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## THE THIRD LEVEL OF ETHIOPIAN COMMENTARIES ON THE APOCALYPSE: ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

**Robin McEwan**, *Picturing the Apocalypse at Gondär: A Study of the Two Known Sets of Ethiopian Illuminations of the Revelation of St John and the Life and Death of John*. Edited [posthumously] by Dorothea McEwan (Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2005) X + 252 pp., 142 figs. ISBN 88-419-296-X.

This book on Ethiopian art is of interest to all who deal with either Ethiopia or early Christian studies. Its late author, Robin McEwan, managed to frame the facts of the history of book illumination in the context of Ethiopian culture of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as a whole. Moreover, his commentary on the miniatures continuously refers to texts that preserve early Christian traditions of both commentaries on the Apocalypse and the life of apostle John. His wife, Dorothea McEwan who has now published his work, is herself a scholar who is very sensitive to such an approach. She is known, among other things, from her paper summing up findings in the field of Ethiopian illuminated manuscripts on the Apocalypse.<sup>1</sup>

So far, our knowledge of the Ethiopian exegetical tradition of the Apocalypse was basically limited to two commentaries, one in Ge'ez (*Tergwame Qalamsis*, translated from a lost Arabic original of Coptic origin somewhere in the 16<sup>th</sup> c.) and another in Amharic (*Andemta*).<sup>2</sup>

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(1) D. McEwan, *Illuminierte Manuskripte in Äthiopien: Entstehung, Bedeutung und Herstellung der beiden Manuskriptbücher der Apokalypse in Qwesqwam und Därasgä Maryam, Kirche und Schule in Äthiopien. Mitteilungsblatt der Tabor Society Heidelberg*, Heft 59 (2006) 39–50. See an enlarged English original ("Illuminated Manuscripts in Ethiopia: Origin, Meaning and Manufacture of Two Manuscripts Illuminating the Apocalypse in Qwesqwam and Därasgä Maryam") on the website of Tabor Society:

<http://www.tabor-society.de/Literatur.html>. Posted 25/01/2007.

(2) Cf., on all of this: Roger W. Cowley, *The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of St John in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (Cambridge, 1983) (Uni-

The latter was written down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but could contain much earlier material than the former. The Ethiopian scribes and traditional scholars are famous for their ability to know by heart enormous amounts of text, and this is why their oral tradition is surely not less stable than the written one. As I have been told by those who have worked with Ethiopian Church scholars, it was common until recently in Ethiopia, that if a manuscript reading turned out to be at variance with a text known by an authoritative teacher by heart, one would make preference to the reading known by the teacher. Be that as it may, the two sets of illustrations to the Apocalypse published by McEwan predate the writing of the *Andemta*, and so, are an important third evidence of the Ethiopian exegesis. This is why I dare to coin them the “third level” of the Ethiopian traditional commentary to the Apocalypse, beside two former “levels” of the *Tergwame Qalamsis* (below: *TQ*) and *Andemta* (below: *A*). Besides, both Ethiopian illumination sets cover the *Acta Iohannis* (CANT 218) known in many recensions and languages including Ethiopic (*BHO* 470).

Both Ethiopian illuminated manuscripts represent the same tradition of illumination, with very small variants. The manuscript of the church Dāräsge Maryam (19<sup>th</sup> c.) is now preserved in this church, in a remote part of Ethiopia. The color photographs were taken on location by the author. Its illuminations are reproduced without exception. Another manuscript is that of the British Library (BL) Or. 533 (first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.). Most of its illuminations (in total 24), while not all, are reproduced, the others being described verbally. Probably, such a decision is reasonable from the viewpoint of an art historian, while I regret this from my own viewpoint of a historian of exegesis. For instance, I would be very interested to see the illustration of “Babylon” (Rev. 14:8) that is available on the miniature of the BL manuscript only (cf. p. 155–156). Unlike most of the European exegesis where this fallen Babylon is Rome, the Ethiopian exegesis (both *TQ* and *A*) preserves an early tradition where Babylon is Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> What does “a Gondärine castle” mean, as McEwan describes this fallen city on the BL manuscript miniature (p. 156)?<sup>4</sup>

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versity of Cambridge Oriental Publications No. 33). Includes a publication of the *Tergwame Qalamsis* as well as the translation of the *Andemta* according to a printed edition of the Ethiopian Church.

(3) On this, see my notices in: B. ЛУРЬЕ, [review of]: Don K. Preston, Who is this Babylon? (Ardmore, 1999), XB 2 (8) (2000) 497–499 (in Russian).

(4) It is interesting to note that, in some difficult points, the illustrations are ambiguous. Thus, it is impossible to decide who is the second person, be-

The mutual relationship between the two illuminated manuscripts is the following: "Unless the painter had access to another set of illuminations, which was very similar to that of BL Or. 533 but which no longer exists or has not come to light, the resemblance suggests compellingly that he knew the Or. 533 set itself" (p. 69). In turn, the earliest manuscript was produced (between 1732 and 1740) by the order of Empress Mentewwab (or, according to her royal name, Mogäsa) for the church Däbrä Sehay at Qwesqyam, her residence and a new Church capital near Gondär.

The book contains an important introduction to the epoch of Mentewwab (ch. 2, p. 10–23, and also ch. 5 and 6, p. 40–66) and to the Ethiopian painting (ch. 3, p. 24–31) which make the book easily accessible to a large audience and simply a fascinating reading on the history of Ethiopia. Ch. 4 (p. 32–39), dedicated to apocalyptic and messianic ideas in Ethiopia (I would prefer to use the term *Reichseschatologie* by Gerhard Podskalsky<sup>5</sup>) is of special interest to all students of medieval apocalypticism, that is, to the traditions of the "historical eschatology". It is unfortunate, although quite natural, that the author ignores a brilliant historical analysis of this epoch provided by the late Sevir Chernetsov and published by him in Russian only.<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to judge whether the illumination exegesis of the epoch of Mentewwab had anything to do with the hot dogmatic discussions of that time, when the Christology of *Qəbat* became predomi-

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side Elias, in the pair of the "two witnesses" (Rev 11:3–7), Moses (as in TQ) or Enoch (as in A and most of the Christian exegetical traditions). The figures on the miniatures are equally compatible with both (p. 131–132).

(5) G. PODSKALSKY, *Byzantinische Reichseschatologie. Die Periodisierung der Weltgeschichte in den vier Grossreichen (Daniel 2 und 7) und dem tausendjährigen Friedensreiche (Apok. 20). Eine motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (München, 1972) (Münchener Universitäts-Schriften. Reihe der philosophischen Fakultät, 9).

(6) In his commentaries to the translation of the official royal chronicles of this period: *Эфиопские хроники XVII–XVIII веков. Введ. и заключ., пер. с эфиопского и комм. С. Б. Чернецова* (Москва, 1989) [*Ethiopian Chronicles of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Introduction and conclusion, translation from Ethiopic and commentaries by Sevir Chernetsov* (Moscow, 1989)]. Chernetsov published two monographs on the history of the Ethiopian Solomonide monarchy covering the period from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and commented translations (in three volumes) of the whole corpus of royal chronicles up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century inclusively. See the details in his bibliography in *Scr* 1 (2005) xxviii–xli.

nant.<sup>7</sup> However, a very indirect relation can be noticed. In fact, the *Qəbat* Christology was a reestablishment, in Ethiopia, of the mainstream monophysite theology of the Coptic Church.<sup>8</sup> But the very name of the Church capital of Mentewwab, Qwesqwam, refers to the quite important shrine in Egypt, Mount Qussqam, considered as the main abode of the Holy Family during their stay in Egypt. Therefore, an orientation of the Church politics of Mentewwab towards Egypt is without doubt. The illuminations of the Apocalypse are also a fruit of her Church politics, while we do not know whether these illustrations have any predecessors in the Coptic world.

All of us, the students of either Ethiopian culture or early Christian exegetical traditions, have to be very grateful to the author and the publishers of the beautiful book, and especially to Dorothea McEwan for her efforts to make this work known to the larger scholarly audience.

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(7) As the best introduction to this Christology, see: GETATCHEW HAILE, Materials on the theology of Qebat or unction, in: G. GOLDENBERG (ed.), *Ethiopian Studies. Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference, Tel-Aviv, 14–17 April 1980* (Rotterdam, 1986) 205–250.

(8) As it has been especially testified to by two Arabic letters of Coptic patriarchs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (published but, unfortunately, never translated into European languages): M. KAMIL, Letters to Ethiopia from the Coptic Patriarchs, Yo'annas XVIII (1770–1796) and Morqos VIII (1796–1809), *Bulletin de la Société d'archéologie copte* 6 (1940) 89–143.