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Review

MORDECHAY LEWY, *Der apokalyptische Abessinier und die Kreuzzüge: Wandel eines frühislamischen Motivs in der Literatur und Kartografie des Mittelalters*

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MORDECHAY LEWY, *Der apokalyptische Abessinier und die Kreuzzüge: Wandel eines frühislamischen Motivs in der Literatur und Kartografie des Mittelalters*, Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums, 61 (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018). 443 pp. Price: 97.70 CHF, €78.54, $95.50. ISBN: 978-3-631-74977-7.

It is rather uncommon to open the review of a book with an account of the author's career—except when that career is, in itself, exceptional. Mordechay Lewy is a diplomat by profession. Among other assignments, he served as Israel's consul general in Berlin (1994–1997) and as ambassador to the Holy See (2008–2012). He also worked for the Municipality of Jerusalem as the mayor's special advisor for religious (i.e. Christian and Muslim) communities, from 2004 to 2008. Since the early 1990s, Lewy has published numerous academic studies on the history of interreligious (especially Jewish–Christian) relations, on the history of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy City, and on other topics. In 2013, he took early retirement from the diplomatic service to pursue a doctoral research project, the results of which are presented in this publication.

The scope of the project Lewy is taking on can be called nothing short of ambitious. It follows the migratory history of a motif through some seven centuries as it successively traversed the mindscapes of oriental Christians, Muslims, Crusaders, and European scholars, and left its traces in rumour and popular legend, apocalyptic and military-strategic literature, travel itineraries, and *mappae mundi*.

The motif is that of a military and political power located in the upper Nile valley or on the Horn of Africa, a kingdom inhabited by a black-skinned people, called al-Ḥabaša/Abyssinia, Ethiopia, or Nubia, that will successfully rise up against the Muslim empire in the last days.

In all, the work comprises two main sections, one of which deals with literary sources (Part A, Chapters 2–7, pp. 35–262), and the other with the motif's cartographical reflections (Part B, Chapters 8–11, pp. 265–362). After a detailed exposition of the historical 'geographic nomenclature' regarding Ethiopia, Nubia, and Abyssinia and the 'interchangeability' of their names in the Middle Ages (Chapter 2, pp. 35–64), the first chapter of the motif-historical investigation proper covers the occurrences of Dhuʾl-Suwayqatayn, the 'thin-legged one', king of al-Ḥabaša, in early apocalyptic *aḥādīth*, similar narratives in early medieval Syriac apocalypses, most notably that of Ps.-Methodius (written *c.*692), the latter's impact on medieval Coptic apocalyptic, and on the medieval Ethiopic (Gəʿəz) literature. It concludes with the Latin translations of Ps.-Methodius, whereby this stream of

traditions on the 'apocalyptic Abyssinian' trickles away, invoked less and less frequently in the course of the eighth through to the fifteenth century.

Lewy argues that the motif's chain of transmission is independent of Ps.-Methodius, that the likely origin of its occurrence in Coptic apocalypses is the Muslim tradition rather than the Ethiopian one (pp. 92–95), and that one of its central elements in Muslim narratives, the destruction of the Kaᶜba 'stone by stone', first occurs in a Christian work in the Ethiopian, early fifteenth-century tenth vision in the *Raʾəyä Sinoda* or *Vision of Sinoda* (i.e. Shenute of Atripe; pp. 101–104).

The next step in Lewy's reconstruction is the transfer of the motif to the European medieval Christian discourse (pp. 117–188) for which he makes out a precise date, place, and actor: the combatants in the Fifth Crusade (1217–1221) encamped at Damietta. Circulating among them were numerous propagandistic prophecies and rumours presaging the imminent intervention of certain (real or imagined) kings and their armies to assist them in their fight and soon put an end to Muslim rule altogether. All these prophecies, as recorded in the sources, have much in common but their exact relationship to one another remains a matter of debate. Lewy identifies two prophecies in particular which several sources ascribe to Clement, the disciple of Peter and second bishop of Rome. Apparently local, Arabic-speaking collocutors made the Crusaders familiar with these versions of Ps.-Clementine writings that survive today in Arabic and Ethiopic manuscripts (*Apocalypse of Peter*, *Qälemənṭos*). They appear to have conveyed the hope that a Nubian king would intervene in the battle to support the Crusaders. Some of the relevant paraphrases in the Crusaders' writings feature elements that, Lewy argues, cannot but go back to Muslim traditions as represented in certain early *aḥādīth*. Other prophecies ascribed to a certain 'Hannan le fil Ysaac' and a 'fil Agap', containing elements apparently originating in Muslim traditions, predict the intervention of a king of 'Albexi' (or 'Alberi', or 'Alberti') and are read by Lewy as referring to al-Ḥabaša (in corrupted forms).

While the textual tradition, instantiated by world histories such as Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*, transmitted the motif throughout the next century, European interest in the Horn of Africa was gaining traction with the rule of Emperor ᶜAmdä Ṣəyon (r.1314–1344) and his successful policy of expansion, against neighbouring Muslim countries in particular. Now, new narratives appear, ascribing a marvellous power to Ethiopia, some locating the legendary Prester John there. Ethiopia (al-Ḥabaša, 'Habesse', '*terre abesie*') first appears on European maps in the fourteenth century (pp. 237–262).

In the second part of his book, Lewy reconstructs the cartographical tradition of marking what he calls an 'exclusion zone' (*Sperrzone*) or 'eschatological danger zone' (*Gefahrenzone*) on the Horn of Africa, the south-east 'corner' of the world, that appears to be barred by a mountain range stretching from the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden to the eastern shore of the Indian Ocean, only interrupted by a 'gate'. Eight *mappae mundi* from the twelfth and thirteenth century feature this motif. Lewy demonstrates how this zone arose from a translation of the one in the north-east, beyond the Caucasus, home of Gog and Magog who in the last days would break through the barrier or gate Alexander the Great had once erected against them (pp. 265–299). The people excluded in the south-east corner are mostly called 'Nubii' (in several spelling variants) although surrounding geographical features point more to the area where Ethiopia is located. It is the Ebstorf map (*c*.1300) that actually states the 'Nubian gate' resembled the 'Caspian' one (p. 313). By juxtaposing the mostly fragmentary 'Nubian textblocks' inscribed in several maps, Lewy produces a unified reading that describes, among other attributes, the 'Nubians' as a 'most Christian people' (pp. 301–345). Finally, Lewy argues for an 'eschatological interpretation' of the Horn of Africa, as represented in the eight maps (pp. 347–362).

Reading Lewy's book, engaging as its content may be, is rather troublesome. Inaccuracies, inconsistencies in the use of terms, and inner contradictions frequently make it difficult to follow the argument closely, and many details in the sources, as well as the scholarly debates are misrepresented. As a consequence the author's argument all too often appears to stand on rather shaky, somewhat less-than-confidence-inspiring, ground. Many passages, beset with repetitions, leaps of thought, unclear phrasing, and so on, leave the impression the text had undergone at least one editing cycle too few before being submitted to the publisher.

When detecting transmissions of religious ideas between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, scholars tend to follow the generative religious-historical narrative of 'Judaism → Christianity → Islam' in a stereotypical manner. Invoking the inversion regarding influences between the so-called mother and daughter religions Judaism and Christianity, as advocated by, for instance, Israel Yuval, Lewy insists that the third, the granddaughter religion as it were, may just as well transfer ideas or concepts to its ancestors, especially in societies with a Muslim majority and/or ruling elite (pp. 114–116). This is a most welcome correction of an all-too-common misconception.

Unfortunately, most of the transfers considered for his motif history—plausible though the connections appear in themselves—are unsatisfactorily reconstructed, often lacking a convincing 'smoking gun'. Particularly where

these transfers involve Muslim ideas and narratives passing over to Christian discourses, such as that which probably took place in Damietta in 1219/1220, Lewy's reconstruction regrettably presents a rather weak case.

Despite its many shortcomings, the lasting merit of Lewy's book is to have drawn attention to the ways in which the interest in the African Christian kingdoms of Nubia and Ethiopia among medieval Muslims and Christian Europeans was informed by their eschatological expectations. It is to be hoped that it will inspire further studies in this fascinating, interdisciplinary field.

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TSEHAI BERHANE-SELASSIE, *Ethiopian Warriorhood: Defence, Land & Society 1800–1941*, Eastern Africa Series (Rochester, NY: James Currey, 2018). xxvi, 309 pp., 3 maps, 13 photographs, 2 illus., 2 tables. Price: $99.00. ISBN: 978-184701-191-6.

The book begins with an explanation of the choice of its theme which had obviously been neglected or misunderstood hitherto by national and international writers alike. The published studies concentrated on 'the prominent state structure and the place of the monarchs in defence, administration, and legislative and judicial systems' (cf. pp. 1–2). There is however at least one significant institution for whose exclusion from research the foreign and national writers might be held responsible. Still worse is that some of them mention it in their works scoffing at it with extraneous appellations such as 'a horde', '*näfṭäñña*', 'militia', 'citizen soldiery', feudal or provincial 'levies', and 'melange' (cf. pp. 8–9).[1]

The misunderstood institution is named *č̣äwa*, a Gəʿəz and/or Amharic term which is complex in its meaning and obscure in its historical origin.[2] The whole book is devoted to the institution's history, encompassing the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth, though its unique name

[1] As far as European writers are concerned, they must have compared the style of the *č̣äwa* to the strict regimentation of their own armies. But Ethiopian writers are more than likely to have valued the military achievements of the *č̣äwa* against the Turks in 1578, the Egyptians in 1875–1876, and the Italians in 1895–1896.

[2] At this point, the author refers only to a Gəʿəz–Amharic dictionary although other historical sources are available, such as Bairu Tafla, ed., *Aṣma Giyorgis and His Work: History of the Gāllā and the Kingdom of Šawā*, Äthiopistische Forschungen, 18 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH, 1987).