

INTRODUCTION TO THE TREATISE OF *Zār'a Ya'əqob*  
AND OF *Wäldä Həywät*

In 1667 Gregorian Calendar an Ethiopian philosopher by the name of *Zār'a a'əqob* wrote a *Ḥatāta*, "Treatise," in which he recorded both his life and his thought. To the person with some acquaintance of Ethiopian history, the name *ār'a Ya'əqob* brings to mind the XV century emperor of that name (reigned 1434-1); consolidator of the First Shoa Kingdom, a religious zealot, a literary figure of considerable repute and an efficient administrator. *Zār'a Ya'əqob* the Philosopher lived about a century and a half later. By temperament and family background, he was an exact opposite of his namesake.

The [philosopher] is much more important than the king. Only this [philosopher] was really an original thinker of Abyssinia, as far as literature is known to us.<sup>1</sup>

The philosopher is original in many ways. He begins his *Treatise* with the story of his life. It is the only known autobiography in Ethiopic literature. *Zār'a a'əqob* was born on *Nāhas'ē* 25th 1592, Ethiopian Calendar, August 28th 1599, Gregorian Calendar, in the environs of Aksum, from a poor farmer. He attended the traditional schools of Ethiopia, studying in particular the Psalms of David, the *z'ema*, the *qən'ē* and the *sāwasəwā*. This is a point of special importance: The language of *Zār'a Ya'əqob* is pure *qən'ē gə'əz*; it shows no foreign influence: Latin, French or Italian.<sup>2</sup> Indeed it is the jewel, the masterpiece of Ethiopian literature: the impact of the *qən'ē* school on *Zār'a Ya'əqob* went further than mastery of the Ethiopic language.

In such a school discussion and asking questions is encouraged. Since the students in such an atmosphere throughout the Ethiopian church tradition have been trained to think rather than believe, they have been dissenters more often than not. Since they tend to rely on reason rather than on mere faith, they tend to be more philosophical than their counterparts the priests. Indeed, it can be said that *Ethiopian philosophy* in its true sense, i.e. philosophy based on primacy of reason, originated in the *kine* school. This is not more so explicitly illustrated in any other book than in the *Treatise of Zār'a Ya'əqob* and of *Wäldä Həywät*.<sup>3</sup>

In 1626 King *Susənyos* made his solemn profession of Catholic faith. Shortly afterwards, *Zār'a Ya'əqob* was denounced before the king by *Wäldä Yohānnəs*, a priest from Aksum. *Zār'a Ya'əqob* was compelled to flee for his life, taking with him three measures of gold and the most precious of his possessions — the second great influence in his life together with *qən'ē* language and culture: the Book of Psalms, the *Dawit*. On his way to Shoa in the south he found a beautiful uninhabited location: a cave at the foot of a valley south of the *Täkkazi* River, where he lived for two years, till the death of *Susənyos*. There, in the peace and solitude of the cave, far from the conflicts among men, he elaborated his philosophy.

It is an absolutely original work, the fruit of his own personal reflection, and not a translation or an adaptation from foreign sources, as most of Ethiopic literature is. The philosophy that later on will be developed in his *Treatise* is clearly rationalistic.

Rationalism is here considered as the view which recognizes as true only that content of faith which can be made to appeal to reason. In Ethiopia, traditional philosophy in its written form is intimately linked with Christianity in general and monasticism in particular. It is precisely in this sense of the absolute and exclusive sufficiency of human reason which denies all dogmatic assertion that reason would be unable to establish by its own means and to comprehend adequately that *Zār'a Ya'əqob* is said to be rationalist.

The light of reason is for *Zār'a Ya'əqob* the discriminating criterion between what is of God and what is of man, between the essential tenets of natural religion and the man-made additions to prove men's "inventions." Through the application of his method, the light of reason whose immediacy enlightens his investigation, *Zār'a Ya'əqob* has found a basic principle: THE GOODNESS OF THE CREATED NATURE. From this foundation he moves towards theodicy, ethics and psychology, his theodicy being mostly a creational one, his ethics accepting only that which is based on the goodness of the created thing, like that of married life and of food, thus rejecting the time-honoured monastic life and fasting of traditional Ethiopia, and his psychology emphasizing man's freedom and his superiority over the rest of creation.

After his death in 1692, his disciple, *Wäldä Həywät* also wrote a *Treatise* in which he recorded the last years and death of his master, and expounded his thought in a more pedagogical and parenetic way.

I have been asked whether we should speak of two *Treatises* (in the plural) written, the first by *Zār'a Ya'əqob*, the second by *Wäldä Həywät*, or of one *Treatise* (in the singular) written conjointly by two authors. We should speak of two *Treatises*, the first by *Zār'a Ya'əqob*, the second by *Wäldä Həywät*. And yet the title in *gə'əz* is not in the plural but in the singular ሐተታ: *ḥatāta*. Although there are two *Treatises* written successively by two authors, the unity and continuity of the inquiry from the master to the disciple is underlined by the singular form. The Ethiopic word translated by *Treatise* in English, *ḥatāta*, comes from a root which originally means: "to question bit by bit, piece-meal; to search into or through, to investigate accurately; to examine; to inspect." The singular of the title in *gə'əz* indicates that there is but one principle of the method of *Zār'a Ya'əqob*:

- 1 Bahru Zewde, "Consolidator, Zera Yacob: Ethiopian Philosopher." *The Ethiopian Herald*, January 10th 1968, p. 2. I have taken the liberty of replacing the word "monk" by "philosopher." *Zār'a Ya'əqob* was not a monk, see his *Treatise* 22:28, "I am not a monk, but I pretended to be one because of the difficult circumstances."
- 2 *Qən'ē* is a codified type of poetry. See Alemayyehu Moges, *Ḥatāta Zār'a Ya'əqob*, thesis presented at Addis Ababa University on Genbot 1961 E.C., 1968 G.C., p. 33.
- 3 Solomon Gebre Ghiorgis, "Ethiopian Philosophy." (First in a Series) *The Ethiopian Herald* March 26th 1977

"the inquiry," and that Zār'a Ya'aqob's disciple did not make use of another principle, although he was a different author.<sup>4</sup>

The authorship of these very original *Treatises* was challenged in 1920 by Carlo Conti Rossini<sup>5</sup> who claimed to have identified the real author in Padre Giusto d'Urbino, an Italian scholar who worked in Ethiopia in the XIX century and who copied the two manuscripts of the *Hatātas* which are extant in the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris. His arguments are mainly extrinsic, as the recent age of the manuscripts, the name Zār'a Ya'aqob that would hide the baptismal name of Giusto d'Urbino: Jacopo, Giusto's knowledge and love of the Ethiopic language and literature, and the information on Islam which would have been taken from the Ethiopic translation of *Les soirées de Carthage* made by Giusto himself. In 1934, arguments, mostly linguistic, were brought forward by Eugen Mittwoch to apply to the second as well as to the first *Treatise*.<sup>6</sup> From that moment on, nearly all interest was lost for the *Hatātas*, which were no more considered "as the jewel of Ethiopic literature"<sup>7</sup> but as a mystification.

Two Ethiopian scholars, Dr. Amsalou Aklilu and Ato Alemayyehu Moges, have taken over the whole question of authenticity:<sup>8</sup> the first in the light of the value of the testimonies in favour of authenticity given by Antoine d'Abbadie and Giusto d'Urbino himself, and of the lack of value of Tāklā Hayman<sup>9</sup>'ot's testimony which was the starting point of Conti Rossini's investigation, in the light also of the "nonreligious" character of the *Treatises* (concerning the recent age of the MSS), and of the order of words in Zār'a Ya'aqob's sentences; the second in the light of Biblical quotations, of the *qən'e gə'əz* that is used, of the *qən'e* culture that explains the singularity of the *Hatātas*, and of the knowledge of Islam they exhibit.

I have investigated both the internal and external types of evidence. A statistical investigation (of both the quantitative and the qualitative-quantitative kinds) yield the duality of authors which is denied by the opponents of the Ethiopian authorship. The Biblical quotations of Giusto d'Urbino have nothing in common with those of either *Hatāta*.

Five unknown letters by Giusto d'Urbino have been found in Rome. A letter by Giuseppe Sapeto vindicating the memory of Giusto d'Urbino against the insinuations of Tāklā Hayman<sup>9</sup>'ot together with documents concerning the whole

controversy, have also been collected and published. In Matraia the baptismal record shows that the baptismal name was Giovanni Iacopo. A complete *dossier* of original letters and a memoir of Giusto d'Urbino were discovered in Lucca. Investigation has been made into all the *gə'əz* works of Giusto d'Urbino: MS. 16 of the Società geografica italiana, Ms. 134 of the Biblioteca nazionale Vittorio Emanuele, MSS. d'Abbadie 216 and 217 of the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris and MS. Ethiopic 165 of the Vatican Library.

The study of all these sources yields:

1. that Giusto d'Urbino does not share the ideas that are expressed in the *Hatātas* at the time he is supposed to have written them;
2. that his knowledge of *gə'əz* in general and of the *qən'e* in particular appalling — and hence cannot be the perfect Ethiopic language of the *Hatātas*;
3. that Giusto's scribe who has copied one of the two MSS of the *Hatātas* (MS. 215) did not know *gə'əz* well enough to be its author under the editorship of Giusto.

If these conclusions are valid, the Ethiopian authorship of the *Hatātas* is not established, and the conclusion follows that MODERN PHILOSOPHY, in the sense of a personal rationalistic critical investigation, BEGAN IN ETHIOPIA with Zār'a Ya'aqob at the same time as in England and in France.

In 1976, I presented the first complete English translation of both *Treatises* together with a discussion of the problem of authorship.<sup>9</sup> The *gə'əz* text used for this translation followed d'Abbadie's manuscript No. 215 (sigla: DAB 215). Since DAB 234 is a copy of the former, only the principal MS was used. A critical edition of this MS was made by Enno Littmann.<sup>10</sup>

In 1948 Ethiopian Calendar, 1955 Gregorian Calendar, *Zāmānfās Qäddus Abrəha* published the Ethiopic text.<sup>11</sup> The author has orally stated that he used the Paris MS.

Littmann has given a Latin translation which was published in Vol. 18 of the *CSCO*, Vol. 2 of *Scriptores Aethiopici*, 1904.

- 9 Claude Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy*, Vol. II, *The Treatise of Zār'a Ya'aqob and of Wäldä Həywät. Text and Authorship*. Printed for Addis Ababa University by Commercial Printing Press, Addis Ababa, 1976. The English translation has previously been published in two installments:
  - 1 "The Treatise of Zār'a Ya'aqob and of Wäldä Həywät. English translation of the Treatise of Zār'a Ya'aqob." *Ekklesiastikos Pharos*, Vol. LIII. II (1971), pp. 344-71.
  - 2 "The Treatise of Wäldä Həywät." *Ekklesiastikos Pharos*, Vol. III-IV (1972), pp. 272-407.
- 10 Enno Littmann, *Philosophi Abessini*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 18, *Scriptores Aethiopici*. Paris, Presses républicaines, 1904, Vol. 18, Ethiopic Text.
- 11 *Zāmānfās Qäddus Abrəha, Hatāta Zāzār'a Ya'aqob 'Aksumawi Wäwäld Həywanəfrazawi*. [Asmara, Arti grafice eritree,] 1948 E.C., 1955 G.C.

4 See the epilogue to *The Treatise of Zār'a Ya'aqob* added by Wäldä Həywät, 28:8-10.

5 Carlo Conti Rossini, "Lo Hatata Zar'a Ya'aqob e il padre Giusto da Urbino." *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, Series V, Vol. XXIX, 1920, pp. 213-23.

6 Eugen Mittwoch, "Die amharische Version der Soirées de Carthage mit einer Einleitung: Die angeblichen abessinischen Philosophen des 17. Jahrhunderts." *Abessinische Studien*, Heft II, Berlin und Leipzig, Verlag von Walter de Gruyter, 1934.

7 C. Conti Rossini, *Op. cit.*, p. 223.

8 አዎላሉ አክሊሉ (ዶክተር) Dr. Amsalou Aklilu, ዘርዓ ያዕቆብ ረዕሰ-ወ. "Zera Yacob le philosophe." *ጋራን ገላን* *Tarik*, gazette d'information archéologique, historique et littéraire, publié par l'Institut éthiopien d'archéologie. No. 1 (1963), pp. 11-13.

In 1903 and in 1904, extracts from Vol. XVI of the *Zapiski* of the Imperial Academy, Archaeological Section, were published by Boris Turayev.<sup>12</sup> They contain a translation of the *Hatāta* in Russian.

In 1916, Littmann presented a German translation.<sup>13</sup> An abridged translation into English of "The Inquiries of *Zera Yaekob*" appeared in London during the war as successive installments of *New Times and Ethiopian News*.<sup>14</sup> The anonymous author [Abebe Retta] did not translate the inquiries of *Wäldä Həywat*. He based his abridged translation on Littmann's text.

In 1955, the above mentioned author, *Zāmānfās Qāddus Abrəha*, also published an Amharic translation in Asmara.<sup>15</sup>

During the academic year 1964-5, Lino Marchiotto presented his doctoral thesis on "Gli Hatata Zar'a Ya'qob — Walda Heywat e la loro filosofia" at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the Università degli studi di Napoli. As an appendix,<sup>16</sup> he gives a translation of both *Hatātas* into Italian, based on the Latin version of Littmann.

In 1960, Yurii Michailovich Kobischanov published an article on the "Political Significance of the Treatise of Zara-Yakob" in the "U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences. Problems of Orientalists."<sup>17</sup> Ten years later he contributed to the book "Africa: Crossroads of Civilizations" edited by V.B. Mirimanov, a chapter on "Mysterious Manuscripts."<sup>18</sup> This chapter, written in Russian, is also reproduced in an Estonian version of the book published in 1973.<sup>19</sup>

- 12 Boris Alexandrovich Turayev, "Abissinskiye svobodnyye mysliteli XVII veka." *Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnovo Prosveshcheniya* (St. Petersburg, Senatskaya Tipografia) December 1903, pp. 443 - 7. "Hatata Zar'a Yae'qob. Izledovaniye Zarya Yakoba. Ispoved abissinskavo Svobodnovo myslitelya XVII veka." *Imperatorskoye Russkoye Arkheologicheskoye Obshchestvo. Zapisi Vostochnovo Otdeleniya*. St. Petersburg, 1905. Vol. 16, pp. 1 - 62.
- 13 Enno Littmann, *Zar'a Jacob, ein einsamer Denker in Abessinien, mit einer Einleitung von Benno Erdmann*. Berlin, [1916.]
- 14 [Abebe Retta,] "The Inquiries of *Zera Yaekob*." *New Times and Ethiopia News*: No. 405, February 5th 1944, pp. 1, 2. No. 406, February 12th 1944, pp. 1, 2. No. 407, February 19th 1944, p. 3. No. 408, February 29th 1944, pp. 1, 2. No. 409, March 4th 1944, p. 4.
- 15 *Zāmānfās Qāddus Abrəha, Hatāta Zāzār'a Ya'əqob 'Aksumawī Wāwāld Həywat 'ənfrazawī* (Amharic translation). Asmara, Arti grafice eritree, 1955.
- 16 Lino Marchiotto, *Gli Hatata Zar'a Ya'qob, Walda Heywat e la loro filosofia*, Part IV, pp. 233 - 430. Università di studi di Napoli, Facoltà Lettere e filosofia, Anno accademico 1964 - 5.
- 17 Yurii Michailovich Kobischanov, "Politicheskoe znachenie 'Issledovaniye Zara-Yakoba.'" *Akademiya Nauk S.S.S.R. Problemy Vostokovedeniya*, No. 1(1960) 135 - 43.

In 1978, I published a second book on the *Hatātas*.<sup>20</sup> Volumes II and III of *Ethiopian Philosophy* make up one single continuous organic unity, the latter characterizing the literary and philosophical value of a text whose authorship was discussed and established in the former. Besides a section on the literary form of the *Hatātas*, the book studies the philosophy of *Zār'a Ya'əqob*: its individualism (Chapter I), method (Chapter II), the existence and nature of God (Chapter III), the principle of ethics (Chapter IV), individual ethics (Chapter V), social ethics (Chapter VI), psychology (Chapter VII) and topical relevance.

The translation, which was published in Volume II of *Ethiopian Philosophy*, is here reproduced *in extenso* and without any change.

- 18 Y.M. Kobischanov, "Zagadochnye rukopisi." In *Afrika: Vstrechi Tsivilizatsiy*, edited by V.B. Mirimanov, pp. 367 - 82. Moscow, Mysl, 1970.
- 19 J. Kobiššanov, *Tsivilisatsioonide Kohtumine Aafrikas*, pp. 286-95. Tallinn, Valgus, 1973.
- 20 C. Sumner, *Ethiopian Philosophy*, Vol. III, *The Treatise of Zār'a Ya'əqob and Wäldä Həywat. An Analysis*. Printed for Addis Ababa University by Commercial Printing Press, Addis Ababa, 1978.