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Review

MICHAEL G. WECHSLER (ed.), *Evangelium Iohannis Aethiopicum*

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Tatsache, dass im Kəbrä Nägäśt die Lade-Überlieferung einen so schlüssigen Abschluss findet, sollte an der Historizität eher zweifeln lassen denn als ihr Beweis angesehen werden.

Der methodisch undifferenzierte Umgang mit den so unterschiedlichen Quellen, die allzu oft nur kurz angedeuteten Thesen, die bei genauer Argumentation jeweils für sich einen eigenen Band füllen würden, sowie der meist nur vage Bezug auf andere Arbeiten und die ungenaue Arbeitsweise (oft fehlen bei Zitaten Stellenangaben völlig) ermöglichen es kaum, der Darstellung zuverlässige, verwertbare Resultate zu entnehmen.

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MICHAEL G. WECHSLER (ed.), *Evangelium Iohannis Aethiopicum*, CSCO 617 Aeth 109, Louvain 2005. Pp. XLIV + 210. Price: € 79,–. ISBN: 90–429–1648–6.

Michael G. Wechsler's publication of the Ethiopic text of John's gospel is very welcome news: it is an important step forward in the studies of the Ethiopic New Testament in general, and, no doubt that we are now "one inch away" from closing the circle of the long-standing endeavour of providing a critical edition of all the Ethiopic canonical gospels. The gospels of Mathew and Mark have been authoritatively dealt with and critically edited by R. Zuurmond and published in 1989 and in 2001. Now, the only portion that remains in the waiting list is the gospel of Luke. With the results achieved so far, the road for an edition of Luke will not be difficult.

Right from the outset of his work, M.W. recognizes and exalts the importance of Zuurmond's publications of the first two gospels and demonstrates in many ways that his edition of John follows in the footsteps of Rochus Zuurmond. M.W.'s dense volume is articulated in three main parts: an Introduction, the Text with an elaborate critical apparatus and some Appendices. Part One introduces briefly 21 manuscripts employed in the edition. It seems that M.W. has made up his mind to spare his reader the toil of going through an exhaustive list of witnesses that contain the Johannine gospel. Their knowledge must have been taken for granted. But even for the 21 manuscripts he uses, M.W. limits himself to offer only a concise overview. For most of their description he refers the reader to the comments of previous scholars. Thus, he leaves out many of the issues related to the physiological aspects of the manuscripts. There are "brief orthographic observations concerning indistinguishable or hardly distinguishable letters" and "the dates or presumed dates" of the manuscripts (p. IX). Otherwise, questions pertaining to palaeography, a valuable aspect of (scribal) art history,

an expression of local geniuses and *scriptoria*, have been left out. Likewise an analysis of the morphology and syntax of the Gəʿəz texts that M.W. has had the opportunity to study, though hinted at (e.g. in p. XIII), have been largely skipped. In the classification of the manuscripts, he follows the methodology of Zuurmond, starting from the choice of "key words", such as the technical expression "text types"[1]. It is interesting to notice that there is no attempt to draw a *stemma codicum*. A wise decision, given the situation of many unsolved questions that riddle the Ethiopic gospels. Nonetheless, M.W. does not renounce to tackle the issue concerning the origins and evolution of the Ethiopic gospel of John. Indeed, one of the most fundamental questions raised by this work regards the *Greek Vorlage* of the earliest extant Ethiopic text[s] (*Versio Antiqua*). According to Zuurmond and M.W. the *Versio Antiqua* is represented by Abbā Garimā I and III: both are thought to belong to a period between the 9th and 13th centuries[2]. The complexity and the elusive nature of the issue is easily perceptible from the opinions the editor provides. M.W. concedes that "what the *Greek Vorlage* of the *Versio Antiqua* may have been remains inevitably unclear" (p. XVI). The statement which follows (seven lines below), is equally important. M.W. maintains that "the *Versio Antiqua* of John is an eclectic text, attesting *inter alios*, elements of the Byzantine, Alexandrian, and "Western" text types". This affirmation implies that almost all of the major textual representatives of the text of the New Testament have had a role in the formation of the Ethiopic text of John. If we consider the nature of these "text types" as described by experts of New Testament textual criticism, and especially the differences that divide them, the conclusion would be that the Ethiopic *Versio Antiqua* of John is a pluri-parental creature. It will be fair to demand an explanation as to how and under which circumstances this phenomenon would have taken place. It seems that for the time being the deadlock around the exact identity of Ethiopic John's ancestry persists.

It is difficult to see the use and purpose of highly hypothetical sentences such as "… we tentatively accept Zuurmond's preliminary designation of the (composite) *Vorlage* of the Ethiopic *Versio Antiqua* as 'early Byzantine'" (p. XVII). There is always the well known risk, that an often-rehearsed hypothesis, especially if originally presented by a scholar of "the highest caliber", can gradually be taken as a certainty. People can easily

[1] By the way, "the long-standing question of text types has not been resolved to everyone's satisfaction and remains a major issue", cf. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, "Textual Criticism" (electronic set up).

[2] The extent of the age gap (four centuries!) hinted here should give some food for thought.

forget and drop the qualification "... we tentatively accept". The theory advanced by well respected scholars that the Ethiopic gospels were a translation of the "Western Syriac text of Saint Lucian" and the impact that such a claim has subsequently had, is a good lesson of how difficult it is to control a hypothesis, once launched. Immediatly after having formulated the suggestion that the "early Byzantine" type could be behind the Ethiopic *Versio Antiqua*, M.W. underlines once again that "any determined conclusions regarding this Greek *Vorlage* are currently beyond our reach given the utter obscurity of the early Ethiopic textual history as well as the evident fluidity – or, as otherwise described, "the state of total confusion"[3] – of the extant gospel manuscript tradition" (p. XVII). The main stumbling block in the pursuit of the *Urtext* of the Ethiopic gospels is the lack of documentation which precedes Abbā Garimā I and III and their likes. Be that as it may, the project of retrieving Aksumite literature of which the gospels are an integral part, should never be abandoned.

The perplexities that the theories about the origin of the Ethiopic *Versio Antiqua* raise, which are in fact felt and aired by the editor himself, do not diminish in any way the overall value of M.W.'s work and especially the rigour with which he has carried out his investigation. As a matter of fact, in the pursuit of the origins of any ancient text, no one can expect to get to "clear and distinct ideas". In fact, M.W. deserves credit for the caution and professional honesty he expresses all along, beginning in the Introduction. Furthermore, one cannot remain unimpressed, for instance, by the statistical figures (of course, for me impossible to verify) that M.W. offers in order to substantiate his arguments (pp. XVI–XVII). The data indicating "adjustments towards the Greek" and "doublets" in Type A, as well as the "glosses and doublets" which characterize the "conflated" Type C texts are precious pieces of information. They would have been even more helpful, if a short "sample synopsis" of the Greek alongside the Gəʿəz text was offered. Scholars of the Ethiopic New Testament would have had first hand material to draw their own conclusion. M.W. mentions some Arabic versions in connection with what he, following the classification of Zuurmond, calls the "conflated" and "deconflated" texts. All the scholars who have critically edited texts of the Ethiopic New Testament have suggested an Arabic mediation in the process of revising and translating the New Testament into Gəʿəz. However, more needs to be done to clarify better the relevance of the "Arab track" vis-à-vis the Ethiopic. A thorough assessment of the role and influence of the Arabic versions remains a (difficult but hopefully not an impossible) *desideratum*.

[3] Zuurmond, *Introduction*, p. 132.

The Gospel is a living text. "*Scriptura crescit cum legente* = Scripture grows [in several ways] with the reader" as Gregory the Great says rightly. In Christian Ethiopia it has been proclaimed in Gəᶜəz for centuries and quite often this is still the case. In this process, there is a dynamic hermeneutical circle which has constantly to be kept in mind. The Gospel has shaped several aspects of Ethiopian life. But the other face of the coin, to which scholars of textual criticism have to pay all the necessary attention, is that the Bible has been incarnated in the Ethiopian context. There has been a complex process, starting from the transfer of a Greek text into Gəᶜəz, a totally different language and mindset. The texts speak for themselves about the pain that translations have demanded. M.W. has made use of manuscripts which are thought to belong to a period prior to 1270 and which goes up the 18th century: virtually half a millennium. A critical reflection on the evolution of the language as displayed in documents such as the present gospel, throughout this long period would do a priceless service to try to realize how "the Word has become flesh" in Ethiopia. M.W. speaks about a Revised text (Type E). Once again a synopsis showing the shift in the morphology, vocabulary and syntax would have been helpful. In the exuberant list of the *sigla*, alongside BDF and Lamb, I would have expected to see, at least Kidanä Wäld Kəfle, *Mäṣḥafä Säwasəw Wägəs Wämäzgäbä Qalat Ḥaddis*, Addis Ababa, 1948 A.M. and other similar superb tools of research produced by Ethiopian grammarians. Both native and foreign text critical scholars need to have a good acquaintance not only with the Gəᶜəz language but also with how Gəᶜəz is traditionally approached and taught in Ethiopia.

Coming to more technical aspects: the paragraph which introduces the "orthographic standardization" (pp. XXXII–XXXIII) is one of the many examples of M.W.'s academic committment, *acribia* and of the resources of time and scholarship he has generously invested in this work. The number of signs and *sigla* (pp. XXXVIII–XLII) which run in their tens, is quite impressive, though inevitably cumbersome in practical terms. Both the text and the critical apparatus look esthetically good. From a random check, it appears that spelling mistakes are not as many as one would expect in such an elaborate edition. The work as whole represents a considerable milestone and not only for the additional light it throws on the knowledge of the New Testament scholarship in general. It can be exploited by scholars of the Gəᶜəz language and whenever necessary, as a source reference, and/or as a term of comparison in the analysis of other old Gəᶜəz texts, such as, for instance, patristic and hagiographical works, etc. M.W.'s edition can also be used as a solid and reliable basis to prepare good versions of Ethiopic John in languages currently spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Last but not least, an appreciation for the words M.W. writes in the last six lines of his Foreword (pp. VII–VIII). They break that "scientific mould" according to which a scholar, in dealing with texts such as the present one must be "neutral" or at least "reasonably aloof".

While expressing my sincere congratulations to M.W. for this masterly work, it is my hope that a similar edition of the gospel of Luke will be available in the near future.

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CLAIRE BOSC-TIESSÉ – ANAÏS WION, *Peintures sacrées d'Éthiopie: Collection de la Mission Dakar–Djibouti*, St-Maur-des-Fossés: Éditions Sépia, 2005; 132 pp.; black and white and colour illustrations, photographs, drawings, maps, graphics. € 40,–. ISBN: 2–8428–0091–5.

In 1931–33 the French expedition to Africa, known as the Mission Dakar–Djibouti and directed by the ethnologist Marcel Griaule, worked extensively in Ethiopia. Its members collected a large amount of Ethiopian artefacts which found their way to the Trocadéro Ethnographic Museum in Paris (from 1937 the Musée de l'Homme) and were displayed directly after the return of the expedition. However they were never systematically published and only part of them joined the museum's permanent exhibition. Gratitude is therefore owed to the two French scholars who in the work under notice have presented the whole collection to a wide audience.

The book is conceived as a catalogue with commentaries, in which the described objects are presented in the context of general history and the history of art. In the introduction (pp. 8–18) the reader finds a short review of Ethiopian history, with a focus on the 17th and 18th centuries, the period from which most of the collected objects originate. It is followed by the history of the Mission and objectives concerning the gathering of the artefacts.

The first chapter, "Images de dévotion" (pp. 19–63) is introduced by an exposé clarifying the position of images in the spiritual life of Ethiopians, particularly of St. Mary who is the most often depicted figure in Ethiopia. The artefacts described in this part of book are paintings on wood of various forms and sizes and executed in different techniques. Dated to the 15th–18th centuries, they represent various painting styles, although the majority belongs to the so-called first and second Gondarene School. The same chapter presents, somewhat unconnected with paintings on wood, a magic scroll, the only such item of 500 brought by the expedition which is not deposited in the Bibliothèque nationale. It contains the texts and carefully drawn charms asso-