

Scripture and Context in Conversation: The Ethiopian *Andəmta* Interpretative Tradition

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Abstract

The Ancient Ethiopian Orthodox Church has a rich historical and religious heritage that is shaped and anchored by the scriptural interpretation of the *andəmta* interpretive tradition. The Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition uses Scripture in dialogue with the Ethiopian context through translating Ethiopic (Ge'ez) into Amharic and presenting different interpretations and applications of the text considering different horizons of readers. The sensitivity to the cultural context is an important aspect of contextualization to address the needs of the people to whom Scripture is being applied, and this is an extensive practice in the Ethiopian interpretive tradition. This article argues that the Ethiopian Church has possessed the most ancient Bible in the Ethiopic language and uses a unique interpretive tradition that focuses on the textual context and the context of the reader,

presenting alternative interpretive options. Therefore, the Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition enables us to engage in an ongoing dialogue between Scripture and context to shape positively the context of the reader. In addition, it facilitates scriptural teaching by presenting an alternative application for an individual biblical text. Further, the emphasis on the *andəmta* interpretive tradition, with the awareness of balancing both the textual context and the context of the reader, opens a better understanding of the text and its application for contemporary readers.

Keywords

Ethiopic tradition, *andəmta* hermeneutics, Scripture in context, Scripture and tradition

About the Author

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia as an ancient sub-Saharan country received the Christian faith at the earliest time and has sustained the remarkable experience of scriptural interpretation and application for the last 1700 years with continued existence (Woldegiyorgis 2017, 8–9). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church preserved a unique religious culture based on Scripture with a dynamic interactive interpretation practice, and a significant lesson can be derived from this historical practice (An 2015, 116). In addition, the Ethiopian church uses Scripture in continuous dialogue with its context in a unique way in the *andəmta* interpretive tradition that is employed in the production of commentaries for the teaching and preaching of the church (Alehegn 2012, 115). The use of Scripture, the understanding of context, and the conversations through the biblical texts within the Ethiopian church tradition are significant aspects of this religious practice. The Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive strategy addresses the Ethiopian context with the significant fusion of the horizons of the readers, presenting multiple applications for a single biblical text as it engages different contexts (Mennasemay 2014, 10).

The first part of the article attests to the history of research on the area of Scripture and context in conversation, in general and in particular, to see how the Ethiopian church traditions use Scripture and context in conversation to underline its transformative role. The second part of the paper aims to depict the scriptural tradition in the Ethiopian context to show the use of Scripture in Ethiopian church tradition. The third part of the paper portrays the contextual nature of the Ethiopian interpretive tradition of *andəmta* and how this tradition facilitates a dialogue between Scripture and the Ethiopian context. The final section of the paper demonstrates the lessons we can derive from the *andəmta* interpretive tradition to shape our use of Scripture and its engagement with context.

The method employed in this study is critical discourse analysis to understand the nature of the *andəmta* interpretive tradition with its interpretive community (Fairclough 2013, 132–134). Different ways of critical discourse analysis focus on the textual and ideological analysis of a written work. As Hjelm (2022, 235) has demonstrated, discourse analysis is “the study of how to do things with words” and the “process of social construction.” Discourse analysis is the analysis of words by analyzing identities, relationships, beliefs, and knowledge systems that are constructed in the language. Discourse analysis in textual interpretation is employed through the means of combining social theory and linguistic analysis. Critical discourse analysis focuses on ideology in a discourse which is the reproduction and transformation of relations of domains.

However, I have chosen Norman Fairclough’s model because this model is useful for better understanding the nature of the *andəmta* interpretive tradition and the interpretive community (Fairclough 2003, 2–3). Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis model contains three interconnected dimensions of discourse: text analysis at the description level, processing analysis at the interpretation level, and social analysis at the explanation level (132–134). This method is important to better understand the *andəmta* interpretive tradition, because text analysis for description, processing analysis for interpretation, and social analysis for the explanation in a critical discourse analysis allows us a better grasp of selected texts in the *andəmta* commentary of the Ethiopian church tradition. A critical discourse analysis focuses on both the text and the social context of the interpretive community. The method considered in this research is important to better understand the Ethiopian interpretive tradition and its facilitation of the dialogue between text and context.

2. History of Research

The understanding of Scripture and context in conversation is an important issue that has been addressed by different scholars attesting to how Scripture needs to address the existing social, political, religious, and cultural context of the people. In the aim of creating a framework for our actual examination, it is important to consider the views of some selected scholars who engaged on the issue of Scripture and context in conversation, first in a broader framework and then focusing on our particular context. For instance, Keener (2015, 19) has pointed out the significance of cultural sympathy in applying Scripture in different contexts because sensitivity to the culture gives a foundation for Christians in reading Scripture across different cultures. In addition, Pears (2010, 16) has also argued that using Scripture and appreciating the tradition of the interpretive community is a key duty for contextual theological activity. The needs and questions of the interpretive community is essential not only for contextual theologians, but all interpreters of Scripture. However, according to Bergmann and Vähäkangas (2021, 3), contextual theology has often been limited to evangelism and gospel proclamation. Despite this, the nature of contextualization goes beyond the above-referenced issues because the nature of Christian theology and the Scripture itself entertains dialogue between God's message and the context in which the recipients are situated.

In the presence of views on the need for contextualization, evidence indicates that in the Global South, the Bible was read through the worldviews of the Global North. Lim (2019, 5) has argued that "it is important to remember that the Bible comes to many parts of Asia...as the *coloniser's* text." The same is true for the African context, because despite Africa's rich Christian heritage, Protestant missionaries have brought the Bible and the message of the Bible to Africa in the culture of the West,

ignoring sensitivity to the African cultural and religious contexts. Lim (2019, 6) has also argued that even though the center of Christianity has moved from the Global North to the Global South, theological and biblical studies are still under the influence of the West's theological formulation which ignores the existing context of Africa.

The art of contextualization is applying Scripture to different contexts, addressing the needs of the receiving community. Flemming (2009, 13–14) attests that "contextualization has to do with how the gospel revealed in Scripture authentically comes to life in each new cultural, social, religious and historical setting." Within Western theological thought, contextualization is mainly synchronic. In other words, the development or evolution of theories of contextualization are not necessarily given due prominence. Bevans's (2002, 37–127) six models are examples of a synchronic approach. However, An (2016, 149) has argued that these six models do not fit the Ethiopian situation because the church tradition in Ethiopia has "developed through a multifaceted process of contextualization through its long history." Conversely, a diachronic approach considers the long history of the interaction between text and context in the Ethiopian context (150).

It is important to acknowledge that Scripture is in itself contextual since God's revelation addressed and transformed whole people and their communities. Likewise, God's revelation still addresses and transforms real communities, whose contexts are to be acknowledged. The Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition and its commentary are important pieces of evidence that address the Ethiopian context. The way the Ethiopian *andəmta* addresses the context is by presenting alternative application options for an individual biblical text. The *andəmta* interpretive tradition is sensitive to the context without ignoring the author's intended meaning. I contend, therefore, that the Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition is a viable alternative to Western approaches that often decontextualize biblical texts.

3. Scripture in the Ethiopian Church Tradition

The use of Scripture in the Ethiopian church tradition is fascinating because the Ethiopian Church has possessed Scripture in the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) language since the sixth century (Ullendorff 1997, 33). The Bible in the Ethiopic version has also been translated into the modern era national working language, Amharic, and later into other local languages to be relevant to the context (Fellman 1977, 154). The use of Scripture in the Ethiopian Church is nourished by its interpretive tradition that is developed by the “elements from different sources of both internal and external traditions through the dynamic interaction” (An 2016, 150).

The Ethiopic (Ge'ez) Bible is the most ancient translation of the Bible in the world. The coming of the Nine Saints after Frumentius facilitated the translation of the Bible from Greek to Ethiopic (Ge'ez). However, different views exist about the actual time frame in which the Bible was translated into the Ethiopian ancient language (Batu 2021, 277; Isaac 2012, 60–62). Despite these disagreements, the translation of the Bible to the local language allowed the existence of “an extensive body of ancient Ethiopic literature and the evolution of a distinct Ethiopian culture” (Isaac 2012, 59). It is argued that both the process of translation and the interpretive tradition address the existing context of Ethiopia dynamically. For instance, in the translation process, there are special elements that would be relevant to the context of Ethiopia (Batu 2021, 277). Pawlikowski (1971, 196) has pointed out the presence of the Judaic influence in the Ethiopian Church. This heritage is acknowledged and married with Christian expression in the Ethiopic interpretation tradition. This reveals an understanding among some Ethiopians that Ethiopia is the chosen nation that has replaced Israel (Brooks 1996, 171–172). That the Ethiopian social and cultural context is shaped by Israel's Scriptures is demonstrated in different ways. For instance, the dietary prescriptions of the Pentateuch are commonly observed in the

Church of Ethiopia and the wider community. A significant number of Judaic elements are appropriated in the Ethiopian context despite there being some disagreement about the time of their adoption and incorporation within the Ethiopian cultural and religious context (Hailu 2020, 299–300).

The use of Scripture in the religious and cultural context is deeply rooted in the use of *sēm ena wērq* (wax and gold) hermeneutics of *Qiné* that address the plain meaning and the hidden meaning of the biblical text. Unlike a Platonic philosophical outlook, marked by duality between knowledge and practice, the Ethiopian Church tradition of *sēm ena wērq* considers *Tēwahedo* (unity) in interpretive and philosophical creativity (Mennasemay 2014, 30). This method is one of the ways to apply critical thinking to the biblical text. The interpretive tradition was common both in the written form and the oral enterprise of the Ethiopian tradition. It addresses the Ethiopian context, the physical and the spiritual, the observable, and conceptual in a holistic manner. This is incorporated into the biblical interpretation of *andəmta* attesting to the presence of multiple interpretations and applications within the single biblical text to address the different dimensions and horizons of different readers. In general, in the Ethiopian church tradition, Scripture has shaped different dimensions of life from the ethical and practical, to the philosophical outlook. Since Scripture was received early in the sixth century, its language has had a significant influence on the religious, political, and social aspects of the country. The dietary, judicial, and other laws are an indication of this practice and the impact of Scripture (Tzadua 2009, xx).

4. Text and Context in the Andəmta Interpretive Tradition

The *andəmta* interpretive tradition in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church addresses different horizons, demonstrating sensitivity to the context of

the reader. “The *andəmta* corpus of Amharic commentary on Ge’ez biblical and patristic texts derives its name from the repeated use of ‘*andəm*,’ meaning ‘and (there is) one (who says),’ to introduce different interpretations” (Lee 2011, 40). The main text in the *andəmta* interpretive tradition is the Ethiopic (Ge’ez) text, translated into Amharic. This interpretive tradition does not open a door for personal speculation because the interpreters stick strongly to the source text, which is then connected to the reader’s context (Batu 2021, 400). In the *andəmta* interpretive tradition, the mode of exegesis is an Amharic commentary on the Ethiopic (Ge’ez) text translated and interpreted by the use of different strategies, containing many alternative comments as options to give meaning to different horizons (Alehegn 2012, 115). Since the interpretive tradition is not static, it addresses different horizons of dynamism, presenting alternative applications in different contexts of readers with important explanations relevant to each situation. This makes the *andəmta* interpretive tradition a rewarding and important hermeneutical approach that teaches how the biblical text could be relevant to different contexts of readers.

The historical origin of the *andəmta* interpretive tradition is viewed differently by different scholars. For instance, Cowley (1989, 375) has pointed out the historical continuity from the Antiochene literary interpretive tradition against the allegorical interpretive traditions of Alexandria. However, Batu (2021, 401–404) has argued that *andəmta* integrates both the Antiochene literary interpretation and the Alexandrian allegorical interpretive tradition with a unique adaptation in the Ethiopian context relevant to Ethiopian Christian readers. The perspective of An (2016, 156) is interesting because he has articulated that the Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition is unique with its nature of incorporating the internal and external traditions developed uniquely in the Ethiopian context. He

correctly stated that contextualization in the Ethiopian Church “has taken place in the dynamic interactions of primal religious, Hebraic-Jewish, and Christian traditions” with a unique venture that has grown on the Ethiopian soil to address the needs of the people of Ethiopia. Hailu (2020, 301) has also attested to the dynamics of the Judaic elements incorporated and assimilated in the Ethiopian context with the integration of external and internal socio-religious and cultural elements in the Ethiopian church tradition. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the nature of the Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition is unique in two important ways. First, it is developed through the integration of different elements inside and outside the Ethiopian context. Second, it is aimed to serve the Ethiopian context by addressing the needs of the people in its underlining of various interpretations and applications of the text.

The Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition has produced commentaries on the OT and NT in a format that aims to present fresh insights for the readers to better understand and apply Scripture in different dimensions of their lives. In the pursuit of developing commentaries, two important things are the biblical text and the context in which the text is interactively applied. Therefore, the first step is directly translating the Ge’ez into Amharic, intending to be faithful to the original biblical text. The second step is explaining the translated text by the use of two important technical activities. First, reference is made to other texts which could better demonstrate and communicate the word or the phrase in the process of interpretation. Second, stories are included to better illuminate and demonstrate the idea that is being interpreted. Because of these fascinating activities and the different horizons of readers, the *andəmta* interpretive practitioners are considered the “four-eyed.” Beyond translating and interpreting the text by the use of the above techniques, these practitioners always think of different interpretive options to be applied

to different readers within different contexts. According to Mennasemay (2014, 10), “the characterization of the traditional practitioners as ‘four-eyed’ suggests the idea of discovering different horizons of understanding, entertaining multiple viewpoints, and comparing, critiquing and coordinating them.” The Ethiopic interpretive tradition gives an interpretation and application to the text, supporting each possibility to address the intellectual and spiritual needs of people in different contexts.

This contextualized nature of the Ethiopian interpretive tradition is highly sensitive to the Ethiopian identification with Israel as seen in the Ethiopian national epic *Kebrā Nagast*, which tells of the replacement of Israel by Ethiopia (Wallis Budge 2000, 6–7). The *Kebrā Nagast* claims the transfer of the abode of God’s glory from Jerusalem to the Axum of Ethiopia (An 2015, 110). Based on this assumption, the contextualized meaning of the term “Zion” is not a geographical location but the abode of God’s glory. According to Tefera (2015, 40), the term “Zion” is found 150 times in the Bible and interpreted in the Ethiopic tradition in different senses. The use of the word “Zion” is depicted in six different ways: these are hill, whole Jerusalem, heavenly Jerusalem, St. Mary, the Christian empire of Ethiopia, and the Axum Zion Church of Ethiopia (40–50). These interpretations are a sign of the contextual interactions that make the biblical texts relevant to the Ethiopian context. The understanding and the interpretation of different terms in the Bible referring to Ethiopia as the chosen nation helped to create self-identity and a unifying factor in nation-building. An (2016, 158) has argued that the uniqueness of the Ethiopian context has been created because of the scriptural interpretation claiming the belief that they are God’s chosen people and legitimate successors of Israel incorporated in the national history of the country.

The Ethiopian *andāmta* interpretive tradition in the OT and NT claims that Ethiopians have worshipped God from the creation, continuing through

the giving of the law to Moses, and to the reception of the gospel in the NT as referenced in Acts 8 (Tamiru 2020, 180–184). The interpretation of different biblical texts both in the OT and NT are highly connected with the Ethiopian identity. For instance, king Melchizedek of Salam in Gen 14:18 is considered an Ethiopian king (57). Even though Melchizedek is identified with Christ in Heb 7, Ethiopian tradition asserts that he ruled Ethiopia based on the belief that Ethiopia is the land of origins (EOTC 2015, 641–42; Hancock 1992, 48–53). In addition to the above, the Ethiopian *andāmta* commentary on the gospel of Matthew interprets the wise men of Matt 2:1 as Ethiopians, claiming they understood the birth of the Messiah as God leads them towards the newly-born king of the Jews (EOTC 2002, 71–73). The texts we have seen here are some of the important indications of how the Ethiopian interpretive tradition connects the biblical texts with the context of the reader to make them relevant. Unfortunately, because the emphasis is given to the context of the reader, the original and the historical context of the Bible is backgrounded.

Despite its shortcomings, these activities weave together the historical, the literal, and the context of the reader—horizons that have often been separated from each other. Despite modern attempts to integrate the above three horizons within a single interpretive framework (see Tate 2008, 266–268), many of these exegetical traditions fall short of what the Ethiopian interpretive tradition achieves.

5. Lessons from the Ethiopian Interpretive Tradition

The Ethiopic interpretive tradition is both textual and contextual and, despite some weaknesses, its importance in drawing lessons for teaching and preaching the biblical text in different contexts is remarkable. This interpretation engages the reader’s context by acknowledging it and also

inviting it to be engaged and transformed by the text. Therefore, the relationship between text and context in Ethiopia is transactional—text transforms context, and context brings questions and interpretational possibilities to the text.

The Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition is a homegrown contextualized hermeneutical tradition that teaches the dynamic nature of the interpretive tradition unlike many Western methods of hermeneutics that focus exclusively on historical context, literary context, or reader context. The textual and contextual interpretive analysis of the text in the *andəmta* interpretive traditional commentary teaches important lessons for the use of text and context in a dialogue aiming to shape the context of the reader by scriptural teaching. In addition, this interpretive tradition is sensitive to the needs of the believing community, allowing different people to hear God's message, and the message to be relevant to the social, political, and religious context. The Ethiopian social, cultural, political, and religious activity is highly influenced by scriptural interpretation.

The Ethiopian religious and legal systems are shaped by two important books: the *Kebra Nagast* (Brooks 1996; Wallis Budge 2000) and the *Fetaha Nagast* (Gelaw 2001; Tzadua 2009). The first book is about the glory of the kings of Ethiopia, and it claims that Ethiopian kings are the descendants of King Solomon of Israel. The covenant and the glory of Israel are transferred to Ethiopia, claiming Israel is replaced by Ethiopia. The second is the rule of the kings, and it has been serving as the constitution of Ethiopia until the modern era when it was adapted and upgraded to be relevant in the Ethiopian constitution and the court system. These two books are imported from other areas but produced in the Ethiopian context using OT and NT texts to serve the Ethiopian context.

In addition to this, the Ethiopian interpretive tradition of *andəmta* contributes to the creation of self-identity as the unifying factor attesting to the belief that Ethiopia is the chosen nation that replaced Israel. This interpretation avoids the limitation that God is only a God of Israel because Ethiopian Church scholars claim that Ethiopians have been worshipping God even before the giving of the law to Moses (Tamiru 2020, 52–53). This activity paints God as not only the God of Israel, but also the God of the Ethiopians. The worship of God according to the Ethiopian theological and biblical commentaries stretches from the time of the unwritten law of God (creation) to the written law of God (Torah and the gospel) framing God's salvation history from creation to redemption (Belay 2020, 80). This interpretive tradition attests to the eternal plan of God in an organized, inclusive way avoiding antithesis between God's revelation in the OT and NT.

The two extremes in the modern exegetical traditions—the focus only on the author and the text on one side, and only on the present reader's context on the other side—can be challenged by the Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition. The Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition fuses different horizons such as author, the text, and the readers. The readers' horizon is also presented with many alternative applications.

6. Conclusion

The Ethiopian church tradition is ancient, with fascinating historical and religious practices that are uniquely demonstrated, especially by the interpretive tradition of the *andəmta* in the production of different commentaries. This interpretive method addresses different contexts by bringing Scripture into dialogue with the context. This interpretive tradition is developed in the rich Ethiopian history of scriptural tradition, bolstered by the belief that the Ethiopian Church holds the most ancient

translation of the Bible in Ge'ez which has been continued by translation into Amharic and other local languages. The Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition practitioners are considered as “the four-eyed” because in their interpretive activity they consider different horizons of readers to address the interpreted Scripture with relevance to different contexts. For instance, I have argued that the word “Zion” has been given different alternative meanings with the significant support of illustration, story, and exegetical explanation that leads to contextual understanding to create the Ethiopian identity as the chosen people of God. The OT and NT are interpreted in connection with the Ethiopian identity as it addresses the needs of the Ethiopian context.

In general, it is possible to argue that the *andəmta* interpretive tradition in the Ethiopian context teaches three important things that we need to consider in terms of Scripture and its contextualization. The first is the importance of contextual engagement in the biblical interpretations addressing the different horizons of the Ethiopian context such as the social, political, and religious dimensions to shape and create an identity that is built from contextual biblical interpretation and understanding. The second important issue we can learn in this analysis is that the Ethiopian *andəmta* interpretive tradition helps to break unnecessary shackles that hinder critical thinking and engagement because it does not stick to a single interpretation or application of a text but rather presents an alternative interpretation for every text. Third, the Ethiopian interpretive tradition focuses on both the textual context and the context of the reader to be applicable, which is the end goal of contextual interpretation.

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