

Zar'a Ya'eqob's Argument For The Existence Of God

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Introduction

In certain quarters in the west, the very concept of African philosophy has caused a scornful or at least, skeptical laughter. As far as the east is from the west, so appears our continent removed from philosophy. In the western eyes, the west is then home of civilization and philosophy whereas Africa is the home of wilderness, wild animals, wild cultures and wild peoples. By the same token, there are many writers who have questioned the authenticity of the authorship of the treatises of Zar'a Yaeqob and who have attempted to call Ethiopia a country that is devoid of philosophical reasoning. For instance, Conti Rossini claimed that 'the author of the treatise of zar'a yaeqob is Padre Urbino'¹. In my view, this is a western anti-African and anti Ethiopian prejudice.

Many of the problems that trouble us in ordinary life can only be answered if we first ask the more fundamental questions that are a distinctive feature of philosophy. These questions are questions about human life, about knowledge and truth, good and bad, right and wrong, mind and matter; about human nature and the universe, we inhabit. Any thought about these questions counts as philosophy. Thus philosophy is likely to be found in every human society, past and present- wherever there are people struggling to live and make sense of their lives. Hence,

Ethiopia is not an exception to this. It is an obvious foolishness to consider Ethiopia as a country where there is/was no a single thinker.

Ethiopian philosophy is expressed in oral and written literatures² both playing a significant and an inspiring role for the current development of Ethiopian philosophy. There are many written works of philosophy in Ethiopia by Ethiopians. The major distinction to be made within this philosophical literature is between translations and original works. The translation includes the Fisalgwos or The physiologue (in the beginning or middle of V century), The Book of The philosophers (1510/22), and The life and Maxims of Skendas (in the first quarter of XVI century).³

On the other hand, the original work in Ethiopian philosophy includes the Treatise of Zar'a Ya'eqob (1667) and The Treatise of Walda Heywot, the pupil of Zar'a Ya'eqob (in the early XVIII century). Other Ethiopian scholars have also reflected on different aspects of Ethiopian philosophy (see, for instance, The Oromo conception of their environment, a book by Dr. Workineh Kalbessa, The meditations of Zar'a Ya'eqob a 17th century Ethiopian philosopher, a Paper by Tedros Kiros, The Role of sages in conflict Resolution, an article by Dr. Bekele Gutema, the Works of Messay Kebede, The Works of Wondifraw Ambaye, and many others).

In this short paper, I have attempted to disclose Zar'a Ya'eqob's theory of God, the argument he raised to prove the existence of God. The paper has three parts. The first part deals with the need for proving the existence of God. The second part deals with the nature of the argument that Zar'a Ya'eqob used to prove the existence of God. The last part has attempted to examine whether the proof is based on rational reflection.

1. Zar'a Ya'eqob's Argument for the Existence of God.

From what we have seen so far, one can easily understand the fact that Ethiopia has left its imprint on works of philosophy, both in the Aksumite and Medieval periods. Nonetheless, with the exception of the Treatise of Zar'a Ya'eqob, it still remains that none of the philosophical works in Ethiopia shows any trace of a critical frame of mind that characterizes modern thought. The work of Zar'a Ya'eqob differs from all Ethiopian philosophies of both the Aksumite and Medieval periods in that it employed abstract thought. It is the fruit of Zar'a Ya'eqob's own reflective, inquisitive and critical mind. Zar'a Ya'eqob has put his life history in the Treatise. He was born near Aksum, in northern Ethiopia, in 1599.⁴ He pursued his studies in the traditional Ethiopian schools until he reached their highest expression in *qene*, the oral culture which helped him to develop critical mental reflections.⁵

The work of Zar'a Ya'eqob is an absolutely original work.⁶ It is the fruit of his own deep and sustained personal reflection. Unlike the Pre-existing Ethiopian literatures, the Treatise of Zar'a Ya'eqob is neither a translation nor an adaptation from foreign sources. By the same token, contrary to these early literatures (the ones that I have listed earlier on) that had an influence from Greek via Egypt, we do not find an explicit or even implicit quotations of or references to a Greek source in the Treatise of Zar'a Ya'eqob.⁷ It is based on his own critical, reflective and rationalistic approach that he proved the existence of God.

1.1 What is the need for proving the Existence of God?

The mysterious nature of life in this world had attracted Zar'a Ya'eqob's attention. He has observed the fact that some persons born of the same parents and brought up with almost the same amount of care and affection are latter found to differ, in some cases very widely, in respect of their mental equipment, moral dispositions and the general conditions of living. Some are born with silver spoons in their mouths, while some others are found abandoned on roads or thrown in rivers. Some are born blind or crippled, while some others are almost beautiful and blessed in their lives. Some are rendered orphans immediately after their births and have to pass the rest of their lives by begging in the streets and sleeping on pavements of the roads. Some roll in wealth yet has to pass most part of their lives in hospitals. Some are born lucky

being almost complete strangers to those bitter strives and struggles, trials and tribulations of life under which other are born and die.⁸ Zar'a Ya'eqob has observed that some people prosper by leaps and bounds even by indulging in all sorts of immoral practices, without the least trace to compunction of conscience. There are, on the contrary, those who are virtuous and law-abiding, yet victims of poverty and exploitation (which is true of Zar'a Ya'eqob himself).⁹ Some have exceptional qualities, yet have no facilities and, therefore, miss the better opportunities to rise. The unscrupulous ones seem to prosper while the conscientious ones seem to suffer.

These natures of human life gave birth to different questions in the mind of our philosopher. Zar'a Ya'eqob asked: is this universe essentially irrational, governed by blind forces? Who is the creator of this world? Does God exist in the first place? Who is responsible for such contradictions?¹⁰ Based on his reflective and inquisitive mind, Zar'a Ya'eqob attempted to prove the existence of God whom he finally concluded to be the creator of this universe.

1.2. Zar'a Ya'eqob's proof for the Existence of God.

It is through the spontaneous and immediate bent of his thought that Zar'a Ya'eqob tried to prove the existence of God. He did this by passing from criticism to Odicy-God's justice or righteous way.¹¹ The term "odicy (theodicy) in Zar'a Ya'eqob's work is equivalent to the more

cumbrous natural theology, a philosophical science which signifies that all human reason has the tendency to discover by its own efforts about God, His existence, His nature, His attribute and His operations. And it is in a broader sense that the term "theodicy" is used by Zar'a Ya'eqob.¹²

Based on a priori proof, Zar'a Ya'eqob validly demonstrated the existence of God. According to Zar'a Ya'eqob:

*God is breathed in almost each line of this work and He should be the most important problem; However, He is perhaps the less illuminated and the less studied problem. He seems a postulate of reason to whom men tends with a necessary and fideistic movement. He is present in each exigence and metaphysical reason of the creature, however, he must be received by man, and one draws near Him, not with a rational process, that is to say with a process which ascending or descending in the scale of values starts from and arrives at God, but a natural and pantheistic component of the human creature and of all that is created.*¹³

This paragraph has the implication that in spite of the fact that God cannot be easily known and cannot be easily studied, He underlies every creature. It attempts to reveal the view that God can be identified with all the forces of nature and with all natural things. It implies the prior existence of God.

There is also an explicit declaration of the knowability of God, of the efficient power on the part of human soul, of eliciting the concept to God in Zar'a Ya'eqob's view. Consider the following passage:

Our soul has the power of having the concept of God and of seeing him mentally. God did not give this power purposelessly; as he gave power, so did he give the reality.

Moreover Reason teaches me that my soul is created rational, that it may know its creator, praise Him, thank Him at all times, and serve (Him) according to that service that the creator destined for it. As I am in this service, I shall inquire and know the will of God about me, that I may fulfill and perfect my work, because God created me rational for that purpose.¹⁴

From the above quotation, it can be argued that our soul has the capacity to understand God rationally, because the ultimate purpose of rational soul, according to Zar'a Ya'eqob, is to strive for the clear understanding of God's existence and its laws.

Zar'a Ya'eqob also argues that the existence of God can be proved based on the doubt he has about his own (Zar'a Ya'eqob's) coming into being. Zar'a Ya'eqob raised the question how he did come into this world and who created him as a rational being. He has raised different alternatives. He asked: "was I created by my own hands?" He replied

that he did not exist before he was created. Because to be the creator of oneself, one must exist before one was created, which is absolutely impossible for things of the empirical world. Saying that it was his father and mother who created him too is not the right answer, because he must also search for the creator of his parents until he arrives at the first creator who was not created like them, but who came into this world in some other way without being generated.

One may object this view by saying that the cause for his coming into being is the human species of the ancient *austrolopiticus*. But this is not the case, because these species themselves cannot be the creator of themselves. There must be a creator without whom there would have been no creation. Unless, such an efficient cause will lead into an infinite Regress, a regress in the order of acutely depending causes.

In *zar'a ya'eqob's* work, the philosophical enquiry about the existence of God moves form within to without, form inward world to the world around.¹⁵ As he is meditating on psalms, Zar'a Ya'eqob passes from himself who is the prayer to the one who is listening to himself. Then from himself to his parents, from his parents to the ancient ancestors and finally to the one who created these ancestors, the creator of this universe, an almighty God.

Based on his own creatural condition Zar'a Ya'eqob affirmed the existence of God. However, the method he applied is not purely a priori. It is confirmed a posteriori by the impossibility of an infinite regress, on the horizontal, temporal level, according to an accidental subordination of causes¹⁶. Only then does Zar'a Ya'eqob accede to the universal dimension of the creator of all things.

The argument Zar'a Ya'eqob used to prove the existence of God has many elements in common with such great thinkers as his contemporary the Spanish Jesuit philosopher and theologian Francis Suarez, st. Augustine and st. Thomas Aquinas.¹⁷ Yet it cannot be identified with any in particular. For instance, like st. Thomas Aquinas, Zar'a Ya'eqob's argument passes from the limited or contingent nature of finite things to an ultimate first cause or ground. But contrary to Aquinas, Zar'a Ya'eqob makes use of a "horizontal," temporal, accidental subordination of causes.

I agree with Zar'a Ya'eqob in many respects. For me, as in st. Thomas Aquinas, a thing cannot be the efficient cause of itself; for it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. In efficient causes, it is impossible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate cause is the cause of the ultimate cause. Unless there is a

cause there is no effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause.

Nonetheless, through an illuminating and a good attempt it is, there are a number of unsolved problems attached to the cosmological argument used by Zar'a Yaeqob and others for the existence of God is transcendental and beyond the reach of experience. Some of these problems are: (i) the argument assumes that each event in the world of sense has a cause for its coming into being. However, it is impossible to know the applicability of this assumption beyond the empirical world. (ii) Both Zar'a Yaeqob and his counterparts did not give any justification why a series of causes cannot go on to infinity, even in the sensible world. (iii) Though the elimination of a cause may result in the elimination of its effects in the world of experience, we have no justification for its applicability in the supra human world.

One may also question how can we know that the first cause has the name God? The issue is not that much difficult. Once we have reached an agreement on the existence of the first cause, we do not need to be worried about the name by which it should be designated. The designation may vary. For instance, Indians call this first cause 'Brahman' which has the same meaning with the English word 'God'. Therefore, what is important, here, is the conclusion that there was such a first cause, not the name by which it is designated.

Zar'a Ya'eqob has concluded that it is impossible for both the intermediate cause (Zar'a Ya'eqob's ancestors) and the ultimate cause (Zar'a Ya'eqob himself) to exist unless there is a first cause (God). But, how can I know that God still exists? Zar'a Ya'eqob's view, on this issue, is not clear.

1.3. Is the proof based on rational reflection?

As we have seen above, unlike the traditional written works of philosophy in Ethiopia (the translated ones) which are intimately linked with Christianity in general and monasticism in particular, the work of Zar'a Ya'eqob (the proof he provided for the existence of God) is precisely rationalistic in an absolute sense. The method he applied rejects every kind of the dogmatic assertion which says reason has no power and is unable to establish by its own means and comprehend adequately both earthly and supra human matters. Unlike Kant, but like Descartes, for Zar'a Ya'eqob faith is not superior to reason but can become superior to reason, if it is first examined and passes the test of natural reason¹⁸. For both Descartes and Zar'a Ya'eqob, it is reason that illuminates the dark region of human thought.

For Zar'a Ya'eqob, the light of reason is like a powerful torch light in the hand, and it is based on his own rational inquiry that Zar'a Ya'eqob distinguished between what is of an almighty and what is of an

inferior being, between the essential tenets of natural religion(the pure religion which is designed by God) and the man made additions to prove men's inventions. This light of reason, which is of a significant importance for his investigation, and which forced us to call him a rationalist philosopher helped Zar'a Ya'eqob to come across a basic principle, the principle which illuminates The Goodness of the created nature¹⁹ .It is from this basic principle that he moved towards theodicy, ethics and psychology.²⁰

Conclusion

Zar'a Ya'eqob wanted to transcend the different out looks on God and had the intention to transform religion itself into a purely rational construction. His argument is based on reason which is the source of knowledge. While sharing many materials and formal elements with other Christian thinkers (both Africans and non-Africans), Zar'a Ya'eqob exhibits an independence of thought and an originality of presentation which vindicates him off as very personal and purely rationalist. Based on his rational intuition he arrived at the conclusion that God exists. His God is the God of philosophers not of theologians (which the theologians worship simply on the base of pure faith). According to Zar'a Ya'eqob, every intelligent human being has the inherent power with which to interpret the message of the bible. Everything is subject to scrutiny and the severe test of rationality. Reasonable human beings must subject

their faith to critical self-examination before they believe. According to Zar'a Ya'eqob, faith in God must come after profound reasoning. Zar'a Ya'eqob is a revolutionary philosopher in the sense that, in his philosophy, he departs radically away from Ethiopian traditional thought. He discovered the power of his mind to question tradition, to critically examine the Gospels, and to have faith only in God.²¹ With his inquisitive and reflective mind, Zar'a Ya'eqob inspects and examines every thing that he thought could perish by his relentless searching's which were not appreciated by a resistant and reluctant religious Ethiopian tradition.²²

Hence the characterization of the work of Zar'a Ya'eqob as non-philosophical, and presenting him as a purely religious personality, and the attempt to present Ethiopia as a country devoid of philosophy is a mark of misconception and misunderstanding. Regarding this, Claude summer argued that modern philosophy in the sense of a personal rationalistic critical investigation began in Ethiopia with Zar'a Ya'eqob at the same time in England and France²³. This position, in turn, disproves the view that portrays Africa, in the western eyes, as hopelessly irrational. It also debunks the preconception that Africa has no written history of philosophy. It eradicates the Eurocentric view that marginalized Africa as a dark continent. It vindicates the fact that Africans in general & Ethiopians in particular are reflective, critical, and rational beings.

Notes

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2. Tedors Kiros(ed.), Exploration in African political thought, (Rutledge: New York & London,2001),P.21
3. Calued Sumner ,Classical Ethiopian philosophy (commercial printing press: Addis Ababa ,1985),PP.17-198
4. Ibid., P.224
5. Ibid.
6. Claude Sumner, From Africa and Bark, New political science, vol. 23,No.3 (2001), P.434
7. Richard Pankhurst, Ahmed Zekarias &Tadesse Beyene, National conference on Ethiopian studies: proceedings of the first notional conference of Ethiopian studies, (Addis Ababa, 1990),
8. "Treatise of Zar'a Ya' eqob", 13, quoted by Tedros kiros in The meditation of Zar'a Yaeqob , A 17th century Ethiopian philosopher, a paper presented at the Walter seminar in African studies at Boston University, 1994, P.8
9. Ibid.
10. C. Sumner, Ethiopian philosophy, The Treatise of Zar'a Ya'eqob and Walda Heywat, An Analysis (commercial printing press: Addis Ababa, 1978), PP. 120-121
11. Ibid, P.119
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid, P.120
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., PP.120-121
16. Ibid., P. 127
17. C. Sumner, From Africa and Back, New political science, vol.23, No.3 (2001), P.435
18. Teros Kiros, The Meditation of Zar'a Ya'eqob,A 17th century Ethiopian philosopher,1994,P.4
19. C. Sumner, Classical Ethiopian philosophy, (commercial printing press: Addis Ababa, 1985), P.225.
20. Ibid.
21. Tedros Kiros, The Meditation of Zar'a Ya'eqob, A 17th century Ethiopian philosopher, 1994, P.11
22. Ibid.
23. C. Sumner, Classical Ethiopian philosophy, (commercial printing press: Addis Ababa,1985),P.227

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- 9.** Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (ed), The Age of a German Idealism (Routledge, New fetter Lane, London, 2003).
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