
A R T
T H A T
H E A L S

the
Image
as
Medicine
in
Ethiopia

Jacques Mercier

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The Museum for African Art

In memory of the cleric Mazengya, who made medicinal talismanic practice a living world for me.

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Text Editor: David Frankel

Translator: Dominique Malaquais, Vincent J. Errante

Design: Linda Florio Design

Assistant Curator: Elizabeth Bigham

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Cover: Detail of protective scroll, 19th century, parchment, 30 x 14 cm. (image). Collection: Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. Gift of Jacques Mercier. Photo: Guy Vivien.

Back cover: Mrs. Tshahy of Aksum prays before her scroll.

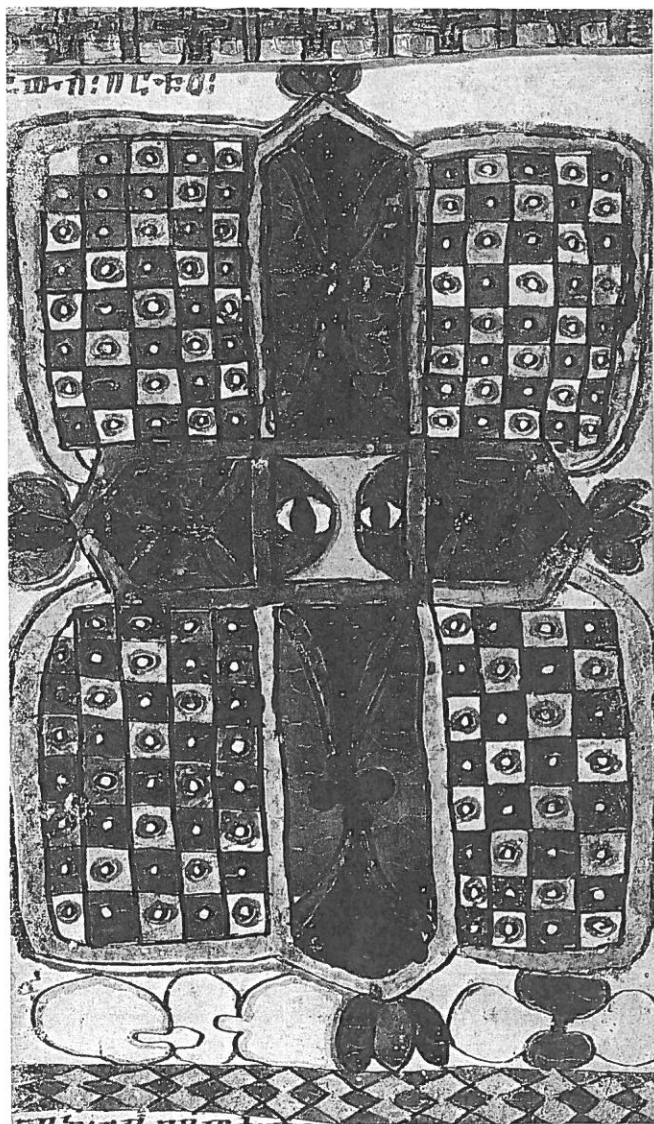
Photo: Jacques Mercier, 1994.

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WISE MEN AND THEIR WORKS

Some two hundred years ago, an Ethiopian cleric wrote two words, and nothing else, on a talismanic drawing he had just made: "powerful medicine." Whether he invented the inscription or copied it from an older manuscript,¹ the result is the same: an arresting though enigmatic caution. We would like to know for what specific sickness, on what basis, and finally for whom this drawing was a "powerful medicine." We would also like to understand the image's graphic and chromatic symbolism. Its author tells us nothing. Such knowledge is, in fact, a mystery (mestir) protected by secrecy.

The mystery of talismans, and other esoteric arts—the knowledge of spells and conjurations, the knowledge of the Names of God (a knowledge closely linked to talismanic art), the knowledge of cures (partially a pharmaceutic knowledge, more a knowledge of how to summon spirits)—all these make up the Ethiopian Wisdom, the *tebab*. Certain aspects of this body of lore stem from the same neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonic sources as alchemy and the Cabala do; Ethiopians got them from Egyptian Christians, from Muslims, even perhaps, in some elements, directly from the schools of the late Hellenistic world at the time of Aksum. Drawings like the one bearing the inscription “powerful medicine” are called *talsam*, from the Arabic *tilasm*, which itself comes from the Greek *telesma*, “effective object.”² Beginning perhaps as early as late antiquity, Ethiopians developed talismanic art to a unique degree, working from rough drawings they



received from the eastern Mediterranean (judging from the tiny fraction that have survived). Over the centuries they have produced thousands of superb and arresting images, part talismanic, part figurative.

Few truly ancient works survive. Some extant works are datable to before 1700,³ a few dozen may be attributed to the eighteenth century, a few thousand to the nineteenth. How to explain this rapid disappearance? Unlike church relics, these are not sacred objects, and priests may urge the faithful to avoid or even destroy them. Also, in times when temporal power saw itself as spiritual power (as it did under the rule of Emperor Zara-Yaqob, in 1434–68), it might undertake massive campaigns of destruction.⁴ More recently the Communist government, in its struggle against “bad” aspects of Ethiopian culture, ordered the destruction of many books and scrolls considered magic. Moreover, the scrolls, produced for a specific person and specific ills, are in principle nontransferable, and disappointed patients are likely to be negligent in preserving them.

One view of the scrolls approaches them through Christian religious art, another through the cult of the *zar* spirits that possess humans. We will begin at the heart of this therapeutic art: the science and practices of the sages. To what knowledge did the author of the inscription “Powerful medicine” have access? How does a cleric become a sage? What do sages learn? What knowledge do they seek?

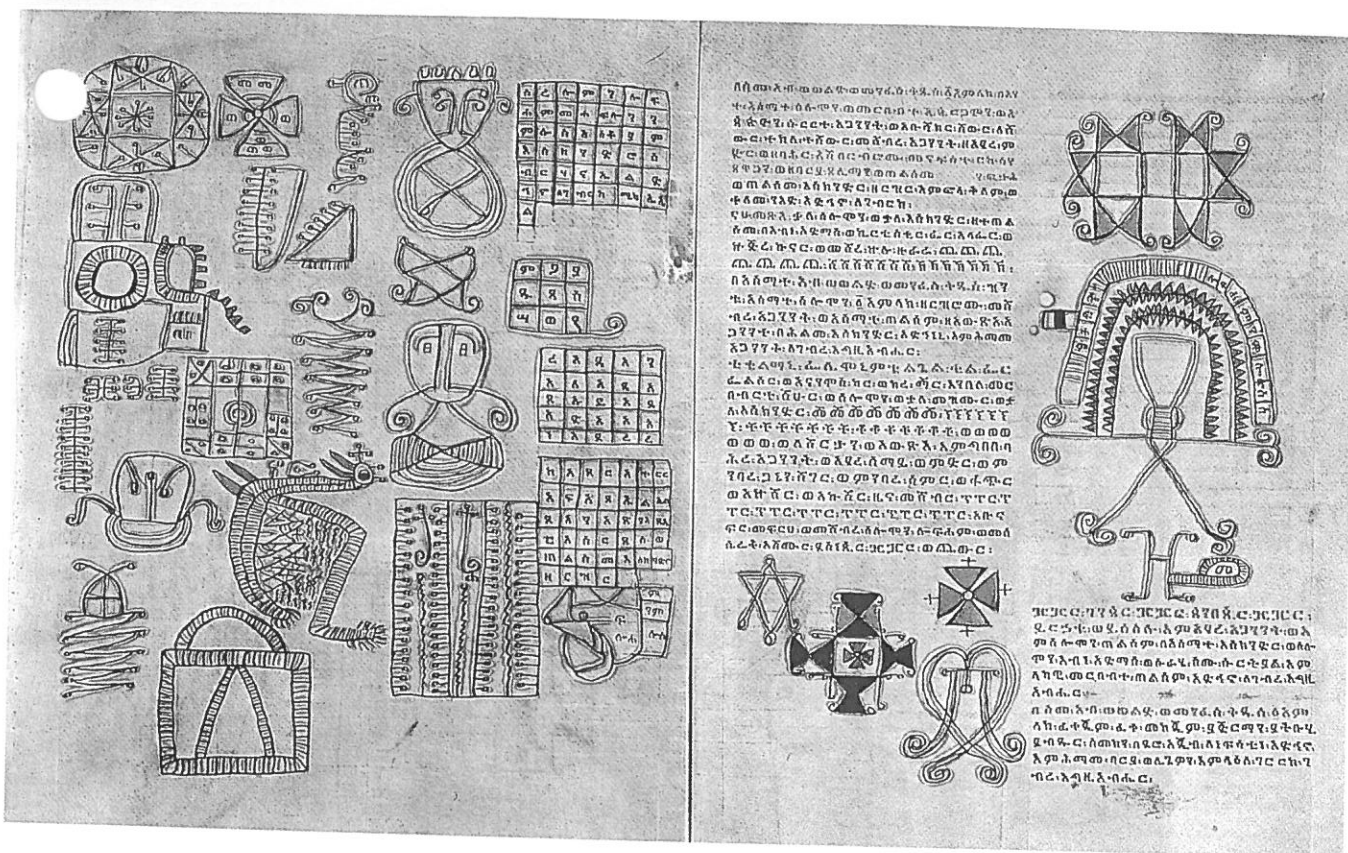
Becoming and Being a Sage Today

When I first met the cleric Asres, in 1974, he was almost 80 years old. His house was never empty of patients and many others awaiting an audience with him. During his rare moments of solitude, he loved to draw talismans, but editing prayers bored him, and he usually gave the job to some student of the religious sciences who was happy to earn a little money. Asres taught the making of talismans to the group of young people, relatives, friends, mediums, and scribes that surrounded him. He made sure to tell them that this was a practical art. One day, in appreciation of many long months of service, he gave a scribe a notebook containing some twenty talismans, scrupulously indicating the purpose of each one—for nightmares and spells, for women in childbirth, for Aquarius, etc.—and the prayers to be inscribed on it. Happy the student who received this book without having to serve its master for seven years, as tradition required! Happy the master whose pupil and servant hadn’t made off with his books!

It sometimes happens that the mysteries are revealed spontaneously. Thus it was for Gera, one of the people who have renewed the talismanic art for the present day. The son of a teacher of liturgical song, Gera initially followed the traditional curriculum of study, first memorizing the basic texts and the music of the liturgy, then turning to history and poetry, or rhetoric. In this latter discipline he became first a tutor, then a professor in a religious school. Outside his studies, he began to familiarize himself with medicinal plants, and from this place and that he put together a few bits of the *tebab*.

One day when he was already a teacher, after his pupils had recited their poems, Gera went home. He had set himself to copying prayers from the *Net of Solomon* (figs. 33, 42),⁵ ignoring its

Fig. 32: Seal. At top left is written the phrase “Powerful medicine.” *Protective scroll (detail), eighteenth century, parchment, 19 x 11 cm. Collection: Berlin (West), Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung.*



CAT. 1: The collection of seals and characters known as “Solomon’s Net” is respected scrupulously from generation to generation. A source of models for the makers of the scrolls, it can also serve the opposite function, as a compilation of talismans and prayers collected from various earlier scholars, who may be cited by name. The bodies of the characters are made out of letters, which are altered and end in small circles. *Talismans from “Solomon’s Net” (codex), twentieth century, parchment, each page 35 x 28.5 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.*

talismans, when a wandering monk, a former professor of poetry and history, stopped by. Gera had met this man once or twice. “I inquired about his trip, and waited for water to be brought to wash his feet. He ignored my questions and asked me to show him the book I was writing. I thought he wanted to see my script, but he turned to the other book, the model. Having compared the two manuscripts, he told me, as if repeating a proverb ‘Like a log in the fire that one has forgotten to put out, a prayer without a talisman will not be found the next morning. Without its seal, a royal edict has no force to compel.’ Then he explained that the talismans are the ancient source of Geez, Hebrew, and Greek letters. Since the development of calligraphy, the interwoven letters of ancient times have become mysterious, serving as ornaments for the front pages of books. The talismans are seals in the form of intertwined letters and shapes.”⁶

Gera was busy with other projects at the time, and paid little attention. Perhaps he had acquired this knowledge too easily; only later, he says, did he understand its importance.

Asres’s career has been very different from Gera’s. A cleric’s son as a child, he left home while still young and eventually began to call the spirits himself. Though the work was lucrative, he soon gave it up, out of shame and fear of judgment. He was returned to it by a dream: on the command of a luminous being, he was eating a hyena’s thigh, and eating it with pleasure. A hermit interpreted his vision: the hyena meat, being impure, symbolized

divination, or prophecy, in other words magic, wisdom in its most general sense. The meat’s taste had become palatable because God had purified magic for Asres, and by making him finish the thigh, God was telling him to dedicate himself to this art until he died. Through the holy man’s warning, Asres yielded to what seemed to be his destiny. The dream justified his engagement in prophetic therapy. Once or twice, he has vaguely wanted to learn liturgical poetry but has never had the leisure, busy with his work as a sage.

Asres tells this story willingly, for it legitimizes his practice of the Wisdom by reference to divine will (though it may seem a little perverse that God has ordered the transgression of His own law against the practice of divination). The story also shows that Asres’s relationship to God is lived as a daily dialogue, and that the dream has authority in that dialogue. Finally, it lets us see that there is room for miracles in such a world.⁷

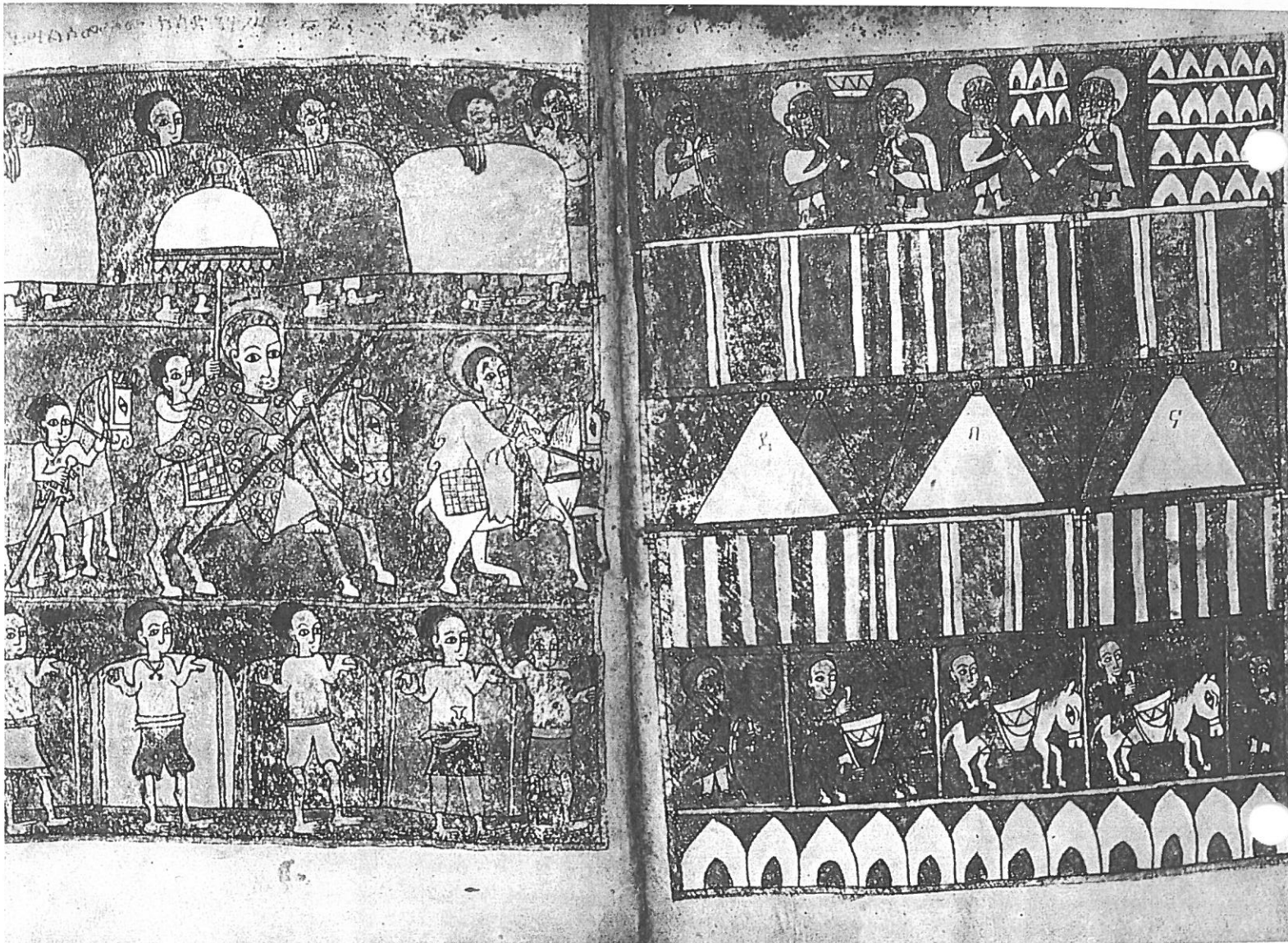
“My God and I understand each other,” Asres used to say when reprimanded by his confessor. Priests are the guarantors of the Christian ethic that used to be the foundation of the social and political order. Present at both the important moments of the outward life and, in their role as confessors, at the inner depths of the soul, they themselves are poorly educated, and the faith they preach is simple and severe. At one time, all education was religious, and the pupil who underwent it was often ordained a deacon. Once married, he might become a priest—as a matter of faith, for prestige, to gain access to church land, or, if he were a priest’s son, to keep such land in the family.

If a student wanted to continue his studies, he had to be ready to leave for some distant land to study with the most respected professors in liturgical, hermeneutic, or poetic/rhetorical chant. Living by begging, in competition his fellow students at the school of poetry and rhetoric, he might easily be tempted to learn herbal lore or the Wisdom, as much to improve his daily living as to



Fig. 34: Cantors (dabtara) dancing at the feast of the church of Saint Claudius, Galawdewos, Gondar. Photo: Jacques Mercier, 21 December 1983.

Fig. 35: Kesad, one of the three Magi (Awanson and Albetar, the other kings, are shown on the preceding pages), reaches the encampment at Bethlehem, guided by a star. To each side of his path, attendants hold cloths to hide him from the eyes of the crowd. He is preceded by flutists and drummers. For Ethiopians, the Magi ("men of divination," seb'a segel) are the descendants of Zoroaster, the astrologer and creator of talismans. Gospelbook, around 1500, parchment, each page 31.5 X 25 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.



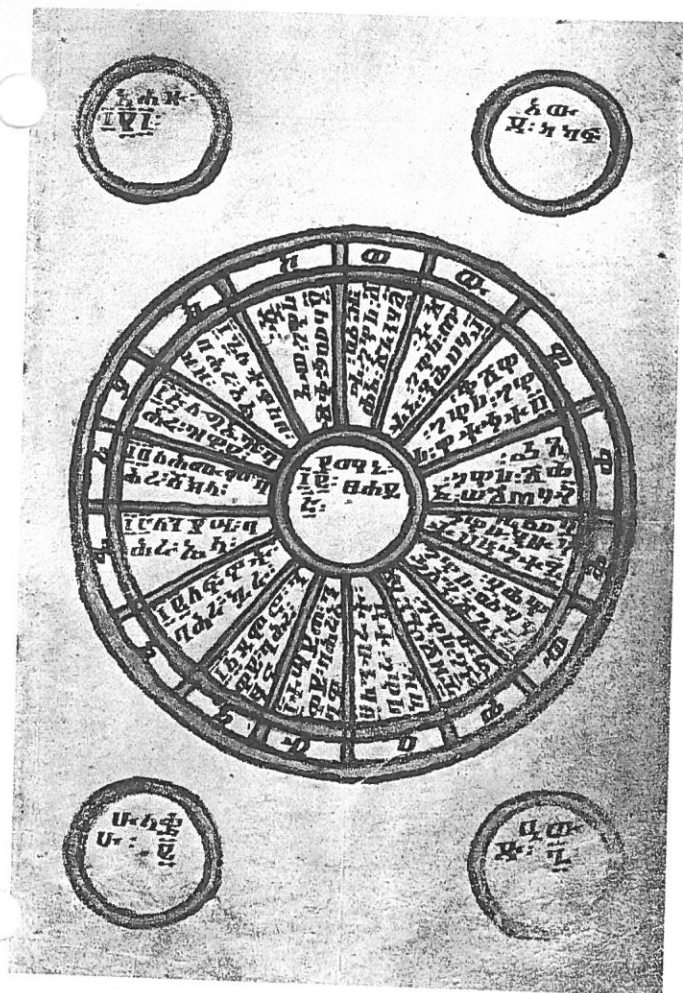


Fig. 36 CAT. 9: The seventh table, called the "circle of Kaf," of a celebrated treatise called "Circles of the Kings" (*awdā nāgiäst*), which gives its name to a whole collection of divinatory computations. Each of sixteen tables, and each of the sixteen sections of each table, corresponds to a theme; in the present case, "track with Jerusalem," that is, with countries overseas. The basic givens of the divination are the names of the subject and of his or her mother, the year, the name of the evangelist associated with that year, the month, and the day. A figure is associated with each of the consonants of these givens. To know "if a trader can send off his merchandise in complete safety," one adds up these figures according to a system based on the number sixteen, then, beginning from this seventh table, one counts off the number of tables equal to the resulting number. From the table one reaches, one reads the prophecies in the seventh section. Health problems are predicted in the fourteenth table. *Table of numerical divination, nineteenth century, parchment, each page 16 x 11 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.*

protect himself and triumph over his enemies. Once he had graduated, he might become a *dabtara* in a church; there he would work as a cantor, a post eventually rolled in with that of professor.⁸ The *dabtara*—a word we might translate as "cleric" or "scholar"—were the sages of the Ethiopian church.⁹ Not ordained, they were not obliged to be ethically strict.¹⁰

The term *dabtara* clearly applies not only to Gera but also to Asres, although he never took the usual religious curriculum. Throughout his life, Asres has had to hide behind the image of a white-turbaned pious man. He appears at religious ceremonies, parish feasts, and commemorative services, attends the banquets that associations organize in honor of Mary or the saints, attends confession. All this he does reasonably, even sincerely—he'll celebrate the feasts of the Archangel Gabriel, for example, whom he believes once saved him from misfortune.

If such slippages in meaning are fairly easy to understand, the term *dabtara* is nonetheless ambivalent. Many people know the *dabtara* as the man who sings sophisticated poems for the aristocracy on feast days at the church. Yet he is also the master of spells, the paragon of ingenuousness, ruse, and deceitfulness, and, in the eyes of the more rigid priests, a fallen and impure being. These clerics have two faces, one of them bright and diurnal, lit by the light of the knowledge of God, the other obscure, casting evil spells in the dark of night. This tension is the source of the sweet-and-sour exchanges between clerics and priests. Commenting on the death of a therapeutic cantor in Dabra Marqos, his parents and friends told me that he had gotten a cold while going out in the morning to pray in church. Meanwhile his enemies claimed he had been attacked by a demon that he had summoned early one morning at the river. Surely he too would have said, like Asres, "My God and I understand each other."

These two opposed aspects are incarnated respectively by Yared, the holy man who invented liturgical song, in Aksumite time,¹¹ and Tewany, a great expert in the occult sciences who invented rhetorical poetry, or at least excelled at it, in the time of the Gondar emperors in the seventeenth century. Tewany is said to have been lifted up by invisible women who took him to Lake Tana. He brought back "all the remedies for sick people and all the recipes to make the sciences quickly learned." He knew of plants that allowed him to change appearance, to travel on clouds in the company of demons, and to allow these demons to participate invisibly in royal banquets. He had a talisman that enabled him to stop the Angel of Death from entering his house for seven years.¹²

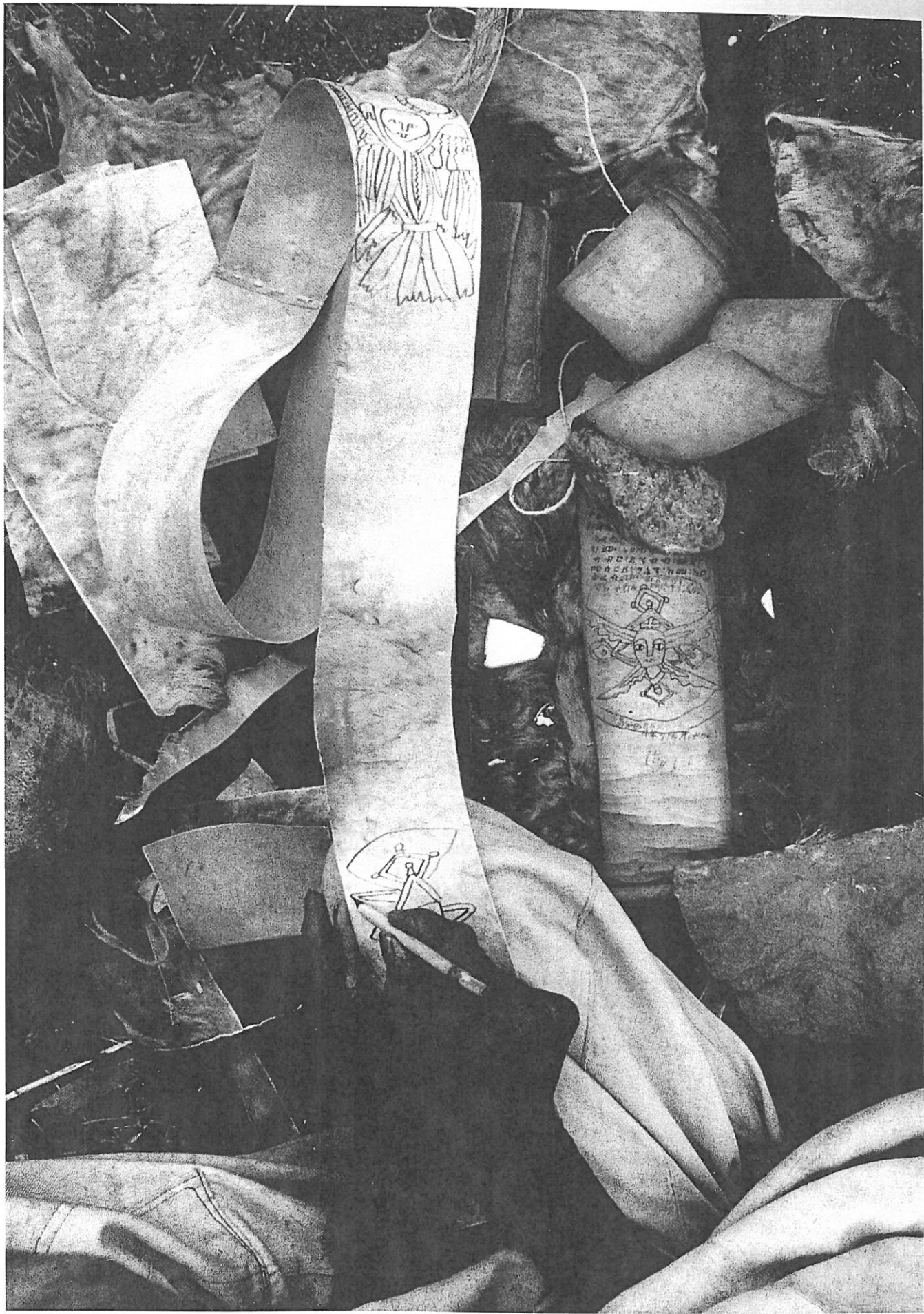
Divination

"Father, open your book for me," said Madame Marta to the cleric she was consulting about her sick child and her marital problems. The cleric asked her name and the name of her mother.¹³ Replacing each consonant in both names by its numerical value (*h*, the first consonant of the syllabary, becomes one, *l*, the second, becomes two, and so on), he added them up, using the numerical system based on the scale of twelve. The result, necessarily a number between one and twelve, he correlated to a sign of the zodiac. Opening his book to the page for that sign, he read Marta her horoscope, which included her life expectancy, illnesses likely to afflict her, the remedies to take, effective medicinal plants, the intercessor saints to pray to, beneficial colors and harmful ones, animals to be sacrificed, prayers to inscribe on her scrolls, and, perhaps, the talismans she should have a cleric draw for her.

We recognize here the theory of correspondences that flourished in the Hellenistic world and is still known and appreciated in the West. There, however, a person's destiny is thought to be determined by the time of his or her birth. Ethiopians follow the Muslim practice, in which one's destiny is fixed by one's name. If, as legend has it, the magician Noctanebo used incantations to delay the birth of Alexander the Great by several hours,¹⁴ Ethiopians submit the names they have chosen for their child to the calculations of a cleric, and modify their decision as a result.

Where a priest may carry a Psalter with him, a cleric never goes on his rounds without his collection of prophetic computations. This most precious, and most costly, of his books is the

Fig. 37: Master Aklog recopies talismans from an old scroll onto a strip of parchment that he has made himself, Dabra Tabor. Photo: Jacques Mercier, 12 December 1978.



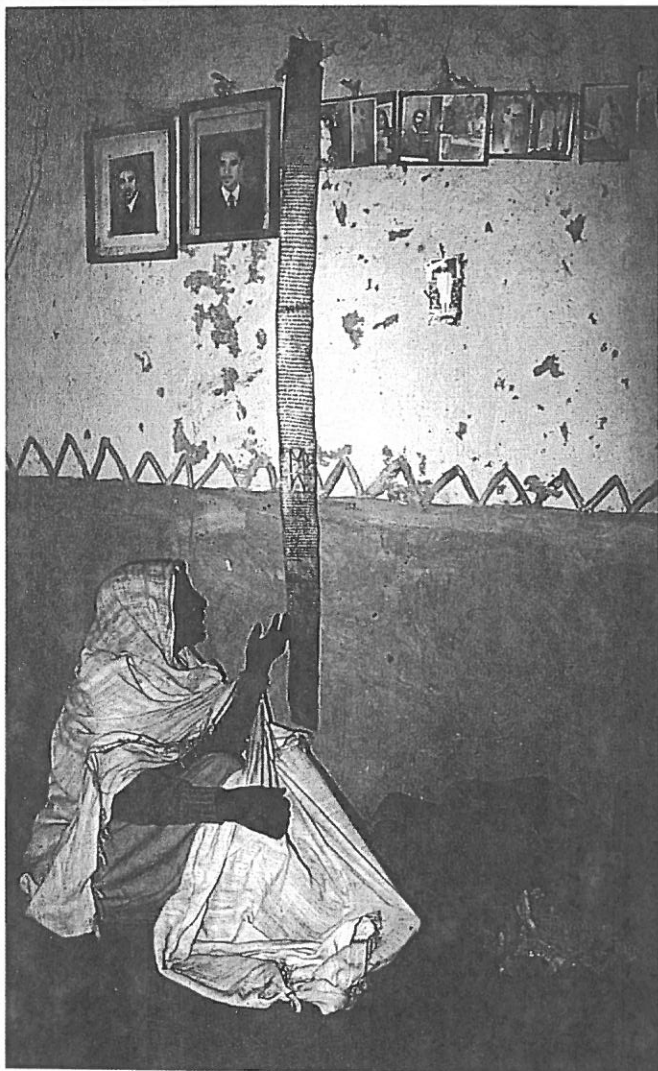


Fig. 38: Mrs. Tsahay of Aksum shows how she prays before her scroll, which she had hung over her bed three months earlier to cure an illness. Note how the scroll hangs next to modern images (portraits of relatives). Photo: Jacques Mercier, 1994.

emblem of his status as a scholar. According to a legend the clerics like to tell, each of the earth's peoples once had a book revealing the secrets of heaven. The Muslims hid it in a tree, and never found it again; since then they have watched the skies to know the future. The Oromo hid their book in the grass, where it was swallowed by a sheep. Now they read the future in sheep's peritoneums. The Wolayta tucked their book away in a riverbank: today they consult gravel, throwing it down and prophetically interpreting the forms that result. The Christians, however, kept their book: they alone have direct access to the written secrets of eternity.

This myth transposes into the domain of divination the idea of the superiority of the religion of the book. However much they might subscribe to this ideological superiority, the clerics need divination as much as their unlettered competitors do, because it is seen as an objective gauge by comparison with the manipulations of personal judgment. The basis of the clerics' practice is the belief in personal destiny: they undertake to cure only the person whose destiny it is to survive. In addition, their sign or spirit must be in accordance with the patient's, or they will send the person away, saying, "I am not your fate." If a patient they have accepted should die, they pay back any funds received.

Preparation and Use of Scrolls

A scroll is prepared for a person suffering from grave and recurring troubles—for women, mainly problems of maternity (sterility, miscarriages, children's death); for men, pains attributed to curses.

Until quite recently, all Ethiopia's bound books were handwritten on parchment. The use of this material for scrolls is therefore commonplace. But not any parchment will do: the horoscope may prescribe sacrificing either a sheep or goat of a certain color (gazelle parchment is sometimes prescribed, in which case there is no sacrifice, and a little hair is left to testify to the skin's origin), washing the patient with its blood and with the contents of its stomach, and using the skin to make a scroll, the length of which must equal the patient's height, so that he or she will be protected from head to toe.

Unlike its European counterpart, the Ethiopian process for making parchment includes no chemical treatment. The animal skin is simply shaved, scraped, and pumiced. Parchment for a codex is made thinner than scroll parchment, which has to be tough. The scroll comprises three bands of parchment of equal width (about three inches for the narrowest scrolls, about ten for the widest), sewn end to end. The patient's height is measured by a string (often the scroll is longer than the patient's body, as the cleric brings the string over the head to the nape of the neck, the better to protect the head), and the parchment is cut.¹⁵

The cleric draws the scroll's images with a reed pen on the parchment's inner side. There is usually an image at the top, one in the middle, and one at the bottom. Then he writes the prayers, inserting the recipient's baptismal name in red ink. Finally he makes a cylindrical case for the scroll, in red leather.

Ethiopian people may carry their scrolls with them when they feel threatened or ill.¹⁶ Some women won't carry a scroll during menstruation, considered a period of impurity. But other menstruating women keep their scrolls with them, to protect them from excessive bleeding and from attack by demons in search of blood.

In the province of Tigray, invalids unroll their scrolls and hang them opposite their beds, where they can clearly see the images and text. When cured, they put the scroll away in a cupboard. In Wello the scroll is sealed in its case, and patients put it under their pillows, or under the part of their bodies that hurts. Even when they're better they carry the scroll with them almost daily. On the last day of the year, some people bury their scrolls for the night, so that it will keep its effectiveness from year to year.

In principle, the features of the scroll—its support, prayers, images, and inks¹⁷—are determined astrologically. However, the practice is often simpler: the cleric chooses texts and images from his book according to his client's symptoms. Or more commonly, the client, believing that illnesses are inheritable, gives the cleric a scroll that had belonged to a deceased relative and asks him simply to replace the old name with his own. If the scroll is in bad condition, and if the patient has enough money, he may ask the cleric to make a new copy. More often, the cleric simply recopies the same old scrolls, inserting the names of new recipients.

The Primordial Revelation of the Talismans

The talismans are a mystery, fruit of a revelation harking back to the Old Testament, to the time of Genesis. Seth, Adam's third son,

Fig. 39, CAT. 16, 48, 42: Three scrolls, eighteenth or nineteenth century, parchment, 203 x 16.2 cm., 207 x 19.5 cm., and 189 x 15.3 cm. Collection: Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. Gift of Jacques Mercier. Photo: Guy Vivien.





and his children retreated to a holy mountain, where they lived a life as pure as the life of angels. When they looked at the sky, they saw angels, and sang with them of the glory of God. But when they looked at the earth, they saw the children of Cain, many and handsome, and they wanted to go down and multiply among them. It was Azazel, accursed angel of the air, who entered their hearts and led them back to the world. They took wives and fathered giants. They ceased to worship God and began to believe in demons, and in divination from the song and flight of birds.

Among the spirits teaching sorcery alongside Azazel was Penemu, who revealed the hidden Wisdom and the art of writing with red and black ink. Penemu brought the talismans: "Demons come to strike in the guise of wild beasts, or of men. . . . To protect yourself from them, to summon them without danger, you must have images like these; it's their medicine, and words like these command them." Thus were the Names of God, written on the hands of the Archangel Michael, provided for our protection. Names and talismans were revealed together.

This story, which I summarize as it was told to me by the cleric Gedewon, is a gloss on the Book of Enoch, known in schools of rhetoric.¹⁸ It locates the revelation of the talismans in a world where humans and visible spirits existed side by side, indeed mingled with one another. Ravages resulted, and punishment followed; the spirits that escaped were ambushed on every side, and they have been hostile to humans ever since (Enoch 15:8–16:1, Jubilees 10:8–9). Today communication between the two species takes place in the negative—in the register of sickness. But the scholar who draws talismans for his patients sees spirits. He moves in the world before the Flood, when spirits revealed themselves to humans and showed them the secrets of the heavens.

Solomon, the "Chief of the Wise Men," and Alexander

The knowledge that scholars aspire to is none other than the knowledge of Solomon, king of Israel, which "excelled the knowledge of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30). Solomon received that knowledge from God, Who taught him "the constitution of the world and the operation of the elements, the beginning and end and middle of times . . . the powers of spirits and the thoughts of men, the diversities of plants and the virtues of roots. All things that are either secret or manifest I learned, for she that is the artificer of all things taught me even Wisdom" (The Wisdom of Solomon 7:17–21, Charles 1913:1:546–47).

The principal motifs of the Solomon legend—the ring, the seal, the mirror, the palace as labyrinth, the power over demons—that developed in the Orient are known to Ethiopians, appearing in many stories and more or less esoteric rituals. Of all the solomonic prayers, the one most precious to the clerics is "Solomon's Net," which begins, "Net of Solomon that he extended over the demons like a net over the fishes of the sea, saying Sadqael, Adnael, Remel. . . ." Most of the prayer tells how Solomon, captured by blacksmiths, vanquished them by pronouncing a Name of God, Lofham, and forcing their king to reveal his evil deeds—tearing infants from the maternal womb, stealing the heart of men, father-

Fig. 40, CAT. 12: King Solomon attended by two demons—the two eyelike shapes to either side of his head. It is because Solomon is the antetype, the Old Testament precursor, of Christ that his crown is ornamented with crosses. Protective scroll (detail), nineteenth century, parchment, 22 x 7.7 cm. Collection: Musée National d'Art d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. Gift of Jacques Mercier. Photo: Guy Vivien.



ing bastards on the royal wives, and, ultimate bewitchment, assuming the appearance of the faces of asses, horses, cattle, dogs, hyenas, lions, and humans. According to a cleric, Solomon drew portraits of the demons he summoned, and collected them in his book. Tradition tells that this work was brought to Ethiopia by Menelik, the son of Solomon and the queen of Sheba (see previous chapter page 35).¹⁹ When a cleric reads it, the demon possessing a patient is unmasked and reveals his spells. Confronted with his own image, a cleric told me, "He leaves in a puff of smoke."

The archangel Michael is said to have given Solomon a ring bearing a seal, the seal of God. With this ring Solomon summoned demons and forced them to build him a palace in the form of a labyrinth, at the center of which he housed his wives and concubines. This divine seal, called the "seal of Solomon," is represented in Ethiopia as an eight-pointed star with a face at its center. Five- or six-pointed stars exist also but are rare. Judging from the evolution of talismanic and decorative art in Islamicized societies, where the eight-pointed star, very common after the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, is also called "Solomon's seal," this is evidence of the seal's late introduction, after the tenth century. Present on most of the scrolls, the symbol is nevertheless variously interpreted.

The historical origin of these legends, as Maxime Rodinson has shown (1992: 132–35), lies in the Hellenistic and Roman East, which served both as the receptacle of the cultures of conquered peoples, or of peoples on the margins, and as the generator of later cultural developments. The peoples drawn into this global cultural circle were not the last to build up the names of their heroes. The Jews attributed a number of books to Solomon: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, and the Wisdom cited below. And since Solomon was reputed to be versed in all the branches of knowledge, he was also made a master of magic (ibid.). Flavius Josephus, for example, writing around 93 A.D. in his *Jewish Antiquities*, remarks, "I have seen a certain Eleazar, a countryman of mine, in presence of [the emperor] Vespasian, his sons, tribunes, and a number of the soldiers, free men possessed by demons, and this was the manner of the cure: he had put to the nose of the possessed men a ring which had under its seal one of the roots prescribed by Solomon, and then, as the man smelled it, drew out the demon through his nostrils, and when the man at once fell down, adjured the demon never to come back into him, speaking Solomon's name and reciting the incantations which he had composed. (Josephus 1988: 5, 595–597). "Solomon's Testament," written in a Christian context in the third century A.D., shows Solomon summoning demons with a ring bearing the divine seal given to him by the archangel Michael. Having made the demons tell him their names, their evil plots, the Names of God and of the angels, and the signs that have power over them, Solomon uses them in the construction of the Temple (Mac-Cown 1892).

Ethiopians attribute the revelation of the talismans to various figures of Hellenic and Roman cosmopolitanism whose stories have reached them through a series of filters. In the third century A.D., legends amplifying Alexander the Great's expedition to the Orient were compiled in Alexandria, in a book that became, after the Bible, the single most widely disseminated work of the Byzantine era—it reached the west of both Europe and Africa, as well as the

Fig. 41: Seal of Solomon. In Ethiopia, the seal of Solomon is an eight-pointed star. The present image is found on the oldest known surviving scroll—the only one that analysis of the letters' shape dates to the sixteenth century. *Protective scroll*, sixteenth century, parchment, 9 x 7 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.

Malay Peninsula.²⁰ Ethiopian scribes also recorded several, later more fantastical stories in which Alexander appears as a Christian king who explores the bounds of the world. He reaches the Land of Darkness, where he finds enormous birds, which he rides to the Country of the Living. There he meets the prophets Enoch and Elijah.²¹ Having learned of the existence of peoples, subjects of the kings Gog and Magog, who look like snakes and hybrids, half man, half animal, he uses a bronze door to close off the narrow pass by which they may invade the lands of men. Sealing this door (Budge 1968:135–36/237–39), he sets automatons there who constantly play different musical instruments, for God has put fear of music into the hearts of the snake peoples (ibid.:269–74/281–85, 451–57/466–71).

Zoroaster, seen as the greatest of the Chaldean magi and the first astrologer, was pronounced a prophet of Christianity by the story of the Adoration of the Magi in the Book of Matthew (2:1–11).²² Hence his reputation in Ethiopian talismanic lore. The linking of the legend of Cyprian of Antioch to the memory of Saint Cyprian, martyred bishop of Carthage, led, in about the fourth century A.D., to the character of Cyprian the Magus, great initiate into the mysteries of Greece, Egypt, and Chaldea, who, at the height of his glory, startlingly converted to Christianity. Embellished over the centuries, this legend was fixed in the West in Goethe's *Faust*. In Ethiopia, it fed the "Prayers for Undoing Charms," the largest of the books of Names and talismans.²³ This literature, whether incantatory or narrative, began to reach Ethiopia in the Aksumite period, in translation from the Greek. It was later translated from the Arabic, principally from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. Certain legends, a number of prayers, and most of the talismans are only known in their Ethiopian manifestations.

The Sign of the Cross and the Seal of the Father

When the Archangel Michael faced the Devil, who had thought to equal the Creator, his troops were twice conquered. On the third assault, God gave Michael the "cross of light." As soon as the Devil saw the cross, he and his followers were overtaken by chaos, and he fell from Heaven.

For the cleric Gedewon, the cross given to Michael is not, strictly speaking, the cross known to us from the Crucifixion. It is the "talisman of the cross," or the "sign of the cross." Engraved on a seal, this sign is nothing less than the Name of God. Out of fear of divine glory, cherubim standing before God cross their wings in a cross formation before their faces, covering their eyes. All this preceded the use of writing. When writing began, the Name of God was written in letters in the talisman, henceforth a composite form. A cross was added after the birth of the Lord.

One can say, then, that the origin of every talisman is the cross, and, at the same time, that Christ's cross is the visible form of a sign that is the Name of God. The eight-pointed star so common in the scrolls can be seen as simultaneously the seal of the Father and the cross of the Son. This symbolic equation of the cross with the seal of the Father, an equation inscribed in the typological framework itself,²⁴ emphasizes the spiritual idea of the cross as the argument less of Christ's passion than of the victory over Satan and death. This victorious quality is the metaphorical basis for the use of the cross against the enemies of the scroll's recipient. Inscriptions such as "Cross, obliterator of enemies!" and "Cross, conqueror of enemies!" sometimes accompany drawings of the cross.

Knowledge and Secrecy

The prayers in the scrolls and protective codices always include a list of afflictions against which Christian spiritual powers and, most important, the Divinity itself are conjured: "By the one God, by the Trinity, and by the five nails of the cross, let demons, evil eyes, headaches, pain in the side and in the stomach, rheumatism of the hands and of the feet, fevers and malaria, sorcerers and sorceresses, *dasek* and *gudale*, Dedeq and the demon of noon, *zar* and demons and the spell-casters, not approach the soul and the body of your servant!"²⁵ Many of the prayers can be reduced to a list of the secret Names of God, followed by a list of the afflictions feared, the two linked by a phrase like "that are destroyed by the force of these Names."²⁶ All the procedures of sorcery are described in detail in these prayers, as are all the sorcerers and all the countries they might come from. Such lists denote a preoccupation with completion, like that of the Greeks who thought it necessary to cite in their prayers the "twelve names and a half" of the she-devil Gyllou. This stance, shared by Gedewon in his talismans, supports the popular notion in Ethiopian medicine according to which the remedy must make the hidden visible, the naming of things being a way of controlling them.

"That which one says in words is stronger than that which one does by hand and by force," Abba Qessu told the ethnographer Marcel Griaule in 1932. "It is through words that one commands, it is through words that one judges. As it says in the text entitled 'The Language of the Man': 'For language kills and language makes alive.' The word is feared, for it comes from the soul. . . . The written word has [even] more power, because that which is oral is forgotten and that which is written is passed on. And the written word is stronger because it is [made] in the name of God."²⁷

This superiority of the spiritual as embodied in the word is ultimately based on Genesis: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." God's Word has engendered all things. Ethiopian scholars sought ontological explanations in various commentaries on Genesis.²⁸ Believing that things are what they are because they have a place in an order—a nomination—they organized their dictionaries by themes classed according to the order of the Creation in Genesis. Hence the importance they grant divination by names. On becoming Christian, they discovered the Jewish conception of the universe, as revealed in the Book of Enoch: the earth is flat, edged by the mountain of the horizon, which supports the sky. Windows in the celestial dome allow storms to pass in and out, and also the stars, ordered by angels. Other Christian communities as well as the Jews themselves, following the Pythagorean image of a spherical earth surrounded by luminary bodies, rejected this notion, but the Ethiopians remained faithful to it. Indeed the Book of Enoch remains their only cosmological textbook.

It is in the name of God, in the name of the king, that Ethiopians conjure a person to submit to a command. The clerics derive pride and, they say, power from the use of the secret Names. They put no faith in spells that would cure the possessed with ordinary language. The emblem of their knowledge, the term that designates all their occult activities, is the word *asmat*—"names," to be understood as "secret Names."

The Ethiopian clerics did not invent the use of secret names, but they do attach a particular meaning to it.²⁹ According to a priest educated in Tigray, who, when I spoke to him, had just read a great protective book (fig. 46) for a person who was ill, "Each of



Fig. 42, CAT. 2: A rare example of a scroll on which a scribe recopied all of the talisman's in "Solomon's Net," instead of choosing a few of them. The lower motif is the net in which the demons are caught. Protective scroll, twentieth century, parchment, 13 x 9.5 cm. Collection: Musée National d'Art d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. Gift of Jacques Mercier. Photo: Guy Vivien.

us has two names: the baptismal name and the name our mothers gave us. Like the first of these, the Names are secret. In reading them one comprehends all other books. This book of the Names, however, is entirely medicinal. The scholars have hidden it, so that it won't be known to all. Are the plants known to doctors familiar to all?" Indeed many Ethiopian people do keep their baptismal names secret, lest someone use it to cast spells on them. They are careful not to lend out a scroll on which that name is written. Moreover, this name, being in Geez, is generally not commonly understood, and is different from the second name, which is in the vernacular.

Why, though, do the sages conceal their science? "Because anything touched by someone, no matter who, gets polluted. It works only if it is taken properly. If an ignorant person read this book, it would be ineffective; if the reader was impure, it would not work." This man's doubt about the reader's purity certainly throws his effectiveness as a priest into question, but it is generally accepted that the transmission of knowledge sullies it and makes it ineffective, attracting distrust. For this Tigrean priest, the patient's incomprehension of the Names is what assures their effectiveness. It seems to me that this creates an essential difference between the prayers' lists of evils and their lists of the Names: the first lists, by unmasking evils, try to render them ineffective; the second, which only appear in veiled form, preserve the therapeutic force of the Name of God.

Demons flee when they hear the Names of Christ; they flee when they see the talismans in the book of those Names. For the Tigrean priest, the talismans are to the figurative images of the churches what the Names are to prayers in which the meaning is explicit. Both are secret. The talismans are not more or less bastardized illustrations of the texts, in other words; these are two forms of discourse in a homological relationship. The talismans' affinity with the secret Names is demonstrated by their intimate link with writing: red and black ink, transformed letters.

The Names of God lack any semantic dimension. They are often written not in characters in the syllabary but in deformed versions of Ethiopian letters, ending in little circles. These "talismanic letters"—also, more simply, themselves called talismans—are local descendants of the "characters" (*charaktères*) of the Hermetists. They are also considered the script for the language of demons known by Solomon. Yet the Tigrean priest and his scholarly colleagues would have no doubt that an initiate or a spirit could "read" them. In fact I have met clerics who excelled in this.

To the clients and apprentices who are the recipients of these secrets,³⁰ their own incomprehension of the sounds and letters of the Names indicates the presence of a powerful knowledge. Mastery of that knowledge, they believe, is reserved for "gods on earth"—the clerics familiar with spirits. Access to the powers of script used to be doubly locked—by a talismanic code and, more immediately, by a constraint around writing itself. Teachers of liturgical song used to forbid their pupils to learn to write, a skill they said would lead to the preparation of amulets and spells (Griaule 1929). The secret talismanic writings were also associated with demons in those days. Whether demonic or divine (holy scripture, the Names of God), writing was rare in this country. We will later see how one of these "gods on earth" revealed, named Asres, got along with the secrecy of the talismans (p. 104).



Fig. 43, CAT. 42: "How Solomon Killed the Kings of the Blacksmiths," the witches Shamburish, Maymun, Berqan, and Mezhab. Protective scroll (detail), eighteenth or nineteenth century, parchment, 39 x 19.5 cm. Collection: Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. Gift of Jacques Mercier. Photo: Guy Vivien.

Fig. 44 (opposite page): "Alexander the Macedonian King." Riding a hybrid of an eagle and a mare, which he has made to fly by offering it meat on the tip of a stick (bottom right), Alexander reaches the Land of the Living, where he meets Enoch and Elijah (top right), biblical prophets who have undergone assumption into Heaven. Top left: "Talisman for Gog and Magog." The serpentine shape of the talisman's arms refers to the appearance of Gog and Magog's subjects (see fig. 94). Bottom left: "Those whose name is Aryaiñyamel" (birds). Protective scroll (detail), eighteenth century, parchment, 19 x 17 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.

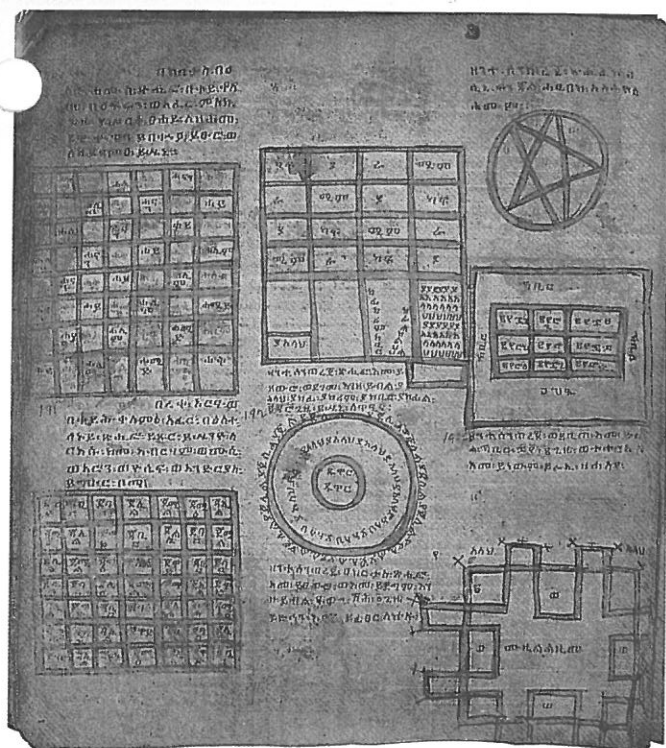


Fig. 45, CAT. 7: Diagrams from the Book of Buni, the Geez translation of a version of the "Sun of Knowledge" (Shams al-Marif), a book attributed to Al-Buni, an Egyptian author of the thirteenth century. Each diagram containing figures or letters is accompanied by its method of use. The Christian clerics adapted a number of Arabic works of medicine and magic into Geez. Muslim scrolls in Ethiopia, written in Arabic, rarely include images, and contain different texts from Christian ones. *Book of Buni, eighteenth to nineteenth century, parchment, 27.5 x 24 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.*

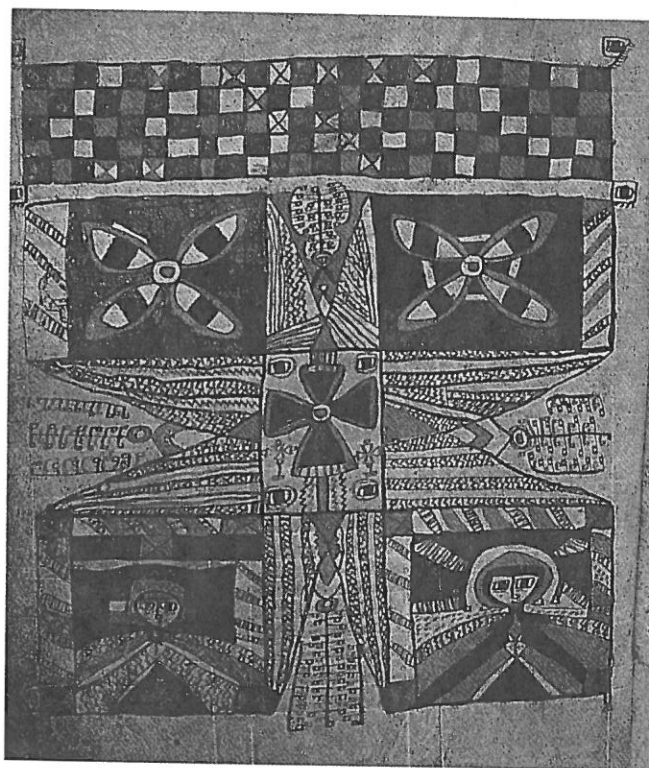
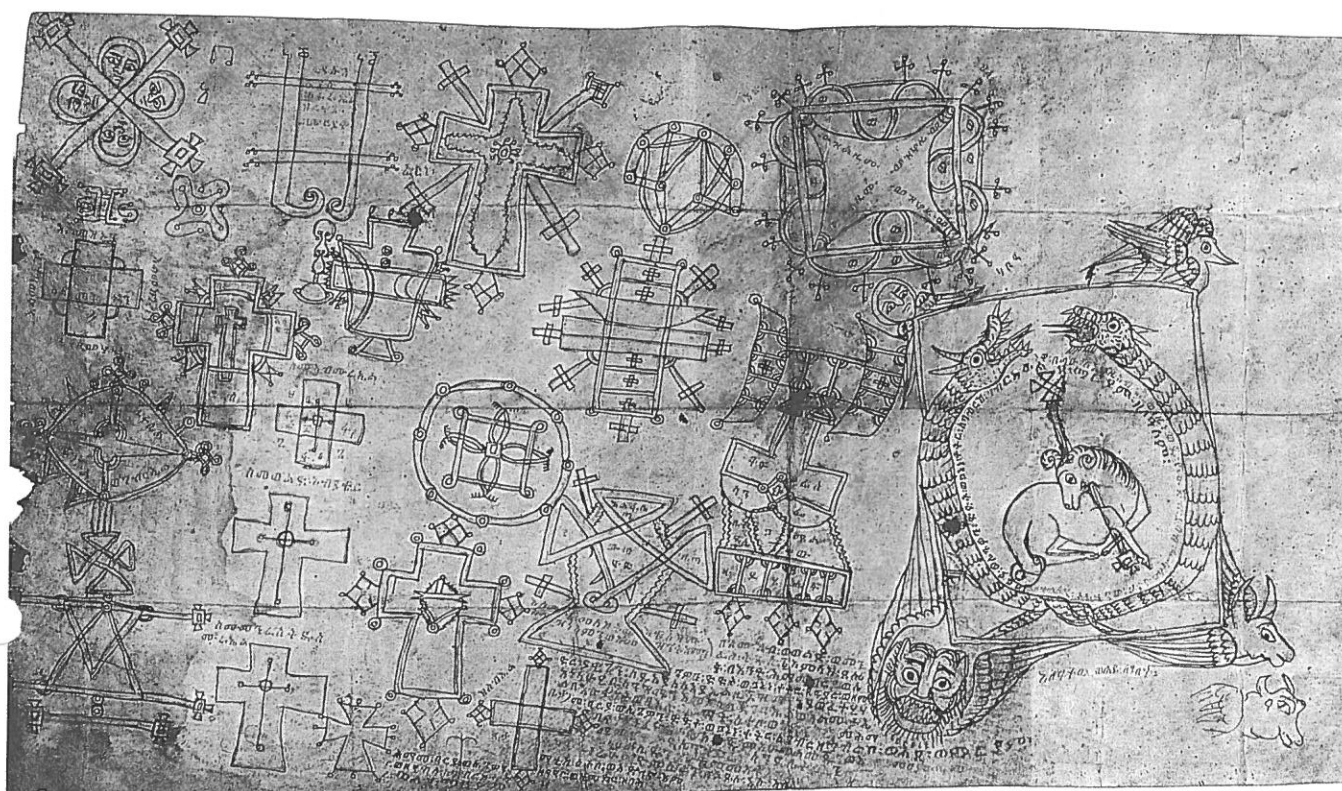


Fig. 46: Cruciform seal. The cross is simultaneously Christ's cross and the seal of the Father, given by the Archangel Michael to King Solomon. From a "Book of Prayers for Undoing Charms" now in Tigray province, ca. 1750-55, parchment. Photo: Jacques Mercier, 1975.



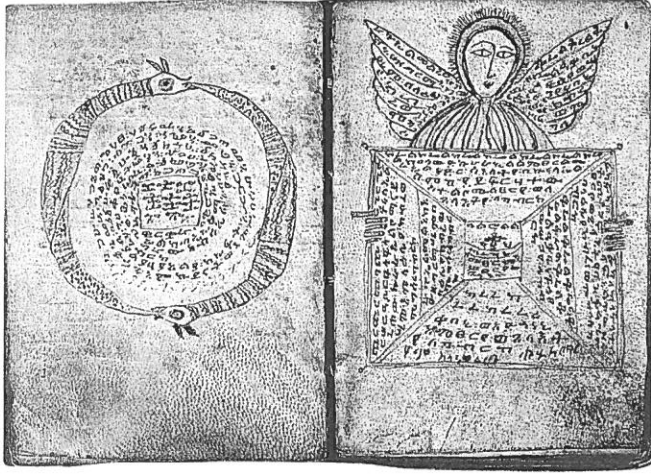


Fig. 48, CAT. 6: The Archangel Raguel's seals. Right: the archangel himself; on his wings and tablet are inscribed the Names that God has revealed to him. The suppliant writes and reads them to attain honor, glory, the protection of his body and soul . . . and "fear in the heart of his enemies." The left-hand talisman, and the Names written there, with Behemoth and Leviathan to either side, also have a protective function. "Image of Raguel," twentieth century, parchment, each page 13.2 x 9.8 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.

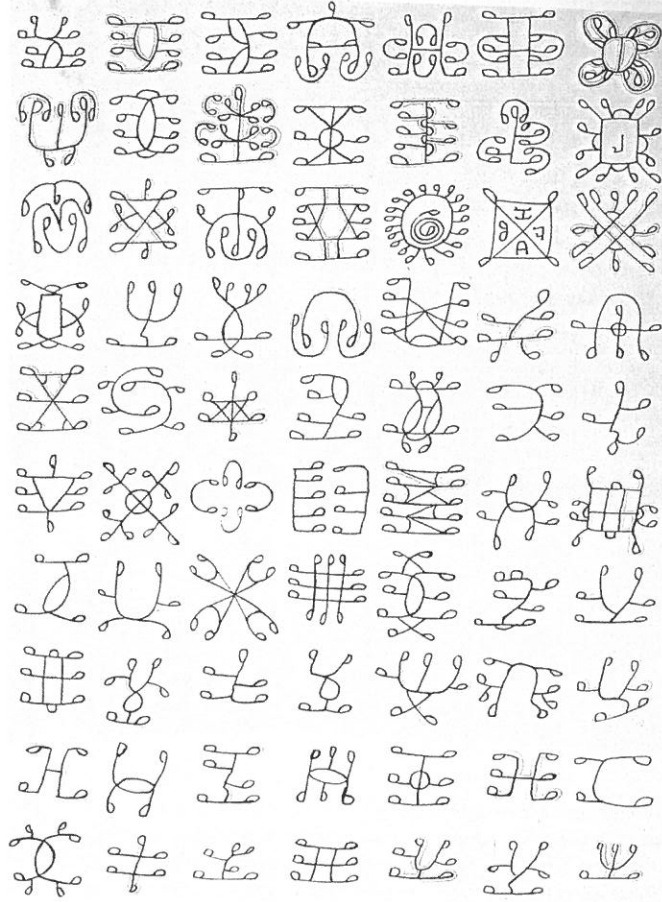


Fig. 49, CAT. 5: In symbols like these, Ethiopian scholars see the origin of all writing. Some of them resemble letters in the Ethiopian syllabary (which derives from the Phoenician, as the Latin script does also). Talismanic characters by Gera, 1992, ink on paper, 70 x 50 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.

Fig. 47, CAT. 39 (opposite page). Talismanic crosses, some of them accompanied by the secret names of the members of the Trinity. To the right, the lamb of God, invoked against the "illness of Barya and Legewon," or convulsions, on behalf of a man called Waldä Maryam. The prayer written below, in the center, has the same function. Some motifs come from "Solomon's Net." Leaves of parchment like this one were folded into a bag and carried by the inhabitants of Gojjam province, who also used scrolls for the same purpose, though cruder ones than in Tigray. Twentieth century, parchment, 28.5 x 51 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.

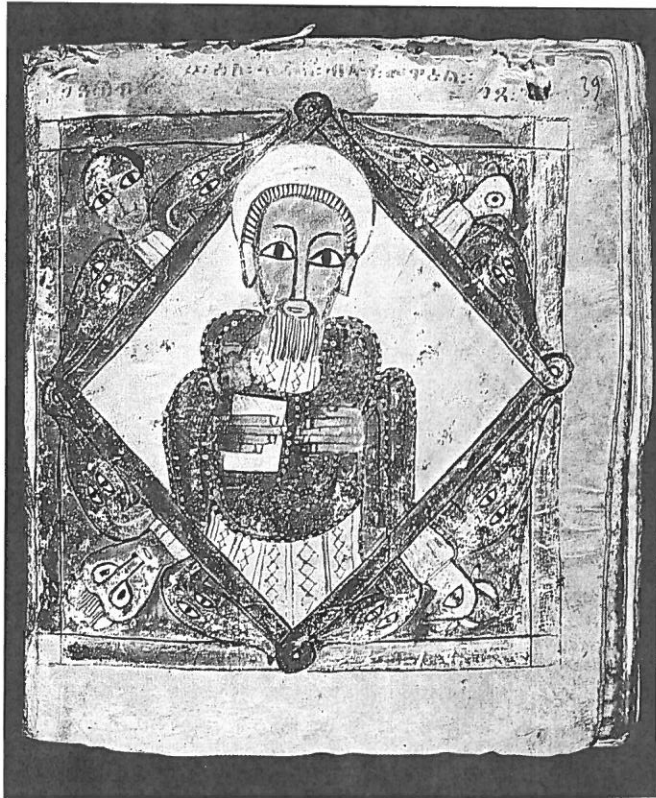


Fig. 51: "The Ancient of Days," surrounded by the Four Animals, respectively with the heads of a man, a lion, a bull, and an eagle, as in the visions of Ezekiel and Daniel. The animals have wings covered with eyes. Gospel of John, early sixteenth century, parchment, this page 15.7 x 13.5 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.

Fig. 50, CAT. 15: In referring to the iconography of the Ancient of Days (fig. 51), the Ethiopian clerics interpret this seal's central face as the face of the Divine, and the four eyes as the cherubim who carry His throne. *Protective scroll, early nineteenth century, parchment, 21 x 18 cm. Collection: Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. Gift of Jacques Mercier. Photo: Guy Vivien.*

On the Interpretation of Talismans

Although the figurative images on the scrolls are sometimes based on legends, the talismans themselves—abstract motifs containing faces and eyes—almost never are, even when they appear alongside legend-based portraits. This certainly attests to their lack of a didactic or commemorative purpose. But is this mutism due to the secret alone? Or do they have a meaning that has been lost? What do the scholars say about these images?

In Shire, in Tigray, I met a scribe who had an old scroll from which he would faithfully recopy three images, while changing the texts accompanying them according to the client's need. He told me that the first image, a winged figure brandishing a sword, was an angel. The second, a face between great eyes, represented the divine face surrounded by cherubim. In the third, a face inside an eight-pointed star, he saw a "face of man," and the star's points, which were arranged in twos, were pairs of scissors to cut the demons who might come from the four points of the compass.

The theme of the divine face surrounded by cherubim appears fairly often in clerics' explanations of the talismans, especially in cases of a central face framed by four eyes or four faces (fig. 50). (Doesn't a prayer say that "the vision of his Face and the hearing of his Names" undoes spells?) God is represented in Ethiopian spiritual painting (fig. 51), then, as surrounded by four bearers, who have the faces of a lion, a man, a bull, and an eagle, all "full of eyes" (Ezekiel 10, Revelation 4). The interpretation of the eyes as the eyes of the cherubim is thus doubly justified. The recitation of the invocation puts vision and speech not in an illustrational relationship but in parallel: both compete for the cure.

In spiritual representations of the throne of God or of Christ, the inscription "face of man" accompanies the image of a cherub with a human face. According to Ethiopian commentators, this cherub is humanity's divine intercessor. That explains his presence on the scrolls.

No talisman has a canonical interpretation. In the eight-pointed star, the cleric in Shire might see a "face of man"; others see the seal of Solomon, or the Cross, a face in light, or a symbol of the four directions of the compass. A number of clerics would offer no interpretation at all.

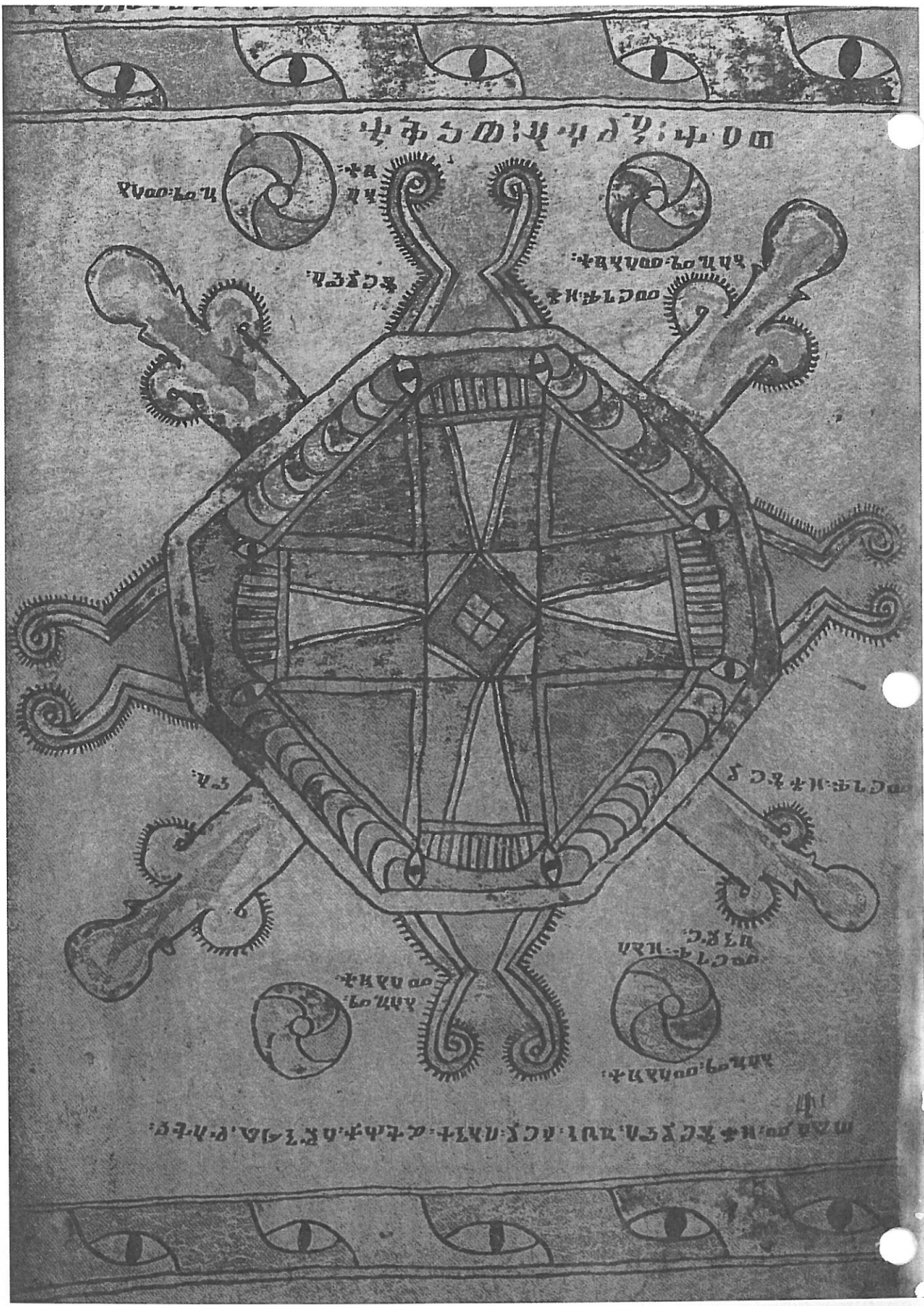
When a cleric gives a colleague a talisman, he indicates its application, the prayer associated with it, its method of use, the master from whom he obtained it, and his own experience with it—that is, how many people he has cured with it. The talisman's name and its symbolism are not indispensable. Asked about the meaning of a talisman, a skillful cleric can recount it while reading prayers. Professors of poetry (*gene*) are best at this game, for they have at their disposal an immense base of oral traditions in which the symbols are no less important than the characters themselves.

Among the clerics I consulted, Gera was one of the most knowledgeable and the most inspired. Beginning in 1973, he instructed me in his art; no doubt he kept some of his secrets for himself, and more than once his explanations were improvised, but this was a traditional behavior, without which there would be neither master nor apprentice. His work and his explanations

evolved over the years (see figs. 110 and 111); his explanations of the talisman reproduced in fig. 53, however, can be taken as characteristic of his manner. The talisman's name, its use, and its elements are semantically linked. The seal of Solomon, for example, is the seal of a king celebrated for the wealth he had at his command. This talisman, then, drives away demons that hinder business—demons such as the "eye-of-shadow." The link between title and function is explicable in terms of metaphor: "As the seal of God procured great wealth for King Solomon, this talisman will bring wealth to its user." The same goes for interpretations of the talisman's elements. But one must be careful not to imagine the talisman as the sum of its symbols, or as having a fixed meaning. According to Gera, "It is the configuration [*aqemammēt*] of the drawing that suggests the name." In no way, he says in effect, is the form (*qerts*) of the talisman justified by that of the object evoked. That is only an appearance. And the interpretation of the talisman is guided by the talisman's function. These concepts provide both a foundation and a limit for the tendency of professors of poetry to expand their interpretations of talismans by appealing to descriptions of the glory of the divine, the angels, or the saints, or by drawing on the cosmology of the Book of Enoch.³¹

A group of scrolls—four in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris,³² two in private hands in the West—provide a happy exception to the general absence of inscriptions on the seals. They are the work of several different scribes, who, however, all copied their seals—there are seven of them—from the same models. These seals consist of geometric forms, centrally symmetrical, and including eyes or faces. They are titled—"Wisdom of Alexander, Greek king, who made requests on the stone of the horizon [the mountain on the horizon that supports the sky];" "Seal of Zoroaster;" "Wisdom of Solomon;" "Wisdom of Aristotle;" "Seal of Cyprian"—and carry inscriptions, some of which are clearly associated with compositional elements: "Scapular of the angels" connotes a spiraling circle, and "Seal of the angels" a rectangle enclosing a crossbar. A figural dimension is sometimes manifest: the inscription "Stars" accompanies three small circles, to each of which is attached a zigzag line, as in the representations of stars in the image of the Crucifixion. All the seals are decorated with volutes bordered with fine lines, with which an inscription is associated: "Fringe [*mārgāf*] of Cyprian" on the "Seal of Cyprian" (fig. 52), "Fringe of Alexander" on the "Wisdom of Alexander;" "Fringe of Solomon" on a Solomon's seal. The word *mārgāf* effectively means both "fringe"—the weft yarns at the two ends of the toga—and also "fine toga," an item of apparel. To follow Gera's thought, one could say that the fringed volutes are, according to these inscriptions, metonymic signifiers of the power of the sages to whom these talismans are attributed,³³ and that the "scapular" and the "seal of the angels" are intended to drive away demons.

It appears from this brief analysis that certain forms may tend to constitute a repertory of symbols (the "scapular of the angels," or, even more so, the "seal of Solomon"), even as the meaning of others, such as the fringed volutes, is singular and linked to the semantic and graphic context. Gera simultaneously limits and opens up the field of interpretation. Given the composition and the prayer next to it, a face surrounded by four eyes can be variously interpreted as showing God and the bearers of His throne; a human-faced cherub and his wings; the demon *Wertzelya* with his soldiers; Satan imprisoned by angels; a lord of demons and his servants, bearers of ill fortune; Christ and His evangelists; and so on. Yet one could also



limit oneself to "face of man" (*getse seb*), in the sense of "face of the talisman,"³⁴ as Gera has it, for a talisman is fundamentally, beyond all interpretation, a figure revealed. This priority of the form revealed, of the drawing, is manifest in those talismans composed of zigzag lines. It is from the exhibition of the drawing that the clerics expect a result: on seeing the drawing, the patient cries out, and the demon flees.

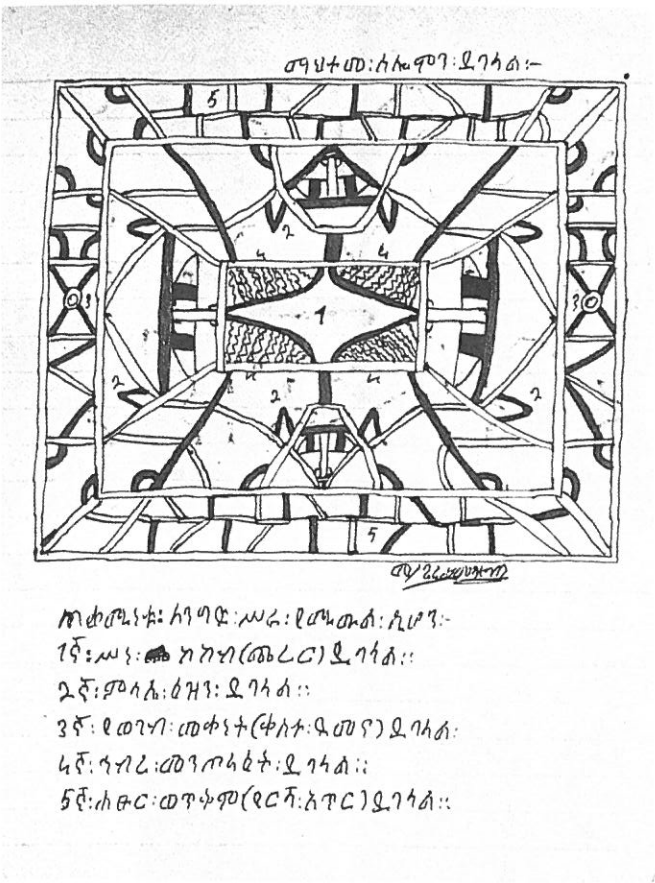


Fig. 53: This talisman wards off the spirits that make business enterprises go bad. Trading gold with the land of Sheba, Solomon used his ring to force demons to advance his enterprises. Inscriptions read, "1: star burst. 2: example of an ear. 3: belt (or rainbow). 4: appearance of a curtain. 5: rampart and fortification (hedge)." The starlight wards off darkness. The ears of the four faces, symbolizing the four directions of the compass, listen to the proclamation of wealth and glory. The belt cinches the waist, giving strength; similarly, the talisman as a whole prevents wealth from dissipating. The curtain hides one from attackers. *Solomon's seal*, by Gera, 1974, ball-point pen and marker on paper, 20.5 x 16 cm. Collection: Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris. Gift of Jacques Mercier. Photo: Guy Vivien.

Fig. 52, CAT. 11 (opposite page): "Talisman of Cyprian, Syrian priest, to free the virgin Justine." The four circles are the "Scapular of the angels," and the motifs with short lines are accompanied by the inscription "Cyprian's fringe." *Protective scroll*, nineteenth century, parchment, 24 x 17.6 cm. Private collection. Photo: Guy Vivien.