CHAPTER NINE
THE ETHIOPIC VERSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Rochus Zuurmond
Revised by Curt Niccum

INTRODUCTION

Since the printing of Walton’s polyglot, the Ethiopic version (Eth) has found a place in the praxis of New Testament textual criticism. Due to the obscurity of the language and paucity of resources, this seldom entailed more than referencing one or two printed editions.1 As the deficiencies of this practice became more and more clear, pleas for critical editions of the Eth NT began appearing, which until recently went unheeded.2 Thankfully, the last two decades have seen a flurry of activity bringing greater clarity to the early history of Ethiopian Christianity and its texts.3 As a result, informed assessments of Eth’s value as a witness to the transmission history of the Greek NT are now possible.

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1 The two almost exclusively employed are the Roman (1548) and Platt (1830) editions. The former does not always represent the Versio Antiqua, as even Ludolf noted (see n. 4). Also, in those places where the MSS used by the editors had lacunae, they translated the missing passages from the Latin Vulgate. Platt’s edition is even more useless for text-critical purposes, as it represents a thoroughly eclectic text, with many later elements of Arabic influence.


3 In addition to the specific volumes discussed below, attention to the following series, in which significant contributions continue to appear, should be noted: Äthiopistische Forschungen (Harrassowitz), CSCO, Scriptores Aethiopic i (Peeters), and Ethiopic Manuscripts, Texts, and Studies (Pickwick). Another important tool is Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, the first three volumes of which have appeared (ed. S. Uhlig; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001–).
I. History of Research

Research on anything connected with Ethiopia begins with Job Ludolf. Although he labored more than three hundred years ago, his oeuvre is still a treasury one should never overlook. He was the first, and for a long time the only one, to discuss the Ethiopic version of the NT. Many of his basic insights still hold.

In his Historia Aethiopica, Ludolf suggested the fourth or fifth century as the version’s date of origin, staunchly defending a Greek Vorlage. Ten years later, in his Commentarius, realizing that parts of the NT may have had a different transmission history, he modified this opinion by admitting that more than one translation may have circulated in Ethiopic, but still none originating other than from the Greek.⁴

This thesis of a multiple origin was sensible in view of the doublets and conflations that characterized Eth already in MSS as early as the fourteenth century.⁵ But a number of questions remained. Were the copious doublets indeed the result of more than one translation? Might they evidence revision instead? One would also like to know whether these translations or revisions covered the whole of the NT, what was their origin and what were

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⁴ Job Ludolf, Historia Aethiopica (Frankfurt am Main: J.D. Zunner, 1681), §III:4: “The Ethiopic version of the Bible undoubtedly originates from a Greek text. In a pure and complete form, however, it is not yet available in Europe.” This last remark refers to the editio princeps (Rome, 1548), and rightly so. Cf. Ludolf, Commentarius ad suam Historian Aethiopicam (Frankfurt am Main: J.D. Zunner, 1691), 295: “It is impossible to assume that the Ethiopic version which is current in Europe, both of the Old and of the New Testament, was translated from the Arabic.” Furthermore, “We shall not deny that different translations of Scripture exist in Ethiopia … but we are in no way convinced that a more recent one has been translated from the Arabic” (p. 297). (In the last remark, Ludolf speaks of the OT, and of the NT only by implication.) See also Edward Ullendorff, Ethiopia and the Bible: The Schweich Lectures 1967 (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 37.

⁵ Examples include MS 3 (Ab-text, twelfth/fourteenth century), which, when translating ἐδίδου καρπόν in Matt 13:8, combines the reading “was fruitful” of MSS 1 and 2 (Aa-text, sixth century) with the more literal reading “gave fruit” of MS 12 (B-text, thirteenth/fourteenth century). This conflation is common in MSS of the C type from the late fourteenth century onward. MS 12, which was used for the editio princeps, although presenting a rather pure B-text, is not without conflations of the same kind. One finds an example in Matt 13:14, where καὶ οὖν αναπληροῦται is translated with a doublet: “that might come and be fulfilled.” The first element represents the A text, while the second is typical of the B text. Again this conflation becomes the standard text in C MSS from the late fourteenth century onward. The Eth classification and enumeration follows Zuurmond, Novum Testamentum Aethiopicum: The Synoptic Gospels, part 1: General Introduction, part 2: Edition of the Gospel of Mark (ÄF 27; Stuttgart: Steiner, 1989), 1:48 ff.