

**Sevir Chernetsov****Ethiopian Magic Texts**

One of the notable features of everyday life among Ethiopian Christians — and for that matter Falasha Jews and Muslims in the country — is the widespread practice of wearing amulets containing pieces of manuscripts which are supposed to protect the wearer from harm and bring him or her good fortune. It should be observed that, although the Ethiopian Church has always forbidden the wearing of these amulets and condemned it in the same way as it does any other magic practice, the clergy, as the only literate stratum of society, has been uniformly responsible for copying the texts concerned and disseminating the amulets containing them. Hence, B. A. Turaev felt able to write:

*in Abyssinia, which is a Christian country, but also a backward one from the point of view of civilised values, there is no obvious boundary between belief and superstition, between religion and magic. The clergy and members of the church hierarchy make money by copying and selling bogus prayers that have the same hold upon the faithful as canonical ones, which canonical prayers, along with the Holy Gospels themselves,*

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may be used for magical purposes, when read aloud in a mechanical way, worn as necklaces, or even simply carefully stored [Turaev 1916: 173].

The function of such texts is well-defined: they are meant to serve as protective manuscripts, as is a characteristic phenomenon in all the monotheistic religions of the world. The scholarly denomination for such texts is ‘forbidden scriptures’, or *orationes falsae*, since the practice of ‘making amulets with names in them’ was directly prohibited by stipulations of the Synods of Ephesus and Galatia. But this did not stop them from becoming widespread among the laity.

Philologists have long taken an interest in these manuscript amulets, which constitute a highly specific area of written culture, being intended not to be read by the owner, but to preserve him or her from harm. This function, added to the external appearance of the amulets (which take a scroll form) has led them to be known as ‘magic scrolls’, and has meant that they are considered a potentially very productive field of enquiry. Thus, P. Yu. Krachkovsky writes:

*Probably the most prolific area of Abyssinian literature is made up by the different types of “forbidden” writing, beginning with Biblical apocrypha and going on to spells and incantations. The main point of interest in this area is that the texts, which are no less bookish in character than other areas of writing in Ethiopic, at the same time reflect folk belief. Not infrequently the expressions of this belief reflect not just the deeply-held ideas of the Semites, to which people the inhabitants of Abyssinia are often held to belong, but also the Kushite tribes dwelling alongside them. The primitive character of such texts, which goes back to deep antiquity, and reflects the world-view of many different tribal cultures, is of enormous interest to the scholar: both the ethnographer and the historian of primitive religion will find rich food for thought here. One of the popular offshoots of this “forbidden” literature is the so-called “magic scrolls”, containing texts of various kinds, sometimes even quotations from canonical scripture, to which, however, a magical significance is assigned. But more often, the texts inside are spells, incantations, or simply a list of magical names, whose significance and origins are almost impossible to establish. The incomprehensibility of the material is, however, of no matter to the owner of the scroll, since it is not the reading of the scroll to which protective force is assigned, but the wearing of it, or even the keeping of it about the home [Krachkovsky 1928: 163].*

This conviction (that the Ethiopian magic scrolls have a ‘primitive character [...] which goes back to deep antiquity’, and that, consequently, ‘both the ethnographer and the historian of primitive religion will find rich food for thought here’ was, however, not derived from close study — which was still in an embryonic phase during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was, rather, the result of

a particular set of assumptions: namely, that manuscript amulets of this kind, such as are widely dispersed among a large number of different ethnic groups across the world, were the product of a specific type of synthesis of ancient pagan beliefs and beliefs drawn from the locally dominant monotheistic religion.

Such views were underpinned by the perceptions of the Russian ‘archaeological Romantics’, with their preference for everything ancient, pagan, and poetic. F. I. Buslaev, for example, portrays this synthesis thus: *‘Gripped though it was by Christianity, the folk imagination, which had not been purged from pagan beliefs, and which, though intimidated into regarding these as something satanic, still refused to surrender these as tokens of the olden times that it was so attached to, had accordingly to surrender its time-honoured freedom and, so to speak, press itself into the constrictive circle of petty superstitions; this, {for all its smallness}, encompassed and still encompasses the whole of life among the common people, life in all its large and small aspects. Therefore, despite its fantastical basis, superstition is significant for the folk because of its applicability to life in practical terms’* [Buslaev 1910: 32].<sup>1</sup>

The belief, then, was that as a result of the assimilation of Christianity, a borrowed religion, into local pagan religions, a specific fusion of belief systems had taken place, such as also expressed itself in the magic scrolls of Ethiopia. However, once one gets beyond a superficial appraisal, things look less simple. Of course, there is no arguing that the magical scroll was *‘significant for the folk because of its applicability to life in practical terms’*; at the same time, there is considerable reason to doubt that such amulets, written as they were in a language that ordinary people could not understand, and which were in fact not intended for reading anyway, can really be considered a product of the ‘folk imagination’.

What kind of objects are these Ethiopian manuscript amulets? Usually they take the form of a scroll made from parchment or some other form of more or less carefully-worked leather. Sometimes, though, they can be shaped like little booklets of the same material, with a cover made of wood. In Amharic, such objects are known as *ketab* (ክታብ) — ‘document’, although the book-shaped kind may also be known as *metshaf* (መጽሐፍ) — ‘book’. The dimensions vary considerably, from 4 to 25 cm. in width and from 40 to 200 cm. in length. The long scrolls are usually sewn together from two or three different pieces of the leather used by means of straps made of the same material. The text is usually written on the shinier, skin side of the leather. Sometimes, however, the hairy side is also written on,

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<sup>1</sup> The passage in curly brackets has been inserted in the English translation for the purposes of elucidation. [Editor].

but such inscriptions tend to be additions of very late date, written in other hands and with a different pen, and not connected, in terms of content, with the text on the face of the leather.

In terms of dimension, and to some extent also of function, magic scrolls can be divided into two categories: 1) small scrolls of up to 6 cm. in width and 50 cm. in length, which are rolled up and worn on the neck after the scroll has been wrapped up in a length of fabric or placed in a cylindrical capsule [Worrell 1910: 398–401]. Such small scrolls are also hung on straps worn over the shoulder or round the shoulders. Sometimes a strap is attached to the upper part of the scroll, and the scroll is then rolled up and fastened with the same strap; 2) large scrolls of up to 25 cm. in width and up to 200 cm. long, such as were termed by Oscar Löfgren ‘wall amulets’ [Löfgren 1963], since they were not intended for wearing as necklaces, but for hanging on walls in an unrolled state [Conti 1912–1914: 218]. Usually such ‘wall amulets’ are richly illuminated.

As a matter of fact, this categorisation has a fairly limited value in practical terms. So, the scrolls that D. A. Olderogge brought to Leningrad and donated to the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Nos. 6607–14 и 6607–15), are executed in the manner of ‘wall amulets’, but they are rolled up into a tube and fastened with strips of cloth. But if some doubt can be cast on the distinction between these two types of scroll in terms of function, the distinction in terms of types of manufacture is clear-cut. Scrolls intended for wearing round the neck when rolled up as a rule contain only the text itself; they are not decorated in any way, and often do not even bear any magical drawings. If such drawings do happen to be present, they are usually done in ink and in a decidedly careless, scrappy way. Large-scale ‘wall amulets’, on the other hand, are executed with a much greater degree of care: the text is framed by coloured ornament, and the presence of magical drawings is obligatory. These drawings are carried out in pigment and are usually done with a fair degree of taste, or at the very least, care: the manner of the execution is close to that of miniatures in manuscript books. The script of ‘wall amulets’ is usually characterised by a higher degree of care and calligraphic skill than is that of the small scrolls.

Magical drawings are one of the obligatory elements in Ethiopian manuscripts of the wall type. In this respect too, Ethiopian scriptural magic resembles the equivalent magic practices of other cultures, where not just sounds, words, and letters are considered to exercise an occult effect, but also pictures and figures [Turaev 1916: 184].

For all their considerable variety, Ethiopian magical drawings can be divided into the following groups: 1) representational drawings; 2) ‘secret signs’ or ‘letters’; 3) illustrations to a given text; 4) geometrical figures with a magical significance.

The first group includes representations of an angel or two angels holding naked swords in their right hands, and scabbards in their left. The angels are usually winged. Sometimes such drawings are accompanied by inscriptions: Gabriel and Michael, Fanuil, or the names of some other angel regarded as a guardian and a defence against evil spirits. Thus, Fanuil is labelled '*he who drives out devils*'. Often one meets with representations of St George mounted on a white horse and holding a spear in his hand, or of King Solomon on his throne. Ethiopian saints can also be found: for instance St Samu'el of Waldibba, mounted on a lion, and Gabra Marfas Keddus as the driver-out of devils and the healer of lepers. The so-called 'face of the devil', surrounded by eight horns, is another representation of this kind. It is usually to be found on the scrolls between lines of a spell that have been written out in red ink. This is the 'captive devil', the personification of the evil eye. Trapped there in the narrow boundaries of the spell text, he is apparently intended to bear witness to the victory of higher powers over the powers of darkness, and thus to act as a warning to evil spirits.

Among 'secret signs' or 'letters' are figures that are supposed to be 'Hebrew', or more rarely 'Arabic', letters, their ends decorated with little circles, which, because of this last characteristic, are known by scholars as 'letters in eyeglasses' (*caractères à lunettes, Brillenbuchstaben*). Such 'letters' are found in both Greek and Coptic texts and amulets (the most ancient of which go back to the fourth century AD), and this is no doubt the original source for the Ethiopian use of them. Professional scribes in Ethiopia itself explain them as leg-fetters (አግረ : ብረት) trapping demons in place.

Illustrations on the lines of manuscript miniatures are a relatively rare feature of scrolls. They usually accompany a magical text of some length, for instance the legends of saints renowned for driving out devils or shorter versions of their lives. The most popular image is the legend of Saint Socinius and Ursula. This subject is encountered elsewhere than in manuscripts as well: for instance, the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in St Petersburg (Kunstkamera) has in its possession an icon showing St Socinius mounted on a horse and stabbing Ursula with his spear — Ursula is the destroyer of infants and women in childhood, and is represented here as a dragon. But the popularity of Saint Socinius is certainly due to magic literature. Sometimes the illustrations to magic scrolls are of equally high quality to those in Ethiopian manuscript books: it seems reasonable to suppose that the same artists may have worked in both genres.

The hardest to interpret are the geometrical figures. Ethiopians themselves include them because it is traditional to do so and the reasons they give for doing so vary widely. The figure most often

found is a stylised representation of a grille, which in Amharic is termed *telsem* (ጠልሰግግ), i.e. ‘talisman’. As Solomon Gebre Sellassie, a priest of the Ethiopian Church who was later to play rather a murky role in the Ethiopian revolution and its aftermath [Heyer 2002: 9], explained when he was a student at the Leningrad Theological Academy,<sup>1</sup> the *telsem* is supposed to represent the throne of the devil, and of evil spirits in general. The representation is used in manuscript amulets so that when the owner of the amulet looks at the image any evil spirit that may happen to have taken up residence in him should leave his or her body and move over to the throne as a more befitting place for it. In order that the evil spirit cannot then move back to its former host, the throne is locked between the lines of a spell written out in red ink.<sup>2</sup> Interesting and logical as this explanation is, however, it is hard to pronounce on its general validity.

Sometimes the text of a spell may be framed by magic squares containing representations of human or demonic faces, eyes, individual letters, diagonal lines, or petal shapes with cross-hatching. One also comes across squares divided into chequer patterns, as one might see on a chessboard. All in all, it seems fair to say that when the Ethiopians make amulets of this kind they are not concerned with the significance of the different elements, and do not exercise anxiety over what meaning these may have; instead, they are making efforts to copy some existing piece as faithfully as possible, since it is precisely the fidelity of the copy, rather than anything else, which gives the amulet its active powers.

There are no set orders for the disposition of drawings on the scroll, but some elements of standardisation can still be found. Usually such drawings are set out thus. At the beginning will be placed Ethiopian eight-point crosses or angels holding naked swords, in the middle, as a rule, the ‘captive devil’, and at the end, the stylised grille (‘the devil’s throne’), or more eight-point crosses. And so, the disposition of magical drawings in manuscript amulets can be seen to have an obvious objective: it systematically illustrates the victory of God over the powers of darkness in order that evil spirits may be intimidated and driven away. The ‘secret signs’, however, do not have any specific place and may be located near any of the other images. Whether there are illustrations depends partly on the content of the magical texts used, and partly on the quality and richness of the work involved.

So much for the appearance of the magical scrolls. What of the texts themselves? Without any doubt, these are spells, but they are spells in written form, and their location in writing has had a strong impact on their content. They were certainly originally derived from oral

<sup>1</sup> During the 1960s. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Pers. inf. from S. G. Sellassie.

tradition. For spells in this tradition, remarks made by Nikolai Poznansky in 1917 are still pertinent: *'The spell is a verbal formula that has the reputation of being a sufficient and inalienable means for reaching a particular end, assuming that all the prescriptions in it are carried out; a means that can be resisted neither by law of nature nor by human will, should that will not be itself simultaneously subject to magic forces prompting it to resist'* [Poznansky 1917: 102]. In the case of written spells, one needs to amplify Poznansky a little: *'the spell is a verbal formula, which may be enunciated or written down...'* But perhaps that is not all there is to it. Is there a difference in principle between the orally-transmitted spell and the spell that is written down? It would seem that the answer to this question ought to be yes: after all, if an orally-transmitted spell relies on belief in the spoken word, then the other kind relies on belief in the written word — and N. P. Vinogradov noted the distinction between these two forms as long ago as 1908 [Vinogradov 1908: 62–3].

In turn, the transition from orally-transmitted to written spells marked a whole epoch in the development of human thought and culture, and had consequences of great importance. As Tadeusz Zieliński was the first to remark, the spell developed out of ritual: actions of magical significance preceded words of magical significance. The first phase of the development of magical ideas came about when these actions started to be accompanied by verbal utterances, when they turned into a ritual as such: *'in order to achieve the desired effect, a process of enchantment is carried out, i.e. a phenomenon that is akin to what is desired and associated with this [...]* *In expressing this magical process and its purpose in words, we arrived at the formulae of the spell'* [Zelinsky [=Zieliński] 1897: 24]. The second phase came about when the ritual (the magical action itself) and the spell changed places, i.e. when the original pattern of words accompanying rituals was replaced by one of rituals accompanying words — with the former remaining an extremely important element in magical practice, but not the crucial factor in this. In turn, the process of transition from orally-transmitted spells to written document represents a third phase of the development of magical thinking, when the ritual begins to lose its independent significance. And if originally it was the ritual that ensured the transmission of magical works (i.e. spells and incantations) from generation to generation — which were in turn strongly linked with ritual, this forming the basis of oral tradition — then, in this third phase of evolution, it was their written form that guaranteed the unchanging character of magical texts.

As a result of the transition of magic from the oral to the written tradition, the content of magical works changed as well. The written form opened new and broader possibilities for magic. The possible dimensions of the spell altered, which meant that there was, for

example, more space for narrative elements. And peoples who had come into contact with monotheistic belief systems started to draw on the sacred texts of these religions as a source for such narrative elements. While such a fusion of magic and religion may shock some believers, it should come as no surprise either to the historian of religion or to the student of medieval culture, which is organically permeated by fusion of this kind. As Edward Westermarck observed, *‘There may perhaps be some reason to believe that the affinity between magic and religion has found expression in the word religion itself. It has been conjectured that the Latin religio is related to religare, which means “to tie”. The relationship between these words has been supposed to imply that in religion man was tied by his god. But the connection between them — if there is any connection — seems to allow of another and more natural interpretation, namely that it was not the man who was tied by the god, but the god who was tied by the man [...]’* This is what we should call magic, but the Romans might in ancient days have called it religio’ [Westermarck 1932: 10]. And regarding magic practice and the way this was justified in Ethiopian Christian culture, Taddese Tamrat, a noted specialist in the area, wrote, *‘The dichotomy between Good and Evil — God and Satan — in Ethiopian Christian cosmology did not at all rule out the existence, nor the strong arbitrary powers, of evil spirits in the world [...] which were only the manifestations of the malign forces of the Fallen Angels. The pagans sought to placate these evil forces through the agency of their religious leaders [...] More common still apparently was the use of magical prayers by members of the Christian community, including the clergy’* [Tamrat 1972: 235]. Christians may not have dared to ‘tie’ down their god (to borrow Westermarck’s expression), but they were prepared to ‘tie’ down evil spirits, and to intimidate them by the power of the mighty names of God and of his many servants, i.e. the angels and the holy saints.

And indeed, in Ethiopian magical scrolls one finds a wide use, as narrative elements, of biblical episodes (above all John 1: 1–6; Matthew 8: 28–32; Mark 1: 23–6, and Luke 8: 43–4), of apocryphal tales, and of foreign mythology. In contradistinction to oral magic, written magic often includes foreign material, with the borrowing here working in a directly ‘literary’ way: rarely do the developed subjects of Ethiopian magic literature not have a prototype somewhere in Coptic, Christian Arabic, or even Greek magic literature. Thus, the tale of how St Socinius killed the witch Ursula [Fries 1893; Basset 1894; Worrell 1909: 163; Ullendorf 1968: 80] goes back

<sup>1</sup> In the passage omitted, Westermarck describes rituals in Morocco according to which rags were tied to objects or trees near cult sites, according to the practice known as *‘ar*, or ‘transference of a conditional curse’. When performing this practice, a petition would be uttered, and the petitioner might announce that he was tying up the saint and did not propose to release him. [Editor].



through Coptic magic literature [Lemm 1907: 499–501] to the Hellenistic legend of Gilla, the destroyer of newborns (who was in turn the prototype of Gella in Mikhail Bulgakov's famous novel *The Master and Margarita*). And the legend of 'the nets of Solomon' [Euringer 1928, 1929; Löfgren 1963: 117] goes back to the Chaldean tract, *The Testament of Solomon*, which has come down to us in a Latin translation [Migne 1877: vol. 122]. One could proliferate other examples at will.

The desire for protection against evil spirits and the forces of darkness in turn gave birth, alongside the magic scrolls, to an abundant magical literature, which is distinguished from the texts included in the former because these writings did not function as talismans, and were meant to be read, rather than being worn on the body. This literature is so widely represented in Ethiopia that the German scholar Enno Littmann felt able to write, '*the major part of Ethiopian literature is made up by magic texts*' [Littmann 1904: 2]. Déborah Lifchitz, the author of a specialised study of these texts, terms them 'magico-religieux' [Lifchitz 1940]. Ethiopians themselves call them *Temhertä Hebu'at*, i.e. 'secret knowledge'. Stephen Wright, a specialist on early Ethiopian printed books, wrote of the genre: '*In the popular mind, however, temhert retains its old sense, of erudition founded upon the sacred doctrines of the Christian church; it inspires awe and respect, and is regarded as beyond the comprehension of common folk. It is a mysterious thing, a sort of temhertä hebu'at, to use the Ge'ez title of the Doctrina Arcanorum, which the editor [Déborah Lifchitz] included among her textes magico-religieux. (This text is, by the way, obtainable in Addis Abbaba in cheap printed editions, and is often acquired by the literate devout as an inexpensive gateway to esoteric knowledge, though of course the Ge'ez is in fact incomprehensible to most of them)*' [Wright 1964: 11–2].

But Ethiopians did not only term this 'knowledge' secret or precious because '*the Ge'ez is incomprehensible to most of them*'. There were also other reasons behind the name. Thee 'literate believers' were being crafty: they were pretending that they did not dare to compel their God to do what they wanted, when as a matter of fact that was exactly their purpose — to force Him to defend them from evil. Striking in this regard is the text of the Ethiopian 'Scroll of Righteousness'<sup>1</sup> that is often included in magic scrolls [Turaev 1909: 359–78]. It narrates how the Virgin Mary, whom Jesus has shown members of her family enduring the torments of Hell, asks him for the 'Scroll of Righteousness' with its list of Jesus's sacred names, which can act as a means for people to save themselves from the

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<sup>1</sup> An early commentary is entitled *The Bandlet of Righteousness* [Budge 1922], but the term 'scroll' is preferred here for consistency with the term generally used. [Editor].

pains of the inferno. Jesus says no to his mother, and motivates his refusal in a perfectly natural way: *'I shall not tell you, for what is told to one person is passed on to another, and then from a second to a third, and then becomes known to all mankind, and so people will sin and say, "We have that which will save us."*' But Mary adopts an unanswerable female strategy: she weeps and exclaims: *'Why then did I bear you in my womb nine months and five days!'*

Her son gives in and presents her with the scroll, in parallel to the god Toth in the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead. Of the latter, B. A. Turaev wrote: *'But now we see the god of wisdom and justice more or less surrender his ethical component. He teaches the dead man formulae that will render his judges harmless: the knowledge of these formulae and of his judges' names makes moral purity irrelevant [...] thus Toth's role as a merciful protector of the dead sometimes prevails over his function as a decent prototype of the Egyptian civil servant and patron of the exact sciences: he allows himself to put a finger on the scales and move them in the dead man's favour'* [Turaev 1898: 52]. And although the Virgin Mary promises her son that she will not reveal these divine names to *'persons of unsound mind, who are not in search of heavenly glory and who do not set worldly glory at naught'*, the essential meaning of this Ethiopian text remains the same: the salvation of a person from the flames of Hell and his or her entry into the Kingdom of Heaven depends primarily not on how virtuous he or she is, but on whether they know 'the sacred names of God'. This knowledge constituted the 'secret knowledge' set out in what Déborah Lifchitz termed 'magico-religious texts', as found both in manuscript amulets, and in literary works as such, i.e. those intended for reading. And in terms of their content, these different types of text are strongly similar.

Indeed, though the resemblance of the Ethiopian 'Scroll of Righteousness' and of the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead has always been noted by scholars (e.g. [Turaev 1909; Budge 1922; Euringer 1940]), the Ethiopian text of the manuscript amulet has much more in common with the Ethiopian 'Prayer of Our Lady after Her Departure from Jerusalem'. Its function is less that of a magic scroll than of a genuine *oratio falsa*. Unlike the 'Scroll', the 'Prayer' is compositionally speaking highly ordered, and contains a narrative about how, with the aid of many incantations, Mary is able to summon up Jesus Christ. On witnessing the ceremonial arrival of Her Son, surrounded by the angelic host, She falls into a swoon, but Jesus raises Her, and listens to Her repeated appeals that the people who honour Her should be granted favours, and swears repeatedly that this will be done, promising these people protection against illness and the forces of darkness in this world, and salvation for their souls in the next:

*And all those who hear this prayer will be saved from all catastrophe,*

*and from sufferings, and from serious illness. And if he shall have an illness that is not mortal, I shall raise him. I shall {do this} swiftly, in the twinkling of an eye. And if he shall have sins {dwelling in him}, they shall quit him. And if he shall have a mortal illness, I shall send down angels of light so that they shall take his soul and bring it to Me, so that the savage angels {of darkness} shall not approach him and snatch him away. And if unclean spirits should assail him at the entrance to the third heaven, I shall defend him. I shall {fight} for him and shall give him aid.<sup>1</sup>*

So we see that this prayer was meant to be carried on the person, just as manuscript amulets were; the boundary between amulets and magical-religious texts was porous. René Basset, the first scholar to take note of these texts, described them as ‘*Ethiopian apocrypha*’ [Basset 1894], and his choice of term was absolutely accurate, if one recalls the primary meaning of the Greek word — secret, precious knowledge. As a matter of fact, the readers who regarded these books as sacred gave them a similar name: *Doctrina arcanorum* was the Latin term, and *Temhertä Hebu’at* the Ge’ez term. Of course, in Ethiopia these texts were read only by initiates who had received the appropriate church education, but the same could be said for Ge’ez Christian literature in its entirety.

Both these magical-religious texts, and the texts of the magic scrolls can be termed, following Littmann, ‘magic literature’; in ideological terms, moreover, this was Christianised magic. Without doubt, the adoption of Christianity provided a new impulse for magic literature and directed this in a new way. Alongside the former orally-transmitted spells in living vernacular languages appeared written forms of magic in liturgical languages, the language of the Scriptures, which had the role not so much of spells as of protective texts in written form, in whose capacity for salvation people believed in the way that they believed in the capacity for salvation of Christianity more generally, and of the Christian Scriptures. Structurally these written texts were organised in a similar way to orally-transmitted texts, although the written form, as noted above, facilitated the expansion of the narrative elements, and the appearance of the new ideology led to the infusion of these narrative elements with Christian mythology.

These, then, are the obvious features of Ethiopian documents. In addition, something else is clear: the majority of the epic motifs used are of non-Ethiopian origin. The process by which this arrived is usually referred to as ‘borrowing’, but one should be clear about the

<sup>1</sup> Manuscript collection of the Oriental Institute, Russian Academy of Sciences (St Petersburg Department), No. Ef. 56. (The passages in curly brackets have been inserted in the English translation for the purposes of elucidation.) [Editor].

form that this took. It seems most unlikely that the assimilation of the Christian motifs as such took place in Ethiopia itself; far more probable is a process according to which written spells were adopted from elsewhere not piecemeal, but as complete texts, and using entirely literary methods of transmission — that is, the translation of works of non-Ethiopian magical literature into Ge'ez, and just as the Scriptures themselves and the works of the Church Fathers made their way into Ethiopian culture. By extension, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Ethiopians took their Christian magic literature from the same source as Christian texts more generally — the territories of the Near East — and that they absorbed these as a complete corpus of material — an egg complete with its shell, white, and yolk, so to speak. And in Ethiopia this magic literature (where, in B. A. Turaev's words '*no obvious boundary between belief and superstition, between religion and magic*' can be felt) has been preserved intact to the present day. However, this literature does not, pace P. Yu. Krachkovsky, reflect '*the deeply-held ideas of the Semites [...] [and] also the Kushite tribes dwelling alongside them*'; rather, it confronts us with the religious world of the Near East during the first centuries of Christianity.

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