

Introduction to the Accordance Module of the CFRRC Text of the Ethiopic Bible

By Steve Delamarter, director of the Ethiopic Manuscript Imaging Project, director (with Curt Niccum) of the Textual History of the Ethiopic Old Testament Project, and director of The Social Lives of the Ethiopian Psalter Project

Draft 03

The present Ethiopic Bible module in Accordance represents the Modern Textus Receptus form of the Ethiopic Bible (19th-20th century), known in Ethiopia as the Mahibere Hawariyat edition, based on the manuscript IES 77, and transcribed by the Capuchin Franciscan Research and Retreat Center (CFRRC) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, under the direction of Abba Dr. Daniel Assefa, and in coordination with Dr. Steve Delamarter (George Fox University).

The last decades have seen several commendable efforts to produce electronic texts of the Ethiopic Bible, most notably, perhaps, through the work of the Israeli scholar, Ran HaCohen, though there have been others. The scope of the job has rendered it impossible to deliver a product that was either complete or coherent in terms of its content. So, it stands out as a splendid achievement that a full electronic module is being brought to publication through the remarkable efforts of *Abba* Daniel Assafa and the team of workers at the Capuchin Franciscan Research and Retreat Center (CFRRC) outside of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Following Syria and Armenia, Ethiopia was the third country to adopt Christianity as a nation, somewhere in the mid-300s. Within decades, much of the Christian Bible was translated from the Greek (Septuagint and New Testament) into the local language of Ge'ez and within a century or two, a translation of every book of the Bible was probably complete. Consequently, the Ge'ez Bible tradition is among the oldest in the Christian tradition.

As a translation of the Greek Old Testament, there is no expectation that the Ge'ez Bible will have great relevance for the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible. But, Septuagintalists have always had a keen interest in recovering the Ge'ez Old Testament as a witness to the early transmission of the Septuagint. And the story of the transmission of the text within the Ethiopian context is, itself, both interesting and important.

Unfortunately, up until the mid-to-late twentieth century, an unrealistic idea persisted that it should be no small task to make the "Old Ethiopic" Bible available for scholarship. Edition after edition of Ethiopic Old Testament books appeared in the nineteenth and early twentieth century that claimed explicitly or implicitly to present the "Old Ethiopic," i.e., a text that approximated the bible of early Christian Ethiopia. But in retrospect, it is clear that the editors of these volumes were in no position to know exactly what version of the Ethiopic they were publishing. They had access to a very few number of manuscripts and often used only one to four manuscripts in their

work. With these limited numbers of manuscripts, it was impossible to establish anything like a clear picture of the textual history of the tradition. It was, perhaps, only in Lofgren's edition of Daniel (1938), based on eighteen manuscripts, that the situation began to change. All other editions produced before that time may have called themselves the "Old Ethiopic," but are usually, in fact, what we now know to be editions of transitional texts (late 15th century) or Standardized (17th century) texts.

Statisticians have taught us that thirty is the number of samples necessary to provide a sufficiently rich data set on which to draw statistically reliable conclusions about the nature of a data pool. The Textual History of the Ethiopic Old Testament project has performed such studies—with thirty manuscripts—on more than twenty books of the Ethiopic Old Testament. A consistent picture is emerging: the Bible of Ethiopian Christianity, like every other Christian tradition, has developed in small ways and changed over time and is marked by moments of clear and intentional innovation.

Ethiopia has had its own traditions about the history of the translation and transmission of the biblical text. In the last two centuries, Western scholarship has brought its own methods to the question, but, until the last fifty years or so, these theories have been too dependent on traditional accounts and attributions of work to a few vaguely-known historical figures and processes. I suspect that everyone would acknowledge that these sorts of accounts can never be adequate substitutes for the only data that can actually provide a reliable history of the text, namely, transcriptions of quantities of extant manuscripts that represent the full sweep of the tradition, followed up with statistical analysis of their shared variants.

As the work of manuscript microfilming and digitization have progressed in the last few decades, and more and more manuscripts have become available, a working consensus seems to have emerged around the historical forms of the text now known to us:

- *The Axumite Bible - 4th-6th centuries.* Since we do not possess any copies of this form of the Ethiopic text, the Axumite Bible remains a theoretical form, posited by historical traditions about the origins of Christianity in Ethiopia and by a couple of monumental inscriptions which include a handful of small texts. This would be "the Old Ethiopic" that people are after, but it is clearly well beyond our grasp.
- *The Era of the Abba Garima Gospels* - whose dates are not exactly known, but are the only biblical texts which come to us from the era between the period of the Axumite Bible and the otherwise earliest Attested Text. As the name implies, this applies only to the Gospels.
- *The Earliest Attested Text - 13th to 15th centuries.* Until there may be more discoveries like the Abba Garima Gospels, this is the earliest recoverable form of the text we can expect to get. It is now possible to find at least fifteen manuscripts from this epoch of every book of the Ethiopic Bible.
- *The Transitional Text(s) - 15th and 16th centuries.* This represents a form of the text that starts to emerge at the end of the era when the inadequacies of the Earliest Attested Text began to press for revision. It is probably best to think of these transitional texts as a subset, a closing stage, of the Earliest Attested text.

- *The Standardized Text - 17th and 18th centuries.* This form of the text is one that emerged out of some significant program to revise the Earliest Attested. It became the received text of the era and was produced in great quantities.
- *The Modern Textus Receptus - 19th and 20th centuries.* This form of the text is almost always grounded on the Standardized form of the text, but, in the 19th century begins to evolve slightly away from the Standardized. It culminates in the first third of the twentieth century in the great pandects of the Haile Selassie scriptorium (especially IES 77). The differences between the Modern Textus Receptus and the Standardized Text are not great, but they are discernible.

Now, Westerners will just assume that the form of the text that we would want to publish would be the oldest form of the text. But we would do well to remember that this sort of conclusion is purely a corollary of Western philosophical thought: *ipsissima verba* = truth. Lest we unwittingly perpetuate a history of colonialist behavior, we would do well to recognize that Westerners and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have sensibilities that are at odds on this topic. In fact, modern Ethiopians want the latest form of the text, the Textus Receptus based on IES 77. Westerners want the Earliest Extant form of the text if not the Axumite Bible. Fortunately, these two forms of the Ethiopic Bible are not greatly different: the entire extant Ethiopic tradition is very uniform, with a level of difference between the Earliest Attested and the Modern Textus Receptus at only between eight and twelve percent. And to this consideration we would add another: the practical realities of what is possible at the current moment.

1. Even though it may not be the most desirable goal for Westerners, the text of the Modern Textus Receptus is within grasp. The team at the Capuchin Franciscan Research and Retreat Center, led by *Abba* Daniel Assafa, and with only minimal assistance from the team working on the Textual History of the Ethiopic Old Testament project, has produced a complete transcription of the Modern Textus Receptus. It represents the best and most achievable first step we can make. It provides us with the form of the text that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries.

2. To recover any of the other forms of the text will require a lot of basic text-critical work. This is the very sort of work that we have been doing in THEOT for the last six years or so. We collect 30+ manuscripts, representing the full sweep of the Ethiopic textual history, we identify sample passages, we transcribe these, collate them, arrange them for computer analysis, produce a dendrogram, identify clusters, analyze distinctive readings, determine stemma, and describe which manuscripts are the best representatives of the cluster. At that point, it is possible to identify all of the clusters (Earliest Attested, Transitional, Standardized, Modern Textus Receptus and a few others) and to create editions of them, either critical or simply by transcribing the best representative manuscript of a cluster.

The quickest path toward the earliest attested form of the Ethiopic Old Testament will probably be to produce an edition made up of transcriptions of the best representative manuscripts of the earliest attested cluster of each book of the Old Testament. THEOT is producing these as we go. However, it should be clear that these will not be purely and fully critical texts. And even these will take time to produce.

Eventually (and hopefully), a project will emerge with the goal to produce fully critical editions of each of the books of the Ethiopic Old Testament, but this will not be for a decade or two and even then, the texts may be copyrighted and unattainable.

3. For the New Testament, we have the combined efforts of Rochas Zuurmond (synoptics), Michael Wechsler (John), Curt Niccum (Acts), Tedros Abraha (Romans, 1-2 Corinthians and Hebrews), Nebeyou Alemu (the Pastoral Epistles), Uhlig and Maehlum (the Prison Epistles), Hofmann and Uhlig (the Catholic Epistles), and Hofmann (the book of Revelation). This has given us print editions of fully critical texts. It remains to be seen if the texts in these editions will soon become available in electronic form or not.

It is perhaps obvious to everyone concerned that the best use of such texts will be in the context of a fully robust research software package like Accordance. But the current combination of copyright restrictions and an unproven market demand (which could pay for use of the critical editions), will probably prevent this desideratum for some time. In the meantime, it could, perhaps, be possible to produce an electronic version of the Ethiopic New Testament by producing transcriptions of the best representative manuscripts of the Earliest Attested text. But this is no small project, and we do not know of any team working on such a project at the moment.

So, we applaud the publication of the Accordance Module of the CFRRC Text of the Ethiopic Bible and recognize it for what it is. This electronic edition represents a solid, if not remarkable, starting point for an electronic edition of the Ethiopic Bible. Once again, we express our indebtedness to the team in Addis Ababa for their fine and diligent work.