

Addressing a Global Audience: The Ethiopian Orthodox Textual Tradition in the Context of the Early Ecumenical Movement

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The modern ecumenical movement was born and found its first institutionalised forms in Europe. However, it was not exclusively a European project. Ethiopian Orthodox Christians were also part of the modern quest for Christian unity from the very beginning. Indeed, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahədo Church was the first (and for a long time the only) sub-Saharan African actor in the international ecumenical movement, as well as being the largest Oriental Orthodox Church and a founding member of the World Council of Churches (wcc).¹

Involvement in the ecumenical movement and the need to address a global audience largely unfamiliar with the Oriental Orthodox heritage inevitably influenced the textual practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The paper analyses these entangled processes. The first step reconstructs the history of the early engagement of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church with the global ecumenical movement and contextualises these initiatives. In the second step, it examines the transformation of the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition by using the

1 Of the wcc's 147 founding member churches, only two others were Oriental Orthodox: the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church (however, the delegation of the Coptic Orthodox Church was unable to join the Amsterdam Assembly in 1948 for technical reasons). In addition, two Eastern Orthodox Churches joined the World Council of Churches from the very beginning: the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Church of Greece. Several other Eastern Orthodox Churches as well as the Assyrian Church of the East had accepted the invitation but were not represented at the Amsterdam Assembly. Cf. Athanasios Basdekis, "Introduction to Major Ecumenical Organizations with Relevance for Orthodox Churches" in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism. Resources for Theological Education*, ed. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Thomas FitzGerald et al. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 42. The reason for the relatively low level of Orthodox participation at the Amsterdam Assembly was that just one month before the Assembly, an international meeting of Orthodox leaders in Moscow adopted a resolution discouraging Orthodox participation in the wcc. Cf. Daniel Buda, "On the Critical Role of Orthodox Churches in the Ecumenical Movement," in *Orthodox Handbook on Ecumenism. Resources for Theological Education*, edited by Pantelis Kalaitzidis, Thomas FitzGerald et al. (Oxford, Regnum Books International, 2014), 123–124.

case study of the very first Ethiopian Orthodox work deliberately produced for the global ecumenical audience – the contribution of *Blatta Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos* [Märsäe Hāzān Wäldä Qirqos] published in the first volume of *The Ecumenical Review*, a quarterly of the World Council of Churches, in 1949. In doing so, the paper seeks to trace the transformations of the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition and to uncover its entanglements with the emerging global ecumenical discourse.

Printing and translating the Word: *Ras Tafari Makonnen's* European journey and the project of Ethiopian modernity

"All the Christians in the world, although they may be divided in some minor matters ... yet in essence there is no-one who does not know that there is one Christ only."² These simple words emphasised the fundamental nature of Christian unity during the festive Pentecost Vespers in Uppsala Cathedral on 8 June 1924. The fact that the congregation of the overcrowded church listened with undivided attention was not so much due to the novelty of the ecumenical vision expressed but rather to the exceptionality of the person who proclaimed it. The Crown Prince and Regent of Ethiopia, Ras Tafari Makonnen [*Ras Täfäri Mäkwännən*], the future Emperor Haile Selassie I, addressed the Swedish Christians.³

The uniqueness of the situation described can hardly be exaggerated. Tafari Makonnen was not only the first Ethiopian ruler ever to visit Europe but also the first one to give a sermon in a Protestant church. At the Crown Prince's request, a visit to Uppsala was included in his five-month tour of Europa, which included Paris, Brussels, London, Geneva and Athens. There, he met Archbishop Nathan Söderblom, the head of the Church of Sweden. Söderblom's leadership in the Life and Work movement in the 1920s has led him to be recognized as one of the principal pioneers of the ecumenical movement.

It should be noted that Söderblom, who himself had a keen interest in the Orthodox churches,⁴ took this high-profile visit to the realm of his church very seriously. At the invitation of the archbishop, the Ethiopian ruler celebrated Pen-

2 Həruy Wäldä Səllase, ደስታና፡ ከብር፡ የኢትዮጵያ፡ መንግሥት፡ አልጋ፡ ወራሽና፡ እንደራሴ፡ ልዑል፡ ተፈሪ፡ መኰንን፡ ወደ፡ አውሮፓ፡ ሲሄዱና፡ ሲመለሱ፡ የመንግሥቱ፡ አኳኝ፡ [Joy and Honour. On the Journey of His Highness the Crown Prince and Regent of Ethiopia Täfäri Mäkwännən to Europe] (Addis Ababa: Täfäri Mäkwännən Press, 1917 Ethiopian calendar [= 1923/24 A.D.]), 61–62. Cf. Haile Selassie I, *My Life and Ethiopia's Progress, 1892–1937: The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie I*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Frontline Distribution International, 1997), 97.

3 In English transliteration usually: Haile Selassie.

4 Cf. Georges Tsetsis, "Nathan Söderblom and the Orthodox Church," *Tro och Tanke* 7 (1993): 89–102; Jörg Mathias, "Unity in Christ or Pan-Europeanism? Nathan Söderblom and the Ecumenical Peace Movement in the Interwar Period," *Religion, State and Society* 42, no. 1 (2014): 11.

tecost in the cathedral of Uppsala. During vespers, he even gave both the invocation and the benediction in Amharic.⁵ During the sermon Söderblom read several verses referring to Ethiopia in the Bible, teaching the congregation that the Ethiopians, “the mighty Christian nation on the heights of Africa,” embraced the faith and “became members of the household and fellowship of Christ” much earlier than the Swedes.⁶ Ethiopia, this ancient Christian nation with biblical roots, evoked fascination among the gathered audience. As Mrs. Anna Söderblom, the archbishop’s wife, mentioned that

the church was more than filled by the congregation, which was so enthralled that it would be wrong to describe their mood as one of curiosity. Among the thousands who filled the church, most were readers of the Bible. And the Bible’s wonderfully mighty poetry has bestowed a ‘magic’ glow upon Ethiopia’s people and history.⁷

Tafari Makonnen’s interest in the ecumenical movement and its attempt to overcome the divisions among Christians was expressed not only during the church service, but also in a private conversation with Nathan Söderblom. When Tafari Makonnen asked: “Why do Protestant Christians not unite?,” the archbishop eagerly spoke of the forthcoming Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work, to be held in Stockholm in August 1925.⁸

Söderblom invited the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to send ten delegates to this important ecumenical meeting, but the Ethiopian Church could not respond to this invitation at short notice.⁹ The conference was indeed a success and is regarded as one of the most formative events in the modern ecumenical move-

5 Cf. Jonas Jonson, *Nathan Söderblom: Called to Serve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 334.

6 ዘጅረህ ወልደሳቤድ ሥላሴ፡ ደስታና፡ ከብር፡ የኢትዮጵያ፡ መንግሥት፡ አልጋ፡ ወራሽና፡ እንደራሴ፡ ልዑል፡ ተፈሪ፡ መኰንን፡ ወደ፡ አውሮፓ፡ ሲሄዱና፡ ሲመለሱ፡ የመንግሥቱ፡ አኳኋን፡ [Joy and Honour. On the Journey of His Highness the Crown Prince and Regent of Ethiopia Tāfāri Mākʷānnən to Europe], (Addis Ababa: Tāfāri Mākʷānnən Press, 1917 Ethiopian calendar [= 1923/24 A.D.]), 61–62.

7 Anna Söderblom, “Tre vise män från Österlanden,” in *Minnen från Livskalle*, ed. Julius Wellhaugen (Uppsala: Lindblads, 1945), 245. Quoted in Ezra Gebremedhin, “‘Let there be Light!’ Aspects of the Swedish Missionary Venture in Eritrea and their Implications for Political Awareness (1866–1962),” in *African Identities and World Christianity in the Twentieth Century. Proceedings of the Third International Munich-Freising Conference on the History of Christianity in the Non-Western World (September 15–17, 2004)*, ed. Klaus Koschorke (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 206–207.

8 Cf. George Kennedy Allen Bell (ed.), *The Stockholm Conference 1925: The Official Report of the Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work held in Stockholm, 19–30 August, 1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 235–375.

9 Cf. Viveca Halldin Norberg, *Swedes in Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia, 1924–1952. A Study in Early Development Co-operation* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1977), 122.

ment. Its paradigm of “practical Christianity” became a milestone in creating ecumenical and socio-political awareness among Christians. Although the Ethiopian church could not send a delegation to the Life and Work conference, its ecumenical paradigm resonated with Tafari Makonnen’s personal views, which he tried to implement in the Ethiopian context. The encounter between the Ethiopian ruler and Nathan Söderblom led to their personal friendship, which lasted until the archbishop’s death in 1931.¹⁰

Tafari Makonnen’s stay in Uppsala was not just a courtesy visit. His aim was to integrate Ethiopia into the global processes taking place in the aftermath of World War I. The Ethiopian Crown Prince used his diplomatic contacts and skills to secure Ethiopia’s admission to the League of Nations in September 1923, which ensured the country’s formal diplomatic equality with other states. His tour of Europe in 1924 brought him, his country, and his church (as well as other Africans and people of African descent) to the attention of the European press and public. At the same time, Ras Tafari Makonnen succeeded in bringing Ethiopian Christianity into the emerging ecumenical discourse and became its active upholder.

Furthermore, Tafari Makonnen’s journey to Europe has to be seen in the context of the broad pattern of cultural and religious concerns which had increasingly crystallized as “Ethiopian modernity,” or in Amharic *zämänawinnät*.¹¹ *Zämänawinnät* was used at the same time as the description of the changing reality in the Ethiopian Empire with its rapid modernization as well as an ideal, as a utopian image of an unprecedented cultural and economic advancement to be reached. Ethiopian modernity was in the making and its main symbol was a printed book, or to be even more precise: a printed book in Amharic language. I would suggest that the practices of translation and printing which made such a book possible embodied the main characteristics of the transformations of the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition in the twentieth century. In 1921, just several years prior to his journey to Europe, Tafari Makonnen established the first Ethiopian governmental publishing house and the printing press with the aim of publishing Amharic-language books and tracts, which name was at first “The Printing Press of the Heir to the Throne of Ethiopia His Highness Ras Täfäri Mäk’ännən” (የኢትዮጵያ፡ መንግሥት፡ አልጋ፡ ወራሽ፡ ራስ፡ ተፈሪ፡ መኰንን፡ ማተሚያ፡ ቤት), but

10 A tangible symbol of these relationships were bee wax candles, specially blessed by Ethiopian Orthodox clergy, which had been sent to Uppsala every year as long as Haylä Səllase lived. Cf. Jonson, *Nathan Söderblom*, 334.

11 Cf. Stanislaw Paulau, “Isaac of Nineveh, Ras Täfäri and the Making of Ethiopian Modernity,” in *Symposium Syriacum XII* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 311), ed. Emidio Vergani and Sabino Chialà (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2022), 645–652.

later was changed into “Light and Peace” (ብርሃንና ሰላም).¹² Ethiopian entanglements with Europe, and notably with Sweden, in this enterprise are evidenced by the fact that this first Ethiopian governmental printing press was managed by Gebre Kristos Tekle Haymanot, a scholar from Aksum who had been educated by the Swedish missionaries in Asmara.

Interestingly enough, the very first book being published by this newly established printing press was Amharic translation of the Ethiopian corpus of Isaac’s writings, known as *Mäṣḥafä Mar Yəshaq* (መጽሐፈ ማር ይስሐቅ) together with its Gə‘əz text and the traditional commentary (ትርጓሜ ለማር ይስሐቅ, *Tərgwame lämar Yəshaq*). Tafari Makonnen himself wrote an introduction to the book, stressing its spiritual importance. Apart from the book of Isaac of Nineveh, Tafari Makonnen ordered translation and publication of the sermons of John Chrysostom. The choice of these two non-Ethiopian authors, representing the Syriac and Greek traditions respectively, albeit widely recognised throughout the Christian world, may indicate Tafari Makonnen’s desire to emphasise the interconnectedness of the Ethiopian textual tradition with the rest of Christianity. These publications were in fact not merely noticed but also highly appreciated within a wider ecumenical context extending beyond the borders of Ethiopia. This aspect was notably emphasised by Archbishop of Canterbury Randall Thomas Davidson in his address during Tafari Makonnen’s visit to England in 1924:

Your Highness! Your Church has an ancient history of about 1600 years. Its beginnings approach the even earlier period of the apostles of Our Lord. Your Church has a history which is related to the time of Athanasius and his companions. Your Highness is not only holding on to ancient traditions, but it is your glory to develop Christian civilization for the future and to spread the Christian scriptures among young people.

For your printing press issues not only ancient and modern religious books. But you yourself are an active participant in the work. The Ethiopian books which Your Highness has caused to be printed have an introduction by you: everyone who studies the books of Chrysostom and of the monk Mar Yeshaq will derive much benefit.¹³

12 H. Rubinowska, “Bərhanənnā Sālam,” in S. Uhlig (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. Volume 1 A–C* (Wiesbaden 2003), 537.

13 Haile Selassie I, *My Life and Ethiopia’s Progress, 1892–1937: The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Selassie I*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Frontline Distribution International, 1997), 109.

At the same time, the publication of Amharic translations of the writings of Isaac of Nineveh and John Chrysostom was perceived by some Ethiopian Orthodox scholars as a scandal. The chronicles of *Abeto Iyasu* and Empress Zewditu, the last of the Ethiopian royal chronicles, make the following mention of the publication of these books and the subsequent reactions:

ዛሬም፡ ግርማዊት፡ ንግሥተ፡ ነገሥታት፡ ዘውዲቱና፡ ልዑል፡ የኢትዮጵያ፡ መንግሥት፡
አልጋ፡ ወራሽ፡ ተፈሪ፡ መኰንን፡ ለአገር፡ ብርሃናት፡ ለሕዝብ፡ ዕውቀት፡ ለወንጌል፡
መንግሥት፡ ስፋት፡ እንዲሆን፡ ብለው፡ በግዕዝና፡ በአማርኛ፡ ቋንቋ፡ መጻሕፍት፡
ቅዱሳትን፡ በሊቃውንት፡ ጉባዔ፡ እያስተረጎሙ፡ አሳተሙልን። ሊቃውንቱ፡ ግን፡
እኛ፡ ብቻ፡ መጽሐፍ፡ ዐዋቂ፡ ተብእን፡ ስንሞገስበት፡ ስንሸለምበት፡ እንኖር፡ ነበር።
ከእንግዲህ፡ ወዲህ፡ መጻሕፍት፡ ሁሉ፡ በአማርኛ፡ ከታተሙ፡ እኛን፡ ማን፡ ይጠይቅናል፡
የማለት፡ ሐሳብ፡ ገባቸው። አውነትም፡ ኢቃውንቱ፡ እንዳሰቡት፡ መኳንንቱና፡
ውይዛዝሩ፡ ሁሉ፡ መጻሕፍትን፡ እየገዙ፡ ዘወትር፡ ከመመልከታቸው፡ የተነሣ፡ ቀሳው
ስቱን፡ በጥያቄ፡ ያስቸግሩ፡ ነበር።¹⁴

Recently Her Majesty Empress Zewditu and His Highness the Crown Prince and the Heir of the throne of Ethiopia, Tafari Makonnen, have had holy books printed in Gəʿəz and Amharic, translated by a group of scholars, so that they become light to the people and give knowledge for the expansion of the rule of the Gospel. But the church scholars became worried saying, “We alone used to be praised, being experts on books, and we used to be rewarded by this. But now, after all the books have been printed in Amharic, who will come to ask us?” And true enough, as the scholars feared, all the noblemen and noble ladies bought the Amharic books and were bothering now the priests [instead of the church scholars] with questions arising from their daily readings.

This account illustrates the contentious nature of the transformations of the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition introduced by Tafari Makonnen among the ecclesiastical elites. Simultaneously, the favourable reception of the printed books by the noble laity (including noblewomen), who, in fact, constituted the vast majority of individuals who could read and write, besides the clergy, at that time, merits particular attention. However, it would be erroneous to presume that the primary division regarding book printing took place exclusively between the

¹⁴ R.K. Molvaer and Elyas Gebre-Igziabihier (eds.), *Prowess, Piety and Politics. The chronicle of Abeto Iyasu and Empress Zewditu of Ethiopia (1909–1930)* (Studien zur Kulturkunde 104; Köln 1994), 182.

ecclesiastical and secular elites. There are some accounts which indicate that, for example, the printed edition of Isaac of Nineveh was highly appreciated in monasteries, since it had a special advantage over manuscripts – the book provided a detailed table of content and a division of the text not only into chapters (አንቀጽ), but also into subchapters (ምዕራፍ), which proved itself to be highly practical.

Ultimately, the textual transformations initiated during Tafari Makonnen's era exemplify the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's ability to adapt to new historical contexts while maintaining its theological continuity. By embracing print culture and engaging with ecumenical conversations, Ras Tafari Makonnen laid the groundwork for the Church's continued involvement in the ecumenical movement, culminating in its role as a founding member of the World Council of Churches and a key voice in Oriental Orthodox Christianity on the global stage.

Engaging in a global network: the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the foundation of the World Council of Churches

One of the major milestones in the modern history of the ecumenical movement was the formation of the World Council of Churches. The decision to create the World Council of Churches was taken at a meeting in Utrecht in 1938 by a committee of fourteen people appointed by the Life and Work and Faith and Order movements. The basis of the organisation read simply: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour."¹⁵ The young theologian Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft was appointed general secretary of the provisional committee. One of his main tasks was to organise the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches. Due to the outbreak of the Second World War, however, this assembly had to be postponed until a more favourable time and did not take place until 1948.

Although the Ethiopian Orthodox Church did not participate in the Life and Work and Faith and Order movements, it became a founding member of the World Council of Churches and has been actively involved in the work of this ecumenical organisation ever since. The first involvement of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the work of the World Council of Churches marked a new period in the ecumenical engagement of Ethiopian Christians at the global level and, therefore, deserves special attention.

¹⁵ Article 1 of the Constitution of the World Council of Churches. Cf. Hanfried Krüger, "The Life and Activities of the World Council of Churches," in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Vol. 2, 1948–1968 ed. Harold C. Fey (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004), 33.

On 28 January 1947, Willem Adolph Visser 't Hooft addressed an official letter of invitation to the *echege* [፳፻፳፭] of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Gebre Giyorgis. In the letter, Visser 't Hooft expressed “the earnest desire and hope of the committee that the Ethiopian Church may join the World Council of Churches and participate in the constituent assembly” in Amsterdam from 22 August to 4 September 1948.¹⁶ Along with the invitation letter, he also sent some documents explaining the vision of the World Council of Churches. To underline the importance of the organisation, Visser 't Hooft emphasised that “130 churches, including churches of different confessions, many of them from the old historic Eastern traditions have already joined the Council. We hope that the Ethiopian Church may be led to take a similar decision.”¹⁷ However, no answer from the Ethiopian Church followed.

The dispute between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church over the latter's autonomy seemed to be the central obstacle to the participation of an Ethiopian delegation in the inaugural assembly of the World Council of Churches. The Coptic Orthodox Church regarded the Church of Ethiopia as part of its ecclesiastical structure and sought by all means to counter the growing aspirations for ecclesiastical independence in Ethiopia. Therefore, a direct invitation to the Ethiopian Church to join the wcc could have been seen by the Coptic Church as an unwelcome and, indeed, illegitimate interference in its internal affairs.

As the Assembly approached, the organisers decided to activate ecumenical contacts in Addis Ababa that could help to resolve local problems. In late April and early May 1948, just a few months before the Assembly, Visser 't Hooft wrote to the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Aksum, Nicholas (1890–1967)¹⁸ and to the Anglican Pastor A. F. Matthew,¹⁹ asking for help:

Since this is the constituent meeting of the World Council and since we attach particular significance to the presence at that first meeting of delegates of the oldest Churches we are very eager to have a favourable reply from the Abyssinian Church. But so far no answer has come. We should be

¹⁶ Letter of W. A. Visser 't Hooft to ፳፻፳፭ Gābrä Giyorgis, 28 January 1947. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Letter of W. Visser 't Hooft to Metropolitan of Aksum Nicholas, 26 April 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4. The reason behind this letter was that Metropolitan Nicholas has previously mentioned in a conversation with Archbishop Germanos (1872–1951), Metropolitan of Thyateira who was also one of the Presidents of the wcc, that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church wishes to attend the assembly.

¹⁹ Letter of W. Visser 't Hooft to A. F. Matthew, 3 May 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4.

most grateful, if you would kindly use your influence in this matter and we should be glad to hear whether we can do anything further.²⁰

This step proved itself to be decisive. On 8 May 1948 A. F. Matthew met the two leading ecclesiastical figures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, *Echege*²¹ Gebre Giyorgis (1883–1970; later: Abuna Basilyos, the first Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church)²² and *Liqā siltanat*²³ Melaktu, the Dean of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Addis Abeba (1910–1979; later: Abuna Tewoflos, the second Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church).²⁴ A.F. Matthew explained to them the vision of the proposed assembly, which they seemed to favour.²⁵ Apart from theological reasons, emancipation from the Coptic Orthodox Church was one of the aspects that played an essential role in the deliberations on possible participation in the Assembly. Official representation at an international ecumenical gathering was an excellent way to mark one's ecclesiastical autonomy. In response to this sensitivity, A.F. Matthew even urged Visser 't Hooft to use "Ethiopian Church" instead of "Coptic Church in Abyssinia" in correspondence sent on behalf of the World Council of Churches.²⁶

20 Ibid.

21 *Echege* [Ἐῖḡḡe, አጪጊ] is the title traditionally given to the abbot of Debre Libanos monastery. It was used to designate the administrative head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In contrast to the metropolitan, the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, who until 1951 has been a Copt from Egypt, the *echege* has always been a native Ethiopian ecclesiastic appointed directly by the emperor. Cf. Getatchew Haile, "Ἐῖḡḡe," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. Volume 2. D–Ha*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), 212–213.

22 Gebre Giyorgis was made *echege* in 1934. During the Fascist occupation of Ethiopia, he lived in exile in Jerusalem. After liberation of the country and return to Addis Abeba in 1942, he was reinstalled in his former position and remained de-facto head of the Church and the Emperor's chief advisor on religious affairs. In July 1949 he was consecrated as bishop in Alexandria and became known as Abuna Basilyos. In January 1951, following the death of Qerellos, the last Coptic metropolitan of Ethiopia, he was consecrated as the first ever Ethiopian metropolitan. In 1959, when the affiliation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to the Coptic Church was finally terminated, Abuna Basilyos became the first Patriarch of the new autocephalous church. Cf. Bairu Tafla, "Basālyos," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. Volume 1. A–C*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 495–496.

23 *Liqā siltanat* [Liḳā sāḷḷanat] (lit. "Chief of the authorities") is the ecclesiastic title coined for the head of the Holy Trinity cathedral in Addis Abeba. He used to be a member of the imperial cabinet and assumed some of the power wielded by the *echege*. Cf. Evgenia Sokolinskaia, "Liq," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. Volume 3. He–N*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 576–578.

24 Cf. Mersha Alehegne, "Tewoflos," in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. Volume 4. O–x*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 938–939.

25 Letter of A. F. Matthew to S. A. Morrison, 8 May 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4. Cf. also letter of A. F. Matthew to W. A. Visser 't Hooft, 15 May 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4.

26 Letter of A. F. Matthew to S. A. Morrison, 8 May 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4. At the same time, he was sceptical about the language skills of the possible Ethiopian delegates: "It had better be made plain, if not already understood, that there is no priest in Ethiopia with sufficient knowledge of English or any other foreign language really to follow the discussions which will take place

A few days later, on 12 May 1948, the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Aksum Nicholas managed to contact the private secretary of the emperor and to discuss with him the participation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the planned assembly.²⁷ It can be assumed that Haile Selassie personally decided that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church should be attending the Amsterdam Assembly. Since already two days later, on 14 May 1948, the *de facto* head of the Ethiopian Church, *Echege* Gebre Giyorgis, finally sent an answer to Visser 't Hooft:

Your letter of 28th January is before me with its attached invitation to the Ethiopian Church to become a member of the World Council of Churches and to take part in the Constituent Assembly in Amsterdam from 2nd [*sic!* for 22nd] August to 4th September.

The Ethiopian Church will follow with great interest and with every desire to encourage the work of the Provisional Committee. It has accordingly been decided that the Ethiopian Church will be represented at the Constituent Assembly in Amsterdam and that authority will be bestowed upon their representative to determine the participation in the World Council when it is formally constituted.

Would you therefore continue to inform me of the progress of your work with its great promise of Christian cooperation and the growth of economical [*sic!*] consciousness among the members of all the Churches.²⁸

In his answer, Visser 't Hooft stressed, in the name of the Provisional Committee of the World Council, the joy at this decision and highlighted the considerable value ascribed to the full participation of the ancient Ethiopian Church in the work of the World Council.²⁹

It seems that the ecumenical movement, to some extent, facilitated the development of internal church affairs between the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox

at Amsterdam. They will be unable to contribute anything that way. The priest who went to Birmingham last year can have got very little out of the specific matter for which he went, but I do not doubt that his ideas have been much enlarged. That may also be expected for the delegate to Amsterdam, if one be sent; and if he may give nothing to the Conference, he will probably gain something which will be of great benefit ultimately to the Church here." Cf. also letter of A. F. Matthew to W. A. Visser 't Hooft, 15 May 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4.

27 Letter of Metropolitan of Aksum Nicholas to W. Visser 't Hooft, 12 May 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4.

28 Letter of Ἰḫčäge Gäbrä Giyorgis to W. A. Visser 't Hooft, 14 May 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4.

29 Letter of W. A. Visser 't Hooft to Ἰḫčäge Gäbrä Giyorgis, 16 June 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4.

churches. In this context, the Coptic Orthodox and Ethiopian Churches finally reached an agreement on 13 July 1948 that led to the elevation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to the status of an autonomous church. It also allowed the Archbishop of All Ethiopia to consecrate bishops and metropolitans for the Ethiopian Church and to form a local Holy Synod. As part of this agreement, the Coptic Patriarch in Cairo consecrated six Ethiopian clergy as bishops on 25 July. Among them were also the aforementioned Echege Gebre Giyorgis and Liqa siltanat Melaktu, who became Abuna Basilyos and Abuna Tewoflos respectively.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was represented at the Amsterdam Assembly by two official delegates: the newly consecrated Bishop Abuna Tewoflos and the scholar *Blatta*³⁰ Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos (1899–1978), the head of the Imperial Record and Archive Office, who was later to write the article for the *Ecumenical Review*.³¹ However, since the names of the delegates were not given to the Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches until 10 August 1948 (less than two weeks before the event),³² they do not appear in some of the printed materials prepared for the Assembly.³³

Abuna Tewoflos participated in the work of Section I, “The Universal Church in God’s Design,” and of Committee II on “Policy”. The topic of ecclesiology in its relation to the challenging quest for the unity of the churches discussed in this section was also reflected in his speech addressed to the assembly. There, he summarised the ecumenical vision of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the following way:

The representatives of the church of Ethiopia understand fully that the unity of churches is most needed for the benefits of Christians all over the world, but as there are some differences in doctrine and tradition, we find it necessary to have time to report to our church on the proposed work of the assembly to be studied there.

30 *Blatta* (በለታ): honorific title granted to men of learning in the late imperial period. Cf. Sevir Chernetsov, “Blatten geta,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. Volume 1. A–C*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 595–596.

31 About him, see Asfaw Damte, “Märsä’e Hazān Wäldä Qirqos,” in *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica. Volume 3. He–N*, ed. Siegbert Uhlig (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 798–799.

32 Telegram and letter of *Abunä Basälyos* [formerly ፀርጋጎሳ ገብረ ጊዮርጊስ] to W. A. Visser ’t Hooft, 10 August 1948. WCC Archives 42.4.022/4.

33 In the list of participants kept in the archive of the World Council of Churches they can be found under numbers 964 and 565. Cf. [List of attendance of the] *First Assembly World Council of Churches*. WCC Archives 31.019/13. It has to be noted that even though the Ethiopian Orthodox Church received credential for two delegates, in some documents of the WCC *Blatta Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos* is mentioned not as “participant,” but rather as “visitor” or “observer”. Cf. for instance: *Observers*. WCC Archives 31.019/13.

As representatives from one of the most ancient cradles of the Christian faith we bring to this assembly our hopes and prayers for the meeting of Christians of the entire world to bring peace and the Kingdom of Christ on earth.³⁴

Blatta Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos, on his part, participated in the work of the Section II: “The Church’s Witness to God’s Deign” and of the Committee I on “Constitution and Rules and Regulations”. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the participation of the Ethiopian delegation in the work of the Amsterdam Assembly. On the one hand, it marked the beginning of a new period of global ecumenical engagement by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. On the other hand, it allowed Western Christians to become acquainted with this African Christian tradition. At the same time, the Ethiopian Orthodox engagement in the ecumenical movement opened a new chapter in the history of its literary production.

Addressing a global audience: the case study of Blatta Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos

Participation in the global ecumenical movement posed a particular challenge for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Its textual tradition had to be adapted to a new readership and incorporate new themes that had not played a significant role before. Whereas previously Ethiopian Orthodox religious texts were almost exclusively produced for Ethiopian Orthodox believers either in Gə‘əz or Amharic and even by the mid-twentieth century circulated predominantly in handwritten form, the intended public of texts created in the context of the ecumenical movement was global, predominantly non-Orthodox and at the same time mostly unfamiliar with the Ethiopian Christianity. Moreover, for the first time, Ethiopian Orthodox literary tradition had to find an expression in English. Similarly, the content of these texts was radically different from the works (re)produced for the Ethiopian Orthodox religious community back home. All this allows us to speak about the formation of a new literary genre within the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition – texts written for a global ecumenical audience.

This observation brings us to the question that will be explored in more detail. Namely, what elements of earlier Ethiopian Orthodox literary production were adopted in the context of the ecumenical movement, and in what ways were they transformed to serve the intended goal of reaching a global ecumenical audience,

34 *Abba Theophilos, [Word of greeting from] Ethiopia*. WCC Archives, 31.008/17.

and what new themes had to be incorporated into these new texts. In the following, I would like to discuss these questions based on the case study of the very first Ethiopian Orthodox text deliberately produced for the global ecumenical audience – the contribution of Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos under the title “The Ethiopian Church” published in the first volume of the *Ecumenical Review*, a newly established quarterly of the World Council of Churches.³⁵ The quarterly editors wanted it to become “an instrument to be used by the Churches to give substance and reality to the new relationships between them.”³⁶ The issue focused on the Amsterdam Assembly and its reception in various churches. Articles in the issue include, for example, “Amsterdam in the Perspective of the Younger Churches”³⁷ and “The Moscow Patriarchate and the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches.”³⁸

Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos prepared his contribution “The Ethiopian Church” before the Assembly. The original text of the article that is now kept in the Archive of the World Council of Churches was written in French and was entitled “L’Église éthiopienne. Bref aperçu historique et descriptif.”³⁹ The first folio of the document bears the following note: “Presented to Dr. W.A. Visser ’t Hooft to be taken into consideration as a material for the *Ecumenical Review* by Blatta Marsie Hazen. 2nd September 1948, Amsterdam.”⁴⁰ The folder contains two versions of the contribution. The longer version is typed on paper stamped “Legation Imperiale d’Ethiopie en Egypt” and has some handwritten additions and corrections; the shorter version of the text is typed on blank paper and has no additions or corrections. It could be assumed that the Ethiopian delegation spent some time in Cairo on their way to Amsterdam and that Mersea Hazen’s originally handwritten contribution was typed there in the Ethiopian embassy. However, it is unclear how and when the abridged version of the contribution was produced. As the text was presented to Visser ’t Hooft towards the end of the Assembly (which ran from 22 August to 4 September), it could theoretically have been created directly in Amsterdam. Nevertheless, the shorter version of the French text was translated into English and appeared in the *Ecumenical Review*.

35 Blatta Marsie-Hazen, “The Ethiopian Church,” *The Ecumenical Review* 1, no. 2 (1949): 179–187.

36 “Editorial,” in *The Ecumenical Review* 1, no. 1 (1948): 1.

37 T.C. Chao, “Amsterdam in the Perspective of the Younger Churches,” *The Ecumenical Review* 1, 2 (1949): 131–136.

38 “The Moscow Patriarchate and the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches,” *The Ecumenical Review* 1, 2 (1949): 188–197.

39 Märṣä’e Ḥazän Wäldä Qirqos, “The Church of Ethiopia,” WCC Archives 42.8/110.

40 Ibid.

As there is no mention of the author of the English translation, the assumption is that the translation must have been the work of the *Ecumenical Review*'s staff.

Mersea Hazen Wolde Qirqos's adaptation of the Ethiopian Orthodox literary tradition to a new setting can be best understood within the context of his remarkable background. Born in 1899, he embarked on a path that would see him play a pivotal role in preserving and disseminating the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, both within and beyond the borders of Ethiopia. The son of *aleqa* Wolde Qirqos, a teacher of *Degwwa* at the esteemed monastery of Debre Libanos, Mersea Hazen was immersed in a rigorous traditional education from a young age. By the age of eleven, he had already completed his studies in *qəne*, a traditional genre of oral poetry in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. His scholarly journey continued with three years of New Testament exegesis (*andimta*) under the guidance of the renowned scholar *memhər* Welde Giyorgis, culminating in his studies of the patristic writings (*liqawint*) in Harar.

In 1920, his expertise and commitment to Ethiopian Orthodox scholarship led to his appointment as secretary of the newly established Commission for the Preparation and Publication of Biblical and Patristic Texts. This role, initiated and closely supervised by Tafari Makonnen, saw him translating and commenting on a significant corpus of biblical and patristic texts, making them accessible in Amharic. This initiative should be considered part of the broader programme of modernisation of Church and society initiated by the future emperor. The cornerstone of this programme was to increase literacy (also religious literacy) by introducing modern school education and disseminating key texts of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition in Amharic translation. It was in the context of these educational reforms that Mersea Hazen became a teacher of Gə'əz and Amharic at the newly founded Tafari Makonnen School in Addis Abeba in 1925. There, he authored the first systematic grammar of the Amharic language, which became a cornerstone in Ethiopian education until 1975. His literary endeavours also included the publication of *Təmhərtä ḥəṣānat*, a book of religious lessons for children, showcasing his dedication to education at all levels.

After the liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation, Mersea Hazen held several key positions. He was the head of the Imperial Records and Archives Office and the head of the Amharic Bible Revision Committee, whose work culminated in the publication in 1962 of the "Imperial Bible" (also known as the Haile Selassie I Revised Amharic Bible), the first Amharic translation of the Old and New Testaments produced and published for use in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Emperor Haile Selassie explained the need of the Amharic Bible translation in the following way:

Ethiopia, an island of Christianity, is recorded in history as having received first the Old Testament, and then the New Testament earlier than most of the countries of the world. When, in Old Testament times, she received the Law, and when, in New Testament times, she received the Gospel, she ensured that the Scriptures were translated into the ancient language of Ge'ez. From those times to this, various books both of spiritual and material profit have periodically been compiled and written in Ge'ez. We remember with deep gratitude those fathers of old who, as time and opportunity allowed, worked with much care and labour and have left us books for the preservation of the Faith and for the increase of learning and knowledge.

In former ages, Ge'ez was the language of the country and so, even without an interpreter, the people had no difficulty in examining and understanding the books; but just as one age succeeds another, so Amharic, which sprang from Ge'ez, gradually grew until it became the common speech of the people, taking the place of Ge'ez. At that time, Ge'ez was understood by the learned people of the Church, but was not readily understood by the ordinary people. Arising from this, the scholars in their preaching and work have for centuries been forced in their teaching to interpret from Ge'ez into Amharic. And these conditions prevailed until Our own times.

Since the time when, by God's goodness, We were chosen to ascend the Throne of Ethiopia and while We have been leading Our people to progress in learning and knowledge, We have laboured in every way possible with an eye to their growth in spiritual and material learning and knowledge. In order to reach this goal, and realizing that the first necessity was to have the Scriptures translated into Amharic and printed in bulk, in 1918, when We were still Heir to the Throne and Regent, We chose from amongst the scholars some to translate the Scriptures and to produce the translation alongside the Ge'ez.⁴¹

In other words, Blatta Mersea Hazen was one of those scholars who had a life-long dedication to the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition. At the same time, he belonged to the new generation of Ethiopian intellectuals interested in bringing

⁴¹ This English translation of Haile Selassie's foreword to the Amharic Bible is taken from here: Haile Selassie, Statement on the Revised Amharic Bible, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Statement_on_the_Revised_Amharic_Bible.

this tradition into dialogue with contemporary currents of thought and making it accessible to his compatriots through new translations and adaptations. These qualities played a crucial role in his involvement in the ecumenical movement. His efforts to present Ethiopian Orthodoxy to a global audience on the pages of the *Ecumenical Review* were not merely an act of cultural translation but a profound engagement with the ecumenical movement aimed at fostering understanding and unity among Christian traditions worldwide.

Mersea Hazen's portrayal of the Ethiopian Church is deeply rooted in its literary tradition. The text begins with the traditional story of the founding of the Ethiopian royal dynasty by the son of Queen Makeda (Queen of Sheba) and King Solomon. This historical narrative, presented as historical, but in fact midrashic in origin and legendary, is emblematic of Ethiopian Orthodox literature and underscores the nation's ancient Christian heritage. It also highlights the theological continuity between the traditions of the Bible and Ethiopian Christianity:

Up to the time of the meeting between their Queen Makeda and King Solomon, about 1000 B.C., the Ethiopians, like all other ancient peoples, were pagans. They did not, however, worship idols, but regarded as their gods the light, the sun and the stars. The son born to Queen Makeda and Solomon, Ibn-el-Hakim (Menelik I), founded the dynasty still reigning there today. Makeda and her son introduced into their kingdom the faith of the God of Israel, which lasted until the adoption of Christianity. [...] The religious observances and burnt-offerings were in accordance with the regulations laid down in the Old Testament, and from the time of Menelik I to the coming of St. Frumentius, who brought Christianity to Ethiopia, there was a sound Hebrew basis which was to act as a foundation for the building of Christianity.⁴²

The mythical idea of the *translatio imperii* from ancient Israel to Ethiopia manifested here is the central theme of Ethiopian Orthodox theology. It can be found in a vast number of works of the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition, but in the most profound way it was articulated in the highly influential medieval treatise *Kəbrä nəgāšt* ('Glory [or Nobility] of the Kings').⁴³ The *Kəbrä nəgāšt* substantiated

⁴² Blatta Marsie-Hazen, "The Ethiopian Church," *The Ecumenical Review* 1, no. 2 (1949): 179.

⁴³ The *Gə'əz* text has been critically edited and translated into German by Carl Bezold: *Kebra Nagast. Die Herrlichkeit der Könige. Nach den Handschriften in Berlin, London, Oxford und Paris zum ersten Mal im äthiopischen Urtext herausgegeben und mit deutscher Übersetzung versehen* (München: Verlag der K. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1905). The constantly reprinted English translation done by

this claim in a twofold way. Firstly, by creating a genealogical link of the Ethiopian monarchy with Solomon, King of Israel, and the Queen of Sheba, called in the text Makkeda and the “Queen of the South” (*Nəgəstā Azeb*).⁴⁴ Secondly, by putting forward an elaborate narrative about the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Aksum, which in turn was interpreted as a visible sign of the divine election of Ethiopians as God’s newly chosen people. Menelik I, the alleged son of King Solomon and the Queen of the South,⁴⁵ would have been the first in a line of Ethiopian rulers which stretched to the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie.

By recounting ecclesiastical history and hagiography, Mersea Hazen follows the traditional narrative, especially highlighting that “Ethiopia counts among the first Christian nations of the world, as it was in the year 330 A.D. that St. Frumentius came there bringing the Gospel.”⁴⁶ However, to engage a global ecumenical audience, Mersea Hazen strategically transforms some traditional elements. The text is framed ecumenically, presenting Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as a national heritage and a vital part of the universal Christian experience. This is achieved through an emphasis on Ethiopia’s early connections to the broader Christian world, notably through its historical ties with the Coptic Church of Alexandria. Mersea Hazen also emphasizes themes of Christian unity, appealing to ecumenical values by highlighting the Ethiopian Church’s contributions to protecting Christians in the Middle East and its support during periods of persecution: “Three times during the Middle Ages the Church of Ethiopia rescued the Christian minority in Egypt from the persecution of the Sultans. In the twelfth century she worked for the ensuring of places of worship in the Holy Land.”⁴⁷ Additionally, the narrative is crafted to be accessible to those unfamiliar with Ethiopian Orthodoxy, elucidating terms and practices in clear, understandable

Ernest Budge is to be used with caution, since it has a number of notorious flaws: Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her only Son Menyelek, Being the History of the Departure of God & His Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, and the Establishment of the Religion of the Hebrews & the Solomonic Line of Kings in That Country: A Complete Translation of the Kebra Nagast with Introduction* (London: The Medici Society, 1922).

44 This narrative develops the biblical story depicted in 1 Kings 10: 1–13 and 2 Chronicles 9: 1–12.

For a detailed discussion of the figures of the Queen of Saba and Solomon in Ethiopian tradition, see: Alessandro Bausi, “La leggenda della Regina di Saba nella tradizione etiopica,” in *La Regina di Saba: Un Mito fra Oriente e Occidente*, ed. Fabio Battiato et al. (Napoli: UniorPress, 2016), 91–162; Witold Witakowski and Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, “Solomon in Ethiopian Tradition,” in *The Figure of Solomon in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Tradition. King, Sage and Architect*, ed. Joseph Verheyden (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 219–240.

45 According to well-established later Ethiopian tradition the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba was called Mənilək (ምኒሊክ). However, in the *Kəbrā nəgəst* itself he is called Bāynā Ləḥkəm (በይነ ልሕም; from Arabic *Ibn al-Ḥakīm*, “Son of the wise man”).

46 Blatta Marsie-Hazen, “The Ethiopian Church,” *The Ecumenical Review* 1, no. 2 (1949): 179.

47 *Ibid.*, 180.

language. Thus, the tradition is made approachable and engaging for a global audience. Another innovative feature of the text is its comprehensive narrative of the modernization of the Ethiopian Church, which showcases its adaptive responses to contemporary challenges while maintaining its rich historical and theological traditions. Here the author especially highlights three fields: theological education, ecclesiastical reform and transformation of textual tradition.

A pivotal development Mersea Hazen mentions regarding the modernization of theological education is the founding of a theological seminary in December 1944, an Imperial foundation whose curriculum aligns with modern theological faculties. With an initial enrolment of 220 pupils from across Ethiopia, this seminary represents a landmark shift from traditional monastic education to a structured, formal theological education system. The syllabus includes Gəʼəz, Amharic, English, and Arabic and comprehensive studies in Old and New Testaments, church doctrine, ritual, and religious music, alongside secular subjects like hygiene, geography, history, and mathematics. Mersea Hazen underscores the seminary's role in preparing clergy for contemporary ministry, reflecting a significant modernisation effort within the Church's educational domain: "The education given there is to fill all the requirements of the ministry as practised in our day."⁴⁸

Mersea Hazen's narrative also touches upon administrative reforms within the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, particularly the move towards national and administrative independence. The consecration of Ethiopian bishops in July 1948, after two decades of negotiations with the Patriarchate of Alexandria, marked a historic moment of ecclesiastical autonomy:

[...] the consecration has just (July 1948) been carried out of six Ethiopian bishops, whose ministry marks the beginning of complete and definite national independence for the Church of Ethiopia, and of administrative independence from the Patriarchate, whose obedient daughter-church it still, however, remains in matters of dogma.⁴⁹

This shift towards self-governance is portrayed as a response to the growing need for an indigenous leadership structure that resonates with the national consciousness and modern aspirations of the Ethiopian people.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., 184–185.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 181, 186.

The transformation of the textual tradition under the auspices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is another theme Mersea Hazen explores. He highlights the translation of the Gospels and the liturgy into Amharic, spearheaded by the emperor.

The present Emperor has, however, caused the Gospels and the liturgy to be translated into Amharic [*sic!*]. He imported a printing-press and had them printed with their commentaries. In 1922, at the Emperor's command, the translation of the Bible into Amharic [*sic!*] was begun.⁵¹

This initiative not only made religious texts more accessible to the Amharic-speaking populace but also represented a modern approach to engaging the faithful through their vernacular language. Furthermore, Mersea Hazen notes the significant project of translating the Bible into Amharic, completed in 1934 but published in England due to the outbreak of the Second Italo-Ethiopian War in October 1935.⁵² Though hampered by the war, this endeavour symbolizes a monumental step in making the Scriptures available and understandable to a broader segment of the Ethiopian population, thus fostering a deeper, more personal engagement with the Christian faith.

Thus, Mersea Hazen's narrative encapsulates a Church in transition, actively engaging with modernity through educational reform, the revitalization of religious literature, and administrative restructuring. These endeavours reflect the commitment of the Church to preserving its ancient traditions while simultaneously embracing changes necessary to address the needs and challenges of contemporary society.

Another prominent theme, besides that of modernisation (he uses the adjective frequently when talking about reforming the educational system, e.g. "modern systems"⁵³), which does not usually play a major role in Ethiopian Orthodox literature, but which is highlighted in the text of Mersea Hazen, is evangelisation. Mersea Hazen articulates a bold vision of evangelisation, emphasising its ongoing relevance amidst the shifting demographics and religious landscapes of contemporary Africa. According to Mersea Hazen, evangelisation "is the primary calling of the Ethiopian Church, its aim and its ideal."⁵⁴ His text reveals an understanding of evangelization as a dynamic and unfinished task started by St. Frumentius,

⁵¹ Ibid., 185.

⁵² Cf. *ibid.*

⁵³ Ibid., 184.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 186.

which requires the Ethiopian Church to adapt and respond to the complexities of modern African society.

Rather unexpectedly, Mersea Hazen showcased an ecumenically open stance towards assistance in evangelization from other Churches explicitly calling for the “support of ardent believers in the Word of God all over the world.”⁵⁵ This appeal for global Christian solidarity not only acknowledges the immense scale of the missionary task at hand but also positions the Ethiopian Orthodox Church within the broader ecumenical movement, seeking collaboration and support beyond its traditional confines. Notably, the missionary responsibility of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is understood here not in the context of Ethiopia itself but in the context of the whole African continent: “The Church of Ethiopia believes that it has a mission in Africa. It wishes to brandish the torch of the Faith, sending the flame out from its mountain-tops far beyond its frontiers, to spread there the peace and the light of God.”⁵⁶

By adopting traditional elements of Ethiopian Orthodox literary production and transforming them to address a global audience while also incorporating new themes pertinent to ecumenical concerns, Mersea Hazen’s work stands as a testament to the rich contribution of the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition to the tapestry of global Christianity. Ultimately, his contribution also innovated the discourses of modernisation and evangelisation within Ethiopian Orthodox literature by aligning the mission of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church with the broader objectives of the global ecumenical movement.

Transforming of a textual tradition: conclusion

The transformation of the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition in the first half of twentieth century was shaped by two interrelated forces: the internal drive for modernization and the Church’s engagement with the global ecumenical movement. The visit of Ras Tafari Makonnen to Europe and his interactions with the emerging ecumenical movement marked a critical moment in this transformation. His efforts to modernize religious knowledge dissemination – most notably through the establishment of the first governmental printing press and the publication of Amharic translations of key patristic texts – initiated a shift from the traditional manuscript culture to a printed textual tradition that was both more accessible and aligned with the broader Christian heritage.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 187.

This shift was deeply connected to the broader vision of Ethiopian modernity. First, the introduction of printed books in Amharic represented a technological and epistemological rupture, replacing the slow, labour-intensive manuscript tradition with a more efficient means of textual production. This “Gutenbergian” revolution in Ethiopia was a deliberate effort to standardize and disseminate religious knowledge on a scale previously unimaginable. Second, the adoption of Amharic as a primary medium of religious literature reflected the modernization of education, moving away from the exclusive reliance on Gəʿəz, which had traditionally restricted theological learning to the ecclesiastical elite. Printed books in Amharic not only made religious texts more widely available but also redefined the very notion of theological education. Third, the printed book became an instrument of nation-building. The translation and printing of key religious texts reinforced the role of Amharic as a unifying national language and emphasized the legitimacy of the “Solomonic” monarchy, which was often visually represented in the first pages of these publications.

However, these innovations also provoked resistance. The shift from Gəʿəz to Amharic and the move from manuscripts to printed books challenged the authority of the traditional custodians of theological knowledge – monastic scholars and church elites. The democratization of religious texts, which now became more accessible to noble laypeople and even monastic communities, sparked anxieties over the loss of clerical control. This tension illustrates that the transformation of the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition was not a simple linear progression but rather a negotiated process between tradition and modernity, between local ecclesiastical authority and broader national and global influences.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s participation in the World Council of Churches (WCC) represented a further evolution of this transformation. More than a political or diplomatic milestone, this engagement required a fundamental reorientation of the Church’s textual practices. The production of Ethiopian Orthodox texts, which had long been confined to Ethiopian monastic and ecclesiastical circles, now had to account for a non-Ethiopian, non-Orthodox audience. The Church had to articulate its theology in European languages and within new literary genres suited to ecumenical discourse. The contribution of Blatta Mersea Hazen to the *Ecumenical Review* in 1949 epitomized this shift, as it marked the first intentional effort to present Ethiopian Orthodox thought within a global Christian framework.

This expansion of the textual tradition to a global readership brought new challenges. The transition from handwritten manuscripts to printed books had already disrupted traditional modes of religious learning, and now, the shift

toward producing texts for an international audience further altered the function of Ethiopian Orthodox literature. No longer intended solely for internal theological transmission, Ethiopian Orthodox texts had to serve as bridges between Ethiopian Christianity and the wider Christian world. This required careful curation of Ethiopian Orthodox identity – emphasizing historical continuity with biblical traditions, theological connections with other Christian communities, and an openness to the global ecumenical conversation.

Ultimately, the evolution of the Ethiopian Orthodox textual tradition in the first half of twentieth century highlights the dynamic interplay between internal reform and external engagement. By embracing new forms of textual production and participating in global Christian discourse, the Church not only preserved its theological heritage but also redefined how it communicated that heritage both within Ethiopia and beyond. The shift from manuscript to print, from Gəʿəz to Amharic, and from local to global audiences illustrates how the Ethiopian Orthodox Church navigated the challenges of modernity while maintaining its historical and theological foundations.

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