

## The Use of Charms and Amulets in Ethiopia.

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IN dealing with Ethiopic charms and amulets, it is necessary to remember that the Christian population of Abyssinia, which is strongest in the north, and with whom Ethiopic ranks as the sacred and classical language, has throughout its history remained in close contiguity with the pagan races belonging partly to African aboriginal nationalities and partly to the Hamitic or Cushite tribes who settled there in the remote past, long before the Semites, from whom the main stock of the Christian communities is drawn, obtained a footing in the country.<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, not to be wondered at that we are here confronted with a veritable medley of notions and practices. Superstitious pagan rites have been taken over bodily into the popular Christian customs; purely Christian ordinances have to a certain extent been degraded from the high spiritual inwardness, on which their true value depends, into something like talismanic signs and symbols; and—what is more commonly the case—Christian and pagan practices have in the popular mind been mixed up in a manner which to us seems startling and confusing. All these combinations of customs and ideas are well illustrated in Ethiopic charms in general and the species of charms known as amulets in particular.

**i. Charms.**—A striking instance of borrowing from pagan religion is the use made of the 'ghost-tree' for the purpose of driving out all sorts of demons, the desired effect being produced by the burning of a root or branch of the tree.<sup>2</sup> Other examples of what appear to be purely pagan charms are certain herbs worn as a protection against hydrophobia, the application of shreds of blue paper to counteract headache,<sup>3</sup> models of hostile ships or soldiers maltreated or destroyed for the purpose of bringing about the destruction of the real enemy and his fleet.<sup>4</sup> As an instance of a

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the races and religions of Abyssinia, see art. 'Abyssinia' in vol. i. of Hastings' *Encyc. of Religion and Ethics*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 56, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Harris, *Highlands of Ethiopia*, 1844, ii. 158. A dim notion of medical properties may possibly lurk in this use of herbs and blue paper.

<sup>4</sup> Budge, *Life and Exploits of Alexander the Great*, 1896, ii. 4-5.

spell employed by an evil spirit against human beings may be mentioned the muttering into a particular kind of straw selected by the demon named Bouda, in his malignant designs on his intended victim. The straw is then bent into a circle and placed under a stone, whereupon the person marked out for harm is taken ill. If the straw snaps, the patient dies.<sup>5</sup>

Very great importance is attached in magic spells to the knowledge of names and of the power residing in them; and in this potent element of the magician's art Jewish, Christian, and pagan ideas curiously meet. It is well known that in primitive times the use of a name was considered to involve the person or thing bearing the same. In genuine Christian belief the efficacy of pronouncing a holy name, of course, depended on the inward spiritual realization of the power thus invoked; but in Abyssinia, Biblical sacred names, together with a large number of fanciful appellations much resembling those in the Jewish Kabbala, were magically pronounced for the purpose of warding off the power of demons and all kinds of diseases. A good exemplification of this use of names is found in the book *Arde'et*, or 'Disciples,' probably composed between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>6</sup>

Another curious case in which various elements meet is the belief that special magical powers reside in the persons of Jewish blacksmiths, who, amongst other things, are held to possess the power of changing the shape of a person into any other form they please. The blacksmith lies under suspicion on account of his being a worker in metals,<sup>7</sup>—an occupation which has in various parts been associated with magic, and is probably also ultimately connected with one aspect of the history of Cain, whose name is by several scholars

<sup>5</sup> Parkyns, *Life in Abyssinia*, 1868, ii. 146.

<sup>6</sup> See Littmann's ed. in *J.A.O.S.*, vol. xxv. 1st half, pp. 1-48.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps not only because the power of melting metals was ascribed to demons (Budge, *Lady Meux's MSS*, Nos. 2-5, p. li), but also because subterranean operations are required in order to obtain the metals. It should also be noted that the profession of a blacksmith is hereditary in Abyssinia.

taken to mean 'smith,' or artificer in metals. The fear inspired by the Jewish element is apparently due to the opposition on the part of the Christians to the Falashas or Abyssinian Jews. Anyhow, the power of the spell here derives its efficacy from the occupation and race of those who exercise it.

This part of the subject may fitly be closed by a reference to the exorcism of *Bouda* (a kind of possession to which *Zar* [= *Tigritiya*?]<sup>1</sup> is very similar). In the account given by Stern (*Wanderings among the Falashas*, 1862, p. 154), the exorcist with one hand laid an amulet on the heaving bosom of the suffering woman, whilst with the other he made her smell a rag in which the root of a strong-scented plant (ghost-tree?), the bone of a hyæna (specially intended to counteract the hyæna-like character of the possession), and some other things were bound up. He then asked the name of the demon (which, by the way, is always masculine, the person possessed being generally feminine), and finally concluded with Christian invocations, ending with the 318 bishops who attended the Council of Nicæa. The demon, however, only gradually left his victim. He had, indeed, to be considerably coaxed and fed before he finally consented to depart. Modern travellers agree that a good deal of shamming is practised in these cases of possession, but the shamming itself is a testimony to the hold which the superstition has upon the popular mind.<sup>2</sup>

**2. Amulets.**—All the Ethiopic amulets so far brought to Europe are externally very much like one another, differing only in size, and for the most part belong to the eighteenth century or thereabouts. They consist of slips of parchment, narrow as a rule, and more or less carefully sewn together. When completed, they are tightly rolled up and generally placed in leather receptacles, which, by means of straps, are hung round the neck or attached to another part of the body. They are also often fixed on the wall of a room belonging to a woman in expectation of confinement. It is essential that the name of the person to be protected by the amulet should be embodied in the prayers contained in it.

<sup>1</sup> The identification of *Zar* with *Tigritiya* appears to follow from a comparison of Stern's narrative with those of other travellers.

<sup>2</sup> There are, however, sufficient indications to show that in modern Abyssinia the appliances of medical art introduced from Europe are on the way towards displacing cures by magic.

When opened out, an amulet is generally found to contain on the top a coloured design, more or less crude, of the archangel Michael, an ornamented cross, or some other figure. At the bottom are sometimes found rectangular or other designs, with eyes numbering two or more. Similar emblematic figures are also frequently found in the middle, and, in the case of longer amulets, at certain intervals throughout the scroll. Littmann considers that the eyes are intended to symbolize the 'evil eye' ('Princeton Ethiopic Magic Scroll,' p. 32, in *Princeton Coll. Bulletin*, xv.), but it is quite as likely that the healing power of the Divine eye is here represented.<sup>3</sup> Another favourite design is a picture representing the fight between Sūsenyōs and Werzelyā (see below). The serpent, the fish, and other animal forms also, though rather rarely, occur.

The contents of an amulet (the Ethiopic being often mixed with some Amharic) consist of invocations of curiously formed angelic names, scraps of genuine Christian devotion, and legendary narratives compounded mainly of Jewish and Christian elements, but permeated by magic, and therefore heathen, notions. They are expressly stated to be preservatives against various diseases, such as fever, colic, and sickness; against demons of divers kinds who have power to injure infants as well as adult persons; against the evil eye, and other malevolent powers and influences.

A narrative found in the majority of the scrolls is that of Sūsenyōs and Werzelyā. The story is briefly as follows:—

A man named Sūsenyōs married a wife. When their first child was born, a female demon bearing the name of Werzelyā entered the house and killed the infant. On hearing this, Sūsenyōs mounted his horse, took his lance, and went forth to seek Werzelyā. He succeeded in overcoming the demon, who since that time lost the power of doing harm to any child where the names of Sūsenyōs and of his heavenly protectors are pronounced.

The forms of the story differ considerably in different scrolls.<sup>4</sup> According to some, Werzelyā is actually killed by Sūsenyōs; but the version above stated seems to be the more original one; for, if Werzelyā had been killed, there would

<sup>3</sup> Compare the 'eye of Osiris' as a protection against the evil eye (F. T. Elworthy, *The Evil Eye*, 1895, p. 126). Littmann lays stress on the black colour of the eye depicted, but he points out in a note that, according to Dr. J. P. Peters, 'the light, particularly the blue, eye is the most dangerous in Syria and Mesopotamia.'

<sup>4</sup> See W. H. Worrell, 'Studien z. abessin. Zauberwesen,' in *Z.A.* xxiii. 166.

have been no need for amulets as a protection against her destructive power.<sup>1</sup>

The original Sūsenyōs is identified by Littmann ('Princeton Ethiopic Magic Scroll,' p. 41) with the martyr of that name found in the Ethiopic *Synaxarium* (see also Basset, *Les Apocr. Ethiopiens*, iv. 10). According to the account there given, Sūsenyōs lived in the time of Diocletian, and he is reported to have killed in Antioch his sister, who had caused the death of her daughter, and had had a son by Satan. In one of the MSS used by K. Fries ('The Ethiopic Legend of Socinius and Ursula,' in the *Transactions of the Congress of Orientalists*, held at Leyden in 1893), the sister of the Sūsenyōs in the *Synaxarium* is actually called Werzelyā. In the corresponding Greek and Slavonic legends her name is, however, Melintha (see M. Caster, *Folklore*, xi. 126 ff.); and there can be no doubt that Werzelyā in the amulet legend is the Ethiopic<sup>2</sup> Lilith, who plays among the Semites the same part as Lamia among the Greeks.

Another element which—as may be expected—is not unfrequently referred to in the magic scrolls is the power of King Solomon over demons, and there are also a number of other traits of a more or less significant character.

The largest number of topics embodied in Ethiopic amulets so far published is found in Budge's edition of *Lady Meux's MSS*, Nos. 2-5. Omitting the story of Sūsenyōs and Werzelyā, which is of course also found there, these topics may be briefly summarized as follows:—(1) The

<sup>1</sup> Unless the idea is that the death of Werzelyā only signifies the separation of her spirit from the body she was inhabiting.

<sup>2</sup> As for the origin of the name *Werzelyā*, Littmann thinks it probable that it is Cushite. Dr. Fries identified it with the Latin *Ursula*, but Basset has (probably with justice) pronounced against this.

story of a woman fiend whom our Lord and His disciples met in the neighbourhood of Tiberias, and who had the power to destroy travellers and children, and to do other kinds of mischief. By our Lord's command she was burnt, and her ashes were scattered to the four winds of heaven. Here we clearly have an element akin to that of Werzelyā.

(2) A piece of rare occurrence is a prayer ascribed to the Prophet Jeremiah, who was by the gift of prophecy enabled to declare the power of the cross of Christ. (3) A conversation between King Solomon and the children of Kedar, who were workers in metal, devoured the flesh of men, and did other fearful things. Solomon obtains their secret, and overcomes them by the power of a series of Divine names specially revealed to him. (4) One of the amulets contains a reference to the 'twenty-seven lamps which were given to Enoch.' (5) In another amulet reference is made to Enoch, Elijah, Nabal, who opposed David, Uzza, who dared to look into the ark, and to the magical names which God gave to Moses. (6) A subject which appears to have been purposely embodied in order to lead the owner in a more decidedly Christian direction is found in the British Museum MS. Or. 4716 (Budge, p. lxi). It is a kind of litany, beginning with the invocation of the Holy Trinity, and then proceeding with addresses to Christ, in which a number of the events of His life are enumerated. The evils to be warded off are the tongue of the demon Bāryā, the tongues of men both of kinsfolk and strangers, fever, rheumatism, and other diseases.

## Mercy and Truth.

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Two verses in St. Paul's writings which throw some light on each other seem to have been imperfectly understood by the translators of the A.V., and one of them scarcely better comprehended by the Revisers. They are Eph 2<sup>17</sup> and Ro 15<sup>9</sup>. The A.V. in the former case reads, 'He came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.' The entire concealment of the second 'peace' of the Greek text is here not easily explicable. (Luther's version similarly sup-

presses the second 'peace'). The Vulgate brings out the sense exactly, 'Evangelizavit pacem vobis, qui longe fuistis, et pacem iis, qui prope.' The Revised Version, similarly, has, 'preached peace to you who were afar off, and peace to them that were nigh.' The repetition of the word *peace*, producing, as it does, an emphatic but rather rough sentence, must have been intended by the writer to call attention to some difference, such as in the form, the source, or the conditions of the gift, if