was called Abbawi during the reign of Dawi II (1381-1411). He reports that “ወውዕቱ ዳዊት ዘሜሱ ለፈለገ አባዊ ከመ ኢይረድ ግብጽ በምክንያት ዘሞቅሆ ንጉሠ ግብጽ ለአባ ዮሐንስ ዘለእስክንድርያ በምክንያተ ፀባይት ወበይነዝ ፈነዎ ሎቱ ንጉሠ ግብጽ አምነ ለዳዊት ንጉሥ ግማደ መስቀሉ ለክርስቶስ።”<sup>57</sup> (At that time Dawit had diverted River Abbawi not to flow to Egypt, because the Egyptian king imprisoned Abba Yohannes, patriarch of Alexandria. As a result of this quarrel, the Egyptian king sent a gift to king Dawit a piece of the True Cross of Christ). Tekletsadiq might have accessed this evidence from Ethiopian manuscripts found in European libraries and museums but the source what I have accessed here in Ethiopia says

<sup>52</sup> K. Conti Rossini(ed.), *Acta Yared et Pantaleon* ,(Louvain:Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbeq, 1955), p.21

<sup>53</sup> McCrindle (trans.& ed.), *The Christian Topography*, p.75

<sup>54</sup> Matthew Spinka(trans.), *Chronicle of John Malalas (Books VIII-XVIII)*, (Chicago-Illinois: The University of Chicago Press,1940), p.137

<sup>55</sup> Jules Perruchon(ed.), *Les Chroniques De Zar’a Ya’eqob et de Ba’eda Maryam Rois D’Ethiopie De 1434 A1478*, (Paris: Emile Bouillon, Editeur, 1893), pp.158-159

<sup>56</sup> Bairu Tafla, *The Father of Rivers*, p.168

<sup>57</sup> Tekletsadiq Makuria, *YäGragh Ahmad Wārāra(The Invasion of Ahmad Gragn)*, (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1965 E.C.), p.90

Abbay and the name of the Egyptian patriarch was Michael, not Yohannes.<sup>58</sup> The source which I came across might have been copied after the eighteenth century because all the chronicles, except Iyasu II's, from Baeda Maryam's up to Iyoas's (1755-1769) used the name Abbawi. Related to this, Pankhurst states as:

Most of the manuscripts of the chronicles up to 1769, including the XIII texts of the abbreviated chronicles such as PC, use the form Abbawi, though those of Iyasu II have Abbay (All.PP.86, 121 text referring to the years 1738-9 and 1745-6). The Portuguese authors use the form Abaoi (Paez) and Abauy (Al Meida), Ludolf, too gives consistently the form Abbawi as that used by his informant Gregory. The modern form is Abbay, but the date of the general adoption of this form is uncertain.<sup>59</sup>

Like Ludolf, Lobo, one of the seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries in Ethiopia and who visited Gesh Abbay next to Paez, use the form Abbawi. He states that "The Nile, which the natives call Abbawi, that is the father of rivers, rises first in Sacala, province of the kingdom of Gojjam, which is the most fruitful and agreeable of all the Abyssinian dominions."<sup>60</sup> Nineteenth century travellers such as Isenberg and Krapf also used the name Abbawi interchangeably with 'Blue Nile' in their narrative about the river. They tell us that "the Abbawi, or Blue Nile, at the ford of Furi is from seventy to eighty yards broad, five feet deep and the current from two to three miles per hour."<sup>61</sup>

Despite the fact that Abbawi had been used as the proper name of Ethiopia's largest river, at least from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, Bruce attempted to discredit the name Abbawi as it did not signify anything. Bruce wrote:

Ludolf, the only one in the age he lived that had any real knowledge of either the Geez or Amharic, was the first to perceive this: he found in neither of these languages Abbawi

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<sup>58</sup> *Chronicle of Dawit II* (ገብግብ-507), Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency, pp.54-55

<sup>59</sup> Richard Pankhurst(ed.), *The Historical Geography of Ethiopia: From the First Century AD to 1704*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.144

<sup>60</sup> Arthur Murphy(ed.), *The Works of Samuel Johnson, With an Essay on His Life and Genius*, (London: Alex R. Chalmers, 1806), p.14

<sup>61</sup> Isenberg and Krapf, *Journals of the Rev. MESSRS, Isenberg and Krapf, Missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, Detailing their Proceedings in the kingdom of Shoa, and Journey in other parts of Abyssinia in the Years, 1839, 1840, 1841 & 1842*, (London & Edinburgh: Frank & Company Limited, 1843), p.87

could be a nominative, and consequently could not be applied to anything; and next he as truly found it could not be of the singular number, and if so, could not signify one river.<sup>62</sup>

Bruce's commentary is very misleading. The real knowledge of either the Ge'ez or Amharic in fact is in the hands of Ethiopians. Ludolf did not cross Ethiopia's borders and his knowledge of Ge'ez and Amharic was totally dependent on his mentor, Gorgoryos. In the work of Ludolf, Abbawi mentioned as it was a dialect of Amharic<sup>63</sup>. On the contrary, he tells us that Abbawi was derived from the word Ab, meaning parent.<sup>64</sup> This indicates that Ludolf's knowledge of Ge'ez and Amharic was superficial because Abbawi is not an Amharic dialect and its meaning is not 'paren't. A parent, as we know, is to mean either 'father' or 'mother' but Abbawi in its meaning is only connected with father. Ludolf further argues:

But this derivation neither suits with grammar, neither (d) Abbawi simply signify a parent, neither, if you rightly consider it, is it agreeable to sense; for Nilus does not send forth from his own bowls, but receives the tribute of all other rivers; so that he may rather said to be their captain and prince rather than father of them.<sup>65</sup>

Abbawi is the adjective form of Ab and there is no grammatical error. Regarding its name, it is evident that every river has its own tributaries but the name of that particular river is identified only by a big stream. So the name Abbawi cannot be an exception. Moreover, the name Abbawi was given to the river on the assumption that it is the biggest compared to other rivers in the country, not by comparing it with its tributaries.

The name Abbay appeared as a substitute of Abbawi for the first time in the chronicle of Iyasu II (1730-1755) and mentioned only once as “ሒረ እንተ ደብረ ፆት ወወደዎ ፈለገ ዓባይ በገመድ በረ ወበአ ጎንደር።”<sup>66</sup> (He travelled through mount Tsot and crossed River Abbay on the way called Gämäd Bär and entered Gondar). During the reign of Iyoas (1755-1769) the name Abbawi used instead of Abbay. The chronicler tells us that “ሑሩ ዕቀቡ እምነ ፈለገ ዓባዊ እስከ ፈለገ ረብ”<sup>67</sup> (Go

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<sup>62</sup> Bruce, Vol.III, 1972 rpt), p.655

<sup>63</sup> John Philips(trans), *A New History of Ethiopia: Being a Full and Accurate Description of the Kingdom of Abyssinia, Vulgarly, though Erroneously called the Empire of Prester John*, (London: Sasor Publisher, 1982), p.33

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. ,p.34

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ignatius Guidi (ed.), *Annales Regum Iyasu II et Iyoas*, (Lipsiae: Otto Harrassowitz, 1910), p.43

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. ,p.230

and keep from River Abbawi to River Reb). From 1769-1840 chroniclers used the name Geyon and Abbay interchangeably. For example, to mention some, first it says “ወበጽሑ ፈለገ ግዮን”(They arrived at River Geyon) and then , “ወበጺሑ ፈለገ ዓባይ”<sup>68</sup>(He arrived at River Abbay).

Based on the available sources, a hagiographer of St. Zärabruk claims that the name Abbay came into use as a result of the miracle performed by the saint. He reports that “ወአሜሃ ይቤሎ ለረድኡ ርኢ አባ እሎንተ መጻሕፍትዮ ዘተረከባ እንበለ ርጥበት ወኢሙስና ወርዕዮ ውዕቱ መነኮስ ዘሩፋኤል አንከረ ወተደመ ወአስተዐፀበ ግብረ እግዚአብሔር...ወአሜሃ ተሰምዮት ዓባይ ይዕቲ ፈለግ ወበዝንቱ ስም ትጾዋዕ እስከ ይዕዜ።”<sup>69</sup>(At that time he said to his disciple, father, look at my books, I got them dry and none of them were spoiled and then having seen this, Monk Rufael admired and was astonished by the acts of God ... since then, this river called Abbay and we call it by this same name up to now). The hagiography was written in Ge’ez and says ርኢ አባ (look Abba). So the phrase cannot be translated into Abbay. The hagiographer seems ignorant of the name Abbawi and that is why he asserts that the name Abbay emanated in association with the miracles of St. Zerabruk. According to the hagiography, the miracle was performed during the reign of Iyasu I but the name Abbay emerged in the chronicle of Iyasu II. In addition, there are no testimonies in Ethiopian literature as Abbay was coined in connection with the miracle of St. Zerabruk.

Bruce, who visited Gesh Abbay in 1770, mentioned the name Abbay but did not say anything about St. Zerabruk’s Church.<sup>70</sup> This indicates that the ark in the name of Zerabruk came to the area after 1770. Cheesman even asserts that Zerabruk was a corrupted form of Bruce. He contends:

It had been suggested to me this name (Zarabruk) was a corruption of the name Bruce, and the next time I visited the locality I make enquiries. The priests said Zarabruk was a saint but seemed to have no idea who he was. It is certain that Zarabruk was not associated with St. Michael when Bruce was there; as he mentions St. Gish in his book.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Weld Blundell(ed.), *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia 1769-1840*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1922), pp.8 &45

<sup>69</sup> Diocese of Gesh Abbay, *Gedle Zerabruk (Hagiography of St. Zerabruk)*, (Addis Ababa: Gutenberg Printing Press, 2001E.C.), p.71

<sup>70</sup> Bruce, Vol. III, p.590

<sup>71</sup> R. E. Cheesman, *Lake Tana and the Blue Nile: An Abyssinian Quest*, (London: Macmillan and Co.Limited, 1936), p.16



On the other hand, Habtemaryam asserts that Abbay was an ancient name and was coined by Axumite soldiers. He suggests that the name Abbawi might have come into use after the invasion of Ahmad Gragn.<sup>72</sup> The assertion that Abbay was coined by Axumite soldiers seems an ethnocentric view because his claims do not have any support from historical sources. Habtemaryam also argues that in both Ge'ez and Tigregna Abbay means great and serves for both sexes.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Getachew, by citing Tsegaye's poem entitled 'Abbay', claims that Abbay is a feminine gender. In the poem of Tsegaye, Abbay stated as “አንች የምድረ ዓለም ሲሰይ፤ በረሃውን ጥለሽ ግዳይ፡”<sup>74</sup> (You the nourishment of the world, captured the desert). If we spell the name as ዐበይ in Ge'ez grammatically it is feminine, meaning 'her greatness'. However, from time immemorial the river among the people was known by masculine gender. In all languages such as Ge'ez, Greek, Latin and English Geyon or Abbawi is identified as male. For instance, in Ge'ez, ‘ወስሙ ለካልእ ፈለግ ግዮን’ ወስሙ signifies masculine. Homer used the masculine gender for the river and feminine to Egypt.<sup>75</sup>

In a hymn to the Nile, ancient Egyptians had treated the river as masculine. They tell us that “He that waters the meadows, which Re-created, in order to keep every kid alive.”<sup>76</sup> In the warning letter of king Teklehaymanot (1706-1708) Geyon's masculinity is described as “Since God hath put into our power his fountain, his outlet and his increase...”<sup>77</sup> Moreover, in the folklore of the local community, though linguistically Abbay is feminine, the river is still known by the people as male. The following couplets manifest this.

ዐበይ ጉደል ብለው አለኝ በታህሳስ፤ (When I beg Abbay to decrease, he said to me in

December)

የማን ሆኖ ይችላል እስከዚያ ድረስ፡፡ (It is unbearable to me up to that time)

ዐበይ ጥቁር ነበር ከሰል የመሰለ፤ (Abbay was black like charcoal)

እየቀለ ሄደ ደም እየመሰለ፡፡ (Getting red like blood)

<sup>72</sup> Habtemaryam Aseffa, *Yäityopia Tarik: Teyaqewochena Baheloch (A History of Ethiopia: Questions and Cultures)*, (Addis Ababa: Np. 1986), p.181

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. , p.182

<sup>74</sup> Tsegaye Gabre Madhin, *Isat wäy Abäba (Fire or Flower)*, (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1966 E. C.) p.154,

<sup>75</sup> Lindsay(trans.), *The Nile*, p.323

<sup>7676</sup> William J. Duiker & Jackson J. Spielvoel, *World History: Volume One to 1800*, (Wadsworth, USA, Np, 2004), p.16

<sup>77</sup> Bruce, Vol. II, p.526

In Ge'ez literature, both religious and historical, the form ዐባይ already existed and serves not only as adjective of feminine gender but also as an adjective of other great rivers. In relation to this, the chronicle of Sarsa Dengel testifies: “ነበረ ዝንቱ ንጉሥ ንበ እሙ ዓባይ ንግሥት ሠናይተ ዝከር ሰብለወንጌል።”<sup>78</sup> (The king was living with his mother her greatness Queen Säbläwängel, who was known with good memorial). Similarly, in the chronicle of Iyasu I river Gibe is mentioned as “ዓደውናሃ ለዓባይ ፈለገ ጊቤ ቦኃይለ እግዚአብሔር።”<sup>79</sup> (With the help of God, we crossed the great river Gibe). In the hagiography of Teklehaymanot, river Žema is described as “ተንሥኣ ሰልላው ገብረ ዘስሙ መቶሎሜ ወስማ ለእሙ እስላንዳኒ ወነግሠ በፈቃዱ ላዕለ ኩሉ በሐውርተ ዳሞት ወበሐውርተ ሸዋ እስከ ወሰነ አምሐራ ንበ ፈለገ ዐባይ እንተ ስማ ዝማ።”<sup>80</sup> (A certain evil man by the name Motolemi rose and whose mother's name called Eslandani became a king by himself upon the people of Damot and Shewa up to the border of Amhara to a great river, which is known as Žema). In the Psalm of David, ዐባይ is used as “መልአ ምድረ ዘፈጠርከ፤ዛቲ ባሕር ዓባይ ወረኅብ፡ (The earth is full of thy riches. So is this great and wide sea (Psalm 103/104:24-25).

If we spell our great river as አባይ (no stress) it is derived from an Amharic word አበለ meaning a liar. In relation to this, Solomon states that “አባይ ሚዛን በእግዚአብሔር ፊት አስጸያፊ ነው፤ እውነተኛ ሚዛን ግን ደስ ያሰኘዋል። (A false balance is abomination to the Lord: but a just weight is his delight (Proverbs 11:1)). When one wants to insult a wizard, he/she says አባይ ጠንቋይ. Abiy (ዐቢይ) is the adjective form for masculine gender. In line with this, it is stated as follows: “ውዕቱ ራስ ሚካኤል ዓቢይ ወልዑል ዘበጽሐ ልዕልናሁ እስከ ሰማይ።”<sup>81</sup> (Ras Michael is great and his greatness reached the sky). In the chronicles of Ethiopian Emperors, such as Baeda Maryam, Lebna Dengel, Sarsa Dengel and Susenyos, the father of rivers is spelt as አባዊ. On the other hand, in the chronicles of Yohannes I, Iyasu I and Bakaffa the name of the river is spelt as ዓባዊ which is grammatically incorrect. Finally, as a nominative ዓባይ appeared only once in the chronicle of Iyasu II and the name ዓባዊ continued in the chronicle of Iyoas. All the sources that I have consulted in this paper reveal that Abbay is a corrupted form of Abbawi.

<sup>78</sup> K. Conti Rossini(ed.), *Historia Regis Sarsa Dengel(Malak Sagad)*, (Lipsiae:Otto Harrassowitz, 1907) p.7

<sup>79</sup> Ignatius Guidi(ed.), *Annales Iohannis I, Iyasu I et Bakaffa*, (Lipsiae:Otto Harrassowitz, 1903), p.245

<sup>80</sup> Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *Gedle Teklehaymanot*, (Addis Ababa: Tensae Zegubae Printing Press, 1989) p.31

<sup>81</sup> Blundell(ed.), *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia*, p.5

### 4.3. The Etymology of Nil

Nil was one of the ancient names of today's Abbay. Its origin is Ge'ez, meaning blue in colour. All the Ge'ez dictionaries define Nil as blue in colour. Similarly, in his Tigregna dictionary, Girmatseyon tells us that Nil signifies the colour of the sky.<sup>82</sup> From both Tigregna and Ge'ez sources the word Nil describes the colour of Abbay. In addition, some sources written in Amharic use the nominative Nil to differentiate Abbay from Bahr al-Abyad or the White River. For instance, Taye states that “ነጭ ዓባይና ኒል ዓባይ በሚገናኙበት ውሃውን ወደሰሀራ ሊመልሰው ቆረረው።”<sup>83</sup> (At the confluence of White ‘Nile’ and Nil Abbay he (Lalibela) has dug the land to divert the water to the Sahara). Likewise Tekle Iyasus tells us that “ከገነት ይወጣል ከተባሉት ከአራቱ አፍላጋት ግዮን የሚባለው የሚፈልቀው ከገጃም መሬት ነው። የውሃው መልክ ኒል ይመስላል።”<sup>84</sup> (From the four rivers of Eden, Geyon rises in Gojjam and its colour appears blue). Tesemma similarly elaborates that “ኒል ሰማያዊ ቀለምን መስሎ ከገጃም ምድር መንጭቶ፤ ገጃምን አካባቢ ወርዶ ሱዳንንም አቋርጦ አራት ሺህ ማይል ዐልፎ ከሜድትራንያን ባህር የሚቀላቀል፤ ኒል ዓባይ።”<sup>85</sup> (Nil, seems blue in colour, rises and encircles Gojjam and passes through the Sudan and joins the Mediterranean sea after four thousand miles, blue Abbay). Regarding its length, Tesemma is inaccurate. He told us the length of Bahr al-Abyad, not Abbawi. The length of Geyon is about 3260 miles or 5,216 kilometres.

In the same manner, Abbawi was also known by the appellation Nil in Sudan. In relation to this, Bruce states that “In the plain country between Fazuculo and Sennar, it is called Nil, which signifies blue; and the Arabs interpret it by the word Azraque, which it keeps as far as Halafaia, or near it where it joins the White River.”<sup>86</sup> Besides Nil, Azraq is also a Ge'ez word, meaning ‘blue’, colour of the sky.<sup>87</sup> All the aforementioned sources indicate that Nil is nominative only to River Abbay. As opposed to this reality, Smidt argues that Nil is a loan word from Sanskrit. He asserts:

<sup>82</sup> Girmatseyon Mebrahtu, *Lesanā Agazi (The Language of Agazi)*, (Asmara :Government Printing Press, 1976), p.400

<sup>83</sup> Taye Gebremariam, *Yälytopia Hezb Tarik(A History of Ethiopia)*, (Addis Ababa: Central Printing Press, 1964 E.C.), p.50

<sup>84</sup> Girma Getahun(ed.), *YäGojjam Teweled Bāmulu kăAbbay Eskä Abbay(A Genealogy of Gojjam from Abbay to Abbay)*, (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2003 E.C.), p.14

<sup>85</sup> Tesemma Habtemichael, *YäAmaregna Mäzegäbä Qalat(An Amharic Dictionary)*, (Addis Ababa: Np,2002E.C.), p.685

<sup>86</sup> Bruce, Vol. 3, p.656

<sup>87</sup> Yared, p.376

The term ኒል (Nil) exists, but appears rather rarely, mostly in the context of foreign influence (e.g. Arab. CP CeraMaria 207). It usually refers to the Nile in Egypt but sometimes also used for the Blue Nile (e.g. BT of a204f: here the term Abbay designates the whole Nile and contrary to the normal practice – Nil stands for the Blue Nile only). The word is not to be confused with Amh./Tg. Nil, or Arab. Nil, ‘indigo;’ a loan word from the Sanskrit.<sup>88</sup>

The author knows the existence of the term Nil in Ethiopia but he did not want to acknowledge it. Rather, he attempted to associate its origin with Sanskrit. As a matter of fact, both in Sanskrit and the Hindu Puranas the appellation Nil was known as Nila, meaning blue.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Sanskrit itself was a loan word for Indians. Concerning this, Kennedy, as cited by Higgins, asserts that ‘An examination of the vernacular dialects of India will render it evident that Sanscrit is a foreign language, which has been super induced on them, and not they on Sanscrit.’<sup>90</sup> Higgins adds that “the ancient system of letters of India and Ethiopia may be considered the same, notwithstanding their great distance and the intervention of so many other nations lying between them.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Jones ascertained the relationship between Indian and Ethiopian letters as follows:

The letters on many of those monuments appear, as I have before intimated, partly of Indian, and partly of Abyssinian or Ethiopick, origin; and all these indubitable facts may induce no ill-grounded opinion, that Ethiopia and Hindustan were peopled or colonized by the same extraordinary race.<sup>92</sup>

All the above stated sources are indicative that Sanskrit itself originated from Ethiopia, and not the vice versa.

In other languages, Nil is spelt as Neilos, Nilus and Nile. The term Neilos was first mentioned by Hesoid, a Greek poet. Nilus is the Latin form, while Nile is an English one. Encyclopaedia

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<sup>88</sup> Uhlig(ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica*, Vo. III, p.1177

<sup>89</sup> Rawlison(trans.), *History of Herodotus*, Vol. II, p.25

<sup>90</sup> Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis: An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veils of Saitic Isis; or an Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations and Religions*, (New York: Macy-Masius-Publishers, Vol. I, 1927), p.449

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. ,p.457

<sup>92</sup> William Jones, *Works of Sir William Jones, in Six Volumes*, (London: G.G. & J. Robinson, Pater-Noster-Row, Vol. I, 1799), pp.30-31

Britannica claims that “the name Nile is derived from the Greek Neilos.”<sup>93</sup> Quirke and Spencer likewise assert that Nile is derived from the Greek Neilos, but they do not know where the Greeks found the term Neilos.<sup>94</sup> Contrary to the above, Gunther argues that nobody knows where the name Nile was originated from.<sup>95</sup> Still, other authors assume that the Greek Neilos might have come from the Semitic nahal, meaning a river. Regarding the latter, Cooley dares to say that “The name Nile was probably of Semitic origin, and learned by the Greeks from the Phoenicians. It certainly cannot be traced to the languages of Greece or Egypt or of Ethiopia.”<sup>96</sup> The speculation of Cooley is refutable. Nile in the Old Testament is found under the name of Sihor, i.e. black stream.<sup>97</sup> In the book of Prophet Jeremiah, Nile is stated as “And now what has thou to do in the way of Egypt, to drink the water of Sihor?” (Jeremiah 2:18).

In Ge’ez, Sihor is described differently as “ወይዜኒ ምንት ብኪ በፍኖተ ግብጽ ከመ ትስተይ ማየ ሕመግ፡” (And now what has thou to do in the way of Egypt, to drink the brown water). The Ge’ez version does not use Sihor as a proper name of Nil. Rather, it is translated into its equivalent meaning as “ማየ ሕመግ” which signifies the colour of the river during flooding. The Amharic Bible translated in 2000 E.C. changed Sihor into Geyon. “አሁንስ የግዮንን ውሃ ትጠጭ ዘንድ በግብጽ መንገድ ምን ጉዳይ አለሽ? The Amharic Bible translators knew that Sihor is another name of Geyon but Geyon does not indicate the colour of the river. It denotes only the flow of the Ethiopian biggest river.

Although many sources do not know certainly where the word Nile originated, all agree that Nile signifies the colour of the water.<sup>98</sup> If the name Nile is related to the colour of Abbawi and its meaning is blue, it is indisputable to assert that Nile is the misspelt of Nil. Besides, Nil for westerners does not give sense because in both Latin and English ‘nil’ means nothing.<sup>99</sup> As stated above, the word Nil describes the colour of Geyon but mistakenly western writes use Blue ‘Nile’ to differentiate Abbawi from Bahr al-Abyad or the White River. So the appellation Blue Nile and White Nile are misnomers.

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<sup>93</sup> *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 13, 2005 15<sup>th</sup> edition, p.104

<sup>94</sup> Quirke & Spencer (eds.), *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*, p.12

<sup>95</sup> John Gunther, *Inside Africa*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), p.223

<sup>96</sup> Cooley, *Claudius Ptolemy and the Nile*, p.3

<sup>97</sup> *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*, in <http://www.biblehistory/easton/N/> Nile

<sup>98</sup> *Smith, Smith’s Bible Dictionary*, p.498, *International Standard Bible*, in <http://www.Bible.history.com/isb/N/Nile>.

<sup>99</sup> Robert K. Barnhart and Sol Steinmetz(eds.), *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, (New York: Chambers, 2005 rpt), p.705

Today the Arabic word for the Nile is al-Nil or Bahr al-Nil, a loan word from Ge'ez Nil. The name Nile is not an Egyptian by origin.<sup>100</sup> The Arabic language was introduced to Egypt following the occupation of the country in the seventh century AD<sup>101</sup> and yet Arabic, the language of Quran, was under the influence of the Ge'ez language.<sup>102</sup>

Concerning the colour of Geyon there are misunderstandings. Many travellers who saw Abbawi during the rainy season argue that the colour of the water does not reflect its name. Regarding the colour of Abbawi and Bahr al-Abyad Penn explains:

As in many cases, the colours of the rivers do not accurately reflect their names, but it is true that the White Nile with its lighter sediment load usually had a muddy, gray look. While the Blue Nile, eroding the Ethiopian mountains carries more grit and soil has a darker, brown-green colour that looks blue at dawn and in the evening.<sup>103</sup>

The blueness or whiteness of a river is connected with other factors. For instance, the adjective blue is the result of a reflection of the colour of the sky on the clear waters of Abbawi. In relation to this, Desta reports: “ፈሳሹም ሰማይ መስሎ ስለሚታይ ጥቁር ዓባይ ይሉታል፡”<sup>104</sup> (They call it black Abbay because the colour of the water seems to be the colour of the sky). Similarly, Baker states that “during the dry season the water of the Blue Nile is clear, as its broad surface reflects the colour of the blue sky, hence the appellation.”<sup>105</sup> The name Nil or the blueness of Geyon or Abbawi is applicable only when the water is clear during the dry season of the year but during the rainy season its colour is almost chocolate-brown.

## 5. Conclusion

There is no river in the world that has many names as Geyon. In the Old Testament alone the river is known by different appellations. It has been identified as Gihon, Sihor, Egyptian river or merely a river. In Ethiopian literature it has been identified as Geyon, Nil and Abbawi. Likewise, the largest Ethiopian river had been identified by diverse appellations in different parts

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<sup>100</sup> John Baines, *Time and the River*, in <http://www.duskin.com/online>, p.38

<sup>101</sup> Trevor Mostyn and Albert Hourani (eds.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Middle East and North Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.27

<sup>102</sup> Haggai Erlich, *The Cross and the River: Ethiopia, Egypt and the Nile*, (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. ,2002),p.53

<sup>103</sup> James R. Penn, *Rivers of the World: A Social, Geographical and Environment Source Book*, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC Clio, 2001), p.28

<sup>104</sup> Desta, p.75

<sup>105</sup> Samuel W. Baker, *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia and Sword Hunters of Hamarn Arabs*, (London: Macmillan and Co. , 1806), p.552

of the world. In ancient Egypt, for example, Nile had the name Iteru, meaning a river, or Iteruaa, the great river. Nowadays in Egypt and northern Sudan it is known by the names of Bahr al-Nil or Bahr al-Azraq.

In the final analysis, it is safe to conclude that all the three appellations found in Ethiopian literature namely Geyon, Abbawi and Nil are etymologically derived from the classical language of Ethiopia and describe the different features of one river. Geyon signifies the flow of the river, Abbawi as a nominative denotes the father of rivers and Nil indicates the colour of the same river. Thus, the appellations of Blue Nile and White Nile are misnomers. Assertions like the name Abbay was coined by Axumite soldiers and it came into existence in association with the miracle of St. Zerabruk are ill-grounded and ill-informed opinions. The name Abbay is a corrupted form of Abbawi. The appellation Abbay is inaccurate by the following reasons. Firstly, አባይ (no stress) is an Amharic word meaning a liar. As a result, it never appears in Ge'ez sources. Secondly, በባይ (stressed), on the other hand, has already existed as an adjective of other great rivers even before the appearance of the name Abbawi.

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