

Aethiopistische Forschungen  
Band 83

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Band 83

2017

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden



*Getatchew Haile*

# Studies in Ethiopian Languages, Literature, and History

Festschrift for Getatchew Haile  
Presented by his Friends and Colleagues

Edited by  
Adam Carter McCollum

2017

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Titelvignette: Adelheid Kordes

This publication was made possible by a generous donation made through the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen  
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet  
über <http://dnb.dnb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche  
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the internet  
at <http://dnb.dnb.de>

Informationen zum Verlagsprogramm finden Sie unter  
<http://www.harrassowitz-verlag.de>

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Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier.  
Druck und Verarbeitung: Memminger MedienCentrum AG  
Printed in Germany  
ISSN 0170-3196  
ISBN 978-3-447-10848-5

## Preface

At some point after first getting to know Getatchew Haile at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (Collegeville, Minnesota), through conversation and then through reading sessions in Gəʼəz, it occurred to me that this grand scholar and kind man merited a celebratory volume of essays by his many friends and colleagues in Ethiopia, Europe, and the United States. At the time, I was a new cataloger (mostly for Syriac and Arabic/Garṣūnī) at HMML and Getatchew and I became fast friends, thanks chiefly to our common interests and delight in Semitic philology. Getatchew early on expressed to me how glad he was to have someone around who, like him, often sought the company of Wright, Nöldeke, Dillmann, etc. I have to think that I was the party that learned the most in our frequent conversations and our Gəʼəz reading sessions, but I can hope that our enjoyment was mutual. His friendliness, patience, and generosity made my years at HMML even more instructive and pleasant, and it has been a pleasure to stay in touch since we have both moved elsewhere.

The contributors to the volume each chose their own topics, and while the subjects treated do fall together into a few broad categories, the authors had the freedom to write in whatever tone and style they desired. The contributors were patient in the longer-than-wished-for process for the book to move from first intentions to final product.

The poem in Amharic that follows the introduction was penned for Getatchew by Amha Asfaw in May 1999, in Chicago, Illinois. I take the opportunity here heartily to acknowledge the thorough assistance of Thomas Rave, especially in the final parts of producing the book.

It is my hope—and I am sure the same hope is shared by every contributor to the book—that this volume, which covers various aspects of the languages and literature of Ethiopia and beyond, will be not only a testament of gratitude to Getatchew Haile himself, and a monument to the various fields of Ethiopian and related studies in which he has worked, but also an open avenue through which those fields will continue to grow in richness.

Adam Carter McCollum  
February 12, 2016  
Vienna

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## Introduction

Getatchew Haile was born *Gənbət* 24, 1924 EC (= June 1, 1932 AD) in Shenkora, Shewa, Ethiopia. His father, a layman, served as a *däbtära*. He began learning to read Gəʿəz as a small boy in the church school with the Psalter. This was according to old norms: children used to crowd around manuscripts with one person reading, but by Getatchew's time printed editions were available and each child had his own copy. The school had only one master with a number of students under his tutelage, but certain more advanced students also served as under-instructors for younger students. As a young boy, it was obvious to him that his singing voice was not as fitting to the church songs as the voices of his fellow students (and they also helped point out this fact to him!), and thus he devoted his energies rather to reading and understanding the texts than to musically chanting the hymns.

When Getatchew began studying Arabic in the Coptic Theological College in Cairo—where, incidentally he became friends with the future Pope Shenouda of the Coptic Church—he noticed similarities and patterns among certain words in Arabic, Gəʿəz, and Amharic. He was also learning Latin, Greek, and Coptic at this time, and realized that these three languages were unrelated to the other three. When he came to study Hebrew, he recognized yet another language clearly of the same stock as Arabic, Gəʿəz, and Amharic. This was all before he had heard any mention of comparative grammar, Semitic studies, Bergsträsser, or Brockelmann, yet he took it upon himself to make a notebook with columns for each language, and any time he came across a possible correspondence, he made note of it. Of course, there were times when a lexeme occurred with only one language as witness, or perhaps the languages showed different words for the same thing, two against two, three against one, etc. One day before Hebrew class, he was waiting for his instructor, Murad Kamil, on the steps under the Egyptian sun with his notebook in hand. Dr. Kamil, who had studied with Enno Littman at Tübingen, arrived and no sooner had he asked, 'Getatchew, what are you studying?' than he grabbed the notebook for an inspection. He said, 'Ah, you are interested in Comparative Semitics', a field formally unknown to the young Getatchew. 'You should go study at Tübingen', Kamil continued. And it was then and there, on the sunny steps before a Hebrew class, that

Getatchew was sure he wanted to turn his life toward this now obvious calling of studying the Semitic languages.

Getatchew spent most of the 1950s in Cairo, having arrived there in 1951. He reckons this period of his life as very formative. In Ethiopia he had been part of the majority, and his language and culture was dominant, but in Cairo, where he studied among Copts, he saw how a minority might be treated by a ruling majority, and this attentive notice and recognition instilled in him a liberality and open-mindedness that remain with him to this day.

Getatchew eventually made it to Germany to study, the end of his studies there being at Tübingen, as Murad Kamil had recommended. The letter ቸ in Getatchew's name is typically transliterated *č* (*ch*) and it is pronounced like English 'ch' in 'church', but he realized that in Germany this phoneme in his name would be mispronounced if regular German pronunciation of 'ch' were followed, so ቸ became 'tch'. His dissertation at Tübingen, written under the guidance of Otto Rößler and Maria Höfner, has the title *Das Verbalsystem im Äthiopischen: Ein morphologischer Vergleich mit den orientalischen semitischen Sprachen* (1962, 109 pages). The 'Lebenslauf' at the end of the dissertation lists the following details:

|           |                                                                                                                           |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1933      | Born April 19 in Shenkora, Shewa, Ethiopia                                                                                |
| 1945–1951 | Student at Trinity School in Addis Ababa                                                                                  |
| 1952–1957 | Studied theology at the Coptic Theological College (B.D.)<br>Studied sociology at the American University of Cairo (B.A.) |
| 1957–1958 | Studied Semitic philology at Göttingen                                                                                    |
| 1958–1961 | Studied Semitic philology, Islam, and political science at Tübingen                                                       |

Getatchew then returned to Ethiopia. After a brief period working for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he took up a post at then Haile Selassie I University (now Addis Ababa University) in the Department of Ethiopian Languages and Literature, which he held from 1962–1973, when the university was closed. Getatchew's first book in Amharic was a translation of Mark Twain's *Extracts from Adam's Diary*, based not on the English original, however, but on a German translation: *Addamənnā Hewan: Şəfawət Yätägäññä Mastawäša; Ləbb Wälläd* (Addis Ababa, 1965).

While Getatchew was still in Ethiopia, he was involved in early discussions of the EML project. Little did he know then that he would spend much of his life engaged in cataloging manuscripts microfilmed in that project.



Getatchew Haile with his wife Misrak Amare at his office in New York City, June 12, 2013; photo by Jean Manas

Getatchew married Misrak Amare on July 12, 1964, in the Church St Michael in Yirgalem, Sidamo. They would go on to have four children and adopt two more; they now have nine grandchildren.

For his opposition to the *Därg*, soldiers arrived at his home and shot more than four thousand rounds at his house. Getatchew was gravely injured, his property was confiscated, and he was essentially exiled. Getatchew and Misrak arrived in London for his medical treatment, although they had to leave their children in Ethiopia. While in London, Getatchew was visited by Julian Plante, director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML). They were known to each other through the EMMML project. An agreement was reached for Getatchew to serve at HMML as a cataloger for the EMMML project, that work having already begun with William Macomber, whom Getatchew would later regard as his teacher and mentor. Thus in 1976 Getatchew and Misrak came from London to central Minnesota, where their children were eventually able to join them.

The well-known scholar of Semitic and Ethiopian studies Edward Ullendorff was a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 1987 Getatchew, too, was elected for the same honor. A few years into Getatchew's cataloging work, Ullendorff, in an obituary for Stefan Strelcyn, remarked:

Strelcyn became the most accomplished connoisseur of Ethiopian manuscripts in our generation. His only friendly rival to this claim would be Dr Getatchew Haile who has been engaged for some time on the description of the thousands of manuscripts microfilmed in Ethiopia and processed at Collegeville, USA.

from the obituary in 1981, reprinted in *Studia Aethiopica et Semitica*, p. 297

After lamenting the loss to the field of Ethiopian studies from the viewpoint of paleography by Strelcyn's death and acknowledging that some younger scholars were working on paleographical analysis, Ullendorff advised, 'I may, perhaps, take this opportunity of counseling these epigones not to rush into print without the advice of Getatchew Haile'.

Ten years after these remarks, Prof. Ullendorff again praised Getatchew's labors and scholarly activity. His own words cannot be improved upon:

During the past decade and a half Dr Getatchew has been engaged in one of the most creative and, at the same time, most back-breaking scholarly enterprises: he has produced many volumes of minute and profoundly erudite description and analysis of thousands of hitherto little known (or even entirely unknown) Ethiopic manuscripts. This masterly work ... is not one of 'mere' cataloguing but represents a most meticulous and original study of Ethiopic literature on a scale and depth never before attempted. Many of our notions of this literature have been placed on an entirely new and much more secure footing. It is likely that no other person before Getatchew Haile has ever been able to survey so much of Ethiopic literary creation and thus to gain so sovereign a command of this *genre*. The benefits of this labour have been embodied in a long series of periodical articles which have, by general consent, been the most significant accretion to our knowledge of this field. His work is of relevance not only for Ethiopic literature but has a profound bearing on Christian oriental writings in general.

Edward Ullendorff, 'Foreword', in Getatchew Haile and Misrak Amare, *Beauty of the Creation. ሥነ ፍጥረት* #

Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph, 16

(Manchester: University of Manchester, 1991), pp. ix-x

Macomber, EMMML III, p. viii: '... it is clear that this present volume is a vast improvement over its predecessors and that the reason for that is the contribution furnished by Dr. Getatchew'.

While scholars engaged with Ethiopian studies will know and readily appreciate Getatchew's scholarship, whether in cataloging, in the edition of texts, or otherwise, those who have had the pleasure of his company have even greater cause to celebrate him. I and the other contributors to this volume are happy to dedicate, in open acknowledgement of that celebratory appreciation, these offerings to Getatchew, and to share them with the cadre of interested readers in these subjects.

### ደርሶኛል ለፕሮፌሰር ጌታቸው ኃይሌ

አእምሮዬ ሳይላሸቅ በፊት ፣  
 ፊቴን ሳያዞር ልጅነቴ ፣  
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ግን ፣  
 ሳውቅዎ አይደለም ፣  
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ማድረግ ቢሳኝ የኔ ።

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አምሃ አስፋው  
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