

# Ethiopian Bible

## The Missing Books

Editor Sebastiano Vottari

# PREFACE

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*An open door to the forgotten canon*

Deep in the heart of the Ethiopian plateau, there exists a Bible that the rest of the Christian world has forgotten — or, more precisely, never truly known. While the Western and Eastern Churches were establishing the boundaries of their own scriptural canon between the fourth and fifth centuries, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church continued to preserve, copy, read, and venerate a corpus of eighty-one books: a canon larger than any other in Christendom, a textual heritage that encompasses texts

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rejected, lost, or simply ignored by other traditions. The volume the reader now holds in his or her hands is a courageous and necessary attempt to bring this submerged heritage to light.

Let us say right away, with the frankness that a work of this magnitude deserves: *The Ethiopian Bible – The Missing Books* , edited by Sebastiano Vottari, is not, nor does it claim to be, a critical edition in the academic sense of the term. It is not the work of a chair of Semitic philology, it does not offer the array of textual variants that a specialist scholar might expect, and it does not engage systematically with the immense secondary literature produced over a century and a half of Enochian, pseudepigraphic, and Old Testament studies. But it would be a grave mistake to dismiss it for what it is not, losing sight of what it is: namely, the first comprehensive multilingual collection that brings together under one roof the principal "missing" texts of the Ethiopian canon, offering the general reader—the curious student, the restless believer, the enthusiast for the history of religions—direct and readable access to writings otherwise confined to specialized editions in English, German, or Ge'ez.

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## *What does this work contain?*

The volume opens with the **Book of Jubilees** (Kufale), offered in full translation or summarized by section, spanning its fifty chapters. It is one of the most fascinating texts in the entire pseudepigraphic panorama: a rewriting of Genesis and Exodus narrated by the voice of the "angel of the presence" to Moses on Sinai, which reorganizes the entire sacred history according to a calendar of jubilees – forty-nine-year cycles – and interweaves the biblical narrative with a series of calendrical, ritual, and halakhic prescriptions that shed extraordinary light on Second Temple Judaism. For many readers, having access to the Jubilees in their own language means being able to touch firsthand the world that gave rise to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the debates between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the very roots of early Christian liturgy. It is a text that transforms the understanding of the Bible: after reading it, the Pentateuch never appears the same.

**Book of Enoch (1 Enoch)** follows , presented in its first two major sections: the *Book of the Watchers* and the *Book of Parables* . Here the reader encounters one of the most dizzying monuments of ancient apocalyptic literature. The Book of the Watchers recounts the fall of the rebel angels – the "Watchers," in fact – who descended to earth

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attracted by the beauty of the daughters of men, fathered the Nephilim, taught humanity forbidden arts (the metallurgy of weapons, cosmetics, astrology, magic), and corrupted the order of creation. It is a powerful tale that profoundly influenced the New Testament—the Letter of Jude cites it explicitly—and which resonates with surprising relevance in an age questioning the relationship between knowledge, power, and moral responsibility.

The Book of Parables, then, represents perhaps the most theologically dense section of the entire 1 Enoch. Here appears the mysterious figure of the "Son of Man"—a pre-existent being, chosen by God before the creation of the world, destined to judge the powerful of the earth and inaugurate the kingdom of the righteous. For anyone interested in the origins of Christology, these pages are of capital importance: they show that the expression "Son of Man," which the Gospels attribute to Jesus, was already circulating in apocalyptic Judaism with a cosmic and judicial meaning that decisively illuminates the context in which Christianity was born. The reader who engages these Parables will discover a visionary universe of extraordinary imaginative power: celestial journeys, thrones of fire, rivers of flame, mountains of precious

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metals, the destiny of the righteous and sinners revealed in majestic and terrifying visions.

The volume continues with **The Remainder of the Words of Baruch** (also known as the Paralipomena of Jeremiah or Four Baruchs), translated in its entirety in the version attested by the Ethiopian tradition. It is a text that combines the historical account of Jerusalem's fall at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar with a miraculous narrative: the supernatural sleep of Abimelech, who falls asleep on the eve of its destruction and awakens sixty-six years later to find the figs still fresh in his basket—an image of poignant beauty that speaks of God's faithfulness through time. It is a short but dense tale that the reader can savour in a single sitting and is unlikely to forget.

Next comes the **Apocalyptic Ezra** (4 Ezra, corresponding to chapters 3–14 of 2 Ezra in the Latin numbering), also offered in a complete translation. It is one of the pinnacles of Jewish apocalyptic literature: a tense and at times anguished dialogue between the prophet Ezra and the angel Uriel on God's justice, evil in the world, the destiny of the soul after death, and the end of time. The seven visions that make up the text address theology's oldest question with an almost modern radicalism: why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? The answer the

text offers – or, more precisely, the way it refuses to offer easy answers – makes it a reading of extraordinary spiritual depth. For many readers, the Apocalyptic Ezra will be the most surprising discovery in this volume: a text thought buried on the dusty shelves of specialists, yet revealed to be disarmingly modern.

The final section of the volume is dedicated to the **three Books of the Meqabyan** ( ሙቃብያን ), presented in the form of a detailed summary CHAPTER by CHAPTER. These texts represent perhaps the most unique and least-known element of the entire collection: present *exclusively* in the canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, originally composed in Ge'ez and probably dating back to the Middle Ages, the Meqabyan have nothing *to* do with the Books of the Maccabees known to the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. The name is the same – Meqabyan is the Ge'ez form of "Maccabees" – but the content is radically different: not the story of the Hasmonean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes, but rather original narratives that intertwine the struggle against idolatry, the temptations of the Devil, the resurrection of the dead, and a vigorous moral theology. The First Meqabyan, with its thirty-six chapters, introduces the reader to the world of the idolatrous king Tseerutsaydan and the martyrs who resist him; the Second develops the theme of bodily

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resurrection with a forceful argument that places it at the heart of the theological debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees; the Third offers a dramatic dialogue between God and the Devil that recalls the prologue to the Book of Job but develops it in its own original directions.

The volume ends with a note on the **Josippon** ( 𐩦𐩣𐩪 ( Zena Ayhud), the fascinating medieval reworking of the works of Josephus, which the Ethiopian tradition included in its scriptural canon. This work covers an immense historical span, from the end of the Babylonian exile to the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, interweaving biblical history, secular history, and legend in a narrative fabric unmatched in any other Christian tradition. Its inclusion—even if only in the form of a concise presentation—completes the picture and offers the reader a window into the Ethiopian conception of universal history as sacred history.

Particularly valuable is the **Appendix on Transversal Theological Themes** , which runs through the entire collection, identifying the common threads that link texts composed in different eras and contexts: the resurrection of the dead, the role of the Devil and temptation, the condemnation of idolatry, eschatological judgment, the relationship between faith and works, and the question of

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the Nephilim. This appendix reveals a fascinating theological tension: the First Meqabyan describes the Nephilim as descendants of the unions between the sons of Cain and the daughters of Seth, openly contradicting the Book of Enoch—which also belongs to the same canon—where the Nephilim are the children of the Watchful Angels and human women. It is this kind of internal contradiction that makes the Ethiopian canon so intellectually stimulating: not a monolithic block, but a living organism in which different traditions coexist, dialogue, and sometimes clash.

### *Strengths: Why this work deserves attention*

The first and most obvious merit of this collection is its very existence. This may seem like a trivial statement, but it is not. Many readers today wishing to access the texts of the Ethiopian canon would find themselves faced with an almost complete editorial desert. Translations of the Book of Enoch and Jubilees exist in few languages, but a collection that brings together Jubilees, Enoch, 4 Baruch, 4 Ezra, the three Meqabyan, and the Josippon under a single editorial project simply did not exist in so many languages.

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The second merit is *readability*. Pseudepigraphic and apocalyptic texts can be difficult: their repetitive structures, endless genealogies, and dizzying cosmological descriptions tend to alienate the non-specialist reader. In this edition, the effort to make the text accessible is evident: the prose flows naturally, the denser or more repetitive sections are intelligently condensed (with the honesty to admit it), and the result is a text that can be read with pleasure even by those who have never opened a biblical studies manual. This is a rare and precious quality. Too often, the dissemination of ancient texts oscillates between dry technicality and banal simplification; here, a valuable balance is found.

The third merit is the *project's comprehensiveness*. The editor has not limited himself to the most famous texts—Enoch and the Jubilees, which alone would justify the volume—but has included works that even specialists struggle to find. The Meqabyan, in particular, represent an absolute rarity: texts virtually unknown outside the Ethiopian tradition, of which very few translations exist in Western languages and none complete in many other languages. Offering a detailed summary CHAPTER by CHAPTER, accompanied by introductory notes and a thematic appendix, is a genuine service to culture and knowledge. The reader who completes this volume would

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have an incomparably richer vision of the Ethiopian canon than he could obtain from any encyclopedia.

The fourth merit is the courage to combine *complete translations with annotated summaries* within the same volume, openly declaring the difference. The Book of Jubilees, Enoch, 4 Baruch, and 4 Ezra are offered in complete or nearly complete translation; the Meqabyan and the Josippon are offered in analytical summary form. This choice, which a purist might question, is actually pragmatically wise: given that there are no readily accessible complete translations of the Meqabyan, not even in English (the Curtin/Tesfaye and Selassie editions have limited circulation), a detailed and honest summary is infinitely preferable to silence. Better a rough map than no map at all.

Finally, a less obvious but no less important merit deserves mention: the *theological sensitivity* with which the work is assembled. The sequence of texts is not random: it begins with a rewriting of primordial history (Jubilees), moves on to apocalyptic revelation (Enoch), moves on to reflections on the fall of Jerusalem and divine justice (4 Baruch, 4 Ezra), arrives at moral theology and the cosmic struggle between good and evil (Meqabyan), and concludes with the great historical narrative of the

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Josippon. The reader who follows this path journeys through the great questions of biblical tradition: creation and fall, sin and redemption, suffering and hope, judgment and mercy. This is not a random assemblage of curious texts: it is an itinerary.

### *Who is it for and why should you read it now?*

This volume speaks to different audiences, and offers something specific to each.

For the **believer** –Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, or simply a searching Christian—it offers the opportunity to engage with a sister tradition that has preserved a broader Bible. It's not about questioning one's own canon, but rather understanding that the formation of the biblical canon was a historical process, not a sudden event; that texts like Enoch and Jubilees were read and venerated by the communities from which Christianity arose; that the Letter of Jude cites Enoch as a prophecy, and the Letter to the Hebrews may allude to the martyrs of the Meqabyan; that an ancient Church—the Ethiopian Church, which traces its origins to the eunuch baptized by Philip in the Acts of the Apostles—deemed these texts worthy of standing alongside Genesis, Isaiah, and the Gospels. It's a

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broadening of horizons that enriches the faith rather than impoverishing it.

For **students and scholars** of the history of religions, Second Temple Judaism, early Christianity, or apocalyptic literature, this volume offers an entry point to fundamental texts.

For the **curious reader** — those who have heard of fallen angels, the Nephilim, the "forbidden" books of the Bible, and want to look beyond the sensational headlines — this volume offers the opportunity to read the texts directly, discovering that the reality is far more interesting and complex than any conspiracy theory. There are no hidden secrets: rather, there is a millennia-old religious tradition that has made choices different from those of the West, and those choices deserve to be known for what they are.

for the **literature enthusiast**, these texts hold remarkable surprises on a purely narrative and poetic level. Enoch's cosmic visions, with their landscapes of fire and crystal; the pressing dialogue between Ezra and the angel on divine justice, which has the intensity of a philosophical drama; Abimelech's miraculous sleep in 4 Baruch, with fresh figs after sixty-six years; the grandiose and terrifying figure of the Devil in 3 Meqabyan, who recounts his strategies of temptation with a lucidity reminiscent of

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Milton's Satan—these are pages that possess an independent literary force, capable of speaking even to those with no theological interest.

And why read it *now* ? Because we live in an age where intercultural and interreligious dialogue is no longer an academic luxury but a necessity. Because Ethiopia—with its millennia-old Church, its ancient liturgical language, its unique theological culture—is too often reduced, in our imagination, to stereotypes of poverty and famine, and learning about its spiritual heritage is an act of justice even more than intellectual curiosity. Because at a time when identities are becoming rigid, discovering that the Bible itself—the sacred text par excellence—has never had unambiguous boundaries and that different traditions have preserved different treasures is a powerful antidote to cultural absolutism.

### *What the reader needs to know: honesty and limits*

An honest preface would not be such if it did not also point out the limitations of the work, not to belittle it but to help the reader place it correctly.

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The Meqabyan, as mentioned, are presented in summary form, not as a full translation. The final bibliographical note is transparent about the sources used—the Curtin/Tesfaye editions, the Selassie translation, and materials available on Wikisource and in specialized encyclopedias—and those wishing to delve deeper can follow these instructions. But the summary, however detailed, remains a summary: the reader must be aware that they are reading a condensed interpretation, not the direct voice of the text.

Furthermore, the Book of Enoch presented here includes the first two sections (Watchers and Parables) but not the remaining three of the traditional Enochic corpus (the Astronomical Book, the Book of Dreams, and the Epistle of Enoch). This choice is understandable—the two included sections are the most widely read and the most theologically relevant—but the reader should be aware that the complete 1 Enoch is a larger work than what is represented here. A future expanded edition could fill this gap.

Finally, the critical apparatus is essential: there are no footnotes discussing textual variants, translation issues, or historiographical questions. For a popular work, this is acceptable and perhaps even preferable—excessive

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apparatus would have burdened the reading without benefiting the intended audience—but it must be made clear. Those seeking an academic study tool should supplement this reading with the reference editions.

### ***The broader meaning: the Bible as a living organism***

Beyond the individual texts, this collection has the merit of raising a question that too often remains confined to university classrooms: *what is the Bible?* The question may seem trivial, but it is not. For most Western Christians, the Bible is a closed book: a defined list of canonical books, fixed once and for all. But history tells a different story. The Hebrew canon contains 24 books (or 39, depending on how you count them); the Catholic Bible has 73; the Protestant Bible 66; the Greek Orthodox Bible adds a few more; the Slavic Bible adds still more; and the Ethiopian Bible reaches 81. The very fact that different Christian traditions—all ancient, all venerable, all sincerely believing they preserve the word of God—cannot agree on

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what the Bible is is one of the most important and least understood facts of religious history.

These "missing books" are not at all missing from the Ethiopian tradition: they have been there for centuries, read in the liturgy, copied in monasteries, studied by theologians. The title of the volume, therefore, should be understood from the perspective of the Western reader: it is the books *we lack*, not them. This reversal of perspective is, in itself, a small act of cultural decentralization: it invites us to look at our tradition from the outside, to recognize that what we consider "normal"—a Bible of 66 or 73 books—is the result of historical choices, not theological necessity.

In this sense, the volume the reader holds in his or her hands is much more than a simple anthology of ancient texts. It is an invitation to rethink the boundaries of the sacred, to discover that the biblical tradition is broader, more varied, and more fascinating than any single confessional tradition suggests. It is, ultimately, a call to intellectual curiosity and respect for the traditions of others—an invitation our age desperately needs to embrace.

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## *Concluding note*

These pages may seem like a long one. Yet, once you begin reading, the most real risk is that you won't be able to stop. There's something magnetic about these texts: perhaps it's the echo of ancient voices speaking to questions that have never ceased to be our own; perhaps it's the wonder of discovering stories we never knew existed; perhaps it's simply the beauty of great religious literature, which, when authentic, can speak to anyone, believer or not, ancient or modern.

This work deserves credit for opening a door that was closed to many. It's up to the reader to decide whether to walk through it. But whoever does, I'm certain, will find on the other side a world they never imagined – wider, deeper, and brighter than they imagined.

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# THE BOOK OF JUBILEES (KUFALÉ)

## CHAPTER 1

This is the account of the division of the days of the Law and of the testimony, of the events of the years, of the weeks of years, of the jubilees, for all the years of the world, just as the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, when he went up to receive the tablets of the Law and of the commandment, by the will of God, who said to him: "Go up to the top of the mountain".

And it came to pass in the first year of the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt, in the third month, on the sixteenth day of the month, that God spake unto Moses, saying, Come up unto me into the mount, and I will give thee the two tables of stone of the law and of the commandments, which I have written, that thou mayest teach the people.

And Moses went up to the mountain of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and a cloud covered him for six days. And on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from the midst of the cloud, and the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a burning fire on the top of the mountain.

And Moses was in the mount forty days and forty nights: and God revealed unto him both what was in the beginning, and what shall be in the end, even the divisions of the Law, and of the testimony, every day.

And he said, "Set your heart on every word that I speak to you on this mountain, and write it in a book, so that

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their generations may see that I have not forsaken them, despite all the evil they have committed in transgressing the covenant that I am establishing between me and you this day on Mount Sinai for their generations.

So it will be that when all these things come upon them, they will recognize that I have been more righteous than they in all their judgments and in all their actions, and they will recognize that I have truly been with them.

And you, write down for yourself all these words that I am making known to you today, for I know their rebellion and the stiffneckedness of their necks, even before I bring them into the land which I swore to their fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give a land flowing with milk and honey.'

And they shall eat and be filled, and shall turn after other gods, which are not able to deliver them out of any tribulation: and this testimony shall be heard for a testimony against them.

For they will forget all my commandments, and all that I command them, and will go after the people, after their filthiness and their lewdness, and will serve their gods; and they will become a snare and a distress and a torment and a snare to them.

And many shall perish, and be taken, and fall into the hand of the enemy, because they have forsaken my statutes, and my commandments, and the feasts of my covenant, and my sabbaths, and my holy things, which I have sanctified unto myself in the midst of them, and my tabernacle, and my sanctuary, which I have sanctified

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unto myself in the midst of the earth, that I might put my name there, and that he should dwell in it.

And they will make for themselves high places, and groves, and graven images; and each one will worship his own image, to err; and they will sacrifice their children to demons, and to every work of error in their hearts.

And I will send them witnesses to warn them, but they will not listen, and they will kill the witnesses. And they will also persecute those who seek the Law, and they will abolish and change everything, and they will begin to do evil before my eyes.

And I will hide my face from them, and will give them into the hand of the people, to be taken captive, and to be plundered, and to be devoured; and I will remove them from the midst of the earth, and will scatter them among the nations.

And they will forget all my law, and all my commandments, and all my judgment, and will err in the new moons, and in the sabbaths, and in the feasts, and in the jubilees, and in the ordinances.

Afterward they will turn to me among the nations with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their strength, and I will gather them from all the nations, and they will seek me, that I may be found by them, when they search for me with all their heart and with all their soul.

And I will reveal to them the abundance of peace with righteousness, and I will transplant them as a plant of

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righteousness, with all my heart and with all my soul, and they will be a blessing and not a curse, and they will be the head and not the tail.

And I will build my sanctuary among them, and will dwell with them, and will be their God, and they shall be my people in truth and in righteousness.

And I will not forsake them nor reject them, for I am the Lord their God."

And Moses fell on his face and prayed, and said, O Lord my God, forsake not thy people and thine inheritance, that they may go astray in the hardness of their hearts; and deliver them not into the hand of their enemies, the peoples, that they may not dominate them, and cause them to sin against thee.

END PREVIEW