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Article

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Aksum and the Bible: Old Assumptions and New Perspectives

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In the short Preface to the first edition of his ground-breaking *La letteratura etiopica* ('The Ethiopian literature'), Enrico Cerulli (1898–1988)—the great Italian *éthiopisant* and the third member, so to speak, of the Italian 'holy trinity' of iconic specialists of Ethiopian studies, along with Ignazio Guidi (1844–1935) and Carlo Conti Rossini (1872–1949)—clearly stated that the purpose of his monograph was not to provide the reader with a new list of texts mentioned in existing catalogues of Ethiopic manuscripts (a slightly polemical reference to what had been done previously by Conti Rossini and Guidi), but to clear such 'dead wood' in order to give an idea of 'the beauty of the [Ethiopian] forest'.¹ There is no doubt that his attempt was successful, even if one may today lament the excessive attention he paid to some of the more 'beautiful trees', instead of giving a comprehensive view of the whole 'forest'. However, in doing this he was simply adhering to the esthetical principles of his epoch, that is, Benedetto Croce's poetics of the beautiful fragment (e.g. the Paolo and Francesca episode in Dante's *Inferno*) against the absolute tediousness of the entire work (especially the more dogmatic passages of the *Paradiso*).²

To be sure, the methodological problem is not the act of focusing on a 'beautiful tree' (for instance, the *Book of Enoch*), which is a legitimate approach per se—we all do it, at least at the moment of writing a PhD dissertation on a very specific text or question. However, matters become more difficult as soon as we start to extrapolate and create general conclusions based on the isolated tree, and then apply them to the entire forest. If the temptation to essentialize is always present, another risk of which we should be aware is the fragility of general conclusions that are based on such limited and arbitrary selections of the evidence. In other words, sometimes generalizations are made not even from the study of a single tree, but from a

¹ Cerulli 1968, 5–6 (1st edn 1956).

² On Cerulli's cultural background and perspectives, see Mallette 2010, 132–161, and Bausi 2016a, 191–194 (with further bibliography).

quick survey of a few choice leaves. I certainly do not mean to disparage surveys and case studies, which I believe are not only necessary, but often informative; rather, it is essential to ask, how are such investigations being carried out and are the chosen examples representative enough? To my mind, this is the question.

In the study of the Old Ethiopic and the Aksumite Bibles, cases of over-generalization were, and indeed still are, quite common: the wrong leaves were often used to sketch a certain picture of the whole forest. In what follows, I will briefly criticize some previous proposals that are, in my opinion, unjustified and try to suggest other possibilities based on a different appreciation of the literature and collection of pottery sherds. The irony is that, in the end, I too will be relying on a new set of beautiful leaves, though hopefully more significant than those collected by my predecessors.

The majority of the manuscript evidence for the Ethiopian Bible is made of medieval copies, the most ancient of them being approximately seven or eight centuries old, that is, they can be dated to the fourteenth or possibly thirteenth century. The earliest manuscripts of both the Old and the New Testament (including illustrious Jewish Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and a few Christian apocryphal texts)³ show a clear and unmistakable transmission from one (or more) model(s) that were written in uncial Greek and were not too far removed from manuscripts as well preserved as the Sinaiticus or the Vaticanus. This is what we normally call the Old Ethiopic text of the Bible, the result of a long textual transmission of at least six or seven centuries that separates it from its Aksumite original(s).⁴ The Old Ethiopic text was subsequently revised with the help of an Arabic translation of the Peshitta and eventually, in the case of the Old Testament, He-

³ On the dynamics of the preservation of these texts in Ethiopian culture, see Piovanelli 1993; Piovanelli forthcoming a.

⁴ One should bear in mind that the Old Ethiopic is the oldest recension of the Ethiopic version of the Bible we can reconstruct from the testimony of at least one or more medieval manuscripts free from subsequent revisions. In other words, as it is often the case for ancient texts, not simply the Ethiopic ones, the Old Ethiopic text of a given biblical book is the archetype that we can, to the best of our ability, critically reconstruct from the direct (all the surviving manuscripts) and indirect (the various quotations in Ethiopic literature) traditions at our disposal (on these and other questions, see notably Canfora 2006, 25–46). One should avoid identifying the text of a single manuscript, no matter how *antiquus optimusque* it is, with *the* Old Ethiopic recension of an Aksumite text.

brew and Aramaic original texts,⁵ but those late revisions should not keep our attention.

Concerning the Aksumite Bible, the direct ancestor of the Old Ethiopic text, until recently we had to content ourselves with a few biblical citations found in three royal inscriptions discovered forty years ago (more below). In 1999, carbon-14 analysis was carried out at the University of Oxford on two small fragments of the famous ʾĪnda Abba Gärġma Gospel manuscripts I and III at the initiative of the French *éthiopisant* Jacques Mercier.⁶ These two beautiful manuscripts, which are used as textual bases for the critical editions of Rochus Zuurmond (Mark and Matthew) and Michael G. Wechsler (John),⁷ were already considered to be the oldest *medieval* Ethiopian manuscripts and tended to be dated, on palaeographic grounds, to the twelfth or thirteenth century.⁸ The radiocarbon analysis has demonstrated that they—or, at least, some of their illuminated folia—are dramatically older than what was normally thought: Gärġma I should be dated to 430–650 CE and Gärġma III to 330–540 CE, which would make them the only two

⁵ See the useful syntheses of Knibb 1999; Bausi 1999; Zuurmond 1995; Zuurmond and Niccum 2013. Among the most recent critical editions of Ethiopic biblical books, there should be mentioned Tedros Abraha 2001 (Romans); Tedros Abraha 2004 (Hebrews); Niccum 2014 (Acts); Knibb 2015 (Ezekiel), as well as those quoted below (n. 7).

⁶ The fragments were retrieved by Mercier himself in the course of a restoration of Abba Gärġma manuscripts I, II, and III, with the support of the Ethiopian Heritage Fund, a charity organization based in London and actively involved in the preservation of Ethiopian antiquities. One should note that Gärġma II (tentatively dated by Siegbert Uhlig to the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century in Uhlig 1988, 117–118) and III were initially bound together, and that many folia of the three manuscripts were (and in some cases still are) misplaced. Alessandro Bausi has conveniently described this intricate situation as follows: ‘At the time of the first discovery and until 2006 the three manuscripts (henceforth AG I, AG II, and AG III, whereby Jacques Mercier calls AG I and AG III ‘Gärġma 1’ and ‘Gärġma 2’ respectively) were bound in two volumes, each with two metal covers, one volume containing *mainly* AG I and a second volume *mainly* AG II and III. Leaves from each of the three manuscripts were transposed and fragments from other manuscripts were present as well. A restoration undertaken in 2006 finally separated the three manuscripts and established the presumably correct sequence of the leaves, unfortunately not without patent errors’ (Bausi 2017, 289; emphasis added).

⁷ Zuurmond 1989; Zuurmond 2001a; Wechsler 2005. The three Gärġma manuscripts have also been put to contribution by Bausi 2015 and McKenzie and Watson 2016, 221–227, the most recent editors of the Gǝǝz version of Eusebius’s *Letter to Carthianus*.

⁸ See notably Uhlig 1988, 74 (Gärġma I and III) and 175–176 (Gärġma I), in contrast to the eighth to tenth century dates proposed by Davies 1987.

known surviving *Aksumite* manuscripts.⁹ A recent radiocarbon analysis carried out on a third fragment in 2012 has substantially confirmed their late antique origins. A colloquium especially devoted to these exceptional manuscripts (the first of its kind in Ethiopian studies) was even held in Oxford on 2–3 November 2013.¹⁰ Finally, art historian Judith S. McKenzie and New Testament specialist Francis Watson joined forces to publish a beautifully illustrated volume in 2016, with reproductions of the colour photographs taken by Michael Gervers, on codicological, iconographic, and text critical issues.¹¹ Thus, thanks to the rediscovery and re-evaluation of the *Gärima* Gospels, our knowledge of the Aksumite Bible—or more cautiously, of a significant part of the New Testament—has suddenly and dramatically increased.

Be that as it may, an even more intriguing phenomenon is the presence of a series of technical terms in the text of the Aksumite and Old Ethiopic Bibles which are apparently of Syriac origin and related to a typically Christian vocabulary. It was precisely on the basis of (1) such evidence, taken

⁹ Mercier 2000, 36–45; Lepage and Mercier 2011–2012, 166, n. 27; cf. ‘Ἐνδα Abba Gärima’, *E Ae*. II (2005), 284a–286a (A. Bausi); Bausi 2010; Bausi 2011. Marilyn Heldman had already suggested, on iconographic grounds, a sixth-century date for the evangelist portraits in *Gärima* III and the decorated Canon Table frames in *Gärima* I (Heldman 1993, 129–130).

¹⁰ Ethiopia and the Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity: The *Garimā* Gospels in Context, sponsored by the Ethiopian Heritage Fund. For an overview of the communications, see Bausi 2014a. Only three papers have been published so far: Getatchew Haile 2016; Mathews 2016; and Mersha Alehegne 2016. Getatchew Haile provides an edition and translation of the marginal notes contained in *Gärima* I and II. Interestingly enough, the only grant attributed to King Armäha—apparently to be identified with ጳጳሒ, the last Aksumite suzerain to have issued coins, c.630—is tentatively dated, on paleographical grounds, to the seventh century (*Gärima* I, doc. 14, originally belonging to *Gärima* II, therefore to a medieval manuscript, on which see Davies 1987, 293 and fig. 6; Schneider 1990, 152; Kropp 1992, 264–265; ‘Ἐνδα Abba Gärima’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 284a–286a (A. Bausi), especially p. 285a–b; Getatchew Haile 2016, 22–23; McKenzie and Watson 2016, 211, n. 4), while the various donations attributed to the legendary King Gäbrä Mäsqäl are dated to the fourteenth/fifteenth century (*Gärima* I, doc. 11, originally belonging to *Gärima* III) and to the seventeenth/eighteenth century (*Gärima* I, docs 1–5, originally belonging to *Gärima* II). Mersha Alehegne has collected contemporary oral traditions about *Abba* Gärima, the holy man who founded the monastery that would later bear his name (Bishop Yoḥannäs’s homily in his honour has been newly translated by Gérard Colin in Colin 2017, 6–37), and his scribal skills in writing what is considered to be ‘the first Ethiopic Gospel’.

¹¹ McKenzie and Watson 2016; cf. Bausi 2017.

together with other elements as diverse as (2) the ‘Syro-Occidental’ derivation of the Aksumite Bible, (3) the ‘Syrian’ and monophysite pedigree of the Nine Saints (including the putative scribe of the Gärima Gospels), the Šadəqan, and other early missionaries,¹² and (4) the ‘Syriac’ rendering of Greek velars and dentals in biblical proper names that Guidi and Conti Rossini elaborated the master narrative of a relatively late date for the biblical translations. According to this hypothesis, these translations would not have been carried out at the moment of the official conversion of King ʿEzana in the 340s, but sometime after 451, following the arrival of a wave of anti-Chalcedonian, Syriac-speaking monks expelled from their native homeland.¹³

In the years since, almost every aspect of Guidi and Conti Rossini’s reconstruction has been deconstructed and authoritatively dismissed by Hans Jakob Polotsky and Paolo Marrassini,¹⁴ two great specialists of Semitic and Ethiopic linguistics. Yet, the theory of ‘Syriac influences’ on Aksumite Scriptures and Christianity exerts a certain attraction on *éthiopisants*, as exemplified in this passage from an essay written a few years ago by the late Richard Pankhurst:

The coming of Christianity was followed by the arrival of *many* Christians from other parts of the Roman Empire. The most notable of them were the Nine Saints, who *came from Syria and adjacent areas around the fifth century* and established important monasteries in the north of the country. This period thus witnessed the establishment of the monastic system, with the creation of church schools, as well as *the translation of the Bible* and other Christian writings into the Ethiopian language, Geez.¹⁵

Moreover, since 1959 Edward Ullendorff has been elaborating on the original theory, suggesting that, because of their background and linguistic skills, those Syrian translators not only had access to the Greek Bible, but also the Hebrew and Aramaic originals of the Old Testament, as well as the

¹² On these ‘saintly shadows’, see Brakmann 1994, 125–132; Munro-Hay 2005 (repr. in Munro-Hay 2006, 131–155, 195–202); Brita 2010; Piovanelli 2014, 240–244.

¹³ Guidi 1888, 33–34; 1922, 125–126; 1932, 12–15. See also Conti Rossini 1899, 199–201; 1928, 155–156, 161–163, and 223–225. On the persecution of anti-Chalcedonian religious leaders, see now Shepardson forthcoming.

¹⁴ Polotsky 1964; Marrassini 1990; Marrassini 1999; Marrassini 2011, 11–15; Marrassini 2014, 103–108.

¹⁵ Pankhurst 1993, 20 (emphasis added). For other scholarly works in which similar views are expressed, see Knibb 1999, 23, n. 2.

Book of Enoch and the Peshitta version.¹⁶ Ullendorff's positions were faithfully followed by his disciple Michael A. Knibb in his doctoral thesis, a diplomatic edition of the Ethiopic version of the *Book of Enoch* published in 1978.¹⁷ Their claims were independently refuted by James C. VanderKam and me in 1987,¹⁸ and in the end Knibb too came to the conclusion, in his 1995 Schweich Lectures, that the Aksumite Bible was more or less monolithically translated from Greek models.¹⁹ In spite of this chain of rejoinders, the scholarly ghost of those 'Syriac influences' still has a powerful impact on the syntheses proposed by contemporary specialists of Ethiopian Christianity,²⁰ especially regarding the date of the Aksumite translation and the identities of its authors. Perhaps the time has come to set the record straight.

The most impressive evidence for an extremely late date that would betray the involvement of 'Syriac-speaking missionaries' comes from the colophon of the Ethiopic version of the Book of Ecclesiasticus (or Wisdom of Sirach). In manuscripts Frankfurt am Main, Stadtbibliothek zu Frankfurt am Main, MS. orient. Rüpp. II, 7,²¹ and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de

¹⁶ Ullendorff 1960; Ullendorff 1968; cf. Knibb 2011, 223–224. Just a few years before Ullendorff, an equally unsuccessful attempt to identify the *Vorlage* of the Ethiopic version of the Gospels with an Old Syriac version was made by Arthur Vööbus (Vööbus 1951; 1954, 243–269). For an analogous effort to detect Syriac influences on the Ethiopic version of the *Book of Enoch*, see Caquot and Geoltrain 1963.

¹⁷ Knibb 1978, 37–46.

¹⁸ Piovanelli 1988a; Piovanelli 1988b, 89 and 93–94; and VanderKam 1987.

¹⁹ Knibb 1999, 35 ('there is no unambiguous textual evidence to support it [i.e. the use of Syriac models]') and 40 ('there is no convincing evidence that the Hebrew elements in the Ethiopic Old Testament go back to the time of the original translation'). As for the *Book of Enoch*, see Knibb 2007, 23, 25–26, 28–29, 38, 40; cf. Piovanelli 2012, 258–259.

²⁰ See the surveys of Witakowski 1989–1990 and, more recently, Lee 2011. An eloquent example of the coexistence side by side of plausible, unwarranted, and/or contradictory hypotheses is provided by the first three entries devoted to the Ethiopic version of the Bible in the first volume of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*: 'Bible: Time and Context'. *E Ae*. I (2003). 563a–564a (S. Uhlig); 'Bible Vorlage: Greek', *E Ae*, I (2003), 564a–565a (R. Zuurmond); 'Bible Vorlage: Syriac, Hebrew, Coptic, Arabic', *E Ae*, I (2003), 565a–b (M. A. Knibb). It should therefore not be so surprising if some of these views are uncritically adopted by non-specialists of Ethiopian studies like, for instance, Portier-Young 2011, 310–312, who still subscribes to the opinion that the *Book of Enoch* was certainly translated from a Greek *Vorlage* into Gəʿəz, but with the help of some Aramaic original text.

²¹ Goldschmidt 1867, 20–22, no. 7. Concerning the present location of this manuscript, Dr Francesca Panini has kindly informed me (email, 24 October 2018) that, accord-

France, Éthiopien 6 (*olim* 9), this colophon reads, ‘ተፈጸመ ፡ መጽሐፈ ፡ ሲራክ ፡ ዘተጽሐፈ ፡ በጳጊወዘጊወዘሮዓመት ፡’, ‘Has been completed the Book of Sirach, which was written in the year 6170 [year of creation, i.e. 678 CE]’, while in manuscripts London, British Library, Or. 494 and 499, and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Éthiopien d’Abbadie 16, the same colophon has what seems to be the correct date, ‘ዘተጽሐፈ ፡ በጳጊወዘጊወዘሮዓመት ፡’, ‘which was written in the year 6970 [year of creation, i.e. 1478 CE]’.²² This simply means that some manuscripts of the Ecclesiasticus, including those with the wrong date of 678 (-ወዘ- instead of -ወዘ-), were copied after a manuscript written in 1478 and therefore it is not actually a clue as to the date of their Aksumite ancestor. Unhappily, such a common-sense observation, already made by Alfred Rahlfs (in 1915–1916!),²³ does not prevent a large majority of scholars from continuing to imagine that the process of translating the Bible into Gəʿəz lasted until the fall of the Aksumite kingdom and beyond.

To this we can add that today we also have a real *terminus ante quem*: the inscriptions of Kaleb (*RIÉth* 191 and 195), whose Mārib inscription can be dated to 525 CE, and his son W^cZB (*RIÉth* 192) contain biblical quotations from Genesis 15:7 (?); Exodus 13:8 and 14:14; Isaiah 22:22–23; Isaiah (unidentified); Ezekiel (unidentified); Psalms 18:48, 40–41 (17:48, 40–41), 20:8–9 (19:8–9), 24:8 (23:8), 35:1–2, 4–5 (34:1–2, 4–5), 37:34 (36:34), 66:16–17 (65:16–17), 68:2 (67:2), 101:6 (100:6) (?), 118:15–16 (117:15–16); and Matthew 6:33.²⁴ If by 525 the Gəʿəz version of various books belonging to different sections of the Bible (not only the Psalms, but also the Pentateuch, the Prophets, and the Synoptic Gospels) were available to the kings of Aksum for their political propaganda, we should thus conclude that the Ethiopic translation had been completed prior to that date. The reference by John Chrysostom to the existence of an ‘Indian’ version of the Gospel of John (*Homilies on the Gospel of John* 2.5) would even point to a fourth-century

ing to Dr Bernhard Tönnies, director of the Department of manuscripts at the Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg in Frankfurt am Main, manuscripts Rüpp. II, 1, Rüpp. II, 2, and Rüpp. II, 7 ‘have been lost since their move [to the Universitätsbibliothek?] in the Second World War’.

²² See Dillmann 1894, 114.

²³ Rahlfs 1965, 679–681; cf. Knibb 1999, 17–18, n. 2.

²⁴ Biblical quotations in Aksumite inscriptions have been listed by Marrassini 1999, 331–332, and analysed in detail by Knibb 1999, 46–54. Concerning the citation of Isaiah 22:22–23 in *RIÉth* 195 II:23–25, which had originally gone unnoticed, see below n. 38.

date for at least the Ethiopic version of the Fourth Gospel,²⁵ a date that brings us closer to the epoch of ‘Ezana’s conversion,²⁶ not to mention the fact that the translation of many apocryphal texts speaks for a pre-367 CE date, that is, prior to the measures taken in Egypt and elsewhere by Athanasius of Alexandria and other Christian leaders, against preservation and diffusion of those texts.²⁷

Did the so-called ‘Syrian missionaries’ play any role in that process? If we go back to the medieval tradition concerning Libanos/Māṭa^c, originally used by Conti Rossini, we can read that the saint ‘remained in Bāqla for 7 years inside a cave, and there wrote the Gospel of Matthew, “Blessed” [i.e. Matthew 5:1 ff., the Beatitudes] and “When he will come” [Matthew 25:31 ff.]’ (*Life of Libanos* § 30).²⁸ In other words, the holy man never translated the entire Gospel of Matthew into Gəʿəz, but contented himself with copying two of its most inspirational passages. Therefore, the absence of any positive evidence compels us to relegate such a connection to the realm of speculative hypotheses.

Was the mother tongue of the translators really Syriac? For Polotsky, the loan-words in the lexicon of Aksumite Gəʿəz were but of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic origins.²⁹ Ullendorff maintained the Syriac derivation of **ሃይማኖት** : (‘faith’), **ገናፊ** : (‘pagan’), **ቀሲስ** : (‘priest’), **ተጸልበ** : (‘to be crucified’), and **ቅርባን** : (‘sacrifice’, ‘Eucharist’),³⁰ while Marrassini saved only **ልልዋ** : (‘al-

²⁵ As noted by Rahlfs 1965, 668–670; cf. Niccum 2014, 14.

²⁶ In this respect, the prudence of Knibb (‘It is possible that the translation was begun soon after the adoption of Christianity by Ezana in the mid-fourth century. But we have no documentary evidence for this, and it has been argued that there would not have been an immediate need for an Ethiopic version of the scriptures in the limited circles in which Christianity was first established’, Knibb 1999, 14) seems to be excessive. Needless to say, one could argue exactly the opposite.

²⁷ On the aims and the impact of Athanasius’s *Festal Letter* 39, see Piovaneli 2013a, 97–100.

²⁸ Adopting Alessandro Bausi’s original interpretation (Bausi 2003a, xxxiv, n. 34; 2003b; 2014b), in spite of Lanfranco Ricci’s editorial alteration in the published translation of the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (Bausi 2003a, 11). Moreover, as pointed out by Getatchew Haile 1990, 34, and Knibb 1999, 24, the absence of this tradition from an earlier and less reworked homily in honour of Māṭa^c seems to confirm its secondary nature.

²⁹ To quote his conclusions, ‘in the light of the linguistic evidence it seems hardly possible that the Aramaic words should have been introduced by Syriac-speaking missionaries or Bible translators: some of the words are characteristically non-Syriac, while none of them is characteristically and exclusively Syriac’ (Polotsky 1964, 196).

³⁰ Ullendorff 1968, 120–125.

oe', apparently with an East-Syriac pronunciation [!], but cf. the variant spelling **𐩬𐩁𐩨** (:), **𐩧𐩬𐩨** (:), **𐩧𐩬𐩨** (: ('to draw by lot'), **𐩠𐩣𐩣𐩬𐩨** (: (Book of Chronicles), **𐩠𐩣𐩣** (: (Psalter), and **𐩠𐩣𐩣** (: ('priestly belt'), the last three belonging probably to the lexicon of medieval, not Aksumite, Gə'əz.³¹ Actually, **𐩧𐩬𐩨** (:, the most significant 'religious' loan-word, which both Ullendorff and Marrassini agree is characteristically Syriac, is also present in Christian Palestinian Aramaic, where it was used to translate the Greek *πρεσβύτερος*, 'elder', 'priest'.³²

In the end, it seems as if previous scholarship has fallen into the classic trap of thinking that, because of its name, Syriac was the Aramaic dialect normally spoken in Syria-Palestine. This was certainly not the case and, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, the language spoken by Jesus was not Syriac—a language belonging to the Eastern branch of Late Aramaic, together with (Jewish) Babylonian Aramaic and Mandaic—but Galilean (Jewish Palestinian) Aramaic, that is, a Western Aramaic dialect spoken in Syria-Palestine, and related to Samaritan Aramaic and Christian Palestinian Aramaic.³³ Similarly, the translators of the Aksumite Bible had been exposed to the cultural influence of travellers or residents probably coming from Syria-Palestine (more below in the post scriptum) and speaking not an Eastern, but a Western-Aramaic idiom.

Equally impressionistic and illusory are the textual agreements with the Peshitta detected in the citation of Psalms 66:17 (65:17) found in *RIÉtb* 195 (**𐩠𐩣𐩣𐩬𐩨** : = **𐩠𐩣𐩣** ≠ ὑπὸ τὴν γλῶσσαν μου), which in Marrassini's opinion

³¹ Marrassini 1999, 328–329.

³² New texts, published by Alain Desreumaux (Desreumaux 1997) and Christa Müller-Kessler and Michael Sokoloff (Müller-Kessler and Sokoloff 1996; 1997; 1998a; 1998b; 1999), have dramatically increased our knowledge of the Christian Palestinian Aramaic lexicon. As a consequence, not less than six terms that could have been lent to Aksumite Gə'əz can be found in Sokoloff's new dictionary (Sokoloff 2014) of this poorly documented Western-Aramaic dialect: *hymmwṯ*, 'faith, belief, faithfulness' (p. 101); *ṯwt*, 'error, mistake, deception, idolatry' (p. 151–152); *rwbt*, 'eve, Friday' (p. 320); *ṯtlb*, 'to be crucified' (p. 354); *qwrbn*, 'sacrifice, offering, service, worship' (p. 367); and *qšyš*, 'old person, priest' (p. 386). The question of the Aramaic loan-words in Gə'əz and their cultural and historical meaning has been recently re-examined by Tubach 2015, whose readiness to uncritically accept the truth of the traditions found in texts such as the *Kabrä nägäšt* has been criticized—in my opinion, rightly—by Bausi 2016b, 310–311. For a different interpretation of the linguistic data, see Piovanelli forthcoming b. As for the relatively poor historical value of the *Kabrä nägäšt* for the reconstruction of Aksumite past, see Piovanelli 2013b and Bausi 2016c.

³³ As clearly specified by Müller-Kessler 1999.

exemplifies the phenomenon of exegetical convergence,³⁴ as are the sixteen ‘similarities with the Syriac’ in the Old Ethiopic version of Hebrews recently identified by Tedros Abraha.³⁵ As Tedros Abraha acknowledges himself, ‘similarities with texts such as the Peshitta can be interpreted in various ways, it is therefore risky to draw conclusion based on them’.³⁶ His final judgment, however, is less cautious, not to say contradictory: ‘That there was an interaction with the Greek is [...] out of question, but it is undeniable that there are signs of influence from other sources other than Greek’.³⁷ One wonders how ‘undeniable’ those ‘signs of influence’ are, and even ‘interaction’ is too weak a word to describe the process of translating the full body of Aksumite literature from Greek into Gəʿəz. It is no wonder then that for more than forty years specialists were unable to recognize the remains of a citation of Isaiah 22:22–23 in *RIÉth* 195 II:23–25 for no other reason than because the Ethiopic version, having been translated from the Septuagint, is different from the text of the Hebrew Bible and the Peshitta.³⁸

Another important aspect to which we need to direct our attention concerns the identity—whether Jewish or Christian, Syro-Palestinian, or Ethiopian—of those translators. In a paper that I presented to the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies held in Paris in 1988, I had the idea to carry out an elementary survey of forty-eight translations of a very characteristic divine name that would give us a more precise idea of the religious culture of the translators.³⁹

In the Hebrew Bible there are forty-eight occurrences of שְׁדַי (שֵׁן), ‘(El) Shaddai’, normally rendered into English as ‘(God) Almighty’. In forty-one cases, the translators of the Septuagint have rendered it as (ὁ) θεός (+ possessive), (κύριος) παντοκράτωρ, (ὁ) κύριος, and other related expressions. Forty-one times the Old Ethiopic version faithfully follows the Septuagint against

³⁴ Marrassini 1999, 332–333.

³⁵ Tedros Abraha 2004, 91–92.

³⁶ Tedros Abraha 2004, 93, n. 31.

³⁷ Tedros Abraha 2004, 94.

³⁸ See Piovanelli 2013b, 22–24. For the sake of comparison, the Septuagint (followed by the Old Ethiopic) reads, ‘And I will give him the glory of David, and he shall rule, and there shall be no one to contradict him. And I will make him a ruler in a secure place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house’. On the other hand, the Masoretic Text (followed by the Peshitta) reads, ‘I will place the key of the house of David on his shoulder: when he opens, no one will shut, and when he shuts, no one will open. I will fasten him like a nail in a secure place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house’.

³⁹ Piovanelli 1994, 328.

the Peshitta as, for instance, in Genesis 48:3, ὁ θεός μου = አምላኪያ፣ (≠ አሌሌ), or Psalms 67:15 (66:15), ὁ ἐπουράνιος = ሰማያዊ፣ (≠ ጦጦሌ). In seven cases, however, the God's name Shaddai was probably missing from the original text of the Septuagint and was secondarily added from the text of other, more literal versions; one occurrence is transliterated, while the other six are interpreted as יְיָ שׁ (ὁ) ἰκανός, 'the One who is (self-)sufficient'. Unsurprisingly, the Old Ethiopic regularly follows the Septuagint:

- 1) Ezekiel 10:5, θεὸς σαδδαι = አግዚአብሔር፣ ሰዳይ፣;
- 2) Ruth 1:20, ὁ ἰκανός = ፈድፋድ፣ (i.e. ἰκανῶς);
- 3) Ruth 1:21, *idem*;
- 4) Job 21:15, ἰκανός = ይክል፣ (contextual exegesis);
- 5) Job 31:12, ἰκανός = ጎያል፣ (i.e. ἰσχυρός);
- 6) Job 40:2, ἰκανός = ቢጽከ፣ (contextual exegesis);
- 7) Ezekiel 1:24, ἰκανός = ሰራዊት፣ (contextual exegesis);

to which we can add

- 8) *Paraleipomena of Jeremiah* 6:3, ὁ ἰκανός = መእመን፣ (i.e. ὁ πιστός), rendered as ክርስቶስ፣ (!) in the Amharic version.

Almost thirty years later, I still believe that these few leaves are very eloquent about, on the one hand, the exclusive use of Greek models by the original translators and, on the other, their lack of familiarity with Jewish exegesis. Those translators had a good knowledge of biblical Greek and did their best to make sense of their models.⁴⁰ The final outcome was not always homogeneous,⁴¹ but from a global point of view it was of relatively good quality. In any case, it is thanks to the genius of those learned *Ethiopian* translators who were active in the 350s if a beautiful forest of precious Second Temple and Early Christian texts has been preserved, with the exception of only a few probable losses over the course of more than sixteen centuries.

Finally, as a post scriptum, I would like to draw attention to two relatively disregarded texts that can contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of the communication networks between the Roman Empire and the kingdom of Aksum in the third and fourth centuries.⁴² The first

⁴⁰ For their translation techniques, see Miles 1985 (still an essential work) and, more recently, Knibb 1999, 55–86.

⁴¹ Thus, for example, Zuurmond judges that Matthew's 'A-text as a translation is typically a first draft' and that '[o]ne could call it a "wild" text' (Zuurmond 2001b, 4).

⁴² See, in general, Tomber 2008, 88–93.

passage, possibly taken from a now lost section of the pilgrim Egeria's *Travels*, should be dated to her journey to Mount Sinai in late-November or early-December 383.⁴³ The second is taken from Epiphanius's *Panarion*, written a few years earlier in 374–377, and is a biased report on the origins of the fortune that the prophet Mani would have inherited from the widow of his former master. Even if such an account is the result of a series of—deliberate?—misunderstandings, it still provides some plausible and useful information concerning the prestige of Greek culture in Northern Arabia and the main harbours from which Roman ships were sailing to 'India', namely, the Egyptian ports of Clysma (Suez) and Berenice, and the Palestinian city of Aila (Eilat/Aqaba).

[Clysma] is on the shore, right by the sea. It has an enclosed harbor which makes the sea come right inside the fort, and it is the port from India, which is to say that it receives ships from India, for ships from India can come to no other port but this in Roman territory. And the ships there are numerous and great, since it is a port renowned for the Indian merchants who come to it. Also the official (*agens in rebus*) known as the logothete has his residence there, the one who goes on embassy each year to India by order of the Roman emperor, and his ships lie there.⁴⁴

Scythianus, who was a Saracen but had been brought up on the borders of Palestine, that is, in Arabia [...] had been taught the language and literature of the Greeks there and had become proficient in their futile worldly doctrines. But he made continual business trips to India, and did a great deal of trading. And so he acquired worldly goods and as he traveled through the Thebaid—there are various harbors on the Red Sea, at the different gateways to the Roman realm. One of these is at Aelan—Aelon in sacred scripture. [...] Another harbor is at Castrum in Clysma, and another in the northernmost, at a place called Berenice. [...] And this is how merchants from India who reach the other lands by sea make trading voyages to the Roman Empire.⁴⁵

⁴³ This is at least the opinion of John Wilkinson and Pierre Maraval, the most recent editors of the *Travels*, even if a specialist of ancient Egyptian geography as competent as Philip Mayerson disagrees. See Wilkinson 1981, 179–180 and 206; Maraval 2002, 42–44 and 107–109; Mayerson 1996a; Mayerson 1996b.

⁴⁴ Peter the Deacon, *About the Holy Places* Y.6, translated by Wilkinson 1981, 206.

⁴⁵ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 66.1.7–12, translated by Williams 2012, 227–228.

The mention of Aila is especially noteworthy, because it is from that harbour that Aramaic-speaking travellers would most naturally embark in order to reach India via Adulis. This was probably the itinerary followed by the Tyrian brothers, Frumentius and Edesius, in the journey that would finally lead them to play a decisive role in the conversion of the Aksumite elites to Christianity. Regular contacts, on the one hand, with Syria-Palestine through Aila and, on the other hand, with Egypt through Clysma and Berenice,⁴⁶ perfectly explain the majority of the phenomena that we are able to infer from the critical study of our primary sources (in this case, inscriptions, manuscripts, and hagiographic traditions), including the presence of a few Greek- and Aramaic-speakers among the earliest Aksumite Christians. While those exogenous groups contributed to the creation of a distinctively Christian Gəʿəz lexicon, at least at the homiletical and catechetical level, it would have been the task of indigenous bilingual scholars to have the content of the voluminous codices that were brought back from Alexandria conveniently translated into the language of their country.

Needless to say, from the same ports other travellers took the same ships for the same destinations. They were Jews, Jewish Christians (or Jews *and* Christians who had not parted ways), Samaritans, Manicheans,⁴⁷ Palmyrenes,⁴⁸ and others. Unfortunately, they have left no trace in the historical records available to us, whether inscriptions, architectural remains, or textual references. The reasons why the documentation is so silent about them are rather intriguing, not to say mysterious, especially when we compare the situation in Aksum with that of the South Arabian kingdom of Ḥimyar, where a significant Jewish presence is well attested and Ḥimyarite elites started to adopt a Judaizing form of monotheism just decades after ʿEzana’s conversion to Christianity.⁴⁹ But this is another question.

⁴⁶ On these ports, see Ward 2007 and Parker 2009. For the key role of sea trade in the spread of religious ideas in late antique East Africa and beyond, see now Seland 2012; 2013; 2014.

⁴⁷ For the reference to Aksum in the saying about the ‘four great kingdoms’ attributed to Mani in *Kephalaia* 77, see Metzler 1989; de Blois 1992; Tardieu 1992.

⁴⁸ A short votive inscription on a wooden tablet left in a cave on the Socotra island by a Palmyrene traveller in 257–258 CE was discovered in 2002 and published by Robin and Gorea 2002.

⁴⁹ This phenomenon has been especially highlighted by Christian J. Robin in a series of ground-breaking studies (Robin 2003; 2004; 2012, 262–273; 2014, 49–59; 2015a; 2015b, 129–145) largely based on the discovery of new epigraphic evidence. See also Gajda 2009, 35–71; Bowersock 2013, 78–85 and 153–154; Piovanelli forthcoming b.

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Summary

The Aksumite Bible, as a cultural product of Late Antiquity, is still relatively obscure. Thus, in spite of the most recent advances in the field of Ethiopian studies—notably, the new radiocarbon dating of Gäräma I and Gäräma III Gospels—old scholarly opinions, such as the active role played by the famous fifth-century Syrian Miaphysite refugees in Aksumite Ethiopia, are not only still uncritically repeated, but also used to build up even more extravagant theories. The time has come to reassess some basic issues about the Egyptian and Palestinian origins of the first missionaries and the nature of the Greek texts they brought with them, as well as the Ethiopian identities of the first translators and the chronological framework for their work.