

SAINT QUEEN KETEVAN AND THE THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF THE SOUL'S VICTORY OVER THE BODY

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Abstract: The conference report explores the tumultuous political and religious landscape of 18th -19th-century Georgia. This period is marked by the country's struggles for survival amidst the crossfire between Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia. Queen Ketevan spent ten years as a hostage of Shah Abbas. When King Teimuraz resolved to seek assistance from Russia to free his mother, Shah Abbas in response, commanded Undiladze to force Queen Ketevan to convert to Islam. Undiladze, terrified by the terrible order, pleaded with the queen to outwardly convert to Islam while remaining Christian in her heart, however, the queen's response was firmly motivated: 'Georgians can't see into hearts, but they will accept the verbal confession of Islam, and because of the queen is a mirror of the nation, therefore nation will become Muslim.'

Consequently, St. Ketevan remained unwavering. Before her torture, she only asked for the right to pray. „The queen was steadfast,“ wrote the French Catholic missionaries at the Iranian court afterward. Her unyielding spirit left a profound impression on the people. The body of the queen, who had been tortured with unprecedented cruelty, was considered a priceless treasure by those who witnessed it. French missionaries found the holy relic, which had been specially hidden by the enemy. They wrapped it in a cloth soaked in precious ointment and took it to France, from where it was sent to King Teimuraz. However, the sacred relic, buried in the Alaverdi Monastery, was lost in 1723. The holy relics of the queen, renowned for their healing power, were taken to India (Goa Church), Rome (St. Peter's Basilica), and Belgium (Namur Church).

The heroic sacrifice of Saint Ketevan resulted in Georgia's awakening and a significant arousal of the spirit of freedom. This is evidenced by the battles of Martkopi and Marabda, during which the Safavid Iranian army struggled and was nearly defeated by the bravery of Georgians, inspired by the saint. The torture of the queen saved Georgia and disrupted Shah Abbas's plan to completely Islamize „Gxurjistan“, which meant stripping the country of its ontological foundation, represented by Christianity.

In the conference presentation, we discuss the theological factors that guided the saint to endure unspeakable suffering, so that the soul might ultimately triumph over the body.

Keyword: Saint Ketevan; Christianity; Georgia.

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This conference paper is dedicated to a globally recognized act of martyrdom that transformed the country's historical reality for the better during the difficult political and religious climate of the 18th-19th century Georgia. This study aims to examine the historical and social circumstances that preceded the self-sacrifice of Saint Queen Ketevan. It seeks to explore what Christian anthropology reveals in the context of this process, and how the theological concept of the soul's triumph over the body is formed in the mind of a faithful and spiritually wise adherent. Altogether, these elements constitute a universal human unity in the struggle for survival, where the devotion of one can lead to the salvation of thousands, inspiring even people of differing confessions to unite around this supreme act of goodness.

Caught in the crossfire of geopolitical rivalry between the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Iran, Georgia struggled to retain its very existence. They deemed the Islamization of Georgians and the conversion of Georgian lands into provincial territories as necessary and inevitable steps. Catholic Rome, though extending a hand of friendship, saw Georgia's integration into the Roman Church as a non-negotiable condition for cooperation. At the same time, Orthodox Russia pursued Georgia's annexation by reclassifying it as a guberniya (a provincial district within the Russian Empire) (Tsintsabadze, 2010:39-40).

Amidst a nation on the brink of collapse, torn apart by interneccine bloodshed and the unrelenting pursuit of royal power, where even fratricide and patricide became tools in the hands of marginalized Georgian nobles, Queen Saint Ketevan emerged as a wise and steadfast monarch. In the face of such dire internal and external political turmoil, she managed to govern her kingdom with remarkable prudence and to make the most reasonable decisions under the circumstances. This is not only acknowledged by Georgian chroniclers but also attested by researchers.

Queen Ketevan was held captive by Shah Abbas for ten years. During this time, she embraced a life of profound asceticism: fasting, praying, and lying upon bare stone, her body withered like a candle consumed by its flame. And yet, she remained steadfast and full of compassion, attentively caring for and watching over the twenty Georgians placed under her authority. Among Queen Saint Ketevan's attendants were her spiritual father, Mose, and the priest Vasili, who celebrated the Divine Liturgy nearly every day, as though they were preparing the Queen for martyrdom and themselves, too, awaiting death for Christ each day. In doing so, they embodied the exhortation of the Apostle Paul: „Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to Him as an instrument of righteousness“ (Romans 6:13). Within such a sacred process of transformation that a person denies the self and, with complete trust in God, begins to create a new self: one born through ascetic struggle and offered entirely to the Divine.

Asceticism became the foundation for the unimaginable torments endured by Saint Queen Ketevan and her spiritual father, Father Mose. Pietro della Valle recounts how, in the foreign land of captivity, the Queen drew strength from her confessor's deep spirituality and fervent faith – qualities that did not go unnoticed at the royal court of Iran. Seeking to eliminate him, they falsely accused the devout priest of various crimes. At last, he was offered life, honor, and riches – if only he would renounce Christ. When the desired answer did not come, the Persians, enraged, allowed a furious mob and a wrathful khan to tear to pieces the unyielding soldier of Christ, cutting him down with stones and blades. This happened five years before the martyrdom of the Holy Queen, and rather than weaken her, it became a source of unshakable strength, deepening her faith beyond measure.

It must be noted that Shah Abbas, though a follower of an Abrahamic religion, directed his extreme cruelty more out of personal hatred toward King Teimuraz than from any genuine opposition to the Christian faith itself. All the more so, in Islamic theology, Christians are regarded as „People of the Book“ – a group seen as divinely favored, albeit believed to have distorted the original message, and therefore ranked above pagans. Shah Abbas's inhuman brutality toward Queen Ketevan was, in fact, a manifestation of deep resentment and vengeance, driven primarily by his animosity toward King Teimuraz.

To analyze our subject, it is essential to reflect on Shah Abbas's hatred, which consumed one of the most powerful rulers of his time and led to his defeat by a fragile queen. Saint Ketevan anquished Shah not with force but through her deep love for family and homeland and unwavering trust in Christ.

As we explore this subject, we also seek to understand the theological factors that shaped Saint Ketevan's psychology and consciousness, which enabled her to endure unspeakable suffering and attain the soul's final triumph over the body. According to Jacques Lacan, a reformist thinker in the tradition of 20th-century Freudian psychoanalysis, salvation does not demand self-sacrifice as an offering in exchange. Yet, it does include an act of renunciation, rejecting the ego.

This kind of analysis inevitably leads us to the concept of kenosis – from the Greek *kénosis*, derived from *kenoūn*, meaning „to empty.“ In biblical and theological language, the interpretation of kenosis has varied across theological traditions. One widely accepted understanding holds that Christ „emptied“ Himself not of divinity itself, but of personal will, becoming entirely receptive and obedient to the divine will of the Father, even unto death on the cross. Some theologians also interpret the concept as emphasizing the humanity of Christ, suggesting that, to fully experience the mortal condition, Jesus voluntarily refrained from the active use of His divine attributes. As *Philippians 2:6* states, „though he was in the form of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be exploited,“ thus indicating that Christ did not use His divine status to bypass the suffering and limitations inherent to human life. Saint Queen Ketevan’s life offers a deeply kenotic witness: stripped of every earthly comfort, she stood humbly before God, offering her entire being in obedience, much like Christ. Though she could have chosen a life of worldly pleasure as Shah Abbas had offered her, her God-centeredness prevailed. Unlike the Shah, she possessed a spiritual intelligence rooted in divine wisdom: the discernment required to walk the path of victory not by might, but by surrender.

According to the Italian missionary and painter Don Cristoforo de Castelli, who lived in Georgia, Queen Ketevan was „highly eloquent and gifted with extraordinary talents – her beauty could rival that of an angel. Moreover, she radiated the spiritual brilliance of a saint.“ Because of the astonishing piety that characterized her personality, Saint Ketevan drew particular attention from French Catholic missionaries at the Persian court, who wrote extensively about her. During her captivity in Shiraz, she was in contact with several European missionaries, who were deeply moved by the unshakable strength of her soul. Gregorio Orsini and Pietro della Valle recorded her martyrdom. The latter’s 1624 account later inspired the German playwright Andreas Gryphius to compose the tragedy *Catharina von Georgien* (The Georgian Queen Catherine) in 1646–47. (Kekelidze, 1958:496)

It is also worth noting two hagiographic works dedicated to Queen Ketevan: *The Martyrdom of the Most Glorious Martyr, Queen Ketevan, Who Was Martyred by the godless Shah Abbas, King of Persia, in the City of Shiraz* by Grigol Dodorkeli, and *An Encomium and Narrative of the Struggles and Passions of the Holy Great Martyr, Queen Ketevan* by Catholicos Anton I. In both texts, the martyred queen is portrayed not only as a Christian who suffered for her unwavering loyalty to the Orthodox faith, but also as a patriot who gave herself wholly for her homeland, a figure who fought for its freedom and independence, and who firmly offered her life upon the altar of her nation. (Nachkebia, 2024: 212)

Devotion to her homeland was inseparably bound to Saint Queen Ketevan’s love for Christ. When Shah Abbas issued the horrifying order for her forced conversion to Islam, Undiladze, deeply shaken, pleaded with the Queen to feign conversion, to outwardly accept Islam while secretly remaining Christian in her heart. Yet the Queen’s response was firm and theologically grounded: „They will not see my heart, they will only hear the confession of my lips. And once the queen confesses Islam, they will believe the faith of the people has fallen.“

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Thus, Saint Ketevan remained steady. Before her torture began, she asked only for permission to pray. Brother Dush Anjush describes the Queen’s dreadful martyrdom under the powerful title: „The Glorious Martyrdom and Beautiful Death of Queen Ketevan.“ According to his account, after one final and fruitless attempt to persuade her, the Queen told the Shah’s envoys not to waste more time. The executioners then entered, bringing with them two braziers filled with blazing coals and a pair of terrifying heated pincers. When they moved to bind her hands behind her back, the devout Queen, instead of trembling in fear, requested: „Do not bind my hands behind me. Bind them in front, as it is done to Christians, so that I may lift them in prayer to our God and Lord.“ The torturers scorched her flesh with red-hot iron and pressed burning coals against her body. Yet even when the Queen collapsed

from exhaustion, they could not take her life. At last, consumed with rage and fearing failure, they strangled her with their own hands. (Gulbekiani, 1967: 39-40).

Now hung at both her hips, the burning iron,
Two searing spears tore her breasts into shreds.
Her blood flowed in torrents, quenching flame and fire,
Was not her Savior thus nailed to the cross?
Bound hand and foot, naked, not adorned!
Chained in iron, tormented on the tree of pain
So too did Christ once part from this vale of tears.
(Gryphius, Catharina von Georgien, 1975, S. 194)

The holy queen's miraculous strength, endurance, and other remarkable personal qualities can be understood as the fruit of her ascetic life. At the heart of asceticism lies prayer. The words of prayer hold a transformative power so profound that they seem to impose a sacred obligation upon reality itself. As author Mark Batterson observes, „Prayer is prophecy. It is the best predictor of your spiritual future. Who you become is determined by how you pray. Ultimately, your prayers' transcript becomes your life's script.“ In other words, prayer is your future self. The circumstances of your life and the contours of your character are shaped by the things you dare to say to God (Waits & Tisdel, 2021)

According to Scripture, the power of prayer is, at its essence, the power of God, the One who listens and answers. In the lives of the saints, prayer often appears not merely as communion, but as transfiguration: a holy fervor so deep it carries the body beyond gravity's hold, lifting the soul, and even the flesh, into a realm where the material bends before the divine.

As many have witnessed, Saint Queen Ketevan dwelt continually in prayer. Her ascetic life carved a path toward a union with God so intimate and consuming that her entire being seemed to pulse with His presence. Through this sacred discipline, she was granted not only prophetic insight but the foretaste of that ineffable joy born only of divine closeness. Detached from all that is fleeting and perishable, even from her flesh, her spirit rose high. And when the hour of her martyrdom came, and cruel irons and flame broke her body, she did not waver. It was as though she had already shed her body like a garment grown old. Thus, she passed from this world, not as a queen of passing glory, but as the Bride who „in exchange for a temporal kingdom, inherited the Kingdom of Heaven“ (Troparion).

What else could inspire such unfathomable strength in Saint Queen Ketevan, if not the deification of her soul through Christ – a transformation rooted in the mystery of the Cross and Resurrection? Her life, transfigured by faith, reflects the meaning of suffering and opens a luminous path of salvation for all who seek truth in tribulation. Queen Ketevan's exemplary heroism inspired artists and writers far beyond Georgia's borders. Her sanctified image found its echo in hearts and minds across nations. Even King Teimuraz I, her relative and poet-king, composed The Martyrdom of Queen Ketevan, a solemn poetic tribute that captures the Queen's ascetic devotion, her radiant Christian virtues, and her political and spiritual significance in the life of the Georgian nation. More than a historical record, the poem unfolds the inner, mystical drama of the martyred queen and the grieving poet himself. Woven with Gospel allusions, Teimuraz imbues the text with theological depth, portraying her martyrdom as a mirror of Christ's Passion. In a particularly poignant moment, he laments his absence during her suffering, wishing he could have borne the cross beside her, standing at her right hand, crucified in shared sacrifice.

I, the sinful thief, was not nearby,
Not crucified – yet dared not ask why.
In sorrow drowned, my soul appears,
Repentant, flowing – a river of tears.
(Teimuraz I, 1934)

Teimuraz thoroughly describes the act of martyrdom, drawing a parallel to the heavy burden his mother had to endure for many years. The martyrdom that culminates in a life devoted to attaining the truth of Christ is one of the strongest affirmations of the soul's immortality and the future resurrection. It is through following Christ's example of crucifixion that one shares in His resurrection. Martyrdom is one of the highest peaks of ascetic life, embodying all Christian virtues in the Holy Scriptures. A martyr reaches the state described by the Apostle Paul: „I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me“ (Galatians 2:20). Through their martyrdom, the saints receive the strength and life of Christ, becoming „graced gods“ and are themselves Christ-like in Christ. Holiness fundamentally realizes the return to God's likeness, which was first intended in the creation of humanity. Through faith and love, every saint realized God's likeness within themselves. Christ calls, „Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him“ (John 14:23). Martyrdom is the realization of perfect love, a love that casts out fear through Jesus Christ, and one that enables a person to die with Him, knowing that they will rise again with Christ in eternity. This Christ-like love endowed Saint Ketevan with the strength to triumph over Shah Abbas, who sought to devastate her nation with his ferocious hatred.

The body of the Queen, having endured torments of unspeakable cruelty, became so filled with the grace of miraculous healing that from the very first, it was accounted a most precious treasure by those who beheld her passion. By the labors of French missionaries, her sacred relic, hidden away by the enemy, was discovered. They wrapped it in a cloth steeped in fragrant and costly ointment and bore it unto France. Thence, a portion was sent unto King Teimuraz; yet the holy relic, once laid to rest in the great cathedral of Alaverdi, was lost in the year of our Lord 1723. The sacred remains of the Queen, renowned for their healing grace, were thenceforth borne unto distant lands – unto the temple in Goa of India, unto the Church of Saint Peter in Rome, and unto the Church of Namur in Belgium. The heroic sacrifice of Saint Ketevan awakened the soul of Georgia and exalted the spirit of liberty in measure hitherto unknown. This truth was manifest in the battles of Martqopi and Marabda, wherein the hosts of Safavid Persia were brought low by the valor of Georgians, whose hearts were kindled by the example of the holy martyr.

By the Queen's passion, Georgia was preserved, and Shah Abbas's design to utterly Islamize „Gurjistan“ and to strip the nation of its very ontological foundation, which is Christ, was overthrown. Noteworthy is that Saint Ketevan was venerated alike by Orthodox and Catholics, though she never renounced her Orthodox confession. This is affirmed even by Ambrosio dos Anjos, who in a letter sent to Rome in 1640 wrote thus: „It is most probable that the Queen abideth now in heaven and rejoiceth in the glory of God. Though she adhered to Greek customs, she greatly loved the Holy Catholic Church and all the Latins.“ Of no small import are the personal attainments of Queen Ketevan, which even the most exalted hierarchs have scarcely attained. Though many Popes and Patriarchs have endeavored to heal the breach between East and West, little progress has been made in the past fifty years. Yet through her sacrifice, Saint Ketevan did merit equal honor from both great confessions of Christendom.

Thus, may we rightly conclude that by her perfect embrace of the highest universal virtues and her right discernment of their meaning in this earthly life, Queen Ketevan was led unto the foretaste of eternal life. Thereby did she attain a friendship with Christ so steadfast and sacrificial, that through her salvation, she became the means of deliverance for multitudes, and did wholly partake, in soul and body, of that blessed path which leadeth unto everlasting glory.

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