ON LOANS AND ADDITIONS TO THE FIDÄL (ETHIOPIC) WRITING SYSTEM

Azeb Amha

Introduction

Fidäl is the local name of the writing system widely used in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Both countries make use of other scripts as well, but fidäl is undoubtedly the major script used for administrative and educational purposes. Fidäl is known by various names among scholars: the Ethiopic, Ge’ez, Abyssinian, Ethiopian or Amharic writing system. It was originally used for writing the classic Ethio-Semitic language, Ge’ez. A rich heritage of inscriptions in stelae, old parchment manuscripts, numerous religious and secular books as well as annotations on icons and scrolls has been preserved with this writing system. Currently fidäl is used for writing a number of Ethiopian languages from the Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan language families.

A number of scholars claim that fidäl is the result of the gradual transformation of the Sabaean/Minean script (Coulmas 1989, Diringer 1968, Getachew Haile 1996, Jensen 1970). The two writing systems are indeed strikingly similar (see examples below). The contrasting view that fidäl originated in Ethiopia has also been proposed (Asres 1959, Bernal 1990, Wossene 1990, Ayele Bekerie 1997). Hudson (2002: 1767) suggests a middle position, i.e., that there was a common South Semitic writing from which the Sabean writing system and fidäl further developed independently. As justification for his view, Hudson refers to the dating of inscriptions from Ethiopia/Eritrea and Yemen, which point at the contemporaneity of the two writing systems (cf. also Drewes 1962, Ricci 1994, among others). Thus, the question of origin is still

---

1 I am grateful to Alex de Voogt, Baye Yimam and a reviewer for helpful comments on earlier versions of the paper.
2 Ge’ez ceased to be used as a mother tongue language since the ninth century. However, it is still used in religious services in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church.
3 See a review of Ayyele Bekerie’s book by T. Daniels posted at: http://www3.aa.tufs.ac.jp/~aflang/TEXTS/review/Daniels.html
In Section 2 we compare the Sabean writing system to the Ge’ez writing system in order to demonstrate the qualitative and quantitative differences and similarities between the two scripts. When Ge’ez ceased to be a spoken language, the script was employed for writing Amharic and later other Ethio-Semitic languages such as Tigrigna. This brought about a number of additions and modifications in the script, as we show in Section 3. The first written Amharic text dates back to the fourteenth century (cf. Richter 1997), but broader use of written Amharic for educational purpose is relatively recent. Use in education necessitated yet more adaptations and additions to the script. These developments will also be discussed in Section 4. The third stage of modifications and additions can be observed from recent times when fidäl was used for writing certain Ethiopian Semitic (other than Amharic and Tigrigna), Cushitic and Nilotic languages, the consequences of which will be discussed in Section 5.

Fidäl I: The Script of Ge’ez Compared to Sabean

The oldest form of fidäl, used for writing Ge’ez, appeared around the year 350 (cf. Jensen 1970: 243). Ge’ez-fidäl contained twenty-six basic graphemes (cf. Table 2). Twenty-four of these graphemes have strikingly similar parallels in the Sabaean script (see some examples in Table 1). The differences include orientation (straight vs, tilting), direction, length and presence or absence of part of a grapheme. In a few cases e.g., ኮ (sä) and ዳ (zä), the graphemes are significantly different from that of the Sabaean writing. Table 1 includes examples of Ge’ez graphemes (indicated by the arrow) and their corresponding Sabean forms to the left (See Asher 1994: 1149).

There are other substantial differences between the two systems. An important innovation in the initial stage of writing Ge’ez involved the addition of two graphemes to represent the bilabial ejective (p’), represented in Ge’ez by ኢ and the voiceless bilabial stop (p) written as ቴ. The consonant segments represented by these graphemes came into the Ethio-Semitic languages through Greek and Latin loans such as: ካ’ap’p’as (አአሁ) ‘bishop’, ኣር ሳም (ክርጄ) ‘table’ and ካ’ስ (ፖለስ), ድ (ፖስታ). In Amharic, some speakers still replace, ሳ (قة) with ትpronouncing the words police and posta as bolis and bosta.

Initially, the Ge’ez writing system was non-vocalized just like Sabean. Until about 350 AD the graphemes represented only consonants and