

Ethiopian Biblical Commentaries on the Prophet Micah

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INTRODUCTION

Ethiopian commentaries on Sacred Scriptures are a corpus of traditional teaching. They comment on all books of the Bible, following a relatively uniform methodology. Moreover, they represent traditional teaching inasmuch as they form part of the Ethiopian theological tradition of eastern Christianity. In turn, this ancient Ethiopian tradition is an heir of the traditional branches of Antiochene and Alexandrian Christianity, which precede and accompany it over the centuries until today.

Biblical commentaries in the Ge^{ez} language are the result of a complex process of transmission of over fifteen hundred years. Cowley distinguishes three groups of commentaries: a group made up of translations of exegetical commentaries which are Alexandrian-Greek in origin; a later group, composed of translations of Syrian, Coptic and Arabic sources, that are in the ancient theological and exegetical tradition of Antioch; and, a group made up of original Ge^{ez} compositions that combine material derived from the first two groups and add material of their own¹. In the process of both oral and written transmission, these translations were eventually assumed, re-interpreted and enriched by the Ethiopian Christian tradition, that endowed them with its own personality and character.

At the end of this process are the exegetical commentaries in the Amharic language. They represent, according to Cowley, the translation and combination of literary sources in Ge^{ez}. The number and variety of sources is such that we can no longer say that one source is more dominant than others².

The existence of these exegetical commentaries is practically unknown outside the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, whose mission has been to keep and faithfully transmit them from generation to generation. Most of the

1 R. COWLEY. *The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of St. John in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church* (OrP 33: Cambridge 1983) 35-40.

2 COWLEY. *The Traditional Interpretation*. 41-42.

commentaries are in the form of privately owned, parchment manuscripts³. These have been handed down from masters to disciples, until today.

Although some European libraries have had a number of these manuscripts and commentaries in their possession for over a century, western scientific interest in their study has been shown only in the last quarter of a century. It was the late Dr. Roger Cowley, an Anglican missionary in Ethiopia and a great linguist and researcher, who made them known to western circles of biblical research.

Dr. Cowley published two books that although covering a very small portion of the material available, must form the starting point of any scientific research on this topic. These books are: *'The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of St. John'*⁴ and *'Ethiopian Biblical Tradition: A Study in Exegetical Tradition and Hermeneutics'*⁵. Furthermore, the same author published in scientific reviews a considerable number of monographs dealing with Ethiopian exegesis.

To the aforementioned publications we ought to add two doctoral dissertations that study these commentaries. Kirsten Pedersen wrote *'Traditional Ethiopian Exegesis of the Book of Psalms'*⁶. Furthermore, W. Tensae Andeberhan wrote *'Commentari Etiopici sul Libro del Profeta Osea'*⁷. The titles of these books show the inchoative character of the research undertaken in this field. Ultimately, it seems to us that further acquaintance in the western world with this ancient heritage will enrich both the science and faith of the Christian tradition.

To the question as to why it took such a long time before western scholars became interested in the field of Ethiopian exegesis, we reply along with Pedersen: first, the manuscripts are very few in number and extremely difficult to find; second, the few western researchers who eventually got to know these commentaries, perhaps failed to understand or realise the value of this kind of exegesis; finally, it may be due to the small number of scholars who know the Ge'ez and Amharic languages and who, at the same

3 So far only the following commentaries to biblical books have been printed: the Book of Psalms, the Five Books of Solomon (Proverbs: Tagsas [chpts 1-4 correspond to Hebrew Proverbs chpts 25-28 and chpts 5 and 31.10-21 correspond to Hebrew Proverbs 29]; Wisdom, Ecclesiastes and Songs of Songs), Ecclesiasticus, Ezekiel, the four Gospels, Acts, the Epistles of St. Paul, the Catholic Epistles and Revelation.

4 This work was published by the University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 33: Cambridge 1983.

5 This work was published by University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 38: Cambridge 1988.

6 This work was published in ÄthFor 36: Wiesbaden 1995.

7 This work was published in ÄthFor 40: Wiesbaden 1994.

time, are familiar with biblical studies (particularly patristic exegesis), so that they can start this kind of research⁸.

This book is made up of three main parts. The first introduces the methodological considerations and presents a detailed description of our sources. The second part analyses the literary form of this kind of exegesis and the use of technical vocabulary. The third part contains the main object of our research: the text-critical edition of Ethiopian exegetical commentaries on the prophet Micah. Here, we also present an English translation of the manuscripts edited. Therefore, we favour a synchronic study of the manuscripts covered, so as to complement the diachronic approach which Cowley, Pedersen and WoldeTensae Andeberhan adopted.

I would not like to finish this foreword without giving a proper acknowledgement to all those who have helped me with this work and whose contribution has been extremely important. First of all, I would like to thank Don Osvaldo Raineri, professor of the Ge^cez language and Ethiopic literature at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome. I would like to express too my special thanks to Megabie Beluiat Seife Sellassie Yohannes, professor of Old Testament Literature in Saint Paul Orthodox Seminary, Addis Ababa, and professor of the Ge^cez Language at the Holy Trinity Orthodox Theological Faculty at the University of Addis Ababa. With devotion and perseverance he revised and made necessary corrections, sometimes substantial, to all my translations. I am also grateful to Memher Alemayehu Moges, Professor emeritus of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Abeba University, who revised and made important corrections to my English translations of the Ge^cez manuscripts. I would also like to thank Dr. Demeke Berhane, Director of the Manuscript Section of the Faculty of Ethiopian Languages, Addis Abeba University. With great availability and guidance he helped me to perform the difficult task of finding and classifying the manuscript material I needed to study. Also a word of thanks to Professor Victor Jaccarini, S.J. and Mr. Bernard Conroy, F.S.C., who helped to proof-read the English part of the manuscript. Last but not least, I would like to thank many other friends gave me their support in many ways and helped me finish this publication.

8 K.S. PEDERSEN. *Traditional Ethiopian Exegesis of the Book of Psalms* (ÄthFor 36: Wiesbaden 1995)1-2.