



**Book review of "The Ethics of Zär'a Ya'eqob A reply to the historical and religious violence in the seventeenth century Ethiopia", Roma, 2012, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana [Tesi Gregoriana. Serie Filosofia 30], 455 p." by Dawit Worku Kidane,**  
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**Dawit Worku Kidane, *The Ethics of Zär'a Ya'eqob*.**

***A reply to the historical and religious violence in the seventeenth century Ethiopia,***

Roma, 2012, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana [Tesi Gregoriana. Serie Filosofia 30],  
455 p.

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[p. 232] This book is the publication of a PhD thesis defended in 2012 at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. It purports to address the question of ethics in the *atat* *Zar'a Y'eqob* (HZY), a short philosophical text in Ge'ez attributed to an educated Ethiopian cleric of the 17<sup>th</sup> c.

At the outset, and because it is not done in the present book, I have to present the controversy about this text.<sup>1</sup> The HZY or *Treatise of Zar'a Y'eqob* together with its appendix, the *atat* *Walda eywa* (HWH), a treatise attributed to Zar'a Y'eqob's disciple Walda eywat, were "discovered" by a Catholic missionary, Giusto d'Urbino, around 1852. The only two known manuscripts of the HZY were sent by Giusto d'Urbino to Antoine d'Abbadie (ms BnF Éthiopien Abbadie 234, copied by Giusto d'Urbino himself, and ms BnF Éthiopien Abbadie 215, copied in B t lehem church, the place in G ynt where Giusto d'Urbino settled, by a scribe from whom Giusto also commissioned other manuscript copies). Edited and translated twice at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the HZY and HWH struck the academic audience with their uncommon characteristics: autobiographical, challenging Christian cultural values such as celibacy and fasting, discussing the existence of God (to reaffirm it)... The *atat* enjoyed a time of success until 1920, when C. Conti Rossini developed a number of arguments proving that Giusto d'Urbino was more than the discoverer of the *atat*, he was actually their author! C. Conti Rossini's arguments were accepted by the scientific community and the *atat*, now exposed as a "fake", were thrown out of the field of Ethiopian literature. Nonetheless, after the Second World War, a series of short articles re-introduced the *atat* as genuine Ethiopian texts. After the independence of many African states in the 1960s and the creation of national universities all over the African continent, the need to build an African philosophy was urged. In the mid-1970s, Claude Sumner, a Canadian Jesuit, founded the Department of Philosophy in Addis Ababa University and promoted the *atat* in the new academic field of African philosophy. The *atat* became the cornerstone on which this political, ideological and intellectual movement of renewal was grounded. Thanks to this text, African philosophy could now compete with the European philosophies as a written culture, with

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis and bibliographical references, I refer to my three articles in *Afriques*, 2013, the introduction in collaboration with A. Mbodj-Pouye.

identifiable thinkers and authors. Since then, the *atat* have led two separate existences: in the field of classical Ethiopian studies, mainly in the western world, they are rejected as a forgery and hence, ignored; in the field of African philosophy and for some Ethiopian scholars, the work is the crowning jewel of Ethiopian literature and philosophy. The present reviewed book falls in the second category. The reviewer represents the opposite point of view.

The book is divided into three parts of two chapters each. The first part gives the historical background and details the content of the *atat*. The second deals with the essential notions of “human being” and “God” as found in the *atat*. The third part deals with ethics and morality. Only the Ge'ez text of the HZY (not the HWH) is edited, and this calls for some remarks. Dawit Worku is not [p. 233] working from the manuscripts but establishes his edition on the basis of E. Littmann's edition of 1904, which did not take into account the differences between the two known manuscripts and which considered the manuscript BnF Eth. 215 as the best manuscript, because it was written on parchment and includes both texts, HZY and HWH. Nonetheless, I have demonstrated elsewhere that the ms BnF Eth. 234 was the earlier version of the text, and that its differences from ms. 215 were introduced by the author himself -in my opinion Giusto d'Urbino- and therefore cannot be ignored (Wion, 2013a and b).

The first chapter presents a broad historical narration of the interreligious conflicts since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, of the theological debates since the 15<sup>th</sup> c. and of the political and religious history of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in order to situate the text of the HZY in its alleged context of production. Lengthy presentation of long historical developments are occasions to accumulate mistakes, notably if the sources are secondary (for instance, E.A.W. Budge is the main source for the history of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. while contemporaneous sources such as the *Chronicle of Susenyos* or the Jesuit literature are ignored). Such topics as the dispute over the two Sabbaths or Susenyos' Catholic policy are dealt with at length but their relationship with the HZY is not made clear. This first chapter ends with a synthesis of Zar'a Y 'eqob's biography, already written so many times. The fact that the only information we have about Zar'a Y 'eqob's life comes from his autobiography is never considered in a critical way. Using an autobiography to write a life history should always raise doubts and questions! Is it the debate on the text's authenticity that leads scholars who consider it as an authentic document to lose all sense of critical analysis when dealing with its content ?

In the section called “Authorship reconfirmed” (p. 85 ff.) comes a very partial account of the historiography of the study of the authorship of the text. First, the several arguments of C. Conti Rossini are reduced to the account of *Abba* Takla H ym not (an Ethiopian Lazarist monk, contemporary of Giusto d'Urbino, who reports that he heard about him writing, in collaboration with Ethiopian clerics, the HZY and HWH). And second, the *auctoritas* of C. Sumner is repeatedly acknowledged. The latter is presented as having conducted an enquiry based concretely on documentation, whereas C. Conti Rossini is presented as having just repeated the ill-intentioned accusation of *Abba* Takla H ym not.

An even weaker proof of the “reconfirmed authorship” of Zar'a Y 'eqob in Dawit Worku's argumentation is the dedication of Giusto d'Urbino written in manuscript 234, in which he states that he bought the book; if he bought it, he cannot be its author, and if he said so, then it is *ipso facto* true! Such a clumsy and naive application of sources' criticism leaves the reader speechless... but in fact it was already one of the arguments used by C. da Sessano in 1951<sup>2</sup> and by C. Sumner (1976, p. 82). Later on, page 89, Dawit Worku compares the differences between the circumstances of the death of Zar'a Y 'eqob and of Giusto d'Urbino in order to show that Giusto cannot be the author of the HZY. Why such a strange demonstration ? Here I have to recall (for Dawit Worku does not do it) that one of the arguments developed by C. Conti Rossini is the parallelism between the birthdays of Giusto d'Urbino and Zar'a Y 'eqob as well as their names (Giusto d'Urbino's baptismal name was Giacompo or Giacomo (James), and Zar'a Ya'eqob means “Seed of James”). Comparing their deaths is then a way for the author to discredit the comparison on their birth... but Dawit Worku seems to forget that if Giusto d'Urbino was ever the author of the HZY, he was not dead when he wrote it... and had no foreknowledge of his future death.

Chapter 2 is an “analysis” of the content of text, with much paraphrase and repetition. In this very much derivative work to the studies of Claude Sumner, there appears on pp. 105-07 what seems to be an original idea, that is the “end-centeredness” of Zar'a Y 'eqob's thinking, or its teleological nature. Rather than focusing on this original idea *per se*, I would like to stress that this long book is lacking a systematic historiography of the philosophical analysis done so far on the text. It would have been very useful to analyze how the philosophical readings of the text have evolved since the seminal work of Alemayyehu Moges (1968, unpublished), and then the numerous analyses of C. Sumner (from 1976 up to the 1990s), the renewed reading of Teodros Kiros (2005), and the many MA theses from Addis [p. 234] Ababa University. If the author had displayed a good command of this small field of study, it would have helped to dispel suspicions about how much he relies on Claude Sumner.

The second part opens with an apology for not dealing directly with the topic of ethics, and with the need to examine two fundamental concepts in the *atat* namely human being and God. Chapter 3 is devoted to the “nature of human being”. Although the author asserts that Hebrew, Greek, Syriac and Arabic texts influenced Zar'a Y 'eqob, he cannot demonstrate this, for the lack of intertextuality in the *atat* prevents any comparative study. And that indeed is, to my opinion, one of the strength of the *atat* : it is autonomous. Except for the Psalms and a few Biblical passages, the *atat* do not quote any other texts, giving no easy clue to the intellectual background of its author.

On the other hand, Dawit Worku does compare the *atat* with what is now considered the canonical corpus of Ethiopian philosophical texts, even if all are from foreign origin (*Book of the*

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2 Da Sessano is nowhere to be found in the rather clumsy bibliography, where Carlo Conti Rossini is alphabetized under R (not C), Jean Simon is mentioned as "Jean S." and the numerous publications of C. Sumner are not ordered chronologically, to mention only some of the inconveniences of the references section.

*Wise Philosophers* (*Ma'af Falsefa*), the *Physiologus*, and the *Maxims of Alexander* (*Eskendes*)). This corpus was "created" by C. Sumner in order to represent Ethiopian philosophy, and Teodros Kiros also uses it as such. But the aim of this comparative attempt is unclear: to prove that Zar'a Y 'eqob had read these texts, and hence that he was Ethiopian? That he was a philosopher? That there is an Ethiopian notion of "human nature"? Or a special Ethiopian way to prove that God exists (chap. 4)? One of the challenges of studying the HZY is the very peculiar character of this text, which does not fit into the known Ethiopian written culture. That is why, throughout the book, the author is at pain to figure out what could have been the foreign literary influences on the HZY. He concludes that "it is very probable that the philosopher [Zar'a Y 'eqob] might have read some of those [translated] writings" (p. 80) but without giving any demonstration nor quoting any such writings. Then, on page 84 comes a very doubtful assertion, drawn from Alemayyehu Moges, that many genuine Ethiopian philosophical texts actually did exist but were lost or destroyed, and that the HZY survived while the others disappeared. This statement is of course a useful way to get rid of the peculiarity of this text; but an affirmation, even if strongly and repeatedly asserted, is not a demonstration.

Among other aspects of the concept of "human being", chapter 3 (p. 171-72) examines the notion of "heart" (*lebb*) in the HZY. Dawit Worku embraces the theory of Father Bernard de Geradon (1974) who opposed a "Semitic" view of man, made of three parts (mouth, heart and feet)<sup>3</sup>, to a "western" conception of man, which is dualist. But if he can present the concept of mouth and heart, using the words of the *atat*, the concept of feet is infinitely less amenable to such treatment. As regards the notion of "heart", one is surprised not to see mention of the study of Teodros Kiros, for whom the concept of the heart is the core of Zar'a Y 'eqob's philosophy.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the notion of God. The chapter displays first the various general arguments used in philosophy to prove the existence of God, here with no specific relation to the *atat*. Then comes a section on "the Ethiopian proof of the existence of God", which is entirely drawn from the phraseology of the *atat*. Then the author deals with the proof of God in the HZY. Ten pages later, after having paraphrased all the argumentation of the HZY, the author judges that it is a very naïve one, but that it gets to its point. Then he draws three parallelisms: with the thinking of St Thomas Aquinas; with Descartes (which was already done at length by C. Sumner, then by Teodros Kiros); and with St Augustine. But no conclusions are drawn from these comparative studies.

The third part is built following the same general pattern: definition of a concept usually according to one single author who is considered as the reference authority; Ethiopian views on this notion (taken from *Physiologus*, *Eskendes* and/or *Falsefa*); and presentation of the same concept in the HZY. The concepts of "nature", then of "human act", are dealt with in this way. The topic of "acting well" is indeed fundamental in the HZY. The last chapter is arguably the most interesting, for it

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3 De Geradon's three parts are actually heart, tongue and hand (not foot) as stated by Dawit Worku.

actually deals with the text, analyzing the vocabulary (*lebbun* , *ellin* , *egg er'at*) and approaching the text more concretely even if still in a paraphrastic way.

The conclusion of Dawit Worku's analysis is that there was no impact of Zar'a Y 'eqob's thinking on Ethiopian literature. The first initial stated objective of analyzing the *atat* as a reply to religious violence has been gradually lost sight of, for the text is indeed not an answer to religious violence; rather, as Dawit Worku has pointed out very well, it is a confession as well as an accusation against the violence imposed on the society, by the Catholic rules, and especially on its own clerics. [p. 235]

Manuscrit BnF Éthiopien Abbadie 234, *atat Zar'a Y 'eqob*.

Manuscrit BnF Éthiopien Abbadie 215, *atat Zar'a Y 'eqob and atat Walda eywat*.

Alemayyehu Moges, *atäta Zär'ä Ya'eqob, Ethiopian Philosopher*, PhD dissertation, Addis Ababa University [unpublished].

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