Mōšṭīra Zaman
“The Mystery of Time”

“PV’ʺX: ΣLõ” is an early seventeenth century Ethiopian manuscript in the Magdala collection of the British Museum, Or. 790. It is written on vellum of 193 folios with a page size of about 14 3/8 in. by 12 1/2 in. and bound in a decorated leather binding. The original owner of the manuscript was “Mšrš. ‰:" ń:.‰.” (ff.2v, 193r). This may have been the Ethiopian builder Walda Giyorgis who built castles for the Emperor Yohannes I and his son Iyasu I (mentioned in R. Pankhurst, A Social History of Ethiopia, 1990, p.106). He presented the manuscript as a gift to the church of the Holy Trinity at Dabra Berhan (f.1v). The text of the manuscript is a liturgical poem addressed to the Holy Trinity.

The following pages present two selections from the manuscript. The first selection is the first stanza of the poem with the illustration of the Trinity surrounded by the symbols for the Gospel writers and underneath stand the 24 elders (f.3r). The second selection is nine stanzas related to the story of Joseph (ff. 16v - 19v).

The English translation of these two selections were made by an Ethiopian Orthodox priest, The Rev. Seife S. Yohannis. The translation was made in 1980 at the time when Rev. Yohannis was a student in religious journalism at the Africa Literature Centre, Mindolo Ecumenical Centre, Kitwe, Zambia.

Rev. Johannis spent his early years in a village of the Baso District in the Gojam Province. His father who was a peasant farmer died when he was young and when his mother died he was left an orphan under the care of the church. He progressed through the traditional educational system. From the village church school he was sent to the school of music (Dorgam Iyesus) and from there to the House of Poetry (Bete Kene) and then to advanced Bible studies at a monastery, Dema Georges. From his traditional education he entered a more Western style boarding school in Addis Ababa, Mikanis Yesu, where he was introduced to the study of English, Maths, History and Geography. Later he studied in the Anglican Holy Trinity College in the United Kingdom.

Before coming to the Africa Literature Centre, Rev. Johannis worked translating Orthodox canon from Ge’ez into Amharic. He then served as a broadcaster in Amharic for Radio Voice of the Gospel, an ecumenical radio station located in Addis Ababa and beamed to a large part of Africa. After the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie by the military regime of Mengistu the ecumenical program was ended and the radio station was confiscated for the State. After the six month course in journalism at the Africa Literature Centre Rev. Johannis was called to teach New Testament at the orthodox Theological School in Addis Ababa.
Peace², I say to the unity of the Holy Trinity,
Standing in front of the Trinity,
Without doubting, I believe the existence of the Trinity,
And their face³ triune and their person triune,
And their liturgy⁴ as it is triune.
painted by Ezekiel⁵
Notes:
1 The መለህ (malk°) is a type of Ge’ez poetry consisting of five lines (usually addressed to a saint praising the various parts of the body). As liturgical poetry there is a traditional way of chanting that is used. An audio tape was produced of Rev. Johannis chanting the nine stanzas related to the Joseph story in this traditional manner. Below is an attempt to describe the first three verses of this chant in staff notation.

Notes:
1 The መለህ (malk°) is a type of Ge’ez poetry consisting of five lines (usually addressed to a saint praising the various parts of the body).
2 እለም (salêm) is a greeting, such as שåלôm (šalôm) in Hebrew and سلام (salâm) in Arabic.
3 A contemporary of John Chrysostom stated that the plural of face could not be used for a person of the Trinity because then there would be nine faces (3x3=9).
4 The ይ роли (q°ddase) is the recital of the ይ роли (q°ddus)”holy” in the liturgy.
5 The marginal identification of the artist is very unusual for Ethiopian manuscripts. The few examples are manuscripts that are incomplete. Pankhurst suggests that the artist’s name on in-complete manuscripts may be for the purpose of indicating who is responsible for its completion (Pankhurst, “Ethiopian manuscript illumination,” Azania, pp. 105ff., Vol. 19, 1984). It is clear that it was intended that every page of the text of the poem be illustrated. The text is complete, but the illustrations are not complete. The illustrations are fully painted through the first 19 folios. After that the illustrations are still only line drawings, sometimes partially painted, sometimes the names of colors (in Amharic) indicated for the painter, sometimes only the text with the space for the illustration blank. This manuscript provides an opportunity to study the artists’ technique in developing the illustrations.
Portion of preceding stanza, f16a - b.
When [Esau] met Jacob who was full of fear,
Holy Trinity, clothed in fire,
turn aside the enemy of wicked strife
and thus prevent the acceptance of death.

Portion related to Joseph, ff.16b- 19b.
O Joseph whom your heart loved,
Becoming his guardian when his brothers sold him,
Holy Trinity, in covenant and promise
Say to myself, “We will revive you from your tribulations,”
Since your work is restoration.
O you who sewed purity in Joseph’s mind
When his master’s wife repeatedly tempted him eagerly,
Our meek-hearted Trinity who loves meekness,
Give generously happiness to my heart,
And from my earthly eye take away the tear.

O you who made him wise at the time of his
temptation and imprisonment
That he interprets the dreams of two prisoners,
Trinity, because of your loving Joseph
Make my heart wise and remove the veil
That it might know things.
O you who gave him favor before Pharoah,
Until he will make him master and king under him,
From his being wise and fulfilling a need,
Clothe my heart with clothes of new knowledge,
O Trinity who need not to be clothed.
O you who punished the two children of Judah
When they rejected Tamar
Holy Trinity who are clothed with glory,
From the one of you when he was humbled
Receive earthly birth from the house of Judah.

O when the children of mighty Jacob travelled
To where they sold Joseph that they might buy cereal,
O Trinity who caused the heart of Joseph to forget revenge,
Strengthen me in your love and make me stand straight
That I die and carry the cross in your name.
O your kingdom which lives and exists forever
While its authority accomplishes everything and reveals its power,
O Trinity be fair to me and be gracious from the highest
When (Joseph) gave to his brothers from his wealth and property
(And) gave Benjamin more than all.
O you who kept Jacob and his children
When they descended to the land of Egypt to
unite with Joseph,
Your power, O Trinity, trembled in the Sinai desert.
Pluck the strings of faith (without) hate or doubting
That I might praise you with a new harp.
To your glory the knees of Jacob knelt
When he blessed children one by one,
And you, Trinity, showed the cross with your hands
To the children of the younger Ephraim,
And the elder Mannaseh will be a subordinate tribe.