

John Anthony McGuckin

The Harp of Glory: Enzira Sebhat

An Alphabetical Hymn of Praise for the Ever-Blessed Virgin Mary from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. (Popular Patristics Series Number 39, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010), ISBN 978-0-88141-054-9, 160 pages

Reviewed by Sergey Trostyanskiy

The Enzira Sebhat (The Harp of Glory), this great Ethiopian poem in praise of the Blessed Mother of God is the “African Akathist to the Theotokos” created in the fifteenth century by the priest, Hensa Krestos, the servant of the Theotokos who monastically styles himself as “a deceitful sinner”. The poem is structured in the form of a love song (the Byzantine *Eroticon*) and presents the drama of salvation history manifested in the image of the Theotokos, the mighty Warrior Virgin, who protects the faithful from the hostile activity of the serpent who disturbs the peace of the world.

This poem not unexpectedly suffered a fate of not being accessible to a Western audience due to the post-Chalcedonian Christological division followed by the mutual alienation between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian branches of Orthodox Christianity. Taking into account that the ethos of the non-Chalcedonian African world is filled with the living spirit of the Orthodox

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liturgical tradition, the translator (an Orthodox poet-theologian, John McGuckin), undertook the task of making this poem accessible to a modern audience. This book thus signifies the first appearance of this great Ethiopian masterpiece in English.

The introductory part of the volume unfolds an intellectual horizon of fifteenth century Ethiopia and provides various historical details associated with the creation and reception of the poem. This part of the book, I thought, was as valuable as the poem itself and could have been easily turned into a full scale monograph dedicated to the historical, exegetical, and theological aspects of the Ethiopian Christian world.

The second part of the book, the poem itself, offers a very delightful exposition of the theology of redemption and vividly exemplifies typological readings of the scriptures. The African poet offers his great proskynesis to the Theotokos who is magnificent and radiant, who demonstrates the resurrection glory of Christ to the world. The aesthetic appeal of the poem transcends the boundaries of the Ethiopian Christian world as its original purpose, as Professor McGuckin notes, was both to evangelize and entertain.

The book is a very affordable paperback costing only \$17. Scholars and students of Church history, theology, and literature will greatly benefit from having this book on their shelves as it is certainly the bringing to light of a major world-class Orthodox theological treasure, a poem of equal standing to the well known Byzantine Akathist.

One hopes that the introduction could someday be expanded into a full length work as it provides an exceedingly valuable material for the scholars of non-Chalcedonian eastern Christianity.