

observations of a somewhat critical nature, and neither of them are aimed at the author. First, the editorial decision to have endnotes rather than footnotes is incomprehensible in an academic book of this nature and drove this particular reviewer nuts. Second, the style has a tendency to be unduly repetitive, particularly in the more theoretical sections; unfortunately this seems to be an endemic problem now that most publishers have dispensed with the services of a properly trained copyeditor.

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AFRICA

WENDY LAURA, BELCHER (ed.), Jessica Wright and Leon Grek (trans.): *The Jesuits in Ethiopia (1609–1641): Latin Letters in Translation*. (Aethiopistische Forschungen.) xvi, 272 pp. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017. ISBN 978 3 447 10879 9.
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This work concerns events of Jesuit missionaries who were active in Ethiopia during the first half of the seventeenth century. The core of the book consists of 30 letters translated from Latin into English by Jessica Wright and Leon Grek. The Latin original was published between 1911 and 1913 (Camillo Beccari, *Rerum Aethiopicarum Scriptores Occidentales Inedita a Saeculo XVI ad XIX*, vols 11–13). Most of the letters are attributed to Afonso Mendes, the last high representative of Rome in Ethiopia before the failure of Catholicism in 1632 and the subsequent expulsion of the missionaries.

Relevant events that took place in Ethiopia between 1515 and 1641 are presented in a chronological arrangement (p. x). In the preface the editor, Wendy Laura Belcher, explains the letters' history of translation and their significance. After a brief presentation of their contents, she underscores the role played by Ethiopian women in favour of local Christianity versus the proselytism of Catholic missionaries (xii–xvi).

In a very helpful introduction, Leonardo Cohen depicts the political and religious situations of sixteenth–seventeenth-century Ethiopia (pp. 1–30). Alongside Church–state relations, attention is paid to the crisis triggered by Jesuit missionary activities. Modern scholarly writings on this period confirm many of the reflections given by Cohen.

Following the introduction, Jessica Wright and Leon Grek explain their method of translation. The details are important for cross-checking against the Latin version. At the end of the book one finds a glossary (pp. 194–258) and an index (pp. 261–72), which is quite helpful in analysing the letters.

Valuable documents for Catholic and Mission history, the letters also open a window into Ethiopian social, religious and political history. One may examine significant events, religious and political figures, as well as names of historical places. The aim of the Jesuit mission was to make Ethiopian Christians embrace the doctrines, rite and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, and thus make Rome the head of the Ethiopian Church. With a militant and one-sided vocabulary, the letters betray a judgemental perspective towards Ethiopia's Christianity. Although the conflict was between Christians, any apparently successful mission is described as a triumph over "apostasy". When the contrary takes place, opposition to and rejection of the Jesuit mission are not considered as failure but rather as occasions of martyrdom (p. 127).

Today one may question the need to evangelize people who had already received the Gospel centuries earlier. The mission is justified in the letters on the ground that the Ethiopian Christians were heretics (*passim*) or schismatics (pp. 41–2). Among other issues, the controversy over Christ's nature is raised (p. 84). The date of child baptism in the Ethiopian tradition is contested and critiqued: "many die unblessed and defiled by the sin of Adam" (p. 96). The missionaries were also opposed to the practice of circumcision, the communion in two species and the observance of the Sabbath.

On the other hand, the Roman faith is constantly praised as a source of healing and miracles (pp. 84–5). The manger or crib is, as customary in the Latin tradition, praised even by the Ethiopian king who converted to Catholicism, albeit it is challenged by the people (p. 89). The missionaries are portrayed as virtuous, with purity of mind and body, chaste, with fidelity in keeping promises, in keeping objects and free of revenge (pp. 41–2). Apart from the questionable comparison between some missionaries and an entire local population, it seems as if chastity was unknown in a country with such a long monastic tradition. In the letters the missionaries and those who have converted to Catholicism are always right (p. 98; 101), unlike the members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. In addition to persuasion, coercion with a view to converting to Catholicism is approved (pp. 127–33).

Noteworthy is the evolution of the situation reflected in the letters. One can thus make a remarkable diachronic analysis of the failed mission. The earlier letters describe the mission as successful and satisfactory without denying the opposition it encountered. The later ones depict disappointment.

The letters are blatantly silent about Ethiopian spirituality. One wonders whether the missionaries ever read or understood the Ethiopian antiphony, rich in biblical theology and remarkable in intertwining Christological themes with ecological motifs. Nor does one find any appreciation of the traditional schools of oral poetry, inspired by biblical themes, observation of nature and reflection on current situations. No mention is made of patristic writings and their hermeneutics also appreciated by the Catholic Church. How does one explain the silence on these issues? Does it mean no missionary of that time could appreciate the spiritual values of the Ethiopian church? Or, was it to please the addressees that the letters had this tenor? Were the letters meant to say what the senders wanted to convey? Or maybe a combination of these factors. We may never know whether or not it was done deliberately. This explains the need for careful reading between the lines.

In other words, the image one gets of the Orthodox *Tewahido* Church would have been seriously deficient if one had only these letters as historical sources. That is why one would need to read them in context and in comparison, with contemporary works written by Ethiopians.

An ecumenical spirit cannot ignore or bypass injuries of the past. Can any authentic ecumenical journey and reconciliation be realized without the healing of the wounds? This book gives service not only to those who do not read the letters in Latin but also to a much larger public. Besides important issues of ecclesiastical and civil history, one may also grasp the need for a humble self-examination with regard to missiology for the respect of other forms of Christianity.

This collection of letters is a precious corpus of sources that shed some light on the political and social situation of Ethiopia in the seventeenth century, including challenges faced by the Christian kingdom and the Oromo movement. Translations of the other volumes that deserve to be accessible to modern day researchers are most welcome.

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