



The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Cathedral

THE ROLE OF THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN LITERATURE AND ART

By Adamu Amare and Belaynesh Mikael

Ethiopic or Ge'ez Literature

Ethiopia occupies a unique place among African countries south of the Sahara, having evolved her own literary language, Ge'ez, in very early times. A vast body of literary works in Ge'ez grew up from fifth century A.D onwards. Almost all of these works are religious in content. Religion lies at the very core of Ethiopian civilization and the Ethiopian Church has been not only the storehouse of the national culture, but also its propagator, instrumental in shaping and moulding Ethiopian literature and art. Ethiopian men of letters have, in almost all cases, also been men of the Church and many Scholars consider that the most distinctive attainment of Ethiopian culture lies in the vast collection of manuscript, compiled and preserved in the monasteries and churches, which embody the national literary tradition. Their subject matter and their style strongly imbued with religious concepts.

It is interesting to note that while many of the literary works extant in Ge'ez are based on translations from Greek, Syriac Coptic and in later times, Arabic originals, in every case the work in question has been not merely translated but, in Professor Ullendorff's phrase, has been "conveyed into the spirit and ambiance of Christian Abyssinia". In other words, these works have been submitted to such a process of adaptation and transformed that instead of being mere copies or hackneyed translations they stand as literary works of art in their own right.

The literary achievements of the Aksumite Period c. 5th- 7th centuries A.D

The major literary achievement of this period was the translation of the Holy Scriptures into Ge'ez. This great undertaking was the work of a group of learned Syrian monks known as the Nine Saints who came to Ethiopia in the fifth century to escape the Byzantine persecution of the Monophysites. The translation of the Old Testament was rendered from the Lucianic recension current in Antioch at that time. The Ethiopic Bible contains 81 Books; 46 of these comprise the Old Testament and 35 are found in the New Testament. A number of these Books are apocryphal or deuterocanonical, such as the Ascension of Isaiah, Jubilees, Enoch, the Paralipomena of Baruch. Noah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Maccabees, Moses and Tobit. They are of intrinsic importance to scholars either because no other complete version of the text is extant in any language other than Ge'ez or because the Ge'ez version is authoritative.

Perhaps the most important of these apocryphal works is the Book of Enoch, which has been preserved in Ge'ez alone. The name Enoch signifies "teaching" or "dedication" and Enoch is one of the great Biblical characters, the first-born son of Cain. The Book of Enoch was lost for centuries to western scholars who knew it only because it is mentioned in the Epistle of St. Jude, until, in 1773, James Bruce brought three complete manuscripts to Europe. This great prophetic work may be summarized in five parts as follows:

1. The laws governing the heavenly bodies.
2. An account in the form of visions of the history of the world until the Last Judgement and the coming of the Messianic Kingdom with its center at the New Jerusalem.
3. The establishment of a temporary kingdom that heralds the approach of the Last Judgement.
4. A vision of Enoch and other and his journeys through earth and heaven.
5. This section contains the Similitude's and describes the coming of the Messiah as the judge of all mankind.

Other early Ge'ez works of significance which have been mentioned in a previous chapter include the famous work known as Qerlos, the great collection of Christological writings which opens with the treatise by St. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, known as Haimanot Rete'et, or De Recta Fide. On this book is based the teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Another work translated at this period was the Ascetic Rules of Pachomius, which established the rules governing monastic life in Ethiopia. It is interesting to note that the same period saw the translation of a secular work, the Physiologus, the well-known work of natural history, which was very popular in Europe during the Middle Ages.

The Solomonic Restoration

After the decline of the Aksumite Empire, towards the middle of the eight-century, Ethiopia entered a tenebrous period from which literary documents have not survived (or yet discovered). A grate period of cultural renaissance followed upon the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty about 1270, however, and the fourteenth century was the beginning of what has been termed the "Golden Age" of Ethiopian Literature. Although Ge'ez was no longer a living language it retained its primordial role as an ecclesiastical and literary language, like Latin in the western Church. In addition to works of a theological or dogmatical nature we find the beginning of the grate series of Royal Chronicles of Ethiopia with the reign of Amda-Seyone (1314-44). The chronicle of Amda-Seyone is an outstanding work. The vivid and compelling account of Amda-Seyone's struggles against the Moslems was certainly the work of an eye-witness and denotes a new phase of Ge'ez literature. To the same period dates the earliest known Amharic text; a collection of solders songs celebrating the victories of Amda-Seyone. From this time onwards royal chronicles became a regular feature of the Ge'ez literary development in Christian Ethiopia.

This period also saw the composition of the *Kebre Negest* or *Glory of the Kings* which is perhaps the most significant work of Ethiopian literature. It was composed by the Nebura'ed Yeshaq of Aksum and combines history, allegory and symbolism in its re-creation of the story of the Queen Sheba, King Solomon and their son, Menelik I of Ethiopia. The grate achievement of the author, Yeshaq, lies in the way he has gathered together and syncretized all the myriad strands of this grate cycle of legends and stories which is woven into the very fabric of Ethiopian life.

Other works of this period include the *Matshafa Se'atat* or *Horologium*, a very popular work attributed to Abba Giyorgis of Gascha. The *Weddase Mariam* or *Praises of Mary* is, as the name implies, a collection of hymns and laudations dedicated to Our Lady and ordered according to the days of the week. It is ascribed to Abba Salawa, who also engaged in a revision of the text of the Bible.

A new genre of literature which appeared was devoted to the lives of the saints and martyrs. Well-known works of this nature are the *Gadle Sama'etat* or *Acts of the Martyrs* and the *Gadle Hawaryat*, or *Acts of the Apostles*. But the most important of these is the *Senkessar* or *Synaxarium* which has been translated by Sir E.A. Wallis Budge under the title *The Book of the Saints of the Ethiopian Church*. This is a compilation of the lives of the saints arranged in order of their feast-days throughout the year. In general these works are devoted to the struggle and suffering endured by the saints and martyrs in defense of their faith. The torments inflicted upon them are described as well as their patience in affliction, their working of miracles, their martyrdom and, after death, their receiving of the Crown of Glory. Mediaeval Ethiopian literature is particularly rich in hagiographies. The lives of well-known saints, such as Saint Anthony and Saint George Enjoyed grate popularity and the lives of such famous Ethiopian Saints as St. Tekla Haimanot and Gabra Manfas Keddus provide important source books for Ethiopian Studies. In many manuscripts the whole volume is occupied with the life of a single saint and the miracles wrought by him both in his lifetime and after his death. Such manuscript often contain beautiful illustrations.

Two important original works appeared in the early fifteenth century. The first of these was the *Fekkare Iyasus* or the *Explication of Jesus*, an interesting work, messianic in tone and foretelling the coming of a king called Theodore (Tewodros) who would restore peace to suffering humanity. This prophecy became of considerable importance in Ethiopia until the middle of the nineteenth century when King Theodore II chose this throne name, apparently because of its associations with the prophecy. Another philosophical work was the *Mystery of Heaven and Earth*, setting forth the eternal struggle between good and evil.

The reign of the Emperor Zar'a Ya'iqob (1434-1468) was notable for the development of grate literary activity. Zar'a Ya'iqob himself was a zealous reformer and wrote several important works, such as the *Matshafa Berhan*, or *Book of Light* and the *Matshafa Milad* or *Book of Nativity*. The king sought to refute heresies which had taken root and to attack the corruption of religious practices. Other works which have been attributed to him include the hymn collection entitled the *Arganona Maryam Dingle* or *Organ of the Virgin Mary* and the *Egziabeher nagsa* or *God has reigned*. Numerous edifying homilies were produced during this period, the most famous of these is the collection entitled *Retu'a Haimanot* (True Orthodoxy) ascribed to St. John Chrysostom.

The beginning of the sixteenth century saw many changes in Ethiopia. The Moslem invasions caused grate destruction to the nation's Christian heritage. Many churches and monasteries were destroyed together with their collections of manuscripts. However enough survived to preserve national traditions. An interesting literary figure of this period was a

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Certain Embakom (Habakkuk) an Arab converts to Christianity who entered the celebrated monastery of Debra Libanos. He was the author of the Ankasa Amin or Gate of Faith and of a number of translations from Arabic. A series of important literary works was inspired at this period by the need for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to define her position vis-a-vis the Roman Catholic influence. The best known of these is the *Confessio Claudii*, or Confessions of the Emperor Claudius (1540-59), a spirited exposition of the Alexandrine Faith. Other works are *Sawana Nafs* or Refuge of the Soul Fekkare Malakot, Exposition of the Godhead; and *Haymanote Abaw* or Faith of the Fathers.

No summary of Ethiopic literature would be complete without mention of the great work known as the *Fetha Negest* or Laws of the Kings. The *Fetha Negest* is indeed the repository of Ethiopian ecclesiastical and civil law and as such a literary work of fundamental national importance. Throughout its history, the *Fetha Negest* has been closely linked with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which still observes many of its precepts. The *Fetha Negest* was always faithfully conserved in the monasteries and important churches. There it was available for consultation; there also it was studied and taught by leading ecclesiastical scholars. Even in modern times it has served as the basis or inspiration of much civil and penal law.

Liturgical Works

The liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church serves as the central point for the whole service conducted by priests and deacons. It is written in the form of a litany. Portions or passages of prayers, chants and hymns which are said by priests and deacons differ from those said by the faithful. As the liturgy is sometimes referred to as the "Drama of Salvation", it is acted out like a drama, telling the life and teachings of Christ, relating the sufferings of the Saints and Martyrs of the Church and using many symbols such as the Cross with its signs, the Censer, the Bell, the Chalice, the Container for the holy water, the washing of hands by the Chief Priest, the bows and the whole elaborate vestment of the priesthood.

In the Ethiopia Orthodox Church, at least two priests and three deacons are required to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. No Mass can be performed after taking meals. Hence, the Holy Eucharist always takes place before and meal.

According to the teachings and practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the liturgy consists of two main parts, some of which are sung while other portions are read aloud by the priests.

The first part of the Mass is known as the Synaxis and includes the reading of the Epistles and Gospel, while the second part is called the Anaphora or Canon. This is the sacramental part of the Mass which consists of fourteen Anaphoras: of these, the standard one in most common use is the Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles.

The first part of the Mass is known as the Synaxis and includes the reading of the Epistles and Gospel, while the second part is called the Anaphora or Canon. This is the sacramental part of the Mass which consists of fourteen Anaphoras: of these, the standard one in most common use is the Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles.

These Anaphoras may be listed as follows:-

- I . The Anaphora of Our Lady Mary
2. The Anaphora of the Apostles
3. The Anaphora of Our Lord Jesus Christ
4. The Anaphora of St. John The Evangelist
5. The Anaphora of St. Basil
6. The Anaphora of St. Athanasius
7. The Anaphora of The Three Hundred and Eight Fathers
8. The Anaphora of St. Gregory the Armenian
9. The Anaphora of St. Epiphanius
10. The Anaphora of St. John Chrysostom
11. The Anaphora of St. Cyril
12. The Anaphora of St. James of Serug
13. The Anaphora of St. Dioscorus
14. The Anaphora of St. Gregory of Alexandria.

The exact origin of most of the Ethiopic Anaphoras has not been discovered. They first appear in Manuscripts of the 15th century, but were doubtless composed very much earlier. Scholars at one time assumed that all or most of these Anaphoras were translated of foreign liturgies, but recent studies, such as that of Ernst Hammerschmidt have demonstrated that many of the Anaphora are genuine creation of Ethiopic literature evincing theological thought;

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

and liturgical poetry of a high order.

Painting and Manuscript Art

The hall-mark of sophisticated artistic expression of any country can be tested by its capacity to assimilate many elements from foreign source and indigenous these foreign influences. Ethiopian representational art is no exception to this rule. In fact Ethiopian art has syncretized both Oriental and Byzantine artistic traits. Although architecture and metal work belong to representational art, we are here concerned with painting, which is by far the most representative and ubiquitous branch of Ethiopian Art.

With the exception of a few ancient rock carving or drawings which depict both human and animal scenes, Ethiopian painting is virtually wholly ecclesiastic. It is Christianity, the religion of the state, that has determined the scope and purpose of painting in Ethiopia.

Generally speaking, clarity, vividness and the capacity to convey an idea dominate Ethiopian painting more than the desire to give pleasure. Ethiopian artists may even go so far as to distort proportion in order to convey an idea vividly. Such paintings are found in the form of icons, as murals in churches and in manuscripts.

The imaginative church artists have beautified and ornamented these paintings with elaborate color, illumination and elegant design. Priests and monks insert pictures in their books in order to communicate the message to the faithful more vividly and colorfully.

In fact Ethiopian artistic accomplishment is considered by many scholars to have reached its apogee in the illuminated manuscripts produced in the grate monasteries between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The finest manuscripts are written on goatskin, whereas for ordinary purpose sheepskin is used. The text is usually written in a copiously decorated heavy black script with occasional insertions in red. The pages vary in size, but may be very large; the text is written in one, two or three columns according to the size of the manuscript. Lavish illustrations abound, sometimes occupying whole pages and sometimes incorporated into the text. The leaves are put together in quires, usually of ten pages. They are then bound between wooden boards often covered with tooled leather and the completed book may be provided with a leather case with straps that make it convenient for carrying.

Ethiopian paintings are characterized by Biblical themes and figures. Angels, evangelists, saints, martyrs and other biblical personalities are the subjects of painting in Ethiopia. Of all these biblical personalities the Virgin Mary occupies a very prominent place in Ethiopian painting. The extreme veneration attributed to St. Mary finds its expression in many ways, for instance, some pictures depict St. Mary as a delicate and modest young girl, while others show her as a strong, mature women and protector of the Ethiopian people.

The paintings and pictures found in various manuscripts and on the walls in churches, afford the viewer a moral lesson and religious instruction. As they communicate their message clearly they are a way of acquainting the faithful with the teachings of Christ, the history and teachings of the Church, the lives and acts of the Apostles. All this of course is in addition to the purely aesthetic role they fulfill as objects of beauty and decoration.

Sources

Written by Professor Sergew Hable Sellassie and Professor Tadesse Tamerat

"THE CHURCH OF ETHIOPIA A PANORAMA OF HISTORY AND SPIRITUAL LIFE"

Addis Ababa -December 1970. A publication of the EOTC