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The Apocryphal Legitimation of a “Solomonic” Dynasty in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* – A Reappraisal*

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1. The Queen of Ethiopia and Her only Son Bāynä Ləḥkəm

The ክብረ ፡ ነገሥት ፡¹ is a great apocryphal fresco that has the narrative appearance of a long discourse pronounced by Gregory the Illuminator – erroneously identified with Gregory Thaumaturgus – in front of the 318 orthodox Fathers on the occasion of the Council of Nicaea, in 325 CE.² In his sermon, the apostle of Armenia relates the revelations he received³ and the meditations he had during his prolonged imprisonment for “fifteen years” (ch. 2) in the

* A preliminary version of this study was presented at the conference “The Armenian Apocalyptic Tradition: A Comparative Perspective”, organized by the Armenian Studies Program, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, October 16–19, 2008, and will be published in the proceedings, BARDAKJIAN – LA PORTA forthcoming. I would like to seize this opportunity to thank once again Kevork Bardakjian for inviting me to participate in that highly stimulating, interdisciplinary conference. My gratitude also goes to Alessandro Bausi, Rajiv Bhola, Robert M. Edwards, and Geoffrey Greatrex for their insightful comments and suggestions.

¹ Excellent overviews of the research are provided by MARRASSINI 2007; 2008: 800–810; BAUSI forthcoming. For an up-to-date bibliography, see BAUSI 2012: lvi–lix. The Ethiopic (Gəʿəz) text has been critically edited by BEZOLD 1905. Recently, no less than six new translations – into French (COLIN 2002 [reviewed by KROPP 2003; LOUISIER 2003; MARRASSINI 2008: 798ff.]; MAHLER 2007; BEYLOT 2008 [reviewed by KROPP 2008; BAUSI 2009; RICHELLE 2009]), Amharic (SERGEW GELAW 2007/08 [briefly presented by TEDROS ABRAHA 2009: 456f.]), Italian (RAINERI 2008 [reviewed by LOUISIER 2008; BIASIO – PRIESS 2010]), and Hebrew (HACOHEN 2009) – have been published (for a global review of four of them, see WION 2009), as well as a new English version of the too often neglected Pedro Páez’s Portuguese translation of chapters 22–87 (BOAVIDA – PENNEC – RAMOS 2011: 80–92; an older version is reprinted in MUNRO-HAY 2005a: 209–19), the first substantial, albeit not integral, translation of the core of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* into a modern European language ever done. North American readers are probably more familiar with the English translation of BUDGE 1922, constantly reprinted in spite of its notorious flaws. In the present essay, unless otherwise stated, the translations from ancient languages are my own.

² Actually, as Jean-Pierre Mahé aptly reminds us, “it was not Gregory who came to Nicaea, but his son and successor Aristakes” (quoted by BEYLOT 2011: 213).

³ “The Lord showed this to me (when I was) in the pit” (ch. 113).

“deep pit” (the famous Khor Virap) about the **ክብር** ፣, the “glory” or, more precisely, the “nobility” of the royal families of the world.⁴ In Gregory’s opinion, all of the royal dynasties descend without exception from Shem, Noah’s eldest son, “for by the will of the Lord all the kingship of the world was given to the offspring of Shem, and servitude to the offspring of Ham, and hard labor (**ጉዕድ** ፣)⁵ to the offspring of Japhet” (ch. 73). However, in the case of the kings of Rome (i.e., Constantinople) and Ethiopia, they are directly linked to the wisest and most illustrious of all the biblical suzerains, King Solomon. Actually, Adrami, Solomon’s youngest son, married the daughter of Baṭṭāsor, the king of Rome, thus taking over his realm (chs. 72f.). While Bāynā Ləḥkəm (i.e., Ibn al-Ḥakīm, which means “Son of the wise man” in Arabic), Solomon’s eldest son, born from his love affair with Queen Makədda (probably, “the Macedonian lady”),⁶ inherited Ethiopia, the kingdom of her mother, with the royal name of David (ch. 39).⁷

The main body of the work is thus devoted to the meeting of Makədda and Solomon and the various adventures of their son Bāynā Ləḥkəm, particularly how the latter was able to involuntarily bring back to Ethiopia, thanks to the ruse of the priest Azariah, the holy Zion, the **ታቦት** ፣, the “tabernacle” or “ark” containing “the Law of God” (i.e., the two tablets on

⁴ “When I was in the pit, I meditated about this matter and about the madness of the king of Armenia, and I said, ‘What is, in my understanding, their greatness? Is it in the multitude of soldiers, or in the splendor (**ክብር** ፣) of worldly possessions, or in the multitude of the cities they rule?’ Having meditated about this at each time left over by my prayer, my thought was troubling me again ...” (ch. 2); compare KROPP 1996.

⁵ For the meaning of this term, see BEZOLD 1905: xxxii and LESLAU 1987: 175, who rightly questions the derivation suggested by DILLMANN 1865: 1186 from the Greek γοητεία, “magic, art of casting spell”.

⁶ On the figure of Makədda, see now FIACCADORI – BALICKA-WITAKOWSKA 2007; too aleatory are the suggestions made by Robert Beylot of a derivation of the queen’s name from (1) the Aramaic Malkath Sheba (BEYLOT 2004: 78) or (2) the Old Nubian *koud(i)*, “wife, second wife, concubine” (BEYLOT 2008: 122). In any case, according to SATZINGER 2004: 532f., the element *-kouda* found in Nubian personal names would mean “servant” (e.g., Mar[i]ankouda, “Servant of Mary”).

⁷ One should note, with GETATCHEW HAILE 2009: 129f., that in the *Kəbrä nägäšt*, even if Makədda is explicitly identified with the Queen of the South in ch. 21, she is always described as the queen of Ethiopia, not of Sheba. In the same vein, as KROPP 2008: 269 and BAUSI 2009: 266 correctly point out, Bāynā Ləḥkəm/David is never called Mənilək, as is generally the case in Ethiopian literature. With this in mind, a more appropriate modern title for the *Kəbrä nägäšt* would be *The Queen of Ethiopia and Her only Son Bāynā Ləḥkəm*.

which the ten commandments were inscribed).⁸ The transfer of those Mosaic relics to Ethiopia would eventually provoke a dramatic shift of the divine favour from Jerusalem to Aksum, from the first to the second Zion – the perfect story on which to base all kinds of religious and political claims. According to its colophon, this was certainly the case at the time when the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* was rediscovered in Arabic⁹ and translated/edited into Ethiopic by the “poor” Yəšəḥaq, to be identified with the *nəburä əd* – the highest ecclesiastic dignitary in the city of Aksum – of the same name, in the days of “the righteous governor Yaʿəbikä Əgziʿ, loved by the Lord”, at the beginning of the reign of ʿAmdä Şəyon (1314–1344), or more exactly, as Carlo Conti Rossini argued, between 1314 and 1321/22, when Yaʿəbikä Əgziʿ rebelled against the emperor.¹⁰ In his recent monograph on the legend of the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopia, the late Stuart Munro-Hay suggested as a mere possibility that Yəšəḥaq was perhaps “inflating the Ethiopian monarchy in support of the aspirations of Yaʿəbikä Əgzi himself”.¹¹ It is true that the powerful governor of ʿƏndārta, in northern Təgray, was probably a very ambitious person,¹² but such cynical considerations about the ever-changing latitudes of political loyalties should not prevent us from acknowledging the basic fact that, in David Hubbard’s words, “The K[e]bra[N]gäšt was written to justify the claims of the

⁸On the Ethiopian *tabot* (or “altar tablet”), its Coptic origins, and its late identification with the Ark of the Covenant, see now MUNRO-HAY 2006: 69–130 and 173–195.

⁹On the identity of the mysterious Abalʿez and Abalfarag, to whom Yəšəḥaq attributes the translation of the Coptic original text into Arabic, see MUNRO-HAY 2004.

¹⁰CONTI ROSSINI 1925: 506–508; compare TADDESSE TAMRAT 1972: 72–74.

¹¹MUNRO-HAY 2005a: 86, as well as 2001: 47; compare MARRASSINI 2008: 800f. In the same monograph Munro-Hay seems to suggest that, similarly to what happened in the case of a great number of other Ethiopian literary texts, the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* also underwent a long and complex process of editing and rewriting until the publication of what would become its *textus receptus*, at the end of the 16th or the beginning of the 17th century (MUNRO-HAY 2005a: 199–206). However, even if we cannot exclude such a possibility, based on my codicological and palaeographic examination in July 2008 of the famous Éthiopien 5 (formerly 94) of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, the most ancient known manuscript of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* (inserted here, on foll. 108^r–154^v, after 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles, as the last of the biblical books relating the stories of the kings of Israel), I can confirm that this codex was copied approximately between 1450 and 1500. A 15th-century date was also suggested by GRÉBAUT 1930 and, more recently, Ted M. Erho, for whom “the latter portion of the period is most probable” (email of January 4, 2011). This means that the official edition of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* was released, at least, one century prior to the date proposed by Munro-Hay.

¹²After all, the name Yaʿəbikä Əgziʿ means “May the Lord exalt you”.

so-called Solomonid dynasty founded by Yekun[n]o Amlak over against those of the Zagwé family who had held sway for well over a century”.¹³

The major ideological aim of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* is thus evident: to establish the moral authority of the new royal dynasty founded by Yəkunno Amlak (1270–1285) by presenting the arrival to power of the new southern, Amharic-speaking military leaders not as a revolution but as a timely restoration after centuries of trouble and usurpation.¹⁴ Medieval Ethiopian society was a traditional one, accustomed to interpreting collective realities as complex as interethnic and international relations through the filter of biblical stories and genealogies. Other newcomers in different cultural contexts would claim to belong to the family of the Prophet or to be the last legitimate heirs of the Roman Empire. Ethiopian clerics chose to take advantage of the mythic Queen of Sheba so vividly depicted in 1 Kings 10: 1–13 and 2 Chronicles 9: 1–12.¹⁵ The rulers of the late antique kingdom of Aksum had already tried to extend their influence over their South Arabian neighbours, the most important of those interventions being the second military expedition of King Kaleb/ʿEllä Ašbəḥa in 525 CE¹⁶ against his Ḥimyaritic rival Yūsuf Asʿar Yaṭʿar,¹⁷ who converted to Judaism and was guilty of having exterminated the Christian inhabitants of the Naḡrān oasis. Moreover, in their official inscriptions, which were often carved in at least two languages (Ethiopic and Greek) and no less than three alphabets (Ethiopic, South Arabic, and Greek), it was customary for the kings of Aksum to substantiate their imperialistic claims through the addition of “king of [...] Ḥimyar, Raydan, Sheba” (i.e., of Yemen and the royal palace, *Ḍū-Raydān*, of its cap-

¹³ HUBBARD 1956: 360; see, e.g., CRUMMEY 2004: 192f. or MARCUS 2002: 17ff.

¹⁴ On the establishment and the consolidation of this new regime and its religious policies, see especially TADDESSE TAMRAT 1972 and DERAT 2003.

¹⁵ On the historical background (if any) of these biblical stories, see KITCHEN 1997; LEMAIRE 2002; PURY 2003, as well as the bibliography quoted by MARRASSINI 2008: 802ff.

¹⁶ The second and decisive Ethiopian campaign, and the killing of the Ḥimyaritic king are mentioned in the inscription *CIH* 621 = *RÉS* 2633 dated to February 640 of the Ḥimyaritic era, corresponding to 525 or 531 CE. The first date was convincingly defended by the Italian *éthiopisant* Paolo Marrassini (see MARRASSINI 1979: 179–186 and 190–196; 2011: 17–27), while the second has the favour of the French *sud-arabisant* Christian Robin, for whom Yūsuf’s death should have occurred in 530 or 529 CE (see BEAUCAMP – BRIQUEL-CHATONNET – ROBIN 1999–2000: 36f. and 68ff.; compare GAJDA 2009: 255–270). For an up-to-date presentation of the documentation and the relevant bibliography, see BAUSI 2006a; 2010. For an overview of the 6th-century conflicts between Aksum and Ḥimyar, see FIACCADORI 2006; NEBES 2008; GAJDA 2009: 73–156; HATKE 2011; BOWERSOCK 2012: 1–28 and 79–82; 2013.

¹⁷ Called Finḥas in the Arabic and Ethiopic versions of the *Martyrdom of Arethas* and in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* (ch. 117).

ital city, Zafär) to their Ethiopian royal titles.¹⁸ Therefore, it is not too difficult to imagine that for Ethiopian priests and monks of the Middle Ages the famous Queen of Sheba was but an Ethiopian queen of old.

Thanks to such a bold solicitation of the Israelite and Sabeian legacies, Yəshāq and his team of translators/editors were able to establish the perfect pedigree of pre-Christian Ethiopia, a nation that, under the leadership of a Solomonic dynasty, a Judean aristocracy, and a zadokite and levitical priesthood, had already converted to monotheism and adopted, according to the theologian Giyorgis of Sägla (ca. 1365–1425), an uncontaminated version of the Old Testament that would preserve a certain number of key passages and books in spite of their subsequent exclusion from the Jewish Scriptures.¹⁹ In

¹⁸ See, e.g., the first lines of the Ethiopic inscription celebrating king ‘Ezana’s campaign against the Šarane: “[E]zana, son of Ella Amida, Bisi Halen, king of Aksum, Hīmyar, Raydan, Saba, Salhin, Šiyamo, Beja and of Kasu, son of the invincible Mahrem”; or King Kaleb’s Ethiopic inscription in South Arabic script relating a campaign against the Agʿezat and the Hasat: “Kaleb, Ella Ašbeḥa, son of Tazena, Beʿese LZN, king of Aksum, Hīmyar, Raydan, Saba, Salhen, and of the High Country and Yamanat, and the Coastal Plain and Hadramawt and of all their Arabs, and the Beja, Noba, Kasu, Siyamo and DRBT ... of the land ATFY (?), servant of Christ, who is not defeated by the enemy”, in Munro-Hay’s translation (MUNRO-HAY 1991: 227 and 230). In this connection, the same author rightly observes that “the general outline of the majority of the inscriptional titularies seems to prescribe Aksum, Arabia and Africa in that order”, with the exception of Kaleb’s “more elaborate Arabian claims” (MUNRO-HAY 1991: 159). The old Ethiopic inscriptions have been conveniently collected and (re)published by BERNAND – DREWES – SCHNEIDER 1991–2000: nn. 185–189, 191f., 270f. and 286.

¹⁹ In the *Mäšḥafä məšṭir*, or “Book of the mystery”, an encyclopedic catalogue and refutation of all known heresies written in 1423/4, Giyorgis claims: “Concerning the books of the Old (Testament), they have been translated from Hebrew into Gəʿəz in the days of the Queen of the South who visited Solomon. Therefore, the interpretation of the prophetic books found in the land of the Agʿazi (ጎሳሪ ፡ አግዳዚ ፣ i.e., Ethiopia) was faithful, because they had adopted the Jewish Law before the birth of Christ. If they had translated them after the birth of Christ, the crucifiers would have changed the true word into a testimony of falseness. [...] Concerning the books of the New (Testament) of our country of Ethiopia, they have been translated from Roman (ፎግጆስ፡ ፣ i.e., Byzantine Greek) into Gəʿəz before the appearance of Nestorius’s faith and before the creation of Leon’s faith, before the meeting of the council of dogs, i.e., the bishops of Chalcedon. [...] The reception of the books of the Old (Testament) goes back to the time when the Queen of the South came from Jerusalem, while the reception of the books of the New (Testament) goes back to the time when the Saints came from Rome (i.e., the Byzantine empire)”. For this highly ideological passage, initially translated by CONTI ROSSINI 1948: 29f., see the critical edition of YAQOB BEYENE 1990–1993, 1, 124ff. and 2, 75f. Concerning the very problematic hypothesis of the Nine Saints and other late antique missionaries as Monophysite refugees from

doing so, the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* played a major role in the shaping of the special Christian identity of Ethiopian society, in the creation of the biblical flavour that permeates every aspect of Ethiopian daily life and culture that the late Edward Ullendorff has romantically caught in the best pages of his famous *Ethiopia and the Bible* or in some of the autobiographical sketches of *The Two Zions: Reminiscences of Jerusalem and Ethiopia*.²⁰

2. An “orthodox” rejoinder to the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*

Obviously, to acknowledge that the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* was so influential in establishing the true Israelite lineage of medieval Ethiopia is one thing, but to maintain that the Jewish elements detected by Ullendorff in Ethiopian culture were as ancient and of Jewish origin as he tried to demonstrate, and not the result of a Christian desire to imitate the Old Testament, is another.²¹ Actually, during the last 20 years a new generation of *éthiopisants* has expended a lot of energy demythologizing the foundational narratives and discourses shared, to a certain extent, by traditional Ethiopian culture and previous Western scholarship. One could think of Bertrand Hirsch and François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar’s study of the ideological reemployment

Syria and eventual translators of the Bible into Ethiopic, see MARRASSINI 1990; 1999; BRAKMANN 1994: 125–136; KNIBB 1999: 13–17 and 23–29; BAUSI 2003b; MUNRO-HAY 2005b: 156–162; BRITA 2010: 29–40; PIOVANELLI 2010.

²⁰ ULLENDORFF 1968 (on the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, 74–79 and 139–143); 1988; see the insightful comments of MUNRO-HAY 2006: 65–68 and 173, whose conclusions are worth citing: “[A]mong all the evidence we have from pre-Aksumite D’amat and from Aksum itself, there is nothing that offers any support at all for such traits [i.e., ‘Jewish’ elements and customs]. Such evidence, derived from primary sources like archaeology, inscriptional material, other lesser finds, coins, and secondary historical documentation whether Ge’ez or foreign, offers us a clear picture of South Arabian Judaizing, but not a single straw to grasp for the Ethiopian case. Ethiopia was pagan until the fourth century AD, then gradually became Christian. *Its large-scale Judaization in early times is a chimera. It never existed outside the pages of the Kebra Nagast and its later derivatives*” (68, emphasis added). The situation was, of course, quite different – as shown especially by ROBIN 2003; 2004 – on the other shores of the Red Sea.

²¹ One would especially think of Ullendorff’s attempt to show that the Ethiopian Scriptures, including *1 Enoch* and other Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, were translated not only from the Greek Septuagint, but also from the Hebrew and Aramaic originals (ULLENDORFF 1968: 55–62), a thesis to which even his pupil Michael A. Knibb is no longer subscribing (see his negative conclusions in KNIBB 1999: 35 and 40). That the Ethiopic version of *1 Enoch* was exclusively translated from the Greek has been demonstrated by PIOVANELLI 1987 and VANDERKAM 1987. It is then even more surprising that non-specialists of Ethiopian studies still believe that “the *Vorlage* of [the Ethiopic] version is not clear” (thus ARCARI 2005: 60).

of the Aksumite remains by medieval and modern Ethiopian emperors;²² of Stuart Munro-Hay’s sophisticated analysis of the development of the legend of the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopia;²³ of Steven Kaplan’s deconstruction of the Israelite origins of the Betä ʿƏsraʾel (Falaša);²⁴ or of Paolo Marrassini’s text-critical, literary, and contextual rereading of the major texts of Ethiopian medieval literature,²⁵ just to mention a few seminal works of this new wave of Ethiopian studies and to remain close to the questions raised by the study of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*. These and other critical inquiries have also dramatically changed the way we now look at the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* as a meaningful element in the elaboration of a new cultural identity for an emerging nation.

The true turning point of the research on the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* was the discovery that this relatively late Ethiopian epic can be read as the mirror story of the much earlier *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, written in Syriac at the end of the 7th century.²⁶ The aim of such an extremely popular and influential apocalyptic text was to locate the victorious Muslim offensive against the Byzantine heirs of the Roman Empire within the eschatological map of the four world empires originally found in the Book of Daniel.²⁷ Interestingly enough, in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* the kings of Rome and Ethiopia are distant relatives sharing a common ancestor who is, in this case, not Solomon, but Kūshyat, “the Nubian/Ethiopian” princess, daughter of King Pīl and mother of Alexander the Great (chs. 8f.). For this reason, what David prophesized in Psalm 68 (67):31 (literally, “Cush/Ethiopia will stretch out her hands to God”, but in the Syriac version of the Peshitta, “Kūsh will surrender to God”) refers to the Greek (i.e., Byzantine) kingdom that holds the Holy Cross of Christ in Jerusalem (ch. 9).²⁸ At the beginning of the 7th millennium,

²² HIRSCH – FAUVELLE-AYMAR 2001 (on the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, 64ff.).

²³ See above, n. 11.

²⁴ KAPLAN 1990; 1992; also see SHELEMAY 1986; QUIRIN 1992.

²⁵ Especially important for the historical background of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* is his critical edition of the *Chronicle of ʿAmdä Šəyon*, MARRASSINI 1993 (to be compared to KROPP 1994).

²⁶ The original Syriac text has been republished by MARTÍNEZ 1985: 2–121; SUERMANN 1985: 34–85; REININK 1993, and translated into English by ALEXANDER 1985: 36–51; MARTÍNEZ 1985: 122–154; PALMER – BROCK – HOYLAND 1993: 222–242. The Greek and Latin versions have been published by AERTS – KORTEKAAS 1998.

²⁷ See, in general, KOCH 1997; more specifically, MARTÍNEZ 1987.

²⁸ “Alas, many brothers among the children of the Church have thought that the blessed David made this statement about the kingdom of the Kūshites. However, those who thought these things were mistaken. It concerns the kingdom of the Greeks, which is from the lineage of Kūshat, and holds what was erected in the center, that is, the Holy Cross. It was about it that the blessed David said: ‘Kush will surrender to God’. There is not, therefore, a nation or kingdom under the heavens that could overcome the kingdom of the

God will allow the sons of Ishmael to “come out from the desert of Yathrib” and invade the kingdom of the Christians as a terrible punishment for their iniquities and sins (ch. 11). After many tribulations, a king of the Greeks will suddenly appear and attack the Muslims “from the sea of the Kūshites” (ch. 13). He will be able to overthrow their power and restore peace and joy on earth, at least until the opening of the gates of the North and the arrival of the barbarous peoples that Alexander had segregated there (ibid.). Finally, as soon as the Antichrist is revealed in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, the last Greek king will put his crown on the top of the Holy Cross on Golgotha and “hand over the kingdom to God the Father”, thus fulfilling the prophecies of David and Daniel as a necessary precondition to the second coming of Christ (ch. 14).²⁹

To the best of my knowledge, the first scholar to argue for a literary relation between the two texts was Irfan Shahîd, who suggested that the author of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* had made use of the Coptic original of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* mentioned in its colophon, a hypothetical document that Shahîd dates to the 6th century.³⁰ However, Francisco Javier Martínez³¹ and the late André Caquot³² were able to point out that, actually, in many cases the Ethiopian clerics who wrote down the *Kəbrä nägäšt* seemed to be reacting to the eschatological scenario developed by the author of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*. A character called Dəmatyos or Dəmatewos (i.e., Domitius, clearly a deformation of Methodius), patriarch of Rome (chs. 19 and 117) or Antioch (ch. 94), is even credited in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* with having “found in the Church of (Saint) Sophia among the books and the royal treasures a book (which states) that all the kingship of the world (belongs) to the king of Rome and the king of Ethiopia” (ch. 19), thus vali-

Christians, as long as it takes refuge in the living Cross, which was set up in the middle of the earth and upholds the heights and the depths” (translated by MARTÍNEZ 1985: 136).

²⁹ “And the saying of the blessed David, which he prophesied about the end of time saying, ‘Kūsh will surrender to God,’ will be fulfilled, because the one who will surrender to God is the son of Kūshat, daughter of Pil, king of the Kūshites. And as soon as the Holy Cross is taken up to heaven, the king of the Greeks will deliver his soul to his Creator, and then all sovereignty, authority and power will be abolished” (translated by MARTÍNEZ 1985: 152f.).

³⁰ SHAHĪD 1976: 174ff. (on the relation with the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*); 1979: 26, 63f. and 66 (on the *Kəbrä nägäšt* as a 6th-century historical document); 1989: 403f. The similarities between the two texts (as, for example, the role of Makədda in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* and that of Kūshyat in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*) have been noticed, among others, by VASILIEV 1950: 299ff. and ALEXANDER 1973; see also KRIVOV 1988.

³¹ MARTÍNEZ 1990.

³² CAQUOT 1983; 1990; 1994.

dating the assertions of Gregory the Illuminator.³³ Moreover, the evidence provided by late Coptic and early Arabic apocalyptic texts (such as the *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamun*, the *Letter of Pisentius of Koptos*, and the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius*) studied by Martínez shows that the reaction against the theses defended in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* had already begun in Abbasid and Fatimid Egypt, where the local Christians had chosen to make the king of Ethiopia the eschatological champion of their orthodox (Miaphysite) faith.³⁴

3. Preserving and appropriating the memories of Aksumite splendor

Concerning the international prestige of the Ethiopian monarch and the purity of his faith, Yəšəḥaq and his collaborators chose to conclude their work on a very strong note. The last two chapters of the *Kəbrä nāgäšt* provide the prophetic announcement – needless to say, *ex eventu* – of King Kaleb’s glorious achievements in South Arabia. “For a little while, after this time the Jews will rebel against (Christian) believers in Nağrān and in Armenia and this will happen by the will of the Lord in order to destroy them”, as Gregory tells the Three Hundred Eighteen Fathers in Nicaea (ch. 116), but “the king of Rome, the king of Ethiopia, and the patriarch of Alexandria will be commissioned to destroy them [...]; they will make war to fight the enemies of the Lord, the Jews, and to destroy them, the king of Rome (to destroy) ʾEnya (?), and the king of Ethiopia (to destroy) Finḥas” (ch. 117), “for Armenia is a province of Rome and Nağrān is a province of Ethiopia” (ch. 116). This passage offers an intriguing and so far mysterious synchronism between an otherwise unknown Jewish insurrection in Armenia³⁵ and the Ḥimyaritic effort to be rid not necessarily of the Christians themselves, but more likely of the Ethiopian political influence.

Alessandro Bausi, the new editor of the Ethiopic version of the *Martyrdom of Arethas*, has recently argued that the main source for the events of

³³ MARTÍNEZ 1990: 258; CAQUOT 1990: 62f. and 65; 1994: 334f.; compare BEYLOT 2002: 194–198; 2008: 97–105; RICHELLE 2012: 47–51. In this context, it does not matter too much if the works for the construction of the Hagia Sophia had just begun in 325 CE.

³⁴ Needless to say, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* deeply resonates with many other narrative attempts to incorporate the rise of Islam into Jewish, Christian, and even Muslim eschatological perspectives. See the apocalyptic texts studied by ALEXANDER 1985; COOK 2002; REEVES 2005.

³⁵ I am obviously pleased to leave the question of the historicity of this information – not to mention the identity of the mysterious ʾEnya that puzzled VASILIEV 1950: 301, n. 81; according to SHAHĪD 1989: 404, this would be “a mutilated form of ‘Anastasius’”, while BEYLOT 2008: 96f. and 394 suggests a possible reference to the Avars identified here with the Huns – in the hands of our colleagues *arménisants*.

Naḡrān that the translators/editors of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* had at their disposal was but the Ethiopic version of the *Martyrdom of Arethas* itself.³⁶ This is certainly true for the names of the Ḥimyaritic king (Finḡas) and the Roman and Ethiopian emperors (Justin I and Kaleb); for the mention of the mediation of the patriarch of Alexandria (correctly identified with Timothy III in the *Martyrdom of Arethas*); for the rather generic description of the activities carried out by the winners (killing the Jews, devastating the land, and building churches); and finally, for Kaleb's decision to renounce the throne and end his life in a monastery. However, there are also other relevant narrative features that are completely absent from the *Martyrdom of Arethas* and whose presence should receive a different explanation. Thus, for example, the episode of the meeting of the two kings of Rome and Ethiopia in Jerusalem in order to "establish the faith" – obviously the only orthodox one from the point of view of Yəṣḡaq and his friends – and "be in agreement" about it, as well as to "divide between them the earth from the half of Jerusalem" and to jointly adopt the title of "king of Ethiopia" (ch. 117), does not stem from the *Martyrdom of Arethas*, but from the Copto-Arabic apocalyptic responses to the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* discussed above.³⁷

Finally, the most original feature of the *Kəbrä nägäšt*'s eschatological prophecy is the strange tale of the two brothers ʿƏsraʿel and Gəbrä Məsqäl (ch. 117). The first, Kaleb's eldest son, will apparently remain in Jerusalem in the company of the son of the Roman emperor, while the second, Kaleb's youngest son, will reign over Ethiopia. "But when the king of Naḡrān, Kaleb's

³⁶ In BAUSI – GORI 2006: 106; on a newly discovered Ethiopic version of the *Martyrdom of Arethas*, see now BAUSI 2010: 249ff.

³⁷ See MARTÍNEZ 1990: 249–56; in his opinion, "[t]he whole motif of the two Christian kings constitute in a certain sense a Monophysite exegesis of P[seudo-]M[ethodius]. [...] Behind the motif of the two kings in the Egyptian apocalypses there is a polemical point which is best understood as a response to Melkite propaganda, an instrument of which was perhaps P[seudo-]M[ethodius]. The reaction pays homage to the influence of such propaganda" (MARTÍNEZ 1990: 257). One should note that Giyorgis of Sägla has inserted a version of such an eschatological meeting attributed to *abba* Sinoda (i.e., Shenute), "the chief of the monks and the father of the anchorites (i.e., the archimandrite)", in his *Məṣḡafä məṣṡir*; see YAQOB BEYENE 1990–1993, 1, 125–129 and 2, 75ff. (where all the verbal forms translated in the imperfect should be turned into the future tense). The source summarized here by Giyorgis – already correctly identified by ZOTENBERG 1877: 248 – is an Ethiopic apocalyptic text called *The Ten Visions of Shenute*, published by GROHMANN 1913–1914 and recently restudied by GRYPEOU 2007. DERAT 2012 has now reexamined the impact of the Copto-Arabic apocalypses, especially *The Ten Visions of Shenute*, on Ethiopian political thought, giving rise to the idea of a special election of the Ethiopian orthodox kingdom.

(eldest) son, will have been told (about his father’s abdication), he will come in order to reign over Zion (i.e., Ethiopia)”, according to Gregory. The two brothers “will meet together at the strait of the Southern Sea (ባሕረ ፣ ሊባ ፣)³⁸ and will fight together”. However, God will hear their prayers and will divide between them the most precious heritage of the Solomonic lineage of the Ethiopian kings. Gäbrä Mäsqäl will “take Zion and will reign openly upon the throne of his father”, while ʾƏsraʾel will “choose the chariot and will reign secretly; he will not be visible and (God) will send him to all those who have transgressed the commandment of the Lord”. This would be a rather perplexing conclusion to the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, unless we accept that behind the curtain of this apocalyptic story lies a transposition of the “fratricidal” conflicts for the control of South Arabia that opposed, after 531 CE, the king of Aksum and his former general Abraha.³⁹ Kaleb’s fruitless campaigns were the swansong of Aksumite imperialistic policy.⁴⁰ As for Abraha’s probable attempt to recreate an independent Ḥimyaritic state, it was annihilated by the Persian intervention in the 570s.

If this explanation is true or simply plausible, we have to acknowledge that the memories of the late antique Aksumite splendor that survived among Egyptian and Ethiopian medieval clerics were not only rare, but also extremely confused – a confusion that is perfectly understandable after five to six centuries of absence of strong political power on the highlands of Ethiopia. Thus, in the period between the disintegration of a late antique, relatively urbanized society and the appearance of the first kernel of a medieval, “feudal” state, in the first half of the 12th century, ruled by the Zagʿwe kings (ca. 1137–1270), a dynasty of Cushitic (Agaw) origin,⁴¹ as a direct conse-

³⁸ A probable reference to the strait of Bab el-Mandeb – an interpretation already suggested by BEZOLD 1905: 137, n. 8, that makes, in any case, better sense than “the North-western Sea” (BEYLOT 2008: 381) or “the Sea of Libā” (BUDGE 1922: 227).

³⁹ Abraha took power after April/September 531 CE (the date of Justinian’s embassy to Kaleb and Sumyafaʿ Ašwaʿ according to Procopius of Caesarea, *Wars of Justinian I*, 20.9–11) and held it until, depending on the chronology we adopt (see above, n. 16), at least November 552 or 558 CE (date of the inscription Ja 547+544+546+545); see GAJDA 2009: 112ff. and 116ff.

⁴⁰ Munro-Hay’s evaluation of Kaleb’s Ḥimyaritic wars – “Glorious though Kaleb’s re-establishment of the Christian faith in the Yemen seemed to contemporary (and later) ecclesiastical historians, it was Aksum’s swan-song as a great power in the region. The real result may well have been quite the opposite; a weakening of Aksumite authority, over-expenditure in money and man-power, and a loss of prestige. The venture was, it seems, too ambitious for the times, and did Aksum nothing but harm in the long run” (MUNRO-HAY 1991: 88) – this applies also to his efforts to restore Ethiopian authority in South Arabia.

⁴¹ See, in general, HELDMAN 1993; PHILLIPSON 2012: 227–243.

quence of the loss of any form of royal and, probably, even episcopal archives, the monastic institutions of Eritrea and Təgray were the only places where some oral traditions and historical records of the Ethiopian past were kept.⁴² In this context, hagiographic interests were going to shape both the content and the form of the documents – aetiological stories, genealogies and lives of the monastic founders, and land grants – in which local holy men and women were associated with prestigious figures of old.⁴³ The best illustration of this is provided by the oblivion of the historical identities of King ʿEzana and his brother Šʿazana (SʿZN[H]), who were converted to Christianity by the Tyrian traveller Frumentius in the 340s and were subsequently identified, in Ethiopian medieval hagiographic traditions, with the legendary kings Abrəha and Aṣbəha,⁴⁴ that is, the last Christian ruler of Himyar, who built the cathedral of Sanʿāʿ, and his former Aksumite patron Kaleb/ʿAllä Aṣbəha.⁴⁵ As for the historical figure of an Aksumite king called ʿEzraʿel, the only valuable information we can obtain from the study of his coins is that he probably reigned in the last quarter of the 6th century, at least 50 years after Kaleb’s abdication.⁴⁶

Such a selective blending of the memorial traditions of the Aksumite past in Ethiopian medieval literature (including the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*) can be conveniently summarized in a synoptic table as follows.

⁴² Between the 7th and the 10th century, newly discovered archaeological evidence – essentially limited to churches (on which see LEPAGE – MERCIER 2005; LEPAGE 2006; PHILLIPSON 2009) – betrays, in David Phillipson’s words, a “fluorescence of eastern Tigray as a more localized focus of Christian civilization” (PHILLIPSON 2012: 223).

⁴³ To date, the best studies of Ethiopian hagiographical traditions are MARRASSINI 1981: xxxiii–cix and KAPLAN 1984. Concerning the cycle of the so-called Nine Saints and other holy men from the “Roman” empire, see now the exhaustive monograph by BRITA 2010; as for the continuities and discontinuities of medieval Ethiopian culture, see, more generally, PIOVANELLI 1993; 1995; 2004; BAUSI 2006b; 2006c; LUSINI 2009b.

⁴⁴ On ʿEzana’s conversion to Christianity and the Christianization of the Aksumite kingdom, see especially THELAMON 1981: 37–83; KAPLAN 1982; BRAKMANN 1994: 51–78; HAHN 2005: 479; HAAS 2008; PHILLIPSON 2012: 91–104; RUBIN 2012.

⁴⁵ A possibility also admitted by MUNRO-HAY 1991: 205, even if the reference he makes to ULLENDORFF 1949 does not really support such an interpretation. Actually, Ullendorff’s conclusion was that “Ezana and Zezana [i.e., Šʿazana] are the same persons as ʿAbreha and ʿAṣbəha” (ULLENDORFF 1949: 62).

⁴⁶ “King Israel bears the name of one of Kaleb’s sons in the legendary histories [...], but seems too far removed from him from a numismatic point-of-view to be so identified” (MUNRO-HAY 1991: 90).

The Apocryphal Legitimation of a “Solomonic” Dynasty in the *Kəbrä nāgäšt*

<i>Kings of Aksum in late antique sources (inscriptions, coins, and contemporary literary texts)</i> ⁴⁷	<i>The same rulers in Ethiopian medieval literature (apocryphal and hagiographic texts)</i>	<i>Kings of Ḥimyar in late antique sources (inscriptions and contemporary literary texts)</i>	<i>The same rulers in Ethiopian medieval literature (apocryphal and hagiographic texts)</i>
ʿEzana and his brother Śōʿazana (SʿZN[H])	Abrəha and his brother Aṣḃəḥa ⁴⁸		
... ..			
Kaleb, whose royal name is ʿĪllä Aṣḃəḥa	Kaleb	Yūsuf Asʿar Yaṭʿar	Finḥas
ʿĪllä ʿAmida II, to be identified with WZN (?)		Sumyafaʿ Aṣwaʿ	
WʿZB (ʿĪllä Aṣḃəḥa’s son), to be identified with ʿĪllä Gäbāz (?)	Gäbrä Mäsqäl and his brother ʿƏsraʿel (Kaleb’s sons)		
ʿƏsraʿel	ʿĪllä Gäbāz, also called Zä-Gäbāzä Aksum (?)		

⁴⁷ According to the chronological sequence of the kings who reigned over Aksum between ca. 515 CE and ca. 600 CE reconstructed on epigraphic and numismatic grounds by Munro-Hay: “Kaleb → Alla Amidas → Wazena → WʿZB/Ella Gabaz → Ioel → Hataz = Iathlia? → Israel” (MUNRO-HAY 1991: vii and 88ff.). Compare Éric Godet and Wolfgang Hahn’s alternative sequences: the first tentatively proposes “Kaleb → Alla Amidas → Ella Gabaz → Israel → Ioel (?)” (GODET 1986: 194), while the second opts for “Kaleb → Israel → Gersem → Hataz → Wazen = Ella Gabaz” with the insertion of Alla Amidas, “perhaps as temporary coregent”, between Kaleb and Israel, and Joel between Hataz and Ella Gabaz (HAHN 2000: 293; 2003: 767). One should note, however, that Hahn candidly acknowledges that “[t]he succession after Kaleb’s abdication is obscure and cannot be elucidated by the coins”, while “[t]he name of Israel is well attested in the Ethiopian tradition as belonging to one of Kaleb’s sons” (HAHN 2000: 298f.; compare FIACCADORI 2005, for whom ʿƏsraʿel = ʿĪllä Gäbāz/Zä-Gäbāz, while WʿZB = Gäbrä Mäsqäl). For an eloquent criticism of the arbitrary use of post-Aksumite traditions in numismatic studies, see BAUSI 2003a. Perhaps it would be wiser to acknowledge the irreconcilability of the inscriptional and numismatic primary data with the secondary information provided by medieval texts and traditions, as Hahn himself now seems to concede: “[t]he evidence has to be viewed critically and reweighed, *avoiding any influence of those traditional tales that have entered into the historiography*” (HAHN 2010: 5 [emphasis added]). As a result, in his newly proposed sequence the coins of King Israel are tentatively dated to about 570–580 CE (HAHN 2010: 8ff.). Be that as it may, hopefully the publication of Godet’s exhaustive study of Aksumite coinage, based on a fresh analysis of 1452 Aksumite coins of the National Museum of Addis Abāba (GODET 2004), will shed more light on the chronology of Kaleb’s successors.

⁴⁸ A significant exception, more apparent than real, is found in an early medieval, if not even late antique, homily copied in the 14th-century manuscripts ms EMML no. 1763 and

4. Ethiopia, the last empire to surrender to God

In conclusion, the commemoration of the past glories of the last Himyaritic wars at the end of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* does not demonstrate that a first edition of the work had already been published in the 6th century,⁴⁹ but simply that, for the late authors that reinterpreted them in an apocalyptic manner, those military exploits were the most significant claim to the title of nobility of the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty.⁵⁰ Apocalyptic rhetoric was thus employed in a rather unconventional way, not to console a persecuted minority, but to legitimate the new elite,⁵¹ while memorial traditions of old were recycled in a perfectly apocryphal manner.⁵² The *Kəbrä nägäšt* provided Ethiopian Christianity with a strong and lasting Israelite identity that eventually enabled its rulers to negotiate as equals with their European homologues and even, in the case of Emperor Ḥaylā Šəllase I, to be perceived as the black messiah of the African people in exile. In this sense, the *Kəbrä nägäšt* functioned as a means to establish a new political, social, and reli-

ms EMMML no. 8509, in which the names of (Ḥ)llä Azg^wag^wa, the young king converted by Frumentius, and his father Ḥllä Alāda probably result from a deformation of the names of the historical ‘Ezana and his father Ḥllä ‘Amida I known from Aksumite royal inscriptions (BERNAND – DREWES – SCHNEIDER 1991–2000, 1, 251, 255, 259, 263 and 371); see GETATCHEW HAILE 1979: 316f.; BRAKMANN 1994: 64f.; FIACCADORI 2005: 259f.; MUNRO-HAY 2005c.

⁴⁹ Shahīd’s proposal (see above, n. 30) has been accepted, among others, by JOHNSON 1995, who postulates an improbable Greek original text, and, with more nuances, LUSINI 1999: 236f.; 2001a: 555f.; 2001b: 51f.; 2004: 103f.; 2005: 96f.; 2009a: 13f. (it is, however, inexact to claim that even Marrassini subscribes to such an hypothesis: in MARRASSINI 1983: 388f. he summarizes it in the conditional mood, while in MARRASSINI 2007; 2008 he simply prefers to ignore it). More realistically, the mention in the colophon of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* of a Coptic original subsequently translated into Arabic and from the Arabic into Ethiopic could simply point to the Coptic origins, perhaps already at the end of the 7th century (see the polemics about the interpretation of Psalm 68 [67]:31 in *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* 9, quoted above, n. 28), of the apocalyptic traditions that celebrate the eschatological role of the king of Ethiopia.

⁵⁰ Pace BEYLOT 2008: 122–125 and 127f., who speculates about a Nubian connection on the grounds of, among other things (see above, n. 6), a questionable identification of the city of Waqərom (*Kəbrä nägäšt* 84) with the kingdom of Makuria. Actually, the three Nubian kingdoms of Nobatia, Makuria, and Alodia (Alwa) played no role in the “holy” war against Yūsuf As‘ar Yaṭ‘ar.

⁵¹ In this sense, the social perspectives of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* are quite different from those of the majority of ancient apocalyptic works, such as the Enochic Book of Parables (*I Enoch* 37–71), on which see PIOVANELLI 2007b. Hence, SHAHĪD 1976: 160 was at least right in comparing the aims of Yəṣṣāq’s *Kəbrä nägäšt* to those of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

⁵² According to the definition of apocryphicity suggested by the late Jean-Claude Picard and developed by PIOVANELLI 2005; 2006.

gious order. As Aleksandr Vasiliev, in his analysis of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, aptly concludes, “In the sixteenth century in Russia the theory was proclaimed: ‘Moscow is the third Rome.’ Moscow began to be regarded as ‘the new city of Constantine,’ and the Grand Prince of Moscow became ‘Tsar of all Orthodoxy.’ A Russian scholar, [Boris] Turayev, writes: ‘Ethiopian scholars came to a similar conclusion two centuries earlier, but their formula was still more ambitious’.”⁵³ It was more successful too, because their Solomonic reconstruction of Ethiopian reality lasted until the deposition of Ḥaylā Śəllase I, in 1974. Ethiopia was thus the very last Christian empire to disappear, following Russia and Austria-Hungary, in 1917 and 1919 respectively.

5. Once again, a 6th-Century *Kəbrä nəgäšt*?

In 2006–2007 Glen Bowersock presented a cluster of new elements that should point to a late antique, 6th-century date – if not a hypothetical first edition of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, then at least conserving “much authentic material” from it.⁵⁴ He was followed, in 2008, by Muriel Debié, who, after a careful reexamination of both internal and external evidence, concluded that the integrality of the actual *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, with only the exception of the colophon and a few passages, should go back to the middle of the 6th century.⁵⁵ The consequences of such a dramatic shift in the interpretation of a literary work that clearly belongs to the first quarter of the 14th century would be considerable, not only for the history of Aksumite, post-Aksumite, Zag^we, and early Solomonic Ethiopia, but also for the dynamics of the relations between the different religious actors – Chalcedonian (Melkite), anti-Chalcedonian (Miaphysite), Nestorian, and/or Judaizing Christians, together with Judaizers, Rabbinic, and/or non-Rabbinic Jews – of late antique Ethiopia, Arabia, and beyond. This would mean that the main elements of the discourses legitimating the Israelite origins of the Ethiopian suzerains, as well as their image as the champions of orthodoxy and future saviours of Christianity, were already in place in the first half of the 6th century and used as political propaganda during and after Kaleb’s “holy war” against the Jewish king of Ḥimyar. Therefore, even if, in my

⁵³ VASILIEV 1950: 302.

⁵⁴ BOWERSOCK 2006: 984–85 = 2009: 44–45 (*in nuce*); 2008 (for the citation, 385) = 2010 (for the citation, 213). His conclusions are now accepted by BEVAN forthcoming (actually, what follows stems from a lively discussion engaged with George Bevan at the occasion of the workshop “Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity [200–800 CE]”, held in Ottawa [On.], October 11–13, 2012, a conversation pursued by email since then).

⁵⁵ DEBIÉ 2010.

opinion, Munro-Hay has already adequately shown the fragility of such a hypothesis,⁵⁶ it is worthwhile to spend a few more words on the new aspects of this old debated question.

5.1. The “glory of David” in *RIÉ* 195 II: 24

In what survives of the highly damaged inscription *RIÉ* 195 from Mārib (Yemen), an Aksumite leader – to be almost certainly identified with Kaleb – relates the landing of his troops and the beginning of the military operations (first fragment); then, after a lacuna the extent of which is difficult to determine, he describes the conquest of Mārib and gives thanks to God for his victory (second fragment).⁵⁷ From the last part of the inscription Bowersock singles out an invocation of “the glory of David” (ክብር ፡ ዳዊት ፡), which he interprets as a “reference to the House of David provid[ing] contemporary testimony for what is undoubtedly the most important item in the ancient history of Christian Ethiopia. That [...] is its claim to direct descent from the Jews from the Queen of Sheba”.⁵⁸ However, such a reference occurs in the middle (II: 23–25) of a chain of biblical quotations (II: 20–23 and 26–29) that are intended to demonstrate that the successful deeds of the Ethiopian king are the results of God’s favour: Matthew 6:33 (II: 20–21) and Psalm 66 (65):16–17 (II: 21–23), followed by Psalm 20 (19):8–9 (II: 26–28) and a mutilated citation from Isaiah (II: 29).⁵⁹ Therefore, it should not be so surprising to discover that even lines 23–25 belong to a biblical

⁵⁶ See above, n. 11; needless to say, those who find Munro-Hay’s arguments “unconvincing” should take the time to review and, eventually, if they are able to do so, refute them.

⁵⁷ HATKE 2011: 363–384 provides an English translation and an excellent commentary of the Ethiopic text.

⁵⁸ BOWERSOCK 2008: 385 = 2010: 212f.; 2012: 19f. and 81.

⁵⁹ Its beginning, “Thus says the Lo[rd ...” (ከመዝ ፡ ደቤ ፡ እግ[ዚአ ፡ ብሔር ፡ ...), which are actually the last preserved words of *RIÉ* 195 second fragment, could correspond to a wide range of Isaianic passages (8:11; 28:16; 30:12; 37:33; 42:5; 43:1, 14, 16; 44:2, 24; 45:1, 11, 14, 18; 48:17; 49:5, 7, 8, 22, 25; 50:1; 51:22; 52:4; 65:8; 66:1). These biblical quotations are preceded by a citation of Psalm 68 (67):2 in the first fragment (I: 5–6). Unhappily, due to its fragmentary condition, we cannot determine if the key passage of Psalm 68 (67):31 was also included in *RIÉ* 195. Be that as it may, as HATKE 2011: 368 pertinently observes, “the use of Biblical quotations in sixth-century Ge’ez inscriptions indicates not only that a translation of at least a portion of the Bible was available in Ge’ez by that time but also that, by having such a translated Scripture at their disposal, the Aksumite kings acquired a new mode of expression, one in which rival powers were portrayed as not merely enemies of the Aksumite state but as enemies of God Himself”.

passage, a fifth quotation gone so far unnoticed probably because the expression “the glory of David” is absent from the text and the concordances of the Hebrew Bible⁶⁰ and, in order to find it, one has to look instead to the Greek version of Isaiah 22:22–23: “And I will give him *the glory of David*, and he shall rule, and there shall be no one to contradict him. And I will make him a ruler in a secure place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house” (καὶ δώσω τὴν δόξαν Δαυὶδ αὐτῷ, καὶ ἄρξει, καὶ οὐκ ἔσται ὁ ἀντιλέγων, καὶ στήσω αὐτὸν ἄρχοντα ἐν τόπῳ πιστῷ, καὶ ἔσται εἰς θρόνον δόξης τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ).⁶¹ This allows us to tentatively restore, with the help of the Ethiopic version of Isaiah, and translate the text of *RIÉ* 195 II: 23–25 as follows:

23. ሁ : በአፋዮ : ወከላሐኩ : በልሳንዮ : ወ[ካዕበ : ይብል : ውስተ : ኢሳያስ : እሁ]
 24. ቦ : ክብረ : ዳዊት : ወይኔንን : ወአልቦ[: ዘዩአብዮ : (ተኩንኖ :) ወእሠይ ሞ : መከጋ]
 25. ንነ : ለመእመን : ብሔር : ወአነብሮ : ዲቦ[: መንበረ : ክብር : ዘቤተ : አቡ ሁ :]

²³Him with my mouth and shouted with my tongue”. And [moreover he says in Isaiah, “I will give] ²⁴him the glory of David, and he shall rule, and there shall be no one [to refuse (to obey) him. I will make him a ru]²⁵ler for a safe place, and I will put him on [the throne of glory of his father’s house”.]

Besides its undeniable interest for the textual criticism and history of the Ethiopic version of the Bible,⁶² this newly discovered quotation should

⁶⁰ A passage such as Zachariah 12:7, which refers to “the glory of *the house of David*”, should be ruled out as possible source of the present citation because its content is too different from what we find in *RIÉ* 195 II: 23–25.

⁶¹ Moisés Silva’s translation (in PIETERSMA – WRIGHT [eds.] 2007: 840f. [emphasis mine]) of the Greek text published by ZIEGLER 1967: 199f.; the Masoretic Text, upon which the majority of ancient versions, including the Peshitta, depend, is quite different and reads, “I will place the key of the house of David on his shoulder: when he opens, no one will shut, and when he shuts, no one will open. I will fasten him like a nail in a secure place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father’s house”. It goes without saying that this is additional evidence of the Greek origins of the Aksumite version of the Bible.

⁶² The Ethiopic text of Isaiah 22:22–23 published by BACHMANN 1893: 39 has the additional sentence “and I will give (him) the keys of the house of David: if he opens, no one will shut, and if he shuts, no one will open” (ወእሁብ : መራኅተ : ቤተ : ዳዊት : ለእመ : አርኅወ : ውእቱ : አልቦ : ዘዩዐጹ : ወለእመ : ዐጸወ : አልቦ : ዘዩርኅ :) inserted between “to obey” (ተኩንኖ :) and “and I will put him” (ወእሠይ ሞ :). This is probably the result of a late revision of the Old Ethiopic text, more or less faithfully preserved

make sufficiently clear that the goal of the accumulation of scriptural references in *RIÉ* 195 II: 20–29 is to show “what the Lord has done” on behalf of the king of Aksum (II: 19, **ወዘንተ ፡ ገብረ ፡ ሊተ ፡ እግዚአ ፡ ብሔር ፡**), that is, that God justified him (Matthew 6:33), heard his call (Psalm 66 [65]:16–17), and gave him full support against his enemies (Psalm 20 [19]:8–9), thus confirming on the battlefield his legitimacy and political power (Isaiah 22:22–23). As David says, and Kaleb here repeats, “They (i.e., the enemies) boast in horses and chariots, but we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God” (II: 26–27, **እሙን[ቱስ ፡ በአፍራስ ፡ ወበሰረገላት ፡ ወ]ንሕነስ ፡ ነግሲ ፡ በስሙ ፡ እግዚአ ፡ ብ[ሔር ፡ አምላክነ ፡**). In this context, the king of Aksum, who implicitly presents himself as “the anointed” of the Lord (Psalm 20 [19]:7), manifestly does not have any need to boast in a mythical descent from the Queen of Sheba or in divine protection obtained through the improbable possession of the Ark of the Covenant or its chariot.⁶³ But did such legends even exist in Kaleb’s days?

5.2. The “king of the Greeks” in the *Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment*

In addition to the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*,⁶⁴ Bowersock also draws attention to a cryptic reference to the Ethiopian king, described as the defender of the orthodox faith, in the so-called *Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment*, a little-known Syriac rewriting of the *Pseudo-Methodius*, possibly produced in 691/92 CE – in the wake of the *Pseudo-Methodius* – or even as late as the 1280s.⁶⁵ In his opinion, “[t]he author of this fragment clearly distinguishes the Byzantines, whom he calls Romans (*rhūmāyē*), from the Greeks (*yawnāyē*), whose king will hand over his kingdom to God”. The same apocalyptic author emphasizes the Ethiopian origins of this eschato-

in *RIÉ* 195 II: 23–25, carried out after a Syro-Arabic version or the Hebrew text (also note Bachmann’s reading **ወእሠይሞ ፡ መልአከ ፡ ለብሔር ፡ ምእመን ፡** [with the variant **ምእመን ፡ ለብሔር ፡**] instead of *RIÉ* 195 **ወእሠይሞ ፡ መኩንን ፡ ለመእመን ፡ ብሔር ፡**).

⁶³ Incidentally, to qualify the description of this vehicle in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* as that of “a magic chariot that flew through the air at supersonic speed” (BOWERSOCK 2008: 386 = 2010: 213ff.) looks like an anachronistic overstatement.

⁶⁴ BOWERSOCK 2008: 388f. = 2010: 215f.

⁶⁵ The Syriac text has been republished by MARTÍNEZ 1985: 206–231 and SUERMANN 1985: 86–97; English translations can be found in MARTÍNEZ 1985: 232–246 and PALMER – BROCK – HOYLAND 1993: 243–250. The discrepancy between the suggested composition dates is due to a different appreciation of the period of “694 years” mentioned in the text: if the point of departure of such a chronology is the date of the Epiphany of Christ, this corresponds to 692 CE (thus REININK 1990), but if the Hijira era is implied, this means 1294/5 CE and the *Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment* “should have been written shortly before 1284 A.D.” (MARTÍNEZ 1985: 218f.).

logical king when he or she specifies that “[t]his king of the Greeks shall be descended from Kushyat, daughter of Kushyat, of the kings of Kush [Ethiopia]”. Moreover, “here at last we find the full story of Helena’s bridle”, also mentioned at the end of the *Kəbrä nāgäšt* (ch. 113). “So we must now ask why”, Bowersock wonders, “an Edessene Christian in the late seventh century would not only have had access to this Ethiopian tradition but why he might have accepted it”.⁶⁶ This is, however, not necessarily the case because the *Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment* simply follows the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* in making but a semantic distinction between “the Romans”, used as a collective designation for all the inhabitants of the Byzantine empire (compare *Fragment* f. 98^r and 99^r to, e.g., *Pseudo-Methodius* 10:6; 11:11), and “the king of the Greeks”, used as a title for the descendants of the Ethiopian princess Kūshyat (compare *Fragment* f. 103^v to *Pseudo-Methodius* 14:5). As one of those descendants is described as “having a sign in the city of Rome” (*Fragment* f. 98^v), “the king” and “the kingdom of the Greeks” in both texts clearly refer to the Byzantine ruler and his empire (compare *Fragment* f. 99^v to *Pseudo-Methodius* 11:3).

However improbable it is that the author of the *Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment* had access to Ethiopian traditions other than what he or she was able to find in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, he or she nonetheless felt free to incorporate into the narrative a few additional traditions, including the story of the horse’s bridle made out of the nails from the crucifixion, inspired by the “Judas Kyriakos” or the “Helena” versions of the legendary discovery of the True Cross by Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine.⁶⁷

(f. 98^v) When those years that we mentioned – a week and a half – are gone by, at the end of six hundred and ninety four years, then the king of the Greeks will come out having with him the sign which is in the city of Rome, (namely,) the nails that were in the hands of Our Lord and in the hands of the robber. They were mixed together and it was not known which ones were Our Lord’s and which ones were the others. Then, they cast (f. 99^r) them all together into the fire and they forged with it a bridle-bit (*pūgdā*), i.e., a bridle hanging it within the church. And when a horse that has never been ridden nor has ever in his life been equipped with a bridle will come, and by himself put

⁶⁶ BOWERSOCK 2008: 389f. = 2010: 216f.

⁶⁷ On these traditions, see BOWERSOCK 2008: 387f. = 2010: 214f., as well as DRIJVERS 2011: 146–174, who notes that “[t]his discovery, and in particular the incorporation of the nails in the bridle of his [i.e., Constantine’s] horse, fulfills the prophecy of Zech. 14:20: ‘On that day shall there be holiness upon the horse bridle unto the all-powerful Lord’” (2011: 152, n. 114).

his head into that bridle, the Romans will know that the kingdom of the Christians has arrived. They will take the kingdom of the whole earth from the sons of Hagar, and so on. [...] Afterwards, [the king] of the Greeks will hand over the kingdom to God, as is written. As for the bridle, it exists until today.⁶⁸

This is a remarkable feature that the *Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment* shares with the *Kəbrä nägäšt*, in which Gregory makes a special prophecy about the imminent loss of the invincible bridle of Rome.

As for the Vanquisher of the Enemy (መግራሬ ፣ ፀር ፣), God will take it away from the king (of Rome) who will not guard the faith: the Persians will make war against him, and it seems to me that his name is Marcian (መርቅያኖስ ፣), the heretic (ዕልወ ፣ ሃይማኖት ፣, literally, “heretic as to the faith”). The king of Persia, whose name is Irenaeus (ሃራኔዎስ ፣), will hide him (it?): the king will carry him away, together with his horse, and by the will of God the horse on which is the Vanquisher of the Enemy will be stirred up, go into the sea, and perish there. But the nails will shine there, in the sea, until Christ will come again in great glory, on the clouds of heaven, with power (ch. 113).

Munro-Hay has already pointed out the various historical inconsistencies embedded in this passage of the *Kəbrä nägäšt*, such as the confusion of Marcian – possibly identified here with Marcion, the 2nd-century arch-heretic refuted, among others, by Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon – with Heraclius, who lost Jerusalem and the relics of the Cross at the hands of the Persians in 614 CE, or, possibly, with Valerian, who was captured by King Shapur I in 260 CE.⁶⁹ What is really intriguing, however, is the contrast with the information provided by the *Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment*, whose reader is told that the same bridle, kept in a church in Constantinople, “is still there at present”, in store for the day when the Byzantines will strike back and “take the kingdom of the whole earth from the sons of Hagar” (fol. 99^r). One would expect that, in a text written not too far from Edessa, the Chalcedonian kingdom of the Greeks would be depicted as progressively losing its relics and prestige to the advantage of a more orthodox state. This is not the case – unless we concur with Bowersock that the Greeks are to be identified here with the Ethiopians – and the *Edessene Apocalyptic Fragment* seems to closely follow, once again, the path traced by its illustrious predecessor, the

⁶⁸Translated by MARTINEZ 1985: 232f.

⁶⁹MUNRO-HAY 2001: 57, who concludes that “[t]he *Kebra Nagast*, very far from being well informed on current affairs in the sixth century, is in fact thoroughly mired down in a strange confusion of emperors, saints and heretics from the relatively distant past”.

Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, in remaining loyal to, at least, a certain conception of the Byzantine Empire. It is precisely against such discourses about the role of the king of Constantinople as the traditional champion of eastern Christianity – the king who “will hand over the kingdom to God”, as is written in Psalm 68 (67):31, not because he is himself Ethiopian, but because he descends from the Ethiopian princess Kūshyat – that the authors of late Coptic, early Arabic, and medieval Ethiopic apocalyptic texts, including the *Kəbrä nāgäšt*, are reacting.

5.3. The coinage of king MḤDYS and the Council of Chalcedon

In 1995 Munro-Hay published a new gold coin issued by the Aksumite king MḤDYS, previously known from silver and copper emissions, whose reign is now dated, on numismatic grounds, between those of Eon and Ebana, ca. 425–450 CE.⁷⁰ Both the iconography and the legends of this new piece are quite exceptional: on the obverse is featured a portrait of the king standing left, unique in its genre, depicted with all the regalia of the Aksumite monarchy⁷¹ – the king is crowned with a royal tiara, holds a long spear equipped with a waisted head in his right hand, and has a round shield at chest level – in what looks like a powerful and awe-inspiring attitude confirmed by the legend, in unvocalized Gəʿəz, “the victorious king MḤDYS” (ሃሎ ፡ መወከ ፡ መሐደየሰ ፡); on the reverse is a winged female figure standing left

⁷⁰ MUNRO-HAY 1995; MUNRO-HAY – JUEL-JENSEN 1995: 160f. (MḤDYS’s new gold coin = type 67), 162f. (his silver coins = type 69) and 163ff. (his copper coins = type 70); see also HAHN – KROPP 1996; PEDRONI – DEVOTO 2003. The extremely meager information we have about this king is summarized by FIACCADORI 2007b. Manfred Kropp’s proposal to see in his name an Ethiopic adaptation of the biblical name “Mat[a]thias” (in HAHN – KROPP 1996: 98f., followed by HAHN 2000: 303) has been rightly criticized, on philological grounds, by BAUSI 2003a: 172–175. It seems to me that the best interpretation is still the one suggested by Éric Godet, who tentatively reads it as Maḥaddeyes or Maḥaddīs, with the probable meaning of “the renovator” (GODET 1986: 192, n. 24). In this case, a participial form like **māḥaddəyas/māḥaddis*, instead of the habitual *māḥaddə s*, from the root ḤDS, far from being “a grammatical monstrosity” (as Roger Schneider defines it in HAHN – KROPP 1996: 98), would represent but another peculiarity of the Gəʿəz spoken and written in the kingdom of Aksum before its post-Aksumite standardization as a purely literary language. Also worthy of interest is Gianfranco Fiaccadori’s South Arabic variant of the same hypothesis to see in MḤDYS the Sabaic participle “*MḤDṬ, i.e. **Muḥad(d)ṭ* (‘Founder, Renovator’ [...]), then rendered in Ethiopic (via ‘Pseudo-Sabaic’) with a *mater lectionis* – MḤDYS, i.e. **Muḥad(d)is*” (FIACCADORI 2007b: 948f.).

⁷¹ As observed by PHILLIPSON 2012: 86f.

with a long cross in her right hand and the legend, “by this cross (he is) victorious” (ⲒⲐ ⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲫⲗ ⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲗ ⲛ).⁷²

Munro-Hay argues, with reason, that this female figure is an imitation of the image found for the first time on the reverse of a *solidus* minted by Theodosius II in 420–421 or 420–422 CE – the obverse depicts a helmeted, cuirassed facing bust of the emperor, with a spear in his right hand over shoulder and a shield decorated with horseman riding down enemy on his left arm; the reverse shows a winged Victory (*Victoria*) standing left supporting a long, jeweled cross with her right hand – to celebrate the 20th year of his reign and his victories over the Persians. The long, jeweled cross held here by the winged Victory probably refers to the monumental golden gemmed cross that the emperor had erected on the Golgotha Hill, in Jerusalem, in 420 CE.⁷³ Such a representation of a Christianized Victory or *Victoria* became one of the favourite iconographic motifs depicted (with small variants) on the reverse of the *solidi* minted in the name of late Roman and early Byzantine emperors and their spouses, from Theodosius II to Romulus Augustus in the West and Anastasius I in the East.⁷⁴ The same image was used for the last time on the reverse of Justin I’s *solidus* minted in 518–519 CE; the standing Victory was subsequently replaced by a facing angel holding a cross-staff in his right hand and a sphere with a cross on top (the *globus cruciger*) in his left hand.⁷⁵ Therefore, on purely iconographic grounds, MḤDYS’s coin could have been conceived and minted a relatively long time after 420–422 CE. In Munro-Hay’s opinion, the fact that, on the one hand, the Victory’s “robe is extremely similar to the Theodosius II pieces”, while, on the other hand, “the closest (Romano-Byzantine solidus) in style to the MḤDYS piece [...] is perhaps Marcian, as *RIC*, 505ff.”,

⁷² Or, if we read ⲒⲐ ⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲫⲗ ⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲗ ⲛ with HAHN – KROPP 1996: 88, n. 11, “by this cross you will be victorious”. The same legend is inscribed on the reverse of MḤDYS’s silver and, slightly differently, as “by this (he is) victorious, by the cross” (ⲛⲟⲩ ⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲗ ⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲫⲗ ⲛ), copper coins.

⁷³ See HAHN – KROPP 1996: 89f.; FIACCADORI 2003: 193 and 239 (with the relevant bibliography).

⁷⁴ See KENT 1998: *RIC* 218–221, 225–231, 255f. (Theodosius II), 505–513, 524f. (Marcian), 605ff., 616–619, 630–633 (Leo I), 805 (Leo II), 901, 904ff., 910ff., 927–930, 933, 936, 939–942 (Zeno), 1001–1005, 1010ff. (Basiliscus), 1020, 1024–1027 (Basiliscus and Marcus), 1101ff. (Leontius), 1804 (Theodosius II and Galla Placidia), 1808 (Theodosius II and Valentinian III), 2007, 2012, 2020ff. (Valentinian III), 2531, 2535 (Leo I), 2650–2653 (Majorian), 2827ff. (Anthemius), 3201–3208, 3212f., 3217ff., 3223–3239, 3243f. (Julius Nepo), 3245–3251 (uncertain), 3301f., 3304, 3309, 3311ff. (Basiliscus), 3401–3408, 3414–3418, 3421 (Romulus Augustus), 3601–3604, 3625–3634, 3651–3657 (Zeno), 3724, 3732f. (name of Valentinian III), 3756ff. (name of Severus), 3769–3775 (name of Zeno).

⁷⁵ See GRIERSON 1982: 35, 48, 52 and 320f.

would suggest a dating of MHDYS “sometime after 420, and perhaps reigning in the 450s.”⁷⁶ However, there is another detail that betrays a closer similarity to Theodosius II’s original *solidus*, that is, the absence of a star high in the right field, first introduced on coins issued in 423–424 CE, as if the iconography of the reverse of MHDYS’s coin was solely inspired by the 420–422 CE emissions, not by the subsequent ones.⁷⁷

Concerning the association of the image of a jeweled cross with the idea of a victory against the emperor’s “pagan” enemies (in Theodosius II’s case, the Persians), as Erik Thun pertinently reminds us,

The origin of the golden gemmed cross associated with victory dates from Eusebius of Caesarea’s fourth-century description of the *labarum*, the trophy of a cross bearing the inscription “Conquer by this”, that the emperor Constantine saw in a vision. After his victory, Constantine had the visionary *labarum* represented in gold and adorned with precious stones, and somewhat later, he had the ceiling of his palace in Constantinople adorned with a gemmed golden cross intended to serve as the safeguard of the empire.⁷⁸

Thus, it should not be so surprising to find in the Aksumite reuse of the Theodosian imagery of Victory holding the cross an explicit reference to the famous Constantinian motto *in hoc signo vinces* originally connected with the *labarum*. This could even give us a clue as to the primary intent of such a borrowing, that is, as Munro-Hay puts it, “to celebrate a special occasion such as a victory”⁷⁹ – perhaps, we could add, a victory over a non-Christian enemy. But, in doing so, would it imply that a mid-5th century Aksumite king was claiming to be another Constantine, as Bowersock suggests, in order “to assert the leadership of the ‘orthodox’, who are [...] the mono-phsities”, and restore “true faith after the supposed betrayal at Chalcedon”?⁸⁰ Nothing would be more uncertain than this extrapolation, not only because the dating of MHDYS and his gold coin, before or after Chalcedon, is impossible to determine with any exactitude, but especially also because, had an Aksumite king laid this kind of ambitious claim, he would not have adopted

⁷⁶ MUNRO-HAY 1995: 276f.

⁷⁷ The star is consistently absent from *RIC* 218–221 (Theodosius II), and exceptionally omitted by 511f. (Marcian), 1005 (Basiliscus), 2531, 2535 (Leo I), and possibly, 2650–2653 (Majorian), 3224–3239, 3243f. (Cornelius Nepos), 3245, 3248ff. (uncertain), 3302, 3309 (Basiliscus).

⁷⁸ THUN 2002: 27 (summarizing Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Vita Constantini* III,49); compare HAHN – KROPP 1996: 90f.; FIACCADORI 2003: 189–192, 237ff. and 249.

⁷⁹ In MUNRO-HAY – JUEL-JENSEN 1995: 161.

⁸⁰ BOWERSOCK 2008: 390f. = 2010: 218f.

for the second time in the history of Aksumite coinage, about a century after King W^cZB, Gəʿəz language for the legends of his gold issues, which were normally intended for international trade. Rather, he would have certainly maintained, for prestige and propagandistic reasons, the habitual use of Greek. Paradoxically enough, if we opt for a post-Chalcedonian dating, then MḤDYS's initiative of communicating through a new type of coin displaying, at the same time, an image borrowed from the coinage of his hypothetical rival Marcian and a supposedly programmatic message of the restoration of orthodoxy written in Gəʿəz, could actually mean the opposite of what Bowersock is trying to demonstrate, namely, that MḤDYS, the “renovator” of true faith, was not acting as the champion of the anti-Chalcedonian party, but that he had adopted the same theological perspectives as the emperor of Constantinople and was, probably unsuccessfully, trying to enforce them on Ethiopian soil. After all, it is well known that in traditional societies the best way to introduce new ideas and practices is to present them as rediscoveries and restorations of old, forgotten habits.⁸¹

5.4. Another historical context for the anti-Jewish polemic of the *Kəbrä nägäšt*

Finally, the point of departure of Debié's attempt to predate the original edition of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* to the 6th century CE is the supposed lack in the text of any allusion to historical events posterior to Kaleb's Ḥimyaritic wars, in particular the absence of any reference to the rise of Islam or the settling of Muslim communities in Ethiopia.⁸² This, however, is not exactly the case and it would be, in my opinion, too drastic a move to attribute the various mentions of northern Šäwa (ch. 39),⁸³ Cairo (ch. 59), Ḥadyā (ch. 94), and other medieval *realia*, such as the list of the regions ruled by the sons of Ishmael (ch. 79)⁸⁴ – not to mention the names of Bāynä Ləḥkəm or Ablis, the devil (ch. 67)⁸⁵ – to the actualizing initiative of the Arabic translators of the *Kəbrä nägäšt*. On the one hand, this laconic attitude to-

⁸¹ A few illustrious examples of such rediscoveries, including Dəmatyos/Dəmatewos' book-finding in the Hagia Sophia, are given by PIOVANELLI 2007c: 41–44.

⁸² DEBIÉ 2010: 261ff., echoing SHAHĪD 1976: 138f.

⁸³ *Si vera lectio est*, the majority of the manuscripts, including the Parisian manuscript Éthiopiens 5, reading ጊዳዎ ፡ instead of ሲዋ ፡.

⁸⁴ A point well taken by HATKE 2011: 392, n. 693, for whom “the *Kəbra Nägäšt* refers to Mecca (*Mākā*) and Madīna (*Mōrənā*, from the Arabic *Madīnah* > *Marīnah*) as well as the Ishmaelite invasions of Egypt (*Qəbt*, cf. Arabic *Qibṭī*); Libya (*Lībā*); Phoenicia, i.e., the Levant (*Fīnqānā*, Greek Φοινίκη); and [in 651–652 CE] the Christian Nubian kingdoms of Nubia (*Nōbā*) and Alodia (*Sōba*)”.

⁸⁵ A long, albeit still not exhaustive, list of the Arabic loanwords in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* is provided by BEZOLD 1905: xxxv–xxxvi.

wards Islam simply means that it was not the main concern of Yəshaq and the intended readers of his translation/edition of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, who were apparently more interested in the mythological legitimation of their Israelite pedigree than the justification of a Muslim presence in eastern Ethiopia.⁸⁶ On the other hand, if the first edition of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt* had really been produced in the 6th century CE as an apocryphal tract on behalf of the Aksumite champions of orthodoxy, one wonders why it would not have been directly written in Gəʿəz instead of being hypothetically composed in Coptic, then translated into Arabic, and from the Arabic retranslated into Gəʿəz. Accordingly, the most economic explanation of this state of affairs is that a team of Ethiopian editors well-versed in Arabic language used as a point of departure for the writing of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, in addition to what was already available to them in Ethiopic literature, a series of Christian Arabic texts that they translated and heavily reworked.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Compare MUNRO-HAY 2005a: 65f. and 237; DERAT 2012: 137f.; the subsidiary role of Muslims in the newly restored Solomonic Christian kingdom is perhaps foreshadowed by the figure of the merchant Tamrin, who is depicted as a powerful international trader – he owns “520 camels and about 73 ships” and exports precious raw materials from Arabia (ch. 22) – at the service of the Queen of Ethiopia. This does not, obviously, mean that the relations between the first Solomonids and the rulers of the Muslim principalities, especially Ifat, were more often than not aggressive, as eloquently documented by TADDESSE TAMRAT 1972: 119–155. Incidentally, one should note, with MUNRO-HAY 2005a: 87 and 241, that it is at the chancellery of ʿAmdä Şəyon, in an anti-Muslim context, that we find the first echoes to the new claims about the prestige of the Ethiopian kingdom put forward by the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*, when the narrator of the *Chronicle of ʿAmdä Şəyon* reacts to what he or she perceives as a false prophecy about the imminent end of the Christian kingdom at the hands of Sabraddin, the sultan of Ifat, in the following terms: “As for us, having heard and learned from the Holy Scriptures, we say the truth without ambiguity (literally, ‘which is neither yes nor no’): the kingdom of the Muslims will last but 700 years and will be removed in due time, while the kingdom of the Christians will last and endure until the second coming of the Son of the Lord, as it is announced by the Holy Scriptures – and especially the kingdom of Ethiopia will last until the second coming of Christ, (because) it is on her behalf that David prophesized and said, ‘Ethiopia will stretch her hands to the Lord’” (MARRASSINI 1993: 62f.; KROPP 1994: 1, 8 and 2, 12).

⁸⁷ This could especially be the case regarding a text close enough to the Arabic legend on “the reasons why the kingdom of David was transferred from his son Solomon, king of Israel, to the country of the *Nəgus*, i.e. Abyssinia”, which was supposedly “found in the chronicles of the ancient fathers of the Coptic church”. MARRASSINI 2008: 808f. has convincingly argued that this text – originally published by BEZOLD 1905: xliii–lx and translated by AMÉLINEAU 1888: 144–164; BUDGE 1922: xxxix–lvi – cannot be considered as an Arabic abridgment of the *Kəbrä nəgäšt*. BEYLOT 2002: 198f. has noticed a strong analogy between the episode of the substitution of the true Ark of the Cove-

Be that as it may, Debié's strongest case is the anti-Jewish bias that pervades especially the last part of Gregory's discourse, which corresponds, in her opinion, to chapters 102–105 and 106–111 of the *Kəbrä nägäšt*,⁸⁸ but that is actually already present in the previous section, chapters 96–101, in which the Illuminator interprets a series of key passages of the Hebrew Bible as prophecies about the coming of Christ. If it is, at least theoretically, plausible that such an argument had originally been fashioned in order to be used against Jewish and/or Judaizing enemies in the course of the Ḥimyaritic campaign against King Yūsuf Asʿar Yaṭʿar, Debié seems to underestimate the point made by Munro-Hay that an even more compelling need to clearly redefine the identity of Ethiopian Christianity as True Israel was actually felt during the first decades of the Solomonic restoration, when the political and religious centre of gravity of the kingdom switched from the Cushitic-speaking northern province of Lasta to the Semitic-speaking southern territory of Amhara. It is in this context that Ethiopian sources mention, for the very first time, the existence in the 1330s of a population “of apostates who are like the Jews crucifiers” and live in mountain regions of “the Səmen, the Wägāra, the Šällāmt, and the Šägāde; originally they were Christians, but they have now denied Christ like the Jews crucifiers”.⁸⁹ This is probably not only the first historical reference to the Betä ʿEsraʿel, the so-called Falaša or Ethiopian Jews, of Agāw origins, but a clear indication of the emergence of at least some of them from various groups of dissident Christians opposed to the royal policies of the day.⁹⁰ Hagiographical texts also mention the attraction

nant in the Temple of Jerusalem with an imitation made by a carpenter in the *Kəbrä nägäšt* (chs. 45 and 48) and the story of the stealing of another holy relic from Jerusalem, the coffin containing the garment of Mary, by the Byzantine noblemen Galbius and Candidus, “at the time of Leo the Great, the faithful emperor of the Greeks [*sic*] who reigned after Marcian”, narrated in the *Life of the Virgin* attributed to Maximus the Confessor (580–662 CE; see SHOEMAKER 2012: 142–148). Interestingly enough, some details of the version of the same incident found in the Arabic text are even closer to Maximus' retelling of the story of Galbius and Candidus. Finally, BEYLOT 2008: 71–82; 2011: 210–213 has published a short Ethiopic text related to the Arabic legend and attributed to Sawīrus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, the bishop of al-Ashmūnayn (ca. 905–987 CE), author of the famous *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, which demonstrates that at least some version of it was known in Ethiopia.

⁸⁸ DEBIÉ 2010: 269f., an argument already raised by SHAHĪD 1976: 139f.

⁸⁹ MUNRO-HAY 2001: 56, as well as 2006: 62f. and 172 (referring to the passage of the *Chronicle of ʿAmdä Šəyon* now in MARRASSINI 1993: 68f.; KROPP 1994: 1, 11 and 2, 15); see also TADDESSE TAMRAT 1972: 192f.; SHELEMAY 1986: 20f. and 32; KAPLAN 1990: 24; 1992: 55ff. and 181f.; QUIRIN 1992: 43 and 228; BRAKMANN 1994: 46–50; CANNUYER 2002: 67f.

⁹⁰ Adopting a milder version of the “rebel perspective” advocated by KREMPPEL 1972.

that Betä ʿƏsraʿel eventually exerted on the disciples of the Təgrayan monk Ewostatewos (ca. 1273–1352), the most zealous defender of the observance of both first Sabbath and Lord’s Day,⁹¹ one of the most conspicuous “Old Testament” practices, together with circumcision, that the Ethiopian church finally adopted, in 1449, and still observes today. Therefore, in such a framework of competing claims as to the exact measure of the Israelite elements that make Christian and/or (in the case of the Betä ʿƏsraʿel) Ethiopian identity authentic, it was particularly urgent for ecclesiastical authorities to set the record straight, so to speak. This was done, in part, through the publication of the *Kəbrä nəgəšt*.

6. Once again, of texts, intertexts, and contexts

At the end of his brilliant doctoral dissertation on the relations between Aksum and Himyar in the 6th century CE, George Hatke has devoted a few pages to the sensitive question of the historical value of the *Kəbrä nəgəšt* as a primary source for understanding late antique history, in which he describes the current scholarly debate on the origins of the *Kəbrä nəgəšt* as a dichotomy “between maximalists who argue for a sixth-century date for the text [i.e., Shahîd and Johnson], and minimalists who assign it to the fourteenth century, the date of its colophon [i.e., Munro-Hay]”.⁹² Even if one cannot but agree with the majority of Hatke’s conclusions, especially with his suggestion that “the *Kəbrä Nəgəšt* is a composite work containing some sort of *Vorlage* of uncertain – though probably early medieval – date”,⁹³ the use of maximalist/minimalist rhetoric, probably unconsciously borrowed from Hebrew Bible and biblical archaeology studies, is rather unfortunate because, in the present case, we should consider as minimalists precisely those scholars who think that 6th-century motifs and traditions did not evolve, or were only affected by *minimal* changes, until they were finally edited at the beginning of the 14th century, while maximalists are those who try to put both the medieval environment and the Aksumite and post-Aksumite background of the *Kəbrä nəgəšt* into an extended, *holistic* perspective.

From a methodological point of view, it is rather perplexing that the only interest in a text as complex and fascinating as the *Kəbrä nəgəšt*, achieved in the second decade of the 14th century, seems to be in the late antique traditions or passages it is assumed to faithfully preserve. Normally, contemporary approaches to reading literary texts begin with the analysis of their

⁹¹ On the movement he founded and its involvement in 14th and 15th-century theological controversies, see PIOVANELLI 1995: 213–217 (with the relevant bibliography).

⁹² HATKE 2011: 384–402 (for the citation, 391f.).

⁹³ HATKE 2011: 399 (based on a personal communication with Getatchew Haile).

internal narrative texture, and proceed then to the examination of their inter-textual and socio-historical dimensions, in an effort to reconstruct the profiles of their implied audience and community.⁹⁴ Texts are seen as the result of creative acts of communication, in which a series of stories and discourses informed by the cultural values shared by the audience and the narrator are interwoven in a meaningful way. Too positivistic approaches that tend to mechanically isolate preexisting sources embedded in the actual texts are generally avoided today. This does not mean that the historical study of the origins, evolution, transmission, and reception of the different materials that were utilized by Yəṣṣḥaq and his collaborators to produce what is, in Marrassini's words, "a masterpiece which is, in fact, entirely new",⁹⁵ is neither legitimate nor significant. Rather, it is quite the opposite, as the reconstruction of the trajectory, from the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* to the Coptic-Arabic apocalyptic texts and, from them, to the *Kəbrä nəgəšt*, of the motif of the eschatological role played by the king of Ethiopia has eloquently demonstrated.⁹⁶ However, this and other traditions already had a long story behind them when they reached the Ethiopian highlands, where they were in turn, to paraphrase Marrassini, systematized, purified, filtered, and finally assembled into a new, coherent narrative. Thus, to take for granted that it is still possible to retrieve all kinds of late antique information from a 14th-century text is as problematic as to assume that Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* – to cite another illustrious epic text written at the same time as the *Kəbrä nəgəšt* – gives us direct access to, e.g., truly 6th-century historical data and theological ideas.⁹⁷ If

⁹⁴ For an example of socio-rhetorical analysis inspired by the work of the American specialist of early Christian literature Vernon K. Robbins, see PIOVANELLI 2007a.

⁹⁵ MARRASSINI 2008: 810.

⁹⁶ Compare, for example, the various traditions about the Wood of the Cross studied by CAQUOT 1955 and summarized by PÉRÈS 2002: 56–59, or the legends about King Solomon's extraordinary magical skills, also found in a Coptic fragment reexamined by CANNUYER 2002: 63–66. The late antique and early medieval trajectories of these and other motifs, from Palestine to Egypt, and from Egypt to Ethiopia, are still in need of being clearly identified and drawn again.

⁹⁷ Even if the allusions to contemporary events mentioned or alluded to in the *Commedia* make the dating of its three great canticles relatively easy, one should not forget that, in a not so distant past, claims have been made for a heavy dependence of its infernal imagery on earlier apocalyptic texts like the medieval *Book of Muhammad's Ladder* (a Castilian rendering of the *Kitab al-Mi'rāğ* written in 1264 CE, then translated into Latin and Provençal) or even the late antique *Apocalypse of Paul* (written in Greek around 400 CE, then translated into various languages, including Latin); on these texts, see now ECHEVARRÍA ARSUAGA 2006; PIOVANELLI 2007c (with the relevant bibliography). For an enlightening study of Dante's theory of the two suns (i.e., the empire and papacy), see CASSEL 2001.

we are ready to accept such a premise, why then should the approaches followed in the study of Yəshāq’s *Kəbrä nəgəšt* differ from those applied to Dante’s *Divina Commedia*? This is the question.

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Pierluigi Piovanelli

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Summary

The present study constitutes an attempt to reevaluate the ideological function of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* as an apocryphal production extolling the nobility and orthodoxy of early 14th-century "Solomonic" élites. In this regard, the *Kəbrä nägäšt* can be considered as the Ethiopian response to the religious and political propaganda of the Syriac *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* and related literature. The arguments recently made in favour of a 6th-century date for an hypothetical original kernel of the *Kəbrä nägäšt* are also reexamined and reinterpreted. The mention of the "glory of David" in the inscription *RIÉ* 195 II: 24 is not a reference to the Davidic/Solomonic origins of the kings of Aksum but part of a biblical citation, Isaiah 22:22–23, here for the first time correctly identified, while the connection between the recently published MĤDYS's gold coin and the council of Chalcedon is too speculative and aleatory to be of any use. The glorious memories of 6th-century Ĥimyaritic wars provided but the point of departure for the elaboration of the traditions to be much later creatively recycled in the *Kəbrä nägäšt*.