Geez Qene Translations

1

Etane Moger (Casting Incense)

When he set the Eritrean firmaments of sky by His power
St. Michael didn’t require a pillar
Because his miracles shut the flood gates of hell,
For his chosen Israel.

This poem was expressed on St. Michael’s day as Emperor Menelik was facing Italian invaders in Adwa. And it alludes to God who set the firmament of the sky in place without the need for pillars, and so too can St. Michael’s miracles stop the enemy’s advance (the flood gates of hell) on his chosen people, Israel (meaning, Ethiopians).

2

Asere Nigus (Bind / the king)

Oh Menelik, do unto Rome all that your hands can do
As the time of here harvest is due and her demise is at hand
And remember what the Gospels say:
‘Rome, the fig tree has yielded no fruits’
Said the Son, and St. Yared too, has repeated it

Again this poem was uttered when Emperor Menelik was preparing for a war against the Italians, and it alludes to the New Testament story of Jesus and the fig tree that does not bear fruit. It is cursed and dies. (Mat. 21: 19) St. Yared too has mentioned this in his poetry, the Degua.

3

Kibir yieti (She is Honored)

Abraham due to his kindness failed to eat sacred food
And didn’t kill the Son when he spent a night in his house
Had he known God, Bread of Truth, spent the night in his house,
Let alone The One, he wouldn’t have spared the other two.

The theme here is the Genesis story where God visited Abraham “…as he sat at the entrance of his tent… He looked up and saw three men standing near him…” (Genesis 18), but it is interlaced with the New Testament theme where Jesus says: “I am the Bread of Life...he who eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood shall live forever.” (John 6:51) and also alludes to the Trinity of God.

Asere Nigus (Bind the king)

Oh Menelik, climb Mount Sinai, so you don’t remain down below
And learn from the two prophets about a Tabernacle of Light
For the teacher who lives inside there
Thus is not his beautiful sight, nor is thus his mantle.

Here the author is expresses his sadness in not being rewarded by the king. So he called on him with this verse saying, Menelik, ask the two prophets at Mount Sinai(Elijah and Mosses) but he was actually referring to the
two prominent officials of Menelik at the time (The Honorable Scribe, Gebre Selassie, and the King’s Mouthpiece, Estiphanos), and concludes saying he deserves a better reward.

4

Mewed/Mewed (Praise)

The sword of Menelik, the undefeated Christ,  
Became a kind messenger to circumcise necks  
Those who didn’t sow on Ethiopia, the farm,  
Only harvest untimely to feed the swords of his chiefs  
And Menelik seems to have forgotten  
The sacrificial lambs, the Romans, should be sacrificed.  
As he shortened the measured realm of the sun  
So shall his reign be to the ends of the far horizon  
He shall secure the earth unto himself and  
In his kindness will leave the heavens to the Trinity.

This is a Qene uttered to praise the king, where the author likens the undefeated Christ to the sword of Menelik, as a messenger who circumcises the stiff necks of the unbelievers, and Roman invaders who try to harvest Ethiopia untimely, and what they did not sow, as sacrificial lambs. It also has echoes on the story of Abraham who did not (forgot to) take a sacrificial lamb when he took his son, Isaac, to the mountain to make a burnt offering for God. (Genesis 22)

5

Mibezu/Mibezu (How Plenty)

Words of brotherly prophets  
Entered Pharaoh’s house to herd Egyptian cows,  
In fields of simile sowed Pharaoh’s seeds  
And told of same new wine and its flavor

This is a complex Qene which touches on many levels from the seven cows in Pharaoh’s dreams to the seven ears of wheat, and how Pharaoh’s two dreams were one, (Genesis 41:25) and how the message of all the prophets of the Old Testament, though seemingly different, was really one, in that they all pointed to the single new wine of the New Testament – Christ.

6

Gubae Cana (The Council of Cana)

Gubae Cana is such a narrow gate  
And exceedingly few are those who enter through it

This verse refers to the strait and narrow gate mentioned in the New Testament: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction…” (Matthew 7:13) By the narrow gate here, the author actually is referring to Geez Qene in general, and a verse form known as Gubae Cana in particular.
When he called Jacob
Joseph purchased (sent) a chariot of iron and steel
Because Jacob was old and the road was hard
But when the Lord called his mother, The Queen
He denied her the powerful chariot of Elijah
As her way to death and the grave was direct / peaceful.

This verse was composed on Filseta or Asteryo Mariam, St. Mary’s day of death (Ascension). It compares how Joseph sent his father, Jacob, a chariot to travel on the difficult journey to Egypt, but that when the Lord called his mother to heaven, he would not send her Elijah’s chariot of fire on her journeyped to death and the grave. But it also suggests that St. Mary did not require any chariot as her death was peaceful.

The farmer went out to sow with fingers of blood
Your feet sow in rain of vengeance
And on Egyptian thorns your path is in shade
With plenty of exhaustion and hunger
They feasted in the hardship of your belly
And from the sound of the shouting rocks
The threshold of the doorway rises up a step
Taking turns to guard, and beseech your merciful face
The many eyed and changing faces of Cherub
The Virgin not allowing wealth or followers
Though with you, God did not wipe away your tears

This verse is about a very difficult time the author had at a certain Church of St. Mary where he was put in charge for a short time. Jealous rivals rose up against him and he left the place. He starts with the Parable of the Sower (Mathew 13:1) and moves on to the saying of Jesus: “Foxes have dens, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not wherein to rest his head” (Matt. 8: 20), and then to St. Mary’s flight to Egypt. ”...take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt... for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” (Mathew 2:13) He concludes making a pun on the words of Isaiah 25:8 “He shall wipe away their tears...” by reversing them into: God would not wipe away tears...

A totally unnecessary blame
We level at John’s head
Instead of praise in his land, cruelly, we order him into exile
Though he saw his body weaken, his love never diminished
And the brotherly swords were in harmony
Conspiring on the head of John
To build (him) another mansion in heaven
As the grave, his home, was too small.

The verse was composed on the feast of St. John’s. It is a pun on the sword that cut St. John’s head off.

10

Phil./ Wazema (On the eve)

Solomon in all his glory
After building his own palace and that of his Lord
Continued to work for others in order to get fame.
If such be the way for earthly buildings
Beautify your own home first, O Peter
Then you can think about Moses tomorrow.

A verse composed on Debre Tabor day (Mount of Transfiguration) probably giving an approval to the king who had started to build his palace.

11

Phil./ Wazema (On the eve)

The wealth of relatives is valueless.
The prodigal son fell on great poverty and hunger
While servants were full and had plenty to spare.
We learn this lesson from the manger
Her son was not spared the wearing of leaves
Though the Virgin weaved with golden threads.

A verse composed on Christmas, which compares the prodigal son who fell on poverty and hard times though his father’s servants had plenty to eat, (Luke 15:11-32) and then it moves on to Jesus who was wrapped in swaddling clothes even though his mother, the Virgin, weaved with golden threads...

12

Phil./Wazema (On the eve)

The grave, assistant of
The high priest, who serves the Virgin /temple/
Passed judgment on himself, and would not eat meat
Fled from Pharaoh’s war riding Moses, his horse,
He snatched Datan’s live meat (body and soul)
He (the grave) was full and his stomach never hungered

A complex verse composed on the Day of Ascension, echoing of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16:23-50) who wanted to be priests and rebelled against Moses ‘...and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up live’, but it points to the Virgin Mary’s ascension to heaven in the flesh.
Having not heard the story of Job’s patience
Strange Elijah’s birth is better than the traditional
He did not come out naked from his mother’s womb
And the sky which always had rain flowing
He healed her with his words
There is none other that can open
Or close the sky as he pleases.
Women of Samaria pregnant with hunger
Did not seek the hem of his garment for their oil
And the soldiers seeking the lion’s vengeance
He sat them in rows of fifty on his table of fire

This verse touches on so many levels from Job, to the prophet Elijah who was stayed with the widow whose oil never ran out, to ‘the woman who had an issue of blood for twelve years’ and was healed when she touched the garment of Jesus, (Matt. 9: 18-26) and back to Elijah who stopped rain from coming down from heaven by just uttering his word, and to the fifty soldiers sent to him but he ordered a fire from heaven to came down and devoured them… (2nd Kings 1: 10). It is very cleverly crafted tapestry that shows the depth of knowledge of the author and his superb dexterity in manipulating Qene in the way he so quickly connects various parts of the bible, indicating their unity and similitude. One needs to remember these verses are composed on the spot, and orally uttered or sung to fit the occasion, and are only written down much later.

For what occasion and for how long
Did God hide the power of Cherubs, his horses?
And why does Christ boast of his father’s mansions
While the heart, /Jew’s temple/ was filled with jealous smoke
For his horse, the cross, is lifeless
And the grave, the new abode of his flesh, is narrow.

It is referring to the verse where Jesus says, “In my father’s house there are many mansions” (John 14:2) and asks: ‘Why didn’t God let his Cherubs rescue Jesus who carried a lifeless cross to a narrow grave’?

Michal’s mission
Was to ensnare David
But Wolete Giorgis, /oil,/ extracted from Michael
Is the anointing of the head, and not a snare.
In her mind she is far from the mind of Eve
Though as a woman she is united with Eve
For Hailesellasie she is the path of life
And his hope to future kingship.

The author composed this ‘prophetic’ verse in Harar to the future Queen, Etege Menen, while her husband, Teferi, was still a Dejazmach. Six months later, he was made a Ras. The comparison is between King Saul giving his daughter, Michal, in marriage to David in order to ensnare him, (1st. Sam. 18) and Eve too, became Adam’s downfall, but that Michael’s daughter, (Etege Menen’s father, King Michael of Wollo) unlike the other two, became the oil of anointment for Teferi, and a path of life and glory.

16

"ወአከለን" /Sahleke (Thy grace)

How soon she got used to Ezra’s monastery!
Askalemariam, free from exhaustion of women of her country,
To enemy forces that see her
She is not (wifely) / feminine in her actions.

Another poem also uttered to Queen Etege Menen, named here Askalemariam (her baptismal name?). Now that she is a queen, she need not work the exhausting chores of the women of her country, and to her enemies, she they will not see her as a woman anymore. (As Ezra saw Jerusalem in a vision as a young woman…)

17

"ሆምአን"/Selassie (Trinity)

Zachariah fathered one and Abraham fathered many
They fathered though in old-age it’s a sandy uphill trek
As fathers beat their children in races
And the infinite greatness of Ethiopia
We proclaim it to the ends of the earth
Every generation and in every age
Whoever heard of a child fathering his own father?

This verse was composed in Addis Ababa at the time Abba Abraham and Abba Yakob were appointed to official positions, and Ethiopia named a native Patriarch, breaking the long tradition of getting Patriarchs from Egypt. There are allusions to Ethiopia’s ancient great status predating Egypt, being referred here as a child.

18

"ሆምአን"/Meweds (Praise)

A kind person spares the life of his animal
But Jacob ignored this rule
As Joseph’s cloth was unjustly stained with a lamb’s blood
Without any concern for the lamb that was unjustly slain
Jacob cried and grieved deeply for his son
And blamed it (the wild animal) for something it did not do
He defamed an innocent wild animal
But the Father (God) seeing the injustice of Jacob
Didn’t spare his son, but gave him up in the place of a lamb
So the enemy may not say: “He did not see him like Jacob.”

Was with him before & after the creation of the world, never left him.

This is a very beautiful and very deep theological verse that compares Jacob’s sorrow when Joseph was sold into slavery to Egypt by his brothers and how he was shown his son’s coat stained with a lamb’s blood, and contrasts it with God who didn’t spare his own son, but gave him as sacrificial lamb, but did not abandon him though it all from before the creation of the world and even after the end of the world.

19

**Wazema (On the eve)**

All creatures should cast upon the Creator
Their anxieties as is written in the law of the heart
But now the Creator has rested from his duty
Seeing the shame and anger of his son at Golgotha
He does not seek a throne or golden robes
Because he left all his thoughts upon the virgin

Composed at Harar during Christmas. It is on the theme of David’s and the Gospels where it says: “Cast your burden upon the Lord...” Mathew 11: 28-30, Psalms 55 : 22

20

**Meweds (Praise)**

They left discipline account for their children
Flesh parents who stuck to the tree of love
They pour oil of forgiveness to brighten their faces
After many years
When the Father who changes order came to them
They buried the account of tradition at Calvary
Because the Father does not rebuke the Son He begot
His full and greater love than to Isaac, his friend
A lamb in his place did not sprout from under the cross

Composed during Himamat days – a week before Easter - touching on many levels and comparing the love of parents who discipline their children and the love of Abraham for Isaac, and how God the Father, though He loved the Son, did not provide a lamb to take his place at the cross.

21

**Meweds (Praise)**

Abraham and Lot who always fought
Like strangers, though they were related
With the rope of grudge they made borders
Prophets prepared unified land, /Virgin’s womb/
For the flesh and for the Spirit
The path of sinners and brotherly enemies is no more
And for Lot and Abraham who made borders
He, of our own Flesh, condemns their heart
Unless united with the brother and befriended in spirit
Will not partake or have a place on his left of right hand

A poem composed during lent at Hararge, (Ethiopia’s eastern province) which touches on how Abraham and Lot used to fight over grazing land and created borders between them, but how the prophets had prepared a way that would bridge the divide between God and man through the Virgin’s Womb /Jesus/, and unless one loves his fellow man, will not partake or have a place on his left or on his right.

22

\textbf{Zeyeeze} (Current or for the day)

Peter saw /learned from/ the bird of the sky, how they sow not, nor harvest, but live very well, For it is without sowing or harvesting that a bird strives to build a shelter for itself, Hearing voice in the clouds, his garment He remembered the Teacher of Mount Tabor And his shock became his eternal pain He remembered the Book Master, Tabor

Composed in Hararge, comparing the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor where their garments shone like light, and with: ‘Consider the lilies of the field, and the birds of the sky; they toil not nor labor, they sow not nor harvest, and yet Solomon in all his glory was not refined like one of them...’ Matt. 6: 29

23

\textbf{Sahleke} (Thy grace)

May Ethiopia be free From sin, transgressions, and the curse of Rome And may Haileselassie find thy grace /mercy/ O thou all knowing God.

This poem was composed during the difficult times of Italian occupation.

24

\textbf{Mewed} (Praise)

Wash the feet of our existence with Living Waters Pour on our head the clean oil of forgiveness For he is weak and cannot deliver us \textit{Fasting}, the High Priest named for us, In the upper mouth Our prayers pass under the forgetful feet of Paul
That we may hope to see thy eyes of mercy upon us
The Law, tears of Nineveh, has become our guide
As thy loin cloth of mercy covered the cripple
You freely gave us brotherly status with thee.

This poem too, was composed during the difficult times of Italian occupation. It begs for forgiveness and for God to cleans his people, and not let their prayers and fasting be only lip service.

25

ከከስ /Gubae Cana (The Council of Cana)

I fee sorry for the wild bird /Mengistu/ dominion
Entangled (ensnared) in Gubae Cana, his pinion
It was composed when the author was a student of Qene, and is a play and pun on words. I has no particular meaning, except to say that Mengistu, which means Dominion is hooked on Gubae Cana.

26

መወድስ /Mewed (Praise)

Slightly less than Haileselassie,
Solomon, master of wisdom, in his greatness
The Church of Trinity is absolutely splendid
While Solomon’s Temple has declined
And under its shadow would not even look well
The Cherub to see (The Church of Trinity)
Came down the Holy Mount to the River of Wonderment
And said to each other: the Trinity are wealthy in praise
As this one prepared by Haileselassie, their elect,
Which he had promised by his oceanic jewel of faith.

This was poem of praise composed on the inauguration of The Trinity Cathedral of Addis Ababa.

27

ምብናን/ Wazema (On the eve)

I and the rain
Though clean and pure (without blemish)
In vain, Aaron prevented us from entering into his home
No matter how many times we go up or down,
We found no one to reconcile us with Father Aaron
Not a single worthy elder

The poem plays on words where Aaron’s abode, Monastery of St. Aaron, a cave, does not let in the rain. This is a famous Monastery where the poet studied Geez Qene in his youth.
Additional Verses by other Poets

Aleka Welde Yared

ጉባኤ መንስሳ በስመ ቢት ረት እለም ይወጣ።

O Brothers, let us leave love of the world /animal/

For on Monday fasting /hunger/ will be gripping us tight

This is a poem that alludes to some quaint Ethiopic literature about fasting on a Monday

Aleka Engeda Werk-Hailu

መወድስ /Meweds (Praise)

በዓመተ ከመ ይወጣ።

In the year that the cow, king of the world died

With hunger, god of flesh, whose harvest is end of the world,

In vain I searched for nakedness, home of snow white bandit,

And water its canopy

For who can withstand its freezing cold?

But if Canaan burns and its mountains should smoke

Dark Canaan cannot compare with Debre Berhan

They will march to the first Angel of Light they see

This verse was composed during the dark days of Italian occupation and has many connotations to local events and local personalities of the time. It is rather difficult to translate and do justice to it without knowing all the details associated in it.

Aleka Tetemko

መወድስ /Meweds (Praise)

Judas was not righteous by submissiveness /humility/

And the Lord did not condemn Mardochai /world/

for his pride over Haman. In order (Judah) to be named

Who says ‘Peace’ where there is no peace.

Not to give Hosanna’s glory to Amalek, man of blood

To turn our truth and dream of justice into lies

As Absalom paved his way to the throne with humility

And Hezekiah didn’t go to a place he did not know

Priding himself with law keeping but was afflicted

Another difficult verse to translate… It has many echoes and biblical references from Judas Iscariot to Mardochai and Haman, to Jesus who is referred to as Son of David, to Hezekiah and his affliction. It is a verse most likely composed during the Italian occupation and seems to suggest that paying lip service to the enemy and showing humility towards an invader was not the way to go.

Translated by G. E. Gorfu