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Review Article

*Paths of Cultural Transmission Between Syria and Ethiopia:
About a Recent Book on Symbolic Interpretations*

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Review Article

Paths of Cultural Transmission Between Syria and Ethiopia: About a Recent Book on Symbolic Interpretations

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RALPH LEE, *Symbolic Interpretations in Ethiopic and Early Syriac Literature*, Eastern Christian Studies, 24 (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2017). xviii, 294 pp. Price: \$82.40. ISBN: 978-9-04293-336-1.

The components of the cultural complex of Christian Ethiopia as it emerges at the end of the Middle Ages is a fascinating question that has marked the historical investigations of the past century and will also accompany the new researches in the coming decades. To face it, it is necessary to equip oneself with adequate critical tools and have the ability to imagine plausible historical scenarios of cultural encounters and influences, even when the information from the sources proves insufficient and contradictory.

One of the most recent proposals comes from a book titled *Symbolic Interpretations in Ethiopic and Early Syriac Literature*, by Ralph Lee, originating from a 2011 PhD dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. This study is written with passion and filled with penetrating comparisons and fascinating materials, some of which are offered to the modern reader for the first time in Gə'əz and English translation.¹ At the same time, it is a book with whose core hypothesis I strongly disagree. The vast array of parallels mustered by Lee between Syriac poetry, on the one hand, and Ethiopian prose and poetry, on the other, cannot fail to impress the reader. However, the model invoked to explain these parallels is highly questionable; as I will show later, alternatives may be envisioned.

¹ I suggest the reader to taste the many beautiful pages of the book containing the study and the translation of magnificent Ethiopic texts and to grasp with it the many resonances that they show with a millennial poetic and exegetical tradition, passed through languages and cultures distant from each other in time and space.

The starting point of this study is constituted by Edward Ullendorff's Schweich Lectures, later published as *Ethiopia and the Bible*.² Here, Ullendorff suggested that many characteristics of Ethiopian Christianity (some of which are alluded to in the great national work, called *Kəbrä nägäšt*), such as the Ark of the Covenant, Ethiopian churches' threefold division, and the application of Levitical laws, show direct Judaic influence. Lee argues instead that a number of these features, considered in past scholarship biblical or Judaic, were actually drawn from Jewish-Christian (or, as he calls it, 'Judaico-Christian') Syriac Christianity during the Aksumite period, well before the establishment of the Solomonic dynasty.

The textual corpora used to prove this hypothesis are well known, although the state of their critical edition is of extremely variable quality, and the dating of each corpus is debated. Those corpora include the hymnody preserved in the *Daggwa* attributed to St Yared, the exegetical traditions collected in the *andämta* (a corpus of Amharic commentary on Gə'əz biblical and patristic texts, studied in particular by Roger Cowley),³ and the famous textual cluster known as *Kəbrä nägäšt*.

Before proposing my own interpretation of the cultural developments presupposed by the parallels between early Syriac culture and Ethiopic hymnody and exegesis, a summary of Lee's book is in order. In the author's own words,

The analysis of the Ark, the Cross and Paradise leads to the conclusion that they are united in symbolising the immanent presence of God. Divine immanence characterised the function of the Old Testament Ark, but the finding of this study contrasts with those offered by Ullendorff, who maintained the rôle of the Ark in Ethiopian Christian worship was in primary correspondence with its Old Testament forms. Instead this study has demonstrated how the symbolism of the Ark in Ethiopic and 'Ephremic' literature could be combined with that of the Cross and Paradise, to convey the immanent presence of God, that is often expressed through the Eucharist (p. 215).

This statement is found at the conclusion of a series of chapters that explore these symbols in both Syriac and Ethiopic texts.

After a first chapter titled 'Ethiopian Christianity: Judaic or Judaico-Christian?', and a second one dedicated to a survey of Ethiopic literature, its editions, and its studies, Chapters 3 through 5 contain detailed treatments of the three symbols (the Ark, the Cross, and Paradise). Each of these chapters con-

² Ullendorff 1968.

³ Cowley 1988.

tains a presentation of Ethiopic and parallel Syriac texts, accompanied by a comparison highlighting both correspondences and differences.

More in detail, while the Ark of the Covenant (Chapter 3), or *tabot*, has been considered by Ullendorff and other scholars the most compelling piece of evidence for Judaic influence, Lee highlights its rich symbolism, inseparable from Christian influences, as it appears in the *Kəbrä nägäšt*, the *Dəggʷa*, and the *andəmta*, and, at the same time, demonstrates how Ephrem regards the Ark narrative arising from the Sinai Theophany as a key revelation of the Creator. Chapter 4 deals with the Cross, which, according to Lee, is connected with the Ark in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* as one of the symbols of God's salvation plan. Similar symbolism occurs in the *andəmta*, while the *Dəggʷa* places only minor emphasis on it. Obviously, stories that involve wood, primarily narrated in the lives of Old Testament patriarchs, are interpreted symbolically in relation to the Cross. Lee uses the expression 'Judaic-Christian tradition' to allude to this symbolism and makes reference to the *Odes of Solomon*, which he dates to the first century (Hendrik Jan Willem Drijvers held a very different opinion about the dating of these hymns!).⁴ Ephrem and Jacob of Serugh employ similar interpretations in relation to the patriarchs, so that an early connection between Syriac literature and Ethiopic culture seems possible (but must be proven). The *Kəbrä nägäšt*, *Dəggʷa*, and *andəmta* establish a rich net of connections between Paradise, the Ark, and the Cross, each symbol being closely associated with the Sinai Theophany. Chapter 5 explores the extent to which Jewish texts, such as 1 Enoch, have affected the Ethiopic and 'Ephremic' understanding of Paradise: the three-fold division of the Paradise map and the Eucharistic function of the Tree of Life are studied and compared within the two sets of texts. Lee shows how the distinctive association between the Ark, the Cross, and Paradise found in the Ethiopic corpora is paralleled in Ephrem's poems, which perceive Moses's vision on Sinai as fundamental to an understanding of Paradise as pre-existent reality and focus of the eschatological hope.

According to Lee, these parallels demonstrate that the three symbols, such as they are reworked in the selected Ethiopic corpora, are not signs of direct Judaic influence. The *tabot*, for example, is a symbol of the Incarnation, a fact that excludes Judaism as a source. Therefore, what for Ullendorff was evidence of Judaic influence becomes for Lee evidence of a Jewish-Christian one, mediated by the Syriac culture which was active in Ethiopia already during the Aksumite period.

Despite my doubts and perplexities about Lee's contention on the times and directions of these influences, which I will detail shortly, some aspects of his

⁴ Among other studies, see Drijvers 1981.

analysis are quite convincing. The symbols he has chosen as a guide, as they occur in the selected Ethiopic texts, are not simply Judaic, but exhibit clear Christian features. Indeed, Lee qualifies these symbols as Jewish-Christian features, but does so based on an understanding of this category that is being increasingly debated (I will return to this point later). It is well known that other aspects of Ethiopic Christian praxis—such as circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, ritual purity, and dietary rules—exhibit an apparent connection to the Jewish heritage. Lee's book, however, does not touch on them, inasmuch as they did not give rise to a symbolism as rich as the one analysed here.

In my opinion, however, the question is how and when these Christian (or Jewish-Christian) features were introduced over time, especially if one considers the difficulty with which the Ethiopic corpora under consideration can be dated. Does their introduction date to the Christianization of Aksum or at some point in the evolution those corpora underwent in late ancient and medieval times? And what are its origins? On these questions, my position is radically different from Lee's.

At the same time, it must be remarked that the parallels invoked by Lee do not solve the issues he raises, as they are neither verbal enough to constitute evidence of Ethiopic texts' literary dependence on Syriac texts, nor generic enough to be the result of a polygenetic process.

An example of the dangers of building too much on non-verbal similarities is contained in Lee's examination of *Ode of Solomon* 9 (pp. 170–171), quoted by the author in the form this composition takes not in Syriac but in Greek.⁵ The exceeding genericity of this example, along with the problem of the language of composition, should induce to caution. Is the similarity of conceptions of Paradise the result of a direct influence of this particular text in a precise historical phase or rather, as it seems to me, of a large and complex tradition, evolving over the centuries and reaching Ethiopia rather late? The issue becomes, then, identifying those cultural phenomena or those moments in which a process of generic (as opposed to specific) influence of early Syriac literature on Ethiopic culture can be supposed to have taken place.

As Lee reminds us, it is well known that early inscriptions supply material evidence for the conversion to Christianity of the fourth-century monarch,

⁵ *P. Bodmer* XI: 'And He took me to His Paradise, wherein is the wealth of the Lord's pleasure. I beheld blooming and fruit-bearing trees, And self-grown was their crown. Their branches were sprouting And their fruits were shining. From an immortal land were their roots'. The original language of the *Odes* is still disputed, and the last large commentary, by Michael Lattke, strongly supports the hypothesis of a Greek original; cf. Lattke 2009, 149–150, 165

‘Ezana,⁶ and literary works (Athanasius, Rufinus) offer important witnesses to the subsequent penetration of Christianity into the Aksumite court, under the direct influence of Frumentius, a ‘Syrian’ (Palestinian) missionary.⁷ His ordination by Athanasius established strong ecclesiastical connections between Aksum and Alexandria. At the same time, we do not know what the main features of Frumentius’s Christianity were: Frumentius’s connection with Syria/Palestine—an imprecise geographical and linguistic designation already in Antiquity—can hardly mean that he must have shared the very same culture that inspired, for example, Aphrahat and Ephrem. There were Christian authors coming from the same area who were strongly Hellenized, such as Eusebius of Emesa.

Lee adds that also the traditional account of the Nine Saints’ arrival in Aksum should be invoked to study the question of Syriac influences on Ethiopic Christianity. He admits that there is minimal evidence substantiating the historicity of events and characters contained in the various narratives, a fact that has led some scholars to be skeptical about those narratives’ role in transmitting Syriac culture in Ethiopia during the Aksumite period. According to Lee, however, the story of the Nine Saints is so deeply embedded in national consciousness that these saints could be responsible for the introduction of the works of Ephrem in Aksum. Both Paolo Marrassini’s articles on the subject and the excellent book by Antonella Brita (not mentioned in Lee’s bibliography) have cast doubt on the entire story, and above all on the Syriac provenance of the Nine Saints.⁸

On a broader level, Lee’s book seems to be out of step with contemporary research on such issues as the character of Edessene culture in the early Christian centuries (and its alleged Jewish-Christianity), the definition of Jewish-Christianity itself, the coherence of early Ethiopic culture, and the nature of the latter’s evolution over time. In particular, studies on Jewish Christianity oscillate with regard not only to the bases of the phenomenon (ethnic, ritual, or doctrinal?)⁹ but also to the breadth of its definition. The studies by Hans-Joachim Schoeps and Jean Daniélou are representative of two extreme positions on the topic, in that they respectively present Judaeo-Christianity as coterminous with Ebionism (Pseudo-Clementine literature) or as a descriptor for the entire Christian *forma mentis* prior to the end of second century.¹⁰ Lee’s position could be assimilated to that of Daniélou (who is quoted more than once), which, however, is currently receding in scholarship. Indeed, the very category of Jewish Christi-

⁶ See now Marrassini 2014.

⁷ Brakmann 1994. On the Palestinian origins of Frumentius, see also Marrassini 2014, 64–65.

⁸ Marrassini 1990; Marrassini 1999; Marrassini 2012; Brita 2010.

⁹ Among hundreds of examples which could be quoted see Mimouni 1998; 2001.

¹⁰ Schoeps 1949; Daniélou 1958.

anity has entered a profound crisis.¹¹ If we take into account the situation of these studies and the recent evolution in terminology and historical perspective, one wonders whether a categorization of *Odes of Solomon*, Aphrahat's *Expositions*, and above all Ephrem's poems and prose commentaries under the rubric of 'Jewish Christianity' is useful or even justified. Lee is persuaded that studies of Ephrem's works have revealed a rich and distinctively Judaeo-Christian approach to theology, with an overriding preference for poetic rather than prose forms. This could be true, but it is not the entire truth: Ephrem is also a prose writer and the Greek influence on his thought has been well demonstrated by Ute Possekkel (whose work is not quoted, notwithstanding the importance of her detailed study about the evidence of Greek culture in Ephrem's authentic works).¹²

But my major objection to Lee's thesis comes from a consideration of the most recent studies on the textual heritage of the Aksumite age. I refer here to a number of essays that Alessandro Bausi has published on the subject,¹³ where the borders of this textual heritage clearly emerge. This corpus included the Bible (gradually translated between the fourth and sixth century), some major Jewish and inter-testamental apocrypha, patristic literature, and recently discovered canonical and liturgical literature. The following writings deserve a particular mention: (1) works of the inter-testamental and apocryphal literature: Book of Enoch, Book of Jubilees, Rest of the Words of Baruch or 4 Baruch, Third and Fourth Book of Ezra, *Ascension of Isaiah*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, and maybe the *Lives of the Prophets*; (2) the *Qerellos* (homilies and treatises originating in the context of the Council of Ephesus, 431 CE); (3) two recensions of the monastic *Rules of Pachomius*, as well as other scattered pieces of monastic literature; (4) the *Physiologus*; (5) the *Treatise on the Antichrist* attributed to Hippolytus of Rome; (6) *Ancoratus* by Epiphanius of Salamis (d.403); (7) hagiographical works (among which the *Life of Anthony* and *Acts* of Christian martyrs); (8) probably also the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel*; (9) the *Testament of Our Lord*, of which the *Doctrine of the Mysteries* is a part; (10) several exegetical works attributed to Philo of Carpasia (for example, the commentary on the Song of Songs); (11) the *Aksumite collection*, of canonical and liturgical nature, with an important historical text and Timothy Aelurus's letters at the end.

¹¹ See Gianotto 2012, 10–45.

¹² Possekkel 1999.

¹³ Among these essays, here I refer in particular to the following: Bausi 2012; 2016. See also Bausi 2018.

This list evidences how the Greek Christian culture that exerted its influence on early Ethiopic intellectual circles was marked by more than one tendency.¹⁴ One of these trends was characterized by a strong interest in eschatology and by insistence on a unitary anthropology (a view embodied by Hippolytus and Epiphanius). These aspects are indeed closer to what past scholarship would have called a *Semitic* or *biblical* approach. Today, while nobody would deny the biblical connections of this line, a consensus is emerging around the notion that the biblical perspective is combined with philosophical influences deriving from Stoicism and Aristotelism, the two philosophical currents most inclined to a unitary anthropology.¹⁵ The trend just described coexisted with a more Platonizing one, interested in Trinitarian debates and allegorical exegesis. This latter line originally displayed a more spiritual anthropology (the human being is, above all, his intellect/spirit), although in the fourth and fifth century it was ready to accept a number of theological and anthropological elements typical of the other tendency named ‘biblical’, but more properly ‘Asiatic’. The moderate Origenism of Peter, Alexander, and Athanasius of Alexandria, for example, was corrected by Theophilus and Cyril of Alexandria by reworking those Fathers’ dualistic anthropology in the direction of a tight relationship between body and soul, especially in the liturgical and ascetic contexts; at the same time, a stress on sacramental realism substituted a ‘symbolic’ understanding of baptism and the Eucharist.¹⁶ What I want to emphasize here is that the two tendencies, both philosophically structured, as well as others, were already competing and influencing each other in fourth- and fifth-century Egypt, and can therefore reasonably be supposed to have both influenced in different measures early Aksumite culture.

We may now come back to Lee’s proposal. What is actually lacking in the Aksumite cultural heritage is precisely early Syriac literature. It is true that Aphrahat was translated to Ethiopic, but the itinerary of that translation is not so easy to recover (from Arabic?) and it is unlikely to have taken place during the Aksumite phase. The same should be repeated for Ephrem. Although we cannot exclude the existence of translations of his hymns directly from Syriac, the evidence is lacking. Only actual literary parallels, which have not been identified so far, could provide us with the certainty that his hymns were known. Common motifs and images are not sufficient to establish literary connections. I am not alone in perceiving this lack of Syriac evidence in the Aksumite literary heritage. Not only no work of Syriac origin is to be found in Bausi’s outlines, but Aaron M. Butts’s as well as others’ essays on the topic of Syriac influence on

¹⁴ Simonetti 1973; Prinziavalli 1999, in particular 197–200. See now Girolami 2019.

¹⁵ Navascués 2004; 2007.

¹⁶ Weinandy and Keating 2003; Russell 2003.

Ethiopic culture seem to exclude any meaningful Syriac presence in the Aksumite textual corpus.¹⁷

It is to be stressed that Lee's symbols are only a little section of a more general question, that is, the strong Jewish ('Mosaic') elements in medieval and modern Ethiopic Christianity. Is the Jewish semblance of medieval Christianity a late product? It is difficult to get a clear outline of this phenomenon. Recently Pierluigi Piovaneli has offered a bold and fascinating proposal, which connects the issue to an intentional conciliatory attitude adopted by the king of Aksum Kaleb/Āllä Ašbəḥa, and especially by the general and later ruler Abrəha, towards the Jewish and Judaizing subjects after Yūsuf 'As'ar Yaṭ'ar's defeat of 525: 'Paradoxically enough, it was much later, in the middle of the sixth century, and on the opposite shores of the Red Sea that a new kind of Christian culture in Jewish garb was pragmatically created by the opportunistic Christian ruler of a largely Judaizing South Arabian empire'.¹⁸ This political choice was to determine the characters of later (medieval) Ethiopic culture. Of course, it is only a hypothesis which awaits to be supported by textual data and historical contextualization: again, it has nothing to do with a supposed Syriac Jewish-Christian trend active in Aksum.

In conclusion, let me offer an alternative proposal in which it is plausible to place the results of Lee's study. When we speak of Ephrem, we are actually discussing a literary, exegetical, and theological tradition that exerted an extremely strong influence on the Christian culture that had developed in the Near and Middle Eastern area, in Syriac and Greek, and later in Arabic. Ephrem's literary corpus, which soon included the poetic production of other anonymous authors, had a strong impact on all later poets,¹⁹ such as Jacob of Serugh (and subsequently the Western Syriac currents that generally adhered to the Jacobite Church) and Narsai of Nisibis (and, through him, the Church of the East), on Syriac liturgy and byzantine poetry.²⁰ In particular, Jacob's and Narsai's dependence on Ephrem is impressive, as demonstrated by Taeke Jansma, Tanios Bou Mansour, Manolis Papoutsakis, and others.²¹ While Ephrem's Christological and Trinitarian language was progressively perceived as archaic and was updated over time, his biblical approach and especially his symbolism crossed

¹⁷ Butts 2011. See also 'Syrian influences in Ethiopia', *EAE*, IV (2010), 782b–785b (W. Witakowski); Witakowski 2012, originally published in Witakowski 1989–1990.

¹⁸ Piovaneli 2018, 200.

¹⁹ On Syriac poetry see the introductions by Brock 2008; 2011.

²⁰ Papoutsakis 2007.

²¹ Jansma 1965; Tanios Bou Mansour 1993; Papoutsakis 2017; Butts et al. 2020. On Ephrem's role in later Syriac culture see also Brock 2019.

all fields of Eastern Christian production for centuries. It is possible to claim that Syriac poetry and liturgy,²² much more than Syriac theological, ethical, mystical, and homiletical production in prose, carry an unmistakable Ephremian tone.

Now, all these different corpora of poetry and liturgy experienced a long season of translation from Syriac to Arabic in a broad geographical area.²³ As part of this process, several streams of Ephremian tradition, which in the previous centuries had reached the Church of the East and the Syro-Jacobite Church, were collected in Arabic: ‘Whether through adaptations and abridgments or through more straightforward translations, the Syriac literary heritage has left an indelible mark on Christian Arabic literature’.²⁴ During the so-called Zagwe dynasty in the twelfth and thirteenth century, a new phase of translations from Arabic to Ethiopic took place. It is from this large basin of patristic heritage translated into Arabic, I propose, that the Ethiopian culture of the Solomonic age drew a number of literary and ideological elements, which better explain the similarities between the Gə‘əz corpora studied by Lee and early Syriac literature, Ephrem in particular.

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²² Butts 2017; Brock 1997.

²³ Roggema and Treiger 2019: see the bibliography at the end of the volume (‘A Bibliographical Guide to Arabic Patristic Translations and Related Texts’, pp. 377–417).

²⁴ Butts 2019, 90, an article extremely rich in useful methodological remarks about the complexity of the Arab tradition of Syriac texts. Other essays by the same author which illuminate the process of translation of the Syriac literary heritage in Arabic are the following: Butts and Erho 2018; Butts 2020.

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Summary

This contribution discusses Ralph Lee's volume *Symbolic Interpretations in Ethiopic and Early Syriac Literature*, in particular his proposal about what were the channels of cultural transmission between Syriac and Ethiopic Christian literatures which could justify the consistent number of parallels found in the two poetical and liturgical traditions. Lee's model used to explain these parallels is proved questionable, and an alternative hypothesis is offered: Ephrems' poetry influenced later Syriac writers and liturgical traditions, which, in turn, experienced a long season of translation from Syriac to Arabic in a broad geographical area. As a consequence of this process, several streams of Ephremian tradition were transferred from the Arabic Christian literatures to the Ethiopic world after the twelfth century.