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Ethiopian Psalter: Psalms, Canticles of the Prophets, Song of Songs, and *Wəddase Maryam* (Praise of Mary)

In Ge'ez, manuscript on parchment

Ethiopia, c. 1900-1950

142 folios, unfoliated, complete (collation i² ii⁸⁺¹ iii-ix¹⁰ x⁸⁺¹ xi-xiv¹⁰ xv⁸⁺¹ xvi¹⁰ xvi¹⁴, final leaf blank), ruled in blind (justification 70 x 100 mm.), prickings top, bottom, and outer margins, written in a single column on 23 long lines, except for the last text beginning f. 127, written on two columns, by several Raqiq hands in black with the usual rubrics in red, designating the opening lines of textual divisions, one small ink vignette, thumbing and occasional stains, repair of parchment with stitching on several folios, CONTEMPORARY ETHIOPIAN BINDING executed in the original Coptic manner, with exposed string outside quires which at four places is looped into hewn wooden boards, then tied back onto the twine itself, in string-tied parchment book bag or carrying satchel (string defective, back board with evidence of insect predation, not active). Dimensions c. 95 x 140 mm.

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; here the survival of the book bag or satchel is a special feature. 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 to the present day. This Psalter must have been used to guide the private prayers of its owners.

PROVENANCE

1. The manuscript is undated; the principal hand employed here is of a style called Raqiq (literally "slender") that has been in use from the seventeenth century until the present day. Certain palaeographic features, such as faint serifs at the top and bottom of vertical strokes, suggest that the manuscript was written in the twentieth century.
2. Private North American Collection.

TEXT

The texts in our manuscript, following the tradition of Ethiopian Psalters, include the Psalms, the Canticles of the Prophets, the Song of Songs, and the *Wəddase Maryam* ("Praise of Mary"). These are followed by an extensive prayer to the Virgin Mary. On one leaf (written in Amharic) is a short remedy or "spell," which seems to include using parts of a chameleon. At the end of the text is a sequence of prayers to the Virgin Mary.

1. Psalms (*Māzmurä Dawit*); numbered;

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.

2. Canticles of the Prophets (*Mäḥaləyə Näbiyyat*);

These are a collection of canticles or “songs” drawn from the Old and New Testament: 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).

3. Song of Songs (*Mäḥaləyə Mäḥaləy*), known in the Ethiopian tradition as “The Song Songs of Solomon”;

4. *Wəddase Maryam* (Praise of Mary); two unidentified Marian texts; list of lucky and unlucky days.

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 many such translations were made under the auspices of the Ethiopian metropolitan, Abba Sälama the Translator (Weninger, 2010).

The Psalter is one of the commonest of Ethiopian manuscripts, being produced in great numbers for private devotion as well as for liturgical use in churches. Copies of the Ethiopian Psalter are to be found in all the major European and American collections. Unusual amongst Ethiopian Christian texts, the Psalms, Canticles, and the Song of Songs are always copied – as here – 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.

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 marvelous because their binding structures survive as archetypes of early Christian, specifically Coptic, codices from the fourth to seventh centuries (Szirmai, 1999, pp. 45-50; Boudalis, 2017). 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. The book bag or satchel further enhances the physicality of the binding and warrants comparison with medieval girdle books and transportable book boxes.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Ethiopic Manuscripts," Yale University, Beinecke Library

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Ethiopian Manuscripts at the Wellcome Collection, London

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works?query=ethiopian&workType=h>

British Library, Endangered Archives Programme

<https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP286>

University of Toronto, Gunda Gunde Collection

<https://gundagunde.digital.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/gundagunde%3Apublic>

Ethiopian Collection, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

<https://art.thewalters.org/browse/category/ethiopia/>

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