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Psalter

In Ge'ez, manuscript on parchment

Ethiopia, nineteenth century (probably early nineteenth century)

ii + 140 + i folios on parchment, foliation added in pencil including flyleaves 1-142, in the existing foliation 138 is repeated, missing 2 leaves at the end (collation i^s ii-vi¹⁰ vii^s, viii-xiii¹⁰ xiv^s xv^s [-6, two leaves following f. 141 with loss of text]), original pricking and ruling visible on many leaves (justification 115-120 mm. x 70-81mm.), written in black ink in a neat "räqiq" hand (in use from the mid 17th to the late 19th century) in 23-24 lines, features of which suggest an early 19th century date, the only decoration is the usual red rubrics (alternate opening lines of principal texts, titles of component sections such as each psalm, canticle and sections of the Waddase Maryam), and bands of dots marking the principal text divisions, wear and staining through use to the edges of the leaves, red or dark blue threads have been sewn on the top right corners of some leaves, marking minor text divisions. Bound between wooden boards, apparently contemporary with the manuscript, covered in dark brown leather with a green fabric panel on the inside of the front board, no spine cover. Dimensions 150 x 95mm.

Ethiopian manuscripts are remarkable products of a living scribal culture that has survived from Antiquity until today. Their bindings often preserve structures similar to early Christian books from the fourth to the seventh centuries. Psalters are an excellent representative of this tradition, since they are one of the commonest of Ethiopian manuscripts, copied in great numbers for private devotion and for liturgical use. The Ethiopian recension of the psalms has an additional psalm (Ps. 151) which is only accepted as canonical by the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

PROVENANCE

1. Written in Ethiopia, probably in the early nineteenth century. There is no indication of an original or any other owner. Even private manuscripts often contain a note of the name of the original as well as subsequent owners. The absence of any endnotes or colophons, or any paintings which could aid dating means that providing a dating relies on palaeographic features. The "räqiq" hand used was current from the mid seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, but the general neatness of the hand and some letter shapes favor an early nineteenth century date rather than later.
2. Occasional small text erasures and overwriting including the insertion of incorrect numbering to the last three psalms: 158 for 149, 159 for 150, and 150 for 151 in the Ethiopian recension; repeated pen trials added on the back endleaf, f. 142, in Amharic.
3. Sold by Hartung u. Hartung, Munich, 2003.

TEXT

f. 1rv (flyleaf i), blank;

f. 2 (flyleaf ii), Short poem of five lines, English translation of the incipit, "Come unto me, David King of Israel, lord of psalm(s) and sweet of word(s) ...";

ff. 3-114, Psalms (*Mäzmurä Dawit*), the English translation of the incipit, "Instruction for the righteous and for sinners ..." [reading *ḥatə'an* "sinners" for *ḥatən*];

The Psalms were probably translated from Greek into Ge'ez in the late fifth century, the earliest evidence for which are quotations in inscriptions dating to the first half of the sixth century (Knibb, 1999, pp. 46-52). The oldest surviving manuscripts of the Psalms date, however, from the fourteenth century. The Ethiopic Psalms follow the numbering of the Greek Septuagint, with differences from the Hebrew and Western Bibles arising from variations in division. For instance, in the Hebrew Bible Pss. 9 and 10 correspond to Ps. 9 in the Septuagint, whilst Pss. 114 and 115 in the Hebrew Bible are counted as one Ps. 113, but Ps. 116 is split into two in the Septuagint and Ethiopian recensions as Ps. 114 and 115 (Heldman 2010). In addition, the Ethiopic Bible contains an additional psalm, numbered as 151 which is not part of the Western canon.

ff. 114v-125v, Canticles of the Prophets (*Mäḥaləyā Näbiyyat*);

These are a collection of "songs" drawn from the Old and New Testaments: First Song of Moses (Ex 15: 1-19), Second Song of Moses (Deut 32:1-21), Third Song of Moses (Deut 32: 22-43), Song of Hannah (1 Kgs [1 Sam] 2:1-10), Prayer of Hezekiah (Is 38:10-20), Prayer of Manasseh (apocryphal), Song of Jonah (Jon 2:3-10), First Song of the Three Youths in the Furnace (Dan 3:26-45), Second Song of the Three Youths in the Furnace (Dan 3:52-56), Third Song of the Three Youths in the Furnace (Dan 3:57-88), Song of Habakkuk (Hab 3:1-19), Song of Isaiah (Is 26:9-20), Song of Our Lady Mary, or the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), Song of Zachariah (Lk 1:68-79), Song of Simeon, or the Nunc Dimittis (Lk. 2:29-32).

ff. 125v-132, Song of Songs (*Mäḥaləyā Mäḥaləy*), known in the Ethiopian tradition as "The Song Songs of Solomon";

ff. 132v-141, Praise of Mary (*Wəddase Maryam*), ending imperfectly with the two leaves missing. An important Office of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and one of the three Offices for the Virgin Mary. Tradition attributes it to Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) or to Simeon the Potter, a Syrian poet of the fifth/sixth century. Neither attribution, however, is tenable. More likely is that the Ethiopian text was translated from Christian Arabic in the second half of the fourteenth century, when a large number of such translations were made under the auspices of the Ethiopian metropolitan, Abba Sälama the Translator (Weninger, 2010).

f. 142 (flyleaf iii), Various pen trials including repeated "fifteen gatherings" in Amharic.

The Psalter in the Ethiopian tradition normally comprises the Psalms, the Canticles of the Prophets, the Song of Songs, the *Wəddase Maryam* ("Praise of Mary") and the *Anqäṣä Bərhan* ("Gate of Light"). These last two are liturgical texts devoted to the Virgin Mary. The *Anqäṣä Bərhan* is missing from the present manuscript. The Ethiopian recension of the Psalms (*Mäzmurä Dawit*) follows the Greek Septuagint numbering (Heldman, 2010) and has an additional psalm (Ps. 151) which is only accepted as canonical by the Eastern Orthodox

Churches. Unusual amongst Ethiopian Christian texts, the Psalms, Canticles and the Song of Songs are always copied in a single column of lines of unequal length, or stichs. All other texts are written in one, two or occasionally, in larger manuscripts, three justified columns. The Psalter is one of the commonest of Ethiopian manuscripts, being produced in great numbers for private devotion as well as for church use. Copies of the Ethiopian Psalter are to be found in all the major European and American collections.

Ethiopia is home to a remarkable Christian tradition dating back at least to the fourth century. Until the seventh century Ethiopia maintained close contact with the Coptic Church; after the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the 640s, the Orthodox church of Ethiopia developed largely in isolation. Medievalists and historians of the book are particularly interested in Ethiopian manuscripts, since an active scribal culture was preserved there well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Psalter described here is written in Ge'ez, a syllabic script traditionally used for Ethiopian liturgical texts, in red and black ink on parchment pages.

Ethiopian manuscripts, even those of a relatively late date such as the present example, are marvellous because their binding structures survive as archetypes of early Christian, specifically Coptic, codices from the fourth to seventh centuries (see Szirmai, 1999, pp. 45-50). The quires are sewn with unsupported link-stitch and then laced into rough-hewn wooden boards. The flat spine in our manuscript was left uncovered, making this an ideal binding for classroom use, since the sewing and quire structure are easily examined.

LITERATURE

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