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## Review

KAI MERTEN, *Mäsqäl. Die Traditionsgeschichte des Festes um das wahre  
Kreuz Jesu in Äthiopien*

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Hills and discussed several times by Paolo Marrassini): this is not only the best option but the *only possible one* according to its use in Ethiopic. – A general problem, not affecting only this contribution, is the tendency to discuss terms and expressions occurring in Ethiopic versions of biblical and parabiblical texts by comparing versions that can be centuries distant one from the other, even from linguistically different *Vorlagen* typically, Greek and Arabic, and possibly stemming from completely different cultural contexts (see on pp. 111–113 the long discussion of *‘alāwā* and *kəḥdä* in the ApcPt and in 1 Enoch). In fact, there is nothing, aside from the affinity dictated by the disciplinary interest of the scholars, that linguistically relates the ApcPt to 1 Enoch more strictly than to innumerable other Ethiopic texts where the term *‘alāwā* and *kəḥdä* (always wrongly written as *kəḥda*) occur. There is, as we all know, a dearth of lexicographical resources for the study of Ethiopic, but this state of the art does not authorize any simplification at the risk of heavy distortions of the evidence. The correct understanding of the language needs to go beyond the delimitation of genre and no restriction to the field of biblical and parabiblical literature is legitimate. On the contrary, a broad consideration of the linguistic context of the creation of each single version is necessary for a correct understanding of the letter of the texts.

This book, in the opinion of the reviewer, notwithstanding some oversight of previous scholarship and some approximation in the philological and linguistic analysis of the Ethiopic version of the ApcPt, provides an extremely careful and fresh reading of this fascinating text. The thesis that the ApcPt focuses on *mercy-as-justice* and does not primarily have a monitory character is finely presented and keenly defended with a thorough examination of previous studies, even though it might not convince all readers. Not the least of its merits, this book also repropose the thesis of the presence, acceptance, and rebuttal of the *apokatastasis* doctrine in the Ethiopian Church.

Alessandro Bausi, Sapienza Università di Roma

KAI MERTEN, *Mäsqäl. Die Traditionsgeschichte des Festes um das wahre Kreuz Jesu in Äthiopien*, Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte, 65 (Berlin–Münster: LIT Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2021). 237 pp. Price: €34,90. ISBN: 978-3-643-14986-2 (print).

In Ethiopia, the Feast of the Cross (መስቀል, *mäsqäl*) is a major holiday that was recognized as an Intangible World Heritage by UNESCO in December of 2013. Several questions remain about its origins and the reasons for its current appearance. The celebration, which dates to 326, commemorates the discovery of the

True Cross on which Jesus was crucified.<sup>1</sup> According to legend, Queen Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, went on a search for the true cross and discovered its location through a dream before lighting a bonfire, the smoke of which provided her with the exact location of the Cross's burial.

This celebration is the topic of the monograph under review by Kai Merten, a Protestant pastor and lecturer in religious history at Philipps-Universität Marburg. The book is intended for anyone interested in the history of tradition within the Ethiopian Church or within the Eastern churches in general. It describes the historical and cultural background of the feast of the discovery of the True Cross in Ethiopia. The book is divided into thirteen sections.

A brief introduction ('Einleitung', pp. 15–17) states the main research question of the study: Can the history of the tradition of the Ethiopic feast of the cross be elucidated? The next section 'Die Quellen' (pp. 19–26) presents a valuable list of sources mentioning the legend of the discovery of the cross from various traditions, including historical sources and writings of travelers that describe the practice of celebrating the feast. This section ensures the credibility and importance of Merten's work. The sources stem from the Ethiopian church and other traditions, including Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Armenian, such as *The Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea (265–339) and the *Ecclesiastical History* by Socrates Scholasticus (380–439). It also considers Syriac hymns and homilies attributed to Jacob of Serugh (451–521) and European sources, including the legend of the discovery of the cross known as the *Golden Legend* (thirteenth century). Among the Egyptian source are the Copto-Arabic Synaxarium as well as liturgical books and historical accounts, such as the *History of the Patriarchs* attributed here to Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'.<sup>2</sup> Merten not only includes Coptic historians but also Egyptian Muslim ones, such as al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442).

Merten lists many Ethiopian sources that inform us about the origin of the feast and the form of its celebration, including the *Wəddase Mäsqäl* ('Praise of the

<sup>1</sup> J. W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta: The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 27 (Leiden–New York, NY–København–Köln: E. J. Brill, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> This attribution should be corrected, as it has long been shown that *The History of the Patriarchs* is to be attributed to Mawhūb ibn Manṣūr ibn Mufarriḡ; see J. den Heijer, *Mawhūb Ibn Manṣūr Ibn Mufarriḡ et l'historiographie copto-arabe: Étude sur la composition de l'Histoire des Patriarches d'Alexandrie*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 513, Subsidia, 83 (Lovanii: In aedibus Peeters, 1989). Similarly, the account *Churches and Monasteries*, which is here incorrectly attributed to 'Abū Šāliḥ al-'Armānī but has been revealed to be the work of 'Abū al-Makārim, see F.-C. Muth, 'Abū Šāliḥ' in S. Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*: I: A–C (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 54b–55a.

Cross'),<sup>3</sup> attributed to Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem (fourth century). He also presents the most important work that dates the celebration back to the fourth year of the reign of *Aṣe Zār'a Ya'qob* (1399–1468), the *Māṣḥafā Ṭefut*,<sup>4</sup> of which Caquot translated excerpts in 1955,<sup>5</sup> and then sheds light on sources from the sixteenth century. These sources reveal the Oromo community's interest in the celebration through the writings of the Ethiopian monk *Abba Baḥrəy*.

In section 3, 'Der Stand der Forschung' (pp. 27–30), Merten critically examines previous studies by Emiru Walelign and others, addressing the narration of the celebration's origins and the historical roots that were overlooked by scholarly research.<sup>6</sup> Section 4 'Theoretische Grundlegung' (pp. 31–33) provides the theoretical framework of the study, based on J. Waardenburg's discussion of the importance of celebrations to the study of tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Section 5, 'Kurzer Abriss der Geschichte Äthiopiens', (pp. 35–44), is a historical introduction, in which Merten recounts a brief history of Ethiopia for non-specialists from the establishment of the Aksumite Kingdom and Ethiopia's conversion to Christianity through the efforts of the brothers Frumentius and Edesius to the modern era.

Section 6, 'Die Verehrung des Kreuzes in Äthiopien' (pp. 45–48), discusses the meaning of honouring the cross and the Ethiopian Church's philosophy regarding it. It explains how the cross symbolizes God's blessings and how priests carry it in all their rituals. The sanctification of the cross and the relics for the saints who performed miracles are traced back to biblical texts in both the New and Old Testaments. This veneration specifically applies to the wooden cross.

In section 7, 'Das Kreuzfest—Ablauf und Tatbestände', Merten explains the aspects of the celebration centered around the *dāmāra* (ደመራ), a large bonfire which is built on the feast day on 17 Mäskäräm in the Ethiopian calendar (27 September or 28 September in leap years). He sheds light on the popular beliefs that associate it with new beginnings. For example, believers jump over the ashes to attain blessings and mark themselves with the cross using the ashes

<sup>3</sup> Getatchew Haile, 'Praises of the Cross, *Wəddase Mäsqāl*, by *Abba Giyorgis of Gasəčča: ወደዚህ ስብሐት*', *Aethiopica*, 14 (2011), 47–120.

<sup>4</sup> C. Bosc-Tiessé and M.-L. Derat, 'Ṭefut: Māṣḥafā ṭefut' in S. Uhlig, ed., in cooperation with A. Bausi, *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 887a–888a.

<sup>5</sup> A. Caquot, 'Aperçu préliminaire sur le *Māṣḥafā Ṭefut* de Gechen Amba', *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 1 (1955), 89–108.

<sup>6</sup> Walelign Emiru, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church Festivals of The Finding of the True Cross and Epiphany: Temporal, Symbolic and Spatial Aspects; Anthropological Perspective* (Addis Ababa: n.pub, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> J. Waardenburg, *Religionen und Religion: Systematische Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft*, Sammlung Götschen, 2228 (Berlin–New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, 1986).

from the *dāmāra*. Merten's account is enriched by the input of his Ethiopian wife, Hirut Kebede-Merten, allowing him to provide more realistic details. He supplements this with on-the-ground photos from the actual celebration which makes his work very useful for those who engage in cultural anthropological field work. Furthermore, Merten distinguishes between the official and popular celebrations. He also justifies the heightened sanctity of the celebration at Amba Gəṣān Monastery, where a piece of the true cross is kept.

Section 8, 'Die Quellen zum Ursprung des Kreuzfestes' (pp. 61–123), serves as the backbone of the study. It elaborates on the history and origins of the feast from historical sources and books, reviewing similar traditions. Merten introduces us to the legend of Queen Helena and her son Constantine's discovery of the wooden cross. He highlights the conflicting accounts in the sources, attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea and Bishop Ambrose. In considering various traditions, Merten proposes a hypothesis that the cross was not discovered by Queen Helena. Additionally, he sheds light on the legends of the True Cross and presents their individual hypotheses; for instance, Judas Cyriacus is a Jerusalem bishop whose name is associated with Queen Helena (he assisted her in finding the True Cross) and the Protonike legend (its popular ancient Syriac version replaced Queen Helena with a first-century empress named Protonike, who was the wife of Emperor Claudius). The most famous version is discussed, along with the transformation of these myths as they spread to Europe, culminating in what is known as the *Golden Legend*. Merten attempts to trace the differences between the Coptic and Ethiopian Churches through historical sources, but due to the scarcity of these sources he resorts to speculative hypotheses in this section. Notably, he suggests that the Ethiopian Church's tradition was not directly influenced by the Coptic Church, despite some translated narratives from Coptic to Ethiopic such as Theodoxia.<sup>8</sup> The Coptic tradition lacks elements found in the Ethiopian celebration, such as fire, smoke, and ashes. Consequently, Merten proposes that the received tradition might have originated from the Syriac Church.<sup>9</sup> He further elaborates on this hypothesis in subsequent chapters.

Sections 9, 'Traditionsgeschichtliche Zuordnung' (pp. 125–157), 10, 'Das Datum des Kreuzfestes' (pp. 159–165), and 11 'Die Traditionsgeschichte des äthio-

<sup>8</sup> W. Witakowski, 'Theodoxia and her Finding of the Holy Cross: An Ethiopic Version of the Legend of the *Finding of the Holy Cross* in the *Miracles of Mary*', *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne*, 12/2 (1999), 253–269.

<sup>9</sup> For more further study on this topic, see C. G. Ghali. الطقوس والاحتفالات الدينية في عيدي الغطاس والصليب للأرثوذكس في مصر وإثيوبيا دراسة في الأنثروبولوجيا الثقافية (*aṭ-Ṭuqūs wa-l-iḥṭifālāt ad-dīniyya fi 'īday al-ḡiṭās wa-ṣ-ṣalīb li-l-'urṭūduks fi Maṣir wa-'Itṭyūbyā: Dirāsa fi-l-'anṭarūbūlūḡīya aṭ-ṭaqāfiyya*, 'The religious rituals and ceremonies of the Epiphany and the Cross feasts to the Orthodox in Egypt and Ethiopia: A study in Cultural Anthropology'), MA Thesis, Cairo University (2023).

pischen Kreuzfestes' (pp. 167–202) would have been better integrated into a unified historical chapter to avoid confusion and repetition. In these sections Merten emphasizes the efforts of Zār'a Ya'qob in venerating the cross and bringing a piece of the true cross to Ethiopia. This was done to enhance the symbolism of the cross within the kingdom. Especially later in the face of repeated invasions by *Imām* Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Ġāzī, also known as 'Aḥmād Graññ (1506–1543). Merten asserts that there were two pieces of the cross—one during Zār'a Ya'qob's reign and the other during the reign of Aṣe Dawit II. The latter used it to legitimize his kingdom. Regarding the origin of the celebration involving fire and ashes, Merten hypothesizes that saint *Abunä* Täklä Haymanot (d.1313) or one of his disciples brought this tradition from Jerusalem, motivated by the desire to spread Christianity in the Šäwa region.

Merten's work is excellent and would benefit only from reorganizing the content. I find it to be a valuable guide for anyone interested in tracing the origins of feasts. It relies on historical sources and oral traditions to understand how people practice their rituals and how some popular cultural practices have been transformed into unique and distinguishable religious ceremonies.

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MIKAEL MUEHLBAUER, *Bastions of the Cross: Medieval Rock-Cut Cruciform Churches of Tigray, Ethiopia*, Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 49 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2023). xv, 239 pp. Price: \$90.00. ISBN: 978-0-88402-497-2.

The author sets as his objective 'to model new possibilities for a more inclusive study of the Eastern Christian world' (p. 4). He does so through a detailed examination of three 'medieval' rock-hewn churches from Ethiopia's Tigray region: Abreha wäAšbəha, Wəqro Čerqos, and Mika'el Amba. He sets them in the context of surviving post-Aksumite architecture, on the one hand, and the revival of Late Antique–Early Byzantine aisled, cruciform churches, on the other. A further and welcome extension carries the subject via trade and traders into the Indian Ocean world.

Ethiopia, like Europe, has its own 'Dark Age', but one that extends over a longer period, from approximately the early seventh century to c.1200. The darkness, of course, reflects the extensive period for which material and especially textual evidence is deeply limited. The result has obliged researchers to evaluate and interpret that evidence broadly and then to focus on narrower points that can be fitted into a more meaningful chronology. To date, the time line of medieval Ethiopian church building, or carving as the case may be, is highly uncertain. Archaeological excavations and a few standing remains (not to mention the mint-