

I.

A BRIEF NOTICE OF AN ANCIENT MS. OF THE FOUR GOSPELS, BROUGHT FROM ABYSSINIA, AND PRESENTED TO THE SOCIETY (WITH OTHER MSS.); BY CAPTAIN CHARLES M'INROY, STAFF SERVICE, MADRAS. BY DAVID LAING, ESQ., FOR. SEC. S.A. SCOT. (PLATE V.)

The manuscripts presented this evening as a donation from CAPTAIN M'INROY were put into my hands by ALEXANDER HAMILTON, Esq., LL.B., W.S., a Fellow of this Society, to be deposited in some public collection.

These MSS., including some fragments, were brought from Abyssinia by his son-in-law, Captain M'Inroy; and as the object was to have one or more of them at least exhibited to the public, instead of being put aside and locked up in a dark press, I recommended, that the volume of chief interest should be given to the Society of Antiquaries, and some of the others to the Library of the University of Edinburgh. This recommendation being quite agreeable to the donor, I have now much pleasure in presenting them in his name to the Society.

It is not to be expected that as Foreign Secretary I should be familiar with all strange and outlandish languages, but the principal volume alluded to is evidently a copy of THE FOUR GOSPELS, of which three have still prefixed an illuminated page, in a very primitive style of art, intended for the several Evangelists. It is a square folio in double columns on vellum, containing about 194 leaves, written in the old Ethiopic character. Having no means at hand for comparison, it would not be safe to pronounce a decided opinion on the age of such manuscripts, but I am inclined to reckon this as not later than the end of the fourteenth century.

The facsimile to be given (Plate V., exhibiting a specimen of the writing, and a singular interlaced ornament or cross), may serve perhaps afterwards to ascertain its age. Along with the Abyssinian trophies exhibited last summer (and perhaps still on view) in the South Kensington Museum, there were several MS. volumes. I did not examine them with any care, and the larger collection, of three or four hundred manuscripts, intended for the British Museum, had not then been received.

Along with this volume of the Gospels is added one, of two small curious rolls, on parchment; also a Manual of Prayers in its original blackened leather case with thongs, and having a look of antiquity about it sufficient to carry one's imagination back to the time of the Flood, although not older, perhaps, than the sixteenth century.

Among the manuscripts there were two old PSALTERS. One of these has been given to the University; the other, as of less interest for this Society, I have, with the donor's consent, retained, and in its place substituted a MS. copy of the Koran, in its original Eastern binding.

The following memorandum, received since the above was written, from Captain M'Inroy, states the places in Abyssinia where the MSS. were obtained:—

“The large book, believed to be the Priest's Bible, or rather the one belonging to the Church, and from which he expounded to his people, was procured in a church between Adabagah and Dongälo, about thirty-two or thirty-three miles south of Addigerat.

“The smaller books and scrolls were mostly procured in the neighbourhood of Senafé, from churches and villages. One of the books was said to be the Psalms.

“CHAS. M'INROY,
“Captain Madras Staff Company.

“EDINBURGH, 6th February 1869.”

In reference to Abyssinian MSS. in general, the two following extracts may be subjoined:—

In the “Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country,” published in 1868 from the MSS. of the late W. C. Plowden, Her Majesty's Consul in Abyssinia, we have the following information:—

“All Church service [in Abyssinia] is conducted in the Geez tongue,

unknown save to the learned. The Psalms are also in that language, and the pupil, while encouraged to read, is persuaded that he should not seek to understand them, but that he fulfils a high duty by gabbling over a number of them daily. No one, save the priest himself, is ever instructed in the Gospel, in any tongue. They teach but one book to the children of the laity—the Psalms of David; and, without forbidding other learning, discourage it, confining it as much as possible to the clergy and the scribes. Their great numbers, the almost superstitious reverence of the multitude, and the practice of confession, have enabled the priests to pursue this system with success.

“Their learning is limited almost to the books of the Old and New Testaments, into which some are admitted that we consider apocryphal; besides these, there are some monkish legends, a code of laws, and the chronicles of their kings, containing in a mass of rubbish a few sentences worthy of notice.”—(Pp. 90, 91.)

Professor Max Müller, in his Lectures on the Science of Language, 1861, p. 268, says, that a branch of the ancient Aramaic dialect “is the *Ethiopic* or *Abyssinian*, called by the people themselves the *Gees* language. Though no longer spoken in its purity by the people of Habesh, it is still preserved in their sacred writings, translations of the Bible, and similar works, which date from the third and fourth centuries. The modern language of Abyssinia is called *Amharic*.”

[While this sheet was at press the larger MS. was carefully examined by my valued friend, the Rev. John E. Brown, who has favoured me with the following note :—

“MY DEAR SIR,—In accordance with your desire I now offer to you the results of my examination of the interesting Abyssinian Manuscript, lately presented to the Antiquarian Society of Scotland. It is with all due diffidence that I do so.

“The MS. is, as you supposed, a copy of the Four Gospels (to be found nearly perfect, I hope, when the parchment leaves shall have been properly arranged) in the Geez or old Æthiopic language and character, the latter written with extreme distinctness.

“Each Gospel is divided into sections,—the Ammonian, a division first

occurring in the third century, and generally followed where the more modern distinction by chapters continues unknown.

“In the MS. after a list at the beginning of each Gospel, the announcement of an individual section reappears in red lettering at the top of a column, while, underneath it, the exact place where the section commences is marked by a cross and handle, the old *crux ansata* of Egyptian mythology, which was afterwards occasionally adopted, with widely different meaning, into Christian records.

“At the beginning of each Gospel is placed a portrait, with the name written over it;—St Matthew, St Mark, &c. To the entire four is prefixed a general title, accompanied on another page with a cross of striking figure and various adornments, all of them of most primitive character.

“No date has been determined, but may yet be so through the medium of a preliminary *excursus*, as it may be called, on the style and doctrine of the evangelists, followed by what seems intended as a tribute to the memory of the pious deceased; some, perhaps, canonised saints,—others, it may be, personal friends of the copyist—Anurios (Andreas?). Your own suggestion, meantime, may be embraced as probably a correct one, namely—that the MS. cannot be later than the fourteenth century.—I am, my dear Sir, ever obediently yours,

“J. E. B.

“24 ALBANY STREET, NORTH LEITH,

“30th June 1869.”