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## **CONTINUITY AND TRADITION: THE PROMINENT ROLE OF CYRILLIAN CHRISTOLOGY IN FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURY ETHIOPIA**

The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church is one of the oldest in the world. Its clergy maintains that Christianity arrived in the country during the first century AD (Yesehaq 1997: 13), as a result of the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch, narrated in the Acts of the Apostles (8:26-39). For most scholars, however, the history of Christianity in the region begins with the conversion of the Aksumite ruler Ezana, approximately during the first half of the fourth century AD.<sup>1</sup>

For historical and geographical reasons, throughout most of its long history the Ethiopian Church has shared strong ties with Egypt and, in particular, with the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. For instance, a conspicuous part of its literary corpus, both canonical and apocryphal, is drawn from Coptic sources (Cerulli 1961 67:70). Its liturgy and theology were also profoundly affected by the developments that took place in Alexandria (Mercer 1970).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the writings of one of the most influential Alexandrian theologians, Cyril of Alexandria (c. 378-444), played a particularly significant role in shaping Ethiopian theology.<sup>3</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the enduring importance and influence of Cyril's thought on certain aspects of Ethiopian Christology from the early developments of Christianity in the country to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Its aim, therefore, is not to offer a detailed examination of Cyril's work, or more generally of Ethiopian Christology. Rather, its purpose is to emphasize a substantial continuity in the traditional understanding of the nature of Christ amongst Christian

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed introduction to the history of Ethiopian Christianity, see Kaplan (1982); Munro-Hay (2003).

<sup>2</sup> The body of literature on Ethiopian history is vast and continuously growing. For an introduction to cultural and religious exchanges of Ethiopia with the Alexandrian patriarchate, see Munro-Hay (1997).

<sup>3</sup> For an updated biography of Cyril of Alexandria, see Russell (2000: 3-58).

Ethiopians.<sup>4</sup>

As is the case for most Eastern churches, the writings of Cyril of Alexandria have always been held in high esteem by the Ethiopian Church. He is regarded as a saint in the country, and his death is commemorated in the Ethiopic Synaxarium, the Book of Saints of the Ethiopian Church, on the 3 *Hamle* (27 June). In the Synaxarium, Cyril is described as a ‘pillar of the Faith’ and ‘lamp of the Holy Church’ (Budge 1976: 1057).

Given that Cyril was an eminent and highly influential thinker and, as Norman Russell describes him, ‘a theologian of the first rank and a biblical commentator whose insights can still be illuminating today’, the diffusion of his writings in Ethiopia should be seen under the light of the close ties that existed between the country's Church and the Church of Alexandria (Russell 2000: vii).

Indeed, the bonds between these two ecclesiastical institutions are ancient, dating back supposedly to the first half of the fourth century, when Frumentius (d. 383) was consecrated as the first bishop of Ethiopia by the Alexandrian Pope Athanasius (c. 296-373) (Siniscalco 2005: 123; Kaplan 1982: 101-9). This event also marked the beginning of a long-standing subordination of the Ethiopian Church to the Coptic Church of Alexandria that formally ended only in the twentieth century. Evidence of this dependency can be found in the text known as *Fetha Negest* (the Law of the Kings).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the impact of several heretical movements that emerged in Ethiopia during the period taken into examination here are not considered in this study. It is possible that members of the Ethiopian clergy wrote several anaphorae in the fifteenth century to contrast the spread of heresies in the country (Haile 1981).

<sup>5</sup> The *Fetha Nagast* is a compilation of ecclesiastical laws and canons. One of these canons decrees the obligation for the Ethiopian Church to have its patriarch appointed by the head of the Alexandrian Church. Despite its attribution to the Council of Nicea (325), the canon is a forgery. It was probably written towards the end of the twelfth century by a member of the Coptic Church, with the intent of legitimizing the rights his Church claimed over the Ethiopian one. The Ethiopian Church, nevertheless, remained formally part of the Coptic Church until 1959, when it became autocephalous (Takla-Haymanot 1982: 155). The history of the relations between Ethiopia and Alexandria is characterised by two diverging trends. On the one hand, the Ethiopian Church sought the legitimacy granted by the authority of the Alexandrian see. On the other, the Ethiopian rulers often attempted to shake off the Alexandrian influence (Munro-Hay 2003: 719).

Although the matter still requires further attention, the Ethiopian Church asserts that when the Church of Alexandria refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Council of Chalcedon (451), it adopted a similar position shortly after (Yesehaq 1997). On the other hand, it has also been suggested that the decisive impulse towards the non-Chalcedonian stance of the Ethiopian church came from a group of fugitive non-Chalcedonian monks, known as the Nine Saints, who arrived in the country during the fifth century (Munro-Hay 2003: 718). On the basis of the current state of research, it is possible to maintain that by the sixth century at the latest the Ethiopian Church had adopted its non-Chalcedonian position.

The theological and ecclesiastical developments that surrounded the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century are too complex to be examined in great detail here, but a brief overview of its unfolding is useful to contextualize the discussion. The first thing that needs to be specified is that, although Cyril had died almost a decade before the Council was held, his Christological positions had an enormous impact on its proceedings, and consequently on the events that surrounded its conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

The council itself focused principally on the attempt to reconcile the different theological positions that existed within the Christian community at the time. It should be noted, however, that at the root of these division were not just religious issues, but linguistic, cultural, and political elements as well. Numerous sessions of Chalcedon were devoted to Christological matters, and above all to issues concerning the humanity and divinity of Christ.

During the Council, the Alexandrian patriarch Dioscorus (d. 454), successor of Cyril and an ardent supporter of his work, or more precisely of the interpretation that the ecclesiastical tradition he represented gave to Cyril's work, pressed for the incorporation of Cyril's formula *μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη* (one incarnate nature of God the Word) in the Council's creed. Furthermore, supporters of Cyril's theology claimed that his Christological formula 'one person out of two natures' was more appropriate in defining Christ's person than the one proposed by the delegates of Pope Leo: 'one person in two natures' (Grillmeier 1975:543-555;

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<sup>6</sup> Numerous works have been published on the subject. For an introduction to the history and doctrine of the Council, see Sellers (1961).

McGuckin 2004: 227-238).

In the end, however, not only did the council depose Dioscorus, but it also released a statement that, despite its incorporation of certain elements of Cyril's theology, did not adopt his formula 'out of two natures'. This left most Cyrillines in Egypt and Syria dissatisfied, inducing them to refute the canonicity of the Council itself. More importantly, these theological disagreements led to one of the earliest and most significant schisms in the history of Christianity: the Chalcedonian schism (Meinardus 2002: 53-5).

Customarily, the factions that emerged after the Council are divided into two broad groups: the Chalcedonians and the non-Chalcedonians. Given that it would be reductive and misleading to label Cyril's work as non-Chalcedonian, particularly because he operated in a pre-Chalcedonian context, he has nevertheless been frequently considered as a champion of non-Chalcedonian orthodoxy (Russell 2003). It is therefore in this light that the influence of his work on the Oriental Orthodox Churches must be observed.<sup>7</sup>

Following the Chalcedonian schism, the Christological doctrine of the Oriental Orthodox Churches has generally been labelled by the exponents of the Chalcedonian faction as monophysite, a practice that is still frequently and confusingly encountered in contemporary scholarship. The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church, as part of an ongoing dialogue with other Christian denominations, rejects the use of the this term to refer to its Christology, asserting that the term 'miaphysite', derived from the famous Christological definition of Cyril of Alexandria mentioned above, is more suitable to describe its beliefs (Yesehaq 1997: 101-103).

In truth, both definitions refer to doctrines that hold Christ to have possessed only one *physis* (nature, or *Bahrey* in Ge`ez), thus differing from the Chalcedonian stance that spoke of Christ as possessing two *physes*. However, the term *monophysitism* was often employed by the Chalcedonians in a derogatory sense, implying a

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that these are the contemporary designations used to refer to these Churches; see Binns (2002).

tendency towards doctrines such as Eutychianism and Apollinarism, that is to say towards doctrines that assert that Christ's humanity was in some way absorbed by his divinity after merging into one nature. Yet such tendencies are not encountered in the current Christology of the Ethiopian Church. In fact, while the doctrine of the Ethiopian Church does assert that the divinity and humanity of Christ were united in one single nature, it also maintains that they remained without change (*wulate*), confusion (*tusahe*), separation (*filfet*), or division (*buade*) (Cowley 1976: 38; Yesehaq 1997: 101-103; Hailemariam 2009). Hence, as remarked by some scholars such as Binns (2002: 30) and Lossel (1993:302), this concept of union without confusion, which is strongly indebted to Cyril's thought, is more accurately described by term *miaphysitism*.

In reality, the whole matter of terminology is still at the centre of an ongoing debate, which is of great importance to the more general field of Ethiopian Studies. The ambiguity of certain terms, in fact can engender a lack of clarity, which in turn may undermine the value of certain studies. Most Western scholars still persevere in their use of the term *monophysite* to describe Ethiopian Christology. With regard to this issue it is interesting to note, for instance, that even the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica includes an entry for Monophysitism but not for Miaphysitism (Hainthaler 2005: 1007-9), although it does acknowledge the problematic nature of the two definitions, and that the term *monophysite* is then consistently employed throughout the text by the authors in their discussions'.

Despite the reluctance of some Ethiopianists, however, there are several arguments in favour of the use of the term *miaphysitism* in scholarly discussions centred on Ethiopian Christology: Firstly, in its Ethiopian understanding the term *miaphysitism* emphasises a unity (*mia*) rather than a singularity (*mono*); this notion of unity is key to understanding the Ethiopian conception of the person of Christ. To such an extent, is this true that the Ethiopian Church nowadays calls itself Tewahedo ('made one, union, oneness'). More specifically, as observed by Tedros Abraha, 'the term is used to state the union of the divinity with the humanity after the Incarnation, whereby Christ from two natures, became one' and is 'a formulation inherited by Cyril of Alexandria' (2010: 873-5).

Another reason to avoid the definition *monophysite* is its association to other

doctrines. Because of this association, the designation can cause confusion amongst readers, regardless of whether or not the scholar that employed the definition was aware of the nuances of Ethiopian religious thought in the first place.

And lastly but equally importantly, local nomenclative tradition should be respected, understood, and whenever possible incorporated in scholarly practice. Therefore, when members of the Ethiopian clergy such as the Archbishop Yesehaq argue that ‘without investigation and hence in ignorance, the word monophysitism was unjustly attributed to the Ethiopian and the oriental churches in general that have nothing to do with such a phrase’ (1997: 102), their words should not go unheeded.

In many ways, the current Christological doctrine of the Ethiopian Church does not differ significantly from the one it held in the past. In fact, Ethiopian Christology has always been thoroughly grounded in its own tradition; a tradition rooted in the Bible, in an exegetical practice of Antiochene and Alexandrian derivation, and also in the works of St. Cyril himself that reached Ethiopia in the Aksumite period leaving an ‘indelible mark on the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’ (Bandres 2003a: 6). Nevertheless, some scholars have raised doubts on the existence *ab antiquo* of strong ties with the Alexandrian sphere of influence. In particular, in a study on Christ’s hypostatic union, Takla-Haymanot raised controversies by arguing that the Ethiopian Church did not separate from the Church of Rome until the second half of the sixteenth century, as a result of the disputes its members had in that period with the Catholic missionaries (Takla-Haymanot 1982: 48).

According to Takla-Haymanot, the non-Chalcedonian stance of the Ethiopian Church derived more from ‘an ignorance of the facts of history than from any real philosophical or theological reasons’ (1982: 18). He then moves on to declare that ‘the Ethiopian Church has been cut off from union with Rome through the culpability of the Alexandrian patriarchs and the Moslems’ (Takla-Haymanot 1982:18). Takla-Haymanot concludes his considerations by suggesting that the Ethiopian Church was actually unaware of the doctrine of Chalcedon, because the Alexandrian Church deceived it faking its content, and that therefore, in a sense, Ethiopian Christology remained pre-Chalcedonian (1982: 69-74).

As might have been expected, Takla-Haymanot’s proposals were rejected

vehemently by most of the Ethiopian clergy. For instance, Jembere (1961), a member of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church, questions Haymanot's understanding of Ethiopian terminology. It should be said, however, that some of their arguments, perhaps driven by a nationalist impulse, focused prevalently on questioning the fact that a Catholic should discuss the history or the beliefs of their Church.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Western scholars have started to notice the flaws in Takla-Haymanot's ideas, but their observations have not always been credited with enough attention. In particular Grillmeier, for instance, underscores the limited attention he pays to the early developments of Ethiopian Christology (1996: 336-7).

Grillmeier's observations are correct. Despite the fact that some of Takla-Haymanot's assertions are accurate, his desire to limit himself only to Ethiopian sources causes him to fail to observe the relationships with other Eastern Churches. More specifically, he does not consider a number of works of Christological significance, and of Alexandrian or perhaps even Syrian origin, that arrived in Ethiopia during the fifth and sixth centuries affecting the early development of its theology (Siniscalco 2005: 139; Witawkosky 1989-90). Above all, he does not consider the *Qerellos*, a work that for many scholars (Bandres 2003a; Bausi 2010) played an extremely significant role in shaping Ethiopian Christology.<sup>9</sup>

The *Qerellos* was translated from Greek into Ge'ez during the Aksumite period; it is a collection of pre-Chalcedonian scripts from different Church Fathers. As suggested by its name, it holds several homilies of St. Cyril of Alexandria, as well as some of his epistles and treaties: Prosphonicus to the Emperor Theodosius II on the right faith (Weischer 1973); Prosphonicus to the Princesses Arcadia and Marina on the

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<sup>8</sup> As a Catholic missionary Takla-Haymanot's main intent, as he himself declares, was to settle the schism of the Ethiopian Church from Rome. Hence, a version of his work was published in Amharic in 1959. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, however, reacted immediately by criticising the work in a "Public Note" in newspapers and magazines, and by publicly denouncing it. The Ethiopian government prohibited its republication and seized the copies on sale. Several books were also written by members of the Ethiopian clergy to refute Takla-Haymanot's suggestion. For some examples, see Walda Sellasie (1960); Tasframariam (1960).

<sup>9</sup> Weischer has translated, through several publications, the *Qerellos* into German. For a list of these publications and a summary of their content see Grillmeier (1996: 332) or Bausi (2010).

right faith (Weischer 1993); the Dialogue on the Unity of Christ (Weischer 1977).<sup>10</sup> Through this work, it is possible to understand several essential aspects of Ethiopian Christology. Cyril's thought is predominant in it, and it was mainly thanks to the *Qerellos* that his scripts arrived in Ethiopia (Cerulli 1961: 30; Cowley 1988; Bandres 2003a: 6; Bausi 2010).

According to Grillmeier, Cyrillian Christology, in its Alexandrian and Ethiopian understanding, is characterised by three fundamental technical definitions: a) the *hypostaseis* or *physeis* of Christ cannot be divided following their union; b) the *idiomata* of Christ's humanity and divinity can not be separated from one another; by virtue of the union, the properties of one can be ascribed to the other and vice-versa, but at the same time, they preserve their specificity without confusion (*comunicatio idiomatum*); c) the *logos* is hypostatically united with the flesh (1975:482).<sup>11</sup> Based on these three considerations, the key concept that emerges from Cyril's Christology is that God the Logos did not come into a man, but he 'truly' became man, while remaining God (Bandres 2003a: 8).

Cyril's emphasis on the substantiality of the union between logos and man is typical of the Alexandrian theological school.<sup>12</sup> It is through this union that he is able to explain the soteriological value of the incarnation (Mondin 1996: 226-7). By taking the *sarx* (flesh), God humiliates himself, but at the same time glorifies mankind<sup>13</sup>: 'Christ is called an *heavenly* man, not as though He brought down to us His flesh from above and from Heaven, but because the Word being God hath come down from Heaven, and entering our likeness, that is, undergoing birth after the flesh from

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<sup>10</sup> For a general introduction to these works see Mondin (1992: 175-6); Mondin (1996: 276-7); Tyneh (2002: 67).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detail discussion on this aspect of Cyrillian Christology, see Mondin (1996: 277).

<sup>12</sup> The concept had already been examined by other Alexandrian theologians such as Origen and Athanasius, see Anatolios (2004); Mc Guckin (2004: 75-8).

<sup>13</sup> This view is expressed strongly in Cyril's work 'That Christ is One', translated from Ge'ez to German by Weischer (1977). A free English translation (Pusey 1881) from Cyril's original work, therefore not translated from the Ethiopian versions, is found at [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/cyril\\_christ\\_is\\_one\\_01\\_text.htm](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/cyril_christ_is_one_01_text.htm). It is to this English version that we have referred to for help in translating Weischer.



out a woman, hath remained what He was, i.e. above and out of Heaven and *above all* as God even with flesh' (Weischer 1977: 65).

As stated by McKinion, Cyril recognises that the 'mode of union in the Incarnation is beyond human cognisance, and is thus incapable of complete description' (McKinion 2000: 83). Nevertheless, the redemption of humanity can be understood as its deification, which is made possible through Christ's incarnation: 'For we are earthly, in that there stole in upon us as from the earthy one, Adam, the curse, decay, through which the law of sin too entered in, which is in the members of our flesh: but we have been made heavenly, receiving this in Christ. For He being God by Nature and out of God and from above, hath come down in our estate, in an unwonted and strange way, made offspring of the Spirit according to the flesh, in order that we too as He might remain holy and undecaying, the grace descending upon us as from out a second beginning and root, i. e., Him' (Weischer 1977: 71).

Cyril, therefore, does not claim to explain the mystery of Christ's incarnation, but to illustrate it (McKinion 2000: 84). However, he does accentuate the unity that the humanity and divinity of Christ have after his Incarnation. In light of the prominence that unity has in his soteriological scheme, the reasons for his criticism of the doctrine of Nestorius become clear. He perceives in Nestorius an attempt to juxtapose the two natures of Christ, which he believes to entail a fragmentation of Christ's unity. Cyril maintains that it was through becoming a human, not by connecting externally to a human, that God bestowed salvation on humanity.

For Cyril, therefore, the Nestorian *synapheia* (union) of humanity and divinity resembles more a possession that does not differ much from the spiritual bond through which humanity establishes a spiritual relationship with God (Bandres 2003:12). For the Ethiopian Church, as for all the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Council of Chalcedon had adopted the Nestorian understanding of Christ's natures.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, Cyril denies the accusation of Appollinarianism that was addressed to him, by stating that whoever spoke of 'confusion' of the two natures of

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<sup>14</sup> During the past fifty years, inter-religious dialogues between the Oriental Orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox Churches have shown that the controversies that surrounded the Council of Chalcedon, were partially caused by linguistic issues rather than theological divergence (Van Loon 2009).

Christ was an impostor (Weischer 1977: 105). In fact, as described above in the second fundamental technical definition that can be ascribed to Cyril, the *idiomata* of Christ, that is to say the characteristics of his two natures, maintain their specificity even after their union.

Hence, when he speaks of the 'unique nature of the Word Incarnate', he does not consider the incarnation in a monophysite sense, but rather he uses as a means of defining Christ on the grounds of his divine *physis* (Weischer 1977: 23-9). This aspect of his Christology forms the basis of the traditional understanding of the two natures of Christ in the Ethiopian Church and, as rightly observed by Bandres, 'all attempts to interpret Ethiopian doctrine discarding this feature (i.e. the Christology of Cyril) [...] will lead to misinterpretations and false confrontations' (Bandres 2003a; 2003b: 728-30).

In one of the most recent studies on Ethiopian Christology, to which this study is indebted, Bandres (2003a: 5) also proposes to divide the history of Ethiopian Christology into three phases: the first, from the arrival of Christianity in the country to the fifteenth century, is 'dominated by the Qerellos; the second, from the fifteenth century to the council of Boru Meda (1878), is shaped by the *Haymanota Abaw* (the Faith of the Fathers)<sup>15</sup>; and the third, from 1878 to the present. Given the absence of comprehensive and adjoined studies on Ethiopian Christology, Bandres' effort is to be praised. However, a few remarks need to be made about some of his considerations.

First of all, because Bandres' aim is to offer a more general discussion of Ethiopian Christology than the one intended here, which focuses solely on the enduring influence of Cyril of Alexandria, his choice to concentrate exclusively on the *Qerellos* for examining its early developments might be limiting. His discussion could have perhaps benefited from a broader analysis of the *Qerellos* itself, as well as from a more general observations on the Christology that emerges from other works translated during the Aksumite period, such as the Pauline Epistles and other apostolic epistles (Abraha 2001). A few comments about the early Ethiopian anaphoras could also have been made. It is, however, true that, as Grillmeier states

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<sup>15</sup> This work is discussed in greater detail below.

(1996: 384), Christological controversies are hard to find within the flow of liturgical language, and most Ethiopian anaphoras contain a pre-Chalcedonian rather than a post-Chalcedonian language.

Additionally, some considerations on the possible impact of Syrian and Jewish influences on Ethiopian Christology would have added greater depth to his nonetheless valid discussion, even if the existence of such influences in early Ethiopian Christology has been suggested, but not sufficiently demonstrated (Grillmeier 1996: 324-34; Witakowski 2010).

Bandres also gives little consideration to the developments of post-Aksumite and early Solomonic literature. The history of Ethiopian literature between the seventh and the twelfth century, that is to say in the period leading from the downfall of the Aksumite empire to the emergence of the Zagwe dynasty, is shrouded in darkness. The scarce evidence available may suggest that it was a period of literary stagnation (Cerulli 1961: 35; Harden 1926: 19-22). From the thirteenth to the fourteenth century, however, matters changed considerably, and a new wave of literary production invested Ethiopia. The literary corpus of the Ethiopian Church was enriched by the writings of its own clergy, a number of hagiographies in particular, and by the translation of numerous works of Coptic derivation from Arabic into Ge'ez.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that most of these works are of considerable interest for the general developments of Ethiopian theology and religious literature, but display limited considerations on Christological matters, it could be fruitful for the field to examine them in greater detail.

Returning to Bandres' chronological division, the second phase he traces in Ethiopian Christology, from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century Council of Boru Meda, requires a few considerations. In fact, a question arises as to whether this chronological division is well founded. Unfortunately, he does not explain the criteria he adopts in making such a division. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to discuss the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries separately, as it was during the course of these two centuries that a number of Western missionaries

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<sup>16</sup> Abba Salama, an Egyptian Copt who became metropolitan of Ethiopia, is credited with the introduction to Ethiopia and translation of numerous works from Arabic to Ge'ez, see Harden (1926: 21).

entered Ethiopia with the intent of bringing its Church within the sphere of influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Conversely, it was only towards the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth that the theological controversies on the unction of Christ, which had characterised Ethiopian history until the council of Boru Meda, emerged in a significant manner.<sup>17</sup>

Is it therefore appropriate to include these four centuries in a single phase of Ethiopian Christology, when the first two were defined by debates with the Western Catholic Church represented by its numerous missionaries in Ethiopia, while the last two were characterised by a closure of interactions with the West and the emergence of internal controversies within the Ethiopian Church? It seems not. One may, of course, argue that the seeds of the controversy surrounding the unction of Christ can already be found in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, but is that not a recurring fact of history?

Regardless of whether or not one agrees with Bandres' association of fifteenth century Christology with the developments that took place from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the limited attention he pays in his study to the *Mashafa Mestir*, probably the most influent Christological text of the fifteenth century, is rather surprising. A text of this importance, particularly because it is an Ethiopian composition, cannot be overlooked. This treatise against heresies is of great relevance for any discussion concerning Ethiopian Christology, as it offers numerous insights into the theological concerns of the epoch. Additionally, it is of particular pertinence in the present discussion, because it shows the prominence that the basic elements of Cyrillian Christology discussed above still had in fifteenth century Ethiopia.

The literary production of Ethiopia in the fifteenth century, 'the Golden Age of Ethiopic Literature' as Harden calls it (1926: 22), was dominated by the writings of two figures: Gyorgis of Sagla, and Zar'a Ya'eqob. The first, active in the first half of

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that according to some scholars the seeds of this dispute can already be found in the writings of Cyril of Alexandria. See Beyene (1981).

the century, was a monk and the author of the *Mashafa Mestir*,<sup>18</sup> whereas the latter, active in the second part of the century, was one of Ethiopia's most influential rulers.

Zar'a Ya'eqob's writings do occasionally refer to Cyril. For instance, he is mentioned both in the *Mashafa Berhan* (the Book of Light) (Rossini 1965) and the *Mashafa Sellasse* (the Book of the Trinity) (Wendt 1963:75, 84). But overall in his oeuvre, besides some passages that focus on the Trinity and seemingly incorporate Cyrillian perspectives, the Ethiopian ruler appears to be concerned primarily with ecclesiastical questions and Mariology.<sup>19</sup> It may be useful at this stage to briefly recall the importance that the concept of Θεοτόκος (Mother of God) had in Cyril's thought, and notice that parallels could perhaps be drawn with the prominence of the Virgin in Zar'a Ya'eqob's writings. This overarching trend in Zar'a Ya'eqob's work should not be read as a departure from Cyrillian Christology. Rather, it appears that Zar'a Ya'eqob did not feel the necessity to delve into Christological matters.<sup>20</sup> It may even be that he felt these aspects to have been covered in sufficient depth by Gyorgis' *Mashafa Mestir*.

A totally different case, as already said, is that of Gyorgis of Sagla, for whom Christological issues appear to be the main concern. At the time of the composition of the *Mashafa Mestir* a number of heretical groups existed in Ethiopia. Most likely, it was to refute these heresies that the book was written (Beyene 1989). The work is divided into thirty chapters, each dealing with a different heresy. It has been described as a fifteenth century 'summa theologica' by Beyene, who also correctly notes that most of its theological content does not differ from the current doctrine of the Ethiopian Church (Beyene 1989: 48).

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<sup>18</sup> A *gadl*, a term used to refer to Ethiopian hagiographies, offering a brief biography of Gyorgis of Sagla, has been published by Colin (1987). Gyorgis is credited, amongst other things, to have written some anaphorae as well as other texts, such as *Araganona Weddase*, *Weddase masqal*, *Mashafa sebbat zama'alt*, *Salotta fatteto*, and the *Fekkare Haymanot*.

<sup>19</sup> For an introduction to Cyril's theology of the Trinity, see Boulnois (2003: 75-112). For a discussion on Zar'a Ya'eqob's Mariology, see Haile (1992).

<sup>20</sup> Emperor Za'a Ya'eqob did forbid the use of several anaphorae which he did not consider canonical. This prohibition may reflect a concern for Christological controversies (Haile, G. personal communication 28, September 2011).

At the same time, an analysis of the *Meshafa Mestir* shows that fifteenth century Ethiopian Christology had remained very much attached to its Cyrillian roots. It also demonstrates that, contrary to Takla Haymanot's suggestions, the non-Chalcedonian stance of the Ethiopian Church was already well defined prior to the disputes with the Jesuits. For example, in the fourth chapter of the book, Gyorgis condemns the doctrine of Nestorius, whereas, in the twenty-first chapter it is the doctrine of the Chalcedonian Council that is confuted: 'Let us expose therefore the folly of the doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon, that is to say of the six hundred and thirty-six bishops that gathered there during the reign of Marcian. [...] They have divided the nature Christ in two natures, his humanity and his divinity, saying: 'What concerns divinity is the work of the divinity and what concerns humanity is the work of humanity'. Oh conventicler of dogs, do you perhaps maintain that 'The divinity enacts miracles whereas the humanity suffers the passion'? This is not the behaviour of the nature of the Son of God, but the way in which martyrs endure fatigue: they suffer, and God helps them to perform miracles' (Beyene 1993: 1).<sup>21</sup>

This extract shows clearly how the objections of Gyorgis to dyophysitism are in many ways similar to Cyril's. Indeed, like Cyril, Gyorgis maintains that the presence of two *physes* in Christ would resemble a possession that would render Christ no different from other saintly figures (Beyene 1990: 50-1).

Another passage from the same text highlights how the conception of the humanity and divinity of Christ of Gyorgis is reminiscent of that of Cyril: 'As the divinity incarnated itself in humanity, the humanity was deified by the divinity. We should not think of a conversion of his divinity, neither to a mutation of his humanity. We should not think of a mixture with regards to his conjunction, nor at a separation with regards to his substance' (Beyene 1993: 4). One finds here the same emphasis on the substantiality of the incarnation that was characteristic of Alexandrian theology and of Cyril in particular. Furthermore, it is a clear statement that for Gyorgis, again like Cyril, the humanity of Christ was not modified by his divinity.

In summary, Gyorgis asserts that Christ is both a perfect God and a perfect man

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<sup>21</sup> Note that for sake of clarity, the following excerpts from Beyene's Italian translation of Gyorgis' *Meshafa Mestir* have been translated by the author directly into English.

(Beyene 1989: 55). He declares that in their union his two natures did not lose their characteristics and remained equal to one another. He also maintains that both of Christ's natures suffered the Passion; therefore, that Christ truly died (Beyene 1989: 56-62). Additionally, he professes that in Christ there is only one person and one nature (Beyene 1989: 59).

To sustain his arguments, Gyorgis refers extensively to the Scriptures, an approach to religious disputes that is typical of the Ethiopian tradition. He also refers to other Church Fathers. For instance, John Chrysostom seems to have played a particularly significant role in his work.<sup>22</sup> However, it is equally evident that his ideas are grounded in Cyril's Christology. This is true to such an extent that in a passage of Gyorgis' hagiography his contemporaries are described in the act of affirming, after reading his work, that 'Cyril mouth of Blessing' had been 'resurrected' (Colin 1987: 24).

The beliefs that emerge from the *Meshafa Mestir* resemble in many ways the current stance of the Ethiopian Church (Beyene 1989: 48). Likewise, in its theological content, it also relates to subsequent texts from the sixteenth century, such as the *Mazgaba Haymanot* (the Treasure of Faith), written in response to the confutations of the Jesuits.<sup>23</sup> In the *Mazgaba Haymanot*, after a summary of the first four Ecumenical Councils, the author responds to some of the objections the Western missionaries had raised against the Ethiopian doctrine. In his third objection, in particular, the author's conception of the incarnation seems indebted to Cyril's (Cerulli 1960: vi). The sixteenth century also saw the translation of the *Haymanota Abaw* (the Faith of the Fathers), a compilation of writings of early Church Fathers and later Alexandrian patriarchs translated during the sixteenth century which, amongst other things, contain the anathemas of Cyril against Nestorius.<sup>24</sup> In the light of these considerations, it seems evident that Cyril's Christology had an ongoing importance in the fifteenth century.

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<sup>22</sup>For instance, see Beyene 1990:45-7.

<sup>23</sup>A translation of this work can be found in Cerulli 1960.

<sup>24</sup>Unfortunately, the Haymanota Abaw has not yet been translated into a Western language.

It is interesting to note that the composition of the *Mashafa Mestir* and the translation of the *Haymanota Abaw* probably stemmed from the necessity of defending Ethiopian Orthodoxy from the accusations of the Catholics, who had been attempting to demonstrate the fallacy of the non-Chalcedonian position of the Ethiopian Church (Beyene 1990: ix). Many of the arguments of these missionaries concentrated on disputing the Ethiopian Church's traditional understanding of the nature of Christ (Cohen 2009: 113-36).

The fact that the *Mashafa Mestir*, one of the most prominent and influential Ethiopian works of Christological content of the fifteenth century, is embedded within Cyrillian Christology is revealing. Equally revealing is how the Ethiopian clergy, faced with the confrontation of the Western missionaries in the sixteenth century, felt the necessity to translate Cyril as a response to the confutations of these foreigners. From this, we may in fact infer that Cyril's understanding of Christ still enjoyed an enduring prominence amongst the Ethiopian clergy during this period. Thus, in a moment of theological uncertainty and difficulty, such as the one that characterised the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Ethiopian clergy relied on Cyril to refute the accusations of the Western missionaries. In this sense, Cyril's Christology truly became a 'pillar of Faith' upon which the Ethiopian theologians could lay the foundations of their doctrinal argumentations.

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