

The relationship of Arabic with Ethiopic gnomologia

Remarks on a projected edition

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Ge'ez literature, a considerable part of which is translated literature, begins with the rise of Christianity in Ethiopia. In the first great literary period up to the 7th century many literary works were translated from Greek. After a dark age of political confusion, a productive period of translating from Arabic began. The influence of Christian-Arabic literature was very significant for the development of Ge'ez literature.

The scope of the translators was, however, mainly theological. Thus we have only the following philosophical works preserved in Ge'ez: The *Mashafa Falāsfa Tabībān* ('Book of the Wise Philosophers', hereafter: MFT), and the 'Life and Maxims of Secundus', being translations of apothegms from Arabic which date from the 16th century.

It was only in the 19th century that Ethiopists directed their attention to the MFT. For his *Lexicon linguae Aethiopiae*¹ Dillmann used a MS from Tübingen (fig. 1), and in his *Chrestomathia Aethiopia*² he published an extract from a Frankfurt MS. Close to ten years later, in 1875, Cornill³ discussed the MFT in a small volume, giving translations of a number of sayings from the Ethiopic gnomologium. Merkle (in 1921)⁴, Euringer (in 1941)⁵ and Altheim (in 1962)⁶ occupied themselves with some aspects of the MFT, but it was only Sumner⁷ who thoroughly took up this subject in the seventies of this century. His extensive studies on this problematic issue as well as his translation into English of the MFT are unfortunately not very well known among Ethiopic scholars, since, having been published in Ethiopia, they have found only a small readership outside the borders of this country.

One of Sumner's best known works is the summary of his five-volume series on Ethiopian philosophy, published under the title *The Source of African Philosophy. The Ethiopian Philosophy of Man*.⁸

As Altheim has remarked, however, we lack '... eine vollständige und einigermaßen genügende Ausgabe des äthiopischen Textes'⁹. Sumner's English translation is unfortunately deficient, 'for he used two late MSS of the 19th/20th centuries, which seem to be

corrupt in part. Furthermore, it appears that his incorrect analysis of its Arabic source has had serious consequences. Sumner supposes that 'this work of translation (i.e. the MFT, U.P.) ... is Ethiopian, not by the originality of its invention, but by the originality of its style and presentation. The Ethiopians never translate literally: they adapt, modify, add, subtract.'¹⁰ In fact, the Ethiopic text is more often than not a literal translation of the Arabic version. Because of this we are able to interpret many incomprehensible passages of the Ethiopic gnomologium.

By comparison with the Arabic text many errors and misunderstandings of the translator have found an explanation; likewise the Arabic version clarifies some of the names of Greek authors mentioned in the text, which had not yet been identified.

The MFT was translated from Arabic into Ge'ez by a certain Abba Mikael, a writer of Egyptian origin, between 1510 and 1522. The date of this translation (as *terminus ante quem*) is attested to by a 16th-century MS (fig. 4), the oldest MS extant¹¹. The MFT was translated 'by the mouth of Mikael'¹². It seems that the author translated the Arabic text into the spoken language, and that an Ethiopian noted it down in Ge'ez.

The problem of the Arabic original has been unsolved for a long time. The first scholar who assumed the *Nawādir al-falāsifa* of Hunayn b. Ishāq (b. 808, d. 873 or 877) to be the source of the MFT was Cornill in 1875. Altheim and Sumner agree with this view: they also regard the *Nawādir al-falāsifa* as the direct or indirect original of the Ethiopic gnomologium. In his work on the *Kitāb ādāb al-falāsifa*¹³ Merkle had identified a Christian collection, written in 1723/24 C.E., as the original of the MFT. This collection, entitled *Kitāb al-bustān* (MS Paris Arab. 4811, hereafter: KB), seems to have enjoyed a certain popularity, as it is preserved in several MSS in Oxford¹⁴, Cairo¹⁵, Jerusalem¹⁶ and St. Petersburg¹⁷.

Altheim rejects Merkle's view, arguing that the text of the KB is to be dated later than the Arabic gnomologium. The above-mentioned date in the KB

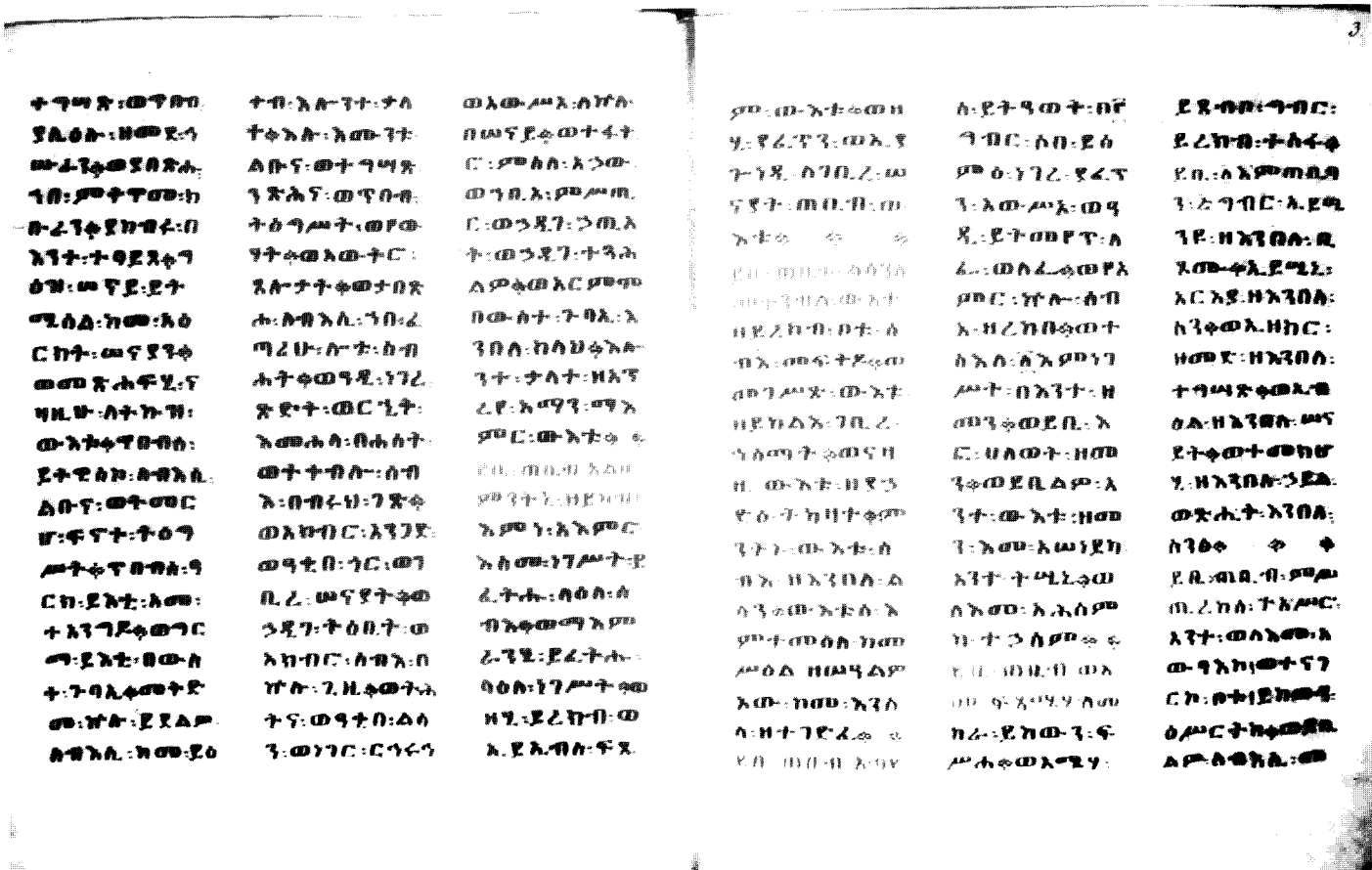


Figure 3. *Mashafa Falāsa Ṭabībān*. MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Ethiopien 106, fols. 2v-3r.

should not, however, be necessarily regarded as the date of compilation: the MS appears to be a late copy of this collection. The Paris MS (fig. 6) gives no identification of the author of the collection (we only find *mu'allif*)¹⁸. The Oxford MS mentions a certain Naṣrallāh b. Yuḥannā, surnamed Ibn al-Kalḥ¹⁹, whose lifetime Merkle dates at the end of the 16th century C.E. Unfortunately, we have no information about this Ibn al-Kalḥ and his literary activities, nor do we know whether he is the compiler of this collection or only the copyist. The Arabic collection contains ca. 800 sayings which are not, however, ordered according to theme or author. Only 10% of the sayings make mention of the author of the sentence.

We here render saying No. 52 in order to give an example of the Greek or Christian authors appearing in the text: 'It is said: A wise man came to (another) wise man, who was a hermit, and said to him: "O wise man, you are a constant man!" But the wise man said: "I am not alone, for I have company with many wise men and writers. To whomever one wishes to speak, one may speak, and he will speak to me." Then he slapped his hand on the books next to him, saying: "This is Galen wandering, and Hippocrates disputing, Socrates exhorting and Plato speaking, Aristotle being present, Euclid (in the Ethiopic text: Aqlāndīnōs)²⁰ enjoining religion, Hermes beginning to speak, and Gregorius speaking, David teaching, and the Gospel

proclaiming; whomever you wish to receive advice from, you can confer with him."²¹

The Ethiopic text adds: 'I do not know heresy at all.' It appears that the Ethiopic translator intended with this remark to show that a tolerant and unbiased attitude towards the Graeco-pagan source would be suspect to many Christians. The above-mentioned remark was apparently intended to make clear beyond all doubt the Christian attitude of the compiler.

It was very possible to integrate ideas from the field of Greek ethics, such as the theory of virtues and vices, individual expectations and endeavours, into Christian or Islamic lifestyles, because of their universal validity.

Saying No. 80 reflects these subjects: 'Knowledge has many limbs. Its head is humility, its brain is the knowledge of things, its tongue is sincerity, and its heart is right intention. Its hands are mercy, and its feet are the endurance of scholars. Its rule is justice, and its kingdom is moderation ...'²²

The representation of knowledge as a human body whose extremities each depict a virtue is very interesting. The religious knowledge that is without a doubt meant by this represents the sum of virtues. It appears to be a parallel phenomenon to the reflection of the categories 'microcosmos / macrocosmos' in the human body, which had a significant place in Christian symbolism. It is not clear, however, where this

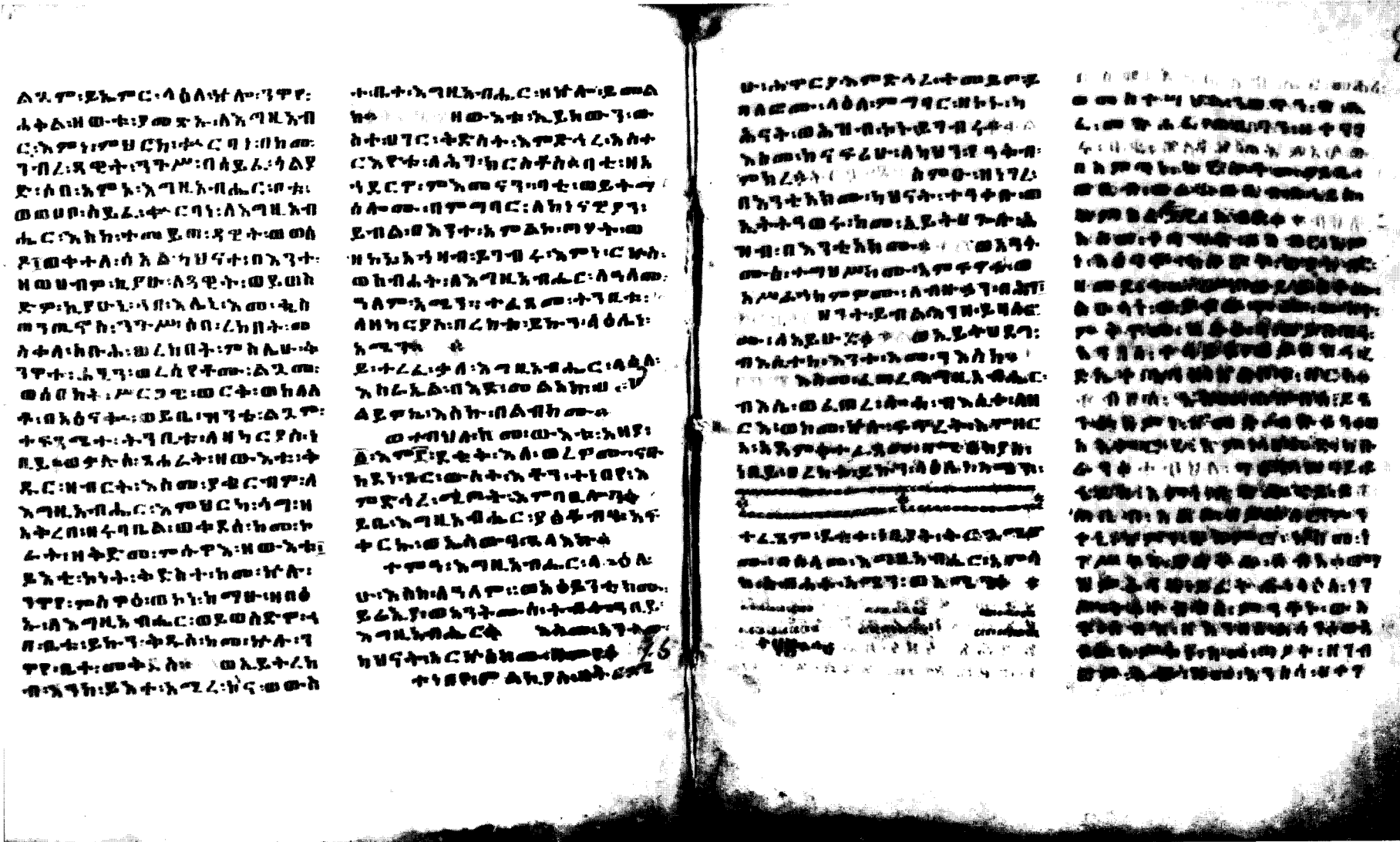


Figure 4. *Mashafa Falāsfa Tabībān*. MS Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Ms. aethiop. 16, fols. 83v-84r.

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 الجمع والتفرقة وازان ما في القلوب وما يتبدل
 على الفعل الذي يزيه بين الصدق والكذب
 وهو الانسان دون تباير الحيوان والقلب من الانسان
 معقل رايه هو به بدن وعنه صدره القلب غرار
 متعلمه بالشر والقوة والحيلة والذكاء والجمال
 والجلد والنبوه واللذ والالفة والفضة في الظرف
 وفي النفس والروح محركة للحد منقطه لذاته فليس
 الفاعل يزرق نفسه ولا الجاهل يزيد شي بجرصة
 بل الامر لله العزيز القادر انما مولف في هذه الكتاب
 اصول يعرف بها الادب من استدلال اهتديت ومن
 تعلم علمه ومن ترك الادب عدم فضلة العقل والادب
 وانا جامع في كتابي هذه الجملة من ملح الاخبار والاشارة
 ومما سن الادب وبتداعة ذوي الالباي منتخبة من
 اهل الادب وحكمه ما جوده من توبين ذوي الادب
 والحكم يشغل حفظها ويحقق استماعها حكمت

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 كتاب البستان وقاعدت الحكما
 وشعر الادب والوزن كتاب الحكمة
 ونية حكيمه هو يظهر الادب يظهر الاخلاق
 ويعلم الناظر فيه حكمة وينين ادبا
 وطر فاوقها وعملا قال المولف
 لهذا الكتاب اشكر الله الباري القدير
 ذي النعمة الصابغة والرحم بالالفه والايات
 والمحكمات والذليل الموضحات الذي قيد
 مهذا وخلق قسوا ليس كنه شي وهو الشيع
 العليم الذي خلق الخلق بقدرته وودره بحكمته
 وفي اختلاف الافعال الكبر على ما سبق من علمه بشيئة
 وخلق لغير اللسان وحمله للسان ودل به علي
 النور وطرقات اللغات المختلفة للمعلومه والف
 الجمع

Figure 6. *Kitāb al-Bustān*. MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Arabe 4811, fols. 1v-2r.

representation of the body as a symbol of religious knowledge originates from.

The universal validity of many of the aphorisms in the KB, in many instances plain practical sense, makes it impossible in many cases to identify the author of a saying, or to recognize similar passages as belonging to the same line of tradition. The search for parallel traditions seems to be more effective in the case of two subjects. Sayings on the terms *ḥikma* and *‘ilm* occur very often in the KB.

In classifying these aphorisms with regard to their content we can distinguish four thematic groups:

1. Knowledge (*‘ilm*) is the highest degree of happiness. Through extensive knowledge a man can attain an honoured social position. A man of letters is the most distinguished and the most prominent person in society²³.

2. The term *adab* is closely related to the terms ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ and here denotes the Greek ‘paideia’, which in addition to knowledge connotes education, morals, and behaviour.

3. Wisdom and knowledge go hand in hand with an ascetic lifestyle. The wise men in the KB are generally described as hermits. The striving for wealth is incompatible with the search for knowledge²⁴.

4. The wise man in the gnomologium emphasizes that his knowledge is limited, and it is quite clear that this self-assessment of his knowledge is in fact evidence of wisdom²⁵.

The parallel passages that have been found up to now show that the views of Merkle, Altheim and Sumner concerning the central position of Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq’s *Nawādir al-falāsifa* in the tradition of sayings in the KB, must be revised.

The parallels are widely spread, especially in *adab*-literature. A certain concentration of these can be traced in Mubashshir ibn Fātik’s *Mukhtār al-ḥikam*, which is not surprising. Al-Mubashshir draws upon various branches of the tradition, especially Christian works such as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq’s *Nawādir al-falāsifa* and our KB²⁶.

An interesting quotation of Galen could contribute to a reconstruction of the Arabic original of this collection. This saying describes the origin of dreams: ‘The wise Galen said: “Dreams are born from the mingling of the four humours. If it is the blood which moves in the body, good and pleasant things are seen during sleep. Furthermore, red colours and an emission of blood are seen. If the yellow bile moves, battles

and war, fire and many colours, lamps, lightning and the like are seen. Furthermore it seems to him that he is in a bathroom and in the sun. If it is the phlegm which moves, seas, rivers, snow, rain, frost, and white colours are seen. It seems to him that he is drinking water. If the black bile moves, darkness, graves, corpses, fright, grief and dark clothes are seen, and he is overcome by fear and trembling.”²⁷ This text, identical with an extract from an anonymous doxography, the *Aqwāl al-ḥukamāʾ*, was probably written by a Christian scholar. Gätje²⁸ published this part of this doxography and noted that this passage does not appear in the works of Galen. Daiber has meanwhile identified this extract as a paraphrase of al-Fārābī's *Risāla fī ārāʾ ahl al-madīna al-fādila*, which is identical with the text in Gätje's publication²⁹.

A detailed comparison of the KB with the MS³⁰ which Gätje and Daiber have mentioned shows that the Paris MS and the Baghdad MS correspond in part. Galen is overly represented in the sayings of the KB. Under his name we find sayings on psychological and ethical problems, without being able to draw direct parallels to Galen's writings. The numerous sayings under his³¹ and Plato's³² name on the soul allow us to assume another Arabic source on this subject. Ḥunayn b. Ishāq translated — as he wrote in his missive to 'Alī b. Yaḥyā³³ — Galen's book 'On the doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato'³⁴. The translations of Galen's work into Syriac and Arabic have not survived. Excerpts, however, are contained in some Arabic medical works, such as ar-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-ḥawī*, or in 'summaries' (*jawāmiʿ*) made by Ḥunayn b. Ishāq³⁵. Another source for our Christian compiler of the KB might be the works of the Jacobite Christian Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (born 893 or 894, died 974 C.E.), especially his *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*.³⁶ In this compendium of philosophical ethics Yaḥyā b. 'Adī describes the tripartition of the soul (*an-naḥs ash-shahwāniyya*, *an-naḥs al-ghadabiyya* and *an-naḥs an-nāṭiqā*), and the virtues and vices of each part. The parallels between his view on this subject and the sayings in the KB are striking³⁷.

These findings should only be taken as provisional, however, since an edition and a detailed comparison of the KB with other gnomologia are still to be expected. We could regard the KB as part of the Arabic literature which represents the distant echo of the Greek doxographical and gnomological tradition. The proof that our Christian gnomologium and thus also the Ethiopic MFT are to be placed in this tradition, is, however, still to be established.

NOTES

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I would like to thank Matthias Westerhoff for his help in revising my English translation.

¹ Dillmann, A., *Lexicon linguae Aethiopiae*, Leipzig 1865, Prolog. IX.

² Dillmann, A., *Chrestomathia Aethiopia*, Leipzig 1866, Praef. XI.

³ Cornill, C.H., *Das Buch der weisen Philosophen*, Leipzig 1875.

⁴ Merkle, K., *Die Sittensprüche der Philosophen* Kitāb Ādāb al-falāsifa von Ḥonein Ibn Ishāq, Leipzig 1921.

⁵ Euringer, S., 'Übersetzung der philosophischen Lehrsprüche in Dillmanns *Chrestomathia Aethiopia*,' in: *Orientalia*, 10/1941, 361-371.

⁶ Altheim, F., *Geschichte der Hunnen*, Bd. 5, Berlin 1962, 215-224.

⁷ Sumner, C., *Ethiopian Philosophy*, Vol. I. *The Book of the Wise Philosophers*, Addis Ababa 1974.

Idem, *Classical Ethiopian Philosophy*, Addis Ababa 1985.

⁸ Sumner, C., *The Source of African Philosophy: The Ethiopian Philosophy of Man*, Stuttgart 1986.

⁹ Altheim, *Geschichte*, 217.

The author of this article is going to publish an edition of the MFT based upon the following MSS:

Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS. orient. quart. 1011, fols. 52^a — 137 (fig. 2).

Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, MS. orient. oct. 3986, fols. 1^a — 22^b.

Frankfurt, Stadt- und Universitätsbibliothek, MS. or. 16.

Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. Ethiopien 106, fols. 1^r-85^v (fig. 3).

Tübingen, Universitätsbibliothek, Ms. aeth. 6.

Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Vindob. aethiop. 16, fols. 84^rb — 103^v1a (fig. 4).

Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Vindob. aethiop. 19, fols. 65^a — 139 (fig. 5).

¹⁰ Sumner, *Source*, 29.

¹¹ Cod. Vindob. aethiop. 16, fols. 84^rb — 103^va (cf. N. Rhodokanakis, *Die äthiopischen Handschriften der K.K. Hofbibliothek zu Wien*, Wien 1906, 13).

¹² Cornill, *Buch*, 13.

¹³ Merkle, *Sittensprüche*, 20f.

¹⁴ Bodleian Library, MS ar. 349 and MS ar. 377, cf. Merkle, *Sittensprüche*, 21.

¹⁵ Cf. Graf, G., *Catalogue de manuscrits arabes chrétiens conservés au Caire*, Città del Vaticano 1934, No. 532, p. 200.

¹⁶ cf. Graf, G., *Katalog christlich-arabischer Handschriften in Jerusalem*, Leipzig 1914-1918, Nos. 80, 333.

¹⁷ St. Petersburg, Library of the Institute of Oriental Studies (the former LOIVAN), MS A 433, 63^a-94^b.

¹⁸ MS Paris, B.N., Arab. 4811, fol. 1^b.

¹⁹ Cf. Merkle, *Sittensprüche*, 21.

²⁰ This passage shows the significance of the Arabic gnomologium for the Ethiopic MFT: We find in this saying the name Aqlāndīnōs, whose identity has not yet been cleared up. Altheim (*Geschichte*, 220) has identified this

name with that of Apollonios of Tyana. Sumner has suggested that we are dealing with Empedocles (*Classical Ethiopian Philosophy*, 71). In the KB an Iqıldus, i.e. Euclid, is mentioned. The Ethiopic reading Aqlāndīnōs can easily be explained by the Arabic spelling.

²¹ MS Paris, B.N., Arab. 4811, fol. 7^b.

²² MS Paris, B.N., Arab. 4811, fol. 9^b.

²³ E.g. MS Paris, B.N., Arab. 4811: 'Knowledge is an ornament of kings.' (fol. 16^b). Cf. al-Mubashshir, 193.

'Wisdom is stronger than many relatives and knowledge is given more credit than respected relatives.' (fol. 4^a).

'One man said: "Why are wise people poor?" A wise man answered: "They are not poor, for wisdom has made them richer than riches ..."' (fol. 20^a)

²⁴ E.g. MS Paris, B.N., Arab. 4811, fol.6^a: "'Why do wisdom and wealth not go together?'" Plato was asked, and he replied: "Because perfection is rare.'" Cf. al-Mubashshir, *Mukhtār al-ḥikam*, ed. 'Abd ar-Raḥmān Badawī, Madrid 1958, 132; al-Māwardī, *Kitāb Adab ad-dunyā wa-d-dīn*, Cairo 1315, 17.

²⁵ E.g. the Platonic saying that Plato only knew that he did not know anything occurs in KB and al-Mubashshir in different places and with ascription to different authorities; cf. Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār*, II, 126; al-Māwardī, *Adab*, 44.

²⁶ Cf. on the inter-relationship of these sources Alon, I., *Socrates in Medieval Arabic Literature*, Leiden-Jerusalem 1991, 21, 38.

²⁷ MS Paris, B.N., Arab. 4811, fol.15^b.

²⁸ Gätje, H., *Studien zur Überlieferung der aristotelischen Psychologie im Islam*, Heidelberg 1971, 136-139.

²⁹ Daiber, H., 'Prophetie und Ethik bei Fārābī', in: *L'homme et son univers au moyen-âge. Actes du 7ème congrès international de philosophie médiévale*. Ed. par Chr. Wenin. Louvain-la-Neuve 1986, 729.

³⁰ MS Baghdad, Auqāf 9763 (fol.1-66^b) in: M. As'ad Ṭalas, *al-Kashshāf 'an makḥḥūṭāt khazā'in kutub al-Auqāf*, Baghdad 1953, 153 a. I would like to thank Hans Daiber for letting me use this MS and to express my gratitude for his many helpful hints.

³¹ Under Galen's name we find e.g. the following sayings: "'Courage is from the yellow bile and happiness from the blood, sorrow from the black bile and pleasure is (born) from the heart.'" The wise Galen said: "Joy comes from the heat and sorrow from the cold. Sorrow is of two kinds. One type is that of conscience: the rational soul becomes sad for lack of things and of knowledge. The animal soul feels sorry for lack of food and drink and the like.'" (MS Paris, B.N., Arab. fols. 27^{a-b}).

³² Under Plato's name we can quote: 'The wise Plato said: "The flesh is the enemy of the soul. The soul will not be established without the destruction of the flesh. Work hard for the destruction of your flesh so that your soul will be in a privileged position over your desire for the satisfaction of the flesh.'" (MS Paris, B.N., Arab. 4811, fol. 28^a).

³³ 'Über die syrischen und arabischen Galen-Übersetzungen', ed. G. Bergsträsser, *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 17.2, Leipzig 1925, no. 46.

³⁴ Cf. G. Strohmaier's remarks on the Arabic translation of this work, in: *Galen. On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*. Ed., Transl. and Commentary by Ph. de Lacy. Berlin 1981, 42-46.

³⁵ Cf. Strohmaier, *Galen*, 43.

³⁶ Cf. *GAL*, S.1, 370, 956. Samir, Kh., 'Le *Tahḍīb al-aḥlāq* de Yaḥyā b. 'Adī (m.974) attribué à Ḡāḥiz et à Ibn al-'Arabī', in: *Arabica*, 21 1974, 111-138. Endress, G., *The Works of Yaḥyā b. 'Adī. An Analytical Inventory*, Wiesbaden 1977, 82ff.

³⁷ Cf. in the KB on the Platonic trichotomy under Galen's name fols. 14^b, 27^b.

