INTRODUCTION TO THE TREATISE OF Zär’a Y’aṣqob
AND OF Wäldä Haywát

In 1667 Gregorian Calendar an Ethiopian philosopher by the name of Zär’a Y’aṣqob wrote a Haditá, “Treatise,” in which he recorded both his life and his thoughts. To the person with some acquaintance of Ethiopian history, the name Zär’a Y’aṣqob brings to mind the XV century emperor of that name (reigned 1434-1502); consolidator of the First Shoan Kingdom, a religious zealot, a literary figure considerable repute and an efficient administrator. Zär’a Y’aṣqob 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.¹

The philosopher is original in many ways. He begins his Treatise with the story of his life. It is the only known autobiography in Ethiopian literature. Zär’a Y’aṣqob was born on Nähás 25th 1592, Ethiopian Calendar, August 28th 1599, in the province of Aksum, from a poor farmer. He attended the traditional schools of Ethiopia, studying in particular the Psalms of David, wór’ēma, the qene and the sāwāwa. This is a point of special importance: The language of Zär’a Y’aṣqob is pure qene ge’ez; it shows no foreign influence: Latin, ranch or Italian.² Indeed it is the jewel, the masterpiece of Ethiopian literature: at the impact of the qene school on Zär’a Y’aṣqob went further than mastery of the Ethiopian 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 prudence of reason, originated in the kine school. This is not more explicitly illustrated in any other book than in the Treatise of Zara Yaeqob and of Walda Heywat.³

¹ Bahru Zewde, “Consolidator, Zara Yacob: Ethiopian Philosopher.” The Ethiopian Herald, January 10th 1968, p. 2. I have taken the liberty of replacing the word “moun” by “philosopher.” Zär’a Y’aṣqob was not a monk, see his Treatise 22.28, “I am not a monk, but I pretend to be one because of the difficult circumstances.”


C. SUMNER

"the inquiry," and that Zär'a Ya'qob's disciple did not make use of another principle, although he was a different author.4

The authorship of these very original Treatises was challenged in 1920 by Carlo Conti Rossini,5 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 Ḥattātas which are extant in the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris. His arguments are mainly extrinsic, as the recent age of the manuscripts, the name Zär'a Ya'qob 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 soeurs 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.6 From that moment on, nearly all interest was lost for the Ḥattātas, which were no more considered "as the jewel of Ethiopian literature" but as a mystification.

Two Ethiopian scholars, Dr. Amsalou Aklilu and Ato Alemayehu Moges, have taken over the whole question of authenticity: 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 Täklä Haymanot's testimony which was the starting point of Conti Rossini's investigation, in the light also of the "non-religious" character of the Treatises (concerning the recent age of the MSS), and of the order of words in Zär'a Ya'qob's sentences; the second in the light of Biblical quotations, of the qem'ə ga'az that is used, of the qem'ə culture, that explains the singularity of the Ḥattātas, and of the knowledge of Islam they exhibit.

I have investigated both the internal and external evidence. A statistical investigation (of both the quantitative and the qualitatively-quantitative kind) yields 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 Ḥattātas.

Five unknown letters by Giusto d'Urbino have been found in Rome. A letter by Giuseppe Sapeto vindicated the memory of Giusto d'Urbino against the insinuations of Täklä Haymanot together with documents concerning the whole controversy, have also been collected and published. In Matria the baptismal record shows that the baptismal name was Giovanni Isacco. A complete dossier of original letters and a memoir of Giusto d'Urbino were discovered in Lucca. Investigation has been made into all the ga'az works of Giusto d'Urbino: MS. 168 of the Societè geografica Italiana, Ms. 134 of the Biblioteca nazionale Vittorio Emanuele, MSS. d'Abbadie 216 and 217 of the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris and MS. Ethiopian 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 Ḥattātas at the time he is supposed to have written them;
2. that his knowledge of ga'az in general and of the qem'ə in particular is appalling — and hence cannot be the perfect Ethiopian language of the Ḥattātas;
3. that Giusto's scribe who has copied one of the two MSS of the Ḥattātas (MS. 215) did not know ga'az well enough to be its author under the editorship of Giusto.

If these conclusions are valid, the Ethiopian authorship of the Ḥattātas is not established, and the conclusion follows that MODERN PHILOSOPHY, in the sense of a personal rationalistic critical investigation, BEGAN IN ETHIOPIA with Zär'a Ya'qob 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.8 The ga'az 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.10

In 1948 Ethiopian Calendar, 1955 Gregorian Calendar, Zämänfäs Qäddas Abraha published the Ethiopic text.11 The author has orally stated that he used the MS of Paris MS.

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


4 See the epilogue to The Treatise of Zär'a Ya'qob added by Walda Hoydrt, 28:8-10.
8 Ḥyän Ḥyäyt (Fh-ty) Dr. Amsalou Aklilu, Ḥyän Ḥyäyt (Fh-ty). "Zera Yacob le philosophie;" Ḥyän 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. They contain a translation of the Ḥatāta in Russian.

In 1916, Littmann presented a German translation. An abridged translation into English of "The Inquiries of Zera Ya‘qob" appeared in London during the war as successive installments of New Times and Ethiopian News. The anonymous author [Abebe Retta] did not translate the inquiries of Wälda Heywat. He based his abridged translation on Littmann's text.

In 1955, the above mentioned author, Zāmānfās Ḍāddas Abrah, also published an Amharic translation in Asmara.

During the academic year 1964-5, Lino Marchiottto presented his doctoral thesis on "Gli Ḥatata Zar’a Ya‘qob — Wälde Heywat e la loro filosofia" at the Faculty of letters and Philosophy of the Università degli studi di Napoli. As an appendix, he gives a translation of both Ḥatāta into Italian, based on the Latin version of Littmann.


In 1978, I published a second book on the Ḥatāta. 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 Ḥatāta, the book studies the philosophy of Zara Ya’qob: its individualistic (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.

