

# Preface

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It was Dr. Loren Bliese who first told me about the collection of manuscripts at the Mekane Yesus Seminary library in Addis Ababa. Dr. Bliese was a former president of the seminary and worked with the United Bible Society in Ethiopia on translation projects for several languages, most notably the Afar language, on which Bliese had written his doctoral dissertation. We met by chance at the regional Society of Biblical Literature Meeting which was held in early May, 2009, at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. Based on his experience with the phenomenon of seemingly-spontaneous poetic composition in cultural gatherings in Ethiopia, he presented a paper analyzing the chiasmic structures of an Old Testament book. I presented a paper on the marking of the midpoint of Ethiopian Psalters. We discovered that we were both working in Ethiopia (Dr. Bliese for many decades; I for just a few years) and that we lived within about 75 miles of one another. A few weeks later I visited him at his home and we talked about things Ethiopian. It was at this time he told me the fascinating story of *Aläqa* Meseret Sebhät Le-ab and of his remarkable collection of manuscripts there at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa.

Within a couple of weeks I had contacted *Ato* Meheret-Ab Bereke, librarian at Mekane Yesus Seminary and, with their permission, made arrangements to digitize the collection. This was accomplished by me and *Ato* Kaleab Demeke on July 2–4, 2009 in the seminary's computer lab. We were assisted throughout by *Ato* Waktola Walda Michael from the library staff.

Almost as we were shooting the manuscripts, my friend, *Ato* Demeke Berhane, head of manuscripts at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, helped to devise a handlist of the manuscripts. I began to think of people we might ask to help with the process of cataloguing and describing the collection.

About this same time, another friend, Dr. Tim Teusink, a medical doctor working in Addis, introduced me to Dr. Ralph Lee. After his undergraduate work at Cambridge, Ralph had earned a PhD from the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, in Chemical Engineering. He and his wife, Sara, then moved to Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, where they lived for more than a half-dozen years and where he helped the University of Bahir Dar to establish a program in Chemical Engineering. This work earned him

an Alumnus of the Year award from the University of Strathclyde in 2001. Recently, Ralph has been living in Addis, studying Gəʼəz, and teaching at Holy Trinity Theological College. Ever the student, Ralph was in the final stages of another PhD program in the Department for the Study of Religions, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He has since completed his thesis on the topic of 'Symbolic Interpretations in Ethiopic and Ephremic Literature,' supervised by Dr E C D Hunter. Ephremic literature has formed a rich resource for Ethiopic writings, including Ethiopic musical literature. Almost ten of the manuscripts in the collection at Mekane Yesus seminary come with musical notation. I asked Ralph if he would contribute a small introduction to –Yaredawi,” the musical tradition which flows from Ethiopia’s musical genius, Saint Yared.

Dr. Bliese and Mekane Yesus Seminary librarian, Ato Meheret-Ab, were in a perfect position to gather information about Meseret’s life and they set about working on a draft of his biography.

I had met Dr. Marilyn Heldman in May of 2008 when I gave a talk at the Library of Congress. She had been doing work there in the collection of materials recently acquired from the estate of Thomas Leiper Kane. With enthusiasm she showed us some of the more interesting pieces. She is probably the leading authority in North America on Ethiopian illuminations and editor of the magnificent book called *Africa Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia* (Yale: University Press, 1993). Having completed the digitization of the collection, I knew that there were several nice illuminations in the collection. Dr. Heldman agreed to write an article on these.

All through this time I had ongoing relations with the Pankhursts and Richard was kind enough to agree to write a foreword.

In November of 2009, the International Conference of Ethiopian Studies was held at the Akaki campus of Addis Ababa University a few miles outside of Addis proper. Those who were in Addis for the conference—Ralph Lee, Loren Bliese, Meheret-Ab, Demeke Berhane and I—met at Mekane Yesus Seminary and finalized plans for the production of a catalog.

In late December I was back to Addis to set up the implementation phase of a project to digitize the manuscripts and archives department at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies. The British Library’s Endangered Archives Programme provided a grant to complete this project (EAP 286) and it called for six months of digitization on four stations in Addis Ababa. Jeremy Brown, a former student and, more recently, colleague in the Ethiopian Manuscript Imaging Project (EMIP) went to Ethiopia to be the on-site director of digitization for the project. He was there, in Addis, for five of the

six months of the project. Jeremy has developed an interest in scribal intervention in Ethiopian manuscripts, and has studied the ways in which scribes add material in margins and between the lines to correct and clarify the text and also how they delete material in an Ethiopian book. In addition to studying this phenomenon in manuscripts in the EMIP and IES collections, he travelled to Collegeville for a week in August of 2009 to study scribal intervention in all of the Ethiopian manuscripts from the seventeenth century and earlier which they have in their collections. Based on this expertise, Jeremy agreed to write an article on the scribal interventions in the Mekane Yesus collection.

While in the final stages of the IES digitization project in Addis, in May and June of 2010, a manuscript of Jubilees and the Minor Prophets came to my attention elsewhere in Addis. The manuscript was in the hands of a dealer. We purchased the manuscript for a reasonable price and, since I am determined not to remove any of Ethiopia's manuscripts from the country, I needed to decide to which institution we would make the donation. In the past few years I have donated five manuscripts to the IES, one to *Mahibere Kidusan* (a youth organization in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church whose offices are adjacent to the Patriarch's compound), and one to the Patriarch's library. In this case, I decided to donate the manuscript to Mekane Yesus Seminary and did so in June of 2010. It became MYS 54 / EMIP 654.

It was just a month or two later that I met Ted Erho in Collegeville. Ted, a former student at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, Canada, is well into a PhD program at the University of Durham. He was in Collegeville to study old Ethiopian manuscripts, particularly of Enoch and Jubilees. We looked at MYS 54 together and he showed great interest in its age and text. I asked him to write up a brief analysis of the textual affiliations of the manuscript in relation to the families of texts identified by James VanderKam.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, another of my students, Sara Vulgan, has spent some time working with EMIP. While Jeremy and I were in Addis digitizing the IES collection, she reviewed the images of the Mekane Yesus Collection and identified those that were blurry or needed, for various other reasons, to be re-shot. Armed with her list, we took a couple of stations over to Mekane Yesus in June of 2010 and digitized those folios that needed it. Sara has developed an interest in codicology, generally, and Ethiopian codicology, in

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<sup>1</sup> James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, 2 vols. CSCO 510/511; SA 87/88; (Louvain: Peeters, 1989).

particular. I asked her to work with me on an article which can serve as an introduction to some of the characteristics of Ethiopian codicology.

We experienced one delay during this timeframe. The library staff at the seminary had been unable to locate one of the manuscripts, MYS 44. It had not been digitized as part of the initial work on the collection in July of 2009. We believed that this was an important work and a rare copy (maybe one of only a handful of copies) of a work written in Amharic, in the early twentieth century, by *Aläqa Tayye Gäbrä Maryam*. The work is called *A Theological Critique of Certain Practices of the Orthodox Church*. *Aläqa Tayye* was born in 1858 and lived until August, 1924. We were quite anxious to recover the book and were therefore delighted when we received word that the book had been found. Because of its odd format, it had been stored in a different location from the rest of the collection. But, now that it had been located, we digitized it in June of 2010, at the same time we were re-shooting blurry images from the other manuscripts.

At this point, the scope of the catalogue was growing by stages. We made the decision to separate the catalogue into two part volumes. In the former, we have included the foreword by Pankhurst, the biography by Bliese and Meheret-Ab, the articles by Lee and Erho and the catalogue entries for the fifty-four manuscripts. In the companion volume we placed those articles that are accompanied by color plates: Jeremy's article on scribal intervention, Sara's and my article on Ethiopian codicology and, especially, Marilyn's article on the illuminations in the collection. By segregating these into a separate volume, the cost of the volumes can be kept down.

Our thanks extend to *Ato* Demeke for his help in so many ways when we are in Ethiopia and for the delightful times we have spent together with his family. We are grateful to Ralph Lee for reviewing the Gəʼəz and Amharic text in the volume and for catching some errors. Finally, I mention again Dr. Bliese, with whom this odyssey began. His generosity and hospitality have inspired and guided the project.