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THE ETHIOPIC SATAN = ŠAYṬĀN AND ITS QURANIC SUCCESSOR  
WITH A NOTE ON VERBAL STONING

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The following brief study was triggered by a recent note on Quranic orthography based on the study of early Quranic fragments from the Great Mosque in Sanaa. There, it is suggested, medial *yā* ' should be understood as *mater lectionis* for long *ā* ; hence *Abrāhām* instead of *Ibrāhīm*, *ilāh* for *ilayhi* and, indeed, *šāṭān* for *šāyṭān* (PUIN 1999 : 40). This suggestion is plausible, but needs to be verified through the evidence of Ethiopic, since the word *šāyṭān* is common to both the Christian-Ethiopian and the Quranic, and later Arabic-Muslim, traditions.

To be sure, a Christian and Muslim audience does not need to be told who Satan is. The following remarks are only meant to save the reader the effort to check the dictionary.

Satan in the Old Testament firstly means "enemy", in particular "opponent in court" and in a wider sense anyone putting obstacles in someone's way, persecuting or haunting him or keeping him from doing the right thing. Satan is the devil *par excellence*, the enemy of God and of men, but without proper power and ultimately subordinate to God. He is thus the opponent of God and all who believe in God. In the New Testament he is also the instigator to the evil deed, the tempter. He is behind the treason of Judas. He attempts to undermine the mission of the Apostles. The hostilities against the Christian community are stirred up by the "throne of Satan" and the "synagogue of Satan".

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A brief characterisation of the Qur'ānic Satan (following AHRENS 1925 : 93-95) reveals the common tradition : He is the tempter and evil foe of man. He allures Adam and Eve and is thus equated to the cursed snake. He sows the seeds of discord among Joseph's brothers, as among all men. He keeps believers from worshipping God. Whoever serves him is betrayed and forsaken, his Erbteil inheritance is the eternal flame. He attempts to undermine the efficacy of the prophets. Satan is but one among many like him.

The overlap and interdependence of the two traditions are evident ; this is not the place to dwell upon the minute differences of the nature of Satan in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, or on the origin of these divergences. The present paper is rather concerned with the emergence, origin and tradition of the word šaytān itself and its peculiar form.

### Šaytān in the Ethiopic Bible

One look at the entry for šaytān in the recent standard reference on Ethiopic vocabulary (LCD 522b-523a) immediately confronts us with a bewildering variety, nay cacophony of scholarly opinions (only the comparative, Semitistic part of the article is quoted here) :

“Semitic : G(ə'əz) *saytan* (*šaytān*) is taken from Aram. *sātānā* (hebr. *šāṭān*) ; see Noeldeke 1910 : 34. As for the relationship between G. *saytān* and Ar. šaytān, Praetorius in ZDMG 61 (1901). 619ff thinks that G. *šaytān* is an Arabic loanword and states that “der jüdisch-christliche saytān durch arabische Beeinflussung entstanden ist”. Noeldeke 1910 :4 7 is of the opinion that Ar. šaytān is a Gə'əz loanword (so also A. Fischer 1953 : 66). The Arabic-Gə'əz form šaytān - saytān (with ay) against Heb. *šāṭān* (with ā) is explained by Praetorius, ZDMG 72 (1918). 343-4 as a pejorative form (schlimmer Satan), a form that he finds in Ar. (Datina) nusayn from 'insān. For the bibliography on šaytān, see Praetorius, ZDMG 61 (1907). 619ff. Ethiopic : Tna. Amh. *säytan*, Te. *šetān*.”

The word in question is certainly found in the first translation of the Gospels into Ethiopic, which was begun around the second half of the fourth century AD (cf. critical edition of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, ZUURMOND 1989 ; 2001). It is probably at this point that the proper name “Satan”, to be read in the Greek *Vorlage*, was replaced by säytan. Alternatively, but much less likely, this exchange could have occurred in the Middle Ages - for instance during the revision of the Ethiopic Bible in the

Middle Ages, around 14<sup>th</sup> c, by Abba Sälama, which has left a number of Arabisms in the corresponding manuscripts - but then one would expect to find traces of the original form in the manuscripts.

One certainly attested revision is the insertion of *diablos* (cf. DL 1127) in later manuscripts in all places where the LXX and the Greek Gospels and texts depending on them have *diabolos*, whereas the old Ethiopic translation has *šäyṭan* almost throughout.<sup>1</sup> Thus St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews 2,14 has *mäl'akä mot zä-we'etu šäyṭän* "the Angel of Death, i.e. the devil" (instead of *diabolos*). This passage is furthermore relevant for of the question of where *mäl'ak* "angel, messenger" originates, as it seems to indicate an Ethiopic rather than Aramaic origin (cf. JEFFERY 1938 : 269-70 ; LCD 303b).

Occasionally one finds the plural *šäyṭanat* as translation of "demons" (hebr. *šēdīm* ; cf. AHRENS 1925 : 95 ; cf. 1 Timothy 4,1 *təmhərtä šäyṭanat zä- yanaffäq* "doctrines of demons, which turn the fickle into heretics"). One may point out a further Ethiopic borrowing in the Quran, *munāfiq* "fickle, shifting person, heretic" (cf. JEFFERY 1938 : 272), which fits well with the bundle of terms directly taken from Ethiopic.

We are hence in a position to decide the question whether Quranic *iblis* could be derived from Ethiopic. The word, here *diabolos*, was practically unknown in Ethiopia, either in Bible translations or in spoken language. The elimination in Arabic of the syllable *di-* is likewise only explicable by way of an Aramaic mediating form, where *di* would have been interpreted as a separable relative particle (cf. AHRENS 1925 : 94 ; JEFFERY 1938 : 48).

The fact that it was understood as a proper name should have spared the word revisions aiming at correctness and semantic improvement. Emendations of biblical proper names in Ethiopic Bible texts usually approach the orthography towards the original forms and indicates a certain knowledge of Hebrew on the side of the "revisionists". But in the case of Satan, this would have led, conversely, to the replacement of *šäyṭän* with *\*ššatan*.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples are found in Matthew 4,1 and 13,39 ; cf. ZUURMOND 2001 : 50-51 ; 146-147. The legends recounting the refusal of the devil (=Diabolos) to prostrate in front of Adam by order of God, where the Quranic *iblis* is used almost exclusively, are thus likewise of Aramaic origin.

One could in principle also assume that the Ethiopic translator of the Bible in the fourth or fifth century, confronted with the word *satan(as)* in the Greek original, took recourse to Arabic (or Old South Arabian?) *šayṭān*, which he happened to know, and which later analogously appeared in the Qur'ān as autochthonic form with the same meaning. But such a scenario, inherently unlikely and unparalleled for the vocabulary of the old Ethiopic Bible, is rendered entirely impossible in the light of the original meaning of the authentic Old Arabic word *šayṭān*, which shall be discussed below ; the solution offered below also has the advantage of harmonising with a whole series of parallel cases of proper names and loanwords and contributes an important further example to the text of the Ethiopic Bible.

### **The adaptation of foreign proper names and loanwords in the old Ethiopic Bible translation**

Rochus ZUURMOND (1989), the principal editor of the ongoing critical edition of the Ethiopic Gospels, provides in his introduction to the Gospel of Matthew a list of ca. 100 proper names and loanwords, whose Ethiopic forms he compares to the Greek, Syriac or Hebrew version respectively (*Transcription of names and loanwords ; 1987 : 92-104*). The analysis of the material yields the following results : The forms cannot be traced to a single origin, such as Greek (102) ; there is a tendency of re-Semittisation of Greek forms, concerning in particular ḥ and 'Ayn, but occasionally also emphatics, i.e. consonants missing in Greek ; it can lead to hybrid forms (Yoḥannas) ; there are cases of peculiar "Ethiopic" developments (e.g. *fasika for Pasha*).

The Semitic explosives 't' and 'ṭ' are consistently transcribed as Greek *theta* and *taw*, and when re-transferred into Semitic Ethiopic they are likewise regularly re-transformed into their original forms ; for instance, Aramaic *ṭalṭa* becomes Greek *talitha* and Eth. *ṭalita*. Both the mechanisms of transliteration and oral transmission work hand in hand here, since the speakers and listeners of the respective languages could unambiguously distinguish and reproduce these sounds. Not so with the sibilants. The various sibilants of Hebrew and Aramaic all result in Greek 's' (*sigma*), and are uniformly transferred into Ethiopic as 's' without regard for the original phonetic values ; for instance in Eth. *Muse, Salomon, māsiḥ*. The word for messiah, *māsiḥ*, is a further good example of a hybrid form. The whole list in ZUURMOND does not contain a single certain example for an Ethiopic 'š'<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> I choose the conventional transcription here, which does not imply a judgement on its phonetic value.

Already at an early date, also in the manuscript tradition, the distinction between 's' and 'š' is given up in Ethiopic. The "correct" orthography and etymologically correct spelling can often only be determined by comparing roots and words with other Semitic languages. The tradition for *šäyṭan* indeed wavers between 's' and 'š'. One may be tempted at first to insert an 's' into *šäyṭan* by analogy to the Greek *satan*, since the phonetic correspondent of the sibilant to the lateral sibilant of the Hebrew base-word for the Greek version can be discarded. On the other hand, the certain borrowing of this word into (*Qur'ān*) Arabic proves beyond doubt that the pronunciation was 'š' also in old Ethiopic (cf. *naḡāšī*). How did this 'š' emerge? A recurrence to the corresponding Semitic sibilant would not only be a unique case, but would also have had to follow the Aramaic version and hence result in 's'. Unless we assume a spontaneous phonetic change of a single word, we may think of a palatalisation caused by the following long vowel *ā* and pronounced as *ē* (*Arab. Imāla*). Another explanation could be the listener's perception of the sibilant of a foreign language in oral communication. Especially the simple sibilant is often perceived as foreign in such cases, viz. its main characteristics do not correspond, and it is consequently realised with the (orthographic) palatal or lateral variant of one's own language.<sup>3</sup> All solutions equally point to *šäyṭan* as a word of the oral sphere.<sup>4</sup> The spontaneous phonetic change, i.e. diphthongisation of the long vowel *ā* into *ay*, also agrees with the oral, regional or dialectal variant (evaluation of *šäyṭan* as a rare Arabic nominal form, see below), which the preceding considerations on the phonetic makeup of *šäyṭan* have shown it to be.<sup>5</sup>

The translator of the old Ethiopic Bible must have noted down proper names and perhaps familiar loanwords ; proper names such as *Ya'qob* and loanwords such as the variants of *Pasha* must have been part of the spoken Ge'ez at the time. Furthermore, and such a case is not listed among ZUURMOND's examples,<sup>6</sup> the case of *ma'ida* for "board, table" has already shown that the colloquial language contained loanwords synonym to those in

<sup>3</sup> As one can observe in the reproduction of Greek *Krestos* in Old South Arabian as *Krštš* ; cf. Ryckmans 1964 : 440 after inscription Istanbul 7608bis.

<sup>4</sup> One may note that the translator of Mark betrays some knowledge of Palestinian topography (ZUURMOND 1989 : 126 and 366), which allows him to provide additional remarks taken from oral tradition ; perhaps he was also familiar with Palestinian Aramaic : he "semiticises" correctly *effatah*, not Syr. *etpatah*.

<sup>5</sup> Could one think of analogous forms in the Lebanese vernacular: *hayde*, *hawn* and *Bayrut* (from Beirut)?

the used in the original text, which the translator had at his disposal to create a text intelligible to all. Instead of the literary *tarapeza* he thus chose *ma(g)ida* (KROPP 2003). Thus as a matter of course he translated the Greek *satanas* with a common term, with which his audience was certainly familiar from everyday language - and how could a living language do without a “devil” with whom to curse things or people on given occasions - with *šayṭan*. More than that : He also employed it for Greek *diabolos* and *daimonia*, and thus offers an insight into the semantic field of the word in colloquial usage ; he may just as well have used Ethiopic *gānen*, pl. *aganent* for demons, whose relationship to Arabic *ginn* does not need to concern us here.<sup>7</sup>

### Šayṭān in the Qur’ān and in Arabic

RUDOLPH 1922 : 34-35 n. 57 ; similarly AHRENS 1925 : 92 : The word is ultimately a Hebrew one, but - due to the diphthong *ay* - only explicable by way of Ethiopic into Arabic, where Mohammad was not the first to employ it.

The first statement is correct, even though no explanation is given ; the second one overlooks the fact that in the Old Arabic sources the word has an entirely different meaning. Hence Satan in the form of *šayṭān* ultimately enters Arabic with the Qur’ān and Mohammad.

### Stoned Satan

The Qur’ānic expression is indeed stereotypically *aš-šayṭān ar-raḡīm*. The meaning of the Arabic root, as in Hebrew and Aramaic, is clearly “to stone”. To judge by other, older Semitic languages and Ethiopic, this is a secondary development of the original meaning from the root RGM. The invisible Satan

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<sup>6</sup> He has of course examples of paraphrasing translations of Greek or Latin loanwords, transliterated in other Bible versions, into old Ethiopic; again this phenomenon underlines the translator’s aim of maximum intelligibility of the text. Is it just coincidence that the terms in question concern taxes and money? The extensive terminology of the old Ethiopic Bible in this field is compiled in the unpublished dissertation by Eric Godet, submitted to the Univ. Paris I - Sorbonne in May 2004, on Aksumite coinage. Many thanks to Mr. Eric Godet for allowing me to consult the respective chapter in the manuscript.

<sup>7</sup> Nor can I dwell here upon other names and designations of Satan in the Book of Jubilees, such as *māstema*.

can hardly be stoned. But he can be cursed. This corresponds to the meaning attested in Akkadian (“call, sue in court” AHW 2. 1972 : 941) and Ugaritic (“speak, say” GORDON 1965 : 432, no. 2307), which is preserved in its specific meaning as “to curse” in Ethiopic (DL 316b ; LCD 465a). We do not need to delve here into the question of whether the root is of non-Semitic origin and how it relates to TRGM “to translate” (cf. RABIN 1963 : 135). The Ethiopic Bible mentions the *rəgəmt* “cursed” snake (Gen. 3,14 ; corresponding designations in Greek and other Semitic languages are unrelated to it). Again the Ethiopic translator of the Bible has opted for an original Ethiopic word for a key term and was not affected by the wording of his source text (cf. *mäsqäl* “cross” and many more ; see in general POLOTSKY 1964). PRAETORIUS’ suggestion (1907 : 620) to regard it as a borrowing from Arabic is untenable. Matthew 25,41 offers a good parallel to the Quranic version, reading “Depart from me, ye cursed *rəguman*, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil *šäyṭan* and his angels”.<sup>8</sup> The infinitive *rəgim* (in the reconstructed sentence *šäyṭanä rəgimo*, “by cursing Satan”), which corresponds to Eth. *rəgum* “cursed” may have paved the way to the Arabic adjective, viz. part. pass. *rağim*.

Concerning the text and language of the Qur’ān, we need to make a careful distinction among the derivations of the root RGM, between forms borrowed from Ethiopic (*rağim* ; *rəğüm*) and forms from the Arabic root, usually finite verb forms (cf. for instance Q 11, 91 ; 19, 46 etc.). Furthermore, *rağim* is not attested in the vocabulary of Old Arabic poetry.<sup>9</sup>

### On the Arabic root ŠṬN

According to Arabic dictionaries (e.g. LANE *Lexicon* 1552), a root ŠṬN exists, which has the basic meaning “rope”. In a metaphorical sense, various special designations for “snake” are derived from it, as well as a common denomination for demonic beings. The fact that *šayṭān* (always without article) is attested as a proper and tribal name in pre-Islamic times accords well with the principles of Old Arabic nomenclature (cf. WELLHAUSEN

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also Matth. 5,44, where in one of the Ethiopic versions - as *lectio facillior* viz. *logificationis* - it says : “... bless them that curse you *yəṛəggəmmu-kkəmmu*”, instead of “... that haunt, persecute you”.

<sup>9</sup> I am very grateful to my colleague Mr. Vahid Behmardi for this and other searches through various digital corpora of Arabic poetry.

1887 : 200 n. 1). All recorded instances of the various forms from this root in Old Arabic poetry can be certainly attributed to this root and this semantic field ; *šayṭān* may well belong here, if the attestations are indeed authentic, e.g. by *Umayya Ibn-Abr-š-Salt*. Then, with the rising prominence of the Qur’ānic Satan, the door to free association and invention was opened wide, by drawing on the biblical stories of Satan and the snake and eventually obliterating the distinction between the two words and semantic fields in the later tradition (cf. SPEYER 1931 : 68-71 ; HOROVITZ 1926 : 120f ; SIDERSKY 1993 : 13-15).

### On the morphological type of *šayṭān* :

The morpheme types *qaytal*, *qaytāl* and *qaytūl* are, according to BROCKELMANN, GVG I p. 344 no. 129, only attested in Arabic ; with J. Barth he recognises them as variants to forms with double second radical. *šayṭān* is not listed in BROCKELMANN.

According to LIPINSKY (1997 : §22.16 ; 29.9), mono- and bi-syllabic forms of the type *šayl/šawl* viz. *fw'al/fy'al/fy'āl* etc. alternate with forms with long vowels of the type CīC/CūC/CāC viz. corresponding morpheme types with long vowel in the first syllable. But the mixed forms of examples from Arabic, in particular Andalusian Arabic, which is said to be particularly close to Old South Arabian, do not appear to be morphological correspondents, but rather the result of dialectal, spontaneous phonetic changes (long vowels turned into diphthongs) ; instances of this process are attested, for instance, in the Lebanese Arabic dialects (FÉGHALI 1919 : 86, § 4B).

### Conclusion

We may summarise the results as follows :

Old Ethiopic *šayṭān* designates, in the oldest Ethiopic Bible translation, the “enemy (of God and of men)” *par excellence* ; “devil” in the translation of *diabolos* and *satanas* of the Greek original. In its plural form it is occasionally used for designating demons (*daimona*).

The linguistic form indicates a common word of colloquial language at the time, which the translator preferred to a mere transliteration, which would have yielded *satan* (as) viz. *diyabolos*. This reconstructed vulgar form has two

peculiarities with regard to the phonetic correspondent to the basic word that one would expect. Firstly, the diphthongisation of the first long vowel, which is certainly attested by the Ethiopic pseudo-syllabic script ; it occurs analogously as spontaneous phonetic change in other Semitic languages. Secondly, the pronunciation of the initial sibilant as š, proven by the Arabic loanword, which might approximately reflect the way that Ethiopian speakers perceived the initial simple sibilant s of a foreign word.

Quranic and Arabic *šayṭān*, as his fixed attribute *rağīm*, are loanwords from Old Ethiopic, which, as many a word derived from Ethiopic, reached Arabic via oral transmission. It may have been already known to Mohammad's circle in Mecca before making its appearance in the Quranic revelations. The knowledge and experiences of Ethiopic Christianity and Ethiopic Christians, which the participants of the first Hiğra brought back with them from Ethiopia, certainly contributed to the formulation of the respective passages in the Quran. The wording of narrations and characterisations of the *šayṭān* then blended, especially in later Islamic tradition, with a word derived from an authentic Arabic root, *šayṭān*, which was known as a metaphorical name for the snake and as a proper name.

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