

Ethiopian exegetical traditions and exegetical imagination viewed in the context of Byzantine Orthodoxy

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The following article analysed the originality and creativity of Ethiopian Orthodox exegesis in a broader context of Byzantine and post-Byzantine Orthodox traditions. The originality of Ethiopian exegesis lies in its relative freedom from the conservative and traditionalist development of exegesis in other Eastern Orthodox contexts marked by the Graeco-Roman philosophical milieu. The Ethiopian exegetical tradition, being linked with traditional schooling, has managed to maintain a highly contextual and lively relationship with the community, with contemporary problems and issues and with other traditions, while maintaining a relationship with its own historical background. Analysing the Ethiopian traditions in comparativist contexts is important, but some important questions need to be further asked as to 'how' and 'why' is an interpretation being produced, what is its exegetical premise and how exegetical imagination functions.

Contribution: The article's input and contribution is manifold. As we have seen, a greater emphasis on the role and potential of the Ethiopian traditional ecclesial schools would facilitate their future preservation and function in a rapidly changing world with differing but often linear and exclusive developments in education. Furthermore, as discussed and demonstrated in the article, Ethiopian theological exegesis has a unique potential to contribute especially to contemporary Orthodox theology, which often struggles to maintain a balance between tradition and contextual or contemporary theology. The article further showed in this context that analysing exegetical traditions must also move beyond mere comparativist analysis and must include a broader study of the indeterminate or 'mystical' nature of interpretation which is intimately linked with the unpredictable or indeterminate dynamics of the world around us. Or in other words, how the exegete understands his or her freedom in interpretation.

Keywords: theology; exegesis; Ethiopia; traditional schools; Byzantium; Orthodoxy; commentary; Bible.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to draw attention to the often neglected and underappreciated originality of the exegetical traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, which uniquely combine local indigenous African contexts with Christian traditions. These local exegetical traditions are, among other areas, developed in traditional Ethiopian church schools. The article, as a contribution in a theological setting, does not aim to reconstruct Ethiopian exegesis and its history through a historical critical prism as has been begun by others but attempts to draw attention to the simple fact of its dynamic originality, especially if compared to the rather lost horizons of contemporary post-Byzantine Orthodox exegesis. The central question brought forward is why is this exegesis so potent in offering original and contemporary exegesis?

There is a certain urgency here, because the rapid development of modern education has adversely impacted traditional schools, the Ethiopian theological mindset generally and local indigenous theological traditions. Modern forms of education in Ethiopia have a consistent presence in Ethiopia and had already been introduced into Ethiopia at the beginning of the 20th century (1908) (Mengesha 2021:4146). But it seems that the overbearing emphasis on economical and industrial development, seen especially in our period, is increasing the pressure on traditional forms of education to their detriment. However, even contemporary theology with its emphasis on rationalism seems to have little appreciation for 'mystical' interpretations offered by Ethiopian exegesis and therefore limits its study of this exegesis, often in the confines of a historical cultural phenomenon. Here, 'mystical' essentially means having an open heart to the Divine and accepting the unpredictability of revelation itself or therefore its 'mystical quality'. Here, the author would like to draw attention especially to the Byzantine or Orthodox context to draw conclusions.

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To appreciate the issues at hand, the author must draw attention to the state of exegesis in the Byzantine or Orthodox context generally. For some time, there has been a negative assessment of the originality of Byzantine exegesis, especially after the 6th century (Kolbaba 2012:458). This assessment, however, can be perhaps drawn even more broadly and include post-Byzantine Orthodox exegesis generally (including the Slavic Orthodox context). Especially after the 'Patristic age', there can be seen a clear 'conservationist' attitude in the various Orthodox churches and contexts, which had a bearing on exegetical imagination.

The flexibility or freedom of exegesis in the Patristic period was undoubtedly conditioned by the rich interaction between Greek philosophical traditions, Judaism and Christianity. As seen in such authors as Gregory of Nazianzus, Clement of Alexandria and others, their good knowledge of Greek philosophy also conditioned a flexibility in interpretation. This is not only a question of allegorical or literal exegesis but a way of approaching and working with the biblical text.¹ In the Judaic world, exegetical or interpretative endeavours were also stimulated by the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and by a need to refocus the spiritual lives of the Jews towards a new or different engagement with the biblical heritage.

In terms of the Byzantine tradition, the Greek philosophical influence was a blessing but also a curse for originality. A curse in the sense that Greek philosophy, especially in relation to Neoplatonism, does enable engagement but according to its own rules, terms and concepts, which undoubtedly reduced the exegetical endeavours, at least in the context of the non-Greek world. Another issue noted by some commentators is that after the 4th to 6th centuries, there was a tendency to limit 'originality' in exegesis to repeating or relying on existing creeds or existing texts of the fathers (Irmscher & Kazhdan 1991:769).

It is also true that regardless of heresies, orthodoxy or patristic authority, there was a goal from the outset of Christianity to 'identify Christ' in the Old Testament. These Christological 'eyes' are also important in assessing the interpretative freedom or its lack among Christian authors.² Here, the Jewish exegetical traditions were marked by a greater liberty, even though there was also the same tendency to a polarity between conservatism and originality. Here, the contrast between the Midrash and Talmudic literature can encapsulate this tendency. More scholars are recently also studying the question of originality in Jewish exegesis in terms of imagination and freedom of textual interpretation (Fishbane 1998).

The issue and stumbling block in any discussions in terms of exegesis is how to explain 'originality'. Any theologian drawing on spirituality or mystical theology and not relying only on comparativist studies immediately faces the

1. For a recent work on this theme, see, for example, Despotis and Wallace (2022).

2. Origen, for example, writes, 'In the Law, everything hints at Christ in figurative and enigmatic form' (*De principiis*, 4:1).

possibility of facing accusations of being unscholarly, especially when it is almost impossible to establish a clear-cut causality in interpretation, and perhaps this is one of the reasons why African or Ethiopian spiritual traditions have been of lesser interest among theologians. Here, the Ethiopian context is all the more remarkable for any Orthodox theologian, because it seems to have been protected from the rationalistic conservatism so indicative of the Byzantine Orthodox world after the 6th century and from the Greek philosophical Neoplatonist borderlines of interpretation. All the more paradoxical this may appear, given the traditionalist character of Ethiopian theology and educational system, yet it produces such freedom in exegesis.

In terms of the modern Orthodox world, challenges in contemporary theology have produced a self-reflection, which for example has designated new ways of being 'conservative and liberated' at the same time, like for example in the context of neopatristic synthesis. 'Father George Florovsky (1975), speaking at the Congress of Orthodox theologians held in Athens at the end of 1936, formulated the project of "neo-patristic synthesis"' as follows:

[T]he authority of the Fathers has been re-emphasised and a 'return to the Fathers' advocated and approved. Indeed, it must be a creative turn. An element of self-criticism must be therein implied. This brings us to the concept of Neopatristic synthesis, as the task and the aim of the orthodox theology today. The Legacy of the Fathers is a challenge for our generation, in the orthodox Church and outside of it. Its recreative power, has been increasingly recognised and acknowledged in these recent decades, in various corners of divided Christendom. (p. 22)

On a completely primitive scale, we may state that 'originality' in exegesis assumes 'imagination' based on 'revelation', which is itself 'mystical' as it is in essence 'unpredictable' through simple rational theological reconstructions. In our contemporary world, rationalism brings in a temptation of predictability. We are often convinced that we can predict and control the forces of nature and so on. But any Ethiopian villager, or perhaps African villager living off the land and devoting himself or herself to agriculture, realises the unpredictability of nature and its forces, whether he or she will have something to eat or not. This is similar to the Ancient Egyptians, who regardless of measuring the inundation by the Nile River could not always determine next year's inundation and therefore harvests. This kind of unpredictability is reflected in exegetical imagination.

Here, in relation to the Ethiopian issues, the author quotes Douglas (1936) who writes about Egyptian and Syrian Christianity:

Egyptian and Syrian Christianity in the early days of the church formulated and developed quite different theologies from those of Greek and Latin theologians: Their minds continued to move in the simplest, uncoordinated theological categories. The concepts of the Latin and Greek theologies belonged to a plane which was incomprehensible to them. Their language had no idiom to express the processes of Latin and Greek

theological thought, and possessed no real equivalents, e.g., for such terms as being, substance, person and nature ... In brief, the Coptic and the Syrian Christianities have remained as static as anything in earth can remain static, and appear to consist today, as they consisted in the first centuries, of what to us a current term by described as Ur-Christianity. That is to say, they conform in everything to the common Catholicity of the primitive Church, but possess theologies which only state the facts of Revelations as recorded in the Scriptures and Tradition, and neither coordinated nor interpret them as a system. (p. vii)

Reading this statement, one has in mind the Ethiopian Christian context, which obviously resonates in the statement. The Ethiopian tradition, just as the others mentioned here, developed outside of the Greek theological orbit, with a great degree of independence. Here, it would be more precise to say not outside of contact with the Greek traditions but outside of Byzantine imperial enforcement of these elements.

But here there is the problem of Western *a priori* perceptions of these traditions. The Ethiopian, Coptic or Syrian traditions are anything but static or underdeveloped. In fact, the dynamism of these traditions lies in their liberation from *a priori* set Graeco-Roman philosophical or theological terminology. Today, Byzantine theology is juxtaposed with, for example, Syrian traditions, to show how rich is the Syrian tradition and its contribution in the early church. Similarly, not long ago the Byzantine liturgical tradition was viewed as completely static, and it has been shown that this is not the case by many commentators (e.g., Taft 1992) and that this tradition was extremely dynamic and diverse and that the problem was not with the tradition but with the methodology and eye of the beholder. The problem lies in how one approaches the material beforehand. Cowley, who is a well-known scholar in this regard, wrote about the beginnings of his relations with the tradition in Ethiopia. Cowley (1988) writes:

I had probably absorbed some prejudices about the state of biblical and patristic studies in the Ethiopian church, and for the most part I had not read or even heard of, the non-Ethiopian sources which contributed to the *Andēmta* Commentary tradition. Principally however, I was unaware of the *Andēmta* Commentary as a possible object of study, and conditions of study were unfavorable. (p. 5)

Cowley (1988), in his important book, offered an in-depth comparativist study of Ethiopian exegesis, where Ethiopian exegetical commentaries were aligned with other traditions. This is very important, but it also seems that it needs to be supplanted by an exploration of the hermeneutics of the process of the exegetical endeavour. From the perspective of a Byzantine commentator or Byzantine Orthodox commentator, as the author has alluded, what is seminal about Ethiopian exegesis (at least from a superficial glance) is its unsystematic nature, or in other words, its nonsystemic nature, being as it is liberated from the increasingly rigid anthropological imprisonment of Byzantine theology or Latin theology marked by system creation. This in no way means that the Ethiopian tradition developed in a vacuum and did not

interact with other traditions, a point sufficiently made in the work of Cowley (1988), who demonstrates the relations and connections of exegetical traditions. Regardless of the possible comparisons, Cowley concluded in his work: 'I am unconvinced that it is possible to construct a system, the application of which reveals the meaning of the text', (Cowley 1988:374).

Cowley, commenting on Jewish exegesis and Ethiopian commentaries, concluded that bringing a ready-made philosophical system and applying it to this material is basically flawed and unworkable if we desire to assess the exegetical system, but the author can add to Cowley that this is also true for bringing in a system which precludes 'imagination'. Rather, as he rightly implies generally in his work, one must discern the rules, being initially a mere observer, as these naturally appear and observe how they interact with the biblical or other text itself.

This would be especially inspiring for Orthodox writers, who often bring in a system with them in studying theological material. Having said this, however, Cowley does not let himself be carried away and perhaps denies the absolute freedom of interpretation, which is expected, because he concludes that Ethiopian exegesis is more indebted to the Antiochene tradition (Cowley 1988:375), also implying that the basic goal of exegesis is to enhance instruction (Cowley 1988:382). Some authors have been surprised by Cowley's emphasis on limiting allegory and its role in Ethiopian exegesis and view it as another testimony for our inability to liberate our approach from an overt rationalistic deterministic form of thought (Keon-Sang 2015:135).

Perhaps what would be useful here is to move beyond traditional categories of literal, allegorical exegesis by analysing the dynamics of how the exegesis internally develops and why such and such interpretation is reached, which is the reason for paying greater attention to the traditional Ethiopian schools and the complex relations between oral tradition and written commentary. Here, the difference between an uncontrolled 'gnostic' imagination and a 'sober' balanced exegesis is safeguarded in the community, the concrete ecclesial community, which 'guarantees rationality in irrationality' and also makes sure that exegesis is based on an appreciation of Christological and biblical frameworks.

There is a new emphasis on a reappraisal of exegetical methods and forms of their analysis in other contexts which have a similarity to the Ethiopian one, in terms of the basic tension inherent in a religious or philosophical system with a codified sacred text versus interpretation. Here, as implied above, a predetermined classificatory taxonomic system has often proved to be detrimental to an appreciation of the local exegetical culture. Similarly, in the Indian tradition, with the exegetical endeavour linked to *Mīmāṃsā* (school of interpretation or exegesis), there was often a projection of contemporary Western notions and categories which could

have limited the appreciation of the exegetical and cultural traditions, as noted by some scholars (Bilimoria 2004). Bilimoria relates generally to a useful concept developed by Tuck, termed isogesis, linked with the projection of one's prejudices, prejudgements and views onto one's approach to texts and sources. Thus, we look in the text for that which is of direct interest in our context or period, which obviously limits the 'freedom of the text' to speak for itself (Bilimoria 2004; Tuck 1990).

Education and exegesis

The importance of Ethiopian traditional (religious) education lies also in the fact that it has survived as a complex integrated whole, while in many other Orthodox settings it has virtually disappeared. Nowhere else it is thus possible to study the dynamics of theological instruction in such complexity as in Ethiopia. However, this has not prevented superficial criticisms of this system. Scholars commenting on the topic of Ethiopian education and exegetical tradition are themselves realising that, partly as a result of an indiscriminate reliance on secondary sources and other factors such as a lack of empirical knowledge of these traditions, a rather negative and unfair image of the Ethiopian educational and theological system has often been promulgated (Kenaw 2004:107–121).

Unsurprisingly, many of the Ethiopian authors criticising the system of traditional church education wrote in the context of the former communist era in Ethiopia. However, much of these opinions and rhetoric were simply carried over into our period, especially in the context of positivistic progressivism. To truly understand the potential of Ethiopian theology, one of course needs to have a full knowledge of the Ethiopian and modern theological environment, which is of course difficult to attain without graduating from all the levels. The basic question is to enquire as to how a traditional form of education with a formalistic and conservative structure can produce or maintain exegetical traditions or 'originality' in interpretation.

Another important thing to realise is that Ethiopian Orthodox traditions, regardless of their Christian content, are remarkably aligned with other indigenous African traditions. In fact, it seems that the Ethiopian tradition has produced a remarkable synthesis of the Christian and African tradition. This can be seen in the kind of 'freedom' associated in the Christian terms with the Holy Spirit.

Oral transmission is very important in Ethiopian education, similar to other African contexts, and this is not necessarily linked with the lack of resources for writing and other forms of transmission. The mechanics of why this or that information is preserved through oral transmission, while other information is 'discarded' or neglected, is a complex one. One of the reasons for this kind of oral taxonomy is related to community issues. Knowledge is preserved in oral traditions which is important for the community. This community-focused context is especially important in African contexts.

The liturgical experience is firmly related to the community and vice versa, and the liturgy itself provided instruction and reflection, as Cowley (1988) himself notes:

The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, contains extensive doctrinal teaching, and the material on the Trinity and Christology, is especially to be found in the anaphoras of St. Mary, of the Three hundred, of St. John Chrysostom and of St. Cyril. (p. 283)

As is well known, the Ethiopian tradition had long-term links with the Arabian Peninsula, even before the appearance of the Holy Qur'an and the Holy Bible. The linguistic links between Ge'ez and Arabic have been attested to and were obviously linked with mutual commercial and cultural contacts between the areas of Ethiopia and the southern Arabian Peninsula, which could have been accompanied by an emerging common exegetical tradition which was then linked with approaches to the sacred texts of the Bible and the Qur'an.

For example, there are instances of Ethiopian linguistic influences on Arabic, with terms in the Holy Qur'an having Ethiopian origin (Dadoo 2016:708). The scholar Dadoo importantly reminds us of a 'genre of rhythmic prose, called *saj'*, which was used by orators and fortune-tellers and which could be used to offer advice through aphorisms and proverbs (Dadoo 2016:708; Daif 2009:24). Dadoo also mentions the author Quss bin Sāidah al-Iyādī, who was bishop of Najrān, as one who utilises this genre and who in his compositions intertwines typical Ethiopian exegetical mechanisms, such as instruction, exhortation and interpretation (Dadoo 2016:709). Further, as some scholars notice, such as Ibn 'Ābidīn (n.d.:122; Dadoo 2003:711), it is possible that the practice of including a poetic extract to conclude a sermon was a prominent feature of Ethiopian preachers for some time, and it may be concluded that it is a common feature of our own contemporary period in many Ethiopian churches.

The Arabic and Ethiopian contexts betray in some instances the same educational exegetical platform with the important feature of placing the exegesis into the contemporary situation. Thus, racism against black people in the Arab environment in some segments of society of the 7th century is nicely addressed by the verses: 'They blame my black complexion While their evil deeds are darker than my skin' by an Arab poet of Ethiopian descent (died 608), 'Antarah (Dadoo 2003:711).

Even though Ethiopian education can be divided into stages or phases similar to the Western European forms, it entails a life-long educational journey. Education here is not something one experiences at a certain phase or intellectual step, but it is a life-long journey, because education is something more than the sum of intellectual knowledge. Further basic misunderstandings and flaws in scholarship have amounted to an oversimplification of church education, which is often viewed as a simple whole (Kenaw 2004:120).

For example, in the context of adult education, the Ethiopian context offers a life-long educational system which can go on for decades. Other African indigenous contexts also emphasise this life-long process of education (Achi 2021).

The traditional forms of education incorporate exegesis in many forms. This includes the tradition of *Qenie*, a form of religious poetry, which requires a high degree of individual talent, education and ability to compose new poems or letters in Ge'ez. Importantly, exegesis is not limited to the biblical books but includes a variety of other sources (*Ye-Metschaft Tereguamie*; Exegesis of *Metschafte Liqawnt*, the Book of Scholars; *Metschafe Menekosat*, the Book of Monks). Or in other words, how the exegete understands his or her freedom in interpretation in relation to the spiritual and practical challenges around us.

Some commentators have noted the emphasis on memorisation in the traditional schools. For example, at the outset of his study, Robso Mengesha (2021) writes:

But, in all forms of the instructional methodology, learning by heart or memorisation commonly characterises the provision of traditional church education. An adult learner needs is expected to ought to stay more than forty years in Yeabinet timhrt bet (Orthodox Church adult school) to complete the church education within/typical of the curriculum of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. (p. 4147)

It would be fair to conclude that memorisation does produce an essential stratum of horizons for any exegesis to take place. Technically, memorisation sets a firm paradigm consisting of oral or textual material (from which it is drawn) which *naturally* limits and at the same time directs the flow of interpretation. But the value of memorisation can touch on psychology and spirituality. For example, memorisation and repetition are both instruments touching on important psychological aspects offering 'space' for reflection and harmony, similar to prayer, where the repetition of prayers is not a form of limitation but a platform for freedom and harmony. Recent explorations into the various roles of memory touch on issues of mental consistency, and more research can be carried out into mental categories including episodic, semantic or procedural memory in relation to education.

A basic criticism of memorisation of certain passages and texts can suggest that such a process limits the vision of things to a particular passage, to the detriment of other passages or writings and sources which are not memorised or repeated. If one remembers a quote or passage from a saint or a parable and does not remember anything else or other passages from the same saint, this limits the scope of vision at least to the taxonomic classificatory ability of the individual in remembering this or that passage and nothing else. Similarly, obviously, this is the same for the Bible, where a favourite passage, quote or story can create a mental perception that this is the main or most important message of the Bible, to the detriment of other passages. However, arguably, the contemporary disdain for anything linked with

memorisation is also not overall positive, because without data and information and learning or memorisation there can be no interpretation.

The role of memorisation is related to community building, because if various individuals from the same group memorise the same text or oral material, this serves as a pillar or reference point for the identity of such a community and its interpretative framework in the future. With our contemporary culture of completely eradicating the need to memorise, it is difficult to appreciate the benefits of memorisation. Here, memorising undoubtedly does not limit one's ability to accept further information but on the contrary enables one to 'classify' and 'authenticate' material. In the traditional schools, the need to memorise was of course also related to the scarcity of available materials. In today's media world, the lack of memories or memorisation of material can create an environment of loosely entangled abstract concepts and information which loses its potential to enrich the community.

The memorisation of texts and biblical writings is the first stage of learning in the Ethiopian church. These texts are also part of the services, which means that those knowing them become part of the liturgical communal system. Thus, memory enables one to enter the communal 'interpretative' framework. This process has multiple levels and aspects, as Pankhurst Richard (1962) notes:

There is also another unique character which is the teaching methodology. The method of teaching is mainly providing oral lesson or [*Yeagal Timihrt*] in a melodious sound the word, which is performed by recitation and memorization. In all schools, in school of Fidel, school of Zema, school of Qene or school of Metshaf Tirguame. Recitation and memorization are the dominant methods of teaching in traditional church schools. (p. 241)

Here, undoubtedly, the important thing to realise is that this process is not a mark of some form of backwardness or a lack of written materials. On the contrary, this process is a mark of one's ability to interact with his or her environment generally by drawing on the commonalities and mutuality (memories and memorisation) in a given community and its environment. It is, after all, the community which 'chooses' the common material to be memorised. Memory is a static concept; remembering is a process. To remember means action – remembering something from memory. Here, the content of memory is not only a recollection of data, but it is an enlivening similar to the process of remembering seen in the Last Supper. As Christ during the Last Supper commanded, 'do this in the remembrance of me' (see Lk 22:18–20; 1 Cor 11:23–25). The Ethiopian tradition understands the Eucharist as a holistic sacrifice, as a unique service drawing on all forms of sacrifice (Gebrselassie 2020:4) through the dynamics of remembering.

As implied earlier, memory is linked with the community. Shared memories are common ground to which everyone can relate. Some scholars have correctly pointed to features of the Bible which show that there is a marked emphasis on collective memory (Cockayne & Salter 2021:278). The word

Zakhar [to remember] is often used in Deuteronomy in the sense of collective remembering (Dt 5:15), (Cockayne & Salter 2021:278). Also, the noun *zikkaron* can be mentioned (Ex 13:9), which in the Septuagint is translated as anamnesis (1 Cor 11:24–25). The author may state that the exegesis and interpretation of the Bible in the liturgical situation is linked to this aspect of interpretation as to how one needs to understand his or her life in the community and the possible sacrifices this entails.

In other Orthodox contexts, theological education in the post-Byzantine world was marked by many factors. The Greek world was, for example, subjected for centuries to Ottoman rule. These various factors and conditions themselves provided for a sieve which perhaps influenced the survival and pre-eminence of certain theological themes and material at the expense of others. Here, regardless of the written or oral possibilities of transmission or the objective importance of theological material, certain theologically specific themes and contents gained pre-eminence in the catechetical or educational system, perhaps at the expense of others. Thus, various ‘synopses’ or ‘summaries’ or selections served educational purposes such as the *Philokalia* compiled by Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain. The inadequacies of transmission are in Orthodox theology relativised by a belief that the Holy Spirit guides the process.

Here, the Holy Spirit is traditionally regarded as a basic ‘corrective’ principle governing the process of theology in the Orthodox Church but also in the Ethiopian setting. The possible inadequate or negative characteristics of transmission and memory are ‘easily’ overcome by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit linked with its work in the community. God is the ultimate spiritual guide. It is, after all, the Holy Spirit which guides the hand of the author and offers the correct taxonomy in selecting this or that. The work of the Holy Spirit is easily discerned in the community itself. In the long run, the community and the Holy Spirit are the taxonomic elements of tradition and theology. The Holy Spirit is thus not a subjective magical force but ‘verifiable’ through its fruits in the community. Unsurprisingly, it is the Holy Spirit which is the principle of imagination and creativity in interpretation.

The selective and transmission process involved in the education system relates to exegetical possibilities. Other factors play a role in the survival or existence of certain material. That there is no general ‘historical logic’ in the preservation of certain material can be seen in the example of the so-called Garima Gospels, which miraculously survived until today being preserved by a monastic community which functioned for centuries and was a kind of taxonomic guarantor of the survival of this work.

The exegetical principle

Exegesis can serve various purposes, and it can be used for instruction or for theological reflection. In the Ethiopian context, undoubtedly, both play a role. For example, in one

such eucharistic setting, the author recalls hearing a homily after the gospel reading where one priest offered a traditional poetic composition in the original ancient Ge’ez language based on the content of the reading, while another following priest translated this into modern Amharic, then another priest followed with an original poetic composition or interpretation, which was followed by a contemporary contextual interpretation, drawing on, among other things, the unique parish setting and environment. The exegesis serves as instruction but also as a bridge to reflection. Undoubtedly, the post-Byzantine context of Orthodoxy has been limited to ‘repetition’ or pedagogical conservatism which marks it as unoriginal, if exegesis is understood as a platform for new contextualisations.

If we use the language of ‘mystery’ in relation to the Ethiopian tradition, this can be explained in the context of contextualisation. The *Andēmtē* commentary is also related to a need in understanding the Ge’ez texts of the liturgical, biblical and patristic material, because Amharic (used by these *Andēmtē* commentaries) became the primary language of Ethiopian Christianity after the medieval period. Here Massimo Villa (2019) observes:

Commentaries are subdivided into *tərgwāme* and *andəmtā* commentaries. The former represent an early stage of the Ethiopian traditional exegesis. They are in Ge’ez and are attested from the fourteenth century onwards. They constitute a heterogeneous corpus since different manuscripts admit different interpretations of the same passage. The decline of the *tərgwāme* corpus is linked to the rise of the *andəmtā* commentaries. The Amharic *andəmtā* corpus, originating in the Gondarine Age and committed to writing only in recent times, intends to explore in depth the true meaning of a given text, verse by verse. (p. 6)

Pederson (1995) states that the commentary:

[I]ntends to clarify and illustrate the meaning of the transmitted Ge’ez text. It is a theological commentary in the sense, that it sees the Bible, as the book of divine revelation, but it shows little tendency, of theological dispute. The *Andēmtā* comprises both the so-called *näṭāla tərgwame*, i.e. simple and direct translation of the text, without commentary, and the *mēstir tərgwame*, “interpretation of the mystery”, which is a clarification based on the sense without too much attention to the words. (p. 4)

Clarification is perhaps needed to define exactly how ‘mysterious’ the commentary can be. We have to realise that a close proximity to the biblical text and issues of instruction do not preclude exegetical imagination, at least in terms of contextualisation. The exegetical imaginative character of exegesis seems to appear even in the designation of the commentaries. The term *Andēmtā* is perhaps derived from the Amharic word *andēm*, and ‘(another) one, which introduces an alternative opinion’ (Pedersen 1995:4), or as Villa specifies, ‘The Amharic word *andēm*, meaning “and (there is) one (who says)” (from which the term *andəmtā* is derived)’ (Villa 2019:6). Pedersen further notes that the word *andēm* corresponds to the Hebrew word *וְיֵשׁ אִחַד* ‘and there is one (there are those) who say(s)’ *וְיֵשׁ מְפָרְשִׁים* ‘and there are those who interpret’. פְּרוּשׁ אִחַד ‘another interpretation’ (Pedersen 1995:4). Pedersen also

stresses that the 'Bible is an inspired Word of God', and Villa adds 'that the term *andəm* is typically used to introduce the hidden explanation of a canonical passage' (Villa 2019:6). Girma writes: 'Andemta can be translated as "and [there is] one [who says]" [...]. The term andemta is derived from the repeated use of the Amharic word *andem* in the commentary corpus' and further according to M.A. Girma (2011; cf. Keon-Sang 2015:118):

The etymological origin of the term Andemta is the Amharic word Aand-which literally means 'number one'. Andem means 'for one' with [the] obvious expectation of lelam which means 'for another'. The term occasionally introduces a chain of successive comments. (p. 385)

It is also necessary to keep in mind that the Ge'ez version of the Old Testament is a translation of the Septuagint, not the Hebrew Masoretic Text (Pedersen 1995):

It is a translation of the Septuagint from the period after the third century, when Origen and others corrected the mistakes of the Septuagint in relation to the Hebrew text (Pedersen 1995:6). The purification process went even longer in the context of Antioch, until the fifth century. (p. 6)

As can be seen from the following quotation of an Ethiopian introduction to the book of Genesis, an alternative opinion can radically depart in content and become a new interpretation rather than an alternative opinion. 'For example, in the introduction of the Book of Genesis, the word andem ("Another says") is repeatedly used in order to suggest alternative interpretations of the word Orit (Torah)'. Cowley (1974; Keon-Sang 2015:118) adds an example:

(Torah) means 'zéna' (narrative), for it narrates the story of the false Messiah, the second coming and the kingdom of Heaven. Another says, it means 'testimony', for it says, 'Testify, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one'. Another says, it means 'law', for having made a law, it says, 'Let this be a law to you' [...]. Another says, a mirror shows dirt on the teeth and grime on the head; the Orit reveals sin and righteousness, apostasy and faith. Also they liken it to a hill. A man on a hill sees stony ground and pasture, and people ascending and descending; the Orit shows what is done from the creation until the second coming. (pp. 135–136)

We can state that 'a different opinion' here would be much freer than in the Talmudic Jewish tradition, where alternative opinions are more developed along rational discourse. Here, there would be more a resemblance to the Haggadah and Midrashic traditions. Cowley noted that there is a continuity with the Haggadah tradition which could have been further developed in the Ethiopian tradition. Cowley (1988) writes:

After a particular Haggadah has developed and stagnated, in a non-Ethiopian tradition, it may later develop further in the *Andemta Commentary*. The transition to another culture presumably, provided a stimulus to redevelopment ... elements which may be considered legendary, are frequently if not always, derived from scriptural exegesis. (p. 380)

The Ethiopian exegetical tradition betrays clear evidence of a selective process. The exegete was not limited by the availability of material, as one would believe at first glance, but chose

between material and themes. Cowley, for example, concludes on the *Andemta Commentary* on Genesis 1 that 'its proximate sources contain, a variety of categories of material, - the interpretation of words, theology, natural science, cosmology, calendrics, and homiletic application' (Cowley 1988:262) and on the theme of Melchizedek's ancestry: 'The Compilers of the *Andemta Commentary* evidently had a wide choice of material. The concerns which prompted their selection appear to have been exegetical ones (rather than idle curiosity)' (Cowley 1988:29).

The problem with comparative historical reconstruction of exegesis is that it often produces an idea that the usage of a particular work by one tradition from another tradition is a mark of dependence and therefore, in a sense, a certain inferiority. For example, the Ethiopian work called 'Miracles of Jesus: (*Ta'amməra I'yasus*)' is a translation mostly of the apocryphal Gospel of John (preserved in Arabic), (Witakowski 2012:209). Regardless of the complex history and reworking of this work, the usage within the Ethiopian tradition would perhaps at first glance suggest a dependence of Ethiopian traditions on Syriac or later Arabic Christian works.

However, in terms of the 'Miracles of Jesus', its popularity in Ethiopia is related to a particular emphasis and concern congenial to the Ethiopian context, which already suggests an original interpretative hermeneutic. Here, the appetite to create or implant 'new stories' about Christ is linked with an interest in the 'mysterious' or 'miraculous' with an obvious link to the exegetical enquiry. The local interest or tradition was the *a priori* taxonomy for selecting this or that 'foreign work'. The popularity of miracles and the miraculous is shown by the dissemination of such works as the Miracles of Gabriel, Miracles of Michael and the Miracles of the Trinity (Witakowski 1995:286).

Here, the author can postulate the creation of what may be called 'reverse exegesis'. That is, an exegesis which actually produces a new 'primary' text, supplanting the original or building a new one, being inspired by a different text. Thus, paradoxically, the Miracles of Jesus can be understood as a new creation or recreation of the Gospel but also of previous apocryphal traditions.

A certain Ethiopian freedom in appreciating the 'mysterious' in exegesis is certainly linked with allegorical exegetical traditions which were so prominent also in the Alexandrian Egyptian area. The later Byzantine concern for dogmatism de-emphasised the liberty associated with allegorical interpretation. An important feature of Ethiopian spirituality is the popularity of the Mother of God. In Ethiopian thought, Mary is associated with many spiritual, apocryphal and cultural aspects, perhaps giving her a greater scope than in other traditions.

In this regard, there is perhaps a relationship with the Coptic Mariological tradition. One may mention the Egyptian author Rufus of Shotep (6th century), who, building on the

story of Annunciation, creates a notion where Mary is an exegete in her own right, being able to ‘discern’ the good intentions of the Archangel in contrast to the ‘ignorance’ of the first woman Eve (Sheridan 1995). The Ethiopian allegorisation of the Mother of God created many possible inspirations for exegetical interpretation.

Of course, exegesis is not linear and there are various forms and techniques of exegesis. For example, *Yandemta Tirguame* (interpretation by alternatives), offering various alternatives which could be introduced by the word ‘or’, the literal meaning (*Neñela Tirguame*) and also *Yemistir Tirguame* (idiomatic interpretation), concentrating on the possible meaning of a given sentence regardless of its structure (Abera 2012; Mengesha 2021:4151).

Here, we have to remind ourselves that many exegetical principles simply follow what would be general and ‘logical’ interpretative rules which could have been well known throughout the various areas, with different technical names. The ‘wax and gold’ method in this sense can be understood as a common method of interpretation. Here, we can be reminded of the Alexandrian Coptic tradition. There is also the ‘image of the exegete as a wise bee’ (Ps 6:8, LXX), which was a common understanding of how to approach texts (Sheridan 1995:4).

It would be fair to state, at least in the spiritual sense, that the directive for differing interpretations is related to the variety of community and life situations in the Ethiopian tradition more than a desire to offer alternative commentaries or opinions in the abstract theological sense (which is also a safeguard against abstract mysticism). This perhaps is the stepping stone for a freer and looser interpretation, which perhaps could have resulted in the creation of explanatory stories (known as *Tarik*) in the Ethiopian tradition.

Here, we can cite an example of a commentary explanation quoted by Villa of Isaiah 40:31 (አለሰ: ደሴፈውዎ: ለእግዚአብሔር: ደሴድሱ: ጎደሎሙ: ወደበቀሱ: ከነፊሆሙ: ከመ: ንስር:, ‘those who hope in God will renew their strength; and their wings will sprout like eagles’) as follows (Villa 2019):

ንስር ባረጃ ጊዜ ዐብዶ የሚባል ጭቃ አለ ያነን ተቀብቶ አንጨቱን ከምሮ ወያሰተጣገዕ ከነፊሆ ከንፍና ከንፉን ያማታዋል፤ ወደወፅኦ አሳት አምክካለ ዘኩ ያፍ: አንዲል ጊዮርጊስ ወልደ አሚድ: ከአካሉ አሳት ወጥቶ አንጨቱን ያቃጥለዋል፤ አሱም አብሮ ይቃጠላል፤ በግብፅ ዝናም ዘንሞ አያውቅም፤ ባምስት መቶ ዘመን ለሐድሶተ ንስር አንዲ ካሬያ ያለ ይዘንማል፤ በመጀመሪያ ቀን ትል ይህላል፤ በሁለተኛው ቀን ያላል፤ በሦስተኛው ቀን በሮ ይሄዳል፤12. (Villa 2019:9)

When the eagle grows old, it secretes the so-called ‘abdo’. After smearing itself with it and after collecting firewood, it fits closely its wings and flutters them. ‘Fire comes out of the body of that bird’ (*Gāaz*), as Giyorgis Walda ‘Amid says: fire comes out its body. Then, it burns the firewood and burns down itself together with the wood. In Egypt it has not rained for five hundred years; however, as soon as the eagle has renovated itself, it drizzles. The first day (the eagle) is a worm; the second

day [*it becomes*] a bird; the third day, (having the sky) cleared up, it goes away. (p. 9)³

As we can see, the exegesis offered here, to say the least, is very complicated and multilayered for a relatively ‘straightforward’ text. It cannot be pinned down to simple literal or allegorical exegesis. Even though we can critically identify the sources or layers of this exegesis, the essential thing is to identify the way the exegete weaves and concocts the material, what the ‘way of thinking’ is here. The challenge with any exegetical studies relates to identifying the inspiration, method or presupposition of the exegesis. Many of the African or Ethiopian traditions of exegesis are underappreciated or misunderstood because there is an *a priori* rejection based on logic, rationality or comprehension. In today’s world, where rationalistic forms of theology dominate, this is even more pronounced, conjoined with a lack of openness to the spiritual or the unpredictable.

It is important to stress that the exegete does not necessarily form their exegesis by studying the reliability or veracity of their source or sources. The Ethiopian exegete is capable of using all possible sources and means for their writings, and as theologians we should primarily be concerned in the underlining way these are connected rather than dissecting them and individually evaluating them. A true theological appreciation of these accounts entails a general understanding of the imaginative and often completely ‘illogical’ connectivity which can be only summarised as the work of the ‘Holy Spirit’.

This seeming irrational or illogical character of exegesis cannot be overcome by a simple critical dissection of its components. This dissection and rationalisation or categorisation of cultural or theological phenomena is so common to the western philosophical or theological approaches to African or other non-Western forms of culture. The African cultural environment especially offers a greater appreciation of the holistic dynamics and spirit of freedom, which is related to the appreciation of the broader interconnectivity of people, nature and other elements, so missing in contemporary Western thought.

The exegesis of Isaiah mentioned here has as its basis the central idea of resurrection. The exegesis offers a link to something related to the local environment. The interplay with the eagle and fragrance (‘abdo’) builds on something indigenous – here, the specific fragrance from a specific known area or even a local bird if we interpret the word *abdo* in various ways. The general hint of resurrection is localised. This localisation is not only a localisation of familiar elements but of activities linked with survival.

3.Villa uses this passage to compare the Ethiopian version of the *andamtā* with a similar story in the *Philostorgus*, claiming that in this instance, there is a difference between the two accounts and that the *Philostorgus* also mentions another similar account but in a different story context. He suggests that the Ethiopian commentary relates to another account, also in the *Philostorgus*, the story of the phoenix. ‘According to the Physiologus, the phoenix, when it has reached the age of five hundred years, enters the forest of Lebanon and fills its wings, with the scent called *abdu*, then it enters the city of the sun, i.e. Heliopolis, and burns itself above the altar. When the priest examines the ashes, he finds a worm, which turns then into a big bird. The phoenix then greets the priest and comes back to its place’. As Villa suggests, the Ethiopian exegete perhaps suggests that the exegete replaced the word phoenix, which could have been lesser known, with the word ‘*abdo* (bird); the similarity here is with the word ‘*abdu* (fragrance).

Collecting firewood and warmth from a fire are essential aspects of survival familiar to all. The rather abstract message of resurrection from Isaiah is thus localised and linked with what it means to survive (be resurrected), understandable to every person.

The idea of renewal has a cyclical character which is here linked with both death and renewal. Death and birth are, of course, facts of everyday life. The Isaiah account is more of a one-time event. For an ordinary person who hears this exegesis, evoking the idea of cycles of life is more congenial and facilitates an understanding of a more complex divine form of resurrection or renewal.

Having said this, we should note that the exegete transforms the abstract statement of Isaiah into a highly concrete event and aspect into a commonplace occurrence of an ageing 'local' bird which dies and emanates a fragrance. One has the idea that nothing extraordinary is actually happening, that the biblical statement is simply a continuation of an occurring feature of everyday life. Of course the 'miraculous' is also present here, but one has the impression that it is simply occurring side by side with the ordinary and forms with it one reality. There is also the image of self-sacrifice or expected death which could be interpreted Christologically.

Similar to Jewish exegesis, an authority is evoked. Giyorgis Walda here offers a spiritual grounding to the statement. Interestingly, the statement 'Fire comes out of the body of that bird' (ገጅጃ) is then repeated with an emphasis from Giyorgis Walda 'Amid, who says that; 'fire comes out of its body' (Villa 2019:9). This could be an allusion to many related concepts of fire and body in the spiritual tradition.

Fire and burning can be found in various contexts (Jos 7):

And he who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the Lord, and because he has done an outrageous thing in Israel. (vv. 15–25)

Similarly, here the fire can purify or be the source of renewal. The other 'sudden' statements such as that in 'Egypt it has not rained for five hundred years' are seemingly completely strange here, but the exegesis links the events with renewal and rain, and the number three is perhaps linked with the resurrection of Christ after three days.

Further, we read (Villa 2019):

In Matthew 3, 7 Jesus calls the Pharisees 'brood of vipers': ወይቤሎሙ፡ ኮ ትውልደ፡ ካራዊተ፡ ምድር፡ መኑ፡ አመረከሙ፡ ትጉግዩ፡ አመቅሰፍት፡ ወ አመንሱት፡ ዘይመጽኦ፡ and (Jesus) told them: 'you brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the punishment and the coming wrath?' The Amharic commentary to that passage is as follows: ትወልደ ካራዊተ ምድር ያላት ክርጭ ገሞራዊት ናት ክፈ ማጎፀኑዋ ጠባብ ነው ዘሩን ባፎ ትቀበለዋቸ አባለ ዘሩን ቆርጣ ታስቀረዋለች። በፅንስ ጊዜ አባት ሥጋዋን በልተው ሆኗን ቀደው ደወጣሉ። በዚህ ጊዜ እናት ትሞታለች። እኒህም እንዳባት

የሚሆኑዋቸውን ነቢያት እንዲ እናት የሚሆኑዋቸው ሐዋርያት ገጅለዋና።16

'Brood of vipers' (the viper) is a snake of Gomorrah, and the opening of her womb is tight. (The female) receives the semen from her mouth. After cutting off the (male) organ, she abandons him. At birth the sons eat the flesh (of their mother), lacerate her belly, and come out. Thus she dies. The prophets, which are like the fathers (of the vipers), and the apostles, which are like the mothers (of the vipers), were likewise killed. (p. 9)⁴

Here, the citation is almost identical to an account attributed to Galen (transl. Robert 2016):

The female viper has a head more suited for destruction than any other creature. For they say it opens its mouth to receive the male's semen and then when it has got it to cut off his head; and this method of their foul intercourse. Then the creatures born from the sperm by a sort of natural revenge eat through the mother's stomach and emerge into the open. (p. 107)

Here, the Ethiopian account undoubtedly utilises this passage from Galen and adds biblical themes. Undoubtedly, again, the snake or other similar creatures evokes a common experience shared by many in the region of Ethiopia. The author possibly here explores the theme of sacrifice and the necessity of death linked with a kind of rebirth. Sacrifice here is something constant, a feature of life required of both children and parents. The parents, men or women, must prepare themselves for self-sacrifice, just like the next generation. Saints from the church are equally caught in this cycle of self-sacrifice or sacrifice and death. Saintliness will not automatically protect one from the necessity of sacrifice. Life in God means an almost automatic death from forces that are earthly (earth) – here, Gomorrah. Anybody advocating a feel-good version of Christianity is thus realistically disappointed and should expect the worst.

These small examples show us a broader view of theology, which was understood as having a direct influence to practice and theory, not separating both. Theology had a direct implication on how the community functioned and how people formed relationships within the community. Further in the Ethiopian context, the entire community being part of an ecclesial experience functioned as a teacher or mentor for children, not leaving this role only to the biological parents. This type of thinking was also common in many other indigenous contexts throughout the world, where it was the community which educated the children, which supplemented any flaws or inadequacies of education which could have otherwise emerged if education was left to parents or a few individuals.

Comparing this tradition with the late Byzantine but also post-Byzantine Orthodox context, it is obvious that the Ethiopian tradition is more advanced in terms of originality and contextualisation (mystery). Here a comparison with the Byzantine *catenae* comes into mind. More studies are needed to assess the role of Byzantine biblical commentaries in the

4.Again Villa (2019:11) sees a similarity with the *Physiologus* (chapter on the Echidna or viper) but also with the 'andamta commentary of a renowned Arabic-based compilation of law, 'The Law of Kings' (Fætha nagäst).

form of *catenae* and compare them with the Ethiopian tradition. The *catenae* are chains of commentaries attached to a biblical text (See Devreesse 1928).

Whatever the case, it is true that the *catenae* overall offer perhaps an interpretation closely linked with the idea of 'tradition' and its preservation (Crostiti 2019:76). However, it is also true, as noticed by Kolbaba and Devreesse, that the *catenae* did not necessarily distinguish between 'orthodox' and 'nonorthodox' commentaries, which essentially means that they provided some degree of freedom for exegesis (Kolbaba 2013:491; Devreesse 1928:1093). Interestingly, however, the exegetical material was clearly termed so. As Kolbaba observes, the most common designations in Greek manuscripts are *eklogai exegetikai* and variations on the theme of *sylloge exegeson*, *synagogue exegeseon* or *epitome exegeseon* (Kolbaba 2013:486).

Here, we can note an interesting parallel with the exegesis of Saint John Chrysostom, who, however, at first glance offers a more literal and nonallegorical exegetical tradition than the Ethiopian one. However, this is only a first impression because, with his emphasis on the deeper psychological dimensions of faith and spirituality, coupled with an overall emphasis on the community as the primary vehicle of faith and theology, he runs parallel with the Ethiopian concerns, showing us that regardless of exegetical form there is an underlining principle related to personal and communal growth moving beyond categories.

Commenting on Acts 8:

And the Angel of the Lord spoke unto Philip, saying, arise and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert. And he arose and went. (v. 26)

Chrysostom notes the obedience to the mission by Phillip: 'And he did not ask, wherefore? but he "arose and went"'. Chrysostom mentions the Ethiopian eunuch, who read the prophet Isaiah (Ac 8:27, 28). Chrysostom mentions that the eunuch was reading constantly, 'that even sitting in his chariot he read'. The Spirit tells Philip to go near. Chrysostom stresses that the eunuch needed interpretation of what he was reading; this interpretation was forthcoming on the basis of the Holy Spirit:

Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? [...]. Observe again his piety; that though he did not understand, he read, and then after reading, examines. (vv. 29–31)

Chrysostom notes that after he gained knowledge and interpretation he immediately desired to be baptised. 'Observe how it is be baptized (v. 36). Mark the eager desire, mark the exact knowledge'.

Phillip goes on to Azotus. Chrysostom goes on to note that the conversion of this eunuch meant the conversion of others in Ethiopia. His quest for exegesis resulted in knowledge and the knowledge of an entire nation. Chrysostom shows that

Phillip is patient with the eunuch: 'Observe the wisdom of Philip: he did not accuse him, not say, "I know these things exactly: [...]". Understandest thou what thou readest?' (v. 30). Chrysostom continues to show that it is because the eunuch had a humble disposition that he was able to receive the explanation of the passage by Phillip who was also humble to the eunuch:

On the contrary, he confesses his ignorance: wherefore also he learns. He shows his hurt to the physician: sees at a glance, that he both knows the matter, and is willing to teach. (Chrysostom Homily XIX, Ac VIII, 26,27) (transl. Walker, Sheppard & Browne 1889)

Chrysostom is an author who would be hardly classified as an allegorical interpreter, but as we have seen, his interpretation offers a freer dimension, something which was lost later on. Importantly, as noticed for example by Dragutinović (2015):

The freedom of an ancient interpreter toward the authorities of the past can be illustrated by a statement from John Chrysostom (on Gal. 4: 24), who did not hesitate in saying that the apostle Paul used the term 'allegory' in Gal 4:24 'in the wrong way' (καταχρηστικῶς). (p. 15)

Chrysostom resembles aspects of the Ethiopian tradition in his aim to instruct and to explain why, for example, the Apostle Paul said or did things as he did. Here, there is a departure from mere textual analysis to understand the behaviour or activity of biblical figures which is subjected to an overall goal or pastoral goal. A similar concern appears in the following commentary on Hebrews in Paul in the Ethiopian tradition as Cowley (1988) cites:

And he wrote this epistle concentrating on spiritual wisdom; and he omitted mention of his name at the beginning of his epistle, for this apostle did not write his name, saying: 'From Paul an Apostle', like all his (other) epistles, because he knew that all his relatives, would hate him intensely, and all the Jewish people would reject him, because he was removing their law, and reproaching them, and (because) he loved the erring Gentiles, who had believed. But if the Apostle had written his name at the beginning of this epistle, who would have read his epistle, and who would have given heed to it? Rather they would have been dispersed quickly, breaking up the gathering, without hearing the word of wisdom, which is in it. Similarly, this (apostle) omitted, mention of Moses' name, at the beginning of his epistle, and he wrote in place of it, 'In many matters', and in many portions God gave information to our fathers, in his prophets from former times. And he said this verifying that the first ordinance came by the hand of a servant, But as for the messianic ordinance he says, 'But in the latter days he spoke to us in his son, whom he made inheritor of all'. (p. 273)⁵

Role of teacher

Instruction linked with a goal and aim is linked with the personality of the teacher. Here, the role of the teacher, the elder, is not of a mere 'information disseminator' but of a person who had the 'same experiences' and embodied that which he

⁵Prologue 3.1.14, Hebrews. MS Cambridge, Or 192f, 109b–110b. with corrections from MSS BL. Or 526f, 4b, Or 528f., 110a–111a, and or 503f., 164a–165a.

taught, making his teaching authentic. A teacher here must be able to correctly choose between information, and this ability stems from his or her own personal experience. The taxonomy of discernment and decision to teach this or that stems from one's own experiences with a view to the concrete situation and needs of the children or community at hand. Therefore, what marks the good teacher is not his or her knowledge or the amount of intellectual information he or she possesses but the ability to 'apply', to 'choose' this or that information for instruction, which posits exegesis as a special role.

The instruction provides a horizon of spiritual intimacy, mysticism and historical continuity. One such contemporary Ethiopian account, speaking about political issues, betrays the influence of such teachers in relation to religious class and discussion of virtues. The necessity of finding one's own teacher or school, for example around the age of 15, promotes intellectual variety and exchange. Travelling afar, begging and utilising the hospitality of various people would have undoubtedly served to disseminate knowledge through social interaction, and undoubtedly, students staying at the houses of various villagers would have had an impact on their surroundings, even if superficially, informing their hosts of their studies and their contents. The support of these students would have also facilitated a spirit of solidarity and philanthropy.

Hailemariam Ared (Abebe 2020) speaks thus:

'I was either in the 3rd or 4th grade when I first learned about the umbilical cord bonding the great Empire of Axum to Adolis. I remember it clearly, after these so many years, in whose class I first learned about it. It was in the Gibre Guebnet class taught by one of Axum's premier priest and scholar of Saint Yared, Mregata Fisseha (may he rest in peace). And it is not only with regards to his class of Gibre Guebnet that I remember him so dearly but for the transforming event I had seen him do too.'

And further:

'Gibre Gebnet was not only about religion, faith, morals and ethics but was also about history. And it was in one of his religion classes, I remember him teaching us about the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon, and how her son Menelik (Emne Melek) brought the Ark of Covenant to Axum. Never it was through the Nile river or across the desert of Beja (Begemdir) of the Sudan to Lake Tana, so concocted by those peddlers of the bogus "Solomonic Dynasty" on whose squatting, no archaeologist could find a trace of anything of civilisation of archaeological value, but through Axum, Adolis the Red Sea, and Jerusalem! I vividly remember it all, the lesson of my life from that great teacher, that renowned scholar and guardian of faith, the priest extraordinaire, the student of St. Yared, and great citizen of the Tigray Nation, the late Mregata Fisseha! There was something else I remember too. There was something angelic about Mregata Fisseha. When he taught, his words were like a beautiful August midnight rain, powerfully soothing as they were both spiritually and intellectually transforming. His words were like music took, full of life and vitality, vivacity, intensely enlightening, and magically healing, energizing, rejuvenating and powerfully empowering! His words had colors too, and did he draw with his words, rainbows of angels and Saints, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and not to mention Heaven and Hell! And in the center of it all was always,

the seat of that great Empire the world has known for so long as the Axumite Kingdom/Empire: Tigray, unlike today, whole all the way to the sea, and all its people one and a mighty family, the former as the land of God, and the latter as the angels of just, committed to live by the laws of God! (n.p.)

Here, the figure of the teacher, his teaching, his spiritual disposition, history and contemporary issues are all conflated into an almost mythical presentation. Here, historical accuracy is somehow relativised and given over to a community narrative which forms the backbone of interpretation and appreciation. The account primarily helps the individual to orient himself, to find his own spiritual grounding, and thus inaccuracies or phantasies are not the most important issues to be studied here. What is important is how the teacher and the content of teaching help the growth of the individual and community involved, which is the primary aim of education and exegesis rather than a simple succession of information.

The Ethiopian schooling system offered a way out for students who would otherwise for one reason or another not be able to work on the farms of their parents. Begging and physical labour accompanied or accompany study, with strenuous regimes. Students can sleep a mere four hours a day, sleeping in simple huts (Kassa 2021). Little study has been carried out on the relationship between physical labour or activity with the development of mental capacities. It has been recently shown that walking and strenuous physical exercises have a relationship with brain function.

Conclusion

The importance and originality of Ethiopian exegesis can perhaps appear only if one compares it to other traditions, such as the Byzantine or post-Byzantine Orthodox exegetical traditions. Authors coming from the Orthodox world especially can appreciate the richness of this Ethiopian tradition and its relevancy in being able to contextualise and offer a rich interaction with its surroundings and world, whereas the Orthodox Byzantine traditions have somehow drifted to an overt emphasis on conservatism. Here lie the possibilities for inspiration, because the Ethiopian tradition maintains all which is 'dear' to Orthodoxy, that is, a reliance on tradition and mystical theology but especially on the theology and centrality of the community.

We have seen that the exegetical material and its originality are not solely based on 'different' opinions or a rational scholastic discourse, that is, the exegetical product is not a logical product or fruit of syllogism of one form or another but is more related to a revelatory experience based on the interaction with the community and the Divine. Here the Ethiopian tradition has managed to keep itself liberated from the predetermination of Greek and Roman philosophical limits, perhaps also by its loyalty to the Old Testament Judaic traditions and African traditions.

It is important to realise is that this imaginative and consistent tradition is produced in schools which are mistakenly viewed by many modern commentators as inadequate because of

their 'traditional forms of teaching', including memorising. Steps need to be taken to learn and maintain these schools. On the other hand, the traditional forms of schooling are not devoid of standard academic reflection and criticism. Students are aware of the differences between manuscripts and editions (see Kenaw 2004). Exegesis is becoming more important in today's world, where Christianity is rapidly losing relevancy, perhaps partly because the Christian traditions have lost the ability to listen to revelation as it appears every day and in every possible context and which therefore requires non-predetermined interpretation.

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Author's contributions

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