



Covenant Refractions in Everyday Devotion

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Antohin, Alexandra Sellassie. *The Covenant's Veil: Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition of Elaboration. Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2025. Pp. xii + 198. US\$34.99.

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The author, of Ethiopian and Russian descent and raised within Orthodox Christian traditions, provides an ethnographic examination of the Christian devotional culture among adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahaḍo* Church (EOTC).¹ The research presented in this work is primarily derived from field studies conducted in Dessie in north-central Ethiopia from 2010 to 2012, with additional investigations in Addis Ababa during subsequent years.

The ethnographic analysis encompasses five distinct forms of lay engagement: feast-day commemorations, gestures of prayerful respect, *tabot* narratives of miracles and resistance, *mahābār* and mutual-aid societies, and pilgrimages accompanied by vow-making. By focusing on the devotional practices of participants with limited formal church/theological education, the book endeavors to articulate a new way of defining the EOTC in contemporary times.

Central to the book is the exploration of Ethiopia's historical conception of covenant. This notion is intricately connected to the cultural and political contexts of Ethiopia and is rooted in the belief that the Ark of the Covenant

¹ Editors' note: *Tāwahaḍo* is a technical Ge'ez term, used also in modern Ethiopian languages such as Amharic and Tigrinya, that indicates the christology of the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Churches, stating that Christ has a single, unified nature — fully divine and fully human. For more details, see the introductory editorial of this issue.

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resides in *Aksum Şeyon* (Aksum Zion).²

Antohin introduces the concept of “covenant refraction” to describe how the narratives surrounding the covenant serve as a reference point that inspires celebrants to expand and elaborate upon a network of meanings in their devotional practices. The author theorizes that these refractions “shape how they communicate and express their faith” (151), demonstrating the adaptability of the covenant concept through various devotional activities.

Chapter One discusses the concept of covenant, recounting the story of the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon, and their son Menelik. Drawing on the 14th-century text *Kəbre Nāgāsət* (Ge‘ez and Amharic: ‘Glory of Kings’), it explains the arrival of the ታቦተ ጸዮን (*tabotä Şeyon*, ‘Ark of the Covenant’) in Ethiopia, housed in a church known as Aksum Şeyon in northern Ethiopia. Scholars contend that *Kəbre Nāgāsət* was used or crafted as an instrument for the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty. Yekuno Amlak, claiming descent from Menelik I, overthrew the Zagwë kings who ruled from the tenth to thirteenth centuries.

This interpretation links the narrative of the Ark of the Covenant to the broader notion of covenant, establishing a close relationship between church and state. Consequently, the idea of covenant is used to maintain the status quo of the ruling elite. Furthermore, as Antohin argues, the Ark of the Covenant story “contributes to a broader discourse of national or religious exceptionalism,” framing Ethiopia as a “new Jerusalem” (24).

Chapter Two illustrates how the Ethiopian conception of covenant functions as a reservoir of cultural elaboration, exploring the centrality of *tabots* within the EOTC, particularly in relation to *Təməqät* (the Feast of Epiphany), an occasion when adherents encounter the *tabot*. The chapter argues that *tabots* represent a refraction of Ethiopia’s covenant idea.³ During the *Təməqät* celebration, all *tabots* are placed outside the church, allowing for public contact with these sacred objects.

Chapter Three centers on liturgy and gestures of respect, asserting that the liturgical service initiates a central activity of the EOTC that sets “the rhythm of their engagement as believers” (55). The author demonstrates how all refractions of the covenant idea manifest within the church’s liturgical services.

² Aksum, a city now in northeast Ethiopia, was the eponymous capital of the ancient kingdom of Aksum, which included modern Eritrea, northern Ethiopia, and parts of Yemen. It was an important Christian center in the patristic era, and the historical center of Ethiopian Christianity.

³ It is believed that the Ark of the Covenant is housed in the church of Aksum Tsiyon in Aksum. However, each Orthodox church hosts a replica of the ark, known as the *tabot*.

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Chapter Four connects the covenant concept with the story of *tabots* ('material arks') and the miracles associated with them. Beyond the *tabot* in Aksum, various *tabots* in different churches are associated with social mobilization and acts of resistance. The author provides two illustrative examples: the defeat of the Italians at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, attributed to the *tabot* of St George accompanying King Menelik, and Emperor Haile Selassie's exile to Bath, England, during which he took the *tabot* of Medhane Alem (Savior of the World). Later, when the Ethiopians triumphed over Mussolini, the *tabot* of Medhane Alem returned to Ethiopia in celebration.

This section includes several *tabot* stories, highlighting how legends are interpreted or codified as "historical" by Ethiopian Orthodox Christians in Dessie and Addis Ababa. It reveals a consistent theme that portrays "Ethiopia as a land where the Ark of the Covenant rests as a people who are responsive to divine presence and agency" (73). The miracle genre characterizes many of these stories, illustrating how the church seeks to assert its cultural and political significance.

Chapter Five discusses *mahābār* ('communal devotional groups') and their associated blessings. A *mahābār* operates as a religious association characterized by membership, dues, a code of conduct, and collegiality among its members. The refraction of the covenant is evident within *mahābār*, as it serves as a domain for ideological elaboration, reinforcing the image of a "chosen people." *Mahābār* fosters spiritual kinship within Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, with diverse types existing that facilitate fellowship outside of the liturgy or other church compound activities.

The book contends that the *mahābār* is not merely a social club but is deeply embedded within the religious system and worldview, with its legitimacy stemming from the theological framework of the church, which the author refers to as covenant refractions.

The concluding chapter explores the movement of sacred promise, presenting vow-making as another form of covenant refraction. Pilgrimages motivated by vows are undertaken with the intent of invoking divine intervention into the routine lives of believers.⁴ The author uses the case study of *Mānəfāsawi guzo* ('spiritual journey') to Gəšāne Mariam, situated 70 km from Dessie, which attracts many pilgrims annually in September. This church is revered as the resting place of a relic of the True Cross, which arrived in 1446. According to tradition, Queen Eleni, the mother of Emperor Constantine, vowed to locate the True Cross during the fourth century, conducting a year-

⁴ In Ethiopia, pilgrimages are most often motivated by vows. For example: "If you heal my mother, I will go to St Gabriel Church and offer a gift."

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and-a-half long excavation that resulted in finding it in four pieces. As the tradition narrates, each piece of the cross was given to churches in Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem, with the right arm given to the Church of Alexandria. Subsequently, in the fifteenth century, as a reward for Ethiopian military cooperation, the relic of the True Cross was given to Ethiopia, where it has since remained at Gəšāne.

Throughout the book, the author seeks to demonstrate how the devotional culture of the EOTC “renders covenant refractions as part of a methodology of elaboration” (135). The book highlights the diverse ways in which EOTC members practice their religion, whether through participating in the Eucharistic liturgy on Sundays or feast days, or through small acts of devotion such as silent prayers and making the sign of the cross when passing by a church. Some individuals express their faith by undertaking pilgrimages to fulfill vows made during crisis or upon the due date of specific promises. Collectively, these practices reflect a constant manifestation of faith in everyday ordinary life.

Beyond a historical examination, the book emphasizes contemporary practices, shedding new insights into the understanding of the EOTC. It operates within a central Orthodox Christian framework, positing that the elaboration of tradition involves expanding, interpreting, and re-expressing existing beliefs, thereby enabling believers to maintain their connection to their roots. This connection is achieved not merely through the repetition of tradition but also by deepening it, building upon it, and adding layers of meaning in new contexts. The author’s elaboration of Church Tradition, along with the identification of its contexts, facilitates an understanding of how EOTC Christians conceptualize and articulate the covenant, both as narratives and as material expressions of God’s promise of protection.

Although there exists a substantive body of scholarship addressing the concept of covenant from historical and political philosophy perspectives, our understanding of how this concept influences the liturgical and social dynamics of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and their cultures remains limited. This study attempts to fill that gap and successfully accomplishes this goal. It effectively elaborates on how tradition is preserved and utilized meaningfully in everyday life, arguing convincingly that the EOTC is not static, simply hinging around ancient traditions; rather, it exemplifies a dynamic practice of living practice.

This book is an anthropological experiment that brings an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the EOTC by elaborating on how the covenant idea is refracted in the church. It is a valuable resource for scholars and non-specialists alike who seek to engage with the theology and practices of the EOTC.