



The Council of the 318

*The Defining Epoch for the Ethiopian Tāwāḥədo Church ?*¹

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Abstract

Although the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwāḥədo* Church (EOTC) does not always reproduce the Nicæan Creed in its formal, dogmatic language, Nicæan thought is strongly influential in the formulation of her incarnational and Christological thought. In three key areas — liturgy, the interpretation of Enoch, and in the Ethiopian national epic, ክብረ ነገሥት, *Kabrä Nägäšt* (KN) — an indigenous incarnational theology is affirmed, indicating the Nicæan basis of Christology in the *Tāwāḥədo* churches. Despite the EOTC contemporary miaphysite Christology, her counter-Chalcedon position is rarely referenced in literature before Jesuit presence in Ethiopia. However, the “Council of the 318” becomes the primary description of the age after the establishment of the Church, justifying the description of EOTC Christology “pre-Chalcedonian” or even “achalcedonian.” The EOTC, however, chooses rather to define her Christology positively in a way that opens opportunities for inter-orthodox ecumenical dialogue, and which could also be explored in developing indigenous African theological approaches. Taken together, these three sources show that the primacy of Nicæa in the EOTC is expressed precisely through the Nicene tradition’s shaping of its Christology: Nicæa is “primary” because the Creed is normative, the 318 define the epoch of Church establishment, and the anaphoras embed Nicene faith; and Nicene Christology is “central” because the Church articulates the incarnation through Nicene categories of pre-existence, divine unity, and the Son’s consubstantiality with the Father.

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Résumé

Bien que l'Église Orthodoxe Éthiopienne *Tāwāḥādo* (en anglais : EOTC) ne reprenne pas toujours le Credo de Nicée dans son langage formel et dogmatique, la pensée nicéenne exerce une forte influence sur la formulation de sa théologie incarnationnelle et christologique. Dans trois domaines clés — la liturgie, l'interprétation d'Hénoch et l'épopée nationale éthiopienne, ክብረ ነግሥት, *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* (KN) — une théologie incarnationnelle indigène est affirmée, ce qui témoigne du fondement nicéen de la christologie dans les Églises *Tāwāḥādo*. Malgré la christologie miaphysite contemporaine d'EOTC, sa position anti-Chalcédoine est rarement mentionnée dans la littérature antérieure à la présence des jésuites en Éthiopie. Cependant, le « Concile des 318 » devient la principale référence pour décrire l'époque qui a suivi la fondation de l'Église, justifiant ainsi la qualification de la christologie de l'EOTC comme « pré-chalcédonienne », voire « achalcédonienne ». Toutefois, l'EOTC choisit toutefois de définir sa christologie de manière positive, de façon à ouvrir des perspectives de dialogue œcuménique interorthodoxe, et qui pourrait également être explorée dans le cadre de l'élaboration d'approches théologiques africaines autochtones. Prises ensemble, ces trois sources montrent que la primauté de Nicée au sein de l'EOTC s'exprime précisément à travers la manière dont la tradition nicéenne a façonné sa christologie : Nicée est « primaire » et « essentiel » parce que le Credo est normatif, les 318 définissent l'époque de la fondation de l'Église et que les anaphores incarnent la foi nicéenne ; et la christologie nicéenne est « centrale » parce que l'Église articule l'incarnation à travers les catégories nicéennes de la préexistence, de l'unité divine et de la consubstantialité du Fils avec le Père.

Resumo

Embora a Igreja Ortodoxa Etíope *Tāwāḥādo* (em inglês: EOTC) nem sempre reproduz o Credo de Nicéia na sua linguagem formal e dogmática, o pensamento niceno exerce uma forte influência na formulação da sua teologia encarnacional e cristológica. Em três domínios-chave — a liturgia, a interpretação de Enoque e a epopeia nacional etíope, ክብረ ነግሥት, *Kəbrä Nəgäšt* (KN) — é afirmada uma teologia encarnacional indígena, o que atesta o fundamento niceno da cristologia nas Igrejas *Tāwāḥādo*. Apesar da cristologia miafisita contemporânea da EOTC, a sua posição anti-Calcedoniana raramente é mencionada na literatura anterior à presença dos jesuítas na Etiópia. No entanto, o “Concílio dos 318” torna-se a principal referência para descrever o período que se seguiu à fundação da Igreja, justificando assim a qualificação da cristologia da EOTC como “pré-calcedoniana,” ou mesmo “acalcedoniana.” No entanto, a EOTC opta por definir a sua

cristologia de forma positiva, de modo a abrir perspectivas de diálogo ecuménico interortodoxo, o que poderia também ser explorado no âmbito da elaboração de abordagens teológicas africanas e indígenas. Consideradas em conjunto, estas três fontes mostram que a primazia de Nicéia no seio da EOTC se expressa precisamente através da forma como a tradição nicena moldou a sua cristologia: Nicéia é «primária» porque o Credo é normativo, porque os 318 definem a época da fundação da Igreja e porque as anáforas encarnam a fé nicena; e a cristologia nicena é “central” porque a Igreja articula a encarnação através das categorias nicenas da pré-existência, da unidade divina e da consubstancialidade do Filho com o Pai.

Keywords

Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwāḥədo* Church (EOTC), Council of Nicaea, *Kəbrä Nāgäst*, *Kebra Nagast*, christology, Nicene orthodoxy, indigenous incarnation theology, *Tawahedo*, *Tāwahedo*, *Tewahedo*

Mots-clés

Église Orthodoxe Éthiopienne *Tāwāḥədo*, Concile de Nicée, *Kəbrä Nāgäst*, *Kebra Nagast*, christologie, orthodoxie nicéenne, théologie incarnationnelle autochtone, *Tawahedo*, *Tāwahedo*, *Tewahedo*

Palavras-chave

Igreja Ortodoxa Etíope de *Tāwāḥədo*, Concílio de Niceia, *Kəbrä Nāgäst*, *Kebra Nagast*, cristologia, ortodoxia nicena, teologia encarnacional indígena, *Tawahedo*, *Tāwahedo*, *Tewahedo*

Introduction

This article explores the creative ways in which the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwāḥədo* Church (EOTC) expresses her incarnation and Christological reflections, seeking to demonstrate the primary importance of Nicaean thinking. In the EOTC, the primacy of Nicaea and the Nicene Christology are not separate claims but two aspects of a single theological reality: Nicaea is “primary” because Creed, its bishops, and its epoch define the Church’s doctrinal and liturgical identity, and Nicene Christology is “central” because the Church expresses the incarnation through Nicene categories of pre-existence, divine unity, and the Son’s having the same nature as the Father. The EOTC is part of the Oriental family of churches, also often referred to as ‘non-Chalcedonian’ because they did not accept the ‘two natures’ formula of the Council of Chalcedon for describing the union of humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus Christ. The reception of Chalcedon was in fact a very complex matter, as it was primarily the churches in Egypt and Syria that took issue with

Pope Leo's Tome and its Christology that was agreed upon on at the council.² Other churches that ended up in the Oriental group took much longer to decide. The Armenian Apostolic Church, for instance, did not make a clear decision against Chalcedon until the Synod of Dvin in 506 CE, opposing it because of suspicions of its Nestorian leanings.³

Since the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOTC⁴) was governed by the Patriarchate of Alexandria until autocephaly⁵ in AD 1959 it adopted a “non-Chalcedonian” position through that connection, as there were no Ethiopians present at the council. It was finally at the Council of Boru Meda in AD 1878 that the Ethiopian Church articulated its eponymous “*Tāwāḥādo*” Christology.⁶ Otherwise, it is not until the fifteenth century that Ethiopian writers specifically attack Chalcedon, and their stance on Chalcedon seems to have been strengthened following engagement with Portuguese Jesuits in the sixteenth century.⁷ Before this, many EOTC texts make no reference to Chalcedon or deal with it only briefly. Most notably, the *Summa* of EOTC Christology, Giyorgis of Gaśšeča's *Book of Mystery*,⁸ makes only brief reference to Chalcedon, and then primarily associating it with “Nestorian” ideas.⁹

The magisterial work of Aloys Grillmeier surveys a wide range of important manuscripts, as well as the anaphoras and other texts of the Ethiopian tradition and her Christology.¹⁰ As with much Ethiopian material, no clear description of Ethiopian Christology is found in this work, because of the EOTC's eschewing of systematic approaches to theology.¹¹ Nevertheless, Grillmeier correctly notes

² Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 15–16.

³ Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 99.

⁴ Since the autocephaly of the Eritrean Orthodox *Tāwāḥādo* Church following Eritrean independence in 1993, the Eritrean and Ethiopian church still share the same tradition, and literature. I restrict reference here to the Ethiopian Church because the key text for this paper, *Kəbrä Nəgāst*, ‘Glory of Kings,’ holds a special place particularly within the nation of Ethiopia, as it narrates the Sheba Legend that tells how the Ark of the Covenant came to Ethiopia. Tradition affirms that following this account the Ark of the Covenant is now kept in a chapel in Ethiopia's ancient capital city, Aksum. This tradition holds less significance for the Eritrean Church.

⁵ “Autocephaly” refers to a church being autocephalous, literally ‘having its own head,’ the term used when an Orthodox Church becomes independent and so has its own patriarch.

⁶ See Eloi Ficquet, “Boru Meda.”

⁷ See Witold Witakowski, “Chalcedon, Council of.”

⁸ Ermias Hiruie, *The Book of Mystery: Mäṣḥafä Mäṣṭir of Abba Giyorgis of Gasāḫča, 1364–1425. Ethiopia's Most Iconic Theological, Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Treatise*.

⁹ Hiruie, *Book of Mystery*, 5, 67, 109, 220, 27.

¹⁰ Aloys Grillmeier and Theresia Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Volume 2: *From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590-604)*, Part 4: *The Church of Alexandria with Nubia and Ethiopia after 451*, 294–392.

¹¹ Grillmeier and Hainthaler reference three important documents relating to the expedition of King Caleb of Ethiopia to Najran early in the sixth century AD. In particular they refer

the importance of works known as *Qerellos*, that is, a major body of literature attributed to Cyril of Alexandria (412-444 CE) that were translated into Gə‘əz along with the books of the Bible around the mid fifth century CE.¹² Cyril of Alexandria’s christology features strongly throughout the Ethiopic literature,¹³ and significant for this study is that the texts in the *Qerellos* have been described by Bernd Manuel Weischer as “anti-Nestorian and achalcedonian,”¹⁴ consistent with Grillmeier’s analysis.¹⁵ Throughout EOTC literature references to Nicaea are often veiled using “The 318” or “The 300” referring to the 318 bishops traditionally understood to have attended the First Council.¹⁶ The significance of “The 318” is expressed in liturgical commemoration, addressed partially by Grillmeier, and in two further texts where they feature strongly: in the interpretation of Ethiopic Enoch, and in much more detail in KN.

Liturgical Reception of Nicaea

There is regular liturgical commemoration of Nicaea. The 318 bishops, sometimes abbreviated to ሠላስቱ ምእት (*sälastu mǝ’ət*, ‘the Three Hundred’), are

to a letter by Simeon of Bēth-Aršām (500s), that uses what he considers to be strong anti-Chalcedonian language; *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 305–312. This letter is published and discussed in Irfan Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents*. Whilst this is important, the documents are not from within EOTC tradition and so are not relevant to this paper.

¹² See these works by or edited and translated by Bernd Manuel Weischer:

“Der Dialog « Dass Christus Einer Ist » des Cyrill von Alexandrien. Nach Handschriften in Berlin, Cambridge, London, Paris und Tübingen zum ersten Mal in Äthiopischen Text herausgegeben und mit deutscher Übersetzung versehen von Bernd Manuel Weischer.”

“Die äthiopischen Psalmen- und Qerlosfragmente in Erevan / Armenien.”

Qērellos I: Der Prosphonetikos « Über den rechten Glauben » des Kyrillos von Alexandrien und Theodosios II.

Qērellos II: Der Prosphonetikos « Über den rechten Glauben » des Kyrillos von Alexandrien an Arkadia und Marina.

Qērellos III: Der Dialog « Dass Christus Einer Ist » des Kyrillos von Alexandrien.

Qērellos IV 1: Homilien und Briefe zum Konzil von Ephesos.

Qērellos IV 2: Traktate des Epiphianos von Zypern und des Proklos von Kyzikos.

Qērellos IV 3: Traktate des Severianos von Gabala, Gregorios Thaumaturgos und Kyrillos von Alexandrien.

¹³ See Alessandro Bausi, “Qerrəllōs.”

¹⁴ Bernd Manuel Weischer, “Historical and Philological Problems of the Axumitic Literature (Especially in the *Qerellos*),” 93.

¹⁵ Although with relatively limited resources available at the time, this account is an extremely important analysis of EOTC outlooks. See Grillmeier and Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian tradition*, 294–392.

¹⁶ The reference to 318 is clearly to the number of bishops that Athanasius stated as attending the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, with a further allusion to the 318 men that Abraham raised as an army in Genesis 14:14. For further information on the attendees at Nicaea see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381*, 155–156.

commemorated on the ninth day of each Ethiopian month. It is striking that this is the only regular commemoration of Fathers connected with a council in the EOTC calendar.¹⁷

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 is used in thirteen of the fourteen anaphora currently used in the EOTC, with The Apostles Creed used only in the Anaphora of the Apostles, which is celebrated only on the memorial day of any of the Apostles.¹⁸ The development of the anaphoras is not fully understood. Two anaphoras, those of the Apostles and of Our Lord Jesus Christ were, in some form, possibly used from the early centuries of the Ethiopian Church. They would have originally been translated from Greek, although their content has been embellished since then, and the inclusion of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in the Anaphora of Our Lord Jesus Christ therefore cannot be dated to this early period. Most of the remaining anaphoras are almost certainly original Gə‘əz compositions dating from the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, but undoubtedly with some limited influence from Arabic sources from the Coptic Church.¹⁹ Furthermore, one of the EOTC’s many eucharistic anaphoras has the epithet, “The Three Hundred;” this text most probably being composed in Gə‘əz in the fifteenth century by the important EOTC theologian, Giyorgis of Gaśsecha (c. 1365 – 1425).²⁰ All this seems to indicate that Nicaean Christology is the primary focus of the EOTC, as there was ample opportunity to address the issues of Chalcedon during their composition. These texts are composed around the inception of the first Jesuit presence in Ethiopia, although there is no clear connection between this presence and the inclusion of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in the anaphora.

Even by fifteenth century, Chalcedon does not appear to feature significantly in the liturgy, with the clearest albeit implicit reference being the Anaphora of Dioscorus, who was banished following the Council of Chalcedon because of his rejection of the “two natures” formula.²¹ Indeed, Grillmeier found that “in the anaphoras the Chalcedonian controversy plays hardly a role in

¹⁷ Unusually this celebration is not shared with the Coptic Church calendar. See Emmanuel Fritsch and Ugo Zanetti, “Calendar.”

¹⁸ Marcos Daoud, trans., *The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, 40n1, 86, 173.

¹⁹ See Habtemichael Kidane, “Anaphoras.”

²⁰ See Habtemichael, “Anaphoras;” Getachew Haile, “On the Authorship of Ethiopian Anaphoras;” and Gerard Colin, “Giyorgis of Sägla.” For a more detailed discussion of the origin of the Anaphora of Our Lady Mary, see Getachew Haile, “On the Identity of Silondis and the Composition of the Anaphora of Mary Ascribed to Həryaqos of Bəhənsa.”

²¹ Volker L Menze, *Patriarch Dioscorus of Alexandria: the Last Pharaoh and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Later Roman Empire*, 151–185. The Anaphora of Dioscorus has no polemic against Chalcedon, although it does affirm a ‘one nature’ Christology, for instance, “. . . as His divinity became one with His humanity unto the ages of ages.” Daoud, trans., *The Liturgy of the Ethiopian Church*, #53, 162.

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regard to ‘one’ or ‘two’ natures,”²² and this brief analysis points rather to Nicaea as the guide.

Salvation History and the *Apocalypse of Weeks*

Since the fifth century translation of the Scriptures from Greek into Gə‘əz, the EOTC has developed an indigenous approach to hermeneutics,²³ and 1 Enoch, uniquely still considered sacred, has an important hermeneutical role.²⁴ An extensive survey of the interpretation of Enoch shows that one of its primary functions is to give an overview of salvation history, and the brief *Apocalypse of Weeks* (AW), the section of Enoch with most frequent commentary, serves this purpose.²⁵ AW follows Second Temple Jewish interpretations to divide salvation history into ten “weeks” representing epochs from creation through to final judgement, which is then followed by “many weeks.”²⁶ EOTC interpretations, like the Second Temple ones are “highly selective choosing from a number of larger pools of possibilities,”²⁷ and EOTC interpretations largely mapping onto those from the Second Temple literature, with later “weeks” identified with the advent and return of Christ.

²² Grillmeier and Hainthaler, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 384.

²³ For a comprehensive appraisal of this tradition see the seminal studies of Roger W. Cowley, esp. his *Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation: A Study in Exegetical Tradition and Hermeneutics and The Traditional Interpretation of the Apocalypse of John in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church*.

²⁴ There is, of course, a strong connection between Ethiopic Enoch and 1 Enoch. Only the Gə‘əz text is complete but the textual developments since its translation, probably in the fifth century AD, and the fact that the earliest extant manuscripts are nearly 1000 years later than this translation date means that they cannot be understood as identical texts. For a detailed discussion of this see Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “The Book of Enoch: Its Reception in Second Temple Jewish and in Christian Tradition.” Enoch is usually included in the ‘canon’ of scripture. The term ‘canon’ must be used loosely in reference to the EOTC. There are normally 81 books listed as biblical texts, and Enoch features in some lists of books and not in others. For further information on this see Bruk Ayele Asale, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Canon of the Scriptures: Neither Open nor Closed.”

²⁵ It is significant that much of the text of Enoch is ignored in Gə‘əz commentary, making the inclusion of Apocalypse of Weeks very significant. See Ralph Lee, “The Reception and Function of 1 Enoch in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition.”

²⁶ Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *1 Enoch 91–108*, pp. 2, 57–59.

²⁷ Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “The Apocalypse of Weeks: Periodization and Tradition-Historical Context,” 84. This article points to other schemas for dividing history in a similar way, but with the presence of 1 Enoch within the EOTC tradition there is little need to look further than this to explain the periodization.

There are several different EOTC interpretations of the “weeks,”²⁸ but two commentaries highlight the Council of Nicaea. The slightly later sixteenth century commentary from the important Gunda Gunde monastery in Tigray (GG) expresses this most succinctly, with “weeks” 1–10 interpreted as: Adam to Enoch; the deluge until Abraham; Abraham, the plant of righteousness, until the giving of the Law; the giving of the Law, the precepts, until the age of Solomon; the age of Solomon, the building of the “house of glory”; the captivity, in which the “house” is burned; from the captivity until the birth of Christ; the age of the birth of Christ and the establishment of the Church; the age of the 318; and the day of judgement followed by “many weeks, the never-ending Kingdom of Heaven, in which sin no longer exists is not mentioned.”²⁹ The earliest known commentary, the fifteenth century *Book of the Mysteries of Heaven and Earth* (MHE), identifies week eight rather than nine as “The Age of the 318 Orthodox Faithful, the sword is the Word of God,” adding that “the place signifies the churches built in the age of King Constantine.”³⁰ The difference is minor, and arises from MHE allowing an extra “week” for the advent of heretics, which are implicit in the ninth “week” of GG. In both cases the “week” associated with Nicaea corresponds to the establishment of the Church, and the articulation of the substance of Christian faith that was formally started at the First Council.³¹ The choice is striking, given the “pools of possibilities.”³² It could be that “The Age of the 318” is shorthand for something like the “age of the councils,” but another EOTC text, ክብረ ነገሥት (*Kəbrä Nəgästä*, ‘Glory of Kings’), suggests that Nicaea is crucial.

ክብረ ነገሥት, *Kəbrä Nəgästä*³³

The Ethiopian national epic, ክብረ ነገሥት (*Kəbrä Nəgästä*, ‘Glory of Kings,’ KN) is a complex text with the Sheba Legend at its core, narrating the encounter between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (ref. 1 Ki 10:1–10, 13). In this

²⁸ For a discussion of all the known commentary, see Lee, “The Reception and Function of 1 Enoch”; and Ralph Lee, “Gə‘əz Commentary on 1 Enoch.”

²⁹ Lee, “The Reception and Function of 1 Enoch,” 317–318.

³⁰ Lee, “The Reception and Function of 1 Enoch,” 316. The text reads, “91:12 And after this there will be another week, the eight, that of righteousness, and a sword will be given to it that the righteous judgement may be executed on those who do wrong, and the sinners will be handed over into the hands of the righteous.” Michael A Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch: A New Edition in the Light of the Aramaic Dead Sea Fragments*, vol. 2: *Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, 219.

³¹ Lee, “The Reception and Function of 1 Enoch,” 316–317. The two texts are the fifteenth century *Book of the Mysteries of Heaven and Earth* and a sixteenth century commentary produced at the important Gunda Gunde monastery in Tigray.

³² Stuckenbruck, “Apocalypse of Weeks,” 84.

³³ In English translation this is generally transliterated as *Kebra Nagast*; e.g., see E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Kebra Nagast*.

embellished version, the Queen bears a son through Solomon, ምኒልክ (*Mənilək*), who returns to Israel and takes the Ark of the Covenant to Aksum.³⁴ Although there has been some disagreement about the date of this text, there is good agreement that it was compiled (and parts composed) no later than AD 1321.³⁵ This date fits with one of its primary intentions: giving narrative and theological support to what was the newly established Solomonic dynasty ruling Ethiopia. Although in western scholarship focus has been on KN's assertion that the Ark of the Covenant came to Ethiopia, it is a complex collection of theological-political texts for which we have very few sources. Although the theological components have received little attention, Witold Witakowsky suggested that KN shows, more than any other text, EOTC reflections on the Nicene Creed,³⁶ with several references made to the Nicene bishops. It is to this text that this paper now turns as a rich source of reflection influenced by Nicaean thought. The portions quoted in this paper all come from material composed close to the time of its compilation.³⁷

A short introduction to KN opens with a Trinitarian statement of faith that is clearly drawn from the Creed of Nicaea:³⁸

በእኩቲቴ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፡ አብ፡ ኢህዜ፡ ኩሉ፤ ወበወልዱ፡ ኢየሱስ፡ ክርስቶስ፡ ዘቡቲ፡ ኩሉ፡ ተነ፡ ወዘእንበሊሁሰ፡ አልቦ፡ ዘኮነ፤ ወበመንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ጳራ-ቅሊጦስ፡ ዘይወፅአ፡ እምአብ፡ ወይነሥእ፡ እምወልድ፡ ፩እምላክ፡ አብ፡ ወወልድ፡ ወመንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ነአምን፡ ወንገኒ፡ ለሥሉስ፡³⁹

³⁴ The Sheba legend, known in many forms circulated around the Middle East, in its Ethiopian form narrates the story of the encounter between the Queen of Sheba and Solomon and how their son *Mənilək* (typically transliterated as 'Menelik' in English) conceived a plan to take the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia. For more information see Carl Bezold, *Kebra Nagast: Die Herrlichkeit der Könige nach den Handschriften in Berlin, London, Oxford und Paris zum ersten mal im Äthiopischen Urtext herausgegeben und mit deutsche Übersetzung versehen*; and E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and her only son Menyelek (I): Being the 'Book of the Glory of Kings' (Kebra Nagast) a Work Which Is Alike the Traditional History of the Establishment of the Religion of the Hebrews in Ethiopia, and the Patent of Sovereignty Which Is Now Universally Accepted in Abyssinia as the Symbol of the Divine Authority to Rule Which the Kings of the Solomonic Line Claimed to Have Received through their Descent from the House of David*. Much of KN lengthy content is devoted to the understanding of the significance of the *Tabot*, that is the Gə'əz word used for the Ark of the Covenant and its connection to the incarnation. The political significance is derived from Ethiopia's possession of the Ark, and the implied blessing on the nation and its leadership. For a detailed discussion of the incarnational symbolism connected to the Ark see Ralph Lee, *Symbolic Interpretations in Ethiopic and Early Syriac Literature*, 53–68.

³⁵ Paolo Marrassini, "Kebra Nagast," 365–366.

³⁶ Witold Witakowski, "Nicea, Council of," 1176.

³⁷ See David A. Hubbard, "The Literary Sources of the Kebra Nagast."

³⁸ All translations of KN are this author's own from the critical edition Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*. Where Bezold uses Gə'əz reference numbers in his critical text instead of Arabic numbers, I have retained his usage.

³⁹ Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, ፩.

bä 'ak'ätetu lä 'əgəzi'abəher ab aḥaze k'əllu, wäbäwäldu iyäsus krsətos zäbotu k'əllu konä wäzä 'ənbälehusä albo zäkonä, wäbämānfäs qədus paraqlītos zäyewäq 'ə em 'ab wäyyənäs 'ə ' emwäld aḥadu amlak ab wäwäld wämānfäs qəddus nä 'amən wänəgäni lāsəlus

With the praise of God, Lord of All,⁴⁰ and of His Son, Jesus Christ, by whom all things came into being, and without whom nothing came into being, and of the Holy Spirit, Paraclete, who proceeds from the Father, and who takes from the Son, One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe in and give thanks to the Trinity.

Immediately following this, at the very beginning of the first chapter “Concerning the Glory of Kings,” the 318 Fathers are invoked to affirm the idea of what KN terms the “heavenly Zion”:

፩፡ በእንተ፡ ከብረ፡ ነገሥት።

ፍካሬ፡ ወዜና፡ ዘ፫፻፲ ወጁ፡ ርቱዓነ፡ ሃይማኖት፡ በእንተ፡ ከብረ፡ ወዕበይ፡ ወተድላ፡ ዘከመ፡ ወሀበ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ ለደቂቅ፡ አዳም፡ ወፌድ፡ፋደስ፡ ዘበእንተ፡ ዕበያ፡ ወከብራ፡ ለጽዮን፡ ታቦተ፡ ሐጉ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፡ እንተ፡ ገባረሃ፡ ወኪንያሃ፡ ለሊሁ፡ በውስተ፡ ጽርሐ፡ መቅደስ፡ እምቅድመ፡ ኩሉ፡ ፍጥረት፡ መላእክት፡ ወሰብእ። እስመ፡ በኅብረት፡ ወበሥምረት፡ ወበዕሪና፡ ገብርዮ፡ አብ፡ ወወልድ፡ ወመንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ለጽዮን፡ ሰማያዊት፡ ለማኅደረ፡ ስብሐቲሆሙ።⁴¹

1 bā 'entä kebrä Nägäšt.

fəḵare wäzena zä318 rətu 'anä hay manot bā 'əntä kbr wä 'ebäy wätädəla zäkämä wähabä əgəzi 'abəher lādäqiqä adam, wäfädfadäsä zäbä 'rrnätä abäya wäkəbra lāsəyon tabotä ḥəgu lä 'egəzi 'abəher enətä gəbariha wäkenyaha lālihu bāwəstā šərəḥa māqdäsu əmqədämä k'əllu fəṭərät mälä 'əkt wäsäb 'ə. əsmä bāḥəbrät wäbäsəmrät wäbä 'ərina gäbrəwwa ab wäwewäld wämānfäs qəddus lāsəyon sāmawayit lämaḥdärä sebəḥatihomu.

1: Concerning the Glory of Kings:

The interpretation and announcement of the 318 Orthodox in Faith, concerning the glory and greatness, and dignity that God gave to the children of Adam, and especially concerning the greatness and glory of Zion, the *Tabot* of the Law of God, which He made and fashioned for Himself and in which he made in the chamber of his holiness, before all creation, [whether] angels or humankind. Because with unity and good will, and agreement the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit made the Heavenly Zion as a dwelling place for their glory.

The theology of the “heavenly Zion” or *Tabot* is central to KN, and the term refers to the Ark that Moses was commanded to construct, and the “heavenly chamber” on which it is understood to be modelled. Mary is further symbolically connected through her bearing of God without being destroyed,

⁴⁰ አጋዘ፡ ኩሉ (‘aḥaze k'əllu) is often translated as “Almighty.”

⁴¹ Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, ፩.

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seen as analogous to the Ark in which God dwelled without it being destroyed. It is not immediately apparent why KN appeals to the Fathers of Nicaea, but the text continues with an imagined conversation between the members of the Trinity in language drawing further on the Creed, that strongly affirms the pre-existence of the Son and the Spirit, with the Father before the creation:

ወእምዝ፡ ይቤ፡ ኣብ፡ ለወልድ። ወለመንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ንግባር፡ ሰብኣ፡ በኣርእያን፡ ወበኣምሳሌን፤ ወኅብሩ፡ ወሠምሩ፡ በዝ፡ ምክር። ወይቤ፡ ወልድ፡ ኣነ፡ ኣለብስ፡ ሥጋሁ፡ ለኣዳም፤ ወይቤ፡ መንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ኣነ፡ ኣኅድር፡ ውስተ፡ ልብ፡ ነቢያት፡ ወጻድቃን። ወዛቲ፡ ኅብረት፡ ወኪዳን፡ ተጉብረት፡ በውስተ፡ ጽዮን፡ ማኅደረ፡ ሰብሐቲሆሙ። ወዳዊትኒ፡ ይቤ፡ ተዘከር፡ ማኅበረከ፡ ዘኣቕደምከ፡ ፈጢረ፡ ለመድኅኒተ፡ በትረ፡ ርስትከ። በደብረ፡ ጽዮን፡ ዘኅደርከ፡ ውስቴታ። ወጉብሮ፡ ለኣዳም፡ በዘዘኣሁ፡ ኣርእያ፡ ወኣምሳል፡ ከመ፡ ይንሥቶ፡ ለሰይጣን፡ በኣንተ፡ ትዕቢቱ፡ ምስለ፡ ሰራዊቱ፤ ወደቅሞ፡ ለኣዳም፡ ተክለ፡ ዘኣሁ፡ ምስለ፡ ጒራን፡ ደቂቁ፡ ለስብሐቲሁ። እስመ፡ ኅሉቅ፡ ወምቱር፡ ምክረ፡ እግዚአብሔር፡ ኣንተ፡ ይቤ፡ እከውን፡ ሰብኣ፡ ወኣስተርኢ፡ ለተሉ፡ ዘፈጠርኩ፡ በሥጋ፡ ኣትጎሰስኪ፤ ወበደኃሪ፡ መዋዕል፡ በሥምረቱ፡ ተወልደ፡ በሥጋ፡ እምዳግማዊት፡ ጽዮን፡ ዳግማዊ፡ ኣዳም፡ ዝውኣቱ፡ መድኅኒን፡ ክርስቶስ፡ ዛቲ፡ ይኣቲ፡ ምክሕን፡ ወሃይማኖትን፡ ተሰፋኑ፡ ወሕይወትን፡ ጽዮን፡ ለማደባታ።⁴²

I bā 'entä kebrä Nägästä.

wä 'əmzə yəbe ab läwäld wälämānəfäs qəddus nəgəbar säbə 'a bā 'arə 'ayanä wäbä 'amsalenä, wāḥəbru wäsāməru bāzə məkr. wäyəbe wäld anä əläbəs šəgahu lä 'adam, wäyəbe mänəfäs qəddus anä aḥadər wəstā ləbä nəbiyat wəsadaqan. wəzati ḥəbərät wəkidan tāgäbrät bāwəsətä šəyon maḥdärä säbəḥatīhomu. wədawitəni yəbe täzākər maḥbäräkä zä 'aqdamäkä fätirä lāmādəhanitā bātrā rəstākä። bādäbrä šəyon zāḥadärkä wəsteta. wägäbərə lä 'adam bāzäzi 'ahu arə 'aya wä 'amsal kāmā yənšto lāsäyṭan bā 'enətä tə 'əbitu məsələ sārawitu, wäyaqəmo lä 'adam täklä zi 'ahu məsələ ḥeran dāqiqu lāsəbəḥatihu። esmä ḥəluq wāmatur məkrä əgəzi 'abəḥer enətä yəbe əkawn säbə 'a wä 'astärä 'i läk'əllu zäfätärku bäsəga ətəgəsäs, wäbādāhari mawa 'əl bāsmrātu tāwäldä bäsəga emdagmawit šəyon dagmawi adam zewe 'etu mādəhaninā krəstos zati ye 'eti mekḥənä wāhaymanotənā täsfanä wāḥeywätənä šəyon sāmawayit.

And after this the Father said to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, “let us make humankind in our likeness and in our image,” and they were united and delighted with this matter. And the Son said, “I will clothe myself with the flesh of Adam,” and the Holy Spirit said, “I will dwell in the heart of the prophets and the righteous,” and this agreement and covenant was made in Zion, the dwelling place of their glory. And David said, “remember your congregation which you made before creation for the salvation of the rod of your inheritance, on Mount Zion, in which you dwell.”⁴³ And he made Adam in his own likeness

⁴² Bezold, *Kebrä Nagast*, 8–9.

⁴³ Ps. 73/74:2 «ተዘከር ማኅበረከ ዘኣቕደምከ ፈጢረ፡ ወኣድኅኒከ በትረ ርስትከ፡ደብረ ጽዮን ዘኅደርከ ውስቴታ።» (täzākər maḥbäräkä zä 'aqdamäkä fätirä wä 'adḥənäkä bātrā rəstākä dābrä šəyon

and image, so that he might take Satan and his army away, because of his pride, and might establish Adam as his shoot, with his excellent children, for his praise. Because God's plan was accomplished and decided which said, 'I will become a man, and I will show myself to all that I have created, and in flesh I will become tangible.' And in the last days with his good pleasure he was born in flesh, from the Second Zion,⁴⁴ the second Adam, which is our Saviour, Christ, who is our boasting and our faith, our hope and our life, the Second Zion.

Rather than reproducing the rigid, formulaic language of the Nicene Creed, *Kəbrä Nəgāst* adopts a narrative-symbolic approach that embeds Nicaean theology within imaginative dialogue. It portrays conversations between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit prior to creation, affirming their eternal coexistence and unity. It is not immediately apparent why the author of KN adopts this approach. It is worth noting that symbolic language is frequently employed in EOTC theology,⁴⁵ developed most expressively in *Qəne* poetry which eschews definitions and instead prefers rather creative imagery and imagined conversations.⁴⁶ In these exchanges, the Son declares, "I will clothe myself with the flesh of Adam," and "I will become tangible," while the Spirit promises to dwell within the hearts of the righteous. This unusual language implicitly affirms Nicaean thought. The phrase «አትገለስ» (*ətagäsäs*, 'I will become tangible') is a very expressive statement about the incarnation — implicitly the Son talks as co-equal with the Father in nature, and indicates his plan to become human. This imagined conversation might be a place to expect a Gə'əz equivalent of *ὁμοούσιος* (*homoousios*). It turns out that there is no consistent translation of this term. The most logical wording, perhaps, would be from the dogmatic language found in the early (fifth century) *Qerrəlos*, ገቡረ ህላዌ (*ḥəburä ḥəlawe*, 'of the same nature'), used to translate the Greek *ὁμοούσιος* in these works, but this is not found anywhere in KN.⁴⁷ Even this dogmatic formulation

zeḥadärkä wəsteta, "remember your gathering which you caused before creating, and you saved the rod of your inheritance, Mount Zion, in which you dwell", from the text known as the 'New Gə'əz Bible': Scholars of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, መጽሐፍ ቅዱስ ዘብሉይ ወዘሐዲስ ዘልሳነ ግሥዝ [*māṣḥaf qəddus zäbäluy wäzeḥadis zäləsanä gə'əz*, 'The Holy Books of the Old and of the New Testament in Gə'əz'], 886.

⁴⁴ The 'second Zion' is Mary, and Christ the second Adam. Zion is the place where God has chosen to dwell, in heaven, in the Ark of Moses, and realized in the incarnation through Mary. For an extended discussion of this see Lee, *Symbolic Interpretations*, 81–88.

⁴⁵ For an extensive discussion of this see Lee, *Symbolic Interpretations*, 79–157.

⁴⁶ This tradition is the subject of a research project at Sankt Ignatios College Sweden led by the author. So far there is little literature in English on this tradition. One short article that gives good insight is Daniel Assefa and Tekletsadik Belachew, "Ethiopian Qene (Traditional and Living Oral Poetry) as a Medium for Biblical Hermeneutics,"

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Weischer, ed. and trans., "Der Dialog « Dass Christus Einer Ist » des Cyrill von Alexandrien," 36.19; 92.13; 102.13; 222.7.

is not used consistently elsewhere. In the liturgy another term is used: «ዘዕፋይ ምስለ ኣብ በመለኮቱ» (*zä 'əruy məslä ab bāmäläkotu*, 'in divinity equal with the Father').⁴⁸ Neither *ḥəburä ḥəlawe* nor *zä 'əruy məslä ab bāmäläkotu* is found in KN, but instead, KN imagines a conversation which indirectly affirms both equality in divine nature and a physical incarnation in language akin to ὁμοούσιος, but without resorting to technical terminology. By framing doctrine through story and symbol, particularly the imagery of the Heavenly Zion and the Ark of the Covenant, the text reflects the EOTC tradition's preference for biblical typology and narrative theology over systematic formulations, making Nicene faith both accessible and culturally resonant.

These brief statements are oblique references to the Nicene statement of faith, but they creatively imagine a conversation between the Father and the Son about the incarnation that implicitly affirms that the Son was before the creation, and that he became human for salvation.

Later, similar affirmations are made attributed to the 318 Fathers of Nicaea:

፲፩: ኅበ: ኅበሩ: ፫፻፲ወጽርቱዓነ: ሃይማኖት::

ወአውሥእዎ: ወይቤሉ: እወ: አማን: ቀደመት: ተፈጥሮ: ታበተ: ኪዳን: ወአልበ: ሐሰት: ውስተ: ቃልከ: እሙን: ወርቱል: ወጽድቅ: ውእቱ: ወአልበ: ተውላጥ፤ አቅዲሙስ: ለጽዮን: ፈጠራ: ለማገደረ: ስብሐቲሁ: ወምከረ: ኪዳን: ዘይቤ: እለብስ: ሥጋ: አዳም: መሬታዊት: ወአስተርኢ: ለኩሉ: ዘፈጠርኩ: በእዴየ: ወበቃልየ: ወሶበስ: ኢወረደት: ጽዮን: ሰማያዊት: ወሶበኒ: ኢለብስ: ሥጋ: አዳም: እመ: ኢተርኣየ: እግዚአብሔር: ቃል: ወእመ: ኢኮነ: መድኅኒተነ፤ ስምዐ: በአምሳል፤ ጽዮን: ሰማያዊት: ተመስለታ: ለወላዲተ: መድኅን: ማርያም፤ እስመ: ሕንጽት: ጽዮን: ወንበር: ውስቲታ: ፲ቃላት: ዘሕግ: እለ: ጽሑፋት: በእደዊሁ: ወውስተ: ከርሠ: ማርያም: ኅደረ: ለሊሁ: ፈጣሪ: ዘበእንቲአሁ: ኩሉ: ኮነ::⁴⁹

12: *ḥabä ḥabru 318 rätu 'anä haymanot.*

wä'awṣä'wwo wäyəbelu ewä aman qädämät täfätəro tabotä kidan wä'aləbo ḥasät wəsətä qaləkä emun wärətu 'ə wəṣedq we'etu wä'aləbo täwlat, aqdimusä läṣəyon fätära lämaḥdärä sebaḥatihi wäməkrä kidanusä zäyəbe əläbsä səga adam märetawitā wä'astärə'i läk'əllu zäfätärku bā'ədeyā wäbäqaləyā. wäsobäsä iwärädät ṣəyon sāmayawit wäsobāni iläbsä səga adam emä itär 'əyā əgəzi 'abəḥer qal wä'əmā ikonä mädəḥanitänä, səmə'u bā'amsal, ṣəyonəsä sāmayawit tāmäsäläta läwäladitā mädḥən Maryam, esmä ḥənṣət ṣəyon wänəbur westeta 10 qalat zähəg əllä ṣəḥufat bā'ədāwihu wäwəstā kərsä maryam ḥadärä lālihu fātari zäbä 'ənəti 'ahu k'əllu konä.

12: Concerning the unity of the 318 Orthodox of Faith:

And they answered, 'Yes, truly the first created thing was the Ark of the Covenant, . . . First of all, he made Zion as a dwelling place for his glory,

⁴⁸ Täsfa Gabrä Šəllase, ed., መጽሐፈ ቅዱሴ በልሳነ ግዕዝ (*Mäṣəḥafä qəddase bēlesanä gə'əz*) [the book of the Liturgy in the Gə'əz Language], 91.

⁴⁹ Bezold, *Kebrä Nagast*, ፭–፮.

and the plan of his covenant which said, ‘I will clothe myself with the flesh of earthly Adam and I will reveal myself to all that I created with my hand and my word.’ And if the Heavenly Zion had not come down, and if he had not clothed himself with the flesh of Adam, then the Word of God would not have been revealed, and our salvation would not have been. His witness is in the likeness, the Heavenly Zion is the likeness of the bearer of Salvation, Mary, because Zion was constructed, and inside her are 10 Words of the Law, which are written by his hand, and he dwelt in Mary’s womb, the creator of all things, and through whom all things came into being.

Here, the 318 Nicaean fathers affirm together a conversation that expresses more the language of Ephesus in 431, expressing Θεοτόκος (*Theotókos*) as resembling the heavenly Ark in the same kind of imagined conversation as was used of incarnation. This language is important for the message of KN, which affirms that the Ark of the Covenant was made as the dwelling place for God on earth, and that this Ark resides in Ethiopia.⁵⁰

ἸἸ ጎበ፡ ጎበ፡ ጎበ፡ አበው፡ ጳጳሳት፡፡

ካዕበ፡ አውሥኡ፡ ማኅበረ ፫፻፲፱፡፡ወ ይቤሉ፡ አሜን፤ ዛቲኬ፡ ይእቲ፡ መድኅኒቶሙ፡ ለደቂቅ፡ አዳም፡ ታቦተ ሕጉ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፡ እምከመ፡ ወረደት፡ ትሰምዩ፡ ሰብአ፡ ቤቱ፡ ለእግዚአብሔር፤ በከመ፡ ይቤ፡ ዳዊት፡ ወማኅደሮሂ፡ ውስተ፡ ጽዮን፤ ወካዕበ፡ ይቤ፡ በአፈ፡ መንፈስ፡ ቅዱስ፡ ወማኅደርዮ፡ ዝዩ፡ እስመ፡ ጎረይከዋ፡ ወእባርከሙ፡ ለካህናቲሃ፡ ወአስተፈሥሐሙ፡ ለነዳያኒሃ፤ ወለዳዊትኒ፡ እሁብ፡ ዘርአ፡ በውስቴታ፡ በዲብ፡ ምድርኒ፡ ዘይከውን፡ ንጉሠ፡ ወበሰማያትኒ፡ ይነገስ፡ እምዘርአ፡ በሥጋ፡ ዲብ፡ መንበረ፡ መለኮት፤ ወጸላእቱኒ፡ ይገብኡ፡ ታሕተ፡ መከይደ፡ እገሪሁ፡ ወይትጎተሙ፡ በማኅተመ፡ ዚእሁ፡፡⁵¹

18: *ḥabä ḥabru abäw pappasat.*

ka`abä awsä`u maḥbärä 318 wä yäbelu amen, zatike ya`äti mädḥanitomu lädäqiaqä adam tabotä ḥəgu lä`əgzi`abəḥer əmkämä wärädät təsäməyi säbə`a betu lä`əgzi`abəḥer, bākämä yäbe dawit wämaḥdärohi wəsətä šəyon, wäka`əbä yäbe bā`afä mänəfäs qaddus wämaḥdärəyā zəyā əsmä ḥaräykəwwa wä`əbarkomu läkahənatiha wä`astäfäsəhomu länädayaniha, wälädawitəni əhubo zärä`a bāwəsteta bädibä mədrəni zäyəkəwən nəgušä wäbäsəmayatəni yənägäs əmzärä`u bäsəga dibä mänbärä mäləkot, wəšälä`tuni yəgäbə`u taḥtä mäkäyädä əgärihu wäytəḥatämu bāmaḥətamä zi`ahu.

18: When the Fathers and Bishops Agreed

Again, the Council of the 318 answered and said, “Amen. This is the salvation of the children of Adam. Since the Ark of the Law of God came down, they shall be called, “People of the House of God” as David said, “and his dwelling place is in Zion.” Again, he says through the

⁵⁰ A full discussion of this thinking is beyond the scope of this paper, but for a more comprehensive discussion see Lee, *Symbolic Interpretations*, 24.

⁵¹ Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, 1፩.

mouth of the Holy Spirit, “and my dwelling place is here, because I chose her, and I will bless her priests, and I will make her poor ones rejoice. I will give to David a seed in inside her on the earth, who will become king, and in the heavens [One] will rule from his seed in the flesh upon the throne of the Godhead. As for his enemies, they will gather under his footstool, and they will be sealed with his seal.”

The Nicaean fathers again affirm the incarnation. A further reference is made to “The 318” in chapter 29 broadly affirming the Nicene statement of faith and ‘that which we should teach and how we should fashion the faith.’

፳፱፡ በእንተ፡ ፫፻፲ወጽ

ወንሕነ፡ ሠራዕ፡ ምስሌሆሙ፡ ጠዩቀነ፡ ዘነበቡ፡ እለ፡ እምቅድሜነ፡ ሐዋርያት፤ ንሕነ፡ ፫፻፲ወጽ፡ አርታዕነ፡ ወአስተራታዕነ፡ ሃይማኖተ፡ እንዘ፡ እግዚእነ፡ ኢየሱስ፡ ክርስቶስ፡ ምስሌነ፤ ወውእቱ፡ ሠርዐ፡ ለነ፡ ዘከመ፡ ንሜህር፡ ወዘከመ፡ ንገብር፡ ሃይማኖተ፡⁵²

29: *bä'antä 318.*

wänəhnäni šära 'ənä məslehomu täyiqänä zänäbäbu əlä əmqədmenä ḥawarəyat, nəhnä 318 arəta 'nä wä 'astārata 'ənä haymanotä ənzä əgzi 'ənä iyäsus krəstos məslenä, wäwə 'ətu šärə 'a länä zākämä nəməhər wäzākämä nəgäbər hayəmanotä.

29: Concerning the 318

And we establish together with them. We know well what they spoke, those who went before us, the Apostles. We the 318 establish and uphold the faith, while Our Lord Jesus Christ is with us, and he established for us that which we should teach and how we should fashion the faith.

This is the final explicit reference to the Fathers of Nicaea but much later, in chapter 93, there is another statement that resonates strongly with Nicaea in condemning Arius, and explicitly affirming that Christ’s humanity is present on the “throne of divinity,” possibly in implicit reference to Chalcedon as a refutation of Eutyches.

፺፫፡ በእንተ ዘአማሰኑ ሃይማኖተ ሮም

ወተንሥእ ሰይጣን ዘእምትካት ዕድዉ ለሰብእ ወአስሐቶሙ ለሰብእ ብሔረ ሮሜ ወአሕሠምዋ ለሃይማኖተ ክርስቶስ ወአምጽኡ ኑፋቄ ላዕለ ቤተ ክርስቲያን ዘእግዚአብሔር በአፈ ንስጥሮስ፤ ወንስጥሮስ ወአርዮስ ወይባዕ እለ ወደየ ውስተ ልቦሙ ዘወደየ ቅንኣተ ውስተ ልቡ ለቀየን... ወይፀርፉ ላዕለ ስብሐቲሁ እንዘ አምላክ ውእቱ ቃለ እግዚአብሔር፤ ወረደ እመንበረ መለኮቱ ወለብስ ሥጋ ኣዳም ወእግዚአብሔር ውእቱ ቃል ወበይእቲ ሥጋ ተሰቀለ ከመ ይቤዝዎ ለኣዳም በእልወቱ ወዓረገ ውስተ ሰማይ ወነበረ ዲበ መንበረ መለኮቱ በይእቲ ሥጋ እንተ ነሥእ ወካዕበ ይመጽእ በስብሐት ይኳንን ሕያዋነ ወሙታን⁵³

⁵² Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, ፳፪.

⁵³ Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, ፻፳፯.

93: *bä'əntä zä'amasānu hayəmanotä rom.*

wätānsə'a säyṭan zä'emṭakat edəwu lāsāb'ə wä'asḥatomu lāsāb'ə bəḥerä rome wä'aḥsäməwwa lähaymanotä krestos wä'amṣə'u nufaḳe la'älä betä krəstiyan zä'əgzi'abəḥer bä'afä nəṣṭəros, wänəṣṭəros wä'arəyos wäyəbaso əllä wädäyā wəstā ləbomu zāwädäyā qənə'atä wəsətä ləbu lāqäyān... ..wäyədärfu la'älä səbḥatihu ənəzä amələk wə'ətu qalä əgzi'abəḥer, wärädä əmänəbärä mäləkotu wäläbsä səga adam wä'əgzi'abəḥer wə'ətu qal wäbäyā'əti səga täsäqälä kāmā yəbezəwo lä'adam bä'əlwātu wä'arägä wəstā sāmay wänəbärä dibā mänbärä mäləkotu bāyā'əti səga ənətä nəsə'a wäka'əbä yəmāṣ'ə bäsəḥat yək'ennən ḥəyawanä wämutan

93: Concerning those who Destroyed the Faith of Rome

. . . Satan rose up, who from ancient times had been the enemy of humankind, and led the people of the nation of Rome astray and they twisted the faith of Christ and brought division in the Church of God through the mouth of Nestorius — and he put into the hearts of Nestorius, Arius, and *Yəbaso* the jealousy that he put into the heart of Cain . . . and they blaspheme his glory, while he is God, the Word of God. He came down from the throne of his divinity and clothed himself with the flesh of Adam, and he is God the Word of God, and in that flesh he was crucified to redeem Adam in his iniquity, and he ascended into heaven and was seated on the throne of divinity in that flesh which he took on, and again he will come in glory and he will judge the living and the dead

This is the only explicit mention of Nestorius in KN. This shows some awareness of the fifth century controversies, but this brief mention does not, however, make any specific reference to Chalcedon or Ephesus or to the Christological issues that were debated at those councils. Indeed, the passage looks back to the time before Chalcedon and the close relationship between Ethiopia and Rome, «ይትዐወቅ ከብረ ነገሥተ ኢትዮጵያ ወከብረ ነገሥተ ሮሞያ እስመ፤ አኅው እመኅተ» (*yəṭə'awäq kabrä nägästä ityopäya wäkebrä nägästä romäya əsmä, aḥaw emuntu*, '... the glory of the kings of Ethiopia and the glory of the kings of Rome might be known, as they are brothers'),⁵⁴ referring to the era of Constantine and his mother Helena.⁵⁵ According to this passage, the kings of Rome believed in an 'orthodox' manner for 130 years. This number is somewhat confusing. If it is taken to be an indication that the Roman kings went astray from the orthodox faith at Chalcedon in AD 451 — 130 years prior to Chalcedon would be AD 321. This lies between Constantine declaring Christianity legally

⁵⁴ Bezold, *Kebra Nagast*, ፻፳፯.

⁵⁵ This perhaps hints at the reason for this reference. One theme of KN is that salvation is connected with wood, and Helena is honoured for her finding of the True Cross. For a discussion of this see Ralph Lee, *Symbolic Interpretations*, 148–157.

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tolerated (313) and Nicaea (325), corresponding to Sunday being declared a day of rest in the Empire (321).

Conclusions

The evidence surveyed here demonstrates that Nicaea's primacy in the EOTC is inseparable from the Nicene tradition's shaping of its Christology: the Creed's normativity, the epochal role of the 318, and the embedding of Nicene faith in the anaphoras are precisely the means through which the Church articulates Christology in Nicene terms. The primary place of Nicaean theology in the EOTC may be seen in several ways, although no absolute discussion of Nicaea's "sufficiency" has been found. Liturgical commemoration is significant, especially with the fathers of Nicaea being the only fathers connected with a Council regularly commemorated in the EOTC calendar. Ethiopic Enoch also gives a special significance to Nicaea given the "pool of possibilities" that are available as possible labels for the ten "weeks" of salvation history. It is, however, KN that points most strongly to the significance of Nicaea as a defining epoch. KN creatively adapts Nicaean language to express the significance of the Incarnation, a central theme in the text. "The 318" are used as a stamp of authority on key matters of salvation that are addressed in KN. These observations have implications for our understanding of theological method and expression and for ecumenical relations. Although Witakowski considers that the Nicaean Creed "has no particular theological consequence for the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwāḥādo* Church,"⁵⁶ the content of KN argues against this.

The fact that KN does not use more dogmatic language such as ገብረ ህላዌ (*ḥəburä həlawe*, 'of the same nature'), used to translate the Greek ὁμοούσιος,⁵⁷ or in the form of the Creed used in the liturgy where «ዘዕሩይ ምስለ ኣብ በመለኮቱ» (*zä 'əruy məslä 'ab bāmälākotu*, 'in divinity equal with the Father')⁵⁸ is used is notable. Instead, KN expresses Nicaean Christology through imagined narrative and symbolic interpretations. In imagined conversations among the members of the Trinity KN affirms the existence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as coequals before the Creation, demarcating the identity of Jesus Christ as fully divine and subsequently "clothed" in humanity, implicitly affirming the ὁμοούσιος. KN employs the unusual verb እትገስስ (*ətagāsās*, 'I will become tangible' or 'touchable'), countering gnostic or docetic understandings of the Incarnation and again affirming full humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ. This approach reflects the EOTC general tendency to eschew systematic and cerebral

⁵⁶ Witakowski, "Nicaea, Council of," 709.

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Weischer, ed. and trans., "Der Dialog « Dass Christus Einer Ist » des Cyrill von Alexandrien," 36.19; 92.13; 102.13; 222.7.

⁵⁸ ተስፋ ገብረ ሥላሴ, ed., መጽሐፈ ቅዱስ በልሳነ ግዕዝ, 1989 EC), 91.

approaches to theologizing. There is no reference to Chalcedon, or Pope Leo, or a “two natures” christology of Chalcedon. The Nicaean language appears to be implicitly assimilated in the descriptions of conversations between members of the Trinity affirming their eternal coexistence before Creation.

Whilst Chalcedon is not in the purview of KN, chapter 93 addresses the key issue of Christ’s full humanity and divinity. The phrase “and he ascended into heaven and was seated on the throne of divinity in that flesh which he took on” affirms the eternal nature of the union in Christ. This may serve as an oblique reference to the EOTC condemnation of Eutyches, whose teachings on the single divine nature of Christ were condemned at Constantinople in AD 448,⁵⁹ in debates that fed into the Council of Chalcedon and shaped its Christological formula.

The recognition that the EOTC is fundamentally Nicaean and “achalcedonian” has important implications for ecumenical relations, and for understanding EOTC identity formation. Joint statements from Oriental-Catholic dialogues show significant Christological agreement.⁶⁰ EOTC thought, developed along different lines by focusing on the roots of Christology at Nicaea rather than on the schism at Chalcedon, could provide fruitful ways of developing that dialogue further.

As well as being historically irrelevant to many African Christians, the “non-Chalcedonian” label carries colonialist undertones. Western missions used “non-Chalcedonian” to dismiss the EOTC as heretical or sub-Christian, a trend that continued with the nineteenth century advent of Protestant mission. The hardening of confessional boundaries in Ethiopia can be partly attributed to polemical encounters with Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Kwame Bediako acknowledged in his Frumentius Lectures in Addis Ababa in 2001 that there was perhaps a chapter missing from his seminal *Theology and Identity*⁶¹ that would have explored Ethiopian christology, and the language of KN makes a further case for this. As African churches seek indigenous christological expressions, the reflections of the EOTC — coming from the only African nation not to be colonized — should surely be included in the conversations. The emphasis on the conciliar agreement, “The 318,” also provides a path away from divisions over biblicism, pneumatology, and tradition. Protestant and Pentecostal Churches across Africa may not generally

⁵⁹ See Vasilije Vranić, “The Christology of Eutyches at the Council of Constantinople 448.”

⁶⁰ E.g., see Catholic –Oriental Orthodox Regional Forum, *Joint Statements and Agreements between the Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches*.

⁶¹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*.

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pay close attention, at least at the grassroots level, to the issues of Chalcedon, but will be familiar with the Creed, aside from the relatively small number of Oneness Pentecostals.⁶² Expressions of Christology that emphasize shared Nicaean foundations, rather than what was rejected at Chalcedon, help reveal common ground often obscured by the frequent use of “non-Chalcedonian” to describe the EOTC. This label obscures common ground by defining the EOTC negatively—by what it rejected—rather than positively by its Nicaean foundation. Moreover, the label can misleadingly suggest heterodoxy. Furthermore, God’s materiality and tangible presence emphasized by African Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity harmonizes with the embodied spirituality of KN in which Christ declares “I will become tangible.” The way KN expresses Nicaean doctrine through imagined conversations between the members of the Trinity reflects broader African affinity with narrative theology and storytelling. This narrative-symbolic approach would be a fruitful avenue for dialogue with other African Christian expressions.

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- NB: In these titles, *Qerlos*, *Qerrəllōs*, and *Qērellos* each refer to the body of literature attributed to Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376 – 444).
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⁶² From data in the *World Christian Database*, ed. Gina A. Zurlo, it may be inferred that Oneness Pentecostals are less than 1% of the Christian population of Africa.

⁶³ Also available at <https://translation.bible/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/asale-2016-the-ethiopian-orthodox-tewahedo-church-canon-of-the-scriptures-neither-open-nor-closed.pdf>

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⁶⁴ Editors’ note: An html version of this article is available at <https://www.islamic-awareness.org/bible/text/canon/ethiopian.html>

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⁶⁵ Editors’ note: A 2005 reprint edition was published by Kegan Paul (London, New York, and Bahrain). It is still in print and is available from Routledge.

⁶⁶ EC = “Ethiopian Calendar.” 1989 EC corresponds to AD 11 September 1996 – 10 September 1997 on the Gregorian calendar.

⁶⁷ Editors’ note: Originally published in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA by University of Michigan Press for the North American market. Curzon Press held distribution rights elsewhere. The book is currently available, for all markets, from Routledge.

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⁶⁸ Editors’ note: *Four Kingdom Motifs before and Beyond the Book of Daniel* has been published as an open access text and is available at <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004443280>

⁶⁹ Editors’ note: A scanned copy of this article is available at <https://www.academia.edu/1011381/>

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