



Aethiopica 16 (2013)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Review

MERSHA ALEHEGNE, *The Ethiopian Commentary on the Book of Genesis:
Critical Edition and Translation*

Aethiopica 16 (2013), 259–266

ISSN: 2194–4024

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

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Reviews

seem to be possible, it is obvious that this obscure epigraphic evidence still needs a closer examination and a satisfactory explanation (note that there are too many errors in the transcriptions, for example p. 342, ተቢቶ, for ተቢቶ; ፍርቶቱ, for ፍርቶቱ; *ba=ma^cadoa*, for *ba=ma^cadota*; ዘከሱ, for ዘከሱ; p. 344, ኖቢ, for ኖባ; ኅሳ, written twice, for ካሱ; p. 345, ቅዋደ, for ቅዳደ; መገጽት, for መገብት; p. 347, አዕይብተ, for አዕይንተ; *γῶσα^canu*, for *γῶσσα^c(^c)anu*; p. 348, ወለደ, for ወለደ; p. 347 00ፈፈ, for አፀፈፈ; p. 348, etc.; many errors also in the Greek, for example ἀτακτῆσάντου, that does not exist, for ἀτακτῆσαντος; Ἄρεης, for Ἄρεως; unfortunately, many errors also occur in the bibliography, s. under Borello, Cerulli, Conti Rossini, Guidi); Wion gives a detailed, interesting, first-hand presentation of the manuscripts collected by Flemming and Littmann in Ethiopia (it is only to be regretted that a few data are unreliable, for example p. 353, “At the beginning of the 20th century, the Royal Library in Berlin had fewer than nineteen manuscripts”, but actually they were 87 in August Dillmann’s 1878 catalogue, and so the estimation of a total of 120 manuscripts and 30 scrolls after the contribution by Flemming and *DAE* is definitely too low); Lusini’s two-page note summarizes the main points of Littmann’s contribution on the Tigre language; Kowalewski approaches the numismatic importance of Littmann’s collection, while Hahn’s contribution puts it into the broader context of the overall findings; finally, Phillips reports on the “small – yet not at all neglectable – finds” of *DAE*.

While waiting for the third volume and the completion of this important and highly commendable editorial enterprise, as a final remark, we can say that still after more than one century the thematic scope embraced by the *DAE* expedition and publication shows to be extremely consistent and coherent. The overall investigation of the kingdom of Aksum and its legacy, in the town as well as in the related areas, through archaeology, epigraphy, philology, linguistics, ethnology, still appears a worthwhile, substantial and unitary field for scholarly investigation.

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MERSHA ALEHEGNE, *The Ethiopian Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Critical Edition and Translation* = AethFor 73, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011. xix + 722 pp. Price: € 138.00. ISBN 978-3-447-06430-9.

The last two decades have brought a sea change of unprecedented proportions in the publication of Ethiopian religious texts, namely: the Bible, Liturgy, Patristic, Hagiography, Canon Law, Computus. It is in this context of editorial revival that the re-edition and fresh publication of many *andämta*

commentaries has taken place. The whole of the New Testament commentaries have been re-edited more than once, and for the first time in Ṭəgrəñña as well. Only a handful of Old Testament commentaries are still in the waiting list. Mersha Alehegne's "critical" edition of the *andəmta* on Genesis is a significant step forward in this direction. Mersha's stated intention (p. 24) in the planning of his huge work is to articulate it in four parts:

- 1) introduction (pp. 1–41);
- 2) text-critical edition of the *andəmta* of Genesis (pp. 43–382);
- 3) English translation of the text with commentaries made on concepts and terminologies in the footnote (pp. 383–659);
- 4) list of archaic terms, of manuscripts containing *andəmta*, general bibliography (pp. 661–722).

An initial claim that the edition's aim was "resurrecting the Ur-Text" (p. 25) is followed by a counter-claim which jettisons prospects of retrieving the Ur-Text or anything near it. The reason is, rightly so, that the *andəmtas* were born to be kept alive in a living memory and handed down orally and not to be nailed down to writing. Their style is chiefly rhapsodic, designed to instruct while entertaining. In a manuscript, there is no way of representing the intonation,¹ which is an integral part of the structure of this literature and an important key, for instance, to mark the pauses. Mersha states that "*andəmta* is the most 'criminal or diseased' text full of chronic viruses which is difficult to be cured based on the established 'therapies' of textual criticism" (p. 27). The author has tried, albeit with an ill concealed reticence, to draw a genealogy of the five witnesses (20th century) he has selected for the edition, recurring to some of the techniques of classical textual criticism, such as pinpointing "separative" and "conjunctive" errors. A modest *stemma codicum* is produced which is qualified as "by no means certain in reality" (p. 35). Why insisting then? If the reasons are to comply with a compulsory academic obligation or to show the author's awareness of a text-critical aspect that needs attention and that he has tried to tackle it, this is fine. Personally, I am of the opinion that applying the stemmatic method to the *andəmtas* is idle. It must be underlined that "stemmatics", the school of textual criticism associated with Karl Lachmann (1793–1851) is not a safe haven anymore, if one can say it ever was. There is ample consensus among classicists that Lachmann's approach is beset with problems. Michael D. Reeve summed up the position of classicists by asserting that "establishing the exclusive derivation of one manuscript from another is not merely diffi-

¹ In some rare instances the scribes supply indications such as *annab* = read together, referring to two or more entries that have to be pronounced at one go.

cult but impossible”.² Mersha’s choices in the setup of the critical apparatus are presented clearly (p. 36): “only those readings which were considered to be ‘significant variants’ were recorded [...] ignoring others *such as* [italics are mine] orthographical, order of words, scribal idiosyncrasies and baloney readings [...] different division words [...] singularly attested spellings of proper nouns”. Moreover, the editor has quietly omitted the classical two dots between one word and the other, and although there is a subtitle that promises to discuss punctuation, the issue is not addressed (p. 35). One may question why the author sometimes writes the various Ethiopic punctuation marks (but also English semicolons, question marks, guillemets, for example in pp. 89, 100, 147), when his initial choice seems to do away with them. While one can agree or disagree on the opportunity of adopting these editorial measures, Mersha’s edition still does not provide a full textual picture of the manuscripts upon which the work is based. The paucity of the witnesses and the heavy handed interventions of the editor on them, makes the title “critical edition” questionable, even when accompanied by the Solomonic gloss “provisional”. The hyper inflated “provisional”, added to “critical editions” seems to be a device to preempt eventual criticism, but it is unlikely that these publications will appear again in the foreseeable future in an improved version. The truth is that these editions are not provisional. There is no word on the origin and transmission of the Gəʿəz text(s) of Genesis in the introduction. In fact it seems that Mersha has excluded this ever vital issue from his horizon throughout his book. In footnote 113, Mersha refers to “Edele B., ‘A critical Edition of Genesis in Ethiopic,’ Diss., Duke University [dir. M. Peters], Durham 1995” which is apparently by no means available. At least a short list of proper nouns would have helped to give an idea about the *Vorlage* of the Gəʿəz text(s) of Genesis. A couple of token examples will substantiate the case: 4:18 the LXX reads: Γαυδαδ whereas the Hebrew has עֵדֶן. The Gəʿəz has ጋይዳድ, identical with LXX. 4:16 says ምድረ ፋይድ አንጻረ ኤደም which matches with the LXX: ἐν γῆ Ναιδ κατέναντι Εδεμ “in the land of Naid opposite to Edem” almost perfectly; rather than: בארץ נוד קדמת עדן “in the land of Nod, east of ‘Eden’”. Among Mersha’s witnesses, there is no alternative to ፋይድ which is very likely a representation of the Greek Ναιδ. The letters ፋ and ድ have been misread by copyists or changed purposely. Mersha’s English version reads: “in the land of

² M.D. REEVE, “*Eliminatio codicum descriptorum*: A methodological Problem”, in: J.N. GRANT (ed.), *Editing Greek and Latin texts: papers given at the Twenty-Third Annual Conference on Editorial Problems, University of Toronto, 6–7 November 1987*, New York: AMS Press, 1989, p. 1; cf. also J. WILLIS, *Latin Textual Criticism* = Illinois Studies in Language and Literature 61, Urbana, IL – Chicago, IL – London: Urbana Illinois Press, 1972, who remarks that “Lachmannian methods would fail every time that they were applied”, p. 30.

Nod opposite to Eden”. The forms of the placenames have been changed, and in the footnote (196) on p. 425, the author refers to the King James version. Consistency in transliteration is a thorn on the side of scholars and Mersha’s work is not an exception. Thus, the same name is “(Gäbrä) Ḥana” in footnote 45 (p. 9) and “Ḥanna” in p. 12. There are several instances of imprecision of various kinds. Iyasu II reigned in the Gondärine kingdom from 1730 to 1755 and not from 1723–1755 (p. 8).³ The metropolitans during the tenure of Iyasu II are Krəstodulos (d. 1735) and Yoḥannəs III (d. 1761), thus the coupling of emperor Iyasu II with *abunä* Marqos (sic, p. 9), which would be Mark IV (d. 1716), seems to be inaccurate. At any rate, the definition of exegetical disciplines took place at the behest of Iyasu I (1682–1706). In his brief assessment of the researches on the *andəmtas*, the author ignores the survey of the studies and publications of the *andəmta* commentaries in European languages contained in the article “Una versione Tigrina (popolare?) degli *andəmta* sui quattro Vangeli: un altro passo nelle edizioni degli *andəmta* nell’ultimo ventennio”, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 73 (2007), pp. 61–96, esp. pp. 64–73. Mersha gives the impression that Kirsten Stoffregen Pedersen has translated the whole *andəmta* on the book of Psalms whereas the Psalms translated are only 11 (pp. 15–16). Footnote n. 72 (p. 17) is not related to the topic of Mersha’s book and is clearly a misleading input of alien hands which would have better helped the author otherwise. Mersha (p. 662, and throughout the book) ascribes the seminal work to the late *məggabe bəlu*y [m.b.] Säyfä Šəllase Yoḥannəs from which he draws a lot of his introductory material: የኢትዮጵያ ኦርቶዶክስ ተዋሕዶ ቤተ ክርስቲያን ታሪክ ከልደተ ክርስቶስ እስከ 2000 ዓ.ም. (*Yä-ityopya ortodoks Täwähədo beta-krəstiyan tarik kə-lədatä krəstos əskä* 2000 A.M., “The History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Täwähədo Church from the Birth of Christ to 2000 E.C.”). While it is true that m.b. Säyfä Šəllase Yoḥannəs has excellently penned the part related to traditional Ethiopian exegesis (pp. 174–209), the book as a whole is a precious collection of several topics, authored by twelve scholars that on p. III are introduced as *yäməšəfafu azzägağoč* “the contributors of the book”. Under the title “the *andəmta* texts and their current state of publication” (pp. 18–19), Mersha provides a list of published and unpublished material. The “Historical Books” registered (numbers 6–13) as unpublished, have been indeed published in the year 2000 A.M.: Joshua, Judges and Ruth in a volume, and 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings in another one, under the title: “Four books of the Kings”. Enoch (n. 19) has been published in 2003 (A.M.). Ben Sira (Book of Sirak) was re-published as *Məšəḥəftä Səlonon wä-Sirak* in 1988

³ Mersha’s date is the same as the one dealing with the entry Iyasu II in the *EAE*, cf. S. CHERNETSOV – D. NOSNITSIN, “Iyasu II”, in: *EAE* III, pp. 251a–252b.

(sic) but omits it in vv. 13, 14, 16, 20, 22, 24. The translation of the variant (*batäta*) in pp. 464f. is incomplete and inadequate. The author omits the last sentence: “in the calculation of the eras of the Patriarchs, the Samaritan Pentateuch agrees with the Torah of the Elders but not with the Torah of the Elders” (Amharic text on p. 129). Here there is a problem either with the manuscript or with Mersha himself for not having copied properly. The sense of the phrase is that the Samaritan Pentateuch agrees with the Septuagint and not with the Hebrew text. This is confirmed by the variant registered on p. 131, which the author treats as follows: “with regard to the counting of the years of the fathers, the book of the Samaritans agrees with the book of Scholars, not with that of the deficient Judah” (p. 466, last two lines of the apparatus). Often “unfamiliar” Gəʿəz and Amharic terms appear as they are in the English version. In 9:21 ሌሽ is written “*fesho*” (sic!). The entry is registered in T. Leiper Kane’s *Amharic–English Dictionary*, explained as “quick-ripening barley”.⁵ A mine of information would emerge from an overall philological analysis of the commentary. 1:4 ጠብ corresponds to Hebrew טוב “good”;⁶ 1:8 አዝረቅ, a loanword from Arabic أزرق = blue, has been translated with “Blue Nile” (p. 392), an uncritical reproduction of Cowley.⁷ The same is true of the reference to መሻፍቃን as the author of one of the interpretations of 1:2. Cowley says that he is Theodore of Mopsuestia, without further explanation, and the author refers back to Cowley (p. 388). It is worth mentioning that መሻፍቃን, which is not registered in any Ethiopian lexicon, comes from the Arabized form مفسقان of the Syriac *mapsqono*, meaning “interpreter”.⁸ መሻፍቃን instead of መፍሻቃን in the Gəʿəz version is a metathesis similar to that between the widespread ታዎላሎስ for ቱዎሎሎስ “theologian”. Since Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428) was later perceived as the harbinger of Nestorius, many scholars (especially anti-chalcedonian) chose not to quote him by name but as “the interpreter”.⁹ The Amharic of Mersha’s witnesses looks like

⁵ T.L. KANE, *Amharic–English Dictionary*, II, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990, p. 2296.

⁶ Footnote 57 reproduces (quietly) R. COWLEY, *Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation: A Study in Exegetical Tradition and Hermeneutics* = Oriental Publication 38, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 155, footnote 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 169–250.

⁸ G. GRAF, *Verzeichnis arabischer kirchlicher Termini. Sonderdruck aus der Zeitschrift für Semitistik und verwandte Gebiete* 7/3 [pp. 225–258], 8/3 [pp. 235–264], 9/3–4 [pp. 234–263], Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1934, p. 82; M. SOKOLOFF, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann[’s]* Lexicon Syriacum, Winona Lake, IN – Piscataway, NJ: Eisenbrauns & Gorgias Press, 2009, p. 811.

⁹ From Syriac literature we can mention the following witness: “Rabbulas montrait auparavant beaucoup d’amitié au célèbre Interprète et étudiait ses ouvrages”. The editor in a footnote observes: “Théodore de Mopsueste, auquel les Nestoriens donnent le titres d’Interprète

“an updated” language. Traces of older Amharic are scanty. *Andämta* editors are faced with the identification of quotations (many introduced with the technical *ändil* “as [the scholar] says”) and allusions which are mostly anonymous. While welcoming Mersha’s English (problematic) translation, an account of the superabundant sources of the *andämtas* on Genesis, with precise references has to be produced as yet (those like, *Wäddase Maryam* “Praise of Mary”, Tuesday, p. 418 will not help), and could be a topic for a monograph. There is no doubt that the vast majority of comments comes from Arabic sources, as the *andämtas* themselves acknowledge explicitly (cf. *ḥatätas* in the apparatus of pp. 92, 120). Echoes of local christological debates are also occasionally hinted at. For instance, the language of MS B contains terms like *tä^e aqqäbo* “preservation” (p. 196) of the divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. *Tä^e aqqäbo* is a *Ṣägga* concept¹⁰ differing from the so-called *Karroç* who would say that after the Incarnation there is only *Täwähädo*, namely, “unity of the divinity with humanity”. The wealth of information contained in the commentaries has to be brought to light. Especially in the case of the *andämta* of Genesis, which, like Matthew and John for the New Testament, appears to be the most scrutinized text of the Old Testament, the comments are not just paraphrases of the text nor simply homiletic in character. Among other aspects, the comments display a keen philological interest which often yields well founded results. For instance, one of the manuscripts (C) says that Cain means not only “wealth, belonging” but also “weapon” (p. 81). In fact in 2 Sam 21:16 the Hebrew term for “spear” is “Cain”. Some variants, selected at the discretion of the editor, have been reproduced in the translation, many more, some of them quite interesting, have not. One of such omissions is the variant of 5:2 in which manuscripts DE say that the name Adam comes from the Hebrew “clay, pottery, red earth, red dust”, an interpretation which is perfectly in tune with the Hebrew text of Gen 2:7. Variants such as that on p. 171 proposes the well known Trinitarian reading of the three guests in Gen 18 and 19, followed by a criticism of Jewish interpretation, which is “guilty” of assigning a non-Trinitarian meaning and is an example that suggests that the commentators were familiar with Jewish exegesis. More importantly, a variant in Gen 21:5 offers explicitly a faithful version of the Hebrew text as alternative to the G^əəz text (reflecting the Septuagint). It

des livres saints par excellence”, *Mar Barhadbšabba ʿArbaya, évêque de Hakwan (VI^e siècle). Cause de la fondation des écoles*, texte syriaque publié et traduit par Mgr ADDAÏ SCHER = *Patrologia Orientalis* 4, 4, Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907, p. 380 [66]. Among the Arab writers: Abu’l-Fadl Ibn al-ʿAssâl, *Kitâb al-Sabâ’ih fi jawâb al-nasâ’ih*, tasnîf al-shammâs ... b. al-Shaykh Fakhr al-Dawlah, al-Qâhirah: Matbaʿat ʿAyn al-shams, 1926, p. 116.

¹⁰ Cf. YAQOB BEYENE, *L’Unzione di Cristo nella Teologia Etiopica* = *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 215, Roma: Pontificium institutum studiorum orientalium, 1981, pp. 237–243.

is regrettable that such variants have not been translated and analysed. The *andāmtas* privilege a synchronic and allegorical reading of Scripture; thus, the Trinity, the sacrifice of the Cross, Mariology are introduced from the first verses of Genesis on. People, animate and inanimate creatures, events, sayings and objects of the Old Testament are taken as *amsal mǎrgäf/mǎssale* “*typoi*” of the New Testament. Last but not least: the language of the *andāmtas* is a treasure in its own right. For people familiar with Amharic there is plenty to enjoy while reading: passionate attention to single words and their ensuing elaboration, irony, humorous puns, rhymed prose, subtle syllogisms, popular sayings (such as: “the sheep spends its days with its butcher”, p. 82), touching examples from daily life to draw up analogies are some of the stylistic features that fascinate the reader. The interpreter is not a scholar dissociated from real life: on the contrary, he is in constant dialogue with a wider spectrum of interlocutors, from the farmer to the royal household. The above observations do not disavow the sheer volume of the material work Mersha has carried out, the long time dedication to this monumental work which will benefit researchers in the field of the *andāmta*. Mersha’s book is a doctoral thesis. It would be unfair to lay the criticism only at his doorsteps. Perhaps the work should have been monitored better by the field specialists who followed the candidate. The author is kind enough to thank me in the preface (as he has done in his article, recently published in *Aethiopica*).¹¹ I would have been happier had he forgotten the acknowledgements and paid heed to some of the advice I gave him after I read some parts of his book.

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OSVALDO RAINERI, *Il Gadl di san Pietro patriarca di Alessandria e ultimo dei martiri*. Edizione del testo etiopico e traduzione italiana = PO 51/5, fasc. 230, Turnhout: Brepols, 2010. Pp. 61 [= 583–643]. Price: € 30.00. ISBN-13: 978–2–503–54158–7.

If we take into account both the number and the variety of Christian texts still unpublished in oriental languages, we are confronted with two contradictory requirements: on the one hand there is a need to produce preliminary editions of a great amount of unpublished manuscripts, so that scholars may become aware not only of unknown texts, but also of the manuscript tradition of known texts; on the other hand, the main task of the scholar is to edit texts in a philological manner, an activity which includes a study of their collocation in the manuscript tradition, in the plurality of recensions and versions from

¹¹ MERSHA ALEHEGNE, “For a Glossary of Ethiopian Manuscript Practice”, *Aethiopica* 14, 2011 [2012], pp. 143–160, here 143, footnote *.