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THE EARLY TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO ETHIOPIC/GEEZ¹

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Introduction

Among the very few languages of the world into which the Bible was translated during the first six centuries A.D., two were African languages, namely, Coptic, the old language of Egypt, and Ethiopic or Geez, the classical language of Ethiopia. In assessing the history of the translation of the Bible into Ethiopic/Geez one has to look at least briefly into the historical, religious and cultural backgrounds of the country. Ethiopia, with her unique geographical setting in the Horn of Africa and on the western side of the Red Sea, had been for over two millennia a bridge between the civilizations of Africa and the Middle East. In the course of history, Ethiopia had developed close contacts with the people of South Arabia, Egypt and Israel. These contacts, however, had been affected largely by climatic and economic conditions. People from the above regions, especially from South Arabia, started long before 1000 B.C. to migrate to Ethiopia. These migrants had subsequently introduced into their new country of asylum their language, their writing system, which underwent significant alterations and improvement later, and other aspects of their cultural and religious heritage.²

The Jewish influence on Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Israel, which had begun through commerce and then developed into the political sphere, reached its peak in the time of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. The earliest biblical source for the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon is 1Kgs 10.1-13 and 2Chr 9.1-12.³ However, the story of the Queen of Sheba has undergone extensive elaboration in the Ethiopian,⁴ South Arabian⁵ and Jewish⁶ literary traditions, and "has become the subject of one of the most ubiquitous and fertile cycles in the Middle East."⁷

1 Geez is the ancient language of Ethiopia. It is not exactly known when Geez became an independent written language. The inscription of the 3rd century A.D. found at Matara in northeast Ethiopia is believed to be the oldest Geez inscription in Ethiopia. See Sergew Hable Sellassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270* (Addis Ababa 1972), 12.

2 Sergew 1972, 29-33.

3 "There are some small, but not insignificant, differences between these two OT accounts which are of little relevance to the development of the Solomon-Sheba legend but of considerable interest to the method of text-transmission." E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London: Oxford University Press 1968), 132.

4 Sergew 1972, 36-38.

5 A.W. Arberry, trans., *The Koran Interpreted* (London 1937), 384-385; E. Ullendorff, "Hebraic-Jewish Elements in the Abyssinian (monophysite) Church," *JSS* 1 (1956) 233.

6 Detailed accounts are given in the work of F. Josephus of the 1st century A.D. and in the Babylonian Talmud of the 3rd century A.D. F. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, ed. J. Thackeray and R. Malcus (Loeb Classical Library, London 1961), VIII, 165-175; *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikan*, trans. A. Epstein (London 1935), 76. The Babylonian Talmud interprets the account of the Queen of Sheba in 1Kgs 10.1-10 in a metaphorical sense.

7 E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (London 1968), 132.

The main Ethiopian source for the Queen of Sheba is a book in Geez called *Kibre-Negest* (Glory of the Kings), the Ethiopian national saga, from which most notions of Ethiopian kingship spring. *Kibre-Negest* elaborately states that the Queen of Sheba had established an intimate relationship with King Solomon and subsequently accepted the Jewish religion. It further states that upon her return from Jerusalem she bore Solomon a son whom she called Menelik, who was later believed to be the founder of the Ethiopian royal dynasty. It was firmly believed in Ethiopia that all the kings of Ethiopia down to the late and last Emperor Haile Sellassie I were descended from Menelik I. This tradition is embodied in the Revised Constitution of Ethiopia of 1955, Article 2 which reads: "The Imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line...which descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of the Queen of Ethiopia, the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon of Jerusalem."¹ Commenting on this, Prof. Ullendorff says, "Here, in the cold terms of legal phraseology, we find the continued insistence on the mystique of a direct descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, a powerful reminder of the enduring efficacy of the Old Testament story and its wide ramifications."²

During his public ministry, Jesus, commenting on the unbelief of some of the Pharisees and the Scribes, commended the coming of the Queen of Sheba from a distant country to hear the wisdom of Solomon, "The Queen of the South shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it, for she came from the uttermost part of the earth to hear the Wisdom of Solomon."³

According to *Kibre-Negest*, Menelik I, when he grew up, was believed to have visited his father Solomon in Jerusalem where he was educated in the Jewish religion and the system of government. On his return to his country, Menelik I was accompanied by a number of priests and teachers of Law who were believed to have widely introduced Judaism in general and the Mosaic Law in particular to the country. It is stated in *Kibre-Negest* that Menelik I secretly took from the Temple in Jerusalem the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in Aksum, the capital of ancient Ethiopia, which has been regarded as a sacred city, and where it is believed that the Ark is still in existence.⁴

These intimate relations of Ethiopia with Israel, especially in the field of religion and culture, can be attested by many deep-rooted Jewish or quasi-Jewish practices detected from the earliest times to the present day in the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia and in the whole fabric of Ethiopian society, such as the observance of the Sabbath, the distinction between clean and unclean animals in the consumption of food, ritual cleanness and the practice of circumcision.

It is evident that the Jewish Sabbath has been strictly observed throughout Ethiopia even after the introduction of Christianity and the founding of a strong church. Regarding the strict observance of the Sabbath in Ethiopia, W.C. Harris has observed, "The ox and the ass are at rest. Agricultural pursuits are suspended.

1 *Revised Constitution of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa 1955), 3.

2 Ullendorff 1968, 139-140.

3 Mt 12.42; Lk 11.32.

4 *Kibre-Negest* 48; Ullendorff 1968, 82-85, 135, 141-142; Sergew 1972, 38.

Household avocations must be laid aside, and the spirit of idleness reigns throughout the day”¹ After the introduction of Christianity both Saturday and Sunday have been observed almost equally; both bear in Geez the name of Senbet (Sabbath). The former is called Qedamit Senbet (the first Sabbath) and the latter Senbete Christian (the Christian Sabbath) or Sanbata Guda (the Big Sabbath) in Oromo. Detailed regulations concerning work that is prohibited on the Sabbath are issued in *Meshafe Berhan* (the Book of the Light) by King Zer’a Ya’eqob, the religious reformer of the mid-15th century. The book is passionately preoccupied with the importance of the Sabbath.²

Many of the Pentateuchal dietary prescriptions have also been observed with some strictness in Ethiopia. Mansfield Parkyns does not exaggerate in writing: “No nation is more scrupulous in its choice of food than the Abyssinians”.³ In accordance with the dietary prescriptions of Leviticus 11, animals which have teeth in their upper jaw such as rabbits, those which do not have divided hoofs such as camels, and those which do not chew the cud such as pigs, are among the animals not to be eaten. Apparently, of all the nations, the Ethiopians have the greatest aversion to pork.

Regulations relating to ritual cleanness observed somewhat strictly among the followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church are evidently derived from the Old Testament.⁴

The custom of circumcision is also widely practised in Ethiopia. But since this custom was a widespread practice among many nations of the world, including many countries neighbouring Ethiopia, even before Judaism was introduced to Ethiopia, the practice of circumcision might have existed in the country before that time. However, it would be possible to establish a special OT connection for its existence in Ethiopia. The performance of circumcision on the eighth day after birth is shared by Jews and Ethiopians only, a fact which proves that Ethiopia was under the influence of the Old Testament injunction in this practice. However, in addition to male circumcision, Ethiopia has been practising female circumcision like most of its neighbours, a practice not found in the Old Testament. It would, therefore, seem probable that Ethiopia has adopted the practice of circumcision both from Judaism and from its neighbours.⁵

In addition to the above, Ullendorff comments that the two regular weekly days of fasting observed by the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia “are a remnant of the two days of fasting each week observed by the Jews.” He added that “the change from Monday and Thursday to Wednesday and Friday was no doubt meant to invalidate accusations of imitating the Jews.”⁶ These views can however be questioned, since these two days of the week are somewhat strictly observed by many other churches such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church and other oriental churches.

1 W.C. Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, vol 3 (London: 1844).

2 *Meshafe Berhan*, ed. Conti Rossini and L. Ricci (CSCO: 1964/5).

3 M. Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia* (London, 1966 impression of 1868 2nd ed), 207-208.

4 Ex 19.15; Leviticus 12, 15; 1Sam 21.4-6.

5 For detailed observation see E. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, 105-109.

6 *Ibid.*, 114.

The existence of such early Jewish influences and deep-rooted Old Testament practices suggests that Judaism was practised at least by a group of people in Ethiopia before the introduction of Christianity. It would, however, be difficult to extend the beginning of this practice of Judaism to the time of King Solomon in the 10th century B.C., as claimed by *Kibre-Negest*. Some scholars feel that this contact with the people of Israel and subsequently with Judaism developed before the time of the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century B.C., because the Falashas, the Jews of Ethiopia, “do not know of any religious prescriptions outside the Pentateuch; Mishnah and Talmud are unknown to them.”¹ Above all, postexilic feasts and ceremonies have never been observed in Ethiopia either by the Falashas or by their Christian brothers. One may still ask whether the Ethiopians were acquainted with the books of the Old Testament or with some portions of it, at least before they received the New Testament. This is a very difficult question and is discussed in the following section.

When was the Bible translated into Ethiopic/Geez?

The question when, by whom and from what language or languages the Bible was translated into Geez is still a matter of debate. The Jewish and the Old Testament influences and reflections which had deeply penetrated into Ethiopia before the Christian era may suggest that the Old Testament, or at least some portions of it, were simultaneously translated into Ethiopic. But the exact period when the Old Testament and the New Testament were translated into Ethiopic is not yet known for sure. There exist some interesting written Ethiopian traditional accounts about this question. But there is no unanimity in these accounts. One account in *Metshafe Mestir* (the Book of Mystery) by a certain monk called Abba Giorgis Zegasicha gives the following description in Geez about the translation of the Old and New Testaments:²

... and as to the books of the Old Testament, they were translated from Hebrew into Geez in the days of the Queen of the South who visited Solomon. Hence the rendering of the prophetic books extant in Ethiopia was faithful as the population were of the Jewish religion before the birth of Christ. However, in the translation after the birth of Christ the crucifiers distorted the true word into a testimony of falsehood.... As to the books of the New Testament...they were translated from Romaist (Latin/Greek?)

1 *Ibid.*, 115-117.

2 ..wemekbibe metsahafetihase ze-biluy te'alwa em'Ibraisti habe Geez bemewa'eliha lenegeste Azeb ente hawetseto leSolomon. Wbe' entez kone tseruye fikarehomu lemetsahifte nebiyat zeweste bihere Ag'azi esme behige Ayhud neberu em'qedme lidete Kristos. Wi' meseke a'e' lewiwo em'dihere lidete Kristos me'tu seqaliyan qale tsiduqe wiste sima' haset. Wekemese tea'lwa metsahifte nebiyat em'Ibraisti habe Geez irekib tie'merto bewste mtsihafe negest zeybl tergwame negere Ibraisti habe Geez. Elohe behil amlak. Adonai behil igzi'i. Tseba'ot behil zehai'lat. Wemekbibe metsahifitihase zehadis lemidrine Ethiopia te'alwa em'Romai'sti habe Geez em'qideme yasterei' haimanote Nistros wem'qideme yitfeter haimanote Li'yon. We'm'qidme yitgabe'au mahibere kelebat zewe'atomu Epis Qoposat ze-Qelqedon. Webe' entez kone fikare metsahifitihase lebihere Ag'azi ze-biluy weze-hadisni netufe keme worq wefitune keme birur.

into Geez before the doctrine of Nestorius appeared (431 AD) and before the doctrine of Leo was created (451 AD)¹ ...²

Similarly, many traditional Old Testament scholars of Ethiopia simply say that the Old Testament was translated into Geez before the birth of Christ without specifying any approximate period of time.³ Either view, however, is apparently doubtful. Many scholars believe that Geez had not reached the stage of being an independent written language before the birth of Christ.⁴ No literary work of any type or size is available for the period before the 3rd century A.D. It is quite true that when Philip the Evangelist under the Lord's instruction went and met, on the way to Gaza, "the man from Ethiopia, a eunuch, a minister of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure," the latter was reading the Book of Isaiah in his chariot.⁵ But one cannot easily tell in what language the Ethiopian eunuch was reading the Scriptures. Was it in Hebrew or Greek, or even in Geez? Definitely it could not have been in Geez, because Philip did not understand Geez, and no miracle was involved in their conversation. Some Ethiopians believe that the Hebrew language was known by many Ethiopians in the past and thus the eunuch might have been reading the Scriptures in Hebrew. But this does not seem likely. Even the Falashas, who strongly consider themselves the descendants of Israel do not possess even the Pentateuch in Hebrew. Above all, all their religious literature have been in Geez and not in Hebrew.⁶ Most probably it was from the Septuagint that the eunuch was reading the Scriptures, "because at that time Greek language was spoken quite widely in Ethiopia"⁷, especially in the royal court. Also, the text he was reading diverges from the Masoretic Text and largely follows the Septuagint. But it is interesting to note that the Geez text of Acts 8.33 differs from both the Septuagint and the Greek NT, and is quite close to the Masoretic Text.

There is no convincing evidence for the exact date at which the Bible was translated into Ethiopic. Although the dating of Ethiopic manuscripts presents considerable problems because of the conditions in which many of them have been kept in Ethiopia, many scholars believe that the oldest Ethiopic biblical manuscripts extant belong to the 13th century A.D.⁸ This, of course, does not mean that the Bible was not translated until the 13th century. I think the translation of the Holy Scriptures, including those of the OT, is at least as old as Christianity itself in Ethiopia.

There are good reasons why we have no biblical manuscripts older than the 13th century. First of all, no sufficient research was made to determine the approximate date of Ethiopian manuscripts with the help of the science of paleography. Secondly, the climate of Ethiopia, particularly on the high plateau where culture flourished and Christianity spread widely, is very wet, a fact which

1 The dates are inserted by the present writer.

2 *Metshafe Mestir* (MSS in parchment in the Library of the Patriarchate of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church), 74 -75. See also Ullendorff 1968, 31-32.

3 Sergew 1972, 44, 120.

4 *Ibid.*, 120, n 35.

5 Acts 8.26-38, Is 53.7-8.

6 Sergew 1972, 44.

7 Sergew 1972, 120; Ullendorff 1968, 10.

8 Sergew 1972, 18.

makes the preservation of manuscripts for a long time quite impossible. Thirdly, in the Middle Ages Ethiopia had suffered two major wars with anti-Christian powers. During this time much of the cultural heritage of the past, including a huge number of biblical manuscripts, were destroyed. In the 10th century, a powerful anti-Christian woman called Gudit seized power and staged severe persecutions against the Christians for 40 years. During her rule many churches and monasteries were destroyed with their invaluable biblical manuscripts and ecclesiastical objects.¹

Similarly, during the invasion of Ethiopia in the 16th century (1520-1551) by a Muslim warrior called Ahmed Gragn, characterized as the Attila of Ethiopia, many biblical and other liturgical manuscripts, including an immense number of ecclesiastical objects, fell victim to his destructive fury.²

The translation of the Bible, however, does not seem to have been done at any one particular period of time. It was believed to be the result of a long and "gradual process extending over two or three centuries and obviously involving a number of translators."³ Scholars have generally agreed that the translation had began simultaneously with the introduction of Christianity in the 2nd quarter of the 4th century and was completed by the second half of the 6th century.⁴ On the other hand, Ullendorff, following R.H. Charles, rightly observes that "it may safely be taken for granted that none of the original renderings was later than the end of the sixth century." According to Rahlfs it was Frumentius, the first missionary from Syria and subsequently the first Bishop of Ethiopia, who began the translation of the Bible in the middle of the 4th century, the time when Christianity was officially introduced to Ethiopia.⁵ This seems to be a very reasonable assumption. But Rahlfs does not adduce any specific evidence in support of his proposal. The fact that Christianity was introduced in the 4th century does not prove that the whole Bible was translated at so early a period.

It is evident that by the middle of the 5th century the kingdom of Aksum had become a strong Christian state, largely through the endeavours of the Syrian missionaries who came to the country after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 to escape severe persecution by the Melchites. These missionaries are commonly known in Ethiopia as "the Nine Saints". They are believed to have translated the major part of the Bible into Geez.⁶

1 Conti Rossini, "La caduta della dinastia Zagwe e la version amarica del Be'ela Nagasti." RRAI, XXI (1923), 2-314; Sergew, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History*, 203, 225-236; "The Problems of Gudit", *JES*, 10:1 (1972) 113-124; "Church and State in the Aksumite Period," *PICES* 1 (Addis Ababa 1966), 1ff.

2 Tekle Tsadik Mekuria, *The History of Ethiopia from Libne-dengil to Theodros* (Addis Ababa 1965), 40-68; Sergew 1972, 18

3 Ullendorff 1968, 38; Sergew. 1972, 120.

4 I. Guidi, *Storia della letteratura etiopica*, (Rome 1932), 12ff; A. Vööbus, *Die Spuren eines älteren aethiopischen Evangelientextes im Lichte der literarischen Monumente* (Stockholm 1954), 15-16; E. Cerulle, *Storia della letteratura etiopica*, (Milan 1956), 23-25.

5 A. Rahlfs, "Die Aethiopische Bibelübersetzung" in *Septuagintastudien*, (Göttingen 1965), 673.

6 Sergew 1972, 115-121.

The translators of the Bible into Ethiopic

There is no doubt that the translation of the Bible into Ethiopic involved a number of translators over at least two centuries; the translations are believed to be of varying linguistic value. Ludolf, the first renowned Ethiopicist, in the 17th century, commented that the same word in the source language was rendered differently in Ethiopic, and believed that this presupposed different authorship.¹ Littman likewise thought that the individual books of the Bible were translated by different translators, clearly distinguished from each other by their varying attainments. Littmann comments generally that some translations are too literal, while others merely reflect the general sense; some translators showed good knowledge of Greek and Geez, while others showed many deficiencies in this respect.²

I have studied some texts of the synoptic Gospels and compared the renderings of some terms, phrases and parallel expressions in these books. I have been surprised to find big differences in the renderings between two or more books as indicated below:

1. *kērussōn baptisma metanoiās* (“preaching baptism of repentance”), Mt 1.4; Lk 3.3; cf Acts 13.24. This phrase was translated differently in Mark, Luke and Acts. In Mark it is rendered as *weyisebek timkete keme yinesihu* (“and he was preaching baptism so that they may repent”). In Luke it is rendered as *weyisebek timkete leniseha* (“and he preached baptism for repentance”). In Acts the rendering is *wesebeke lomu...timkete ..keme yinesihu* (“he preached baptism...so that they may repent”).

2. *eis apheisin hamartiōn* (“for the forgiveness of sins”), Mt 26.28; Mk 1.4; Lk 3.3. Again this phrase is translated in the three Gospels in three different ways. In Matthew it is expressed as *keme yithadeg hati’at* (“so that sin may be forgiven”). In Mark, it is rendered as *weyithadeg lomu hati’atomu* (“and their sin will be forgiven”). In Luke it was rendered as *bezeyithadeg Hati’at* (“so that sin may be forgiven”). They all have *sin* (sing.) instead of *sins* (pl.).

3. *exomologoumenoi tas hamartias autōn* (“confessing their sins”), Mt 3.6; Mt 1.5. In Geez, Matthew has *Inze-yita’menu Hatawe’ihomu* (“confessing their sins”[pl.]); and Mark has *Inze-yita’menu Hati’atomu* (“confessing their sin” [sing.]).

4. *erēmos* (wilderness (RSV), desert (NIV, GNB, CEV), Mt 3.1; Mt 1.13; Lk 1.80; 3.2, 4; Jn 1.23; 3.14; 11.54. This is rendered in two different ways by the synoptic Gospels. Matthew has it as *Gedam*, which means “solitary/lonely place;” Mark has it as *Haqil* meaning “forest” or “an uninhabited place.” The translator of Luke is not consistent: in some places he uses *Gedam* (Lk 1.80) and in other places *Haqil* (Lk 3.2, 4).

5. *meli agrion* (wild honey), Mt 3.4; Mk 1.6. The translator had this in Matthew as *Me’are gedam* which literally means “honey of the wilderness.” Luke has it as *Me’are Tsedena* which means “honey of the wild bees.”

1 H. Ludolf, *Commentarius ad suam historiam Aethiopicum*, (Frankfort 1691), Lib. iii, Cap. 4, 2-7.

2 E. Littmann, “Geschichte der Aethiopischen Literatur” in *Geschichte der Christlichen Literaturen des Orients* (2nd ed, Leipzig 1909), 223-225; cf Ullendorff 1968, 46.

6. *gennēmata echidnōn* (“brood of vipers” (RSV and NIV), “snakes” (GNB), “bunch of snakes” [CEV]), Mt 3.7, cf 12.34; 23.33; Lk 3.7. This phrase is translated differently in Matthew and Luke. The translator of Matthew translated it in the three different places as *Tiwlede arawite mider* meaning “descendants of the beasts of earth” which figuratively means “progeny of snakes”. In Luke this is rendered as *Tiwlede sebedi’at* and means “descendants of vipers.”

7. *poiēsate...karpon axion tēs metanoias* (“Bear fruit that befits repentance”), Mt. 3.8; Lk 3.8. This is translated slightly different in Matthew and Luke. This was rendered in both as *Giberuke inke senaye fere zeyidelewekimu lenisiha*, with the difference that Matthew added the underlined word (good) to the “fruit” and the whole phrase reads as “Make (bear) good fruit”.

8. *dunatoi ho theos ek tōn lithōn toutōn egeirai tekna tō Abraam* (“God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (RSV), Mt. 3.9; Lk 3.8. These words were translated in almost the same way in Matthew and Luke. But the construction of the sentence in the two is different, possibly because different translators were at work on the two Gospels. Matthew has: *Yikl Egzi’abher em-ilantu a’eban ansi’o welud le-Abraham*, “God is able from these stones to raise children to Abraham.” Luke has: *Yikl Egzi’abher anse’o welud le-Abraham em-ilantu a’eban*, “God is able to raise children to Abraham from these stones.”

9. *diabolos* (devil). This word is found six times in Matthew (4.1, 5, 8, 11; 13.39; 25.41). In all the occurrences except 25.41 the word is transliterated as *diabelos*, while in 25.41 the word is rendered as *Seitan* (Satan). But we find the word five times in Luke (4.2, 3, 6, 13; 8.12) and in all these references the word is rendered *Seitan*. Also the translator(s) of the Gospel of John used Satan for Devil throughout the book.

10. *phōnē boōntos en tē erēmō* (“the voice of one crying in the wilderness” = Is 40.3). It is interesting to note that this phrase is translated differently in each of the synoptic Gospels. In Mt 3.3 it is rendered: *Qal zeyitserih begedam* which literally means “the voice shouting in the wilderness (solitary place).” In Mk 1.3 the Geez rendering is *qale ‘awadi zeyisebik begedam* which means literally “the voice of a herald who proclaims (preaches) in the wilderness.” In Lk 3.4 it is rendered *Nahu qale ‘awadi begedam*, which literally means “Behold the herald in the wilderness!”

There are indeed many passages in both OT and NT where in parallel expressions, the same words and terms are translated very differently in different books. This suggests that different books were translated by different translators, although it is also possible that the same translator, through an oversight, translated the same word or expression differently in different books. Even nowadays translators are not always consistent: we find them translating the same word or expression differently in different books. In the circumstances it is essential that someone make a critical edition of the Geez translation of the Bible, using better editions now available of the original Hebrew and Greek texts.

Versions (base texts) used for the Bible translation into Ethiopic

From what language or languages was the Bible translated into Ethiopic/Geez? According to Job Ludolf and many other scholars, the Old Testament was translated from the Septuagint. The New Testament was likewise rendered from a Greek text. This was possible because in those days Greek was the official language of the

Eastern Roman Empire and was widely used in all the churches of Syria, Asia Minor and Egypt. Greek was also in general use in the Kingdom of Aksum, as we know from inscriptions on many monuments and coins.¹

Many scholars agree that the first missionaries to Ethiopia, including Frumentius and the Nine Saints, who came from Syria, used Greek texts in their translation of the Bible into Geez. As regards the translation of the Old Testament it was generally accepted that it was done from the Septuagint. But which recension (version) of the Septuagint was used? There are many recensions of the Septuagint such as the Lucianic recension, widely used in the region of Syria; the Hesychian recension, commonly used in Egypt. Because of the long dependence of the Church of Ethiopia on the Church of Alexandria it was taken for granted that the Geez translation of the Old Testament was based on the Hesychian recension. To Littmann, however, this does not seem likely. Since the first missionaries were from Syria, and most of the translations were made by them, he firmly believed that the Old Testament was rendered from the Lucianic recension of the Septuagint, then widely used in Syria.² This seems a reasonable assumption, but it is difficult to accept this view unreservedly, because of the close contact between the churches of Ethiopia and Alexandria.

But to say that the translators used a Greek text does not mean that Greek was the sole and exclusive basis for their translation. As Löfgren held, if the Nine Saints from Syria were the translators of the Geez Bible, it would be difficult to explain why they would not have used as a base text the Syriac Bible or the Lucianic recension of the Septuagint.³ There is still strong feeling among some scholars that the use of many Syriac loan-words such as *haimanot* (faith), *gehanem* (hell), *Orit* (the law), *ta'ot* (idol), *qurban* (eucharist), *meswa'et* (sacrifice), in the Geez Bible indicates that the translators were familiar with the Syriac language and might have used a Syriac text.⁴ However, some such loan-words might have been "derived from Jewish-Aramaic and belong to the pre-Christian Jewish sediment in Ethiopia"⁵ without of course excluding the Syriac loan-words. The word *haimanot*, for example, in the sense of *pistis* (faith), is not limited to the Christian faith or peculiar to Syriac. This and many other Aramaic words are transliterated and naturalized in the Geez Bible.⁶

Following scholars such as A. Vööbus⁷ and F.C. Burkitt,⁸ Ullendorff rightly states: "The evidence certainly encourages the opinion that, with the advent of the Syrian missionaries in the fifth and sixth centuries, Syriac translations were employed in conjunction with the Greek text."⁹ It is reasonable to concur with Ullendorff in rejecting the views of those who claim either an exclusively Greek

1 Ullendorff 1968, 41.

2 Littman. 1909, 224ff.

3 Ullendorff 1968, 50, 57.

4 Sergew 1972, 120.

5 Ullendorff 1968, 39, n 6.

6 The word *haimanot* occurs in the Targum of Ps 33.4.

7 A. Vööbus, *Die Spuren eines älteren aethiopischen Evangelientextes im Lichte der Literarischen Monumente* (Stockholm 1951), 8, *Early Versions of the New Testament* (Stockholm 1954), 250.

8 F.C. Burkitt. "Text and Versions" in *Encyclopedia Biblica*, iv (London, 1903), col. 5012.

9 Ullendorff 1968, 56.

or an exclusively Syriac version being used as the basis for the Geez Bible translation. Ullendorff states that “the historical circumstances and a linguistic analysis of the texts...rule out such a dogmatic option for either posture.”¹ In the circumstances it is quite reasonable to postulate that both Greek and Syriac versions were used as base texts, with Greek being considered as the major source *par excellence*.

A few traditional Old Testament scholars in Ethiopia insist that the Old Testament was translated directly from Hebrew, but this does not seem to be likely and we do not find convincing evidence to support this view. Some scholars, on the other hand, have expressed a view that the translators must have had the assistance and advice of the Jewish immigrants on some difficult texts,² so that in the translation of such texts some Hebrew sentiments are reflected. Dillmann, who made critical studies of some books of the OT, came to the conclusion that the Geez OT books were later revised by individual scribes and readers on the basis of the Hebrew text and made to conform with Hebrew models.³ Such revision are believed to have been done at an early period, namely, from the 4th to perhaps the 7th century.⁴ As a result, the chapter divisions of some of the Ethiopic Bibles follow those of the Hebrew original.

It is believed that, when the Bible was translated into Geez between the 4th and 6th centuries, all the books of the OT as contained in the Septuagint, including most of the deuterocanonical books, were translated. Also the following pseudepigraphical books: *Enoch*, *Jubilees*, *the Ascension of Isaiah*, *Baruch*, *the Epistle of Jeremiah*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, *the Epistles of Clement*, *Didascalia Apostolorum* and *the Apostolic Constitutions* were translated definitely from the Greek between the mid-4th and 6th centuries.⁵ It will be interesting to note that the early tradition of the Church of Ethiopia does not distinguish clearly between “canonical” and “extra-canonical” or “apocryphal” books. All have been treated equally as “inspired” and canonical.

Revision of the Ethiopic/Geez Bible

There is another traditional account found in the Synaxarium of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church for the 20th Nahase (August). This account ascribes the translation of the Holy Scriptures to a certain Metropolitan called Abba Selama, “the translator” and states that the translation was done from an Arabic version. The account reads⁶:

On this day rested (died) Abba Selama, the translator....

1 *Ibid.*, 56.

2 *Ibid.*, 37-38.

3 A. Dillmann, *Biblia Veteris Testamenti Aethiopica*, vol ii, fasc. i., 3.

4 Ullendorff 1968, 57.

5 R. Zuurmond, “Ethiopic Versions” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 6, 808.

6 *Bezati e'let a'ereje abba Selama metrgum*

Selam leke le'ome haimanot se'rwā;

Ti'ezazate orit wewengel e'nte dibeketeke'ewa;

Selama zikreke keme behabene newa;

bekenaferike me'auzat eme'aza kerbe we'alewa;

Emine Arebi le-Geez metsahift te'alwa.

Greetings to you, root of the tree of faith.

Upon whom the commandments of the Law and the Gospels have been poured;
Selama, how your memory has abided with us!

By your lips sweeter than the scent of myrrh and aloe

Have the scriptures been rendered from Arabic into Geez.¹

This account of the translation of the Scriptures from Arabic into Geez does not refer at all to the original translation of the Bible into Geez but to the 14th century² revision of the Geez Bible. This was made under the guidance of a certain Metropolitan called Abba Selama who is often confused with St. Frumentius who was also called Abba Selama (a man of peace) by the Church of Ethiopia. However, the identity of each person has been established by the Church. Frumentius is known as *Selama kesate berhan* (Selama the Illuminator) while the other is called *Selama metergum* (Selama “the Translator”).

One may ask why it was necessary to revise the first Ethiopic version. It is believed that the original translators were not able to do justice to some difficult texts of the source language, resulting in many inaccurate renderings. In addition, many corruptions had, from time to time, crept into the various books of the canon. This 14th-century revision is believed to have been made on the basis of Arabic version(s). But as there were many Arabic versions in those days, it is very hard to establish which Arabic texts were used in producing the Ethiopic revision. Many scholars believe that this revision was made on the basis of an Arabic version attributed to a learned man called Rabbi Sa’adia Ga’on of Fayum, who had very closely followed the Hebrew original in his renderings.³ However, it is not yet possible to tell for sure how close is the revised Ethiopic/Geez Bible to the text of Sa’adia. It remains for a scholar(s) with good knowledge of Arabic, Hebrew and Geez to study Sa’adia’s text and compare it with the Ethiopic version.

Some scholars have held that the revision of the Old Testament was made on the basis of the Hebrew text,⁴ but there is no specific evidence to support this view. This remains to be seriously studied by scholars with a good knowledge of Hebrew and Geez. Other scholars speak of two different revisions of the Old Testament made in the Middle Ages. The first has been called the “Vulgar Revision”, supposed to have been made in the 14th century on the basis of Sa’adia’s Arabic version discussed above. The other has been designated as the “Academic Revision”. This was probably made in the 16th century on the basis of the Hebrew original.⁵ This version has many strong approximations to the Hebrew original, mainly to the Masoretic Text. Ullendorff, however, rejects the existence of such an “Academic Revision” and comments: “The conditions cannot possibly be adjudged for large-scale Hebrew revisions or corrections in the late Middle Ages.” He finds it

1 “Le synaxaire éthiopien” in *Patrologia Orientalis*, vol ix, 4, 359. The English translation is taken from Ullendorff, *op. cit.*, 32, revised by the present writer.

2 This century is known to be the beginning of the literary renaissance in Ethiopia.

3 *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol v, 1913, 570. See also Ullendorff, 1968, 47-49.

4 H. Zotenberg, *Catalogue des mss. Ethiopiens de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, Paris 1877, 9-11.

5 O. Löfgren, *Die äthiopische Übersetzung des Propheten Daniel*, Paris 1927: xxiv ff; J. Schäfers, *Die äthiopische Übersetzung des Propheten Jeremias*, Freiburg 1912, 178; *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 6, 808.

“impossible to accept the so-called ‘academic’ revision.” He thinks that the Hebrew influences or approximations “can readily be accounted for in the period from the fourth to perhaps the seventh century.”¹ But on the basis of cherished tradition, the traditional biblical scholars of Ethiopia explain that there exist two Geez versions of the Old Testament, one translated directly from the Hebrew original and the other from the Septuagint. They do not speak of any revision in the 14th century. But as regards the NT they acknowledge the existence of two versions, namely, the Selama New Testament and the early New Testament.² It is interesting to note that the text of the Selama NT is not very popular among the clergy and laity in Ethiopia and is not used in church services.³

A. Vööbus, however, maintains that the Syriac versions were used as the basis for the early translation of the Ethiopic Bible, and claims that the 14th century revision was undertaken on the basis of a Greek original.⁴ However, the cultural and linguistic conditions of medieval Ethiopia do not seem to favour such a proposition. It would, therefore, seem most likely that the 14th-century revision was based on the Sa’adia’s Arabic version.

Nevertheless, some scholars have held that the entire canon of the Bible and some of the deuterocanonical books were revised at this time. In addition to these, some of the pseudepigraphical books of the OT and NT such as *Testament of Abraham*, *Colloquy of Moses with God on Mount Sinai* and *Wisdom of the Sybil* were translated from the Arabic in the 14th-15th centuries.⁵ It appears that a number of translators were employed in the revision, a fact which caused the texts of the revision of the various books to be unequal and different.

Editions of the Ethiopic Scriptures

The first printed edition of the Ethiopic Bible was the *Psalterium Chaldaeum*, published by J. Potken in Rome in 1513. This, however, was not a critical edition. A critical edition of the book of Psalms was made by H. Ludolf and was printed in 1701 under the title of *Psalterium Davidis (Mezmur ze-Dawit)*.⁶ Another renowned Ethiopicist, August Dillmann, critically edited and published, between 1853 and 1894, the Octateuch, I-II Samuel, I-II Kings as well as the OT Apocrypha. A complete Ethiopic Old Testament was prepared by the Roman Catholic scholar Francesco da Bassano and was published in 4 volumes in Asmara in 1922-1926.⁷ This has been described as being not “a critical edition with an apparatus of variant readings...”⁸ The principal aim of da Bassano was to produce a complete publication of the Geez Old Testament which would be of practical benefit for the people of Ethiopia.

1 Ullendorff 1968, 57.

2 This information has been confirmed by Megabe-Biluy (expert in OT exegesis) Seife-Sellassie in an interview.

3 This information has been confirmed by H.G. Abune Heriakos, scholar of NT exegesis.

4 A. Vööbus, *Early Versions of the New Testament*, Stockholm 1954, 247ff; cf Ullendorff 1968, 53.

5 R. Zuurmond. “Ethiopic Versions” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 6, 808.

6 *Ibid.*; *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol v, 1913, 570.

7 *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 6, 809.

8 Ullendorff 1968, 59.

The New Testament was published for the first time in 1548 in Rome. This *editio princeps* was based on relatively early manuscripts kept in the Vatican Library. It was edited by three Ethiopian monks who had come to Rome for a visit on their way home from Jerusalem. They had with them some Geez biblical manuscripts which they had used in this first edition of the NT. This edition was reproduced in Walton's *Polyglot* in 1753.¹ The most common edition of the Ethiopic New Testament was prepared by Thomas Bell Platt for the BFBS and was published in 1830. Since then this has regularly been reprinted.²

Ethiopic biblical manuscripts

A large number of Geez biblical manuscripts written on beautiful parchment are preserved in the various monasteries of Ethiopia, such as Debre Libanos, Debre Bizen, Debre Damo, Gunda Gundie, St. Stephen of Hayk, and the monasteries on the islands of Lake Tana. Most of these manuscripts "are splendid specimens, beautifully illuminated and magnificently written..."³ It is surprising to note that thousands of Ethiopic manuscripts are kept in many European national and university libraries. How did these manuscripts reach Europe? Ever since the 16th century and even earlier, many travellers, explorers and tourists have travelled throughout Ethiopia and Eritrea, and naturally visited those monasteries, which have been the custodians of large numbers of invaluable biblical manuscripts. These people used different ways and means to get hold of the best of those manuscripts, carried them to Europe, and sold or presented them to the various libraries, thus enriching the European libraries but dispossessing the monasteries of Ethiopia of their invaluable treasures. Very large and extensive collections of Ethiopic biblical manuscripts are preserved in the British Museum, the Biblioth que Nationale in Paris, the Vatican Library, the Bodleian Library of Oxford University, Cambridge University Library (where the collection of the BFBS is deposited), Windsor Castle Library, the John Rylands Library in Manchester, Berlin (Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz), the St Petersburg Library, and the Vienna Library. The most important microfilmed collections are those of the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library (HMML) at Collegetown, Minnesota. They set up in Addis Ababa with the permission of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church a library named the Ethiopic Monastic Manuscripts Library (EMML) with sophisticated microfilm machines. They have microfilmed a good number of Ethiopic biblical and hagiographic manuscripts in three copies. They give to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Addis Ababa University, and the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library one copy each. Drs. W.F. Macomber and Getachew Haile have prepared commendable catalogues of the microfilmed collections of Ethiopic biblical manuscripts.⁴

1 *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, vol iv, col. 5012; *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 6, 809; Ullendorff. 1968, 34.

2 *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, vol iv, col. 5012; *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 6, 809.

3 Ullendorff 1968, 35.

4 W.F. Macomber, 1975-1978, *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts*, vols 1-3. Collegetown, MN.; Haile Getachew, 1978-1988. *A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts*, vols 4-11. Collegetown, MN.

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ETTIEN KOFFI

RETHINKING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLACK PRESENCE IN THE PENTATEUCH FOR TRANSLATION AND STUDY BIBLES: Part I

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The black presence in the Bible is often inadequately represented in most Western versions of the Bible and, by the same token, in the study Bibles that accompany them. Passages related to black people are often glossed over, or occasionally mistranslated. Some scholars go to great length to expound on passages which seem to be unflattering to blacks, while those which portray them positively are sometimes called into question in spite of the wealth of historical evidence and the support of ancient authorities. On occasion, some versions literally translate rabbinical hearsays and church speculations instead of translating the Hebrew text. Consequently, the contributions made by black people are either ignored, doubted, or made a subject of controversy.

In this paper I have identified portions of the Pentateuch in which the black presence has received an unsympathetic hearing by scholars. Since these views have swayed Bible translation, I have reanalyzed the same passages again to show that the ancient Hebrews who wrote those texts did not harbor negative feelings against black people and therefore, these passages should not be translated in ways that portray blacks negatively. My exegesis of these passages is based on linguistic analysis of the Hebrew text, of the Septuagint (LXX), and occasionally of the Vulgate. When my findings are significantly different from those of existing