

## Tedros Abraha

### Survey of recent publications of religious texts in Ethiopia and Eritrea

The last two decades and half have witnessed an editorial revival in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwähədo Church (henceforth EOTC) of extraordinary proportions. Perhaps, since the golden period of Ethiopian literary productions instigated by emperor Zär'a Ya'eqob (1434-1468), Ethiopia has never seen anything like the recent proliferation of written material (within such a limited span of time) covering the four major areas of traditional sciences: the Bible<sup>1</sup>, the Books of the Doctors<sup>2</sup>, Monastic writings<sup>3</sup>, Computus<sup>4</sup>. The recent wave of publications consists of fresh works, re-edition<sup>5</sup> of dwindling texts or of books difficult to retrieve and more importantly, the publication of some works in Gə'əz that existed in manuscripts only<sup>6</sup>. Ethiopian tradition has, for more than one reason, always favored and still

<sup>1</sup> Yohānnəs Gābrä-Maryam, ዜና አይሁድ ፡ የሴፍ ወልደ ኮርዮን እንደጻፈው [Zena Ayhud. Yosef Wäld Koryon əndä šafāw "Chronicle of the Jews according to the composition of Joseph son of Koryon"], s. l. 2001, A. M. The cover has the following long subtitle: "This book puts the fathers' sequence starting from Set, the third descendant of Adam. When it reaches the three sons of Noah, it widens its horizon concentrating itself on the children of Japheth. When it reaches the tribe of Israel, its point of departure is the tribe of Israel and it analyzes the succession of the ruling powers: Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman. Therefore the book is a pioneer for researches". Unfortunately, the introduction which is nothing more than a summary of the contents of the version, does not provide any information about the text from which the editor has carried the Amharic translation nor any discussion on the history of the work's textual transmission. The *Didascalia Apostolorum* which in the EOTC is one of the 81 Canonical Books of the Bible, is one of the latest texts to be edited in Gə'əz and Amharic: መጽሐፈ ፡ ዲድስቅልያ ፡ ዘአብዊነ ፡ ሐዋርያት ፡ [Māṣḥafā Didasqalya Zä-abāwīnā Ḥawaryat "The Book of the Didascalia of our Fathers the Apostles"], Addis Ababa, 2004 A. M.

<sup>2</sup> Known as *Māṣahəftä liqawənt*, they include patristic, liturgical, hagiographical, liturgical and canonical writings.

<sup>3</sup> They are the so-called *Māṣahəftä Mānākosat*, a trilogy comprising: *Arāgawi Mānfāsawi* [The Spiritual Elder/John Saba], *Mar Yəṣḥaq* [Isaac of Ninive] and *Fəlkəsəyyus* [Filoxenus of Mabbug].

<sup>4</sup> Known as *Abuṣakər*, a Coptic author, cf. Adel Y. Sidarus, *Ibn ar-Rāhibs Leben und Werk: ein koptisch-arabischer Enzyklopädist des 7./13. Jahrhunderts*, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> ሃይማኖት ፡ አብው [Haymanotā Abāw "Faith of the Fathers"], Addis Ababa, 1967 A. M. (bilingual: Gə'əz-Amharic); reprinted in 1982 A. M. with an additional sentence to the original title, ሃይማኖት አብው የጥንት አባቶቻችን ሃይማኖት [Haymanotā Abāw. Yä-tənt abbatoččacən haymanot "Faith of the Fathers. Faith of our ancient Fathers"], Täsfa Gābrä-Šəllase (ed.), Addis Ababa, 1982 A. M. The *Haymanotā Abāw* is a translation from Arabic of the Coptic *Florilegium*, إلباء اعتراف "I'tirāf al-abā" or *Confessio Patrum*.

<sup>6</sup> Gābrä-Yohānnəs Gābrä-Maryam (ed.), መጽሐፈ ቀለሙንጦስ ዘርሞ በግእዝና በአማርኛ [Māṣḥafā Qālemənṯos zä-Rom bā-gə'əz-ənnā bā-'amarəññā "Book of Clement of Rome, in Gə'əz and Amharic"], s. l., Ḥamle 2000 A. M. 252 pp. In the cover, the editor declares the book belongs to the 81 Holy Books, namely, the Bible. The material quality of the whole volume is very poor. S. Grébaut edited and translated into French, parts of the Pseudo-Clementine writings in *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* in 1910 and 1911. Another edition, worth mentioning is: Sirak Gābrä-'Arāgawi



privileges oral transmission and mnemonic acquisition of knowledge. In traditional schools it is simply unthinkable of a professor that enters the classroom with notes that he would read to his students. He/she must know their subject by heart. The “admission” of books at such a grand scale even in the ecclesiastical and monastic milieus is perhaps a signal that the long running ambivalent relationship with the use of writing has been overcome once and for all. It is a phenomenon that has to be welcomed by scholars of Ethiopian studies, and, since many useful productions are in Amharic and to a much lesser extent in Təgrāñña and other languages, this paper is also a call for attention to the new developments and trends that are taking place in the Ethiopian research and editorial world and to benefit from them. Some of the reasons for the current unprecedented surge in editorial activity are due the changed global situation which has eased the practical process of publishing, thanks to the widespread use of computer. The costs of publication are much more affordable now than fifty years ago, and even though the typographic qualities of several of the recent impressions leave much to be desired, more and more people are not discouraged anymore by the mechanisms of book production of the past.

#### The present publishing swell: some of its reasons

The current editorial flurry responds to the renewed sensitivity of re-establishing and strengthening of one's own identity also because of the interface with realities which differ from the local and traditional ones. Many of the publications have been produced by members of the EOTC who have done further studies abroad: in Russia, in countries of Eastern Europe, in Greece, Egypt, Syria and North America<sup>7</sup>. Internal dynamics within the EOTC between the more conservative (majority) soul and the “progressist”<sup>8</sup> wing on the one hand, the ever growing pressure by Evangelical and Pentecostal preaching on the other, have created the necessity of replying in kind. There are plenty of books and booklets of apologetic character, which are anyway useful to understand the position of the various players. Concrete pastoral demands are another important factor that has contributed to re-edit and to produce fresh publications of all the necessary liturgical texts, namely, missals, hymn books (especially the “Yaredian” texts), rituals for the various sacraments, lectionaries, hagiographic and catechetical texts, booklets on

(*mārigeta*), ዜና : ሥላሴ : ተአምረ : ሥላሴ : ወምስላ : መልክአ : ሥላሴ : የአጽዋማት ማውጫ በግዕዝ እና በአማርኛ [*Zena Səllase, Tā'ammərā Səllase wāməslā mālka'ā Səllase yā-ašwamat mawča* “Homilies on the Trinity, miracles of the Trinity with the effigy of the Trinity and an index of the fasts in Gə'əz and Amharic”], Addis Ababa, 1996 A. M. (337 pp. + 5).

<sup>7</sup> Andu'alām Dagmawi, ወላዲተ አምላክ በሃገረ ድኅነት [*Wāladitā Amlak bā-nāgārā dəhnāt* “The Mother of God in Soteriology”], Addis Ababa, 1998 A. M.

<sup>8</sup> Sometimes labelled as *Orto-pāntā* “Ortho-Pentecostal” because of the similarity of their approach to the Bible which in fact boils down to a view of Ecclesiology. Their prayer and homiletic practices too seem to imitate the Pentecostal-Evangelical style.



morality, introductions and comments to the Bible. Islam too has entered the fray: a fresh bilingual, Arabic and Amharic *Qur'ān* with an introduction and with many footnotes has been made available<sup>9</sup>. A bulky Arabic-Amharic-English dictionary has been recently published<sup>10</sup>. Both volumes can be purchased at a cost that can be afforded by ordinary people. It seems that there is renewed interest for the Gə'əz language which has resulted in the publication of lexica, including a Gə'əz-Təgrəñña<sup>11</sup> and Amharic-Gə'əz dictionary<sup>12</sup>, grammars and *qəne* (a general term for a rich *impromptu* poetry) collections.

### Some features of the recent publications

Among the multi-faceted aspects of the literary productions of the ETOC, the following are perhaps the more noteworthy: a) there seems to be a sea change whereby in many publications the approach to science is not marked by methodological prejudices. b) There are heavy weight scholars who in their pursuit for knowledge, are not conditioned by their religious affiliation. There are papers on history of the transmission of the biblical text which quote abundantly sources "external" to Gə'əz tradition. It is safe to speak of an "academic ecumenism" which has been beneficial not only to the quantitative growth of the publications but their quality as well.

### The first seeds of the present situation

The enhancement of printing religious texts for the survival and protection of faith has been an intuition of the last Ethiopian Nəguś, Ḥaylā Šəllase I (1941-1974) who encouraged scholars to do researches and supported them financially to publish their works. Currently, many of the texts for official religious duties are sponsored by the Patriarchate, but dioceses, monasteries<sup>13</sup>, religious associations are also in the frontline of the editorial activity.

<sup>9</sup> Säyid Muḥammad Sadiq (*šäyḳ*) - Muḥammad Šani Ḥabib (*ḥaḡḡ*) (trans.), የቅዱስ ቁርኣን የአግርኛ ትርጉም ከሕዳግ ግስታወሻ ጋራ :: አዲስ አበባ 2004 [*Yäqəddus Qur'an yä-amarəñña tərgum kə-həddag mastawäšə gara* "Amharic version of the Holy Qur'an with footnotes"], Addis Ababa, 2004 (843 pp.).

<sup>10</sup> Mustāfa Ḥamid Yusuf (ed.), አን-ነፌስ ዐረቢኛ አግርኛ መዝገበ ቃላት [*An-nāfis arābiñña amarəñña mäs-gäbä qalat* . عربي النفيس القاموس - أمهري - إنكليزي *Al-qāmūs al-nafis 'arabī amhari inklizi* 18000 ቃላት "Annafis Arabic-Amharic-English Dictionary 18000 entries"], s. l. 2003 (904 pp.).

<sup>11</sup> Ghebrēgziē Adhanom, መዝገበ ቃላት ግእዝ-ትግርይና [*Mäzgäbä qalat gə'əz-təgrəyna* "Gə'əz-Təgrəñña Vocabulary"], Asmara, 2010 (758 pp.). It draws heavily from the Gə'əz lexica of Dillmann and Kidanä Wäld Kəflē.

<sup>12</sup> Bälāy Mäkonnen Šəyüm (*liqä ḥəruyan*), ትንሣኤ አግርኛ - ግእዝ መዝገበ ቃላት :: ዐሥራ አምስት ሺህ ቃላትን የያዘ :: አዲስ አበባ ሐምሌ 2001 ዓ.ም. [*Tənsä'e amarəñña - gə'əz mäs-gäbä qalat*. 'Asra amməst ših qalatən yä-yazä "Resurrection of Amharic and Gə'əz, vocabulary containing fifteen thousand entries"], Addis Ababa, 2001 A. M. (267 pp.).

<sup>13</sup> E. g. መጽሐፈ ምስጢር ዘጊዮርጊስ ዘጋሳጫ [*Mäshafä Məstir zä-Giyorgis zä-Gassäčča* "The book of the Mystery by *Giyorgis of Gassäčča*"] published in an Amharic version in 2000 A. M. and in a bilingual (Gə'əz-Amharic) large format edition in 2001 A. M. by the monastery in Wällo (central



### On three recent seminal works

Before going into the topic of this paper, I would like to introduce very briefly three recent works which are to some extent strictly connected with Ethiopian traditional (*andəmta*) commentaries, namely:

a) መጽሐፍ ቅዱስ የበሉይና የሐዲስ ኪዳን መጻሕፍት [Mäṣəḥaf Qəddus yä-Bəlu-y-ənna yä-Haddis Kidan mäṣəḥəft “The Holy Book the books of the Old and New Testament”], Addis Ababa, 2007.

P. 1 reads: “The Amharic Bible with the Old Testament based on Septuagint published with the permission and the order of Patriarch Pawlos as well as with approval of the president of the World Council of Churches. Gəʾəz text compared with the basic biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek”. It is the latest Amharic version of the entire Bible, the work of an equip of high caliber scholars of the EOTC. The latter have successfully availed of their academic formation at home in traditional schools and of further specialist studies abroad. In this edition, Jubilees and Enoch appear immediately after the historical books, whereas in prior impressions of the Amharic Bible, they were placed in a separate list containing the “deuteron-canonical books”. In the introduction, the editors state that they would provide a comparison between their version with the Greek (LXX) and Hebrew (TM = Masoretic Text) textual traditions. In fact, there are footnotes in which variants from both languages are presented<sup>14</sup>. Even though the text-critical interface is far from being exhaustive, such a keen focus on textual criticism is a good first step in the right directions. The declaration “based on the Septuagint” more than a real allegiance to the Greek text reflects the ideal at which the translators have aimed. A quick look would be enough to see that the order of the books, their numbering and especially their contents do not match with the LXX. A few examples can be mentioned: Psalm 151 is missing; Jeremiah, Daniel and Job correspond to the TM even if for some passages, the Amharic version refers to the LXX. The three Books of Maccabees are the Gəʾəz text and not the Greek version. In the present updated<sup>15</sup> version too, the number of the biblical books is of 81: 54 books of the Old Testament and 27 of the New.

b) Various authors, የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን አጭር ታሪክ ከልደተ ክርስቶስ እስከ ፳፻ ዓ.ም. (2000) [*Yä-Ityoppəya Ortodoks Tāwähədo Betä-Krəstiyan*

Ethiopia) that carries the name of abba Giyorgis zä-Gassäčča who according to the date in the title of the book live from 1357 to 1417 A. M.

<sup>14</sup> The role of the theological concern sometimes at the expense of the truth of the text is exemplified in passages such as Rom 8:34, which, in line with the entire Ethiopian textual tradition reads: “judges in our favour”. However, at least in this edition, there is the intellectual honesty of acknowledging that the Greek witnesses read: “intercedes for us”.

<sup>15</sup> This version drops the classification of the Old Testament books into proto and deuteron-canonical of previous Amharic versions.



*aččər tarik kǎ-lǎdǎtǎ Krəstos əskǎ* 2000 A. M. "A short History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tǎwǎhədo Church from the Birth of Christ to 2000 A.M.", s. l. 383 pp].

It is clear from the title that the book was issued on the occasion of the celebration of the second millennium (Ethiopian Calendar). It is a precious collection of several topics, grouped under fourteen long chapters, authored by twelve scholars that on p. III are introduced as *yǎ-mǎṣṣafu azzǎgağöčč* "the contributors of the book". The volume is accompanied by a rich set of photographic reproductions. Together with the priceless value of the work, intellectual honesty demands to remember some evident flaws of historical objectivity in the presentation of people and facts<sup>16</sup>. Məkrǎ-Šəllase Gǎbrǎ-Amanu'el has written the section on the origin and evolution of the Gəʿəz Bible (pp. 156-173). The late *Mäggabe Bəlu*y (master of the Old Testament) Säyfǎ-Šəllase Yohānnəs<sup>17</sup> has dealt with the Ethiopian traditional Ethiopian exegesis (pp. 174-209). He introduces his contribution by stating that "through this short paper he is trying to explain briefly how, in two thousand years, Ethiopian scholars have interpreted their sacred texts, in a first stage only in Gəʿəz, then in Gəʿəz and Amharic"<sup>18</sup>. In fact, Säyfǎ-Šəllase's paper is far from being a generic *abrégé* but rather an articulate exposition of the birth and development of Ethiopian exegesis. There is a clear and exhaustive presentation of the two main exegetical schools that were born in the eighteenth century, namely "the upper and the lower houses"<sup>19</sup>, with several specimen of their respective patterns of interpretation. The paper introduces some interesting neologisms, such as አብርሃኑ *abrəhot*, a *Gəṃharic* word (a combination of Gəʿəz and Amharic), meaning "enlightening, explanation" (p. 206). Technical terms and concepts alien to Ethiopian vocabulary have been adopted by a first class Ethiopian exegete, like: ፊደላዊ ... ታሪካዊ *fidälawi, tarikawi tərgʷame* "literal, historical interpretation". It is a technical language which helps to complete the well established notions of ነጠላ : ትርጉም ... ጥበረ : አምሳላዊ : ትርጓሜ *nätǎla tərgʷəm, ḥəbrǎ amsalawi tərgʷame (አሊገሪ aligori* "allegory"), meaning: "literary and allegorical interpretation". The two types of interpretation are expressed by the common formula ለጊዜው ... ለፍጻሜው *lä-gizew lä-fəṣṣamew* "for that time ... for the accomplishment" (pp. 204-207), the equivalent of *typos* and *anti-typos*.

Säyfǎ-Šəllase offers a genealogy of the most prominent interpreters. There are critical remarks (p. 188) on the limitations of the *andəmta*'s hermeneutic metho-

<sup>16</sup> The total oblivion of Abunä Märqorewos, Patriarch of the EOTC from 1988 to 1991 (who in his turn was appointed by the military junta that overthrew the Emperor) before the then sitting head of the EOTC, Abunä Pawlos, is one of the examples that the text is "oriented".

<sup>17</sup> Säyfǎ-Šəllase Yohānnəs (*Mäggabe Bəlu*y) (1942-2009) beside an exceptionally solid local formation has pursued further studies outside Ethiopia, particularly in the United Kingdom. For his obituary, cf. *Ethiopian Review of Cultures*, 14 (2011), pp. 3-11.

<sup>18</sup> *Yǎ-Itiyoppəya*, p. 209. There is no mention of commentaries in Təgrəñña.

<sup>19</sup> For a brief survey of the main characteristics of the two schools, cf. R. Cowley, *The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of St John in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 5.



dology as well. They are soul searching observations which are of particular relevance inasmuch as they spring from an insider's knowledge who has dedicated his whole life to the enquiry of the Word of God.

c) Fäqadä Säyfä-Śəllase (*liqā guba'e*), ጥንታዊ የብራና መጻሕፍት አዘገጃጀት [*Təntawi yābəranna māṣaḥəft azzägāgāgāt* "Preparation of parchment books since old times"], Addis Ababa University Press 2002 (A. M.).

The volume is a 320 pages long monograph on Ethiopian codicology. It is the fruit of a lifetime engagement and daily interaction with Ethiopian manuscripts of the author of the book. It is a well structured sage and perhaps the most exhaustive and accurate eyewitness treatise on virtually every aspect of the *bəranna* "parchment". The main body of the book consists of fifteen chapters with the following titles:

- 1 – Parchment writing and the growth of Gə'əz letters.
- 2 – Sequence (evolution) of ancient handwriting.
- 3 – On vowels and punctuation.
- 4 – On the shape of the letters in calligraphy.
- 5 – On the function of calligraphy in general and on the schools of calligraphy.
- 6 – On the earning of the calligraphers for daily life and on the care for their health.
- 7 – Characteristics of various types of animal skins and the extraction of the parchment.
- 8 – Tools for the extraction of the parchment.
- 9 – Techniques to obtain the parchment page ready for writing and the employment of some wild animal's skin.
- 10 – Ink preparation and tools to use it.
- 11 – On ink pot – preparation of pen, on how to write on a parchment book.
- 12 – On decorations, on the elaboration of pictures and talismans.
- 13 – On the binding of parchment books and the preparation of the cover.
- 14 – On how to place (shelving), use and take care of the parchment book.
- 15 – Biography of deceased famous calligraphers.

Post-face (in English by A. Wion)

Glossary by the author.

There are tens of samples of manuscripts of the various stages of Gə'əz script and of ornaments in the margins of the manuscripts. The author provides pictures showing parchment processing and the tools employed.

It would be very important to translate into English the last two volumes. Scholars who are not acquainted with Amharic would benefit from them.