

AMSAU TEFERA, *THE ETHIOPIAN HOMILY ON THE ARK OF THE COVENANT; CRITICAL EDITION AND ANNOTATED TRANSLATION OF DƏRSANÄ ŞƏYON*. Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity (TSEC), vol. 5; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2015, XVI, 286 pp.

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This publication is remarkable in several aspects. A short digression into its prehistory would be convenient. Amsalu Tefera [Amsalu is his given name, and Tefera is the name of his father; the Ethiopians, like the Icelanders, do not have the family name] was among the first students graduated from the MA and PhD programs in Ethiopian philology of the University of Addis Ababa established (in 2004 and 2007 respectively) by the initiative of the late great *éthiopisant* Paolo Marrassini (1942–2013). The programs were aimed at creating in Ethiopia a local scholarly school able to prepare critical editions of Ethiopian texts within the framework of the so-called Neo-Lachmannian (reconstructive) methodology. The present book, being one of the first fruits of this school, is a remaking of the PhD thesis defended in Addis Ababa in 2011. It is published in the Brill series TSEC established in 2012 with the purpose to cover the whole range of Eastern (Chalcedonian) and Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) Christianity. The main object of this book was chosen from an Ethiopian and not Western point of view, being a literary work highly authoritative for the Ethiopians but little known to the Western scholars (cf. p. 96).

The contents of the book is wider than its title promises: not only the critical edition of the “Sermon on Zion” (*Dərsanä Şəyon*, thereafter SZ), pp. 121–173, but also the edition of several pieces of the Ethiopic hagiographical dossier of Zion, always from the convoy of SZ in some manuscripts, namely, the *Zena Şəyon* (Amsalu Tefera translates “News of Zion,” I would translate in a more traditional way “Story of Zion”; anyway, the work hardly contains any news or story: this is a panegyric saturated with biblical “typology”), pp. 174–182, the *Tä’ammərə Şəyon* (“Miracles of Zion,” in the sense of the internationally known hagiographic genre), pp. 182–218, the *Mälkä’a Şəyon* (“Effigy of Zion”: a hymnographic genre which development culminated in Ethiopia but started somewhere in the pre-Arab Byzantium: a poem where is glorified separately each member of the body of a saint or, as it is in our case, of an anthropomorphic image of other holy object), pp. 219–239. All these works are written in Classical Ethiopic (Ge’ez). The manuscripts (ten for SZ, less for other works) are mostly of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but, for SZ only, there is one manuscript of the fifteenth century, one of the sixteenth, and one of the seventeenth. The author makes no attempt to date any of these works but humbly limits himself to the conclusion that SZ was composed independently from the great Ethiopian ideological epos *Kabrä Nägäšt* (“Glory of the Kings,” where the story of the translation to Ethiopia of the Holy Ark, also called Zion, has the most prominent place) and the most popular Mariological work *Dərsanä Maryam* (“Sermon on Mary”), despite their overlapping in the manuscript tradition (pp. 91–110). The study includes a detailed description of the manuscripts (pp. 81–91), as well as linguistic analysis (pp. 110–120) which serves to the author’s reconstruction of the original text. The Appendix (pp. 245–249) contains five colour illustrations related to the topic of Zion/Ark in Ethiopia, including the ceremony of liturgical reading of SZ before the Ark Chapel in Aksum (p. 249, fig. 5; this chapel is a separate building constructed for the Ark of the Covenant, into which the only monk, the life-long guardian of the Ark and recluse, is allowed to enter – at least, theoretically, whereas not always in real life: see pp. 27–36, on the recent attempts to see the Ark).

Beside this philological work, the author provided a hagiographic and liturgical introduction shaped as chapters 1 and 2 (“*Tabot* in the Ethiopian Tradition,” pp. 9–38, and “Traditions on Zion and Aksum,” pp. 39–80) covering the Ethiopian literary compositions and liturgical practices where are involved the Ark of the Covenant and its symbolical equivalents “Zion” (the common name of the biblical mountain and the Ark) and *tabot* (lit. “ark”: the Ethiopian equivalent of the Byzantine antimension, a portable wooden altar; it is considered as symbolically identical to the Ark of the Covenant, and this is the reason why it is always made of wood). This sketch of the available data is very helpful, and its interest is certainly not limited to the circle of non-specialists.

Before discussing several important topics, I would like to point out some little shortcomings. Some commentaries look as addressing an audience having basic problems with education or cut off from the Internet: e.g., fn. 123, p. 166 (who were the Chaldeans), and fn. 124, p. 167 (where *4 Ezra* is to be found in different Bibles), whereas a really difficult but omnipresent epithet of the Theotokos *dəngal bākāl'e* “double Virgin,” or “Virgin in two respects”; Amsalu Tefera translates “twofold Virgin”) is left with no commentary. The reader, however, could forgive the Ethiopian author to whom this epithet is as familiar as the very name *Maryam*. It means either the twofold virginity of the body and of the soul or the virginity “before, during and after” the birth of Jesus (or both) [Getatchew Haile, Nosnitsin, 2007, p. 809]. It is unattested outside Ethiopia. A mention of “the Horologium of the blessed George” in one recension of the *Miracles* would also require a footnote (cf. p. 213)—about the fifteenth-century Abba Giyorgis of Sägla (mentioned elsewhere in the study) and his liturgical work.

When the text mentions the Greek month names *Ἰβρῆλος* (Ἰβρῆλος “April”) and *Μαΐιος* (Μαΐιος “May”), Amsalu Tefera interprets them as the Latin *Aprilis* and *Maius* (p. 154, fn. 33; p. 162, fn. 93, respectively). In the recension of the *Miracles of Zion* published according to a unique nineteenth-century manuscript, Amsalu Tefera notices “an irremediable corruption where no restoration can be proposed” (cf. his definition of the sign *obeloi*, †... †, p. 4, used by him at this place), whereas the meaning is obvious: “And it [i.e. the land] was divided [by Joshua. — *B.L.*] into twelve in order to be a sign for future generations. Then they took up twelve †... †” (p. 189 and fn. 88: “This is not a complete sentence”). This is a paraphrase of Joshua 4:4–9. It is obviously that the missing word is “stones,” but the division between the sentences should be different: “...into twelve. In order to be a sign for future generations, then they took up twelve stones.” Near this segment, another puzzling corruption might be corrected: “...they encircled Jericho three times” (p. 189, no commentary in fn.). Indeed, the text (p. 183) has “three times” (ሠለሰተ: ጊዜ) but here “three” is certainly a corruption from “seven” (ሰባተ: or ሰባተ:), which was facilitated by the coincidence, in the mediaeval Ge’ez, of the historical phonemes *ś* and *s* making the misspelling *w pro ḥ* almost normal. Finally, it would be good to notice that the traditional Ethiopian speculations about the name of Jesus as the Greek letter *iota* (cf. p. 151, fn. 10; p. 179, fn. 54) ultimately go back to the early Christianity, first attested to in the second-century *Epistle of Barnabas* 9:7.

Let us turn now to more fundamental problems. Amsalu Tefera’s great achievement is making such a discussion possible thanks to his critical edition and complementary materials he added or referred to.

A Syriac intermediary

We can approach the *Sitz im Leben* of SZ using its calendrical information. The date of the liturgical commemoration of Zion is now *Ḥadar* 21 (= Julian November 17), the day when the liturgical reading of SZ is established (currently in front of the Ark Chapel, formerly within the inner sixth chapel of the Aksum cathedral: p. 96). Amsalu Tefera is right saying that this date is based on SZ only, even though he is not formally right saying that it is lacking from the Ethiopian Synaxarium (p. 60, fn. 91). In fact, the Synaxarium opens its readings for *Ḥadar* 21 with the note በዛተ: ዕለት: ተዝካሪ: በዓለ: ለእግዚአቲሉ: ቅድስት: ደንግል: ማርያም: ወላዲተ: እምላክ: “On this day, the commemoration (*täzkarä*) of the feast of our Dame Saint Virgin Maria, the Mother of God” [Colin, 1988, p. 106]. Amsalu Tefera himself quotes the 2004/2005 witness of the then *Naburä ad* (the civil governor of Aksum, always a clergyman) Ermyas Kebede that one of the name of the Zion feast on *Ḥadar* 21 is *täzkarä Maryam* “commemoration of Mary” (p. 61), where the same term *täzkarä* is used; no doubt that the Synaxarium puts the feast as the main event of the day. Nevertheless, Amsalu Tefera is right in a deeper sense, because this rubric in the Synaxarium is a later addition, whereas the whole set of the readings on *Ḥadar* 21 is translated from the Arabic Coptic Synaxarium [Basset, 1907/2003, pp. 242–254]. This is an additional reason to think that the feast has neither Coptic nor Alexandrian origin. The date of *Ḥadar* 21 in SZ is prescribed with no explanation (*pace* the editor, p. 172, fn. 149), and the only explanation is provided by the *Miracles of Zion*: “That day, the 21st of *Ḥadar*, was Her first return from captivity to Her home; and it is Her second coming to the land of Aksum” (p. 184/192 txt/tr.). However, as Amsalu Tefera noticed, in SZ, there is no mention of the Ethiopian claim for possession of the Ark at all; there is no story of Queen of Sheba and Solomon, either (p. 92). The historical exposition ended at the first fall of Jerusalem when all the liturgical vessels were kept by the Chaldeans, but the Ark of the Covenant “remained concealed and they could not find Her” (§ 112, p. 142/166). Such a plot belongs to the Jewish Second Temple legends (cf. 2 Macc and Samaritan legends on Mt. Garizim) but hardly to an original Ethiopian literary work.

The key to the riddle of the provenance of SZ could be provided by the passage that is so far considered as erroneous: “The homily, which is read in the month of *Kanun* on the twenty-first of the month of *Ḥadar*, is now completed...” (§ 136, pp. 147/171–172; on the alleged error, see p. 171, fn. 148, where the opinion of Ernst Hammerschmidt is quoted). The problem is that the Syriac month name *Kanun* corresponds to the Julian December, whereas the Ethiopian *Ḥadar* roughly corresponds to November.

However, SZ follows the Syrian (Antiochian) enumeration of the months, where the first month is either April or October and not March or September (as it is in the remaining parts of the Christian world including Egypt and Ethiopia). The month numbers are added to the month names to avoid any misunderstanding: “the second month, which is *Mayiyos*” (§ 86, p. 137/162), “on the 10th [day] of the month of *Abrahyos*, which is the first month” (§ 30, p. 127/154). The latter phrase is my choice between the variant readings (I follow, among others, the earliest fifteenth-century manuscript), but the editor follows the monstrous construction of another part of the manuscript tradition: “...which is the month *Qādaqya*,” although he does realise that the event in question took place on 10.I (Joshua 4:29: crossing Jordan); he does not know what means *qādaqya* but supposes that it “may be a derivation of the Coptic month” (p. 154, fn. 33; which month? Koiak maybe?). It seems to me clear that the correct reading is $\Phi\theta\sigma\eta\varphi$: $\omega\zeta\gamma$: “first month” and not $\omega\zeta\gamma$: [sic!] $\Phi\theta\phi\theta$: “month *qādaqya*,” but the Ethiopic scribes, as their modern editor, were perplexed with counting April as the first month, thus producing a mechanical distortion of the spelling. It is clear from this that SZ reached Ethiopia through a Syrian intermediary.

Such an intermediary, theoretically, could have been written in Greek, but the presence of a Syriac month name, *Kanun*, and the problems with rendering the term “propitiatory” (see below) would suggest that this intermediary was in Syriac.

Sitz im Leben

Let us take another step further. In the supposedly erroneous phrase quoted above the name of the third Syrian month is rendered with the name of the Ethiopian third month, *Hadar*; the Syrian, however, implied the beginning of the year in October, whereas the Ethiopian, in September. This would have been a mistake (if not a deliberately shift of the Ethiopian month names by a Syrian translator from Syriac into Ethiopic), but if one takes the equation of *Hadar* = *Kanun* as granted, one needs to restore the date *Hadar* 21 as *Tahsaś* 21, which would be the correct translation of some *Kanun* date into Ethiopic. This is the Julian date December 17. In the seventh century, December 17 became a great feast in Jerusalem commemorating Patriarch Modestus (614—ca 630) together with his major achievements. Among the latter, the restoration of the Zion basilica was going the first. In 614, it was burned and destroyed by the Persians (“Chaldeans”) but, under Patriarch Modestus, it was completely restored.

The title of the Jerusalem commemoration on December 17 is preserved in various documents in Georgian, as it is usual for the Jerusalem liturgical data of this epoch. Modestus is commemorated as the rebuilder of the holy places, among which the first or the only named, is Zion [Garitte, 1958, pp. 408—409]. Such a coincidence cannot be hazardous: SZ is to be interpreted as a Jerusalem homily delivered (in Greek; cf. the Greek month names preserved) on the feast of 17 December and dedicated to the restoration of the new Zion basilica.

The victorious war of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius against the Persians deeply impressed the Ethiopians and provoked a new wave of interest in Byzantium and Byzantine dynastic legends among them [Lourié, Fiaccadori, 2007].

SZ does not mention Patriarch Modestus yet, that allows supposing that it goes back to the time when Modestus was still alive. It is tempting and reasonable to suppose that the author of SZ was Patriarch Modestus himself, especially when one takes into account the history of the Marian cult in the Zion basilica (see next section).

The disputed phrase in § 136 should be translated with a comma after *Kanun*: $\Omega\omega\zeta\gamma$: $\eta\theta\gamma$: $\lambda\sigma\omega$: $\tilde{\alpha}\omega\tilde{\delta}$: $\Lambda\omega\zeta\gamma$: $\gamma\theta\zeta$: “...in the month *Kanun*, on 21 of the month *Hadar*,”—to exclude the possibility of erroneous understanding “on 21 of *Kanun*” (instead of the correct “17 *Kanun*”).

Mariology and John II of Jerusalem's traditions

The whole theology of SZ is pointing to Mariology. More precisely, it even *is* Mariology. Mary is defined as Zion: $\omega\theta\alpha$: $\eta\zeta\gamma$: $\Lambda\sigma\eta\zeta\theta\omega$: $\lambda\gamma\theta$: $\theta\lambda\theta$: $\theta\theta\gamma$: $\theta\theta$: $\theta\theta$: $\theta\theta$: “...in the womb of Mary who is Zion, Ark of Law, of the Covenant” (§ 13, p. 124/151; I would translate “the law Ark of the Covenant”; cf. § 93, p. 139/164). This is not a metaphor (*pace* Amsalu Tefera, p. 94) or merely *typos* (prefiguration) but a claim of a kind of identity between the heavenly eternal Zion and the person of the Theotokos.

The Zion basilica became the place of Marian cult somewhere between the late sixth and early seventh centuries [Shoemaker, 2002, pp. 138—140], and SZ is certainly fitting well with this interval. It would be natural if it were after Modestus's reconstruction and by Modestus's initiative that the Zion basilica changes its liturgical purpose absorbing the Marian cult.

Nevertheless, the equation Mary = Zion goes to the earliest Christian community of Jerusalem and is itself grounded on the Messianic interpretation of Zion attested in the Qumranic Joshua's prophecy 4Q522, fr. 9, col. ii. These traditions collected into a florilegium were preserved by Bishop John II of

Jerusalem (387–417). He discovered the relics of St. Stephan in 415. In the *Passio Stephani* produced for this event, this florilegium of prophecies on the virgin who will give birth to the Messiah is put into the mouth of Stephanus. In these prophecies, Zion is equated with Mary in such an extent that, in some of them, there is no mention of any virgin at all: the mention of Zion is enough for take a prophecy as pointing to the Virgin. (Cf. [Lourié, forthcoming b]).

Sevenfold liturgical structure

SZ contains an exegesis of the Zion prophecy by Zachariah, where the seven lamps (Zach 4:2) acquire the following explanation: “As for Her lamps, they are the seven [Christian. – *B.L.*] churches, built in the image of Jerusalem in the highest” (§ 133, p. 146/171). The editor recognised an allusion to Rev 1:20 in the explanation of the seven lamps as seven churches (p. 171, fn. 145), but, if so, the following words create a problem, because, in the heavenly Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation, there is no temple at all (Rev 21:22), whereas these “seven churches” (ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι: ከርስቲያናት) are built “in the image of Jerusalem in the highest” (በአምላክ: ሊዮሩሳሌም: ዘላዕሉ:). The heavenly Jerusalem meant here is not described in the Book of Revelation but was modelled with the liturgical structures of the early Christian Zion.

In the fourth century, it was a common knowledge that, to the date of the end of Bar Kokhba’s revolt (132 CE), there were, on the Zion hill, seven Christian synagogues. This sevenfold liturgical structure was preserved, while embedded into an even more complicated structure, in John II’s Zion basilica constructed by him in 394 and destroyed by the Persians in 614 [Lourié, 2008; Lourié, forthcoming a].

Propitiatory as a Problem

SZ mentions the propitiatory (the mercy seat), as one might expect, several times, and the translation confirms this expectation. But the text does not: the Ethiopic standard biblical term *tādbab* [Dillmann, 1865/1970, col. 1105] occurs nowhere in SZ. Instead, we have, most often, *māshal* “covering of the *tabot*-ark” (and also of a corpse), from Arabic *mishāl* “thin garment, piece of cloth” [Leslau, 1991, p. 364]; spelling: *māshal* (§ 20, p. 125) and *māshāl* (§ 20, p. 125; § 23, p. 126). This is certainly not a word suitable for the propitiatory made from the pure gold (Ex 25:17). Given that “Ark (of the Covenant)” in Ethiopic is *tabot*, one can realise that the biblical Ark is depicted as an Ethiopian liturgical *tabot* wrapped with a tissue. In § 23, the text becomes quite explicit: [God says to Moses] “...put my Ark inside [*variant reading*: into] the *māshāl*” ወአንብራ: ለታቦትዮ: እንተ: ውስጥ: [ውስተ:] ምስሐል. Editor’s translation with its attempt to follow the Book of Exodus, “put my Ark inside the Mercy Seat” (p. 153), sounds like **put my saucepan inside the lid*. Something had happened to the propitiatory if, in the Ethiopic text, it turned out to be transformed into the Ethiopian textile covering.

We can figure out the problem judging from the first occurrence of the propitiatory in our text, where it was not recognised by the modern editor. It seems that his mediaeval predecessors were no less perplexed and, therefore, opted for transmitting the whole image into familiar Ethiopian realities. The first occurrence is the following: ለደብተራ: መርጡል: ወታቦተ: ዘሀርመቱ: ወምስዋድ: ዘላዕሌሃ: ወተቅዋመ: መሃጥት: ይነብር: ውስተ: ደብተራ: መርጡል: “...for the Tabernacle of witness, the sacred Ark, and the propitiatory (mercy seat) that is above Her, the candlestick, which is inside the Tabernacle of witness” (§ 17, p. 125; the word order according to the earliest manuscript C against all other witnesses; translation is mine).

The *crux* of the Ethiopian *interpretum* is here the word ምስዋድ: *māḥawwaṣ* used in the meaning “propitiatory,” whereas its habitual meanings are “view, observatory, place through which one looks (such as window), place of visitation” [Leslau, 1991, p. 250]. Amsalu Tefera translates according to this dictionary definition by Wolf Leslau “the observation window” (p. 151) or “window (observatory)” (p. 98), but, for such specific purpose as biblical terminology, it is the *Lexicon* by August Dillmann that is the first authority. Indeed, Dillmann [1865/1970, col. 119] provides one (a unique?) case where this word means “propitiatory”: Ex 31:7.

In the manuscripts, the meaning of the whole phrase was further obstructed by the change of the word order (except MS C, where, however, the keyword is misspelled: ወምስዋድ: “...the sacred Ark, the candlestick, and the observation window which is above it...” (Amsalu Tefera’s translation, p. 151). I retain, in this translation, “the observation window” because, after the permutation of words, this object is no longer “above Her” (the Ark) but above the candlestick (also a feminine noun). In some part of manuscripts, moreover, the keyword was deliberately changed into ምዕዋድ: *māwād* “circle.” Therefore, there is no Ethiopian manuscript preserved which scribe would have understood this place. Instead, at the first mention of the propitiatory, the Ethiopian scribes created rather fantastic furnishing within the Tabernacle (“observatory” or “circle”) and, at the further occurrences, simply replaced the Old Testament objects with their Ethiopian “localised version.”

The unusual meaning of *māḥawwaṣ* has been expelled undigested by the Ethiopian scribes including their modern successor Amsalu Tefera. However, it looks that it was used throughout the whole text by the

translator into Ethiopic. Otherwise, there would not be a need of placing into the Tabernacle of Moses an Ethiopian *tabot* wrapped with a textile covering.

Here we put a finger on an understudied problem of naming the propitiatory with a term having a literal meaning related to vision, implying the propitiatory to be a screen showing to the high priest some revelation. Discussing this problem in relation to the Second Temple Jewish *Apocalypse of Abraham* – preserved in Slavonic only as translated from the lost Greek translation from the lost Semitic (mixed Hebrew and Aramaic) original, – I proposed the following explanation: the genuine Aramaic term for “propitiatory,” חסא, preserved as the standard term in Syriac but having left scanty traces only in the Rabbinic Aramaic (where the Hebrew loanword כפרת became normative), might be read as an equivalent of חזה in the Hellenistic epoch and comprised as “view, appearance, vision”; then, *s* and *z* were often interchangeable, and some wordplay would have been implied [Lourié, 2011].

There would have been no ground for creating such term in Greek, but it would have become quite possible in Syriac. No Syriac text is known applying to the propitiatory a term with the literal meaning related to vision. However, there were some people who became responsible for an occasional appearance of such a term in the Ethiopic translation of Exodus 31:7.

Conclusions

Amsalu Tefera made an edition that will serve not only to those interested in the Ethiopian studies. SZ belongs to the Church of Zion, “the Mother of the Churches.” Therefore, the text is valuable to the whole Christian world, especially the Christian East.

I consider this text to be translated from Syriac, and its lost Syriac original, in turn, to be translated from a Greek *Vorlage*. The homily is dedicated to the Zion basilica after its rebuilding under Patriarch Modestus (between 614 and 630). Most probably, this is the homily delivered by Modestus himself on the feast of the dedication (*encaenia*) of the newly reconstructed basilica. The history of the Ark/Zion preserved when Jerusalem was conquered by the “Chaldeans” is repeated now, in the eyes of Modestus’s audience, after the second fall of Jerusalem to the Persians. Most probably, it was on this occasion that the Zion basilica became a centre of the Marian cult.

We have to be very grateful to Amsalu Tefera for his excellent work. The content of SZ is still requiring further studies, remaining far from being exhausted by his book and my present article.

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