

**Gospels of Saint John**  
**In Ge'ez, illuminated manuscript on parchment**  
**Ethiopia, c. 1875-1925**

*61 folios on parchment (thick), modern foliation in pencil [1-4] + 1-57 leaving the first four illuminated leaves unnumbered, text is complete (collation i<sup>1</sup> [unnumbered illuminated leaves] ii<sup>10</sup> (beginning f. 1) iii<sup>10</sup> iv-vii<sup>8</sup> viii<sup>8</sup> [-6, 7, 8, no loss of text, so these were likely cancelled]), ruled in blind, full-length vertical bounding lines, prickings outer margins, (justification 118-115 x 88-86 mm.), written in two columns of twenty lines in black and red ink, traditional decorative headpiece (haräg) at the beginning of the text, one drawing f. 57v, **FOUR FULL-PAGE ILLUMINATED MINIATURES** preceding the text (described below), opening leaves and last leaf stained, minor soiling and dampstaining lower margins throughout, overall in very good condition, textile covering illumination loose on the right corner. **CONTEMPORARY BINDING** of wooden boards, spine left bare exposing the sewing, chain-stitched, in a string-tied parchment book bag or carrying satchel, very good condition. Dimensions 152 x 111.5 mm.*

Of considerable interest to students of the book arts, this is a perfect teaching example, with four illuminated miniatures, including an image of the Virgin and Child veiled with a decorative textile. Ethiopian manuscripts are remarkable products of a living scribal culture that has survived from Antiquity until today. Their bindings often preserve structures similar to early Christian books from the fourth to the seventh centuries; here the survival of the book bag or satchel is a special feature.

## PROVENANCE

1. Written in Ethiopia, at the end of the nineteenth or early twentieth century, based on the evidence of the script and illumination.
2. Private USA Collection.

## TEXT

ff. 1-57v, Gospels of John in Ge'ez, complete.

## ILLUSTRATION

The manuscript begins with four full-page illuminated miniatures, in full color; the final page of the text includes a drawing. Our nineteenth-century artist was working in a tradition that goes back centuries. Ethiopian Gospel books often included portraits of the Evangelists, sometimes accompanied by other devotional miniatures. Compare, for example, the late fourteenth- or fifteenth-century Gospel Book now found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which includes numerous miniatures (Online Resources), and one in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles from the very early sixteenth century, which is illustrated with Evangelist portraits and an image of the Virgin (Online Resources). In our manuscript, the Evangelist portrait is paired with images of the Virgin and Child and one of St. George (the Patron Saint of Ethiopia), two images repeatedly seen in Ethiopian Christian art. Another manuscript of the Gospel of John, now at the University of San Francisco and contemporary with our manuscript, is illustrated

with just these two iconic images (Online Resources). The additional drawings of a young cleric (f. [1], and the drawing on f. 57v in our manuscript are less traditional. Stylistically its artist is indebted to earlier images (note in particular the prominent stylized drapery folds, and large eyes of the figures), reinterpreted in a more modern idiom.

Subjects as follows:

f. [1], A young cleric carrying an ornamental handcross and a prayer stick; the short text above in red is unclear and may read "Sägännät Zewärsha" (?), perhaps a name;

f. [1v], St. George and the Dragon, with the maiden (called *Birutawit* in Ethiopian tradition) in a tree;

f. [2], Virgin and Child. This miniature was covered by a piece of patterned cloth (now loosened at one corner) that was designed to protect the painting. Here the pigment on Mary's face is smeared, suggesting that this was almost certainly subjected to repeated devotional touching or kissing;

f. [2v], St. John receiving the text of his Gospel from God; the single word between the figures of John and God translates as "The First," which is the beginning of the Gospel text proper;

f. 57v, Drawing of an unnamed bearded figure.

Ethiopia is home to a remarkable Christian tradition dating back at least to the fourth century. Until the seventh century Ethiopia maintained close contact with the Coptic Church; after the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the 640s, the Orthodox church of Ethiopia developed largely in isolation. Medievalists and historians of the book are particularly interested in Ethiopian manuscripts, since an active scribal culture was preserved there well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The manuscript described here is written in Ge'ez, a syllabic script traditionally used for Ethiopian liturgical texts.

The tradition of copying the Bible in Ethiopia goes back to the very early church. Recent research and scientific analysis including radio-carbon dating by Judith McKenzie and Francis Watson (2016) has established that three illustrated Gospels now in the Abba Garima monastery were copied in Ethiopia between the fifth and seventh century. These manuscripts are among the oldest surviving copies of the Gospels in any language. Throughout its history, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church considered the Gospels the most important holy writing.

Ethiopian manuscripts, even those of a relatively late date such as the present example, are marvelous because their binding structures survive as archetypes of early Christian, specifically Coptic, codices from the fourth to seventh centuries (Szirmai, 1999, pp. 45-50; Boudalis, 2017). The quires are sewn with unsupported link-stitch and then laced into rough-hewn wooden boards. The flat spine in our manuscript was left uncovered, making this an ideal binding for classroom use, since the sewing and quire structure are easily examined. The book bag or satchel further enhances the physicality of the binding and warrants comparison with medieval girdle books and transportable book boxes.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

Christian Sahner, "Discoveries in the Ethiopian Desert. Exploring the Ancient Gospels of Ethiopia," *The Marginalia Review of Books*, December 22, 2017

<https://themarginaliareview.com/discoveries-ethiopian-desert/>

Gospel Book, Ethiopia, late fourteenth-fifteenth century, Metropolitan Museum of Art

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/317618>

Gospel Book, Ethiopia, c. 1504-1505, Los Angeles, Getty Museum

<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/109C69>

Gospel of John, 1850-1925?, illustrated with St. Michael and the Virgin and Child, University of San Francisco, Gleeson Library

<https://digitalcollections.usfca.edu/digital/collection/p264101coll7/id/4768>

Ethiopic Manuscripts," Yale University, Beinecke Library

<https://beinecke.library.yale.edu/article/ethiopic-manuscripts#:~:text=Manuscripts%20from%20Ethiopia%20are%20held,complex%20literary%20and%20religious%20history>

Ethiopian Manuscripts at the Wellcome Collection, London

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works?query=ethiopian&workType=h>

British Library, Endangered Archives Program

<https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP286>

University of Toronto, Gunda Gunde Collection

<https://gundagunde.digital.utsc.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/gundagunde%3Apublic>

Ethiopian Collection, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

<https://art.thewalters.org/browse/category/ethiopia/>

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