An illustration depicting a scene from Ethiopian tradition. On the left, a king wearing a crown and a blue and gold robe sits on a wooden throne, holding a staff. To his right, a group of men in white robes and white headwraps stand in a line, holding golden vessels and staffs. The background is a simple yellow wall with a red and gold striped curtain on the left. The overall style is traditional Ethiopian art.

Ethiopian Poetic Traditions and Scripture

Ralph Lee, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

Gə'əz Language

- Ancient language of the Aksumite Kingdom - Pre-Christian inscriptions, derived from Southern Arabian dialects still used by monastics today not only for reading, but for theological discussion and composing poetry
- Early Christian literature, with Bible translated by the early 5th century (1 Enoch's survival points to this), Early translation of the liturgy, preserving some versions otherwise lost
- Ethiopia's literary tradition develops significantly with liturgical poetry from the 6th century, written by St Yared (although no original manuscripts survive and some question this date)
- Campaigns of Ahmed Gragn see destruction of many manuscripts and seems to initiate a decline in written literary works
- This decline is associated with the growth and thriving of the oral poetic culture, and also a new wave of translation from Arabic – including important works from the Church of the East
- Significant theological works and theological method develops
 - Many original theological works that are sparsely researched, (we recently discovered a new genre of Enochic literature in a 16th century homily on Pentecost)
- We will focus today on the later poetic tradition, which shows the theological method to its full



Garima Gospels

- This illuminated Gospel manuscript dates from the 6th century – making it the oldest illuminated Gospel in the world
- It is still read during the liturgy in the Abba Garima Monastery in which it was created (to the horror of western scholars!!)
- Abba Garima is believed to have been a missionary who worked to spread the Gospel outside Aksum

Matt 26:75 –Peter remembers Jesus prediction of his denial

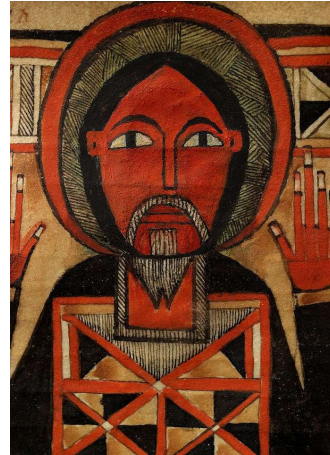


Qəne Poetry

- The highest level of understanding of Gə'əz language, requiring complex use of language, with complex symbolism that draws on St Yared's hymns:
- ሰምና ወርቅ *saməna warq* "wax and gold" to convey (not to conceal) symbolic meaning
 - Wax and gold often involves subtle associations in the language - When Tamar ask Judah for something as a pledge, the word used is 'ሐልቀተክ ወቆብኳክ ወበትረክ' 'your ring and your skullcap and your rod' the word ሐልቀተክ may also mean 'your death' or 'your judgement' creating a wonderful play on words
- Other components are: አንጻር - *'anəḏār* comparison, ውሰጠ ወይራ - *wəṣṭa wayrā* double meaning, ሰረዝ - *saraz* the make a connection between things that are very unlike, አፍራሽ - *'afraš* use of contradiction and contrast to give meaning, ምርምር - *mərmər* deep investigation of meaning
- The complexity and sophistication of these poems makes some of them almost impossible to translate (certainly as poems)
- There are many different schools of *qəne* today each with their own style and approach, although the fundamentals are the same.
- In common with the Syriac tradition, it is felt that expressing theology in philosophical definitions has, '*a fossilizing effect on any theological enquiry.*'

Background

- Qəne poetry expresses adoration, praise, thanksgiving
- Improvised during the celebration of the Divine Office, used in teaching
- Address diverse theological ideas,
- May also celebrate spiritual or secular events and persons
- Qəne are composed *ex tempore* (እንግዳ ድርሰት) and are never used again, (except for training students)
- Each of the 7 forms with their sub forms is associated with a particular singing style and key
- Origins are in the approach of the 6th c. Dəggwā of St Yared's
- Unclear when they were fully developed perhaps associated with a 15th theologian Giyorgis of Gassecha.
- With all of this, Qəne are found to give room for meditation, admiration, and questioning of the Scriptures, and have content that promotes theological discourse and reflection of the Scriptures.



Qəne poetry expresses adoration, praise, thanksgiving

It is improvised by *dabtara* during the celebration of the Divine Office (and at other times)

Address diverse theological ideas, but also celebrate spiritual or secular events and persons

Qəne are only used for a particular occasion – they are composed *ex tempore* (እንግዳ ድርሰት) and are never used again, most are never written down (except for training students)

Each of the 7 forms with their sub forms is associated with a particular singing style and key

Theological origins are in the approach of St Yared's Dəggwā – although these hymns lack the rigid metre and rhyming pattern of Qəne

The origins of this tradition are unclear – perhaps associated with a 15th theologian Giyorgis of Gassecha.

The ideas are probably rooted in the original poetry of St Yared – Yared lacked the sophisticated metrical and rhyming structure, but he laid the foundations of the complex symbolic associations found in this poetry.

With all of this, Qəne are found to give room for meditation, admiration, and

questioning of the Scriptures, and have content that promotes theological discourse and reflection of the Scriptures.



A simple
poem in
translation
(from
Daniel
Assefa)

Love of a vineyard caused
the death of Naboth.
Love of a woman caused
the death of Uriah.
Neither of the two caused
the death of Christ.
However, can we say so?!
Israel is Christ's vineyard,
and the Church, Christ's bride.

The apparent meaning is that Christ's death had different causes from Naboth or Uriah

But each of these were innocent victims

Furthermore, Israel is Christ's vineyard – so Christ possessed a vineyard, and being its owner caused Christ's death; the Church is the bride of Christ, and being her spouse caused Christ's death.

Reflection
on the
Creation

ባሕቲቶ፡ ነቢረ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ ፈርሀ፡
እምኢሀልዎ፡ ንዋም፡ እስመ፡ ዓለመ፡
አንቅሀ።

God feared being alone
Since, from the sleep of non-
existence,
he woke up the world

A strong theological reflection on God's desire to create the world. These poems will often use language that might shock to emphasise a point.

A short
pome on
the
nature of
Christ

ጸላዒ፡ ማልኮስ፡ ፍቁረ፡ ወልደ፡ ኣብ፡ ቦኑ፤
ዘትገሣኤሁ፡ ምሥጢረ፡ እስመ፡ ነበቦ፡ በእዝኑ።

Is the enemy Malkos a lover of the
Father’s Son?
Since he spoke of the mystery of the
resurrection with his ear!

A “Wedding at Cana” poem – making an unexpected contrast (ሰረዝ)
Malkos is Malchus – Caiaphas’ servant who was part of the group that arrested Jesus, and had his ear cut off by Peter.
We might see him as an enemy of Christ – but with the restoration of his ear he was a witness to the resurrection of the body!

A Qəne
that plays
with
words
(and
letters)

ሐወጸ ሮጌል ወወልደ ነገድጓድ መዋቲ
ክሳድዮ እሁብ ለዘይፈትሐ ለዛቲ

Rogel glanced,
and the son of thunder is mortal
I will give my neck
to the one who explains this!

The meaning is dense:

Rogel is (possibly) within sight of Golgotha

The son of thunder died but was not buried

ሐ/ሀ is the first letter of the alphabet

ጸ is close to the end of the alphabet

Using a verb “glance” that joins these two letters together with ወ, the “building block” letter (meaning “and”) and in composing the poem the poet has joined two letters that are far apart – indicating that the son of thunder is far from dead (in Christ).

Another
on Mt
Tabor

**ተፈጸመ የኛም ዘመልክዐ ተውላጥ
ተሥዕሎ፤
ደብረ ታቦር በርሀ አኮኑ እንዘ ደብረ
ዘይት ሀሎ።**

Today is completed the depiction
of the image of the
transformation
Is it not Mount Tabor he lit up
while he was on the Mount
of Olives

The mystery: ‘today’ means the festival of Mount Tabor, on Nahase 13 of the Ethiopian Calendar which is when the changing of his face was completed – and it shone like the sun

The glory of the Mount of Olives was not because of the ‘oil’ that was Christ’s teaching, but rather because of who was doing the teaching – revealed truly on Mount Tabor - the light of his divinity was not revealed on the Mount of Olives, but it is shown on Mount Tabor.

Furthermore, the glory and light that is revealed at Mount Tabor adds brilliance and light to the understanding of Jesus at the Mount of Olives.

A Poem revealing Christ's nature

- አመ ርእየ ወንጌረ፤ ነደ መለኮት ሰይፈ በእደ ሚካኤል መንፈስ
 ሰናክሬም መጥምቀ ነዳዲ ዘአኮ ጽኑስ
 ዘምስለ ሦርሶር ኢዮብ ኩናኔ ሕማም ንፍስ
 ንዋ በግዑ ይቤ ዮሐንስ ሰነኮሪስ
 ሶበ ርእዮ ለክርስቶስ ንጉሥ
- When he looked and gazed at, the divine fire / the sword in the hand of Michael / the Spirit Sennacherib / the baptism of fire, who was not needy
 Who with Sharezer / Job [saw] judgement / the suffering of a soul
 Behold the Lamb, says John, the one who forgives,
 When he saw Christ the King

Sennacherib is a common feature of reflection in the Ethiopian tradition – something that can be connected with interpretations that originate with Theodore of Mopsuestia (c.350-428 CE) – the teacher of John Chrysostom and also Nestorius!! Theodore’s commentary has surprisingly been a strong influence on the Ethiopian interpretation of the Bible!

The ‘Wedding at Cana’ type of poem usually reveals something of the nature of Christ – as did that first miracle.

This poem refers to the story of the overthrow of Sennacherib (2Kings 19:35...)

The Angel Michael (the Angel of the Lord) struck down 185,000 in Sennacherib’s camp, and then Sennacherib was then struck down by his sons Sharezer and Adrammelech in Nineveh.

So Sennacharib looked at the judgement on him and his people by the Angel of the Lord, and saw judgement through Sharezer

In contrast, the baptism of fire that Job saw through his suffering, was not judgement but was forgiveness – through the Lamb of God



The two
ideas
separated

When he looked and gazed at the sword in the hand
of Michael

He who was not needy


Who with Sharezer saw judgement

When he looked and gazed at the divine fire, the
baptism of fire in the hand of the Spirit

He who was not needy

Who with Job saw the suffering of the soul

Behold the Lamb, says John, the one who forgives,
When he saw Christ the King



A poem of
the form
kabr yə'ati
(for the
celebration
of the
Eucharist)
(p 48)

በኅምስ፡ ኅብስት፡ ብዙኃነ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ አጽገበ፤
ይሁዳስ፡ ገብረ፡ እንተ፡ የዐቢ፡ ዕፁብ፤
እመ፡ አሐደ፡ ኅብስተ፡ ውስተ፡ ማዕዳ፡ አቅረበ፤
አምጣነ፡ በልዎ፡ ዓለም፡ ወኢኅልቀ፡ ወእንተ፡ በልዎ፡
ኢርኅበ።

With five loaves God satisfied many
Judah, however, did something of greater
difficulty
Even though he offered one loaf in his meal
As much as the world eats it, it will never
be finished, and the one who eats it will
never hunger

The miracle of the feeding of 5000 points to something much bigger. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, so Christ as the fulfilment of the covenants of Israel offered a single loaf – that is the one body Bread of Life – and this feeds limitless numbers and satisfies them forever

A poem of
the form
‘əṭāna
mogar (for
the
celebration
of the
Eucharist)

- ኤርትራ፡ ማኅበር፡ ዘሰተይዎ፡ በከንቱ፤
ንጉሠ፡ ምድረ፡ ገብጽ፡ ፈርዖን፡ ወሠራዊቱ፤
ጽዋዕ፡ ሕይወት፡ ኢይትበሀል፤
አምጣነ፡ ሙሴ፡ አልቦቱ።
ጸውዕዎሂ፡ እምውስተ፡ ቤቱ፤
ለሙሴ፡ ካህን፡ ውሉዱ፡ መንክራተ፡ ላዕሉ፡
ወታሕቱ፤
ይባርክ፡ ማኅበረ፡ ኤርትራ፡ በመካን፡ ሠለስቱ።
- What the assembly / Eritrea drank in vain,
The ruler of the land of Egypt, Pharaoh and
his armies,
Is not called “The cup of life”
As Moses did not have that drink
Rather, they called from the House of Moses
To the priest / Moses
Heavenly and earthly miracles / children
He will bless the assembly / Eritrea
In three places.

Another complex poem

Here the reference is to a Mahaber or assembly – a group that meets on a particular day for spiritual discussion – but often also to drink Talla (locally made beer). Pharaoh and his armies drank in vain (when they drowned in the Sea of Eritrea). Also the Mahaber may drink their Talla in vain. Moses couldn’t offer Pharaoh and his armies the Cup of Life – because he didn’t have it!

The heavenly and earthly miracles call out to the Priest/ the children call out to Moses from their house

The assembly / Sea of Eritrea to bless for three places.

The Mahaber concerned is led by a man called Moses – and without Moses being present it is not a genuine Mahaber – so the people attending it may drink in vain. The poem is made for a very specific context – playing on the name of the head of the Mahaber.

The analogy is with Pharaoh and his armies who ‘drank’ the Sea of Eritrea in vain – this isn’t to be called ‘the Cup of Life’ – but Moses did not do so and the implication is that he would have the Cup of Life.

A priest may have many ‘children’ who come to him for confession – calling to him from

Moses' house.

Similarly they call to Moses and the miracles associated with him – on the land and in the Sea (??)

He will bless the assembly / the armies in three lines -

The people of Israel were in three lines also when they crossed the Sea of Eritrea.

The Psalms of Christ

- In another monumental poetic effort, the 16th century monk, Abba Bahrey created a work known as the Psalms of Christ.
- The number of psalms, lines in psalms, number of words and letters in each line correspond to the number of psalms, lines, words and letters of the Psalter of David – so that the Psalms of Christ serve as a yardstick for the integrity of the Psalter copies.
- Unlike in the Ethiopic Psalter, however, the hymns in the Psalms of Christ rhyme.
- Abba Bahréy lists his sources as 91 canonical and non-canonical books

Psalm 21

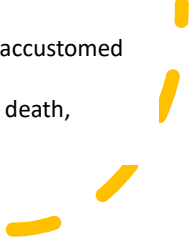
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ወስፎ መነኝ ኪሆኖ ረድኢትክ መድኃኒ፤
እንከ መልአክ ሞት ፀዋግ ይትወልልከመ የሐጠኒ፤
ወሰይጣንኒ ተርቦ ከመ ያደነገፀኒ፤
እንተሰ ገበርክ ለላሊሁ ጥበብ ኢያኦምር መሰከተክ፤
ኢፊርቅ
ሰበ ርእሳዮ ከሱ ተአምራቲክ፤
ዘኮን በዳቦ መስተል፤
ዘከመ ጽሑፍ ውስተ ወንጌል፤
ዘውኡቱ ጸልምቶ ፀዳል፤
አሳምስሎ ሎቱ ቃለ ፍርሃት ወጸሎተ ስኢል፤
መዝሙር
እኦምሳኪህ ነጻረኒ ኢንከ ትሰል፤
ወንጌል
ወእምከ ቀርቦ ንክክ ከመ ያዘምድ ውኅጢ፤
ወእባሃ ቢሥንክ ግብረ ሞት ተሰልጠ፤
ወኡመሰከት አተረፈጠ፤
ኢፊርቅ
አላደ ሰዓተ ወቅሶተ ዓይን ንዳጠ፤
ወዘንቱ ጥበብ ይመስል ጥበብ ለሰዓለ መቃጥን፤
ዘይወዳ ላኢረ በጥበብ ወኪን፤
እስኪ ያሥግር ለዓጣ በትምዳንት፤
ከሚሁ አስተርእይኮ አንተኒ በግብረ ፍርሃት፤
ከመ ይሕየው ኢም እሞት፤
በመስተላ ሞትክ ማሕየዊት፤
እስመ ኢትጥን ሕማም ዓባይ፤
ዳኢመ በጽኑዕ ዓቃቤ ሥጋይ፤
ምንት የዓቢ እምቶስላ ጌጋይ፤
ግድግዳ
እይሁድኒ ያላሉ በሰሚን ጸራንክ ኢልያስሃ ይጹውዕ፤
ግድግዳ
ወመስሎም ንኪሁ ዘይመጸኢ፤
እስመ ስመ ኢሎዬ ወኢልያስ፤

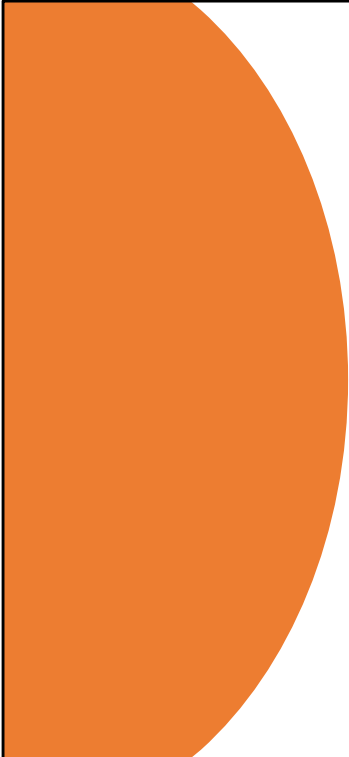
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ወላሊትሃን ትድግክ ወኢሎላይኪ፤
ወአንተሰ ውስተ ቅዱሳኒክ ተገድር ስቡሐ እስራኤል፤
ኪያክ ተመስሎ አበዊ፤
ተመስሎኪ ወእድንክመ፤
ንክክ ጸርኑ ወድንኑ፤
ኪያክ ተመስሎ ወኢተገፍኖ፤
አንሰ ዕዬ ወስኦ ሰብኢ፤
ምንን በገብ ሰብኢ ወትሎት በውስተ ሕዝብ፤
ከሱም አላ ይፍሰደኒ ይትቃወኑ፤
ይሳሉ በከፍረላም ወየሐውት ርእሶም፤
ተመስሎ በእግዚአብሔር ለፍጥኖ፤
ወፍጥኖ ኦመ ይረቅዶ፤
እስመ እንተ አወክኢኪ እምከርሥ፤
ወተመስልኩክ እንከ ሀወወኩ ውስተ አጥባተ እምየ፤
ላላሊክ ተገድኖኩ አማላ፤
እምከርሥ እምየ አንተ እምሳኪህ፤
ኢትርሐት እምኔኒ እስመ አልጸቁ እትመንድበ፤
እስመ አልፀ ዘይረድኢኒ፤
ፀገቲኒ አልሀምት ሳክኃን፤
ወአክቡኒ አስዋር ሥቡሐን፤
ወአቀቀው አፋላም ላላላላ፤
ከመ አንባላ ዘጽንሕ ለመሰጥ፤
ተክወወኩ ከመ ማይ ወተዘርወ ከሱ አዕጽምትሃ፤
ወኮን ልብክ ከመ ለም ዘይትመሰው በግእከላ ዘርሥሃ፤
ወጥብኪ ከመ ገልፀ ንይልሃ፤
ወጠገፀ ልላንክ በግርጌሃ፤



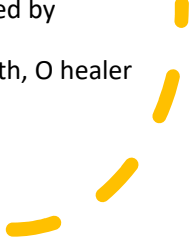
Psalm 21

My God, My God, look at me, why did you abandon me?
And why did he despise me, your Redeeming Servant,
While the depraved Angel of Death dealt treacherously
to humiliate me
And he approached to Satan, to terrify me,
As for you, you brought forth in him the unknown
wisdom of your divinity
When Satan feared approaching you
When he saw all your wonders
Which took place on the Cross
As written in the Gospel
Which is the image of radiance
You made him hear the voice of fear, the prayer of
Sheol
O my God, look at me while you speak
And after this he came close to you to be accustomed
to devouring
Straight away in your flesh, the servant of death,
became the master over death,





But was not separated from divinity
For even one moment, a fleeting blink of an eye
And this, your wisdom, seems to be cunning like
a fishing line
Which places a morsel of food with wisdom and
skill
Until it catches a fish in its net
In the same way, you revealed with works of
fear
That Adam lives again after death
With the lifegiving Cross of your death
For great suffering did not prosper.
Furthermore, for a mighty physician
What is greater than a wound caused by
transgression?
And what is stronger than your death, O healer
of sickness?



Conclusions

- The masters of this tradition would give you much more from these poems, but nevertheless I hope to have shown you that
 - The fascination with the language at least partly derives from this astonishing poetic intellectual tradition associated with it.
 - The reflection of the masters of this tradition are deeply theological, pastoral, reflective, biblical,
 - Understanding this tradition more would be a blessing for the global church!
- The Psalms of Christ indicate a much broader poetic dealing with scripture in the Ethiopian tradition.

A poem
of natural
allusions

- ምንት እገብረከ ቁንፅለ ገዳም አንተ ቤተ አንበሳ
በዊአ።
ኢትሰምዕኑ ጥሀረቶ በአፍአ።
እንከሰ ዘለከ ተጋንዮትከ ጠፍአ።
ኃድግሰ ዘለከ ብፅአ።
አንበሳ በሃይሉ እምድኃረ ሞአ።
ጽንፌ ለእሳት ከዊነከ ብርአ።
- What shall I do for you – a wild fox who
enters a lion’s cave
Do you not hear his roar from outside
Then for you your humble worship was
destroyed
And your blessing abandoned
The lion, by its might, after it has won a
victory
Strengthened the fire, by your being a reed

Dripping with biblical allusions – the roaring lion that is the Devil, the testing fire of 1Pet, but turned around because the believer is a weak reed making the fire stronger – but we know also that the Suffering Servant will not break the bruised reed.

A poem
about the
scope of
salvation

አንተሰ ወዳዊት እመ ትትአረቁ
ዳዊት ወአርዮ ነገረ ቤርሳቤሕ ኢያሳለቁ
አክኑ ልቃሐሙ ፍትሐ ኢፈደይኮሙ በሕቁ
ለዳዊት ከመ ጌጋዩ ወለአርዮ በከመ ጽድቁ

You and David if you will be reconciled
David and Uriah have not finished the
matter of Beersheba
It is not the judgement of their debt
that did not reconcile them sufficiently
For David, according to his sin,
and for Uriah according to his
righteousness



Reflections on the Transfiguration

ኢነገረ፡ ታቦር፡ ምሥጢረ፡
መለኮት፡ ኅቡዕ።
ባሕቱ፡ ደምና፡ ነገረ፡ ለሰብእ።
አምጣኝ፡ ደመና፡ ቀሊል፡
ወደብረ፡ ታቦር፡ ርጉዕ።

Tabor did not explain the hidden divine secrets
Only the cloud spoke to people
As much as the cloud is light,
but Mt Tabor is solid

Poetic reflections related to the Transfiguration abound – always referred to as Mount Tabor in the Orthodox tradition.

it represents mystery, it hides secret things.

Mt Tabor hid much more than it revealed:

Jesus revealed his nature there .

But the cloud hid something when God himself spoke saying ‘this is my son whom I love’.