



Aethiopica 4 (2001)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

STEVEN KAPLAN

Review

MICHAEL A. KNIBB, *Translating the Bible: The Ethiopic Version of the Old Testament*

Aethiopica 4 (2001), 227–229

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

Reviews

Aksum und die Aksum-Archäologie haben seit den Reisen von Europäern im 16. Jahrhundert und den darauf folgenden Jahrhunderten, vor allem aber der Veröffentlichung der wissenschaftlichen Ergebnisse der Deutschen Aksum-Expedition nichts von ihrer Faszination verloren. So haben vor allem seit den 50er Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts wiederholt französische, britische, italienische und seit dem Jahr 2000 erneut deutsche Missionen⁷ für eine Aksum-Konjunktur in der Äthiopistik gesorgt, die bis dato ununterbrochen anhält⁸ und kontinuierlich wissenschaftliche Ergebnisse hervorbringt.

Das Working Paper liest sich wie ein Vorbericht auf die eigentlichen Untersuchungen, die offensichtlich geplant sind, und man darf auf die künftigen archäologischen Forschungen gespannt sein. Dem Team der italienischen und amerikanischen Archäologen ist für die weiteren Untersuchungen und Veröffentlichungen guter Erfolg zu wünschen.

Siegbert Uhlig

MICHAEL A. KNIBB, *Translating the Bible: The Ethiopic Version of the Old Testament* = The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1995. Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1999. Xii +145pp. Price £ 20,-.

Twenty-seven years after the publication of Edward Ullendorff's *Ethiopia and the Bible* (delivered as the Schweich Lectures of 1967), Michael Knibb returns to some of the same themes in his recent book on the Ethiopic Version of the Old Testament. Throughout the book KNIBB acknowledges his debt to Ullendorff and the book is, in fact, dedicated to the senior scholar who in the year 2000 celebrated his eightieth birthday.

In fact, the subjects of the Ullendorff and Knibb books overlap to only a limited extent. Ullendorff examined not only the Ethiopic (and other Ethiopian language) translations of the Bible, but also the general influence of the Bible and Hebraic elements on Ethiopian culture, most notably in the

⁷ Erste Ergebnisse der Kampagnen von Helmut Ziegert und Marlies Wendowski werden in den kommenden Jahren vorgelegt (s. auch die Beiträge 7–31 und 191–194 dieses Heftes).

⁸ S. die jüngste Veröffentlichung von DAVID W. PHILLIPSON, *Archaeology at Aksum, Ethiopia, 1993–7*, I–II, London 2000 (= *Memoirs of the British Institute in Eastern Africa* 17), die in Band 5 der Zeitschrift *Aethiopica* (2002) besprochen werden wird.

Solomon and Sheba legend. Knibb, in contrast, devotes over half his book to comparatively technical issues concerning the translation itself. Thus, the second chapter is devoted to a study of translation techniques (pp. 55–87) i.e., to what extent does the Ethiopic text provide a literal translation of the Greek. Knibb concludes that despite the fact that the Ethiopic translation is overwhelmingly a literal translation, there are also numerous instances of free or mistranslation. Indeed, as he discusses in the third chapter (87–112), the Ethiopic is not always consistent in its rendering of individual words.

Many of the examples cited are taken from Knibb's long anticipated critical edition of Ethiopic Ezekiel and are a testimony to his meticulous scholarship. The issues discussed may well be of greater interest to scholars of the Septuagint than to those of either Ethiopian history or literature. Nevertheless, researchers who work with texts translated from Arabic to Ethiopic would do well to consider the questions raised by Knibb and their relevance to other forms of translation literature.

The first chapter of the book (1–54) will be of the greatest interest to most readers of the journal. Knibb's work serves as a valuable reminder of the important work which has been done in recent decades in the cataloguing of Ethiopic manuscripts. Thanks to the work of Getatchew Haile, William Macomber, Veronika Six and the late Ernst Hammerschmidt scholars of the Ethiopic Bible have a far wider range of manuscripts to work on than ever before. For the most part, these additional manuscripts have served to strengthen the case for an original Greek Vorlage and a later revision on the basis of a Syriac-based Arabic text. Knibb, moreover, presents in considerable detail the evidence that, *pace* Ullendorff, a further revision was made on the basis of the Hebrew in the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

All of this will be welcomed by specialists and generalists alike. For the evidence is presented in a clear non-technical matter. Knibb also offers an important critique of the widely accepted view that Syriac-speaking monks played a major role in the translation of the Bible. In the context, it is somewhat strange to note that Knibb dismisses rather cavalierly the suggestion made by both Paolo Marrassini and Getatchew Haile that the translators must have been Ethiopians.¹ The stature of both these scholars would

¹ Getatchew Haile, Highlighting Traditional Ethiopian Literature, in Tadesse Adera and Ali Jumale Ahmed, eds., *Silence is Not Golden*, Lawrenceville 1995, 44–45; Paolo Marrassini, Some considerations on the problem of 'Syriac influences' on Aksumite Ethiopia, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 23, 1990, 35–46.

Reviews

seem to demand that any analysis they offer be treated with the utmost seriousness. Moreover, general studies of the translation of the Bible have pointed out the decisive role played by local Christians. Could foreign missionaries, no matter how linguistically skilled, have mastered Ethiopic sufficiently to produce independent translations? Do not the misunderstandings of Greek point to local more than foreign translators?

It is impossible to conclude this review without a word about the technical merits and deficiencies of this work. By double-spacing both the text and footnotes the editors and publishers have produced a work which is easy to read and clearly presented. It is a shame that it is marred with typographical errors, which appear sometimes two to a page throughout the text. Consider, for example, the penultimate sentence of the book: "This kind of instinctive approach could lead to casualness, it (sic) not carelessness, and to be the cause of renderings that are inadequate". Inconsistency and casualness are apparently not characteristics limited to the translators of the Ethiopic version of the Old Testament.

Steven Kaplan

MIGUEL ANGEL GARCÍA, *Ethiopian Biblical Commentaries on the Prophet Micah* = Aethiopistische Forschungen Bd. 52. Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden 1999. viii, 343 pp. DM 168,-. ISBN 3-447-04199-4.

For the international academic world, the study of Ethiopian Bible commentaries is a field in its infancy. In fact, the entire bibliography of publications in this area can be listed on one page. First, there was the groundbreaking work of the late ROGER W. COWLEY who can be credited with inspiring this area of research. In addition to some preliminary articles, he published two books, *The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of St. John in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church* = Oriental Publications 33 (Cambridge 1983) and *Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation* = Oriental Publications 38 (Cambridge 1988), before his untimely death. Since then, a few other articles have appeared and two further book-length studies: KIRSTEN PEDERSEN's *Traditional Ethiopian Exegesis of the Book of Psalms* = Aethiopistische Forschungen 36 (Wiesbaden 1995) and WOLDE TENSAE ANDEBERHAN's *Commentari Etiopici sul Libro del Profeta Osea* = Aethiopistische Forschungen 40 (Wiesbaden 1994). GARCÍA's 1996 article