Salama III served as metropolitan toward the end of the period of anarchy called Zamana Masafent, or Age of the Princes (1769-1855), and during the reign of Negus Tewodros II (1855-1868).

After the death of Abuna Qerelos II in 1828, Ethiopia remained without a metropolitan for nearly thirteen years. The political power was then parceled out among various pretenders: in northern Ethiopia the dajjazmac Sabagadis, chief of Tigre, had entered into conflict against the dajjazmac Webe Khayla Maryam, chief of Semen, but had been defeated and killed in February 1831; having become lord of the united Tigre and Semen, Webe nourished great ambitions; knowing that the Protector of the Throne at Gonder, the ras Ali II, an Oromo originating from Yajju and nominally a Christian, was in no hurry to request a new metropolitan from Cairo because the Christological doctrines of the clergy of Gonder differed from those of the Coptic patriarchate, Webe himself sent to Egypt a request for a new metropolitan. In fact, since the doctrine of the clergy of Tigre was in conformity with that of the patriarchate, Webe counted on availing himself of the prestige attached to the metropolitanate to supplant the hegemony of the ras Ali II and prepare for his own ascent toward the supreme throne. Webe’s delegation to Egypt was accompanied by a Catholic priest, Monsignor Giustino de Jacobis, a Lazarist.

The Coptic patriarch PETER VII (1809-1852) consecrated for Ethiopia a very young monk named Andrawus, who had frequented the Protestant school opened in Cairo in 1826 by the Church Missionary Society of England, which explains the inclination this prelate later had for the Protestant missionaries in Ethiopia. Barely a score of years in age, the new metropolitan took the name Salama III in honor of the first bishop of the Ethiopian church. Several Europeans were present at the first steps of this metropolitan in Ethiopia and have left accounts of the period. Salama reached Adwa, the principal seat of Webe, on 19 November 1841;
he was there received with pomp, but this first phase of his episcopate was very short: in February 1842, Webe, accompanied by the abun, invaded the Bagemder and marched on Dabra Tabor, seat of the ras Ali, where he was defeated.

Salama fell into the hands of the victor, who decided to use him at Gonder, where the metropolitan made his entry on 25 February. But there the metropolitan ran into grave difficulties, for the majority of the clergy of the capital followed Christological doctrines contrary to those of the patriarchate. In particular, the most prestigious of the monastic orders, that founded by the sainted Takla Haymanot, followed the doctrine of Ya-sagga lej (Son by Grace). Salama III was not long in rebelling against this situation, and excommunicated both the eccage Mahsantu and his chief partisan, the king Sahla Sellase, lord of Shewa, the region in which was situated Dabra Libanos, the principal monastery of the order.

The crisis reached its height in 1846 when the abun was summoned to revoke the excommunications he had launched.

Salama refused, and so the monks marched on the metropolitan’s house and violated its traditional right of asylum. Salama was then arrested and exiled to Tigre (3 June 1846) by order of the etege (queen, or wife of a king) Manan, who was anxious to preserve order; Manan was the mother of the ras Ali II and governed the capital after having espoused in a second marriage the negus Yohannes III, nominal sovereign of Gonder.

In Tigre, the metropolitan was once again favorably welcomed by Webe, who, encouraged by his presence, reopened hostilities against the ras Ali. But Webe was once again defeated, and his relations with Salama were not slow to deteriorate. In fact, Webe tended to favor the Catholic missionaries (the Lazarists), in the hope that by so doing, France would support his designs on the supreme throne. Salama nourished so profound an aversion for the Catholic missions that he ended by
maintaining relations with Webe’s adversaries. In 1847 the metropolitan prudently retired to Dabra Damo, a monastery hewn out of rock, with a very difficult access, and excommunicated Webe. In reprisal, Webe seized the goods and the fiefs of the metropolitan, but toward the end of 1848, recognizing the impossibility of realizing his ambitions without the metropolitan’s support, Webe went to Dabra Damo, where he succeeded in effecting a reconciliation with Salama. Webe then had to fulfil the condition that Salama had imposed on him: the expulsion from Tigre of the Catholic missionaries.

Meanwhile, there rose the star of Kasa Khaylu (the future King of Kings Tewodros II), who passed rapidly from success to success, so much so that by 1850 he ranked as the principal adversary of the ras Ali. One may deduce from the documents available that from 1849 Kasa Khaylu had allied himself with the metropolitan and passed for a partisan of the Christological doctrine defended by Salama. Each of the two allies drew from this understanding the anticipated profits. After eliminating one after another almost all his adversaries, including the ras Ali II, Kasa summoned Salama, who returned to Gonder on 1 June 1854. Shortly afterward, under Kasa’s auspices, the new eccage became reconciled with the metropolitan. Finally, Kasa convened at Amba Cara, not far from Gonder, a council of the representatives of the various doctrinal tendencies.

The council confirmed the Unionist doctrine, which was the one defended by the metropolitan, and rejected the contrary thesis. In conclusion, on 19 August 1854, Kasa proclaimed as official the doctrine adopted by the council, while Salama solemnly anathematized all the contrary doctrines. Having thus restored unity to the bosom of the clergy, Kasa prepared to combat his last adversary, Webe. He invaded Semen, Webe’s traditional fief, and the latter hastened from Tigre. At the confrontation that took place at Darasge on 9 February 1855, Webe was decisively defeated, and the victor had himself anointed King of Kings by Salama in the church of Darasge Maryam, near the field of battle. The new sovereign of Ethiopia
then took the royal name of Tewodros II.

In return for the support furnished to Kasa at the time of his winning the throne, Salama had obtained from him the promise that he would support him in his struggle against his two principal adversaries: the groups of monks who continued to defend the anathematized doctrines and the Catholic missionaries. It was thus that Salama first accompanied Tewodros to Shewa where the King of Kings, having subjected that region, imposed on all the local clergy the official Christological doctrine. In addition, Salama had the Lazarist bishop Giustino de Jacobis expelled from Gonder, together with the other Catholic missionaries; further, he succeeded in persuading Tewodros to welcome with goodwill some Protestant missionaries. But Salama’s hostility to Roman Catholicism only rendered more concrete the support furnished by France to the Catholic missionaries and indirectly intensified the support furnished by Great Britain to the Protestant missionaries and to Salama. Thus, from the beginning of the reign of Tewodros II, there arose a climate of tension between the negus and the metropolitan.

The relations between Salama and Tewodros, which had never been perfect, were not long in deteriorating because the sovereign’s great political plan contrasted with the interests of the Ethiopian church: Tewodros, who never concealed his contempt for the clergy, dreamed of creating a powerful empire, equipped with a large national army, which would have allowed him to subdue any adversary and to repel Islam once and for all. He counted on realizing this plan by utilizing the resources of the church and reducing its influence on the Ethiopian people. This design could not be accepted by Salama. The violent and suspicious character of Tewodros contributed to the creation of a rupture between the negus and the metropolitan. This rupture became evident at the end of 1856 at the time of the visit to Ethiopia by the Coptic patriarch CYRIL IV (1854-1861).

This was a visit out of the ordinary on two grounds: first, because this
was the first time that a Coptic patriarch had come to Ethiopia and, second, because Cyril IV already knew Ethiopia, for he had gone there in 1850 when he was called only Dawud and was no more than the superior of the Monastery of Saint Antony (DAYR ANBA ANTUNIYUS). On that earlier occasion, he had been sent to Ethiopia by the patriarch Peter VII (1809-1852) with the aim of reversing the effects of a doctrinal order that had set Salama III in opposition to part of the clergy and of asking the negus to contribute to the expenses that the patriarchate had to bear at Jerusalem to help the Ethiopian pilgrims. The details of this first mission are not known, but apparently it was unfruitful.

The high Coptic prelate’s second mission to Ethiopia proved full of incident. The documents available are silent in regard to the precise aims of the mission, but the history of the Copts permits some deductions. The viceroy of Egypt, Sa’id Pasha (1854-1863), was inclined not to pursue in the south the policy of expansion adopted by his father, Muhammad ‘Ali. He had therefore downgraded the Egyptian administration over Sudanese territory and reduced his army in Sudan to the level of a gendarmerie. This policy presupposed a friendly policy on the part of Emperor Tewodros II, who, however, did not cease to proclaim himself the enemy of Islam. Hence, Sa’id thought to send Cyril IV to Tewodros with an offer of friendship.

The Coptic patriarch accepted this mission, for he, too, had a plan. In January 1856, with the aim of forming a national army, Sa’id had decreed that all young Copts, like young Muslims, were to do military service. The Copts, who for centuries had been exempt from any military obligation, were greatly disturbed by this decree, in which they saw only an indirect way of persecuting them. Hence, Cyril IV accepted the mission in the hope also of inducing Tewodros to intervene with Sa’id and get him to revoke the decree.

The two objects of the mission were not attained; indeed, it had results opposite to those hoped for. From the time of his arrival in Ethiopia in
December 1856, the patriarch, in agreement with Abuna Salama III, drafted a letter in which Tewodros, accepting Sa‘id’s friendship, invited him to release the young Copts enrolled by force in the Egyptian army and declared himself disposed to receive from Egypt a certain number of civil and military “workers” (today called “consultants”). Suspecting that Cyril was in the service of Sa‘id as a spy and even a secret agent of Islam, Tewodros refused to sign the letter. His rage became fully manifest when Cyril expressed the desire to see the negus’s troops; convinced of the justice of his suspicions, Tewodros had Cyril IV and Salama III imprisoned.

Then he had the patriarch’s baggage searched and plundered. Five days later, on 16 January 1857, following the intervention of the Ethiopian clergy, there was a public and solemn reconciliation. Recognizing that he had been too impulsive, Tewodros liberated the two prelates and allowed Cyril IV to bless him, but the patriarch was scarcely authorized to leave Ethiopia. In October of the same year, following a new dispute with Tewodros, Salama publicly excommunicated all those who had followed the negus in his actions contrary to the interests of the clergy. It was Cyril IV who put an end to this new crisis by raising the excommunication, and this, it is said, despite Salama’s advice to the contrary. Shortly afterwards, the negus authorized the patriarch’s departure (November 1857), and in fact he returned to Egypt in 1858.

Salama’s prestige continued gradually to decline. Tewodros inflexibly pursued the realization of his grand design and especially his plan aimed at reducing the prestige of the church to make it an instrument totally subject to the state. Since Salama and the clergy had long striven against the proceedings of the negus, they were accused of being the origin of all resistance to Tewodros’ authoritarian regime. They replied by often accusing the negus of acting “like a Muslim.” This tension reached its highest point in 1864: knowing that Salama was maintaining relations with his adversaries (notably Menelik, king of Shewa, and Gobaze, lord of Wag), Tewodros had the metropolitan imprisoned on the amba (mountain
top) of Maqdala, the mountain on which the King of Kings was preparing to entrench himself to resist increasing difficulties in both foreign and domestic affairs. As for the clergy of Gonder, it had to stand by powerless at the plundering of the capital (1864) and its devastation (1966) by order of the negus himself.

The circumstances of the end of Tewodros II, who committed suicide at Maqdala on 13 April 1868 in the face of a British expeditionary corps commanded by General Robert Napier, are well known. But Salama III was not present at this event, for he had died in his prison at Maqdala on 25 October 1867 at about the age of forty-six years, sorely tried by the privations undergone during his imprisonment. Salama III remains one of the most controversial figures in the history of Ethiopia in the nineteenth century.

The successor of this metropolitan was Abuna Atnatewos.

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Salvatore Tedeschi

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