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Acts in Ethiopia—Transmission History

Only recently has the Ethiopic version excited interest among those engaged in New Testament textual criticism. One can hardly fault scholars of previous generations for sidestepping it. In addition to the language's obscurity, those investigators possessing facility in Ge'ez drew text critical conclusions based on limited and uncritically evaluated witnesses.[1] Furthermore, extrapolations made from statistically insignificant data resulted in negative assessments of the Ethiopic Bible's overall value for the discipline. By the end of the nineteenth century, text critics understandably downplayed the importance of this version.

In the 1950s a major shift took place when Arthur Vööbus and Marie-Émile Boismard both ascribed primary importance to the Ethiopic version for New Testament text criticism. First, Vööbus claimed the Ge'ez texts preserved remnants of the lost Old Syriac Gospels.[2] Boismard then countered: the translation of the Fourth Gospel preserved instead portions of the original "Western" text. Those "Syriac" elements identified by Vööbus, he argued, clearly attested the Peshitta rather than the *Vetus Syra* and derived from one of two later revisions of the Urtext.[3]

These mutually contradictory theories derived from very different understandings of Ethiopia's transmission history. Even though they originally concerned the evolution of the Ge'ez Gospels, the respective

[1] See Ludolf, *Historia*, Book 3, chapter 4, 2–7, and *Commentarius*, 295–97; Dillmann, "Äthiopische Bibelübersetzung," 203–206; Zotenberg, *Catalogue*, 24, 30–31; Guidi, "Traduzione," 5–37; de Lagarde, *Ankündigung*, 28; Conti Rossini, "Sulla versione," 236; and Hackspill, "Evangelienübersetzung," 117.

[2] Vööbus, *Spuren*; idem, "Ta'amera," 46–67; and idem, *Early Versions*.

[3] Boismard, "Review," 455.

hypotheses influenced treatments of other portions of the New Testament including the Acts of the Apostles. Since resolution of this problem must precede text critical assessment, what, then, is the history of the Ethiopic version of Acts?

One might expect to find the beginning of Ethiopian Christianity in the historical narrative itself, for Acts 8:26–40 records the conversion of an "Ethiopian" eunuch.[4] By no means is the solution so easy, for Αἰθιοπία could represent any point within a broad geographical area extending south and east of the borders of the Roman Empire.[5] Therefore the eunuch's designation as an "Ethiopian" cannot determine precisely his provenance. Instead, his identity as the treasurer of the Κανδάκη, a title for the queen-mother of the kingdom of Meröe, marks him as Nubian rather than Axumite.[6] Thus the beginnings of Christianity in Ethiopia proper must be sought elsewhere.

Unfortunately, legend obscures its earliest history, a situation further muddied by ambiguous archeological evidence. In all likelihood Frumentius, sometimes referred to as Abba Salama in Ethiopian tradition, introduced Christianity into the region in the first half of the fourth century.[7] It is difficult to imagine him, a foreign tutor from Tyre educated in philosophy, instructing in any language other than Greek. Initially this would have limited his appeal to the royal court, members

[4] This, of course, assumes the historicity of the Acts account. Even those scholars who suspect Lukan embellishment find an early Christian tradition of an Ethiopian's conversion probable. See especially Haenchen, *Acts*, 310–11, and Lüdemann, *Early Christianity*, 105. An exception would be Plümacher who suggests these details arise from the historian's desire to include the exotic based upon Roman fascination with Ethiopia after the expedition sent in 61 CE to locate the source of the Nile, *Lukas*, 13. For the important literary role of this pericope, see Niccum, "One Ethiopian," 2:883–900.

[5] See Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 6.180–97, for a roughly contemporaneous reference. Lösch provides a number of additional sources, "Der Kämmerer," 477–519; see also Knox, *Hellenistic Elements*, 16; and Martin, "Chamberlain's Journey," 111–14. This division of "Ethiopia" into two separate regions probably stems from Homer who writes, Αἰθίοπας τοὶ διχθὰ δεδαίαται, ἔσχατοι ἀνδρῶν, *Od*. 1.23. This phrase intrigued later grammarians and historians. For the latter, see especially Strabo, *Geogr.* 1.2.24–29.

[6] Ullendorff, "Candace," 53.

[7] For a critical review of the sources about Frumentius, see Pétridès, "L'evangelization," 2:77–104 and 3:208–32. Note that the ascription of biblical translation to Abba Salama in Ethiopian tradition refers instead to the work of the fourteenth-century metropolitan of the same name. See Ullendorff, *Ethiopia*, 32–33.

of which could converse in that tongue.[8] Presumably as a result of Frumentius' activity, Ezana became the first Christian king of Ethiopia, converting around 335 CE.[9] News of this excited some interest as the rest of Christianity embroiled in Christological controversies heard the news of a new Christian nation that shared Athanasius' anti-Arian views. Indeed Constantius himself wrote to the Ethiopian king in order to intervene, seeking the recall of Frumentius.[10]

What transpired over the next two centuries within Ethiopia remains largely unknown, for local details remain sketchy. The evidence for the sixth century, on the other hand, radically differs. Literary and epigraphic evidence reveals a developed ecclesiastical structure in Ethiopia; by then it was undoubtedly a Christian nation.[11] What role did scripture play, though, in this seemingly sudden shift? Did vernacular texts contribute to the dramatic spread of this religion beyond the royal

[8] Coins minted during Ezana's reign as well as some of his inscriptions were written in Greek. See Anfray, "Les Rois," 1–5; Pankhurst, "Greek Coins," 79; idem *Supplementum*, 1813; and Munro-Hay, "Coinage," 101–16.

[9] For a date of 333 see Pétridès, "L'evangelisation." Hammerschmidt, granting more historical credibility to Ethiopian tradition, places it up to ten years later, "Anfänge," 281–94.

Although epigraphic evidence permits the conclusion that two kings by the name of Ezana reigned approximately one century apart (see Altheim and Stiehl, "Datierung," 234–48; idem, "Neue Inschrift," 471–79; and Croke, "Ezana Again," 209–211), the overwhelming numismatic evidence to the contrary is convincing (see Schneider, "Chronology," 111–20; and Munro-Hay, "Dating," 111–27). The theory of two Ezanas also suffers from other problems; see Dihle, *Umstrittene Daten*, 36–64.

[10] The literary record preserved in Athanasius, *Apol. Const.*, 29–31, need only indicate that Frumentius had a circle of influence among the ruling class. Croke even argues that the letter from Constantius does not require Christian recipients, "Ezana Again," 210. With regard to other near contemporary descriptions, hyperbole could explain the "countless number of barbarians" in Rufinus' *Hist.* and "all the regions" of the *Synaxar* for 26 Hamle.

On the whole, there are no a priori reasons to dismiss their historicity. Indeed, an early inscription from Ezana's reign refers to the "God Christ," a phrase likely influenced by Athanasian Christology, Black, "Christ God," 93-110. This parallels interesting variant readings in the Catholic Epistles found in p72, an Egyptian papyrus from about the same time, Wasserman, *Jude*, 47, 265–66.

[11] See Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Top*. Other indicators of Christian activity are inscriptions containing scripture dated to the reign of Caleb (Knibb, *Translating*, 46–54) and the recent dating of the Abba Garima Gospels to the same time period or earlier (Bailey, "Discovery," no pages; and Heldman, "Evangelists," 460–63).

houses or did mass conversion underscore the need to produce a Bible accessible to the general populace?

The first scholarly assessments assumed the former. Hiob Ludolf made the earliest observations along these lines suggesting that Frumentius himself initiated a translation project from the Greek.[12] Subsequent treatments basically repeated his conclusions until the work of August Dillmann. He too argued for an early translation of the more seminal biblical texts, unable to imagine a church without scripture in its native tongue, but he denied Frumentius' involvement. He ascribed the work instead to numerous translators, none of whom had command of the Greek language, envisioning a slower process over a period of two centuries.[13]

About this same time scholars recognized that the Ethiopian evidence was not monolithic. Hermann Zotenberg, although never addressing the date of inception, first recognized a historical development within the Ethiopic tradition, identifying two distinct families of biblical manuscripts (equivalent to the A- and B-texts in this study).[14] Ignazio Guidi further demarcated these as pre-Arabic (the A-text) and Arabic influenced (encompassing the Ab- and B-) forms of text. These observations marked a significant development in understanding Ethiopia's transmission history, but one that some later investigators, including Vööbus and Boismard, ignored to varying degrees.

Based on the Legend of the Nine Saints, a story about "Syrian" monks who inaugurated a major spiritual revival in Ethiopia, and apparent Syriacisms identified in the earliest manuscripts, Guidi further postulated that translation began later rather than earlier, probably in the last part of the fifth century as a consequence of the recent growth of Christianity.[15]

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[12] *Historia*, 3.4.7, and *Commentarius*, 296.

[13] "Bibelübersetzung," 203–6. See also his *Catalogus*, 7.

[14] Zotenburg also argued that a Greek Vorlage stood behind "le version primitive" which belonged to the Alexandrian text-type, *Catalogue*, 24, 30–31.

[15] "Traduzione," 33. He is followed by Conti Rossini, "Sulla versione," 236. These theories still presumed Greek Vorlagen. Some scholars dissented. Gildemeister, for example, ascribed the origin of the Ethiopic New Testament to Syrians working from their own texts in the sixth or seventh century, per personal correspondence with C. R. Gregory dated April 20, 1882, cited in Tischendorf's *Novum Testamentum*, 3:895–96.

It was Guidi's student, L. Hackspill, who provided the first study of a New Testament text with any detail. Examining the first ten chapters of Matthew, he concluded that the Ethiopic text was translated from a "Syro-occidentaler" Greek manuscript around 500 CE. This nomenclature later proved unfortunate. Hackspill employed the technical terminology of Westcott and Hort, who labeled a particular textual family of Greek manuscripts "Syrian," a group more frequently identified today as "Byzantine," which had no direct connection to Syria or the early Syriac versions.[16] Later scholars, unaware of Hackspill's original context, sometimes equated this with Syrian influence.

This growing sense of "Syrian" dependence drew Arthur Vööbus to the Ethiopian version. He combed through the Ethiopic Gospels searching for remnants of an Old Syriac version.[17] With regard to the Book of Acts, he merely summarized Montgomery's article in two sentences, correctly noting that "these are only preliminary observations that need to be expanded by more thoroughgoing research."[18] Presumably Vööbus, had he further pursued it, would have argued that Acts followed the same trajectory he postulated for the gospels. Regardless, the influence of his work resulted in others doing so.

Although aware of the problems inherent in arguments from silence, Vööbus noted that evidence of Ethiopian Christianity was conspicuously absent from the archeological record, Greek and Roman patristic literature, and the numerous synods of international importance held in the fourth century.[19] Therefore the best explanation for the rapid growth of Ethiopian Christianity from nearly nothing in the fourth century to a national presence in the sixth hinged upon a momentous time of national religious renewal. In his opinion, the arrival of the Nine Saints provided the catalyst for this sudden, popular reception of the religion.[20] Based on Guidi's work and his own interests, he further

[16] "Evangelienübersetzung," 117. Consult Westcott and Hort, *New Testament*, 2:119–135.

[17] See *Spuren*; and *Early Versions*, 243–69.

[18] *Early Versions*, 269.

[19] *Spuren*, 10–12; and *Early Versions*, 244–46.

[20] A fifth-century or later origin or reawakening of Ethiopian Christianity, whether by an influx of missionaries or not, could explain the henophysite character of the Ethiopian church. (The additional tradition that ties the origin of Christianity to the conversion of the sixth century figures Asbeha and Abreha [which became fused with the story of Ezana] might also help date a religious revival.) Although Vööbus

assumed that these clerics translated the New Testament from Syriac manuscripts they had brought with them.

Vööbus admitted that the Ethiopic manuscripts exhibited strong influence from the Greek and Arabic as well as some from the Coptic, understandable considering the history of Ethiopian Christianity. This mixture plus the late date of the extant evidence allowed him to speculate that successive revisions obscured much of the Ethiopic text's original Old Syriac foundation. He hesitated, however, to identify the number or dates of these revisions apart from the possibility that the literary activity of Abba Salama (fourteenth century) extended to the biblical corpus.[21] Not surprisingly, considering his interests in the Syriac version, whatever "Old Syriac" remnants he discovered necessarily derived from the earliest period.[22]

Rochus Zuurmond has since proven Vööbus' reconstruction untenable. Working with more witnesses than any previous scholar (along with recently discovered Gospel manuscripts dating back to the sixth century) and paying close attention to the different strata within the Ethiopic textual tradition, he showed conclusively that 1) Vööbus failed to evaluate the Ethiopian witnesses critically and that 2) many of his supposed Syriac parallels came from later rather than earlier stages in the development of the Ethiopic gospels.[23] One can also add that the growing body of evidence from the earliest period of Axumite Christianity indicates familiarity solely with texts in Greek.[24]

Furthermore, the idea that the Nine Saints influenced biblical translation during the formative years of Ethiopian Christianity

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correctly avoids this argument for pinpointing the precise date of Syrian influence, he does point to Guidi's observation that the *Qerillos*, a collection of patristic citations, includes arguments against Nestorianism, a heresy that apparently never appeared in Ethiopia, *Early Versions*, 255–56. See also Guidi, "La Chiesa," 125–26. Friedrich Heyer, however, suggests that the Ethiopian church adopted henophysitism only after the Islamic invasions, *Kirche Äthiopiens*, 257. The accruing evidence certainly supports the much later date for this doctrinal development.

[21] *Early Versions*, 265–69. On the traditions of Abba Salama as translator see Ullendorff, *Ethiopia*, 31–33.

[22] Grierson suggests Vööbus' interests in "finding lost 'Old Syriac' quotations" of the Bible colored his judgment, "Dreaming," 14.

[23] *Mark*, 119–23.

[24] A. Bausi, "Corpus Canonum," 532–41. For an earlier survey, consult Guidi, *Storia*, 11–21.

should finally be laid to rest.[25] Since the time of Guidi, scholars have assumed a Syrian origin for these monks.[26] But Guidi postulated Syrian backgrounds on his previous conviction that proper nouns in the Ethiopic scriptures betrayed a Syriac exemplar. To the contrary, H.J. Polotsky and Paolo Marrassini have demonstrated that the words Guidi mustered attest a Western Semitic, not a Syrian (Eastern Semitic), origin. Further, Marrassini observes that the names of the Saints themselves are not Syrian. Indeed, only one of the nine actually may hail from that region.[27]

The historicity of the legend also is suspect. While accepting a Syrian provenance for the Nine Saints, Zuurmond questions whether the account might not reflect thirteenth-century apologetic activity rather than fifth-century ecclesiastical history, for at that time church and state politics resulted in Ethiopia coming under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Antioch.[28]

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[25] For problems with the transcriptional and linguistic arguments for Syrian influence, see chapter 2.

[26] Guidi, "Chiesa," 126. Hackspill encountered difficulties when trying to reconcile a Greek Vorlage with the assumption that the Nine Saints legend had a connection to the translation of the Bible. He suggested that the Henophysite controversy required the Syrians to place a special emphasis ("sehr grosses Gewicht") upon the Greek biblical text, "Evangelienübersetzung," 156. Vööbus rightly balks at Hackspill's feeble attempt to explain why Syrian monks carried Greek manuscripts with them to Ethiopia. (See Vööbus, *Spuren*, 17–20; *Early Versions*, 253–55; *Researches*; and *Old Syriac*, 150–52.) The Peshitta had already exerted considerable influence by this time so that even when some Syrian ecclesiastics did pay greater attention to the Greek wording, they merely edited the text already in circulation, and then only mildly (so Philoxenus; see Brock, *Bible in Syriac*; idem, "Towards a History," 1–14; and Walters, "Philoxenian Gospels"). Thomas of Harkel, a century after the period in question, first sought to conform the Syriac entirely to the Greek, but his version failed to supplant the Peshitta. No basis exists, therefore, for postulating that controversies, Christological or otherwise, forced Syriac missionaries to abandon their native texts for Greek ones.

[27] Polotsky, "Aramaic," 1–10; and Marrassini, "Some Considerations," 35–46. Rahlfs already anticipated these conclusions in his "Bibelübersetzung," 674–75. Marrassini does not discuss the preservation of gutturals in some of these transcriptions, which remains an unusual phenomenon.

[28] Zuurmond, *Mark*, 117n.45. It should be noted that the *Synaxar* for 6 Tiqimt portrays Pentelewon practicing Syrian asceticism, Vööbus, *Spuren*, 13–14. The larger picture of the Nine Saints in Ethiopian tradition reflects Syrian missionary practices of the fifth and sixth centuries and their asceticism in general. This does not rule out the real possibility that later hagiographers used earlier models for describing or creating legendary spiritual figures. I am indebted to Jeffrey Childers

Apart from these problems connected to the origin and circulation of the Nine Saints legend, the textual evidence of the Book of Acts rules out any early Syrian influence.[29] Although missionaries immigrating to Ethiopia in the late fifth century very well might have had some knowledge of Greek, they certainly would not have restricted themselves just to sources in that language when translating. Syrian scriptures and traditions would have proven helpful in many places where the Greek posed insurmountable problems for the translator, yet the A-text offers a narrative devoid of any such assistance. The translator worked with absolutely nothing beyond the Greek manuscript that lay immediately in front of him or her.[30]

For example, the translator omitted numerous verses and some very large paragraphs, most notably in chapter 27, due to the difficulty of the Greek. One would expect monastics familiar with the biblical text, and especially Syrians working from a cognate language, to have attempted at least a modest paraphrase.[31] Even if working solely with a Greek source, one would expect some influence from external Syrian traditions in these and other difficult passages. If foreign monks actually did work on the biblical text, they either did not touch the Book of Acts or they revised it during the thirteenth century, for the A-text is firmly established in the manuscript tradition.

If the legend of the Nine Saints does have roots in early Ethiopian Christianity, it must be interpreted differently. Since some of the names, including place names, in the legend are Ethiopian, the story might refer to native religious leaders, although again their fifth-century arrival postdates the translation of the Bible.[32] However the story is to be understood, no reasons exist for positing any connection between these legendary characters and the translation of Acts.

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for these observations. That the *Synaxar* (14 Tiqimt) attributes the introduction of Pachomian (Egyptian) monasticism to Aregawi, one of the Nine Saints, may support the idea of legendary development or, if historically reliable, may reflect the divergent backgrounds of these men.

[29] See chapter 2.

[30] This was first noted by Montgomery, "Ethiopic Acts," 182.

[31] The B-text, for example, contains Arabic words transliterated into Ethiopic and traditions inserted from Arabic Christianity, with a particularly high concentration in the last two chapters.

[32] "The people who translated the Bible into their own language must have been the *Ethiopians themselves*!" Marrassini, "Some Considerations," 41–42 (emphasis his).

In sum, Vööbus' reconstruction fails on multiple levels. In this particular case he proved overly zealous, twisting the evidence to fit a preconceived notion. As will be shown in the next chapter, one cannot use the Ethiopic text of Acts as a mine for early Syriac readings.

The story is quite different with regard to the Greek text of Acts. Here Boismard and Lamouille made their fantastic claims about the significance of the Ge'ez for the history of Acts. They averred that the Ethiopic version was a critical key to unlocking its earliest transmission period; occasionally it alone preserves the *original* Western text!

In contrast to the typical definition of the "Western" text as expansive, providing, at least in Codex Bezae, a text of Acts approximately 8% longer than that of the Alexandrian text-type, Boismard and Lamouille characterized it as more often abbreviated.[33] For this reason the large portions of "missing" passages in the Ethiopic version of Acts attracted their attention. Since the last third of Acts has few extant "Western" witnesses, the truncated state of the Ge'ez text in chapters 21–28 seemed invaluable. But the two textual families of Ethiopic witnesses posed a challenge to the hypothesis for they aligned much more closely with the Alexandrian and Byzantine text-types.

To remedy this they proposed that Frumentius first translated the New Testament from a Greek source that contained a relatively ("*assez*") pure form of the "Western" text. Only portions of this original translation remain, they argued, because the text underwent two separate and independent revisions, each of which thoroughly modified the original. One of these aligned the text with an Alexandrian Greek manuscript (coinciding with this study's A-text); the other relied heavily on the Syriac Peshitta (equivalent to the B-text). They suggested a date in the sixth century for the latter based on the tradition of the Nine Saints. Although they did not date the Greek revision, it presumably belonged to an earlier period.[34] They rejected any substantial revisions after the sixth century.

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[33] Numerous problems attend the identification of a "Western" text; see Barbara Aland, "Entstehung," 5–65.

[34] Boismard and Lamouille, *Texte (1984)*, 2:93–94. Boismard had proposed this hypothesis earlier in his "Review," 455. Ullendorff presents a similar theory, but does not develop it. He instead favors the possibility of multiple Vorlagen in different languages (i.e., Syriac and Greek), *Ethiopia*, 55–57. See also his "Hebrew," 249–57. For the New Testament Ullendorff offers a hybrid solution to the conflicting descriptions made by other scholars (i.e., it is both a slavish translation of the Greek and closely related to the Syriac) rather than examining the evidence himself. In his

Obviously they repeat many of the fundamental mistakes committed by Vööbus and others, but they also committed gross errors of their own. Considering the occasional but clear implications that they investigated the potential influence from the Arabic on the Ethiopic text, one wonders how they failed to recognize that virtually all of their "Syrian" readings were transmitted through that version and stem from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, not earlier.[35]

Regardless, their erroneous conclusions about the Syriac revision do not necessarily discredit their theory about multiple Greek editions. On the other hand, it is difficult not to suspect that here too, as with Vööbus, the researchers projected predetermined conclusions onto the evidence, for the method of extracting the "original" without having any comparative data must be highly subjective.

Indeed, the evidence confirms suspicions of subjectivity. Boismard and Lamouille's original hypothesis, namely that a shorter "Western" text of Acts was thoroughly revised against an Alexandrian text, totally lacked plausibility since they could not explain why such a meticulous reviser would leave the glaring omissions found in chapters 27 and 28 untouched. As a result Boismard later reformulated their thesis.[36] His second attempt stood Montgomery's interpretation of the evidence on its

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foray into the Old Testament he chooses not to "speculate whether these instances of direct dependence [upon the Hebrew or Aramaic] were part of the original work of Bible translations during the Aksumite period or constituted an important aspect in the revision of those translations generally said to have been carried out in the Middle Ages," "Hebrew," 249. This failure to distinguish between strata contributes to his untenable conclusion that "the Ethiopic Bible translations do not derive from one single *Vorlage*, i.e. Greek," 257. See also the critique by VanderKam, "Textual Base," 247–62.

[35] For example they state, "S'il y eut d'autres influences sur la version éthiopienne, arabe par example, elles n'ont pas modifié profondément la physionomie des deux recensions principales," Boismard and Lamouille, *Texte (1984)*, 2:94. For a parade of evidence to the contrary in Acts, see Niccum, "Acts," 69–88, and chapter 2. Note also the similar conclusions of those investigating other books: Zuurmond, *Mark*, 107–8; Wechsler, *Iohannis*, xxii–xxvi; Hofmann and Uhlig, *Katholischen Briefe*, 60 and 72; and Maehlum and Uhlig, *Gefangenschaftsbriefe*, 46 and 76. Ullendorff notes the "good evidence, internal as well as external, of revisions on the basis of Arabic texts," *Ethiopia*, 57.

Because the evidence reveals only one extant edition of Acts (the A-text) for the first eight centuries of Christian literature in Ethiopia, any readings they identify as "original" found within Ab- and B-text witnesses, since these exhibit late Arabic influence, are suspect.

[36] Boismard, *Texte (2000)*.

head; it was not the original translator but the later reviser who lacked ability in the Greek.

Although a considerable improvement over the original proposal, this solution also failed to do justice to the evidence. It could not explain, for example, why the reviser would, where the "Western" and Alexandrian texts overlapped, purposely obscure an understandable "Western" reading (already well translated into Geʿez) with a poor translation of a barely comprehended Alexandrian Greek exemplar. One might propose that the reviser only added Alexandrian readings to the pre-existing text, but the totality of the earliest attainable Ethiopic text of Acts (A-text) exhibits a rudimentary understanding of Greek, not just portions of it.[37]

Throughout the rest of this book, specific evidence of the theoretical and methodological pitfalls of Boismard and Lamouille will substantiate the claims briefly introduced here. Fundamentally their intricate and ingenious theory fails because they did not do the requisite research.[38]

Granted that conclusions about the earliest stages in the development of the Ethiopic text of Acts must remain tenuous, what then can be postulated? On the whole an early concerted effort to provide native adherents of the new religion in Axum with scripture in their own language seems more and more probable than a long period of development. No evidence for a later translation exists.[39]

Despite the paucity of hard evidence in the earliest period, the record of the first two centuries of Ethiopian Christianity is not quite as tacit as Vööbus would have people think.[40] Synesius, writing around 407,

[37] On a minor note, Boismard and Lamouille are surely mistaken concerning Frumentius' activity in translating the book of Acts. As already noted, the translator appears to be proficient in Ethiopic, yet lacks sufficient knowledge of Greek. One would expect the opposite to be true with Frumentius. Plus, their "original" text identifies Cyprus as a city (4:36), a mistake hardly attributable to a young educated man from the city of Tyre.

[38] For detailed critiques of Boismard's use of versional evidence, see Childers, "Syriac," 49–85, and Niccum, "Acts," 69–88.

[39] One can no longer assume that other "biblical" works continued to be translated thereafter. The oft repeated notion that the book of Sirach, for example, was not translated until 678 derives from a scribal error. The actual date reads 1478 and probably refers to the date of the exemplar from which it was copied. See Piovanelli, "Aksum," 5. Cf. Littmann, "Geschichte," 203.

[40] The absence of Axumite bishops from the ecumenical councils is still odd, but perhaps not inexplicable. The letter from Constantius demanding that Frumentius

refers unequivocally to a community of "Aksumite priests" in Cyrene with their own deacon.[41] Such a state of affairs would seem improbable without an already marked ecclesiastical development at home. Several decades earlier Chrysostom claimed that Ethiopians possessed the Fourth Gospel in their own language.[42] Furthermore, the Caleb inscriptions (ca. 525) cite numerous biblical passages. These quotations come from both the Old and New Testaments with the Gospel texts in remarkable agreement with the Abba Garima gospels just recently radiocarbon dated to the same era. Cumulatively these point to an established scriptural tradition rather than a work in progress.

Also scholars now recognize an "Aksumite Canon" of religious "non-canonical" texts directly translated from the Greek.[43] All of the texts were composed in Greek and date from the fourth century or earlier. Pierluigi Piovanelli notes that Athanasius and others in Egypt and elsewhere attempted to halt the production and dissemination of some of these works. Assuming this would have impacted the evolving literary practice of Ethiopia, the translation of these works must have begun early

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return to Alexandria for questioning by the newly appointed Patriarch and its clear denouncing of Athanasius and his supporters might have convinced the Axumites to remain religiously isolated. Still, the presence of at least one Ethiopian monastic community in Egypt suggests some theological dialogue, but perhaps none at the level of bishop (see the next footnote). Cf. Sergew, who reviews evidence of fourth- and fifth-century Ethiopian monastics in Egypt and Palestine, although without critically examining the use of the designation "Ethiopian," *Ethiopian History*, 109–12. See also Meinardus, "Ethiopians," 116.

[41] Πολλὰ κἀγαθὰ γένοιτο τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν Ἀξωμιτῶν, *Ep*. 122. There are too many variables to assign Moses the Ethiopian with confidence to Axumite Christianity. First, he is merely identified as an "Ethiopian," thus his actual heritage remains vague. Second, as a slave with questionable morals, his connection to a native version of Christianity cannot be assumed, although his name, if actually bestowed at birth, would suggest a Jewish or Christian background. Finally, his extreme pacifism stands at odds with the contemporary Axumite clerics mentioned by Synesius, although his earlier life of violence might seem compatible. See Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 19; and Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 203–206.

[42] He mentions Σύροι καὶ Αἰγύπτιοι καὶ Ἰνδοὶ καὶ Πέρσαι καὶ Αἰθίοπες καὶ μυρία ἕτερα ἔθνη εἰς τὴν αὐτῶν μεταβόλαντες γλῶτταν τὰ παρὰ τούτου δόγματα εἰσαχθέντα, *Hom. Jo.* 2.5. Jerome indicates the same in *Epist.* 46 and 107. Although μυρία should probably be dismissed as homiletic flourish, Rahlfs believes the enumeration of lands has historical credibility (although arguing that Chrysostom employs the term Ἰνδοί rather than Αἰθίοπες to describe Ethiopians), "Bibelübersetzung," 668–70.

[43] Bausi, "Corpus Canonum," 532–41. See also Lusini, "Acts of Mark," 604–10.

to have escaped censure, yet they are unlikely to have been translated *before* the "canonical" texts.[44]

There seems to be good reason then to posit a significant translation project in the second half of the fourth century, but one should not conclude too hastily that this in fact extended to the seemingly less popular books such as Acts, the Catholic Epistles, and Revelation. One can imagine, for example, the Gospels and Pauline letters having priority for liturgical, pastoral, and catechetical reasons.

Indeed, certain readings may indicate some interval between the translation of Acts and that of other New Testament books. For example, Genesis 1:1 or John 1:1 possibly influenced the opening verse of Acts, because manuscript 20, two lectionaries, and the *Kebra Nagast* (*KN*) begin the book with **ቀዳሚሁ**, "in the beginning." Interestingly, the same phenomenon occurs at Mark 1:1. Perhaps the translators assumed that books opening with a form of ἀρχή all alluded to the same biblical text or Christological concept.

According to the Greek text of 17:25, Paul tells the Areopagus that God "gives life and breath to all." In the Ethiopic, though, God gives "to each who asks him," a phrase clearly dependent upon Luke 11:13.[45] At the first mention of Priscilla (18:2), the A-text calls her Prisca, the form found regularly in the Pauline corpus (Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; and 2 Tim 4:19). These examples create the impression that the translation of other portions of the Bible preceded the work on Acts. Caution, however, is warranted as harmonizations such as these could easily have occurred during a later era.

Even more interesting is the translation "they blessed the table" for "breaking bread" (2:42 *et passim*), perhaps suggesting a period of liturgical development prior to the translation of Acts.[46] It should be noted, though, that not only harmonization to other biblical texts, but also to orthopraxy, appears to have been a common scribal activity. This

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[44] Piovanelli, "Aksum," 6.

[45] This reading is facilitated by the division of προσδεόμενος into two words by the translator. Montgomery considered such a poor rendering of the rather simple Greek "unaccountable" and dismissed it as a typical paraphrase, "Acts," 180. That he missed the link to Luke 11 is surprising since the manuscript he studied (ms 42) makes the reference even stronger by having God give "the Holy Spirit" to each who asks Him.

[46] The same phrase is translated differently in the A-text of Luke and 1 Corinthians. Perhaps the use of the stock phrase **ወረደ ፡ መንፈስ ፡ ቅዱስ ፡ ዲበ ፡ ኵሎሙ**, "the Holy Spirit descended upon all of them," for the reception of the Holy Spirit also reflects this development.

phrase too may thus reflect later alterations rather than the earliest form of the text.

Considering the extant evidence, the date of the original translation falls between 350 (when the Ethiopian church was sufficiently established to need translations of some or all biblical books) and 525 CE (the date of the Caleb inscriptions and when translations from Greek taper off), with a more probable origin in the late fourth century.

As with any early version, the possibility of multiple translations exists. Both Vööbus and Boismard attempted to interpose one or more revisions between the original translation and the earliest documentary evidence. Apart from two distinct versions of Acts 1:1–12, though, there is absolutely no evidence for such.[47] However one explains the differing versions of the proem, the theory of multiple translations is the least satisfactory. Except for the first twelve verses, the book of Acts survives in a fixed form. That is to say that all subsequent Ethiopic text-types descend from the A-text.

A not inconsiderable obstacle arises here for unlike the Gospels, which have sixth-century attestation, the earliest known Acts manuscript comes from the fourteenth century, a full millennium after the original translation. Still, certain clues suggest the oldest manuscripts preserve a text that originated centuries earlier.

First, the translation must have occurred very early, for intercourse with the Greek language becomes severely limited to non-existent after the sixth century.[48] Second, Montgomery noted that in Acts 7:4, manuscript 42, a witness to the A-text here, reads **እምፋርስ**, "from Persia," indicating a text predating "the Islamic conquest."[49] Second, on

[47] Zuurmond notes a similar phenomenon in Luke 1:1–4, *Mark*, 214–219. Slavish translation from the Greek marks both passages. Ms. 137 does preserve portions of a second translation, but from the Arabic Vulgate. It therefore does not apply to the earliest period, yet it does attest to a similar phenomenon. The multiple Syriac and Latin translations of portions of the New Testament better exemplify the potential for competing translations whenever Christianity spread beyond the *lingua franca*.

[48] The same is true of inscriptions. Axumite coins bear Greek wording from their inception to the sixth century; but from the early fifth century, Ethiopic appears more and more frequently on the smaller denominations according to Munro-Hay, "Coinage," 103–16. For a history of associations with the Greek-speaking world after the sixth century see Kallimachos, "Patriarchate," 434–79.

[49] "Acts," 194. This reading also appears in the other A-text manuscripts. The appearance of this word in Daniel also led Löfgren to conclude that the translation of the Bible had to have been completed before the time of Persian hegemony in southern Arabia ended, therefore 650 at the latest, *Propheten Daniels*, xlviii.

a more sure footing, numerous readings such as **ዐበይተ**, "the great," for πρὸ τῆς (14:13) and **አንጢቅስኪያ**, "Antiqeskiya," for ἄντικρυς Χίου (20:15) betray a Greek manuscript written *scriptio continua*, thus reflecting a Vorlage copied before the eleventh century and probably before the ninth.[50] Third, occasional influence from the Sahidic on the text would also require a date prior to the eleventh century, for Bohairic becomes the language of choice among Coptic Christians from that time.[51] Fourth, an adaptation of Acts 8:27 in one of the oldest portions of the *KN* clearly depends upon a fixed exegetical tradition based on the mistranslation found only in the A-text.[52] Although not conclusive, these do suggest some level of fidelity through the centuries.

Still, no manuscript preserves the original translation in a pure state. Despite the tenacity of the above noted readings and others that certainly go back to the primitive translation, the text of Acts must have undergone at least some revision in the period between its translation and the copying of the earliest known manuscript. Ethiopian church history allows, though, for a considerable amount of time to elapse with

[50] For other examples of readings originating from a *scriptio continua* Greek manuscript see Chapter 2. Kurt and Barbara Aland catalogue the following ratios for majuscule versus minuscule manuscripts of the Bible: ninth century 53:13; ninth/tenth 1:4; tenth 17:124; tenth/eleventh 3:8; eleventh 1:429 with no majuscule manuscripts known from subsequent centuries, *Text,* 81.

[51] Kasser, "Dialectes Coptes," 287–310. See also Ishaq, "Coptic," 2:604–7.

[52] The verse appears in chapter 33, part of the Sheba-Solomon cycle. Although the story of the seduction of Sheba probably derives from an earlier Coptic source, the claim that Solomon gave his Ethiopian son the governorship of Gaza depends upon a mistranslation of the Greek. Its presence here indicates that the A-text of 8:27 and its interpretation were well established by the time the *KN* was first composed.

On the stages in the development of the *KN* see Hubbard, "Literary Sources." Unaware of the transmission history of the Book of Acts, he assumes the text is "a garbled version" (p. 128) and "a highly altered rendering" (p. 136). The identification of the eunuch as governor of Gaza he attributes to the compiler of the *KN*, 129. Surprisingly, in the other places where texts from Acts occur (all are A-text), Hubbard grants the possibility that a different Ethiopic text is being quoted, but he incorrectly suggests a later form revised from the Arabic rather than a more primitive text, 128 nn.58–59.

A late first-century Aksumite inscription identifies the Ge'ez tribe as Γάζη ἔθνος, Rahlfs, "Königsinschriften," 282–313. If this became the standard designation in Greek, this misreading of Acts 8 becomes even more understandable and could belong to the very beginnings of the Ethiopic translation. Perhaps the translator understood the Ethiopian to be travelling to the land of the Ge'ez, over which he had been placed as governor.

little or no change to the text. The weakness and isolation the Ethiopian church experienced for centuries created an environment in which a large portion of the ancient text could have been kept intact.[53] Indeed, the abysmal quality of the A-text as a translation suggests this was the case.

Although the *versio antiqua* (A-text) descends from the "original" translation, except for a brief peak into its thirteenth-century form in the *KN*, the text is currently only known from the fourteenth century.[54] Manuscript 20 provides the earliest and best attestation, but, as with all but one of the A-text witnesses, it was copied by generally careless scribes.[55] Most of the identifiable revisions in this manuscript derive from attempts to make the text more intelligible. These occur sporadically, and some may be due to the manuscript's two copyists rather than earlier stages in the history of the text. For example, at 6:1 only manuscript 20 clarifies for the reader that the people who multiplied were "from Jerusalem." Also at 5:21 the manuscript has the Apostles "speak to the people this word of life" in strict accordance with the command of the angel given in the previous verse.[56]

Other readings shared by multiple manuscripts, and thus indicative of the textual tradition rather than scribal anomalies, testify to the fact that some textual development has affected the A-text. At 21:1 the name of the island Cos (τὴν Κῶ) has all but disappeared from the A-text. The original probably read **ኀሐረ፡ቆ**, "the land of Qo." Manuscripts 20 and 23 come close, reading **ኀሐረዮ** (nonsensical) and **ኀሐረ፡ቆቆ**, "the land of QoQo," respectively. The other witnesses merely guessed

[53] See Taddesse, *Church*, 38–41, 163–64, 231–33, and 238; and Cerulli, *Storia*, 35.

[54] The absence of many earlier witnesses is due in large part to the policies of Ahmad Gragn who occupied a major portion of Christian Abyssinia from 1531 to 1543. Taddesse states, "The amount of destruction brought about in these years can only be estimated in terms of centuries. Ahmad Gragn and his followers were dazzled at the extent of the riches of the Church, and at the splendour of the Ethiopian Christian culture at the time. And, as the most important repository of the cultural heritage of Christian Ethiopia, the Church was a special target for the destructive furies of the Imam. His chronicler outlines in the *Futuh al Habasha* a large number of cases in which beautiful churches were pulled down, their riches plundered, the holy books burnt to ashes, and the clergy massacred," *Church*, 301.

[55] The scribe of manuscript 532 appears more practiced, but it is late and has numerous expansions. The scribe of manuscript 91 was not "generally careless," but absolutely so.

[56] The B-text does much the same by altering v.20 (changing "speak" to "teach").

ቆሮንቶስ, "Corinth" (2 532) or **ቆጵሮስ**, "Cyprus" (42 91). Elsewhere, the A-text at 2:10 reads **ይትናገሩ**, "those who speak," for the original **ይትናገዱ**, "those who travel."[57] At 4:16 **ትምህርቶሙ**, "their teaching," representing the Greek σημείον, occurs in every manuscript collated for this project.[58] At some early period an inner Ethiopic corruption, the not unusual interchange of **ትምህርት**, "teaching," for **ትእምርት**, "sign," affected the subsequent history of the text.

Other A-text witnesses exhibit a greater degree of editorial activity. Manuscripts 23 and 42 do so to a lesser extent than 91, 1264 (before 7:28), and especially 532 (beginning with chapter 7). Most of these have occasional readings introduced from the Arabic.

It therefore appears that the A-text circulated for several centuries with only modest and minor alterations during its transmission history. Although the A-text may represent the "original" translation, the extent to which it does so and its degree of fidelity can not be fully measured at present.

The group of manuscripts labeled the Ab-text lacks homogeneity but differs enough from the two more well defined forms of text to require separate classification.[59] Its close affiliation with the A-text and its foreshadowing of the B-text warrant the Ab- designation. Scribes probably began to revise the A-text towards the Arabic no earlier than the thirteenth century and certainly no later than the fourteenth.[60]

[57] The full stop after **አይሁድ** and the omission of **ሮሜ** in manuscripts 20 and 91 appear to be an attempt to ameliorate the difficult reading which resulted from this error.

Other examples reflecting lengthy development follow: Metathesis resulted in the A-text (manuscripts 20 42 91) having Barnabas see the "face" of God rather than the "grace" of God in Antioch (11:23) and Paul "fortified" for his midnight trip to Caesarea (2 20 23 42 91 532 R) rather than having a mount provided (23:24). At 19:1, an original **ቢጹ** for μαθητής became **ቦኡ** "they entered" which the B-text corrected to **አርድእት**, "disciples." See also 12:13–14, 13:45, 15:14, 21:33, 36; and 28:8.

[58] This is one of many proofs of the genetic relationship between the A-text and all subsequent texts.

[59] It should be noted that the term "text-type" represents a hypothetical grouping. Each manuscript represents a particular stage in a long history of transmission. Although objective analyses can place a manuscript on a scale of relationship to other witnesses, the entire spectrum is covered. Classification, however, has its usefulness. This demands some level of subjectivity as to where one draws lines for categorization. As Zuurmond states, "In defining the types of text, the best one can deliver is a statistical definition," *Mark*, 67.

[60] See Uhlig, "Questions," 2:1598. The publication of the *KN* (thirteenth century) and the commission of a sumptuous multivolume Bible (Ab-text) in 1400 by King

This relatively narrow window for change makes it probable that the overthrow of the Zagwe dynasty in 1270 and the resulting realignment with the Coptic Church served as a catalyst for a revision of the frequently deficient A-text. Another possibility exists if the attribution of a translation from Arabic to Abba Salama "the translator" 1) contains any truth *and* 2) applies to books of the New Testament. This would place its development between 1348 and 1388 CE. Nevertheless, the variety exhibited within this textual grouping would seem to support an earlier period where no great figure or hierarchical oversight yet played a prominent role in manuscript production. The date of manuscript 2345 (1400 CE), although not requiring a revision before the period of Abba Salama's activity, does make the thirteenth century the more likely starting point.

The fifteenth or sixteenth century then saw the development of the B-text, a thorough revision of an Ab-text adhering even more closely to the Arabic. Although the later text-forms of the Gospels may have resulted from a gradual process, eventually conforming the text to one or more forms of the Arabic then in circulation, the sudden explosion of B-text manuscripts of Acts suggests a single, deliberate effort for this book. The consanguinity of the B-text also suggests its youth, and thus this revision may not have taken place much earlier than the writing of manuscript 41 (sixteenth century), its earliest known representative.

In conclusion, the details of the translation of Acts into Ethiopic and the first several centuries of its transmission remain fuzzy. The earliest attainable text of Acts currently comes nine centuries removed from its inception. Although evidence indicates that large portions of this text faithfully represent earlier stages, those only bring the evidence (in theory) within 500 years of the original translation.

On the other hand, that the Vorlage was Greek is certain. The contrary claims of Vööbus resulted from a questionable interpretation of the Nine Saints legend, a failure to distinguish between the different Ethiopian text-types and their history, and poor methodology. Boismard

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Dawit determine the window's *termini*. On the latter, see Niccum, "Ms 2345." This differs from Zuurmond's conjecture that the presence of Syrian refugees in the Zagwe period (twelfth to thirteenth century) forced the issue (see *Mark*, 117–18). His theory deserves serious attention. If true, though, none of the "corrected" texts had gained sufficient authority to displace the A-text as the biblical basis of the *KN*, which was redacted one to two centuries later, as the confusion about the Ethiopian eunuch and the city of Gaza (Acts 8) and Paul's advice about not marrying "too many" wives (1 Corinthians 7) attest.

and Lamouille's hypothesis breaks down on its historical implausibility and its incredible failure to identify the Arabic version as the primary vehicle of so-called Syriac influence. Plus, as will be demonstrated, the Ethiopic version is not a primary witness for the "Western" text of Acts.

Finally, the Book of Acts appears to have experienced the same transmission history as the rest of the New Testament books (excluding Matthew).[61] Although the Greek has given shape to the A-text, contact with other traditions has had some impact. Surprisingly, at least as best as one can deduce from the data, this influence has been minimal.

[61] Tedros, *Romani*; and Tedros, *Hebrews*; Hofmann and Uhlig, *Katholischen Briefe*; Maehlum and Uhlig, *Gefangenschaftsbriefe*; Wechsler, *Iohannis*; and Zuurmond, *Mark*. Only the Gospel of Matthew has experienced a different transmission history, but it apparently does not affect the earliest period, Zuurmond, *Matthew*; and Zuurmond, "Textual Background," 32–41.