

Hatäta or “Treatise” of Zera Yacob

Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob (1599-1692), also spelled Zära Yaqob.

From “The African Enlightenment” by Dag Herbjørnsrud:

Zera Yacob was born on 28 August 1599 into a rather poor family on a farm outside Axum, the legendary former capital in northern Ethiopia. At school he impressed his teachers, and was sent to a new school to learn rhetoric (siwasiw in Geéz, the local language), poetry and critical thinking (qiné) for four years. Then he went to another school to study the Bible for 10 years, learning the teachings of the Catholics and the Copts, as well as the country’s mainstream Orthodox tradition. (Ethiopia has been Christian since the early 4th century, rivalling Armenia as the world’s oldest Christian nation.)

In the 1620s, a Portuguese Jesuit convinced King Susenyos to convert to Catholicism, which soon became Ethiopia’s official religion. Persecution of free thinkers followed suit, intensifying from 1630. Yacob, who was teaching in the Axum region, had declared that no religion was more right than any other, and his enemies brought charges against him to the king.

Yacob fled at night, taking with him only some gold and the Psalms of David. He headed south to the region of Shewa, where he came upon the Tekezé River. There he found an uninhabited area with a ‘beautiful cave’ at the foot of a valley. Yacob built a fence of stones, and lived in the wilderness to ‘front only the essential facts of life’, as Henry David Thoreau was to describe a similar solitary life a couple of centuries later in Walden (1854).

For two years, until the death of the king in September 1632, Yacob remained in the cave as a hermit, visiting only the nearby market to get food. In the cave, he developed his new, rationalist philosophy. He believed in the supremacy of reason, and that all humans – male and female – are created equal. He argued against slavery, critiqued all established religions and doctrines, and combined these views with a personal belief in a theistic Creator, reasoning that the world’s order makes that the most rational option.

In short: many of the highest ideals of the later European Enlightenment had been conceived and summarised by one man, working in an Ethiopian cave from 1630 to 1632. Yacob’s reason-based philosophy is presented in his main work, *Hatäta* (meaning ‘the enquiry’). The book was written down in 1667 on the insistence of his student, Walda Heywat, who himself wrote a more practically oriented *Hatäta*. Today, 350 years later, it’s hard to find a copy of Yacob’s book. The only translation into English was done in 1976, by the Canadian professor and priest Claude Sumner. He published it as part of a five-volume work on Ethiopian philosophy, with the far-from-commercial Commercial Printing Press in Addis Ababa. The book has been translated into German, and last year into Norwegian, but an English version is still basically unavailable.

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Chapter Two

While I was teaching in my district, many of my friends came to dislike me. During this period there was no real friendship and as a result men became jealous of one another. I surpassed the others in knowledge and in love of one’s neighbor and I was on good terms with all, even with the *Frang* [foreigners; i.e. the Portuguese] and the Copts. And while I was teaching and interpreting the Books, I used to say: “The *Frang* say this and this” or “The Copts say that and that,” and I did not say: “This is good, that is bad,” but I said:

“All these things are good if we ourselves are good.” Hence I was disliked by all; the Copts took me for a *Frang*, the *Frang* for a Copt. They brought a charge against me many times to the king; but God saved me.

At that time, a certain enemy of mine, Walda Yohannes, a priest from Aksum and a friend of the king, went [to bring a charge against me:] since the love of kings could be won by perfidious tongue. This betrayer went to the king and said this about me: “Truly this man misleads the people and tells them we should rise for the sake of our faith, kill the king and expel the *Frang*.” He also said many other similar words against me.

But being aware of all this and frightened by it, I took three measures of gold which I possessed and the Psalms of David, with which I prayed, and fled at night. I did not tell anyone where was going. I reached a place close to the Takkaze River, and the next day, as I felt hungry I went out in fear to beg the farmers for some bread. I ate what they gave me and ran away. I lived in this manner for many days. On my way to Shoa, I found an uninhabited location. There was a beautiful cave at the foot of a deep valley, and I said [to myself:] “I shall live here unnoticed.” I lived there for two years until [King] **Susenyos** died. “At times I would leave [the cave] and go to the market or to the country of the Ahmara as they took me for a hermit who goes about begging and gave me enough to appease my hunger. People however, did not know where I dwelt. Alone in my cave, I felt I was living in heaven. Knowing the boundless badness of men, I disliked contact with them. I built a fence of stone and thorny bush so that wild animals would not endanger my life at night, and I made an exit through which I could escape if ever people searched for me; there I lived peacefully praying with all my heart on the Psalms of David and trusting that God was hearing me.

Chapter Four

Later on I thought, saying to myself: “Is everything is written in the Holy Scriptures true?” Although I thought much [about these things] I understood nothing, so I said to myself: “I shall go and consult scholars and thinkers; they will tell me the truth.”

But afterwards I thought, saying to myself: “What will men tell me other than what is in their heart?” Indeed each one says: “My faith is right, and those who believe in another faith believe in falsehood, and are the enemies of God.” These days the *Frang* tell us: “Our faith is right, yours is false.” We on the other hand tell them: “It is not so; your faith is wrong, ours right.” “If we also ask the Mohammedans and the Jews, they will claim the same thing, and who would be the judge for such a kind of argument? “No single human being [can judge:] for all men are plaintiffs and defendants between themselves. Once I asked a *Frang* scholar many things concerning our faith; he interpreted them all according to his own faith. Afterwards I asked a well-known Ethiopian scholar and he also interpreted all things according to his own faith. If I had asked the Mohammedans and the Jews, they also would have interpreted according to their own faith; then, where could I obtain a judge that tells the truth? As my own faith appears true to me, so does another one find his own faith true; but truth is one. While thinking over this matter, I said: “O my creator, wise among the wise and just among the just, who created me with an intelligence, help me to understand, for men lack wisdom and truthfulness; as David said, no man can be relied upon.”

I thought further and said: “Why do men lie over problems of such great importance, even to the point of destroying themselves?” And they seemed to do so because although they pretend to know all, they know nothing. Convinced they know all, they do not attempt to investigate the truth. “As David said: “Their hearts are curdled like milk.” Their heart is curdled because they assume what they have heard from their predecessors and they do not inquire whether it is true or false.

But I said: “O Lord! who strike me down with such torment, it is fitting that I know your judgement. You chastise me with truth and admonish me with mercy. But never let my head be anointed with the oil of sinners and of masters in lying; make me understand, for you created me with intelligence.” I asked myself: “If I am intelligent, what is it I understand?” And I said: “I understand there is a creator, greater than all

creatures; since from his overabundant greatness, he created things that are so great. He is intelligent who understands all, for he created us as intelligent from the abundance of his intelligence; and we ought to worship him, for he is the master of all things. If we pray to him, he will listen to us; for he is almighty.”

I went on saying in my thought: “God did not create me intelligent without a purpose, that is to look for him and to grasp him and his wisdom in the path he has opened for me and to worship him as long as I live.” And still thinking on the same subject, I said to myself: “Why is it that all men do not adhere to truth, instead of [believing] falsehood?” [The cause] seemed to be the nature of man which is weak and sluggish. Man aspires to know truth and the hidden things of nature, but this endeavor is difficult and can only be attained with great labor and patience, as Solomon said: “With the help of wisdom I have been at pains to study all that is done under heaven; oh, what a weary task God has given mankind to labor at!”

Hence people hastily accept what they have heard from their fathers and shy from any [critical] examination. But God created man to be the master of his own actions, so that he will be what he wills to be, good or bad. If a man chooses to be wicked he can continue in this way until he receives the punishment he deserves for his wickedness. But being carnal, man likes what is of the flesh; whether they are good or bad, he finds ways and means through which he can satisfy his carnal desire. God did not create man to be evil, but to choose what he would like to be, so that he may receive his reward if he is good or his condemnation if he is bad. If a liar, who desires to achieve wealth or honors among men, needs to use foul means to obtain them, he will say he is convinced this falsehood was for him a just thing. To those people who do not want to search, this action seems to be true, and they believe in the liar’s strong faith.

I ask [you,] how many falsehoods do our people believe in? They believe wholeheartedly in astrology and other calculations, in the mumbling of secret words, in omens, in the conjuration of devils, and in all kinds of magical art and in the utterances of soothsayers. They believe in all these because they did not investigate the truth but listened to their predecessors. Why did these predecessors lie unless it was for obtaining wealth and honors? Similarly those who wanted to rule the people said: “We were sent by God to proclaim the truth to you;” and the people believed them. Those who came after them accepted their fathers’ faith without question; rather, as a proof of their faith, they added to it by including stories of signs and omens. Indeed they said: “God did those things;” and so they made God a witness of falsehood and a party to liars.

Chapter Six

There is a further great inquiry, [namely:] all men are equal in the presence of God; and all are intelligent, since they are his creatures; he did not assign one people for life, another for death, one for mercy, another for judgement. Our reason teaches us that this sort of discrimination cannot exist in the sight of God, who is perfect in all his works. But Moses was sent to teach only the Jews, and David himself said: “He never does this for other nations, he never reveals his rulings to them.” Why did God reveal his law to one nation, withhold it from another? At this very time Christians say: “God’s doctrine is only found with us;” similarly with the Jews, the Mohammedans, the Indians and the others. Moreover the Christians do not agree among themselves: the Frang tell us: “God’s doctrine is not with you, but with us;” we hold the same thing, and if we would listen to men, God’s doctrine has reached only a very few people. We cannot even ascertain to which of these few it goes.

Is it not possible for God to entrust his word to men whenever it pleases him? God in his wisdom has not allowed them to agree on what is false, lest it appears to them as the truth. When all people agree on one thing, that thing appears to be true; but it is not possible that all men agree on falsehood, just as by no means do they agree on their faith. I pray [you,] let us think why all men agree that there is a God, creator of all things? Because reason in all men knows that all we see was created, that no creature can be found without a creator and that the existence of a creator is the pure truth. Hence all men agree on this.

When we examine the beliefs taught by men, we do not agree with them, because we find in them falsehood mixed with truth. Men quarrel among themselves; one says: "This is the truth;" another says: "No, that is false." All of them lie when they claim to attribute to the Word of God the word of men. I kept on reflecting and said to myself: "Even if the faith of men does not come from God, it is however necessary for them and produces good effects, since it deters the wicked from doing evil and comforts the good in their patience." To me such a faith is like a wife who gives birth to an illegitimate child, without the knowledge of the husband; the husband rejoices taking the child for his son, and loves the mother; were he to discover that she bore him an illegitimate child, he would be sad and would send her out with her child. Likewise, when I found out that my faith was adulterous or false, I became sad on account of it and of the children that were born from this adultery, namely: hatred, persecution, torture, bondage, death, seeing that these had forced me to take refuge in this cave.

However, to say the truth, the Christian faith as it was founded in the days of the Gospel was not evil, since it invites all men to love one another and to practice mercy towards all. But today my countrymen have set aside the love recommended by the Gospel and turned away towards hatred, violence, the poison of snakes; they have pulled their faith to pieces down to its very foundation; they teach things that are vain; they do things that are evil, so that they are falsely called Christians.