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STÉPHANE ANCEL, Paris

Review

ABBA ABRAHAM BURUK WOLDEGABER and MARIO ALEXIS PORTELLA,
*Abyssinian Christianity, the First Christian Nation? The History and the
Identity of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Christians*

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Editorial

The present issue of AETHIOPICA, like the preceding one, is partly monographic, with a section containing the proceedings of the Panel on Islamic Literature in Ethiopia: New Perspectives of Research, from the '19th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies', held in Warsaw, Poland, on 24–28 August 2015.

Starting from this issue, the annual bibliography on Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic linguistics held from its inception in 1998 for eighteen years by Rainer Voigt is handed over, on Voigt's own will, to a pool of younger scholars, with the substantial support of the AETHIOPICA editorial team. I would like on this occasion to express the deep gratitude of the editorial board of AETHIOPICA and of all scholars in Ethiopian Semitic and Cushitic linguistics to Rainer Voigt for his fundamental and valuable contribution.

Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
ÄthFor Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995).
AethFor Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011); 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG (*ibid.*, 2011f.); 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI (*ibid.*, 2012ff.).
AION *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale'*, Napoli: Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale' (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
CSCO Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.
EAE S. UHLIG, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C; II: D–Ha; III: He–N; in cooperation with A. BAUSI, eds, IV: O–X (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010); A. BAUSI in cooperation with S. UHLIG, eds, V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014).
EI² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I–XII (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960–2005).
EMML Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
JES *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
JSS *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Manchester 1956ff.
NEASt *Northeast African Studies*, East Lansing, MI 1979ff.
OrChr *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig–Roma–Wiesbaden 1901ff.
PICES 9 A.A. GROMYKO, ed., 1988, *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Ethiopian Studies, Moscow, 26–29 August 1986*, I–VI (Moscow: Nauka Publishers, Central Department of Oriental Literature, 1988).
RSE *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma, 1941–1981, Roma–Napoli 1983ff.
ZDMG *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Leipzig–Wiesbaden–Stuttgart 1847ff.

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The book is otherwise enriched by informative and useful materials: table of contents, a glossary, pictures, charts, appendices (five of them), three figures, five maps and 22 plates, etc. as well as a comprehensive bibliography as well as an index. Herewith I congratulate the author on his valuable contribution to Ethiopian studies.

Bairu Tafla, Universität Hamburg

ABBA ABRAHAM BURUK WOLDEGABER and MARIO ALEXIS PORTELLA, *Abyssinian Christianity, the First Christian Nation? The History and the Identity of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Christians* (Florence: Brendan Pringle, 2012). xiv, 343 pp., ill. Price: € 30.00. ISBN: 978-0-615-65297-9.

The title of this book is quite attractive and readers might have expected an honest overview of the history of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tāwəḥədo Church (EOTC) from the fourth century till today. Unfortunately, this work fails to present a comprehensive picture of EOTC history. Mainly based on secondary sources and on a few Catholic documents, this book manifests important methodological deficiencies, over-interpreting information from secondary sources, while failing to place the events it describes in their historical and social contexts. Rather, it proposes a re-interpretation of EOTC history according to an obsolete ethno-centric and ‘Catholic’ point of view.

The first part of the book is devoted to early times of the EOTC, from the time of the Aksumite kingdom to the Middle Ages. The first aim of this part is not to expose historical facts in a comprehensive way but to prove that Ethiopian Christianity preceded Armenian Christianity. The authors expose the weaknesses of the Armenian claims to be the first Christian Kingdom (pp. xi–xii) without presenting weaknesses in the Ethiopian case, despite the fact that it would have been intellectually honest to do so. Furthermore, the analysis is full of errors and mistakes. The authors for example explain (on page ix, see also footnote 16) that Frumentius went to Alexandria in 305, when all previous studies have dated this event to the tenure of bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, meaning between 328 and 335. The authors also claim that the people of Aksum (here called ‘Abyssinians’ – *sic!*) were already Christian before the arrival of Frumentius; according to the authors, this is thanks to the ‘Ethiopian’ Eunuch of queen Candace (pp. ix–x, 16–24), despite the refutation of this opinion by all previous scientific studies. The rest of this part is a mix of various information presented without any historical context: liturgical music is explained through the (legendary) figure of Yared without

mentioning the fact that this music may well have changed since the fifth century (pp. 42–50); the legend of the Queen of Sheba is told without any reference to the *Kəbrä nägäšt* (pp. 61–75). Errors multiply. For example, the *Fəṭṭa nägäšt* is not a Greek text written in 870 (p. 28); the Aksumite Kings were not ‘the supreme head of the church’ (p. 31); and the monastery of Gundä Gunde was not founded by Ḥṣṭifanos (p. 88).

Apparently, internal theological developments, in their local and international political and social contexts did not deserve the attention of the authors. According to them, the theological conflict—between Ethiopian orthodoxy and Catholicism—was based only on a misunderstanding (pp. 28–32). More problematically, the authors suggest that the EOTC should have followed Roman doctrine, but, because of the isolation of the country, it did not happen (p. 31). Thus, according to them, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church should be united with Rome, and later in the book, this speculative and teleological opinion allows them to justify the efforts of Rome to ‘re-unite’ the two Christian communities.

The second part of the book presents the role of Catholics in Ethiopia from the end of the Middle Ages to the present. Here, the reader understands that he is reading a hagiographical book rather than an historical work. Basically, the Ethiopian historical context is not presented in this part which is totally devoted to the praise of Catholic figures and the purported success of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia. Interestingly, the failure of the Jesuit missions (seventeenth century) is exposed only in a few pages (pp. 153–164); no information is given concerning the clear opposition to Catholics in Ethiopia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, except De Jacobi’s ‘martyrdom’; and finally no statistical data about the number of Catholics in Ethiopia is provided despite its availability (0.7 % of the population in 2007).

The third part of the book is entitled ‘Abyssinian Christian and National identity in its historical context’ and represents perhaps the worst part of the book. Simplistic pictures of Ethiopian populations and Ethiopian political contexts are mixed with racial, religious and theological points of view, exposing the ethnocentric stance of this book. For example, the chapter called ‘ethnographical elements of Abyssinia’ (pp. 258–259) presents an obsolete and racist picture of the Ethiopian population, divided between ‘Hamites’, ‘Semites’ and ‘Galla’ and, on page 268, the reader is quite shocked (but not really surprised) when the authors finally dare to claim that ‘true Abyssinians are Christians’. Even if it is not clearly explained in the book, we understand that the term ‘Abyssinians’ means Amhara–Təgṛean Christian people whom the authors consider to be the descendants of the Askumite people. As such, this book simply ignores historically proven movements of peoples and of intermixing, as well as the role (even the presence?) of Muslims and

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Protestants in the Ethiopian highlands and in the historical evolution of the EOTC.

Full of factual mistakes, based on over-interpretations and on opinions rather than historical analysis, this book is very far from scientific, but curiously, it has enjoyed welcome remarks and complaisant reviews.¹ Such a book is usually not reviewed in a scientific journal, but, because it was advertised, some comment seems appropriate, in order to inform those who are interested in the EOTC and its history.

Stéphane Ancel, Paris

JAMES DE LORENZI, *Guardians of the Tradition: History and Historical Writings in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015), 232 pp., 12 ill. Price: £ 70.00. ISBN: 978-15-804-6519-9.

James De Lorenzi is a remarkable scholar who has worked for many years on the modern history, mainly the intellectual history, of the Horn of Africa. His latest, and most interesting book deals with the work of Ethiopian and Eritrean intellectuals, examined in terms of tradition and cultural change. This topic has been analyzed by a great number of scholars, but is rarely treated in such a sweeping geographical-historical framework. Ethiopia and Eritrea are usually separate research themes; investigation into both areas is therefore the first merit of this volume, and this should be underlined here.

The historical background deals with the nineteenth–twentieth century, a period extremely relevant because of the encounter with foreign cultures and the challenges posed by colonialism. Three authors are examined in detail and their work is compared to the historical and cultural works of previous Ethiopian–Eritrean writers confronted with changes in the literary milieu and with new cultural developments.

The first chapter, ‘The Inherited Tradition’, deals with classical Ethiopian historiography and so-called vernacular historiography, ‘intended to preserve, refine, and transmit received knowledge—the historical truths that our fathers have told’ (see p. 28). The author tries to answer many questions and his sophisticated analysis is mainly focused on the different interpretations of the past. It is very well documented and, at the same time, a synthetic narrative presentation.

¹ <http://www.earlyafricanchristianity.com/blog/post.php?s=2014-07-11-ethiopian-christianity>; <http://www.ibtimes.com/ethiopia-first-christian-nation-1110400>.