



**Ethiopian e-Journal  
for Research and Innovation Foresight**

**Vol 4, No 2 (2012) -pp (131-139)**

**Professor Habte Churnet**

Abstract

There is a need to read Zera Yakob's philosophy by relating it to a contextualized interpretation of how he came to write this philosophy. There is a need to produce plausible references and accounts to demonstrate he wrote the Hateta. He wrote at a time when the Ethiopian Orthodox faith was being assaulted by Portugese Jesuits. Philosophers such as Claude Summner, Charles Vernharn and others claim that his philosophy is on a par, if not even better in many ways to the work of the so- called European philosophers. The claim that that the work was actually written by Italian Jesuit D'Urbino rather than Zera Yakob appears to be a fabricated account. What is important is not to be distracted by these claims, but move on to explore the subtely of Zera Yakob's original philosophy by re- reading the Hateta with the perspective of how new philosophical methodologies and insights are included or revealed in it or can be extrapolated from it. Ethiopian philosophers must deeply get immersed in excavating the originality of Ethiopian philosophy, that some philosophers claim is so deep that Ethiopia is indeed the originator of the philosophy of harmony that will save the world.

**Philosopher Zereyacob (1599-1692).** [Other spellings include: Zera Ya'qob, Zera Yacob, Zere Yacob ]

Zereyacob is an Ethiopian philosopher who should not be confused for the learned Emperor Zereyacob (1434-1465). Philosopher Zereyacob was born in an Orthodox Christian faith. He taught his philosophy to his disciples and wrote his autobiographical and philosophical aphorisms of 28 pages on parchment (“brana”) in 1667. He wrote it at the urging of his student Welde Heywet, who also wrote a longer piece on the same title “Hateta.”

Zereyacob lived in a tumultuous century. Yet, the Ethiopian “hateta” discourse, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) that Zereyacob professed offer the medium for constructive work, and Ethiopia lives on. This tradition lives on despite the inability of some who fail to see connections. Some critics view Zereyacob as being born far ahead of his time; yet, they claim that he was totally oblivious to the politics around him. Others find it impossible for philosophical thought to have existed outside of Europe. Some such critics tell the lie that Zereyacob’s philosophy was taken from the west. Some view Zereyacob as having fear of God (“feriha Egziabher”) and was no different from previous notable monks that include Abba Ewostatios or Estifanos. The critics are far too numerous to mention let alone to counter separately. In a way, the multiplicity of critics might be a testament to the greatness of Philosopher Zereyacob, who is known as the father of ethics.

Zereyacob’s piece of 28 pages is not exhaustive. Indeed Zereyacob had proposed that others should develop and continue his work. However, he seemed to have provided sufficient material in it for Professor Sumner to expound on that work in numerous publications.

## **Historical background**

### **A) Political conditions in Ethiopia preceding and during Zereyacob’s time.**

Ethiopia saw a Muslim war, a northward migration of the Boren and Bereytuma tribes (Gala, Oromo) in the wake of the Jihad, Catholic emperors seated on the throne before it returned back to Orthodox emperors. In the reign of Lebne Dengel (1508-1537) Ethiopia suffered a Jihad war spearheaded by locals who were aided by the Ottoman Empire. The Portuguese sent a core of soldiers that helped defeat the Jihadists. Subsequently, the Portuguese worked to convert Ethiopians to Catholicism. Lebne Dengel’s grandchildren professed different religions, Jewry,

Orthodoxy, to Catholicism. Ethiopian intellectuals argued about their faiths as different politicians ascended to power. Emperor Zertse Dengel and his Jewish concubine were the parents of Emperor Yacob (1597-1603). The Ethiopian Philosopher Zereyacob was born at this time. After the first reign of Yacob, Emperor Za Dengel (1603-1604) reigned only to be killed by Ras Za Selassie because the emperor professed the Catholic faith and did not pay wages. Consequently, Yacob regained the throne for the second time (1604-1608). Emperor Susneyos (1608-1632) converted to Catholicism and in 1626 abdicated the throne to his son Fasil (1632-1667), an Orthodox Christian emperor who chased the Portuguese away from Ethiopia. The philosopher presented his written treatise, in Ge'ez in 1667, in the year Emperor Fasil, of the Gondar Fasil Castle fame, died. Philosopher Zereyacob reported that Emperor Susneyos persecuted him for his religious belief. He was no doubt affected by the religious wars, as he focused on how to know God by using the Ethiopian "hateta" discourse.

### **B) Some notable Ethiopian religious fathers preceding philosopher Zereyacob.**

Those who are truly afraid of God ("feriha Egziabher") are not afraid of humans or other gods. Beyond the numerous examples in the Bible that can be cited to show that "feriha Egziabher" actually strengthens the believer, mention of what happened in the 15th Century during the reign of Emperor Zereyacob perhaps clarify what "feriha Egziabere" is all about.

Abba Ewostatios campaigned to make Saturday a Sabbath, and his campaign took him to Egypt, Cyprus and Armenia, where he was buried. Emperor Zereyacob in the 1450 Debre Mitmaq Council made Saturday a Christian Holiday in addition to Sunday. The remains of Abba Ewostatios were returned much later to Emperor Iyasu 1 at Gondar (1682-1706).

Another monk "Abba Estifanos taught his disciples to read and adhere to the New Testament, and worship God and only God. His teachings were strict, and he and his followers would not bow to any other thing (the Cross, the icon of St. Mary, etc.) or person (the emperor) as they considered bowing to be a form of worshiping. His teaching became popular. However, in the court of Emperor Zerayacob (1433-1468) he and his followers were stoned, beaten by sticks, and/or put in jail to die. Perhaps, Abba Estifanos' teaching would have resulted in the reformation of the Ethiopian Church about a hundred years before the German monk, Martin Luther (1486-1546) had the idea of a reformation when he visited Rome in 1511. At any rate, Abba Estifanos and his followers did not flinch from their beliefs because of torture. They did not oppose the emperors on their other roles but they steadfastly stood by their ideas, and as such they were the founders of civil disobedience ("Hizbawi Imbita"). Indeed they were martyrs of what would have likely become an Ethiopia Protestant Church, though none took hold. The above were abstracted from book written in the Amharic about Abba Estifanos and his disciples (Getatchew Haile, 2004).

Whereas the above two monks campaigned for their religious causes, Philosopher Zereyacob's quest was entirely different.

### **Zereyacob's contributions.**

No doubt there were several sages who pursued philosophical discourses in the centuries. Yet, Zereyacob's philosophy has endured because it was written. For those who do not read Ge'ez, Claude Sumner, a philosopher who lived in Ethiopia for over forty years has published in 1985 the work of Zera Yacob in English. Above all else Zereyacob is the provider of the philosophical underpinnings of non-violent movements. Though he was a believer in God and perhaps because of it, the philosopher debunked the great religions that tend to be used for the purposes of waging wars. Zereyacob is well-known for his philosophy on ethics that considered a universe created by God who is good, as are all his creations including reason and nature. The criteria used for ethical behavior is then to bring (ameliorate, nudge) policies to be in harmony with nature.

Zereyacob dismissed validating truth or religion on the basis of being told about it by others either by word of mouth or through books. Rather, he elucidated that truth may be arrived at by reason because religion is "revealed" to reason by following "the Light of our heart" that we are created with. Below is how Zereyacob set the problems posed by organized religions which falsely preach that each of their tenets are the right ones, and the solution to the problem.

Observation or statement of the problem: "As my faith appears true to me, so does another find his own faith true; but truth is one."

The solution: use reason, "light of our heart": "To the person who seeks it, truth is immediately revealed. Indeed he who investigates with the pure intelligence set by the creator in the heart of each man and scrutinizes the order and laws of creation, will discover the truth." (Sumner, 1985, p.236).

Zereyacob accepted the existence of God through anthropic arguments of tracing back to the uncaused cause as did Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and by means of doubting as did Descartes in France 30 years before Zereyacob. Nonetheless, though pieces and parts of Zereyacob's treatise might appear similar to the methods of discourse used by other philosophers of different countries, Zereyacob's was uniquely Ethiopian and was a "Hatata," which means "to question bit by bit, piece-meal; to search into or through, to investigate accurately; to examine; to inspect". (Sumner, 1986). Below is how Zereyacob rationalizes the existence of God.

"Where do I come from? Had I lived before the creator of the world, I would have known the beginning of my life and of the consciousness [of myself] that created me? Was I created by my own hands? But I didn't exist before I was created. If I say that my father and my mother created me, then I must search for the creator of my parents and of the parents of my parents until they arrive at the first who were not created as we [are] but who came into this world in some other way without being generated. For if they themselves have been created, I know nothing of their origin unless I say, 'he who created them from nothing must be an uncreated essence who is and will be for all centuries [to come] the lord and master of all things, without beginning or end, immutable, whose years cannot be numbered.' And I said: 'Therefore, there is a creator; else there would have been no creation. This creator who endowed us with the gifts of intelligence and reason, cannot he himself be without them? For he created us as intelligent beings from the abundance of this intelligence and the same one being

comprehends all, creates all, is almighty.’ And I used to say: ‘my creator will hear me if I pray to him,’ and because of this thought I felt very happy.” (Sumner, 1985, P.233).

By perceiving that natural religion is “revealed “to reason, and that reason that is based on “the light of our heart “ is natural, Zereyacob has identified that nature and reason are good because they are created by God and thus nature and reason would serve as the criteria for assessing truth. Zereyacob’s ethics focused on seeking harmony with nature that is created by God who is good. His investigation led him to expose that good practices promote health, happiness and stability, while bad practices promote instability. Likewise, he was led to support some religious tenets and refute others. He upheld as positive examples those principles that promote mercy, work, monogamous marriage and education of children, and others that oppose killing, stealing, lying and committing adultery. He exposed the falsity (or violation of natural laws) of religious tenets on fasting, celibacy, polygamy, and criticize slavery as well as any form of violence. He believed in the equality of man and woman.

### **A modernistic approach of comprehending Zereyacob’s philosophy.**

Different methods of knowing are pursued to understand different parts of the world. To know what flavor of drink or food a person likes we ask him; and we perform surveys to know what the flavor of many individuals like. For a husband to know the hurt his spouse feels in carrying a child he empathies with her condition. Too perform science there is a stepwise or algorithmic procedure, etc. Hence different methods are used for knowing different parts of the whole, as there is not a single method of knowing the whole. A holistic approach requires “hateta” for inferring what method of knowing to pursue and a “hateta” on how to proceed within a chosen method.

### **Here is discursive interpretation of structure: Zereyacobian style.**

Professor Sumner’s philosophical contribution has brought to light the philosophical method of discursive subjection of faith of Zereyacob (1667), as one of the Ethiopian methods of discussion called “hateta.” “Hateta” depends in part on the utilization of what Ethiopian call “ayenehelina” that may be translated as the mind’s eye. It is as though humans have two eyes: one of which is stuck to their faces for purposes of viewing physical entities and the other exists in the mind for purposes of searching the truth about otherwise intangible concepts. The “hetata” may be equated to iterative hermeneutics when the tapestry of natural occurrences maybe equated to natural scripts. Therein may lay the nexus that the discursive subjection of faith utilized in Zereyacobian philosophy is equivalent to iterative hermeneutics, which is utilized in scientific investigation. If so, Ethiopians may achieve a lot when they realize scientific reasoning is a home span endeavor and not an alien construct. Perhaps the poor dissemination of the “hateta” might explain why there aren’t a plethora of Ethiopia thinkers and scientists. It is to extract, flush out and amplify this angle from the central Zereyacob’s contributions that this report focuses on the Zereyacobian knowledge and hence underscores that education entails keeping the Ethiopian notion of “ayenehelina” alive and alight. The more the experience of the investigator the more the “ayenehelina” is informed and become more able to expound several possibilities. The interplay of “ayenehelina” and “ayen” will be emphasized shortly.

Zereyacob presented his manuscripts of the 1667. When a concerned philosopher, in this case Professor Claude Sumner, heard of and read the original and the translation of Zereyacob's work he became fascinated by the ideas that are shared by Zereyacob, particularly by the internal consistency of the aphorisms. Sumner then could enquire as to the meaning of Zereyacob's aphorisms and he could learn about the context in which they were being used. He then brought flesh and meaning to the work of Zereyacob. The world is fortunate that Sumner got hold of the work of Zereyacob and shared it to all. Sumner exposed Philosopher Zereyacob's work. Thanks to the work of Sumner, Philosopher Zereyacob is now known as the father of ethics and deontological morality, having exposed his views about 50 years before Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) did. Though Kant preached morality, he was unaware of the work of Zereyacob, or the now UNESCO-recognized international treasure of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century rock-hewn Giyorgis Church at Lalibela that he could wrongly state that blacks have contributed nothing to human endeavor. In contrast, to the racist remarks of Kant, Zereyacob not only taught ethics and morality but he also believed in equality of humans, women and men alike, and lived the philosophy that he preached.

The emphasis in this report is the exposition of the concept of "hateta" that involves the interplay of the "ayen" and "ayenehelina." The "hateta" led Philosopher Zereyacob to conclude that God exists, but that the knowledge of God is done independent of the role of organized religion. The truth in religion is God. In other endeavors it is something else. "Hateta," however may be utilized to arrive at the truth irrespective of the discipline. The report will not dwell on the search of God as Zereyacob had done that. Rather, the search is for truth in general and natural structures in particular. I shall use natural structures and appropriate diagrams to present a modernistic approach to make the enquiries based on "hateta" manifest.



Figure 1. Objects A and B.

The question is: what can we learn about the nature and relationships of these two objects. We are going to observe these with the physical eye ("ayen"- includes the natural eye, or a variety of equipment that may be used to help gather data that can be viewed by the eye), and put a model based on our mind's eye ("ayenehelina"). The "hateta" begins when we make a model and check that model (hypothesis) by further investigations involving the "ayen" (the physical eye) and "ayenehelina" (mind's eye").

### Part A. Horizontal upper block

Q1. What are the details of the objects in A and B that are shown in Figure 1?

A1. Answer to Q1. A detailed observation by the “ayen” may reveal that the objects may be gray and they may be composed of horizontally layered strata, as indicated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Layered blocks A and B

Q 2. How could blocks A and B be similar while they are present in different locations? The answer engages “ayenehelina.”

A2. The blocks may be remnants of a large cover rock that occupied the entire region. This answer is really a model (M1) presented by “ayenehelina” (the mind’s eye). M1 has to be checked by exposing the model (hypothesis) even more carefully by “ayenehelina.” For example, if the entire region was covered by a layered cover-material we need to check whether or not the rocks beneath blocks A and B are also layered. This search for new evidence will engage the “ayen” (the physical eye). As shown below, the “ayenehelina” is utilized to ask subsequent questions that should be proved right or wrong when determined by viewing with the “ayen.”

Q2a. Suppose only blocks A and B are layered while the rocks beneath are not, what could the presence of separated blocks of A and B represent? On the basis of such observation by the “ayen,” the following potential answers are offered by the “ayenehelina.”

A2a. The top layers excluding those at blocks A and B could have probably been removed by erosion; that is to say that the repeated action of rain and wind over many years might have removed other layers. Further possibilities presented by the “ayenehelina” include the following.

Maybe blocks A and B were transported and deposited where they are present currently. If so, what is the size of blocks and what would transport them? If their sizes are larger than would be transported by the largest truck that humans have made, then a natural force must have transported the blocks. A similar argument could be given if the blocks were found in a region where there are no human-made, transportation-mechanisms.

Q2a1. What natural forces can move large blocks? This would engage “ayenehelina.” The following include possible answers presented by the “ayenehelina.”

A2a1. Glaciers can incorporate large blocks and transport them to different places, and leave them there as the glaciers melt away. If glaciers had transported the blocks, we should see by the “ayen” (physical eye) polished surfaces on the blocks, as the blocks would have been ground by other surface of rocks on their transit. Also more resistant mineral would scratch and leave groves (striations) on the polished surface. If such features are present on the surface of the blocks, the blocks are called **erratics**. If the blocks were present in marine sediments they would be called **dropstones**, as they may have dropped from icebergs. If polished surface and grooves are not present on the surfaces of blocks, then glaciers might not have transported them.

A2a2. Gliding of upper blocks over lower block is possible by means of gravity gliding and /or as a consequence of plate tectonics. If so, the contact surface between blocks A and B with their substrate is called a **fault**. If the contact is a fault, we need to observe ground up or milled rock and rock pieces (fault gauge). May be the lower part of the blocks A and B show broken up surfaces. If it is determined, by using the “ayen,” that the contact with the substrate is a fault, then the blocks are known as **klippe**. The klippe are remnants of fault-transported blocks, which are separated from the rest by erosion.

### Part B. Inclined layers.

Q3. What are the details of the objects in A and B that are shown at Figure 1?

A3. Answer to Q3. Perhaps a detailed observation by the “ayen” might indicated that the objects may be gray and they may be composed of inclined strata as indicated in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Inclined layers of blocks A and B.

Q 4. How could blocks A and B be similar while they are present in different regions? The answer engages “ayenehelina.”

A4. Suppose the blocks are composed of inclined strata. The strata at A decline to the left and those at B decline to the right. Also, the strata at block A are shallower than those at B. Moreover not only blocks A and B but also the substrate beneath the blocks are layered.



Engaging the “ayenehelina” we may infer that the blocks are sticking out because the region around them was eroded away by rain and wind over the years. We may begin to appreciate the structure depicted by the blocks and their substrate by engaging the “ayenehelina” and asking questions that include the following.

Q4a. Considering that blocks A and B are remnants what was the structure of the rocks depicted in Figure 3? The answer to this question may be investigated more by the “ayenehelina” as follows.

A4a. The structure of the rocks most likely was as depicted in Figure 4.

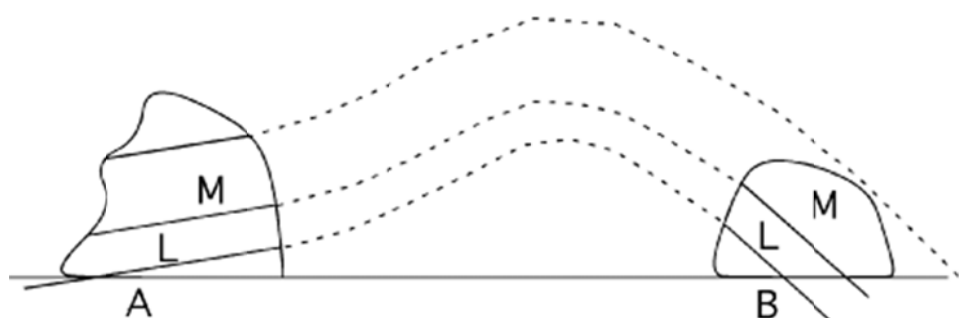


Figure 4. Inferred structure of the region containing blocks A and B. The light dashed lines are inferred and had been removed by erosion.

The structure was likely an up fold (anticline). The limb of the fold at B on the right is steeper than the limb at A on the left. Hence, the fold is not symmetrical.

A4b. What does the asymmetry of the fold indicate? Again engaging the “ayenehelina,” and by using analogies of a stack of papers producing an asymmetrical up fold with a steeper limb on the right when compressed by an unbalanced force that pushes from the left to the right, it may be inferred that the asymmetry shown in Figure 4 was produced by unbalanced force. Hence, that **asymmetry could indicate transport direction**, namely from left to the right.

Moreover, currently the region between blocks A and B is a valley. However, the rock structure indicates that a long time ago the place between blocks A and B was a mountain. Hence, the ancient topography of a ridge has been converted to the current valley by erosion that happened over many years of erosion. The region shows **topographic inversion**. Notice how an investigation engaging the “ayenehelina” leads to inferences of forces such as horizontal transport of strata, its direction, and of erosion and its consequence when applied over many years.

It would be un-Zereyacobian to consider that a simple use of two blocks as shown in Figure 4 can be the means by which we infer that an unbalanced force caused rocks of the entire region to be pushed from west to east. A conclusion about an entire region would require examining many more blocks of the area. However, what is discussed here clarifies what “hateta” is.

### Bibliography

Getatchew Haile, 2000, Bahra Hassab written in Amharic

Sumner, Claude, 1985, *Classical Ethiopian Philosophy*, Addis Ababa, Commercial Printing press.

Sumner, Claude, 1982, *A Classical Ethiopian Naturalist*; Interline, The magazine of Ethiopian Airlines (last Quarter 1982), PP. 21-27.

Sumner, Claude, 1973, “A Thought Pattern of Ethiopian Philosophy,” XIV world Congress of Philosophy, Varna, Bulgaria, Vol-5, PP. 825-7.

Sumner, Claude, 1986, *The Source of African Philosophy. The Ethiopian Philosophy of Man*. Stuttgart.