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THE SEALED BOOK OF ISAIAH [ISAIAH 29: 11–12]: ACCORDING TO EOTC INTERPRETATION

Abstract. This article examines the theological depth and interpretive Tradition of the Book of Isaiah as understood in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, where it is referred to as “däräqə ḥädīsə”. This designation highlights Isaiah’s unique prophetic role in unveiling the divine mystery of the Incarnation the Word of God becoming incarnated. The study explores how Isaiah, through divine revelation, expressed this profound mystery in a way that transcends purely human understanding. One central example is Isaiah 53:1, which asks, “Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” This passage illustrates the spiritual complexity that often renders prophetic texts difficult to interpret without theological insight.

The problem addressed in this research is the difficulty many readers experience when engaging with the prophetic literature of the Bible, especially without proper exegetical guidance. The main objective is to demonstrate how the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition provides a necessary interpretive framework for understanding such texts. The research employs qualitative methods, analyzing biblical passages in light of Church teachings and theological Tradition.

The findings reveal that the Book of Isaiah cannot be fully comprehended through literal reading alone; it requires contextual and theological interpretation rooted in Orthodox Tradition. The study concludes that applying this structured approach helps uncover the hidden meanings of prophecy, particularly regarding the Incarnation. This article contributes new insights by highlighting the unique role of Ethiopian Orthodox hermeneutics in Biblical interpretation, setting it apart from other traditions in terms of depth and doctrinal consistency.

Keywords: Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Ecclesiastical Literature, Biblical Interpretation, *Andəmta*, Book of Isaiah, Commentaries of Isaiah 29:11–12(interpretation), the Sealed book.

Streszczenie. Zapieczętowana księga w Proroctwie Izajasza (Iz 29, 11–12) w rozumieniu Etiopskiego Kościoła Ortodoksyjnego Tewahedo. Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest analizie głębi teologicznej oraz tradycji interpretacyjnej Księgi Izajasza w rozumieniu Etiopskiego Kościoła Ortodoksyjnego Tewahedo, gdzie nazywana jest ona „*däräqə ḥädīsə*”. Nazwa ta podkreśla wyjątkową rolę prorocką Izajasza w odkrywaniu boskiej tajemnicy Wcielenia – stania się Słowa Bożego człowiekiem. W niniejszym opracowaniu badamy, w jaki sposób Izajasz, poprzez Boże objawienie, wyraził tę głęboką tajemnicę w sposób wykraczający poza czysto ludzkie rozumienie. Jednym z głównych przykładów jest Iz 53,1, gdzie pada pytanie: „Któż uwierzy temu, cośmy usłyszeli? na kimże się ramię Pańskie objawiło?”. Fragment ten ilustruje duchową złożoność, która często sprawia, że teksty prorockie są trudne do interpretacji bez przygotowania teologicznego.

Problem poruszony w niniejszym badaniu dotyczy trudności, jakie wielu czytelników napotyka podczas zapoznawania się z literaturą prorocką Biblii, zwłaszcza bez odpowiednich wskazówek egzegetycznych. Głównym celem jest wykazanie, w jaki sposób tradycja Etiopskiego Kościoła Ortodoksyjnego Tewahedo zapewnia niezbędne ramy interpretacyjne do zrozumienia takich tekstów. W badaniu zastosowano metody jakościowe w celu dokonania analizy fragmentów Pisma Świętego w świetle nauk Kościoła i tradycji teologicznej.

Wyniki badania pokazują, że Księgi Izajasza nie da się w pełni zrozumieć wyłącznie poprzez dosłowną lekturę; wymaga ona kontekstowej interpretacji teologicznej zakorzenionej w tradycji ortodoksyjnej. W badaniu stwierdzono, że zastosowanie tego ustrukturyzowanego podejścia pomaga odkryć ukryte znaczenia proroctwa, szczególnie dotyczące Wcielenia. Niniejszy artykuł wnosi nowe spostrzeżenia, podkreślając wyjątkową rolę hermeneutyki etiopskiego Kościoła ortodoksyjnego w interpretacji biblijnej, która wyróżnia się na tle innych tradycji pod względem głębi i spójności doktrynalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: Etiopski Kościół Ortodoksyjny Tewahedo, literatura kościelna, interpretacja biblijna, *Andəmta*, Księga Izajasza, komentarze do Iz 29,11–12 (interpretacja), zapieczętowana księga.

INTRODUCTION

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church possesses a distinctive system of scriptural interpretation designed to illuminate the meaning of the Holy Scriptures for believers. This interpretive tradition is not merely academic but pedagogical, intended to guide the faithful in comprehending

the divine message embedded in every word of Scripture.¹ Through this method, the Church nurtures and anchors the faith of its members, ensuring that believers remain steadfast in their spiritual understanding.²

Historically, Ethiopian Christian communities relied heavily on oral Traditions to transmit sacred knowledge. Some individuals, however, went further by preserving these teachings in written form creating manuscripts on parchment and embellishing them with vibrant illustrations. Among the many traditions passed down, one particularly significant legacy is the practice of “interpretive teaching.”³

One prominent form of interpretation is *Andəmta*, a method used to clarify ambiguous passages, deepen theological insight, and strengthen the faith of believers. As the Psalmist proclaims, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119:130, NRSV). This scriptural witness underscores the transformative power of interpretation in revealing divine truths.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPRETATION

Human beings though created with reason and brilliance akin to angels fell from grace due to sin, thereby losing their clarity of understanding and direct communion with God. As a result, humanity became estranged from divine wisdom, relying instead on the words of creation rather than the Word of the Creator. Scripture attests to this spiritual condition: “You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God” (Matthew 22:29, NRSV), highlighting the necessity of interpretation to regain access to divine wisdom.⁴

¹ Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 47–48.

² J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 71–104.

³ John Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and Its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 9–47.

⁴ Maurice Friedman, *A Heart of Wisdom: Religion and Human Wholeness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 79–85.

Interpretation, therefore, becomes essential not just for comprehension, but for spiritual nourishment. The Word of God is likened to bread and meat, providing sustenance when received with understanding. Just as food must be properly prepared to nourish the body, so too must Scripture be rightly interpreted to nourish the soul.⁵

Given that the Bible was written in a context far removed from our own in terms of language, culture, and worldview, effective interpretation is crucial. The original recipients of the Word lived in societies vastly different from modern ones, both in knowledge and in their relationship with God.⁶ Furthermore, the Bible includes a range of literary styles: dreams, parables, poetry, prophecy often conveyed through metaphor and symbolism. Interpretation is thus necessary to uncover these layers of meaning.⁷

In the Ethiopian Orthodox Tradition, interpretive practices are deeply rooted in the apostolic and patristic teachings of the Church. Saint Paul affirms the transmission of sound teaching in his epistle: “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me put it into practice” (Philippians 4:9, NRSV). The Church, following this apostolic mandate, safeguards interpretive traditions that ensure Scripture is rightly understood within the faith.⁸

Moreover, Scripture warns against private interpretations: “No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20, NRSV). This admonition reinforces the importance of aligning one’s understanding with the teachings of the Church, avoiding subjective or arbitrary readings.

⁵ J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 71–104.

⁶ J. Järvinen, “Ha’adam: Adam, Man or Human—The Importance of Interpretation in Biblical Translation” (master’s thesis, 2008), 50–52.

⁷ G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 36–42.

⁸ Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2016), 9–42.

In conclusion, the interpretation of Scripture is vital for discerning the message of God within its historical, cultural, and theological contexts.⁹ It serves as a bridge between the ancient world and modern faith, guiding believers toward spiritual maturity and unity.

II. TYPES OF INTERPRETATION IN THE ETHIOPIAN ORTHODOX TEWAHEDO CHURCH

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church possesses a distinctive and sophisticated system of Biblical interpretation.¹⁰ It employs various hermeneutical methods to convey profound and complex theological concepts in ways that are accessible and meaningful. The principal interpretative approaches include literal interpretation, parabolic interpretation, mystical interpretation, and *Andəmta Tərgʷame*.

1. LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Literal interpretation involves rendering the text directly, without additional commentary or elaboration.¹¹ It is a straightforward translation that preserves the original wording, often from one language to another. This method has historically been used in the translation of sacred texts into Geʿez, and subsequently from Geʿez into Amharic.

For example, the Geʿez phrase “በልዎ ለዛቲ ቁንጵል” is literally translated into Amharic as “ለዚያች ቀበሮ እንዲህ በሏት”—roughly meaning “say this to that tortoise.” This approach remains faithful to the surface meaning of the original words.

⁹ Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 127–145.

¹⁰ K. S. An, *An Ethiopian Reading of the Bible: Biblical Interpretation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church* (2016), 113–114.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, “A Methodology for Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000), 84–93.

2. PARABOLIC (PARABLE-BASED) INTERPRETATION

A parable is a pedagogical device that clarifies a concept by drawing comparisons with familiar situations (Mathews, S., 293–311). In biblical usage, parables communicate deeper spiritual truths beneath their surface narratives. For instance, King David declares, “*I will open my mouth in a parable*” (Psalm 77:2), and Jesus often employed parables in the Gospels to illuminate divine principles.

Within the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition, parables serve as concise and illustrative explanations, often referred to as “ዘይሐጽጽ” a term that signifies “something that reflects a deeper meaning.”

3. MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION

Mystical interpretation seeks to uncover the hidden or spiritual significance embedded in a text meanings that are not immediately apparent through a superficial reading.¹² It maintains the grammatical integrity of the passage while interpreting its symbolic or esoteric dimension.

For example, the phrase “አንተ ኮሎሳ” (You are the rock) is mystically interpreted as “*You are the foundation,*” referring to Saint Peter as the foundational figure of the Church (cf. Matthew 16:18).

4. ANDƏMTA TƏRGWAME

Andəmta Tərgwame refers to a unique interpretative process where a passage undergoes successive clarifications while preserving the unity and core meaning of the original text.¹³ The term “Andəmta” is derived from the Gēz word “አንድግም” (*Andem*), meaning “again” or “another.”

¹² Ninian Smart, “Interpretation and Mystical Experience,” *Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (1965): 75–87.

¹³ Mersha Alehegne, “Features of Andəmta: The Ethiopian Hermeneutics in Amharic,” *Journal of Ethiopian Church Studies* 2, no. 2 (2012): 11–121.

This iterative method allows for one to fifteen or more layers of interpretation, each reiterating the message without distorting its essence. In contrast to interpretations that introduce new or alternative meanings, *Andəmta* emphasizes unity through repetition, presenting different phrasing or perspectives while maintaining fidelity to the original idea.

Before the years 1674–1698, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church interpreted *Andəmta* in Gēz. During this period, the *Andəmta* Tradition used the suffix “bo” to indicate repetition or multiple interpretations of the same verse. However, after this time, as the *Andəmta* tradition transitioned into Amharic, repetition came to be represented by the combination of “And,” “m,” and “ta.” Thus, terms like “Andem,” “second,” or “third” came to reflect successive layers of interpretation, each deepening the understanding of the biblical text.

Characteristics of “Andəmta” Interpretation Style.

1. Based on sacred texts
The interpretation draws its foundation from scriptural works.
2. Mystery unveiling
It seeks to uncover and explain hidden mysteries within the text.
3. Singular yet multifaceted
It provides both literal and mystical interpretations, often accompanied by allegorical methods
4. Contextual and expansive
It does not interpret words or phrases in isolation but rather considers the broader textual and thematic context.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The interpretation of the “sealed book” in Isaiah 29:11–12 occupies an important place in patristic exegesis, particularly in relation to the hiddenness and revelation of divine truth. Early Christian writers consistently understood this passage as referring to the inaccessibility of Scripture prior to its fulfillment in Christ and its unveiling to the faithful.

Hippolytus interprets the “sealed book” as symbolizing the Scriptures that were hidden from the people of old, especially the unbelieving Pharisees

who relied solely on the literal understanding of the law. He emphasizes that although the prophetic writings were once sealed and unknown, they have now been opened by the grace of God to the saints. This interpretation highlights the transition from concealment to revelation through Christ and underscores the necessity of faith for true understanding¹⁴.

In a similar vein, Primasius explains that the sealing of the book renders both the learned and the unlearned incapable of grasping its meaning. According to him, the learned are hindered by the seal itself, while the unlearned are limited by their ignorance. His interpretation stresses the universal inability of human beings to comprehend divine mysteries without divine illumination, thereby reinforcing the theological theme of spiritual blindness apart from grace.¹⁵

Likewise, Cyprian affirms that Isaiah's prophecy points to the Jews' inability to understand the Scriptures before the coming of Christ. He maintains that the meaning of the sacred text would become clear only in the last times, when Christ would open the understanding of those who were spiritually blind and deaf. Thus, Cyprian presents the "sealed book" as a prophetic indication of the need for Christ's revelation in order to attain true knowledge of divine truth.¹⁶

Taken together, these patristic interpretations present a unified theological perspective: the "sealed book" signifies the hidden character of divine revelation in the Old Testament, which is ultimately unveiled through Jesus Christ and made accessible to believers through grace.

¹⁴ Hippolytus, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament X: Isaiah 1–39*, ed. Steven A. McKinion, gen. ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 395.

¹⁵ Primasius, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament X: Isaiah 1–39*, 396.

¹⁶ Cyprian, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament X: Isaiah 1–39*, 397.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative theological and exegetical methodology to examine the concept of the sealed book in Isaiah 29:11–12 according to the interpretation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The researcher is primarily based on textual analysis patristic interpretation and Traditional Ethiopian hermeneutics (Andəmta).

First the study undertakes a Biblical exegetical analysis of Isaiah 29:11–12 within its immediate and broader canonical context. This includes a close reading of the text in light of its historical, literary, and theological background, with particular attention to the symbolic meaning of the sealed book in prophetic literature.

Second, the research adopts a patristic approach, examining interpretation from early Church Fathers such as Hippolytus, Primasius and Cyprian and also Jacob. Their writings are analyzed to identify how the sealed book was understood in early Christian tradition, especially in relation to the themes of hidden revelation, spiritual blindness and the unveiling of Scripture through Christ. This step provides a historical-theological foundation for understanding later interpretations.

Third, the study employs the Andəmta (traditional Ethiopian Orthodox interpretive method), which integrates literal, allegorical, moral, and mystical dimension of Scripture. Special attention is given to how Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church interprets Isaiah 29:11–12 within its liturgical, doctrine, and theological framework. In this context, the “sealed book” is examined not only as a symbol, of hidden revelation but also in relation to Christological and Mariological interpretations, particularly the understanding of the Virgin Mary as the “sealed book” who bore incarnate Word.

Furthermore, the research utilizes a comparative theological methods to relate patristic interpretation with Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church Tradition. This allows for identifying both continuity and distinct emphases in Ethiopian Orthodox exegesis, especially regarding the role of divine grace, revelation, and sacred mystery.

Finally, the study relies on secondary sources, including theological commentaries, scholarly works on Ethiopian Orthodox hermeneutics,

and relevant academic literature. These sources are critically evaluated to support and contextualize the analysis.

In summary, this methodology combines Biblical exegesis, patristic theology, and Ethiopian Orthodox interpretive Tradition to provide a comprehensive understanding of the “sealed book” in Isaiah 29:11–12.

1. LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

When the prophet Isaiah spoke this prophecy, he emphasized that there was a mysterious aspect to it, as if everything was sealed like a closed book. This message, according to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church teaching, was a warning against false prophets or deceptive individuals who would present the word of God as if it were a sealed or hidden book. At the time, false prophets misled people by binding them to their own limitations or traditions, making it seem like the truth of God was inaccessible. That is why the prophet said these words.

2. THEOLOGICAL AND MYSTICAL TEACHING OF THE PROPHECY

2.1. ST. MARY AS THE SEALED BOOK

The prophet Isaiah, in his book, regarding the eternally sealed virginity of Saint Virgin Mary, has signified it with the sealed book. Therefore, the scholars signify Saint Virgin Mary and call her “The Sealed Book of Isaiah” (Isaiah 29:11–12). Taking this account, I will endeavor to investigate the case from the perspective of the Scripture and from the aspect of the interpretation of the scholars of the Scripture. Therefore, the theme portion of the reading of Isaiah says.¹⁷

And all the vision will be to you like the words of a book that has been sealed, which when they give to him who is literate, saying, Please read this,

¹⁷ Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, *Anədmṫa of Isaiah* (Amharic, 1982), 99–102.

he will say, I am not able, for it is sealed. Then the book will be given to him who is illiterate, saying, Please read this, and he will say I am illiterate (Isaiah 29:11–12, NKJV).

This brief sentence is an account of a wonderful, sealed book. To apprehend the essence of this sealed book, it is worthy to confer with some portions of Old Testament Scriptures, which are related with this book. Many types are referred in both the sealed books (the letters of books) of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Among these, regarding enthronement and kingship (Esther 3:8–12; 8:8), the mystery of divinity (Isaiah 39:11–12; Revelation 5:2–5; Deuteronomy 32:34; Jeremiah 32:11, 32:14). The great prophet Isaiah in chapter 29:11–12 had spoken about the sealed books of mysteries, which speak about Saint Virgin Mary and the mystery of Jesus Christ books that are so perplexing for both the scholars and the illiterate to read.

This book (scroll), in which the word Isaiah spoke is written, is a sealed book, which no one is worthy to open or read, and which is perfectly sealed. In like manner, Saint Virgin Mary, who conceived the physical Word the Christ in her womb, no one is able to approach her. The seal of her virginity is sealed: “before conception and before giving birth, during the period of conception and during the time of giving birth, after conception and after giving birth,” she is the eternally sealed Virgin.

The Ethiopian scholar of the book of mystery, Abba Giorgis of Gascha, regarding this mystery in his book *The Book of Arganon*, the book of the mystery of Mary, has spoken of her in general ways, saying: “Oh you sealed book, which no one is worthy to open it to read, and to close it.” Furthermore, in the book of mystery, he scholarly interprets the book of Isaiah, saying:

Let’s come back to the reports of the pure Virgin whose brother is old man, the daughter of David entered to the son of David; the guileless Dove entered into the house of the guileless Lamb; the sealed book entered to the illiterate. The prophet Isaiah gave the book to the illiterate man; and he said, “I am illiterate.” This sealed-up book ascribes to Saint Virgin Mary. Her being given as a gift is ascribed to her being given to Saint Joseph from the temple. Saying, “I am illiterate,” is ascribed to her being Virgin, and to her not being aware of her pregnancy. As the scholar evangelist said, he did

not know her until she gave birth to a son. She was found conceived of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18). Saint Virgin Mary, prior to her conception of God, during the period of her conception, after her conception, and after she gave birth her virginity is previously inscribed in the letter of the book of Isaiah. Thereby he has interpreted to us that she is a sealed book.

The great Saint Jacob of Serugh, who is well oriented with the book of the mystery of Mary, taking the account of the book of the prophet Isaiah, granted us profound interpretation. He signifies Saint Virgin Mary as a sealed book (letter), and typifies the physical Word, who is Christ, with the word inscribed within her, thereby linking this portion of the Word with the Gospel of John 1:14.¹⁸

This is according to the prophecy that protected her virginity previously, without changing the seal of her virginity. The Word of God, indwelt within her womb, and God the Father has revealed a wonderful mystery within her, who is called a sealed-up book, whom no one is able to read. Furthermore, intricately interpreting that her only begotten Son, without opening the seal of her virginity, dwelled within her womb, he presented it saying, John 1:14: “St. Mary appeared to us as a sealed letter.” Saint Virgin Mary appeared to us as being a sealed letter within whom the mystery of God the Son and His birth is concealed. She presents her body as pure parchment, and the Word wrote the true attribute of His person in the flesh. Furthermore, when God the Son became the Word, she is the letter through whom mercy (forgiveness) is sent to the world. She became this letter not because the letter was sealed after it was written, but because the divine person sealed her and wrote within her. She was read without being opened, because the Father has revealed a new and wonderful mystery within her. Entering into her, who has been preserved by being sealed and closed (Ezekiel 44:2), the Word indwelt within her, yet the seal (testimony) of her virginity remained on her body. However, she has conceived. This is wonder. God the Father sent to us the report of good things, which happened within her. For those who were under condemnation because of the bondage of their sin, He made forgiveness through her.

¹⁸ Jacob Puthuparampil, *Mariological Thought of Mar Jacob of Serugh (451–521)* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), 197–199.

When we read the Bible, we find not only printed epistles (letters) that are full of the good messages of peace and forgiveness, but also we find printed epistles which are full of evil messages. In 2 Samuel 11:15, King David, after committing sin lusting after the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba, wrote a letter to Job informing him of the way Uriah should be killed. Sealing it with a seal, he took Bathsheba. Similarly, King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, maliciously coveting Naboth's vineyard, caused Naboth to be killed by a letter of wickedness sealed in the king's name (1 Kings 21:7–16). These two sealed books (letters) are full of messages of wickedness and evil intentions, by which innocents are killed.

On the contrary, Isaiah, being in the Spirit of God, bore witness regarding Saint Virgin Mary, who is called the sealed letter. Within her, the deep mysteries of God the Son are manifested, and she delivered mankind from the torture of Gehenna. She is full only of the message of peace. She is the sealed book of Isaiah, who conceived the Prince of Peace, Christ, in virginity and bore Him in virginity.

Saint Jacob, when he teaches this wonderful mystery, says:

Oh Mary, you are blessed apart from the women; you are full of praise (glory). My words should not hinder your mysterious wonderful person; you are pure, you are Virgin and mother. You are full of grace, which thousands of utterances and mothers cannot utter. There is a baby conceived within your womb. However, you are Virgin, and virginity is manifest in you bodily... She became a letter. The one who wrote within her is the Word of God. Being read, the earth is refreshed because of the good news of Him.¹⁹

The book entitled *Haimanot Abew*, which means “The Faith of the Fathers,” discloses the following:

Joseph did not know the mystery which would be fulfilled in Saint Virgin Mary. He did not know that the eternally unchanging Second Adam, Christ, would be born of our Virgin, who is the enclosed garden. Hearing this, Joseph said, “Oh Virgin, have mercy upon me,” and bowed down to

¹⁹ Jacob Puthuparampil, *Mariological Thought of Mar Jacob of Serugh (451–521)* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012), 197–199.

her. He believed in her purity. He believed that she is the one prophesied by Isaiah.²⁰

2.2. THE SEALED BOOK IS JESUS CHRIST

The mystery of Jesus Christ becoming a man was perplexing to many, especially to the Jews, who were awaiting the fulfillment of the prophetic promises of the Messiah. While they witnessed His miracles healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, and restoring sight to the blind these actions did not lead them to recognize Him as the Messiah. Instead, their expectations were rooted in the idea of a political or earthly savior, someone who would deliver them from Roman oppression, not the divine Savior who would offer salvation from sin.

In the Gospels, the Jews frequently questioned Jesus Christ's identity, unable to reconcile His earthly appearance with the promises they had received in the Scriptures. In John 8:53, they asked, "Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do You make Yourself out to be?" This question demonstrates their failure to understand that Jesus Christ was not merely a man, but the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and the patriarchs. Further, in John 6:52, when Jesus Christ declared, "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life," the Jews were confused and questioned, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" Their misunderstanding of His words highlights their inability to grasp the spiritual truth of the Eucharist and Jesus' divinity.

The Jews' failure to recognize Jesus Christ also extended to His miracles. In John 10:33, when Jesus Christ spoke of His oneness with the Father, the Jews responded, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself God." This reaction demonstrates their belief that His claim to divinity was blasphemous. Similarly, in John 7:4, when they heard Jesus Christ speak

²⁰ Haimanot Abew, *Tenseye Zgubaye Matemiyā* (2007), 276–277.

of His divine origin, they were skeptical, asking, “Who is this man, and how can He be from God if He is not even educated or of any social standing?”

The Jews’ rejection of Jesus Christ also came from their misunderstanding of the prophecies about the Messiah. Jesus Christ’ arrival did not match their expectations, and they could not accept a Messiah who came in humility and who preached a message of love, repentance, and spiritual salvation rather than political conquest. In Matthew 21:23 and Mark 11:38, the religious leaders question Jesus Christ’ authority, and in Luke 23:37, they mock Him, asking, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself,” even as He crucified on the cross. Despite witnessing His works, they failed to recognize that He was the fulfillment of all the Messianic prophecies.

This spiritual blindness was foretold by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 29:11–12, where he describes the people of Israel as being spiritually blind to God’s revelation. The prophet speaks of the Scriptures being like a sealed book, which cannot be opened or understood. This sealed book symbolizes the mystery of God’s plan of salvation, which was hidden from the Jews due to their spiritual blindness, despite the promises they had received.

The apostle Paul also touched upon this mystery in his writings. In 1 Corinthians 2:8, Paul says, “None of the rulers of this age knew [Christ], for if they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” This statement encapsulates the Jews’ inability to comprehend the significance of Jesus Christ’ life and mission. They were blind to His divine nature and the true meaning of His work.

John Chrysostom, in his commentary on Isaiah 1:3, highlights the irony that even the animals recognized the Creator at Jesus Christ’ birth, while Israel, the people of the promise, did not. He writes, “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s manger,”²¹ indicating that while the lowly animals acknowledged Jesus, Israel did not, despite having received the promises and prophecies concerning Him.

Moreover, Isaiah’s prophecy of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem in Isaiah 1:3 also reflects this failure of recognition. The people of Israel, despite witnessing God’s mighty acts such as the deliverance from Egypt

²¹ Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *Commentary on Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 2–38.

and the provision of manna in the wilderness, failed to recognize the true nature of the God who had been with them. Isaiah laments that the animals knew Jesus, but the Israelites did not, emphasizing the depth of their spiritual blindness.

Paul's words in Philippians 2:6–7 echo this mystery, where he writes about Jesus Christ, "Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men." Jesus Christ, though divine, took on human form and humbled Himself, which led to confusion and rejection among the Jews, as they could not reconcile the Messiah's humble appearance with their expectations.

The sealed book, as described in Isaiah 29:11–12, is a symbol of this hidden mystery. The Jews, despite being the recipients of the promises, were unable to understand. This failure of recognition is not only a matter of spiritual blindness but also a fulfillment of the prophecy that the mystery of God's salvation would be concealed from them, like a sealed book, until it was revealed to those who would receive and understand it.

Generally speaking, the sealed book in Isaiah 29:11–12 represents the mystery of Jesus Christ, hidden from the Jews due to their spiritual blindness. Despite the promises and prophecies given to them, they failed to recognize the fulfillment of these promises in Jesus Christ. As Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 2:8, the rulers of this age did not understand who Jesus was, and this lack of recognition led to His crucifixion. The sealed book thus symbolizes the hidden nature of God's salvation plan, which was revealed in Jesus Christ, but only to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

CONCLUSION

The prophetic words of Isaiah in Isaiah 29:11–12 carry profound theological significance, especially in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church's interpretation. The concept of the "sealed book" serves as a powerful symbol, connecting the mystery of God's revelation with the fulfillment of divine promises. The Ethiopian Orthodox understanding of the "sealed book" encapsulates several layers of meaning, drawing from

the literal, mystical, and Christological teachings. At the heart of this interpretation lies the perpetual virginity of Saint Mary and the mystery of incarnation.

The literal interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy reflects a warning against spiritual blindness, calling attention to those who misrepresent God's word and deceive the faithful. The "sealed book" metaphor emphasizes the inaccessibility of divine truth to those who are spiritually blinded or unfaithful, thus urging the faithful to seek a deeper understanding of God's revelation. In Isaiah's time, this prophecy warned of false prophets who distorted the truth, making it appear as if God's word were a closed book, impossible to comprehend. This warning was as much a challenge to the people of Israel as it was an invitation to uncover the mysteries of God's salvation plan. For the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, this challenge is not merely historical but a continual call to recognize and live out the mysteries revealed in Jesus Christ.

The theological implications of the "sealed book" are intricately linked to Saint Mary, whose virginity is preserved as a divine mystery. According to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the perpetual virginity of Saint Mary is closely associated with her being the "sealed book" of Isaiah's prophecy. The profound mystery of the Incarnation, where the Word became flesh within her womb, is a mystery that no human can fully comprehend. The Virgin Mary, as a "sealed book," embodies the sacred vessel through which the divine Word entered the world, yet her virginity remained untouched, symbolizing purity and sanctity.

Saint Mary's virginity is depicted as an eternal seal, one that was neither broken by conception nor by childbirth. This theological understanding aligns with the teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, where Saint Mary is referred to as the "sealed book" because she carries the Word of God within her, yet remains untouched by human hands. Abba Giorgis of Gascha and other Ethiopian scholars elaborate on this mystery, emphasizing that the Virgin Mary's virginity was preserved before, during, and after the birth of Jesus Christ, a divine seal that remained intact, affirming her purity and sanctity. This understanding reflects a deeper theological mystery, as the Incarnation itself is considered an unfathomable divine act that transcends human comprehension.

The connection between the “sealed book” and Saint Mary’s perpetual virginity is further elucidated by the great theologians of the Church, such as Saint Jacob of Serugh, who interprets Isaiah’s prophecy as pointing directly to the virgin birth of Christ. The “sealed book” of Isaiah is identified with Saint Mary, whose womb became the sacred dwelling place of God’s Word. The divine paradox of her virginity, which coexists with the reality of her motherhood, is encapsulated in the “sealed book” metaphor. Saint Mary, as a “sealed book,” became the means through which salvation entered the world, yet her mystery remained hidden from human eyes, just as the contents of a sealed book remain inaccessible until revealed.

In the New Testament, the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy are manifest in the life of Jesus Christ. The people of Israel, despite witnessing Christ’s miracles, failed to recognize Him as the Messiah, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah. Their spiritual blindness prevented them from understanding the mystery of Christ’s identity. As the sealed book was inaccessible to both the learned and the unlearned in Isaiah’s prophecy, so too was the true nature of Christ hidden from many. The spiritual blindness of the Jews, particularly their inability to recognize the Messiah, is a key theme in the New Testament. Despite the clear signs and miracles performed by Jesus Christ, many failed to see the fulfillment of the prophecies in Him. This failure to recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah is a direct parallel to the sealed book, which could not be read or understood by those who were spiritually blind.

The apostle Paul, in his writings, reflects on this spiritual blindness, noting that if the rulers of this age had understood the mystery of Christ, they would not have crucified Him (1 Corinthians 2:8). This illustrates the deep spiritual confusion that pervaded the people of Israel and their inability to comprehend the significance of Jesus Christ’s life and work. The sealed book, in this context, symbolizes the hidden nature of God’s plan of salvation, which was veiled from those who lacked the spiritual insight to understand it. The “sealed book” thus becomes a symbol of divine revelation, which is hidden and revealed at the same time hidden from those who are blind to its truth, and revealed to those who are open to receiving it.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church’s interpretation of Isaiah 29:11–12 also includes the understanding that the “sealed book” is

a representation of Jesus Christ Himself. The mystery of the Incarnation, which was hidden from many as the Word of God, became incarnated from Saint Mary, who remains the “sealed book.” This theological interpretation emphasizes that while Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the prophecies, His identity and mission were hidden to many, just as the contents of a sealed book remain concealed until they are opened. The failure of the Jews to recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah is not only a matter of spiritual blindness but also a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, which foretold that the revelation of God’s salvation would be hidden from many.

In the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, scholars the book of Isaiah was also called *däräqə ḥädisə*²² and this theological mystery is further explored through the teachings of various scholars, who emphasize that the “sealed book” is not merely a symbol of Saint Mary’s virginity but also a reference to the divine mystery of the Incarnation. The Word of God, who was eternally with the Father, took human flesh and become man. The “sealed book” of Isaiah thus represents the mystery of Christ’s divinity, hidden from many. The Ethiopian Orthodox interpretation stresses that this mystery is not only a theological concept but also a lived reality, experienced through the faith and devotion of the faithful.

Furthermore, the Ethiopian Orthodox understanding of the “sealed book” extends beyond the figure of Saint Mary to encompass the broader mystery of salvation. Just as the “sealed book” was inaccessible to many, so too is the full understanding of God’s salvation plan hidden from those who do not seek it with a sincere heart. The Church teaches that through faith, prayer, and devotion, the faithful are invited to open the sealed book and discover the depths of God’s love and mercy, which were made manifest in the Incarnation of the Word of God.

²² It is Amharic word meaning the prophecy told by Isaiah is just like as he has been lived in the New Testament for instance the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies, such as in Isaiah 53:1–5 and Isaiah 1:3–5, as they come to pass exactly as he foretold in the New Testament.” This concept emphasizes how the events and teachings predicted by Isaiah in the Old Testament are directly reflected and realized in the life and work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

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