

Steven Kaplan

MARY OF ZION: BIBLICAL ANTECEDENTS, HISTORICAL DEBATES AND ETHNOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

The concept of Zion (*ṣayon*) is one of the most complex and multi-levelled in Ethiopian Orthodox thought.¹ It condenses multiple meanings and expresses ideas connected with natural, architectural and celestial space, human and divine existence and sacred time. Most famously, Zion is associated with the traditions concerning the Solomonic dynasty, the Queen of Sheba, the Ark of the Covenant and the early capital city of Aksum.² Indeed, numerous authors have made use of this familiar idea in the titles of volumes including, *African Zion*, *The Two Zions*, *Between Africa and Zion*, *Daughter of Zion* and the unforgettable words of the late Bob Marley, “Iron, Lion, Zion.”³

In the article I shall have cause to return, albeit briefly, to revisit these Aksumite/Solomonic themes. However, in what follows below my main focus shall be upon an often remarked but less analyzed aspect of the Zion traditions, the associations with the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is, of course, not my intention to claim that the Zion-Mary connection is in any way a new “discovery.” It has been commented upon by numerous authors in important works.⁴ Nevertheless, in what follows below, I shall try to point the way to some new directions in exploring this fascinating topic.

¹ For an admirable survey of the Church’s spirituality see the classic work O. Raineri, *La spiritualità etiopica* (La Spiritualità cristiana orientale, 1), Rome 1996.

² From a vast literature see, for example: C. Bezold, *Kebra nagast. Die Herrlichkeit der Könige*, München 1905; E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her only son Menyelek*, London 1922 (reprint. 2001); G. Colin, *La Gloire des Rois (Kebra nagast). Épopée nationale de l’Éthiopie*. Traduction française intégrale (Cahiers d’Orientalisme, 23), Genève 2002; R. Beylot, *La Gloire des Rois, ou l’Histoire de Salomon et de la reine de Saba*. Introduction, traduction et notes (Apocryphes. Collection de poche de l’AELAC, 12), Turnhout 2008; E. Ullendorff, “The Queen of Sheba in Ethiopian Tradition,” in J. Pritchard (ed.), *Solomon and Sheba*, London 1974, pp. 104–114.

³ M.E. Heldman – R. Grierson – S.C. Munro-Hay (eds.), *African Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia*, New Haven – London 1993; S. Kaplan – T. Parfitt – E. Trevisan-Semi, *Between Africa and Zion: Proceedings of the First International Congress of the Society for the Study of Ethiopian Jewry*, Jerusalem 1999; E. Ullendorff, *The Two Zions, Reminiscences of Jerusalem and Ethiopia*, Oxford – New York 1988; M. Simović, *Daughter of Zion: Orthodox Christian Art from Ethiopia*, Jerusalem 2000; “Iron Lion Zion” Bob Marley Lyrics, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bobmarley/ironlionzion.html> (accessed May 7, 2015).

⁴ See especially M.E. Heldman, “Maryam Seyon: Mary of Zion,” in Heldman – Griegson – Munro-Hay, *African Zion*, 71-75.

Æthiopia fortitudo ejus
OCA 298 (2015) 000-000

From the start I must stress that I have intentionally avoided approaching the Mary-Zion connection directly through the lens of Mariology whether in general or specifically in the Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwahaḥädo* Church. To paraphrase Isadore of Seville on Augustine, anyone who claims to have read all the primary and secondary sources on Mary in the Ethiopian Church is probably a liar.⁵ Mons. Raineri, to whom this volume is dedicated, has himself contributed extensively to this topic and is joined by countless others.⁶ Moreover, at least since the fifteenth century Ethiopian monks, Protestant missionaries and even some scholars have expressed their disdain for the Church's "overemphasis" on the Virgin.⁷ Accordingly, I shall approach this topic from beginning with some relevant Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) material concerning female gendered depictions of Zion and move from these to the topic at hand.

⁵ P. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, New York 1972, p. 25: "Isidore of Seville once wrote that if anyone told you that he had read all the works of Augustine, he was a liar."

⁶ There is a vast Mariological literature including O. Raineri, "L'effigie de Maria «Patto di Misericordia». Note per un «Mariale Aethiopicum»," *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 103/1 (1989), pp. 92-109; Idem, *Salmi etiopici di Cristo e della Vergine*, Roma 2005; Idem, *Dal Libro etiopico dei Miracoli di Maria* (Quaderni Fondazione Carlo Leone et Mariena Montandon, 6), Como 2007; Getatchew Haile, *The Mariology of Emperor Zär'a Ya'äqob of Ethiopia. Texts and Translations* (OCA 242), Roma 1992; Amsalu Tefera (ed., tr.), "Dərsanä Şeyon, Philological Inquiries, Textual Critical Edition and Annotated Translation" Ph.D. dissertation, Addis Ababa University 2011; I regret that I have not been able to consult the full version of Dr. Amsalu's dissertation which is scheduled for publication in July of 2015. I am however, grateful to him for sending me a copy of his article, Amsalu Tefera, "Mariology in the E.O.T.C. Tradition: Special Emphasis on Dərsanä Şeyon," *Journal of Ethiopian Church Studies* 2 (2012), pp. 71-95; see also, Idem, "Dərsanä Şeyon: philological inquiries into the text," *RSE n.s.* 3 (2011), pp. 141-166; and finally, Idem, "Dərsanä Şeyon," *E Ae* 5, 304a-305a. See also, Agostinos da Hebbò, "Gli Etiopi e la Madonna: aspetti dogmatici e devozionali," *Marianum* 32/1 (1970), pp. 369-403; A. Grohmann, *Aethiopische Marienhymnen*, Leipzig 1919.

⁷ On the Stephanites see Getatchew Haile, "The Cause of the Estifanosites: a fundamentalist Sect in the Church of Ethiopia," *Paideuma* 29 (1983), pp. 93-119; S. Kaplan, "Stephanites," *E Ae* 4, 746b-749a. On later Protestant critiques, Donald Crummey, *Priest and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia 1830-1868*, Oxford 1972, pp. 31-33; for scholars see U. Zanetti, "Mary. Church and popular veneration of St. Mary. Popular veneration," *E Ae* 3, 812b: "One has to acknowledge that in spite of the theological accuracy of the EOTC, the popular worship sometimes tends to exaggerate M[ary]'s cult"; Getatchew Haile, *Voices from Däbrä Zämüddo: Acts of Abba Bärtälo mewos and Abba Yoḥannäs, 45 Miracles of Mary* (AeF 79), Wiesbaden 2013, p. 135: "But the Church has not managed to control the *däbtära* 'lay clerics' from composing non-Orthodox hymns to — and miracles allegedly worked by — the saints, including Mary, nor has it managed to teach the faithful to adhere strictly to her teaching."

Daughter Zion

As is so often the case, a few considerations regarding the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) would seem to be a useful entry point for the consideration of Ethiopian piety. As I already noted in the final volume of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*⁸ “*The Ethiopian Orthodox Christian concept of Zion is based on the multiple meanings of the term in the Old Testament.*”⁹ While it is first used to refer to the Jebusite fortress following its capture by King David, it became identified with the “City of David” and the “City of God.” When King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem the term Zion expanded in meaning to include the Temple and the area surrounding it (Ps 20:3; Joel 4:17, 21), Zion was eventually used as a name for the city of Jerusalem (Isa 2:3, 33:4, Joel 3:5) and the land of Judea (Isa 51:16) and the people of Israel as a whole (Jer 31:12; Zech 9:13).

An examination of the bulk of these references would take us too far afield, however, in the context of the Mary/Zion connection it is important to notice the frequent association between Jerusalem/Zion and female figures. As has been extensively documented by Ch.M. Maier, the city of Zion is often depicted as “gendered space” in a variety of Biblical books including the Book of Psalms, prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea, as well as the late Biblical book of Lamentations.¹⁰ Moreover, these depictions include such female metaphors as wife, whore, daughter, and perhaps most interestingly for our purposes mother and “maiden,” or should one wish to overreach a bit, “virgin.”¹¹

(Lam 2:13) “To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, Virgin Daughter Zion?” (New International Version = NIV)

(Isa 37:22) “This is the word the LORD has spoken against him: ‘Virgin Daughter Zion despises and mocks you. Daughter Jerusalem tosses her head as you flee.’” (NIV)

Given the interest in women and gender which has influenced so many fields over recent decades it is not surprising that this period has been a particularly productive one for the study of feminine symbolism and imagery in the Bible in general and with respect to Jerusalem and Zion in

⁸ S. Kaplan, “Zion,” *EAE* 5, 189b-191a. For a useful survey, which does NOT focus on feminine aspects, see J.D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, New York 1985, pp. 89ff.

⁹ Kaplan, *Zion*, 190a.

¹⁰ Ch.M. Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel*, Minneapolis 2008.

¹¹ For this controversial issue see G.J. Wenham, “B^etûlâh ‘A Girl of Marriageable Age,’” *Vetus Testamentum* 22/3 (1972), pp. 326-348.

particular. The valuable scholarship on these themes allows us to understand many aspects of Zion imagery far better and in a wider context than before.¹²

In the Hebrew Bible, the personification of Zion is sometimes indicated by formulaic expressions *bat* or *betûla* + name of a city, land, or the collective *ammi* “my people.” The phrase *bat-šiyon* appears twenty-six times in the Hebrew Bible, exclusively in poetry. In most English versions, *bat-šiyon* has been translated as “daughter of Zion,” which seems to refer to a female inhabitant of the city. Syntactically, however, the Hebrew construct chain is an oppositional or explicative genitive, meaning that *daughter* denotes a characteristic of Zion.¹³

Thus despite the popular usages of the translations “Daughter of Zion” for the Hebrew *bat-šiyon*, most scholars are in agreement today, that this is better understood as “Daughter Zion.” The change is not merely a technical one. While the translation “Daughter of Zion” must be understood as distinguishing between “daughter” and the city, this “corrected” translation produced the metaphorical statement that “Zion is a daughter” or in the case of *betûlat bat-šiyon* as cited above in Is 37:22 and Lam 2:13 “Daughter Zion is a maiden” (or virgin or marriageable girl).

Moreover, such expressions are not limited in the Bible to Zion or Israel.

In Isa 23:12 we read: “He said, No more of your reveling, Virgin Daughter Sidon, now crushed!” (NIV). And slightly further on the same prophet intones:

(Isa 47:1) “Go down, sit in the dust, Virgin Daughter Babylon” (NIV)

(Ps 45:12 [13 Hebrew]) “And the daughter of Tyre shall be there with a gift; even the rich among the people shall entreat thy favour.” (English Revised Version)¹⁴

What are we to make of such expressions? These and other texts from the Ancient Near East have encouraged some scholars to discuss more generally the personification/deification of capital cities in West Semitic thought. Some have argued — Aloysius Fitzgerald was the trailblazer here — that in West Semitic thought capital cities were regarded as goddesses who were

¹² J. Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife*, Scholars Press, Atlanta 1992; G. Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books*, Collegeville MN 2003.

¹³ W.F. Stinespring, “No Daughter of Zion: A Study of the Appositional Genitive in Hebrew Grammar,” *Encounter* 26 (1965), pp. 133-141. See also F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Biblica et Orientalia, 44), Roma 1993, pp. 125-134; see however, M.H. Floyd, “Welcome Back, Daughter of Zion!,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70/3 (2008), pp. 484-504.

¹⁴ “The city of Tyre will come with a gift, people of wealth will seek your favor” (NIV).

married to the patron god of the city,¹⁵ and this pattern must form the basis for fully understanding the Biblical Zion traditions. While obviously Israelite monotheism would preclude the explicit depiction of Jerusalem/Zion as a goddess, the Biblical imagery is best understood (they argue) in the broader context of these city goddesses. Some have even extended their view further and earlier arguing for similar divine feminine urban images in early Eastern Semitic thought as well. All of these are indications, they argue, that Zion as a woman is to be viewed in the context of, or may even have originated as, a female partner or consort of the male God.

While these claims have been accepted rather uncritically in some circles,¹⁶ others — most notably Peggy J. Day — have been more skeptical.¹⁷ In fact, Day has argued that Fitzgerald failed to prove that there was an ancient mythological tradition in the Western Semitic world that understood important capital cities to be goddesses or that these goddesses were consorts of male divinities.¹⁸ According to Day, “there are not enough arguments to corroborate the existence of a city goddess as a precursor of female Zion.”¹⁹ This having been said, there is ample evidence for the use of female metaphors to describe cities in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean world.

At the very least remind us of the power of metaphors, of gendered metaphors and of female body imagery in the texts we read. As many scholars of biblical Zion have shown us, the authors of texts, whether depicted as powerful kings, desperate prophets warning of an impending catastrophe, or survivors of disasters, conquest and destruction, found the image of the faithful and adulterous, rejoicing and mourning, virgin and harlot, wife,

¹⁵ A. Fitzgerald, “The Mythological Background for the Presentation of Jerusalem as a Queen and False Worship as Adultery in the Old Testament,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972), pp. 403-416; Idem, “BTWLT and BT as Titles for Capital Cities,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (1975), pp. 167-183. For an earlier and similar approach acknowledged by Fitzgerald, see J. Lewy, “The Old West Semitic Sun-God Hammu,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 18 (1944), pp. 436-443.

¹⁶ M.E. Biddle, “The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East,” in K.L. Younger (et al.), *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective: Scripture in Context IV* (Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies, 11), Lewiston NY 1991, pp. 173-194; M. Wischnowsky, *Tochter Zion. Aufnahme und Überwindung der Stadtklage in den Prophetenschriften des Alten Testaments* (Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament, 89), Neukirchen – Vluyn 2001, esp. pp. 13-45; Galambush, *Jerusalem*.

¹⁷ P.L. Day, “The Personification of Cities as Female in the Hebrew Bible: The Thesis of Aloysius Fitzgerald. F.S.C.,” in F.F. Segovia – M.A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place*, Vol. 1. *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, Minneapolis MN 1995, pp. 283-302.

¹⁸ Day, *Personification*, 301.

¹⁹ Day, *Personification*, 301f.

daughter and virgin all effective in discussing the hope, dangers and fates which befell the inhabitants of their cities and the cities themselves. Clearly, we must acknowledge that the Aksum-Zion-Mary complex must therefore be considered within a widespread and venerable tradition of describing cities as female figures.

The Ge'ez translations of the relevant Biblical texts are one obvious starting point. The manner in which they are quoted and interpreted in other works, particularly the *andämta* commentaries is another.²⁰ One text which appears to shed considerable light on this issue is Amsalu Tefera's forthcoming publication of his dissertation on *Därsanä Şayon*. Despite its title, this homily deals extensively with Mariological issues. Indeed, at present we have only a very sketchy understanding of the detailed contents of the work. Dr. Amsalu's forthcoming publication despite its focus on philological matters will doubtless reveal much more on this hitherto neglected book. Already its close affinity *Käbrä Nägäst* has been revealed²¹ as well as links to several other unpublished "Zionist" works: *Zenä Şayon* (The News or History of Zion), *Tä'ammärä Şayon* (The Miracles of Zion) and *Mälkä'a Şayon* (The Image of Zion). In his study of Dr. Amsalu offers some fascinating examples from this text.

While in *Därsanä Şayon* 1Sam 5:3 reads: "they found him [Dagon] fallen on his face, at the foot of Zion, our Queen."²²

The "original" Hebrew 1Sam 5:3 reads: "Dagon was fallen upon his face upon the ground before the ark of the Lord" (NIV).

In 2Sam 6:2 *Därsanä Şayon* reads: "They brought Zion from there and took Her when Cherub was hovering over Her."²³

In the original 2Sam 6:2 text it reads: "To bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark" (NIV).

And perhaps most remarkably: "In the eight month, I have seen the twofold Virgin, Our Lady Mary in the image of Holy Zion, says Prophet Zechariah" (cf. Zech 4:2ff).

Clearly in all of these verses as well as others, the dominant fifteenth-century understanding of the Zion/Mary connection has been employed to revise the Biblical text.

²⁰ See in general R. Cowley, *Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation: a Study in Exegetical Tradition and Hermeneutics*, Cambridge 1998; K. Stoffregen-Pedersen, *Traditional Ethiopian Exegesis of the Book of Psalms* (AeF 36), Wiesbaden 1995; and especially V. Böll, 'Unsere Herrin Maria'. *Die traditionelle äthiopische Exegese der Marienanaphora des Cyriacus von Behnesa* (AeF 48), Wiesbaden, 1979.

²¹ Amsalu Tefera, *Därsanä Şeyon: philological*, 143.

²² Amsalu Tefera, *Därsanä Şeyon: philological*, 143.

²³ Amsalu Tefera, *Därsanä Şeyon: philological*, 143.

Unravelling History

Having offered a brief discussion of some of the Biblical antecedents for the identification of Zion and capital cities in general with female persona, it is useful now to attempt to unravel some of the threads which together make up the Zion-Mary-Aksum complex itself.

For Ethiopian Orthodox *Täwaḥädo* Church members the connection of these elements is obvious. Mary is (as we shall see in a moment) in various forms the Ark of the Covenant (*tabotä Şayon*). As the Word of God was contained in the Ark, “the Word” (Jesus) was carried in her womb.²⁴ To quote the 15th century ruler Zär’a Ya’əqob: “The golden ark is, indeed, the likeness of Mary, and the tablet the likeness of her womb, and the Ten Commandments [lit. words] are the likeness of her Son, who is the Word of the Father.”²⁵ Indeed, as Getatchew Haile notes,²⁶ “in Ge’ez the Ten Commandments are called ‘*assartu qalat*’ ‘the ten words,’ making it attractive to compare ‘words’ with the ‘Word’ of God.”²⁷

One scholar who would doubtless have been pleased to see these numerous womb/ark metaphors at play and spelled out in our historical sources is the recently deceased Donald Levine. In his challenging analysis of the *Kəbrä Nəgäst*, Levine appears to feel he is going out of something of a psychoanalytical/Freudian limb with his suggestion that “the Ark [of the Covenant] is a maternal figure.”²⁸ This is vital to the overall thesis of his article that the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* can be read as a variant on the Oedipal myth in which the son (Mənīlək) revenges himself on his father, who seduced and deflowered his mother (Makədda), by stealing her (the Ark). He somewhat tentatively offers a handful of citation from the *Kəbrä Nəgäst* in support of this view. In fact, one need not dig deeply into the Ethiopian collective

²⁴ This idea is, of course, not limited to the Ethiopian Church see J. Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church’s Marian Belief*, San Francisco 1983. At least one important Catholic Mariologist Father René Laurentin makes a similar observations when discussing the Nativity stories of the Gospel of Luke. Thus, in Mary’s visit to Elizabeth who is pregnant with the future John the Baptist, when Mary approaches, John “leaps” in his mother’s womb, and Laurentin among others has likened this to the “leaps and dancing” of King David when he brought the Ark into Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:16), thus implicitly depicting the ark as a womb-like object; see R. Laurentin, *The Truth about Christmas: Beyond the Myths: The Gospels of the Infancy of Christ*, Petersham MA 1986, pp. 56-58, and more generally pp. 54-62. However, it is interesting to note that M. Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary*, New Haven 2009, offers an extensive survey of Marian devotion with no mention of Zion.

²⁵ Getatchew Haile, *Mariology*, 99.

²⁶ Getatchew Haile, *Mariology*, 99, n. 8.

²⁷ We shall have occasion to return to this imagery of the womb below.

²⁸ D.N. Levine, “Menilek and Oedipus: Further Observations on the Ethiopian National Epic,” in H.G. Marcus (ed.), *Proceedings of the First United States Conference on Ethiopian Studies, 1973*, East Lansing MI 1975, pp. 11-23.

unconscious to uncover ample evidence that the Ark and/or the tablets and within it were identified with the womb; especially with the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

As the widely popular *Tä'ammärä Maryam* (*Miracles of Mary*) note: “Now, see from the heart how he called her the Redeemer of the whole world. He called her, furthermore, Zion, the tablet of the covenant, and gave (her) to Moses that she may be the Savior of Israel among all (and) above all the covenants given from the good God.”²⁹

And in Zär'a Ya'əqob's *Mäṣḥafä Bərḥan* (Book of Light) we read, Moses “who was given the prototype of Mary, the twofold Virgin — the Tablets the analogy of her womb, the Ark of the Covenant the analogy of her body, and the Tabernacle the analogy of her whole entity (lit. flesh).”³⁰

The *Kəbrä Nəgäst* illustrates precisely the sort of challenges which arise in dating key elements of the Mary/Zion complex. On the one hand, we clearly need to distinguish between the (final) ‘canonized’ version of the book, which does not appear earlier in its Ge'ez version than the 13th century and the various threads which compose the Solomon-Sheba legend. Thus, as is testified to by an early 13th century Coptic priest, Abū I-Makārim Sa'dallāh b. Ğirġis b. Mas'ūd, there were traditions that the Ethiopians possessed the ark, but not through Solomon and Sheba, but rather through the Mosaic line.³¹ Moreover, it is easy to take the legend's connection with Aksum as a given and thus ignore the fact that neither the Queen of Sheba nor Aksum are explicitly mentioned in the text.

Furthermore, the fact that Mary is identified with the Ark of the Covenant, whether in whole or in part, and thus is herself Zion, still does not resolve the question as to when these particular ideas coalesced around the city of Aksum and in particular its most important church. Although there can be little doubt that devotion to Mary was part and parcel of the early faith of the Church in Ethiopia, we would be naive if we took it for granted that all aspects of her centrality in Ethiopian devotion can already be dated to the Aksumite period. Nevertheless, the author of the entry “Church and popular veneration of St. Mary” in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* states with some confidence: “The importance of the Marian veneration in Ethiopia since the early (Aksumite) period appears to be confirmed by the dedication of the main sanctuary of the country, Aksum Ṣəyon, which seems to be old and original. The Beta Maryam church of the Lalibala complex is de-

²⁹ Getatchew Haile, *Mariology*, 7.

³⁰ Ephraim Isaac, *A New Text-Critical Introduction to Maṣḥafa Berhān, with a Translation of Book I*, Leiden 1973, p. 118-119; and see more generally pp. 116-124.

³¹ B.Th.A. Evetts (ed., tr.), *The Churches & Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighboring Countries, Attributed to Abū Ṣāliḥ*, Oxford 1895, pp. 286-287.

dedicated to M[ary] as well.”³² In other words not only — in this view — was Mariology central from an early date, but the connection between Mary and Zion and the central cathedral of Aksum is also posited to have existed in this early period. This view is echoed by Tribe, who writes, “In Ethiopia the association Mary with the Mountain of Zion was established early when the ancient metropolitan cathedral was dedicated to Mary of Zion. This was the mother church built in the fourth century by the legendary founders of the Ethiopian church Abreha and Asbeha, who are probably to be identified with Ezana and Shaizana. Its dedication clearly links the beginning of the Christian kingdom, the new Zion, with the Mother of God.”³³

Not surprisingly several scholars have challenged this perspective. Stuart Munro-Hay, whose general disposition was to date things later than had previously been accepted, devotes considerable attention to “Mary of Zion” in his final book, *The Quest for the Ark of the Covenant*. He rejects the idea that this association dates to the Aksumite period. “We find nothing to confirm an ancient foundation already dedicated to Mary of Zion in Aksumite times.”³⁴ After weighing the abundant albeit equivocal evidence on the matter, Munro-Hay tends to trace the earliest evidence for the Zion traditions to the 12th or 13th century. As for the Marian associations of the cathedral in Aksum, for these he proposes to date these to the second half of the 14th century or even perhaps later under the powerful pro-Marian kings (Dawit) and Zär’a Ya’əqob. “It is only much later — under King Sayfa Ar’ad [1344-72] perhaps ... that the dedication to Mary is actually confirmed. As for the dedication to Şəyon, it could have appeared by the reign of Amda Şəyon, but we can only be absolutely sure for the time of Zar’a Yaqob.”³⁵

Marilyn Heldman, who has written extensively on Ethiopian Church art and architecture is similarly dismissive of an early Aksumite date for the Marian attribution. She too focuses on the glorious period of Zär’a Ya’əqob as the most likely date for the full elaboration of the Mary-Zion-Aksum complex. According to Heldman, “The great church, literally the protector

³² Zanetti, *Mary*, 811b.

³³ T.C. Tribe, “Memory and Wonder: Our Lady Mary in Ethiopian Painting (15th-18th Centuries),” in W. Reinink – J. Stumpel (eds.), *Memory and Oblivion: Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art 7.9.96*, Amsterdam 1999, pp. 625-635, *ibid.* p. 626.

³⁴ S. Munro-Hay, *The Quest for the Ark of the Covenant: The True History of the Tablets of Moses*, London – New York 2005, pp. 153-180, esp. p. 170. It is impossible in the limits of this article to review all the evidence on this matter. Certainly, a great deal depends on the degree of authenticity one ascribes to various land grants found in the Book of Aksum (*Liber Axumae*). See G. Lusini, “Aksum: Mäşḥafä Aksum,” *EAE* 1, 185a-186a; cf. K. Conti Rossini (ed., tr.), *Documenta ad illustrandam historiam, I. Liber Axumae* (CSCO 54, 58 / Aeth. 24, 27), Paris – Lipsiae 1909-1910; Both Munro-Hay and Heldman (see below) make extensive use of this work in their arguments.

³⁵ Munro-Hay, *Quest*, 170.

of Aksum (*gabbaza* Aksum) received a new name during the reign of Zär'a Ya'əqob. Additions to the name of the great church are documented in land grants to the great church"³⁶ As is so often the case in Ethiopian church history Zär'a Ya'əqob appears to be the "culprit."³⁷ "The addition of 'Zion' suggests that the altar stone ... acquired an identification with Mount Zion in Jerusalem ... known as 'Holy Zion, Mother of all churches."³⁸

Obviously, this question of dating and nomenclature is vital to any attempt to reconstruct the history of the Mary/Zion connection. If we accept the view that it dates back to the Aksumite period, then the Mary-Zion theme can be said to run throughout the history of the Church and medieval texts which highlight this connection are merely elaborations of a core belief. If, however, we accept the view that it only appears a millennium after the acceptance of Christianity, then it is a comparatively "recent" development, which must be analyzed as a remarkable innovation within Ethiopian Christian spirituality in the Middle Ages.

Action and Words

In the previously discussed works, Heldman does not limit herself to merely the issue of the dedication or naming of the cathedral, but speculates as to how this may have been expressed in behavior and ritual action. Thus, she notes, the Portuguese priest Francisco Alvares who was in Ethiopia from 1520 to 1526 is one of our first reliable witnesses concerning the Saint Mary of Şəyon. He relates that neither men nor women are allowed entrance to the church (the prohibition on women persists to this day). Heldman speculates that this prohibition "appears to be directly related to

³⁶ M. Heldman, "Two circular diagrams in a royal Ethiopic manuscript (EMML ms. 50): context and meaning," *RSE n.s.* 3 (2011), pp. 185-218, *ibid.* p. 205.

³⁷ Here as in so many cases he may have been completing a project initially undertaken by his father and predecessor Dawit. See S. Kaplan, "Notes toward a History of Aše Dawit I (1380-1412)," *Aethiopia* 5 (2002), pp. 71-88. Of course, as has been well documented numerous aspects of the devotion to Mary both literarily and iconographical can be confidently dated to the 15th century and the reformist Emperor Zär'a Ya'əqob. While he may well have been building upon foundations set in place by his father Dawit, there is little question that Zär'a Ya'əqob had a special devotion to Mary.

³⁸ Heldman, *Two circular diagrams*, 206. Cf. however, her earlier article, M.E. Heldman, "Architectural Symbolism, Sacred Geography and the Ethiopian Church," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 22/3 (1992), pp. 222-241, esp. 226f: "By the seventh century the cathedral was understood to be dedicated to Mary, Mother of God. Several wives of the Prophet Muhammed had visited the cathedral during their exile in Ethiopia and later commented upon 'the beauty of the cathedral of Maria there...' On the historical reliability of this *hadith* see Munro-Hay, *Quest*, 166f.

the growing perception of the numinous sanctity of the alter tablet³⁹ of the great church and hence the great church itself.⁴⁰

Heldman also offers another tantalizing piece of evidence relevant to our concerns. According to Heldman, in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century a new distinctive style of church architecture emerges. “A radically different plan was introduced around 1500 which subsequently replaced the basilica form. The essence of this new plan is an enclosed square sanctuary located at the core of the church structure.”⁴¹ In the holiest part of this structure the *mäqdäs* resided the *tabot* and replica of the *tabotä şayon* which we have seen is identified with the womb and Mary. This area is only entered by the priests. Indeed, the curtains hung to conceal it are referred to as *anqäsä şayon* (Gate of Zion).

The exclusion of laity and a new architectural form both of which emphasize the sanctity of the central area of the church are consistent with the idea that major theological changes took place in the 15th century or later.

If we take the image of the Ark/altar stone as a womb seriously we should not be surprised that this theological idea carries with it ritual consequences. Perhaps most interesting in the context of the final part of this paper are some notes which Dr. Amsalu provides regarding the liturgical use of the work. In addition to its daily use and particular on 21 *Hədar*, November 30 or December 1, the day on which the Church celebrates the arrival of the Ark in Ethiopia. Most strikingly he note that *Dərsanä şayon* is believed to help infertile women conceive if they make a vow in from of the Ark [Mary] while carrying the book.⁴²

Conclusion

In this short paper I have explored three aspects of the Zion/Mary complex in Ethiopian Christianity that are all deserving of further attention. First, as I have shown, the association of Zion with female imagery and metaphors is embedded deeply in the Biblical (Hebrew Bible) text. This would appear to be fertile ground for scholars of Ethiopian Biblical texts, for their quotation and explication. Second, I have shown that the dating of the association of central cathedral in Aksum with either Mary or Zion and in particular with both of these is still the subject of scholarly controversy. Finally, while the Mariological traditions of the Ethiopian Orthodox

³⁹ Heldman, *Two circular diagrams*, 206.

⁴⁰ Heldman, *Two circular diagrams*, 206.

⁴¹ M.E. Heldman, “Church buildings,” *E Ae* 1, 738b.

⁴² Amsalu Tefera, *Dərsanä Şayon*, 304b; Idem, *Dərsanä Şayon: philological*, 141.

Church have been the subject of ample attention, and the Zion traditions are beginning to achieve the focus they deserve, the manner in which these literary devotions are expressed in ritual remain relatively neglected. Future generations would be wise to explore this phenomenon as well as to publish critical editions of the relevant texts.