The focus of this article is the dedicatory colophon and the note of donation of the Four Gospels of Däbrä Mä’är. With elaborate Canon tables, a preface of three full-page miniatures, and four evangelist portraits, the Däbrä Mä’är Gospels is a manuscript de luxe. The three miniatures showing the Crucifixion, the Holy Women at the Tomb, and the Ascended Christ are the earliest known example of what is recognized as an iconographically distinctive Gospel preface. Thus, because of the significant position of this manuscript in the history of Ethiopian manuscript illumination, the translation and discussion of the colophon and note of donation is preceded by a brief discussion of the relationship of the preface miniatures of the Four Gospels of Däbrä Mä’är to other Ethiopian illuminated manuscripts of the Four Gospels dating to the late 13th and 14th cent.

Although a prefatory cycle of Christological miniatures appears in several of the earliest extant illustrated Gospel books, namely the 6th-cent. Greek Rossano Gospels and the Syriac Rabbula Gospels dated A.D. 586,1 the earliest extant Christological preface in an Ethiopic Gospel book is found in the so-called Gospels of abba Iyăsus Mo’a of Däbrä Ḥayq Astifanos dated A.D. 1280/81.2 This is probably not the first Christological preface ever to have been produced for an Ethiopic manuscript of the Four Gospels, but, because

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* Dr. Monica S. Devens is responsible for the translation of the colophon and the note of donation. She also provided provisional translations of the additional notes, which require further study, and thus do not appear in their entirety in this publication.


this is the earliest extant prefatory cycle of Christological miniatures, writing the history of the Christological preface in Ethiopian manuscript illumination must begin with this manuscript. Most earlier Ethiopic manuscripts of the Four Gospels did not survive what Getatchew Haile has termed «a systematic destruction of the past on religious grounds», which occurred some time after the establishment of the so-called Solomonic dynasty in 1270.3 Furthermore, the late Sevir B. Chernetsov observed evidence of the destruction of historical writings during this same period.4 The fourteen-miniature Christological preface of the Gospels of abba Iyāsus Mo’a begins with the Annunciation to Mary, ends with the Ascension of Christ, and includes full-page miniatures of Christ’s Infancy and Passion.5 This Christological preface cycle served as the essential model for the fourteen-miniature Christological preface in the manuscript of the Four Gospel created ca. 1320 at Däbrä Ḥaŷq Ṣṭifanos for the monastery’s abbot, Krōstos Tāsfānā, although the miniatures of the latter’s Gospel book are by no means always direct copies of the former.6 This extended Christological preface inspired the creation of similar prefaces in other Ethiopic manuscripts of the Four Gospels of the late 14th and 15th cent.7

The Christological preface of the Däbrä Mā’ar Gospels, preceded by a set of elaborately decorated Canon tables8 and followed by four Evangelist portraits, is limited to only three full-page miniatures — the Crucifixion, the Holy Women at the Tomb, and the Ascended Christ. In Marilyn Heldman’s


5 The miniatures of this remarkable manuscript have not been published in their entirety; for a complete list of the miniatures, EMML V, 293–301.

6 For lists of the miniatures of the Christological prefaces of these two manuscripts of the Gospels produced at Däbrä Ḥaŷq Ṣṭifanos, see Heldman et al., African Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia (New Haven & London, 1993), 176–177.


8 Canon tables are a tabular form of Gospel concordance that demonstrate the harmony of the Four Gospels. See M. E. Heldman, «Canon tables», in: EÆ I, 680–681.