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Edited by

Gregg Gardner and Kevin L. Osterloh

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Gregg Gardner, born 1976; MA in History of the Jewish People from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and MA in Religion from Princeton University; is finishing a doctorate in Religion at Princeton University.

Kevin L. Osterloh, born 1969, is an Assistant Professor of Ancient History at Miami University.

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Helena's Bridle and the Chariot of Ethiopia

G. W. BOWERSOCK

The Kingdom of Ethiopia became a Christian nation in the fourth century of our era. If the precise date of its conversion from polytheism cannot be determined, there can be little doubt that the reign of Constantius II in the middle of the century provides the correct time-frame. Athanasius reported in his apology to Constantius that the emperor had sent Frumentius to Aksum to establish Christian churches. Ezana (Greek Aezanas),¹ the Ethiopian king at this time, can be observed, on his inscriptions and coins, as both pagan and Christian – first as son of the invincible Ares (the Greek equivalent of the Ethiopic god Mahrem), and subsequently as the humble servant of Christ. The conversion is played out before our eyes on magnificent steles with texts in two languages, Greek and Ge'ez, inscribed in three scripts – Greek, Ethiopic, and Sabaic (South Arabian).² Sumptuous gold coins similarly proclaim Ezana both as a pagan *negus*, as the Ethiopian king was called, and later as a Christian one.³ Like his inscriptions, his coins display two languages, although only unvocalized Ethiopic conveys the Ge'ez.

¹ Athanasius, *Apologia ad Constantium* 31.

² For Ezana before his conversion, see E. Bernand, A. J. Drewes, and R. Schneider, eds., *Recueil des Inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1991), vol. 1 "Les Documents," no. 185, pp. 241–45 with Ge'ez (unvocalized) and Sabaic texts; for the Greek text on the other side of the same stele see no. 270, pp. 363–67; [images in vol. 2 "Les Planches," plates 99–101 (for no. 185) and plate 179 (for no. 270)]. Similarly, no. 185bis, pp. 246–50, inscribed on the two faces as well as one side, with Ge'ez (unvocalized) and Sabaic, plus Greek on the same stele, which is no. 270bis, pp. 367–70. Nos. 187 and 188 are written in vocalized Ethiopic letters from the time of Ezana's paganism (Mahrem is mentioned), and no. 189 is a vocalized text of the Christian Ezana. For the bilingual of Ezana as a Christian, see no. 190, pp. 268–71, a text in Ge'ez written in a form of Sabaic script from right-to-left (unlike Ethiopic). The Greek text on the same stele is no. 271, pp. 370–72 [images on plates 124–28 (for no. 190) and 181 (for no. 271)].

³ Stuart Munro-Hay, *Catalogue of the Aksumite Coins in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 1999), 31–32.

No one now believes that the Ezana documents represent two or more people of the same name.⁴ With what is now available, such an idea is completely untenable. The Greek numismatic legend, *bisi Alene* (βισι Αλενε), gives the tribal affiliation of the pagan Ezana – a man of Ḥalen. (βισι is a transliteration of *be'sī*, the Ge'ez word for man.) The Greek coin legend reproduces the designation *be'eseya ḥalen* in the vocalized Ge'ez inscriptions of both the pagan and Christian Ezana, and it turns up again in Greek as βισι Αληνε on the Greek-Ge'ez bilingual inscription of the Christian Ezana. There can be no doubt that we are dealing with one and the same *negus*.

Frumentius' mission to Aksum was a reflection of the increasing power of Ethiopia after the collapse and conquest of the Nubian kingdom of Kush centered at Meroë. The end of Nubian power came towards the end of the third century. It clearly coincided with increasingly aggressive and imperialistic conduct on the part of the Ethiopians to the south. Their ambitions not only extended northwards into Kush but eastwards across the strait at the southern end of the Red Sea into South Arabia and the territory of the Himyarites. It was just as the Meroitic kingdom was coming to an end that the first Ethiopian coins were struck. These were handsome pieces, designed for export and propaganda, in gold and silver as well as bronze,⁵ and the Aksumite coinage, which continued from that time until the mid seventh century, constituted an anomaly in ancient sub-Saharan Africa. It was clearly meant to put Ethiopia into the main stream of late antiquity. The more than twenty holders of the title *negus* maintained Greek along with Ge'ez on their coins.

This was a Christian monarchy that took itself seriously. Accordingly, when the Himyarite Arabs, who had been converted to Judaism, undertook a persecution of Christians in Najran, it was the Ethiopian *negus*, Ella Asbeha known as Kālēb, who, with the support of Justin I in Constanti-

⁴ For an excellent discussion of the issues before 1981, when inscriptions nos. 185bis and 270bis were discovered (cf. n. 2 above), see Albrecht Dihle, "Frumentios und Ezana" in his *Umstrittene Daten* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1965), 36–64.

⁵ Munro-Hay, *Catalogue*, 27–30. Textual sources are admirably assembled in T. Eide, et al., eds., *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum III: From the First to the Sixth century AD* (Bergen: University of Bergen, 1998). For the collapse of the Meroitic kingdom in Nubia, see William Y. Adams, *Nubia. Corridor to Africa* (Princeton: Penguin and Princeton, 1977, repr. 1984), 382–90. For the rise of Ethiopia, A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Ethiopia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935; original title *A History of Abyssinia*) is still serviceable, as is Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible*, The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy (London: Press, 1968).

nople, went to war against the Jewish Arabs.⁶ Like his great predecessor, Ezana, Kālēb left behind an impressive epigraphical and numismatic record of his achievements, which included eloquent professions of his Christian faith. He even left a memorial of his victory in South Arabia in a surviving inscription at Marib that can be seen today in the Museum at Sana'a. In that text, beautifully inscribed in the vocalized Ethiopic alphabet, Kālēb recounted what God had done for him, and he invoked the glory of David (*kebra dāwit*).⁷

The reference to the House of David provides contemporary testimony for what is undoubtedly the most important item in the ancient history of Christian Ethiopia. That, somewhat paradoxically, is its claim to direct descent from the Jews through the Queen of Sheba. Ethiopian tradition identified the Queen of Sheba with the queen Kandake mentioned in a famous encounter of St. Philip in the Acts of the Apostles, and the tradition maintained that King Solomon had a son with this composite queen. That son, Menelik, was the founder of the Ethiopian dynasty. His story is told, along with much else, in the Holy Book of Ethiopia, the *Kebra Nagast* ("The Glory of Kings").⁸

This extraordinary book survives in a classical Ge'ez text from the fourteenth century, but a colophon at the end states that it had been translated from an Arabic version that was itself a translation from Coptic. No one knows whether there was an original Ethiopic text in Ge'ez, but there can be little doubt that the *Kebra Nagast* conserves much authentic material from late antiquity. Already thirty years ago Irfan Shahid insisted on a sixth-century date for at least some of the historical information in the work, in particular the account of Kālēb's war against the Jewish Arabs as

⁶ See the exhaustive review of current documentation in Christian-Julien Robin, "Himyar et Israël," *Comptes-Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (2004): 831–906. Cf. G. W. Bowersock, "The Ḥaḍramawt between Persia and Byzantium," in *La Persia e Bisanzio* (Rome: Accademia dei Lincei, 2004), 263–73.

⁷ Bernand et al., *Recueil des Inscriptions de l'Éthiopie*, vol. 1., no. 195, with the words cited from stone 2, line 24. For images see plates 143–44 in vol. 2.

⁸ For the meeting of Philip with Kandake's eunuch, see Acts of the Apostles 8:27. The Ethiopic text of the *Kebra Nagast* may be found in Carl Bezold, *Kebra Nagast. Die Herrlichkeit der Könige*, Abhandlungen der I. Kl. der Kön. Akad. d. Wissensch. 23, Bd. I (Munich: G. Franz, 1905). This remains the only edition of the original text. It is accompanied by a scrupulous German translation. Cf. translations by E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek* (London: M. Hopkinson, 1922) – a version that is often cited with greater confidence than it deserves – and by Gérard Colin, *La Gloire des Rois (Kebra Nagast), Épopée nationale de l'Éthiopie* (Geneva, 2002). Colin's is a straightforward translation with minimal annotation, but the references to biblical allusions are helpful in the absence of any publication of D. A. Hubbard, "The Literary Sources of the Kebra Nagast," (Ph.D. diss., St. Andrews University, 1956).

well as the assignment of Chalcedonianism to the reign of Marcian.⁹ Overall the book is designed to establish the Solomonic origins of Ethiopian kingship and the rightness of those monophysite doctrines that put the *negus* in direct competition with the king of Rum, in other words the king of the Greeks who resided in Constantinople. Since the opposition of the *negus* to the Byzantine emperor is so important in the *Kebra Nagast*, it is all the more significant that the author was well aware that the two rulers made common cause together for a brief moment, in the 520s, in the action against their common enemy, the Jews of South Arabia.¹⁰

The symbolic centerpiece of Ethiopian identity was nothing less than the ark of the covenant, which the *Kebra Nagast* reported to have been removed from Jerusalem in the days of Solomon by means of a magic chariot that flew through the air at supersonic speed. The ark itself formed, and still forms, a central part of the Ethiopian liturgy, and the chariot remained in Aksum. But in the final pages of the *Kebra Nagast*, Gregory Thaumaturgus, who functions as an interlocutor with the Ethiopian bishops, addresses apocalyptic matters. For it was said that the ark would be returned to Jerusalem when Christ reappeared there, and every Ethiopian Christian knew that the psalmist had foretold, in Psalm 68:31, "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God."

In this context, two of the last chapters of the *Kebra Nagast* (113 and 116) consider the prospects of two holy objects at the time of Christ's return and the dissolution of the earthly empire. One of these objects is something called the "subduer of the enemy of the king of Rum."¹¹ It is kept in Rome, that is – Constantinople, and possesses a supernatural power that evidently keeps the Persians at bay. It is a horse's bridle,¹² which Constantine's Helena is alleged to have had made out of the nails from the crucifixion. She had the nails melted down and made into a mystic bridle which would be taken away from the Byzantine kings when they perverted their faith. The Persians would then make war on Rum. Marcian is named as the one who would start the perversion. This is clearly a reference on the part of the Ethiopian monophysite writer to the Chalcedonians in Constantinople. In his *vaticinium ex eventu* Gregory Thaumaturgus predicts that the Persian king will take away the bridle with its horse, but the horse

⁹ Irfân Shahîd, "The *Kebra Nagast* in the Light of Recent Research," *Le Muséon* 89 (1976), 133–78. Alessandro Bausi has recently criticized Shahîd's argument as unnecessary because the historical details in the *Kebra Nagast* ultimately derived from the Ethiopic version of the Martyrium of Arethas: A. Bausi, A. Gorsi eds., *Tradizioni orientali del Martirio di Areta* (Florence: University of Florence, 2006), 106 with n. 35.

¹⁰ *Kebra Nagast* 117.

¹¹ *magrarê qar la-negûsa rôm.*

¹² *leguām.*

will go into the sea and die. The nails on the bridle will glitter in the water until Christ comes in glory.

Many scholars have supposed reasonably that the bridle story here is connected somehow with the legend of the True Cross. Jerome acknowledges that Helena was reported to have discovered the nails from the crucifixion, but he is disinclined to credit a story he had heard – that Constantine had made a bridle for his own horse out of one nail and a diadem out of another. Nevertheless, Ambrose had not hesitated to proclaim this story in his speech on the death of Theodosius, and it was repeated in essentially the same form by all the main Byzantine ecclesiastical historians.¹³

That traditional legend of a bridle for Constantine's horse is utterly different from the *Kebra Nagast* version, which has a character all its own. Here it was Helena herself who caused the nails she brought back (not just one of them) to be melted down and fashioned into a bridle. The object was made not for Constantine's horse, but rather to serve as a mystic indicator of the beginning of the end, with the onslaught of the enemy and the coming of Christ.

The other holy object has a similar apocalyptic role. The bishops in the *Kebra Nagast* say to Gregory in chapter 116, "You have spoken to us about the subduer of the enemy of Rum. Now tell us about the chariot of Ethiopia. Will it remain down to the coming of Christ, as you said Sion (i.e. the ark) and the Ethiopian faith would?" The ark, which was known in Ethiopia as Sion, would go back to Jerusalem, and Ethiopian faith would remain unshaken to that moment. But, the bishops want to know, will the chariot stay once the world begins to come apart?

Wallis Budge, in his often cited translation of the *Kebra Nagast*, rendered what follows at this point as, "It shall assuredly not disappear." But Bezold, who had already published the still standard edition of the Ethiopic text, translated, quite correctly, "Nein, er wird verschwinden!", and the new French version of Colin reads, "Non, il est destiné à disparaître."¹⁴ It is precisely at this point that Gregory brings up the Jews in Najran and foretells, in the next chapter (117), the ultimate annihilation of the entire Jewish people. Budge misunderstood what was going on here, as well as the actual meaning of the Ge'ez: *'albô halawô yesawwar*. The chariot, like

¹³ See Jerome, *Commentary on Zachariah* 14.20: (Migne) PL 25.1540, where Jerome mocks the story of Constantine's making a bridle for his horse out of one of the nails. The story is repeated in Ambrose, *De Obitu Theodosii* 47, ed. O. Faller, CSEL 73 (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1955), 396, and in the *HE* of Rufinus (2.8), Socrates (1.17.9), Sozomen (2.1.9), and Theodoret (1.18.5).

¹⁴ For the renderings of Bezold, Budge, and Colin, see the references in n. 8 above.

Helena's bridle, will go when the end is at hand. It will not remain after Christ appears and the psalmist's Ethiopian stretches out his hands to God. Those two objects serve to give signs of what is to come.

The apocalyptic of the *Kebra Nagast* turns out to have an important parallel in west Syrian apocalyptic of the seventh century, for which David's verse in Psalm 68 had no less importance than for the Ethiopians. When the west Syrian and Ethiopic traditions are brought into conjunction the prophecies of Gregory Thaumaturgus in the *Kebra Nagast* suddenly acquire unexpected clarity. A *vaticinium ex eventu*, falsely ascribed to the fourth-century Bishop Methodius from Patara or Lycian Olympus, evokes the cross of Christ's crucifixion as "the sign which will be seen prior to the Advent of our Lord". At the end of time it will appear on Golgotha and be raised up to heaven from there. And at that moment, according to this text, an Ethiopian will hand over all power to God in accordance with the psalm.¹⁵ Sebastian Brock has plausibly dated the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius to the late seventh century (ca. 691) on the basis of its references to the Arab presence in the region for some seventy years.¹⁶ The apocalypse anticipates the removal of all sovereignty and power as the King of the Greeks gives up his soul to his creator.¹⁷ This is obviously the Byzantine emperor, or, as he is sometimes called, the King of the Romans.

The treatise of Pseudo-Methodius is a confection that draws upon Mesopotamian literature such as the Alexander Legend, the Julian Romance, and the so-called Syrian Treasure Cave. It displays a curious preoccupation with the Ethiopic royal family and, in a bizarre genealogical excursus, demonstrates that the mother of Alexander the Great was the daughter of the King of Ethiopia, and that she subsequently married Buz, the eponym of Byzantium. One of their offspring married Romulus.¹⁸ All this is evidently designed to explain why Ethiopia should be involved at the end of days after the imagined defeat of the Arabs. The Byzantine Empire, which

¹⁵ G. J. Reinink, *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, an edition of the Syriac text with German translation in two volumes: CSCO, vols. 540–541, *Scriptores Syri* 220–221 (Louvain: E. Peeters, 1993), 14.4–5, (p. 44 in the Syriac, p. 73 in the German translation). Cf. Sebastian Brock, Robert Hoyland and Andrew Palmer, eds., *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993). On pp. 222–42, Sebastian Brock has provided translation, notes, and bibliography for an extract from Pseudo-Methodius.

¹⁶ For Brock's comments, see Brock, Hoyland and Palmer, eds., *Seventh Century*, 225. See also the unpublished dissertation of F. J. Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius* (Ph.D. Diss., Catholic University of America, 1985), 30–31, for a date of 688/9.

¹⁷ Pseudo-Methodius 14.6.

¹⁸ Pseudo-Methodius 9 (note the mention of Romulus in 9.4 and 9.6).

was known at the time as the empire of the Romans as well as of the Greeks, thus had Ethiopian roots.

In elaborating on the Ethiopian connection Pseudo-Methodius explicitly refers to Christians who had believed that the reference in the Psalms referred to a role for the king of Ethiopia. They were wrong, according to the writer, but it is of the greatest importance that they existed at all.¹⁹ Pseudo-Methodius gives us a glimpse into a much more central role for the *negus* than mere genealogical fabrication would allow. A hint of this role may be seen in Pseudo-Methodius' own prophecy that the King of the Greeks (*malkā d-yawnāyē*, ملك ديمية) would rise up against the sons of Ishmael in anger and "would set forth from the Sea of the Kushites (the Ethiopians) and bring the sword and destruction into the desert of Yathrib (the name for Medina)".²⁰ Here the King of the Greeks, though clearly the leader of the Byzantine Empire, can only be the *negus*, launching a campaign from Aksum across the Red Sea.

The Ethiopic allusions in Pseudo-Methodius are dramatically enhanced in a remarkable fragment of a treatise written in Edessa very soon afterwards – within a year or two, it seems – as a revision of the apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius.²¹ The author of this fragment clearly distinguishes the Byzantines, whom he calls Romans (*rhūmāyē*, رومانية), from the Greeks (*yawnāyē*, يمنية), whose king will hand over his kingdom to God. And here at last we find the full story of Helena's bridle. It is said to have been forged not only from the nails that were in the hands of Jesus but also from the nails in the hands of one of the thieves – clearly the one whom Jesus said he would see in paradise. The text goes on to say, "They cast [the nails] in the fire all together and forged a bridle-bit (*pgūdā*, فجلد), that is – a bridle (*lgāmā*, لجام), which they hung in a church. When a horse that has never been ridden and never even been fitted with a bridle puts its head on its own into that bridle, then the Romans [the Byzantines] will know that the kingdom of the Christians has come."²²

The final moment in Jerusalem is similar to Pseudo-Methodius but a little more detailed: "Then the king of the Greeks will enter Jerusalem, climb up to Golgotha, where our Savior was crucified...This king of the Greeks shall be descended from Kushyat, daughter of Kushyat, of the kings of

¹⁹ Pseudo-Methodius 9.7.

²⁰ Pseudo-Methodius 13.11.

²¹ G. J. Reinink, "Der edessenische 'Pseudo-Methodius'", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 83 (1990), 31–45. The fragment is translated by Brock *apud* Brock, Hoyland and Palmer, eds., *Seventh Century*, and is re-edited in Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*.

²² *Edessene fragment folio 99r*, Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, 223. Cf. the Syriac *lgāmā* here with Ethiopic *leguām* in the *Kebra Nagast* (n. 12 above).

Kush [Ethiopia].”²³ Here we have the conjunction of an Ethiopian king of the Greeks with a much fuller explanation of the bridle, one that coheres perfectly with the account in the *Kebra Nagast*. Contact between Edessa and Aksum is unavoidable. By this period the Ethiopian monarchy appears to have come to an end, at least in the grandiose form of past centuries. The coinage stops completely about 640,²⁴ but presumably the Ethiopian claim, as mentioned by Pseudo-Methodius and documented in the Edessa fragment, continued in Mesopotamia for decades afterwards. So we must now ask why an Edessene Christian in the late seventh century would have not only have had access to this Ethiopian tradition but why he might have accepted it.

The answer, in a word, is monophysitism. The sources of the *Kebra Nagast* explicitly trace the perversion of the faith in Constantinople to Chalcedon in the fifth century and the emperor Marcian. From that time onwards the *negus* could lay claim to being the defender of the true faith. It may be suggested that this is exactly what he did. He and the Ethiopians expected that he would assume the leadership of Christianity and thus become the king of the Greeks, and his claims must have been disseminated throughout monophysite communities in Mesopotamia and Syria. In Aksum, the Ethiopians had the ark of the covenant which they could place in opposition to the True Cross at Constantinople. In the apocalyptic moment of dissolution when the ark would return to Jerusalem the *negus* could have confidence in the psalm of David that put him at the forefront stretching out his hands to God.

The Ethiopian claim to the kingship of monophysite Greeks from the days of Marcian, who is explicitly named as a perverter of the faith in the *Kebra Nagast*,²⁵ can be confirmed by Aksumite coins of the mid-fifth century, when the fateful council was held at Chalcedon. A *negus*, unknown to any surviving literary texts, coined in gold, silver, and bronze, with the epithet “victor” attached to his name in Ge‘ez (*mawā’ī*) and a legend, again in Ge‘ez, “In this cross (*masqal*) you will conquer (*temawe*),” or on other specimens “In this cross conquer.”²⁶ There cannot be the slightest doubt, as the late Stuart Munro-Hay recognized in his catalogue of the Aksumite coinage, that this is an evocation of the famous phrase attached to the revelation of Constantine at the Milvian Bridge (ἐν τούτῳ νικᾷς, *in hoc signo vinces*). The vocalization of the king’s name is

²³ Edessene fragment folio 103r (*ad fin.*) – folio 103v (*ad init.*), Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, 226.

²⁴ See Munro-Hay, *Catalogue*, 41.

²⁵ *Kebra Nagast* 113: *marqeyānōs ‘elwa hāymānōt*.

²⁶ Munro-Hay, *Catalogue*, 36.

uncertain since it is found on the coins only in unvocalized letters (MḤDYS). The claim of MḤDYS to being an Ethiopian Constantine is incontestible.

A newly published gold coin of this king adds to the previously published dossier of his claim.²⁷ It is a most unusual piece, with a full-length portrait of the *negus* on the obverse and a full-length figure of Nike/Victoria, holding a long processional cross, on the reverse. The Ge'ez legends of "victor" and "In this cross you will conquer" both appear along with the king's name. Munro-Hay, who published the coin, observed that there are close parallels to the Victory figure in fifth-century imperial coinage, and the closest from the reign of Marcian.²⁸ He therefore proposed to date MḤDYS to about 450. Since the *Kebra Nagast* is explicit about the perversion of the faith at Constantinople under Marcian (or, in another chapter, 130 years after Constantine²⁹), the claim of MḤDYS to be another Constantine would seem manifestly designed to assert the leadership of the "orthodox," who are, in both Ge'ez and Syriac, the monophysites.

The Constantinian character of MḤDYS' coinage is reinforced in other ways too. The epithet "victor" is attached to his name as unvocalized MW', but, as indicated, it clearly represents *mawā'ī*. This too evokes Constantine, whose titulature is well documented on inscriptions as *maximus victor*, or in some instances *victoriosissimus*.³⁰ Beyond this we should look to the royal name itself. Since no tribal affiliation is given for MḤDYS, we might suspect that he has added a significant name to his given name, much as Ella Asbeha a century later took the biblical name Kālēb. The root of MḤDYS' name is ḥ-d-s, which means "to restore" or "to renew." The Ethiopic adjective for new is ḥadīs, and hence the royal name would mean "the restorer." It was as *restitutor* that Constantine was hailed in his lifetime: *restitutor libertatis* and even *restitutor generis humani*.³¹ The Ethiopian monarchy in the mid-fifth century knew exactly what it was doing in laying claim to restoration of the true faith after the supposed betrayal at Chalcedon.

²⁷ Stuart Munro-Hay, "A New Gold Coin of King MḤDYS of Aksum," *Numismatic Chronicle* 155 (1995), 275–77.

²⁸ Cf. R. A. G. Carson, C. H. V. Sutherland, eds., *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, vol. 10 (London: Spink and Son, 1994), 386–87, 505 (Marcian).

²⁹ *Kebra Nagast* 93.

³⁰ For the titulature of Constantine, see the convenient register in *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (ILS) 3.1, 307–9. For *victoriosissimus*, ILS 723. On Constantinian victory titles, Timothy D. Barnes, *The New Empire of Diocletian and Constantine* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 27.

³¹ ILS 691–692.

The role for the *negus* of Ethiopia among the monophysites fits perfectly with possession of the ark of the covenant ("Sion") as a relic of the kingdom's ancient origins in Jerusalem. The ark was Aksum's answer to the True Cross in Constantinople, and the Edessa fragment explicitly says that the Cross will be taken away before the King of the Greeks stretches out his hands to God. It also says explicitly that the King is none other than an Ethiopian. Pseudo-Methodius recognized, as we have seen, that Christians had made this identification, even though he insisted that the King of the Greeks had to be the Byzantine emperor. But the Edessa fragment gives us an apocalyptic grounded in Ethiopian antiquity precisely as it is presented in the *Kebra Nagast*. It documents, as never before, the close link between Mesopotamia and Ethiopia, or – put more generally – the link that united monophysite Christianity.

The reality of the Kingdom of Ethiopia was, of course, quite different at the end of the seventh century, and some monophysites at that time would not have shared Pseudo-Methodius' hostility to the Arabs, whom they saw as potential liberators from the Chalcedonians. The author of the Edessa fragment is no less fierce in his condemnation of the oppression of those he calls the sons of Hagar.³² But what is conspicuously conserved in this text, and, through Alexander's alleged Ethiopian mother in Pseudo-Methodius, is an earlier tradition of monophysite support for the claim of the Ethiopian *negus* to be a post-Chalcedonian Constantine. The biblical past had been compounded with the more recent past. If monophysites had looked favorably upon Muhammad, not all necessarily approved of those who succeeded him. In 692 or 693 a western Syrian could still dream of an Ethiopian king of the Greeks in Jerusalem at the end of the world. By contrast, the Jews of Mesopotamia, who would have known through the Christians the apocalyptic role of the *negus*, could draw from Ethiopia's mythical origins in Israel and its possession of the ark some hope that the Arab invaders, as fellow Semites, might protect them.³³

³² *Edessene fragment* folio 98r, Martinez, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, 222

(صدر مكي).

³³ My colleague Patricia Crone pointed out to me that in the period between the end of the Ethiopian coinage in the seventh century and the Syriac apocalypics discussed here a Shi'ite fanatic in Kufa, al-Mukhtār (died 687), who presented himself as the Mahdi's vizier, took to parading a new ark of the covenant (تابوت) around town (Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004] 78). This would certainly suggest some contamination with traditions of Ethiopic Christianity, and possibly a wild effort to take over its leadership in the eyes of South Arabian Jews, with whom al-Mukhtār appears to have cultivated relations. The Armenian history by Sebeos mentions (ch. 30) that a group of Jews from precisely Edessa tried to enlist the support of Arabs across the desert against the Byzantines under Heraclius. As Peter

Helena's miraculous bridle, forged from the nails of two crosses at Golgotha, was suspended in a church at Constantinople, called Rome in the Edessa fragment, to await the untamed horse that would voluntarily put its head into it on the last day. This object, with the ark, comprised Ethiopia's answer to the True Cross and just as the Cross was to disappear before the coming of Christ the bridle would fall into the sea and gleam beneath the waters. According to the *Kebra Nagast*, the Chariot of Ethiopia that brought the ark so long ago from Jerusalem would disappear as well. The ark would be returned from Aksum and with it an Ethiopian king would come as the king of the Greeks to stretch forth his hands, as the psalmist had sung, unto God.

This was the monophysite vision of the end, created from Ethiopia's tradition of its own distant past and, at the same time, proclaiming Ethiopian claims to leadership in late antiquity. The *negus*, as a new Constantine, kept the faith and guarded the ark. It should be said, parenthetically, that it is inconceivable that the *negus* actually stood, nearly naked, on top of the ark to receive a Byzantine ambassador in about 530, as Irfan Shahîd once suggested on the basis of a misunderstood passage in Malalas.³⁴ The presence of Ethiopia's magic chariot in Aksum was visible and numinous proof of the kingdom's origins, and as such it, and its surrogates, played (and still play) an important part in the Ethiopian liturgy.

Helena's magic bridle, hanging in a church in Constantinople, played a similar role in Ethiopian belief. The Persians took away the True Cross for a time, but the Byzantines eventually recovered it. So it was clear, to Ethiopian eyes, that the Persian theft had not introduced the end of the world. Of course it had not, because no horse had submitted to the far more potent trophy that Helena had fashioned from the nails she had brought from Jerusalem. In this tradition the *negus* continued victorious.³⁵

Brown suggested to me, this too could be a response to Ethiopic claims as they were known in Edessa in the seventh century.

³⁴ Shahîd, "The Kebra Nagast," 156, with reference to Malalas, pp. 457–58 (Bonn). For the scene described there, see L. Oeconomus, "Remarques sur trois passages de trois historiens grecs du Moyen Age," *Byzantion* 20 (1950), 177–83, with an explanation of that passage in Malalas, on the *negus*' reception of the Byzantine ambassador, ca. 530.

³⁵ I am deeply indebted to Peter Brown, Patricia Crone, and Christopher Jones for comment on this paper.