



REVIEW ARTICLE

ETHIOPIAN CONTENTION ON THE ISSUE OF RATIONALITY

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ABSTRACT

One of the typical illustrations of Africans involvement in written philosophy is the treatise written by an philosopher Ethiopian Zera Yacob. This 17th century treatise is taken as a landmark in some scholars' perception of African philosophy in general and Ethiopian philosophy in particular. Zera Yacob is undeniably worth mentioning figure in the history of African Philosophy; however some claims made by some authors about him are misleading. Though there are several mistaken claims about him, this article tries to deal only with the issue of rationality. A number of pieces written about Zera Yacob following Claude Sumner's publication of the English translation of the treatise affirm that Zera Yacob is a rational philosopher. This article is aimed at illustrating how such an assertion misrepresents Zera Yacob's philosophy. In order to pursue this objective, the translation published by Sumner that many scholars depend on for their account about Zera Yacob, is weighed against other translations.

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INTRODUCTION

Zera Yacob is a 17th century Ethiopian philosopher. According to the translation of Aleka Yared Fenta, Zera Yacob descended from a clergy family in Aksum. He was born three years after Yacob -the king- reigned, on 25th of August in 1592 Ethiopian Calendar (E.C), which was around 1599 in Gregorian calendar, from poor farmer family. He was given the name 'Zera Yacob' when he was Christianized. But his name was 'Worke' among the public (ZeraYacob, 2015). When he matured enough for education his father sent him to the Classical Orthodox Church School. After he is done with the Psalms his father sent him again to a more advanced school by his teacher's recommendation so that he would study Church hymn. However, since the study of hymn requires to be gifted in voice he was humiliated among students for not having good voice. After three months he went to another school where kine (poetry) and grammar are studied. This time he appeared outstanding as a result of which he hung about in this school for four years. "God gave me the talent to learn faster than my companions and this compensated for my previous disappointment; I stayed there four years" (Sumner, 1985). Then he left for other school to study holy books interpretation. In this school he studied how local scholars and foreigners interpret holy books for ten years. But he was not pleased by the way interpretation is done in either of the group. He then returned back to Aksum to teach holy books. He says, for he outsmarted his colleagues he was disliked among them.

And they unfairly sued him before the king's jury; hence, compelled to flee to the desert which was by the side of Tekeze River. After he lived there for several days, he travelled to Shoa and lived in a cave for two years until the king dies, begging for food among Amhara districts pretending as though he was a monk. When he was in the cave he felt as if he was living in heaven for he has suffered from living among people's cruelty. This time he meditated on the philosophical points written in the *Hatata*. However, he wrote the *Hatata* a number of years later in 1667. After the death of the King, he came out of the cave and travelled through Amhara districts to Begmedir. Finally he settled at Enfranz where he married a woman and spent the rest of his life time.

Rationality

Many pieces are written about him recently. He has been mentioned by abundant writers as a rationalist (Teshome, 2016; Churnet, 2012, Teodros,1996, Sumner, 1978, Dawit, 2012). Some who wanted him to be necessarily a rationalist, when refuted severely for their claim, tried to soften the term rationalist by adding another term as a prefix. The term added as a prefix was "religious". According to them, he is a religious rationalist. By religious rationalism it is meant that any religious concept is brought to the test of reason and if it survives the test it would be taken as a faith: if failed it would be denied (Sumner, 2004). According to the proponents of ZeraYacob's religious rationality, Zera Yacob has tested the concepts of faith and identified between beliefs which are relevant to take in and those which must be ignored. In view of that, He held faith only on those matters which successfully

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passed the trial of reason. This thing called “religious rationalism” was explained as discursive subjection of faith to a critical examination of reason by some other writers. Teodros Kiros Teodros, (2004) for instance argues that, though Zera Yacob’s discursive subjection of faith to a critical examination of reason is evident in his submission of faith to the measure of reason, he doesn’t deny the role of faith in search for truth. However, reason always proceeds. Faith was said to be held after a careful examination of religious ideas, concepts, and assertions are done. Teodros caught himself trapped in vicious circularity in his argument when he says reason itself is incomplete without God’s guidance. He says in clear terms reason in Zera Yacob’s philosophy is prior to faith. Yet he also says reason is incomplete without God, which means for one to rightly apply reason he needs to have the support of God. How the support of God could be secured if faith is not held in advance is a question he left unanswered. The whole point of religious rationalism revolves around the power of reason to test faithful assertion in order to sort out that which is reasonable to believe in and that which is not reasonable to hold as a content of faith. One should mark the commonly shared conclusion of the advocates of Zera Yacob’s religious rationalism that Zera Yacob held a faith of the kind tested by the power of reason.

Arguments against the claim of Zera Yacob’s rationality

I would argue that Zera Yacob is not a rationalist. It is known that the term “rationalism” etymologically traces from Latin word “ratio” which means reason (Williams, 2006). Reason stands as a principal pillar of philosophical enterprise. Claims that could not be brought to the trial of reason are considered as superficial, and philosophically none sense. Thus, rationalism has been the measure by which ideas of philosophical nature stand distinguished. It has to be noted that a mere involvement of reason do not suffice to assert a certain claim as rational. There has to be a firm conviction about its power to lead up the path to truth. The role of reason in human beings’ daily life is undeniable. People provide different reasons for doing or choosing among various courses of actions. The rationality in philosophy should be distinguished from the state of reasonability in people’s ordinary life. The reasons sought in people’s decision about their choices in their life largely assume the rationality that pervades the assumption of economic theories. Decisions of healthy people are taken to be rational in economics. This assumption of rationality is intended to mean that people tend to make a decision that makes them better off if they are at a normal state of healthy condition. No one unless his mental order is disrupted makes a decision that makes him worse off. Though the degree of peoples’ understanding about the consequences of their actions and decisions may vary, they tend to engage in actions and decisions they considered could make them better off. No matter how logically sound their reason may or may not be; people provide reasons almost for every course of their actions and every spot of their decisions. These sorts of reasonability do not worth philosophical rationality. Rationality, which I take to be philosophical in its kind, is that which is intended to be used as tool to explain the fundamental meanings of life and facts of the world. Zera Yacob’s reasoning on the matters of daily life is by no means special to worth philosophically meaningful rank of rationality. It is in fact true that he has sought reasons for the justification of the values of some social matters. Nevertheless, this should not obscure his irrational claims on the bigger questions. Reasonability of various

degrees on social and ethical matters that do not involve bigger questions is evident in any person’s life though they may not be written as Zera Yacob’s treatise. Hence, do not deserve further discussion in this article.

Zera Yacob’s Metaphysics and Epistemology

Matters that fit so well into the concern of this article and which I believed to worth elaborate discussion are metaphysical and epistemological. I would argue that questions of these natures, which he attempted to discuss, came to his mind as a result of his reading of the words of the Psalms and were addressed accordingly. Unlike many authors’ claim, I see the novelty of neither the questions nor the answers provided. The only thing he did was to meditate on the questions stated on the Psalms. His meditation initially seems rational but the way it ended proves its irrationality. My point would exceedingly be clear if presented with the following illustrations:

Zera Yacob begins his treatise with the following call “*Come and listen, all you who fear God, while I tell you what he has done for me*” (Sumner, 1985). *Anyone who moves forward with curiosity through his treatise to see what rationally justified point he has got to tell us, immediately strikes with the following wide-ranging metaphysical assertion: “God... is the creator of all things, the beginning and the end, the possessor of all, the source of all life and of all wisdom”* (ibid). *Anyone reading this statement with an assumption that Zera Yacob is a rational philosopher must seek rational evidences for these claims. From the statement: firstly, it is apparent that God’s existence is affirmed. It follows that one who reads the treatise with the aforementioned assumption would reasonably anticipate prove for the existence of God. Secondly, the God mentioned is the creator of all things. As a rational philosopher Zera Yacob is not only required to prove rationally God’s existence but also how He is the creator of all things. Thirdly, it is stated that God is the possessor of all. A rational mind asks what it means to be a possessor of all things. How could it be rationally proved that God indeed is the possessor of all? To assume Zera Yacob as a rational philosopher loads him with a burden to offer a rational account of these and other similar claims. His opening statement not only makes those three allegations but also at fourth level God is mentioned by Zera Yacob as the source of all life and all wisdom. A broader rationality calls for the meaning of life and wisdom. However, to require Zera Yacob to give his rational conception of what life and wisdom are: is too demanding. But at least it is fair enough to expect him in the body of his treatise to explain how God is the source of all life and wisdom; yet unfortunately there is none.*

Moreover, Zera Yacob invites us all to rejoice with him for he has succeeded in finding God. He says “I sought God and he answered me” (Sumner, 1985). *This is a very good invitation; if he had any rational elucidation to offer on how he sought God and managed to receive answer from Him. In addition, I wonder if his sermon that followed is a rationally justified one. Right after he said “I sought God and he answered me”, Zera Yacob goes on preaching us: “approach him and he will enlighten you; let not your face be ashamed. Join me in proclaiming the greatness of God and together let us extol his name”* (ibid). *If Zera Yacob won confidence for his sermon from the rational arguments he had in his meditation, what a great point of interest that might be! I strongly demand anyone*

to bear in mind that all these and other similar assertions are directly copied from the Psalms as if they are thoughts of his own.

Zera Yacob writing his experience in life says; once upon a time, when he was a student, he has fallen into a deep gorge but saved by the miracle of God: "I was playing with my friends I fell into a ravine, and I do not know how I was saved except by a miracle from God" (Sumner, 1985). We don't need to wait how he came to know that he was saved by a miracle from God because the answer is already given here plainly that he does not know. For he didn't understand how he was saved, he concluded that he was saved by a miracle from God. It is as clear as noon day that this conclusion is not even to the slightest rational. It is purely irrational. How is this conclusion different from that which he came to criticize later? He criticized people for attributing miracles to God falsely. He held that people say God has done this and that. And those who do not investigate believe them. People for they do not investigate believe in many false things like sorcery and magical practices. We see he had the same faith which he criticized others for holding. As those of his subjects of critique were not able to investigate, he was also unable to investigate how he was saved and thus concluded God saved him by miracle. His own critique rightly applies to himself. As already emphasized Zera Yacob accused people for believing in many false beliefs. He argued that they hold faith on matters which they didn't investigate to be true. But he also doesn't tell us how he investigated through those things to make a conclusion about the falsity of those beliefs. He said all these things are false where believers might in contrary say they are true. He provided no reason for saying these all are false beliefs. How is his claim different from those who believed in those things?

In addition to this, during the time the country was endangered by the deadly plague, some people who were disappointed with the Catholic Bishop, who came to Ethiopia, held a view that they were cursed because of the bishop. It was at his arrival that the King made Catholicism an official religion of the country. For people betrayed their former Orthodox religion as a result of the king's pressure, the affliction which exterminated many people was attributed to God's wrath. Some others who were convenient with the bishop's religion said the plague was an illustration of God's disappointment with King Fasiledes' act of sending the bishop back to his home country reversing the declaration of his father, King Suseniyos. What would one who believed in Zera Yacob's rationality of his philosophy expect him to say about this serious epidemic? Hopefully, no one expects him to say the infliction was a curse upon the people because of their deviation from God order for this by no means could be tested by reason. But that was precisely what he did say. How is this claim different from the layman's?

Going further through the treatise, we see how his argument is trapped by the claims he himself criticized. While denying the witnesses of others how God saved them in their trouble time, Zera Yacob tries to convince us about the miracles God has done in his life. And amazingly he says that is the other way of knowing that God listens and responds to people's prayers. There are others similar stories which he has written about how he appeared righteous in front of God to escape from God's wrath which was inflamed upon others. These stories look as if they presented to support his redundant claims about the

impurity of people. He has said frequently that people are all liars, preserving truth telling only to him. As a result of which he was saved by God's miracle at the time of trouble. The replay of the points of critiques he had on those people, whom he said to have failed to investigate, in his own claims manifests the irrationality of his arguments.

Yet surprisingly enough, Sumner, who argued more strongly than anyone else about the rationality of Zera Yacob (Oruka, 1997), accepts this personal approach as fitting with the concept of rationality. He writes God is provident because He snatched (him) from the claws of death (Sumner, 1985). Zera Yacob fled from his village Aksum to hide in a cave; he dedicated his time to his prayer. He says: "*there I lived peacefully praying with all my heart on the Psalms of David and trusting that God was hearing me*" (Sumner, 1985). He used to pray. He was hopeful that God was hearing him. Later on in his meditation he felt the need to grow his hope to a reliable knowledge. He begun doubting whether God is indeed listening to him or not. This skepticism was not the result of his independent thinking as many authors say but the result of one of the statements from the Psalms he was praying: "Is there anyone in heaven who knows?" (Ps. 73:11, KJ). Before he came to doubt whether God is listening to him or not he was occupied with deep skepticism about the existence of God. It was this metaphysical skepticism which trickled down to an awful doubt about the existence of ears to listen to his prayer. Though the question which seriously made his mind busy was not his own invention, Zera Yacob tried his best to appear a rational philosopher at least in his attempt to reply to the question. He utilized his mind to the utmost level he could; but sadly, failed. He confessed he was not able to come up with a rational answer to the question. But his advocates still failed to confess that he is no more a rational philosopher. He not only admitted that he couldn't find a way through these sorts of metaphysical question by a means of rational thinking but also accepted the other alternative way of approaching the question: That is prayer. He returned to the Psalms and kept on praying. From his statements he wrote on his treatise it is clear that he came to believe that as the question belongs to David, its answer too, belongs to him. He referred into the psalms and found a relief.

Zera Yacob was wise enough to broaden the statement of David "is the inventor of ear unable to hear?" into "This creator who endowed us with the gifts of intelligence and reason, can he himself be without them?" (Ps. 94:9, KJ). As we have already seen the former statement rescued him from terrible skepticism. He convinced himself that for God is the inventor of ear he is able to hear. He that made him hear is able to hear. The extension of this statement was that he that created him intelligent was intelligent. Zera Yacob's meditation on the question "how God knows?" was supposed to come up with a rational retort. This question as already mentioned was part of the statements of his prayer written on the Psalms; hence, he was deeply occupied with it. He has thought much but as usual brought no solution to the question. So, once again he referred to the Psalms for help and said God not only knows how people misuse his name for their own mischief but He also knows the future which is an attainable to the human mind. It is clear that the question "How God knows?" presupposes that God in fact knows. Asking the question "How God knows?" must be backed with an assertion that "God indeed knows". If one is not certain the fact that God is capable of knowledge, the question it has to

ask first wouldn't be "How God knows" but it would be "Does God know?" Zera Yacob has affirmed that God does know before he came to respond to the question how He knows. He was convinced that God knows because his knowledge is evident in us. For he created as knowing he must be the source of knowledge. This was derived from what David has said as: "who created me intelligent". For God created us intelligent he is genuinely intelligent. He created us intelligent out of His abundant intelligence was Zera Yacob's argument which is no different from David's assertion that He who invented the ear is able hear. Likewise Zera Yacob's attempt of the question "How God knows?" exhibits the same approach. He said God knows the future because David in his Psalms says so. "Lord knows the thought of my heart from afar. Indeed you know all that was and all that will be; and all my paths you know beforehand" (Ps. 139:2, KJ). Hence it is said: "You know from afar...God read my thoughts before I was born" (Sumner, 1985). Instead of providing a direct answer to the question "How God knows?" Zera Yacob made a conclusion that God indeed knows all that was and all that will be because it is written in the Psalms "thou understandest my thought afar off" (Ps. 139:2, KJ). Surprisingly, it is this sort of argument that appeared rational among many scholars!

As intelligent being human kind has to be able to comprehend truth. Otherwise what is the use of intelligence? But Zera Yacob encountered contradiction between this conception and reality on the ground. He observed that people are suited to falsehood despite their intelligent creation. How could this be possible? It is reasonable once again to anticipate a rational answer from him if we assume him as a rational philosopher. However, he implements the same approach. As he did refer to one of the holy books to find answers for the aforementioned problems, he again cites the answer for this question in one of the holy books. He says: 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 (Sumner, 1985).

The fact that both the questions and answers which Zera Yacob dwelt upon reveal that he is by no means a rationalist. Let us see in a bit more detail how he fails to be a rationalist from two distinct perspectives.

The existence of God

The first perspective could be seen in his attempt to prove the existence of God. Though according to some writers he has proved the existence of God by reasoning, I would say, philosophically speaking, he affirmed to himself the existence of God not rationally as many writers came to claim but through some other method which has no bearing with rationality. If we take a look at the steps he has gone through to prove the existence of God, we will see that he used to pray before he proved to himself that God does exist. What does it mean to pray if someone is not certain that there is God to whom he has to pray? For a rationalist man, the first thing to do before prayer have to be making sure that God is there to

hear to his prayer. Rationally speaking, Zera Yacob, since the time he has been to school to learn, to the time he came to be a teacher, was not sure whether there was God or not. But it is evident from his statements that he has a custom of praying. He prays where he was not sure to whom he is praying. After the eclipse of many years Zera Yacob was annoyed by the cruelty of people: he was impatient on the patience of God. It is apparent that he believed in God before he came to prove His existence. He not only believed in God but also attributed some traits to God. One character we can obviously see from his treatise is that God is the guardian of men. From his question that "If God is the guardian of men, how is it that their nature is thus deeply corrupted?" (Sumner, 1985), One can easily infer that the God Zera Yacob believed is a guardian of men.

Moreover, he believed in God who knows. The God he believed in is not a simple object matter but it is that who knows. This can be considered as the second attribute of Zera Yacob's God. The first question he raised is totally unrelated with his second question which he raised right away. As already emphasized, it is because these questions are not the result of his inquisitive mind; rather they are questions he faced when he prayed upon the Psalms. Both questions are explicitly stated in the Psalms. He must have felt restless whenever he reads these two questions from the Psalms in his prayer. I guess that is why the way he jumped abruptly from metaphysical to epistemological questions sounds neither sequential nor reasonable. His statement "I thought and said..." is an attempt to plagiarize these questions! He would have been more honest had he said "I remembered from the Psalms and said....." First, he was asking about God's silence on people's cruelty. But the second one was epistemological question; that is How God knows?

It is when skepticism swallowed him up that he sought a way to prove God's existence to himself. He asked the very big metaphysical questions which as of yet has not got philosophically all convincing response: Is there God? This question was born in his mind out of daily encounter of the verse from the Psalm that says "Is there one who knows in heaven?" and skepticism. He then attempted to find answer to the question through reasoning but failed. Some authors are bold enough to assert that he proved the existence of God rationally. But the fact remains that he utterly failed. Evidently, some scholars' argument that Zera Yacob proved the existence of God through reasoning is wrong. He himself confessed that by his inquiry and reasoning he failed to assert anything let alone the existence of God. As he himself wrote, despite how thoroughly he thought he was not able to turn up at comprehension. I guess those who reached at a conclusion that, Zera Yacob is a rationalist who proved the existence of God through reasoning, haven't cross checked the English translation Sumner published. They are misled to a wrong conclusion perhaps because of this version. Though he admits that he was not able to get answer from his reasoning for the fundamental questions he discussed, the English translation Sumner provided skips one very important statement which led him, and others who made their analysis based on this translation, astray. The Amharic translation made by Aleka Yared Fante and Professor Getachew Haile both assure that the English version has made a mistake. My careful translation of the Amharic version into English goes like this:

I thought and said: If God is the guardian of human beings, how their nature messed up as such? How God Knows? Is

there even anyone (God) in heaven who knows? I thought again that: If there is God who knows, how does He keep silent when people defile his sacred name and used his name to do evil things? Though I thought several times, I couldn't recognize (ZeraYacob, 2014).

Nevertheless, the English translation given by Sumner says: I said to myself: "If God is the guardian of men, how is it that their nature is thus deeply corrupted?" and I said: "*How does God know, or is there anyone in heaven who knows? Or if there is one who knows, why does he remain silent on men's depravity while they corrupt his name and act with iniquity in his holy name?*" period (Sumner, 1985).

Though the rest statements are almost equivalent, the last statement omitted resulted in erroneous conclusions among scholars. It has to be noted that it is true that Zera Yacob initiated by Psalms of David has thought over the biggest metaphysical question. But this will not suffice to make him a rationalist. Had he claimed to respond to this question with reasoning, we would have considered him a rationalist. Yet he appeals not to reason, as those who are probably misled by the Sumner's translation say, but to prayer. How a prayer could be rationalized? As soon as he understands that he could not comprehend those questions by himself, he calls for the God who he is not yet sure to exist through the words of David. This illustrates that he was seeking revelation from God. This approach is not in the least rational. This lacks only one basic requirement to be considered as a typical Orthodox Tewahido Church's approach to truth, i.e. faith. To pray without having perfect faith on God is none sense in Orthodox Tewahido Church' thought at which he completed his education. God will not respond to prayers with no faith. One of the prominent 14th century Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church scholars, Aba Giorgis of Gasicha explains this sort of prayer in a very impressive brief analogy.

A person, who prays with skepticism in his faith and indecisiveness in his heart, resembles a dog which is running holding a bone by his mouth. Another dog is following its footsteps, waiting for an opportunity to seize the bone. Straying they reached at sea seashore. The first dog saw its own shadow in the water. It thought as if there is another dog in the water having bone by its mouth. It then left the bone at the seaside and got into the water aspiring for another bone. The second dog took the bone and run away immediately. When the first dog came out of water and look for the bone, there was no bone. It lost both bones. Likewise a person who prays with skepticism in his faith will not get what he is praying for (Aba Giorgis, 2000), (English Translation: Mine).

Zera Yacob, before he has attempted to prove the existence of God, was praying. He is asking help half heartedly in his prayer from the God who he is not yet sure to exist, to reveal to him His hidden wisdom. It is quite strange to argue that this is a rational argument.

The light of the heart

Secondly, his claim from the light of the heart is the other confirmation about the irrationality of his claims. One can clearly see that in most cases when Zera Yacob fails to provide reasonable arguments, he appeals to what is called as "the light of the heart". It is apparent in the treatise that for most of his claims light of the heart is presented as evidence. The

following are some of his claims that attempted to be authenticated by this thing called "light of the heart": He says the assertion from the light of the heart could not be mistaken for it emanates from the true source. How reasonably could this be affirmed? Which definition of rationality could ascertain that this is a claim which could be presented before the light of reason? According to some writers he didn't discuss issues of Christianity like the mystery of Holy Trinity, resurrection, etc. because these things could not be presented before the light of reason. These people seem to assert that whatever issue he discussed is that which could be judged by means of reasoning. This is not only an exaggerated conception of him but a fantasy about him. I wonder how they could take the following assertions as reasonable. Zera Yacob has asserted duality and life after death when he says: "*It is known that after our body is dead our soul keeps living*" and "*we die and return to our creator we will see how God has made everything correctly*" he also holds Christians' faith that *human creation is from earth and people should worship God bowing down to his majesty*. He also didn't hesitate to provide hope to those who may follow his approach. "The souls which have fulfilled the will of the creator will be perpetually satisfied and will not look for other things" (Sumner, 1985). How these things could be rationally affirmed? He has shown no way but said he was told from his heart. *According to him this poor "light of the heart" belongs to everyone. It is given to everyone and if appropriately used will lead to the truth.*

What is appropriate is clearly vague. It would have been much better if he could have shown us how that appropriateness is defined. Otherwise we will be engulfed in a danger of claims that refer to this light of heart. The danger appears more confusing when we remember that he has said truth is one. If truth is one and the light of the heart is the path to this truth then anyone who appeals to this light of heart for his claim should be correct. No one could say this and that claims are not from the light of the heart provided that the claimer claims it to be from the light of his heart. The impossibility to access what is indeed in others heart, leads the light of the heart to be easily corrupted. If someone asserts that a certain claim of him is true because he got it from his light of heart, there is no way for others to verify it. This counter argument can be established more strongly if Zera Yacob's claims are compared with one of the famous Orthodox Saint, Aba Heriyakos. His words could be quoted as "*My heart indites a good deliberation; my heart ponders a worthy concept; my heart exclaims a noble oracle*" (Ps. 45:1, KJ). *This religious father used this verse as an entrance to his anaphora of Saint Virgin Mary. In his literature of the anaphora he praises and tries to investigate how Saint Virgin Mary could conceive the all holding God. He asks how the infinite God is limited in her little womb. He inquires into the greatness of God's Wisdom that has done this. All his assertions that followed are said to emanate from his light of the heart. Nevertheless his conclusions and the conclusions which Zera Yacob has made have no bearing. While Aba Heriyakos believed in God of Christianity firmly Zera Yacob denied it secretly. But both argued from the light of their heart.*

His claim that the light of the heart is never mistaken is proved wrong in his own conclusions. One of those conclusions, which the so called "light of the heart" lead him astray; we take as an illustration is that which says: "all men agree that there is a God" (Sumner, 1985). Zera Yacob failed to foresee the fact that in the time coming by, more people tend to be atheists

than to be believers. Let alone the time that has to come after him, even in the time he has lived in or even more, thousand years before he was born, no doubt that there were people who hold a view that there was no God, creator of the world. Today, more evidently we had billions of atheists. If the light of the heart was that reliable source of knowledge as he declared, why did he fail to comprehend this fact of all time then? It is clear that the so called light of the heart he appealed to is a cave in which he hide himself from pursue of reason. And above all, his confidence on the reliability of his light of heart emanated not from his own critical thinking but from reading of the Psalm which says "My heart is inditing a good matter" (Ps. 45:1, KJ).

The issue of translation

The wrong conception of Zera Yacob among scholars has to be corrected. Understanding his real figure takes only to do away a sense of nationalism and analyze his treatise rationally. The English translation Sumner provided also need to be cross checked (Tecola, 2010) with other translations because there are some wrongly translated statements and words. For instance in the first chapter of the treatise one finds English translation saying: "my schoolmaster used to laugh at me and tease me" (Sumner, 1985). Zera Yacob wrote that he was sent by his father to study hymn (Zema), a field of study in the Classical Orthodox Tewahido Church schools, which requires a natural gift of smooth voice which Zera Yacob was not endowed with. As a result of his sour voice which is completely unsuitable to the field of study he was embarrassed by his fellow students. Sumner's translation however says it was his teacher who mocked on him. This is completely wrong. First of all, Teachers of the Church are well disciplined to do this. It has to be born in mind that they are religious teachers who not only teach academic matters but also faithful characters. They are trained to be calm, humble, honest, generous, and sincere. To mock on one's student who came seeking both knowledge and disciplinary training is unfitting with the Church's thought and history. This translation defames the disciplinary standards of the Church's school.

Secondly, for the term reason is important to affirm the rationality of Zera Yacob's philosophy; it appeared more often than it actually is there in the treatise. Terms like "Heart", "conscience", "intelligence", and "mind", "Think", are translated as "reason". It is ample evident that these terms mean different things let alone in philosophy even in ordinary language. To translate them all interchangeably as "reason" manifests an inadequate concern for the course known as Gesesa in Kine school which is a very important precondition for further study. Unless Gesesa is done so well, no Kine could be invented. Gesesa means the study of verbs in varies grammatical contexts. Those who studied in kine school are very careful about the words they use. To roughly interpret those terms as if they mean the same thing reason is to underestimate the importance of Gesesa in Ethiopian Classical Kine School. It also leads to a wrong conception of the treatise. One of the reasons which I considered to be worthy in leading Sumner and other scholars to argue for the rationality of Zera Yacob's philosophy is this wrongly spread word "reason" in the treatise. In the last paragraph of the first chapter for instance Zera Yacob says: "Oftentimes their interpretations did not agree with my conscience" (English Translation is Mine). Conscience in Amharic is "Hilina". Both Aleka Yared Fenta and Professor Getachew Haile use "Hilina" in their Amharic

translation. By no means has the term "Hilina" equated the English word "reason". However, the translation published by the name Sumner translates it as "reason".

In the third chapter of the English version you will find a statement that says "O my Lord and my creator, who endowed me with reason make me intelligent, reveal to me your hidden wisdom" (Sumner, 1985). Aleka Yared Fenta uses an Amharic word "Libam" whereas Professor Getachew Haile uses another Amharic word (Asteway), but similar in meaning with Aleka Yared's word. Both "Libam" and "Asteway" mean a one who is able to understand. A single English term to perfectly substitute these two Amharic words is "Intelligent". But Sumner's translation uses the term "reason" which wrongly implies Zera Yacob's rationality. This intention is extremely clear in another quotation. This term which was translated as "reason" in one place, was interpreted as "rational" in another place, "who created me as a rational [being]...?" (Sumner, 1985) When one of the aforementioned Amharic terms appears simultaneously with a different meaning in a given statement the term "Asteway" was translated as "intelligence". For instance in the last paragraph of the third chapter one can read: "This creator who endowed us with the gifts of intelligence and reason, can he himself be without them? For he created us as intelligent beings from the abundance of his intelligence and the same one being comprehends all, creates all, is almighty" (Sumner, 1985). The word which was interpreted as "reason" in this particular quotation is found to be "Asabi" in Professor Getachew Haile's translation (Getachew, 2014). But in Aleka Yared Fanta's translation it is something different. It says "Nebabi" this is most likely the exact word found in the original Ge'ez version because the word "Nebabi" is itself Ge'ez which was adopted in Amharic as it is (Yared, 2015). "Nebabi" means that who could speak or talk in language. It has nothing to do with "reason". These and many other such like arbitrary language usages in the English translation of the treatise should be well taken care of if there is a need to understand the real image of Zera Yacob.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that some of the descriptions given about Zera Yacob have gone wrong. A thorough assessment of some writings on him illustrate that there are not only mistaken claims about him but even about the country Ethiopia. These mistaken claims aroused most likely due to some hidden affairs related to him and Ethiopian writers' failure to make a thorough research on other unexposed philosophical resources of the country. As far as Zera Yacob is concerned most Ethiopian writers are reproducing what has already been produced by Claude Sumner. Therefore, I would like to awaken those who say to know only Zera Yacob in Ethiopian critical thought history from their deep slumber to make their own study to see other magnificent Ethiopian thinkers who are utterly incomparable with the plagiarizer, Zera Yacob.

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