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Chapter 7
The Place of Ethiopian Philosophy in the History of Philosophy

Abstract: This chapter situates the *Ḥatäta* of Zär'a Ya'əqob—and Ethiopian philosophy more generally—within the larger context of Eastern Christian philosophy. It identifies several recurring themes and features of philosophy in Eastern Christian literature across linguistic and confessional boundaries. These include the production of translations, especially of originally Greek sources; a penchant for "popular" philosophical material, often encouraging an ascetic way of life; and the deployment of philosophy in the apologetic context of interreligious debate. It concludes by arguing that the rationalism of the *Ḥatäta* is therefore no obstacle to situating it within Ethiopian philosophy.

A pragmatically necessary, though often lamented, task for historians of philosophy is the division of their subject into chronological and cultural parts. Even such familiar designations as "mediaeval philosophy" have given rise to objections or debates about periodisation. In the case just mentioned, some scholars have proposed the idea of a "long middle ages" that might include much of late antiquity and all of the "Renaissance".[1] It is also an open question whether "mediaeval philosophy" is an apt category for thinkers outside of Latin Christendom. Such discussions, salutary though they may be, often seem to proceed on the basis of an unspoken, and it seems to me mistaken, assumption: that there is just one best way to categorise a given author. Brief reflection should show that this assumption is questionable. Consider, say, Christine de Pizan: to classify her as a late mediaeval philosopher, or a Renaissance philosopher, or for that matter, a feminist or Italian-French philosopher, would be to express alternative, illuminating perspectives on her works. This holds true at larger scale, too. To take a very different example, the African-American leftist thinkers active around the time of World War Two may legitimately be placed under the heading of socialist, American, or Africana philosophy.

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[1] A vocal proponent of this view is John Marenbon, as in his two unpublished papers "When was Medieval Philosophy?" (2011) and "Shallow Periodization and the Long Middle Ages" (2018), both available online.

In this paper, I want to apply this point to a still more extensive block within the history of philosophy: Ethiopian philosophy up to the time of Zärʼa Yaʻəqob and Wäldä Ḥəywat. It seems to have a degree of unity, thanks not just to geography but also linguistic, cultural, and religious factors. So, one could simply think of "Ethiopian philosophy" as an autonomous part of the history of philosophy and study it in its own terms. But if we wish to place it within some larger classificatory scheme, where would it go? An obvious approach, and one I have adopted elsewhere together with Chike Jeffers, is to treat Ethiopian philosophy as part of the still larger story of African (or rather Africana) philosophy.[2] I remain convinced that this approach is a valid one. Clearly, an explanation is needed as to why, say, Hubert Harrison (he was one of those African-American socialists) and the *Ḥatäta* ascribed to Zärʼa Yaʻəqob should be studied within a single historiographical enterprise. Such an explanation can be given. It might take its start from the observation that early modern Ethiopia was faced by the incursion of the Portuguese, an early example of the European colonialism that later created the conditions that produced the thought of a man like Harrison.

Here, though, I want to explore an alternative context for understanding Ethiopian philosophy, which I will call "Eastern Christian philosophy". What I mean by this is philosophy that emerged in the numerous cultures in and around the Eastern Roman empire. We might date its start roughly around the fall of the Western empire, and take as early examples the production of philosophical works emanating from the context of the Platonist school of Alexandria. This would include commentators who wrote in Greek, like Philoponus (d. 570s) and Simplicius (d. 560). But we should also think of Sergius of Reshʻayna, whose works brought the Alexandrian project into the Syriac language, and of David the Invincible, who did the same for Armenian at around the same time.[3] One reason to begin from the sixth century is that it marks the split between Eastern Christian philosophy and its Western counterpart. In this period, Boethius (d. 524/525) was doing more or less the same kind of work as Sergius and David but in Latin. Thereafter, Latin "mediaeval philosophy" developed under very different conditions from the traditions in the East. One notable difference was that thinkers of Latin Christendom were only distantly confronted by the political, religious, and intellectual challenge of Islam, whereas thinkers living further East dealt with Muslims more directly, and often lived among them.

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2 Adamson and Jeffers (forthcoming, Chapters 7–9).
3 For early Syriac philosophy, see Brock (1993), Hugonnard-Roche (2004), Watt (2010), Villey (2014), and Arzhanov (2019). For David, see Calzolari and Barnes (2009); for Armenia more generally, see Thomson (1987).

Furthermore, after the time of Boethius, Latin mediaeval thinkers (with occasional exceptions, like John Scotus Eriugena, d. after 870) ceased reacting directly to Greek philosophy, whereas in Eastern Christianity command of Greek remained common. This was most obviously the case in Byzantium, where philosophers in Constantinople like Michael Psellos (d. after 1081) and Anna Komnene (d. ca. 1153) saw themselves as simply carrying on the tradition of ancient thought, and in the same language: Attic Greek. Scholars of Christian populations, often working within a monastic context, undertook the translation of Greek texts into their own language, or the language of their patrons. Thus, we find such texts being rendered into the languages of Eastern Christianity: Syriac, Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, Coptic, and of course Gəʿəz. This phenomenon of translation is the first of several shared features between Ethiopian philosophy and other Eastern Christian traditions, commonalities that I will sketch in what follows. By way of conclusion, I will propose that placing Ethiopian philosophy within the wider context of Eastern Christian philosophy may help us understand Zärʾa Yaʿə-qob's *Ḥatäta.*

1 Translation

In the five volumes by Claude Sumner (1974–1978) that remain fundamental to the study of Ethiopian philosophy, all the texts studied apart from writings ascribed to Zärʾa Yaʿəqob and Wäldä Ḥəywat are translations into Gəʿəz. Sumner covers the *Physiologus*, a symbolic bestiary based on Greek, and two works that were originally Greek but rendered from Arabic versions, *The Life and Maxims of Secundus* and the *Book of the Wise Philosophers.* I will have more to say below about the fact that these three texts may all be considered "popular" philosophical works. For now, let us reflect on the more basic fact that they are, indeed, translations. While it has been taken as a "defect" of Ethiopian literature that it is "for the most part a literature of translations",[4] this very feature allows us to connect Ethiopian philosophy to philosophy in other Eastern Christian cultures. This is especially so given that Sumner's influential collection of texts only barely scratches the surface of the translations made from Greek and Arabic into Ethiopic.[5] While the majority of texts translated in Ethiopia are religious in character, Sumner's selection certainly does not exhaust the works that are of evident philosophical in-

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4 Harden (1926, p. 20).

5 A number of studies on this topic have been produced in recent years by Alessandro Bausi (e.g., Bausi 2014; 2018; 2020).

terest. Consider for instance the short treatise called *On the One Judge* which is included in the recently unearthed "Aksumite collection" of Gəʿəz translations from late antique models.[6] This is a work of philosophical theology, which draws on the Platonist tradition—as when it says that god makes visible things as images of invisible models, or describes the soul as immaterial and intellective in nature—and which stresses the power of human reason to discern the nature of God and His relation to the created world.

As for translations elsewhere in the Eastern Christian world, I have already mentioned the fact that philosophy was received in the Caucasus in late antiquity, thanks to David the Invincible. He wrote commentaries on Aristotle's logic that are extant in both Greek and Armenian. We are told that he also translated Plato, and there are indeed some extant translations of Plato into Armenian though it is disputed whether they come from the time of David or from the eleventh century.[7] Later on and in the same region of the world, the Georgian philosopher Ioane Petritsi got in on the act.[8] His dates are unclear, as he may have lived in the late eleventh or late twelfth century. Especially if the earlier dating is correct, his project could reflect a wave of enthusiasm for Neoplatonism that rippled through Constantinople in the eleventh century, as we can see from the work of Psellos and his student John Italos (d. 1082). That project was to translate and comment upon the *Elements of Theology*, a work by the pagan philosopher Proclus (d. 485), which sets out Platonism as a deductive system on the model of Euclid's *Elements.*

As remarkable as these developments are, they pale in comparison to the efforts devoted to translating Greek philosophy into Syriac and Arabic. It is right to put stress here on the Syriac translations, since these preceded those into Arabic and thus gave the Graeco-Arabic translators an intellectual and philological "head start" in their undertaking.[9] Syriac is after all a Semitic language, like Arabic (and Gəʿəz), so translating from Greek into Syriac could be seen as a significant step towards an Arabic version. In fact we know that some translators produced a Syriac version from Greek (the hard part), with this version then being rendered into Arabic (the easy part). This is a practice we can connect to the circle of Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq (d. 873), a specialist in the translation of Galen whose son, Isḥāq ibn Ḥunayn (d. 911), focused on philosophy, especially Aristotle. They were Christians of Syrian extraction but active in Iraq. The same goes for the translators gathered around the Muslim philosopher al-Kindī (d. after 870), who at the behest of the

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6 Bausi (2021).

7 My thanks to Michael Papazian for information on this. See also Calzolari and Barnes (2009, pp. 18–19).

8 Gigineishvili (2007); Alexidze (2009); and Nutsubidze, Horn, Ostrovsky, and Grigoriĭ (2014).

9 On the translation movement, a good place to begin is Gutas (1998). See also D'Ancona (2005).

elite of ʿAbbāsid society rendered into Arabic works by Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, and others.

The reputation of Christians as experts in philosophy continued into the tenth century, when a group of thinkers known in modern scholarship as the "Baghdad school" dominated the study of Aristotelianism in Arabic.[10] There is a telling remark from the historian al-Masʿūdī, reflecting on what he sees as a stagnation in philosophical culture in the tenth century: "in those days, I do not know of anyone to whom one could have recourse for [philosophical instruction], apart from one Christian in Baghdad, known as Abū Zakariyyāʾ Ibn ʿAdī".[11] Usually referred to by scholars as Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī (d. 974), he was yet another translator (from Syriac, not directly from Greek) and commentator who devoted himself to Aristotle but, as we will see below, also wrote Christian apologetics. The modern-day reader is apt to be perplexed by al-Masʿūdī's judgement, firstly because the tenth century was in fact quite a vibrant time for philosophy and secondly because Ibn ʿAdī's own colleague al-Fārābī (d. 951), a Muslim thinker also associated with the Baghdad school, has gone down in history as one of the great Aristotelian thinkers not just of his own time but of Islamic history as a whole.

Still, the remark goes to show that in wider Muslim society there was a strong association made between Greek philosophy (which even went by the word *falsafa*, obviously derived from Greek) and Christianity. The same story is told by a more hostile engagement with the Baghdad school, more specifically Abū Bishr Mattā (d. 940), the putative founder of that school and the teacher of both Ibn ʿAdī and al-Fārābī. He was humiliated when he got involved in a public dispute with the grammarian al-Sīrāfī (d. 979).[12] It becomes clear in a report of this debate that al-Sīrāfī joined polemic against the study of logic with polemic against Abū Bishr's faith. For example, he mockingly noted that expertise in logic had not stopped Abū Bishr from believing in the contradictory idea that God is both one and three. Arguably, it was only with Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037) that philosophy stopped being seen as a distinctively "Christian" activity, albeit one that Muslims could also pursue. This was entirely reasonable, since so many of the scholars who had been responsible for the initial reception of Greek thought in Arabic, both as translators and commentators, were Christians.

The foregoing should make clear how well the Ethiopian "literature of translations" fits into the broader picture of Eastern Christian philosophy. In all these Eastern cultures, except of course in Byzantium, where translation was not need-

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10 On them, see Endress and Ferrari (2016).

11 Urvoy (2008, p. 63).

12 Margouliath (1905); Endress (1977); and Adamson and Key (2015).

ed, Greek philosophy was being ushered into local languages, often languages that were used also for liturgical purposes and for the writing and reading of theology. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that Patristic literature was also chosen for translation: a good example is the Pseudo-Dionysius, whose writings appeared in both Syriac and Armenian. Monastic culture provided an institutional context for the continued study of Greek language and literature, hence the connection between translators and monasteries. An example would be George of the Arabs at Qenneshrin, who dealt with Aristotelian logic but also wrote scholia on homilies of the Cappadocian church father Gregory Nazianzus.[13] The same was true in Ethiopia: the Gəʿəz version of the *Physiologus* was probably made by a monk.[14] So, the historical association between Christianity and Greek translations, including translations of highly rationalist philosophical texts, was by no means incidental.

2 "Popular" Philosophy and Asceticism

At this stage, you may have the following worry: while the Ethiopian translations fit nicely into the wider picture of Eastern Christianity, does not that same picture show them at a disadvantage? In all these other languages I have mentioned, translations were made of Aristotle's logical writings, while advanced treatises like Aristotle's *Metaphysics* or the *Elements* of Proclus were rendered into Arabic and Georgian and interpreted in these languages. By contrast, the texts studied by Sumner look rather undemanding. They seem to be examples of what is sometimes called "popular" philosophy. In fact such works would, by the standards of most philosophers nowadays, not count as philosophy at all. They offer few if any arguments, and to some extent consist of lists of "wise sayings", the sort of material you might see on an inspirational coffee cup, not on the whiteboard in a philosophy seminar room. This description applies most straightforwardly to the *Book of the Wise Philosophers*, which compounds our disquiet by ascribing the sagacious quotations to famous Greek figures who did not in fact say them.

The Life and Maxims of Secundus meanwhile consists of two parts. First, a narrative about a scholar named Secundus who secretly seduces his own mother to test the thesis that "all women are whores", which drives her to suicide when she discovers what she has done, prompting Secundus to take a vow of silence. He holds to this vow even in the face of death-threats from a king. But he does agree to supply this king with a set of written philosophical definitions ("What

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13 Miller (1993).
14 Sumner (1985, p. 17).

is the universe?", "What is the ocean?", and so on). Here, then, it is the title character who plays the role of the sage dispensing wisdom to a non-specialist audience, represented by the king.

The second part of the text reads like a catechism. Here is an example, just to give a flavour:

> What is the human (*ti anthropos*)? Fleshly mind (*nous*), spirited (*pneumatikon*) vessel, sensing (*aisthetikon*) receptacle, toiling soul (*epiponos psyche*), brief dwelling, image of time (*phantasma khronou*), instrument (*organon*) of bones, searcher after life, fortune's plaything, fleeting good, expense of life, fugitive from life (*phugas biou*), deserter from light, claimed by earth, eternal corpse.[15]

As this example shows, the definitions are clearly based on a long philosophical tradition. Here, for instance, we have technical terms familiar from Greek psychology like *psyche, nous, aisthesis,* and *pneuma,* and we may detect an echo of Empedocles' statement that he was an "exile" or "fugitive" from the gods (*phugas theothen*).[16] The very way the definitions are introduced (*ti* X? or *ti esti* X? meaning "what is X?") also recalls the Platonic Socrates and his search for definitions. Still, the answers are not even close to being a definition by Aristotelian standards, and look more like they may be intended for edifying memorisation by the amateur reader or listener. Something similar might be said for the bestiary in the *Physiologus*, albeit that its intentions are more overtly religious. Indeed this work has been summarised as "an allegorical compilation of pseudo-science in which the descriptions or natures of animals, birds, stones, and fantastic beasts are used to illustrate points of Christian doctrine".[17]

If this sort of thing is not really to your taste, then you are probably not a mediaeval Eastern Christian. While calling such works "popular" may sound condescending, it is accurate at least in the sense that they were indeed widely disseminated and read. The tale of Secundus, for example, was translated from Greek into Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, Latin, Old French, and of course Gəʿəz. The Latin version was then the basis for further translations into Spanish, French, German, and even Icelandic! The *Physiologus* existed in a similar range of languages, and it was also still read in the original Greek in Byzantium.[18] As for the *Book of the Wise Philos-*

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15 My translation from the original Greek, edited in Perry (1964, p. 82). The most recent edition is Heide (2014).

16 Diels and Kranz (1974 [1903], fr. 115, line 7).

17 Mermier (2004, p. 20).

18 For instance, it was a source for the *Chronicle* of Michael Glycas, written around 1170, as mentioned by Treadgold (2013, p. 406). For the multilingual reception, see now Macé and Gippert (2021) as well as Muradyan (2005). The version from Ethiopia was already studied in Hommel (1877).

ophers, Sumner showed that the Gə'əz version is based on a translation by some-one we have already met: the Galen expert and leading light of the Greek-Arabic scientific translation movement, Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq. All of this shows that the choice to render "popular" works into Gə'əz was not distinctive or disappointingly unambitious relative to the other literary traditions discussed above. To the contra-ry, it puts these works squarely within the broader picture of translation move-ments that existed across the diversity of Eastern Christianity in these centuries. (And, to anticipate what I will argue later concerning the *Ḥatäta* of Zär'a Ya'əqob, the second *Ḥatäta* ascribed to Wäldä Ḥəywat fits very nicely with the Eastern Christian penchant for "popular philosophy", given how much of it is given over to aphoristic ethical advice.)

Furthermore, it is not really true to say that these works are philosophically undemanding. While they may not ask the reader to follow complex argumenta-tion, they demand a great deal when it comes to philosophy as a "way of life" by encouraging a regime of strict asceticism. Here, it is worth recalling that the Greek word *philosophia* often referred to a virtuous or abstemious way of living in antiquity throughout the Byzantine era. Thus the *Fountain of Knowledge* of John of Damascus (d. 749) offers a set of definitions of philosophy that includes the Platonic idea of imitating God and also the etymologically-inspired observation that "philosophy" means love of wisdom, but wisdom is God, so that philosophy is love of God.[19] The same attitude was expressed centuries later by Psellos when he equates his mother's ascetic approach to life with her "philosophy".[20]

These attitudes were also found in other language traditions of Eastern Chris-tianity. Stories about heroically ascetic Christians, especially the "desert fathers", were a popular genre disseminated in many languages: Latin, Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, Georgian, Ethiopic, Arabic, Slavonic, and Sogdian.[21] Thus the seventh-centu-ry Syriac author Isaac of Nineveh told his readers to imitate the discipline of the philosophers, referring to one who "had so mastered the will of the body that he did not deviate from his vow of silence, even under threat of the sword".[22] Isaac was, of course, thinking of Secundus. One might argue that such endorsements of rigorous asceticism were not a typical feature of Eastern Christian philosophy in particular but were found in mediaeval culture more generally. And certainly,

19 See §3 of the translation in Chase (1958). Similar lists of definitions appear elsewhere in the Eastern traditions, as in the Armenian author David the Invincible, as noted by Arevšatyan (1981, p. 38). For the Graeco-Arabic tradition, see Hein (1985).

20 See the translation in Kaldellis (2006, §22a).

21 Young, Aures, and Louth (2004, p. 374).

22 Brock (1984, article II, 10). For more on asceticism in the Syrian tradition, see Vööbus (1958) and Griffith (1998). My thanks to Peter Tarras for the references.

there were ascetic tendencies across the full range of Abrahamic confessions. But there were also important differences. The monastic ideal of chastity, for instance, was not typically admired by Muslims. A good testimony of this fact is a short treatise by the Christian Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī defending the practice and value of chastity, evidently against arguments put against him by Muslim opponents, for instance that a widespread adoption of chastity would lead to depopulation.[23] Tellingly, Ibn ʿAdī replied to this that only a small scholarly and spiritual elite would ever adopt this form of asceticism.

The Gəʿəz works discussed by Sumner clearly reflect the same ascetic ethos. The text that bears this out most obviously is the tale of Secundus, whose narrative portion may look to us like simple misogynist sensationalism but was intended as a sincere reflection on the dangers of sexuality and perhaps of deception. The Gəʿəz version is less sensationalist than the original, because it has been expurgated so that Secundus does not actually have intercourse with his mother but only lies next to her for the night. But the general point remains crystal clear. A fear of women is confirmed in the list of definitions offered by the second part of the work: "woman (*gune*)" is defined in terms of desire and worry as well as a viper, a storm, a war, a burden and a "necessary evil (*anangkaion kakon*)".[24] This is repellent material, no matter how much historical perspective we try to take. But it does need to be understood within the monastic culture in which such works were written, copied, and translated. It was natural that in such a culture, asceticism regarding material luxury would also be a leitmotif. This is well illustrated by Secundus' "definitions" of wealth and poverty: wealth too is a burden, and something subject to fortune, whereas poverty is a "much hated good (*misoumenon agathon*) and mother of health", as well as the "discoverer of wisdom".[25]

Underscoring the link between asceticism and philosophy, a figure who appears as a kind of ascetic hero in much "popular philosophy" is Socrates. Gnomological collections in Arabic give him extensive attention, with an early example being al-Kindī's list of the *Sayings of Socrates.* It was, of course, based on material made available through the efforts of his Christian translator colleagues.[26] Thanks in part to a conflation between Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic, one that we find also in the *Book of the Wise Philosophers*, Socrates appears in multiple languages

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23 Griffith (2006 and 2008) and Druart (2008). For the late ancient background for this issue, see Brown (1989) and Hunt (2012).

24 Perry (1964, p. 84).

25 Perry (1964, p. 88).

26 Adamson (2007). For Socrates in Arabic, see Alon (1991, 1995) and Wakelnig (2019). For Arabic wisdom literature more generally, see Gutas (1981).

as a homeless and destitute, yet happy and virtuous, sage.[27] In the latter collection of sayings, we find alongside such various pagan philosophers some anonymous monks who have also learned to take asceticism to heart: be "grateful for a handful of food", they say, "and always ready to die".[28]

Ascetic literature was likewise a fundamental feature of pre-modern Ethiopian literature, which is unsurprising because so much of that literature was produced in a monastic context.[29] Ascetic ideas are often, for example, woven into hagiographies of late mediaeval figures like Täklä Haymanot and Samuʾel of Wäldəba.[30] As in other Christian contexts going back to late antiquity, asceticism often had a political significance: Secundus' initial defiance to the king is exemplary in this regard. For a real-life example of the same phenomenon from Ethiopia, we might think of the Stephanite movement, whose members shunned contact with the outside world.[31] Its founder Ǝsṭifanos (d. 1444) famously refused to prostrate himself before the emperor Zärʾa Yaʿəqob.[32]

Everything we have seen so far—translation, an interest in wisdom literature, and an ascetic ethical stance—comes together in a later work of the Ethiopian tradition: the *Gate of Faith* by Ǝnbaqom.[33] Originally a Muslim and probably from Yemen, Ǝnbaqom came to Ethiopia in 1489 CE and translated several Christian works from Arabic into Gəʿəz.[34] He fully embraces the relentless asceticism of the earlier texts, saying that Christians are distinguished by their abandonment of this world for the sake of prayer and fasting. Drawing in part on quotations ascribed to pagan sages in previous Gəʿəz literature, he quotes Plato, Aristotle, and other Greek figures to confirm Christian doctrine. As I have pointed out elsewhere, there is a remarkable parallel between Ǝnbaqom's Plato and al-Kindī's Socrates:

> The philosopher Plato said: the first cause is the benevolence moved by pity for all things; the second cause is the idea that is creative of all things; and the third cause is the spirit that makes that life which is the life of all things.[35]

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27 On the confusion between Socrates and Diogenes, see Strohmaier (1974).

28 Sumner (1974a, pp. 138 – 139).

29 Cerulli (1959); Taddesse Tamrat (1970); Kaplan (1981; 1984); Bausi (2007b). See also Brooh Asmare's essay (Chapter 8) in this volume.

30 The former is preserved in several versions, on which see Derat (1998). For a translation, see Budge (1906). For the hagiography of Samuʾel of Wäldəba, see Colin (2013).

31 Getatchew Haile (1983).

32 See further Binyam Mekonnen's essay (Chapter 9) in this volume.

33 van Donzel (1969).

34 On Ǝnbaqom, see also Anaïs Wion's essay (Chapter 2) in this volume.

35 van Donzel (1969, p. 249); my translation from the French.

> Socrates used to say: nature is the handmaiden for the soul, soul is the handmaiden for the intellect, and the intellect that of the Creator, because the first thing created by the Creator was the form of the intellect.[36]

Here, we see both texts fathering the Neoplatonic triad of principles onto much earlier Greek thinkers, with Ǝnbaqom gladly taking the opportunity to see "Plato" as having already anticipated the dogma of the Trinity. But none of this constitutes the main purpose of the *Gate of Faith*. It is, rather, a work of interreligious polemic, in which the author draws on his knowledge of Islam to attack his former faith. In this too, Ǝnbaqom is typical of the Eastern Christian philosophical tradition, as we will see next.

3 Interreligious Debate

We should not simply take for granted the interest that Eastern Christian scholars took in philosophy. In fact the pagan intellectual legacy was often held at a distance. John of Damascus, followed by later Byzantine authors, called it the "outside (*exo*)" philosophy, in contrast to the proper wisdom of the true faith. But, if not usually to the same extent as Psellos and Italos in Constantinople, Christians around the East found something to value about the outside philosophers.[37] They accepted that these thinkers had achieved personal virtue, with Socrates being a notable example, as we have seen. Like exegetes in the Latin tradition from Augustine to the Victorines and the scholastics, they also found philosophical tools useful for interpreting the Bible.[38] Logic especially was also seen as an important tool for maintaining consistency and providing proper explanations within theology, which is why Aristotelian logic is surveyed among other philosophical topics in John of Damascus' *Philosophical Chapters*. Even during the so-called "dark ages" of Byzantium, scholars continued to produce at least basic textbooks in Greek on logic,[39] and logic was a mainstay of the Syriac tradition. This helps to explain why one of the Syriac translators, a bishop trained at Qenneshrin named George of the Arabs, said, "let no man find fault with philosophy, but with those who make use of it wrongly!".[40]

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36 Translation from Adamson and Pormann (2012, *Sayings of Socrates* §27). I mention the parallel and provide further discussion of Ǝnbaqom in Adamson (2022, Chapter 4).

37 See, e.g., Brock (1984, article V).

38 For Syrian examples in the context of the *Hexameron*, see Ten Napel (1983) and Wilks (2008).

39 Roueché (1974).

40 Miller (1993, p. 314).

While George was here thinking of the positive use of philosophy to establish morals and doctrine, Christians also frequently "made use" of Hellenic ideas in the context just seen in the case of Ǝnbaqom: apologetics. Again, this is a major genre in literature from Ethiopia, since the Christians there often wrote in the context of defending their faith or attempting to convert those outside that faith. Following the early period of Christianisation, which gave rise to the translation movement mentioned above, there was a long period of rivalry with Islam,[41] and closer to the time of our Zär'a Ya'əqob, with Catholics. Again, hagiographies are often important in this context, not just because the holy figures celebrated represent the best of what this religion had to offer but also because they were often involved in efforts at conversion.

As far as I know, there is no Ethiopian writer who uses Hellenic philosophy as explicitly in the service of apologetics as what we see in an author like Ibn ʿAdī. His aforementioned defence of chastity also falls under this heading, and he also wrote a number of further treatises defending his preferred (Miaphysite) account of the person of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity.[42] On the latter point, he made use of a formula taken from the Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias to say that God is threefold because He is "intellect, intellecting, and intellected (ʿaql, ʿāqil, maʿqūl)". He also composed a counter-refutation against a refutation of the Trinity penned by someone we have met numerous times, al-Kindī. The latter's close collaboration with Christian translators did not stop him from polemicising against their beliefs. Aristotelian logic is fundamental to this exchange, with al-Kindī organising his anti-Trinitarian argument in accordance with the logical predicables, and Ibn ʿAdī responding by suggesting that al-Kindī failed to understand both Aristotle and the Christian dogma he was attacking.[43]

There would be much more to say about the history of interreligious polemic in the Eastern Christian cultures, but for present purposes, it may suffice to observe that this was a natural context to deploy rationalist, and hence philosophical argument. After all, it is no good appealing to interpretations (however contentious) of one's own Scriptural texts when arguing with an interlocutor who does not accept the legitimacy of those texts. Actually, things are not quite that simple. The aforementioned Ǝnbaqom does discuss the Qurʾān, trying for example to show that the mysterious unjoined letters at the start of some chapters indicate the name of Christ. We see something similar in earlier authors, for example the pat-

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41 On Christian–Muslim relations in Ethiopia, see, e. g., Trimingham (1952); Cuoq (1981); Ahmed (2009); and Anaïs Wion in this volume (Chapter 2).

42 See Périer (1920).

43 Adamson (2020). For the background to the debate, see Schöck (2012; 2014).

riarch Timothy in debate with the caliph al-Mahdī. In that clash between two community leaders, both parties had tried to support their own religion by citing the revelatory texts of their opponent.[44] Still, generally speaking it was a good tactic to show that one's opponents were being downright incoherent, thus setting rational proof or at least consistency as the measure of tenable religious doctrine. One could use philosophy at least to defend the cogency of one's own religion, as when Christians used such ideas as the Porphyrian theory of individuation to explain the difference between the Persons of the Trinity.[45]

Here, we return to the point made above, that other Eastern Christians had in common with Ethiopian Christians that they either lived within a majority Muslim population or at least had constant dealings with them.[46] John Meyendorff once wrote that "there was an abyss between the two religions which no amount of polemics, no dialectical argument, no effort at diplomacy, was able to bridge".[47] But this was not going to stop some intellectuals from trying. Occasionally, they even suggested that reason could be used to choose the right religious doctrines from a "neutral" perspective, just as it could be used to settle disputes between people already born into different faiths. Thus, to mention one last time the great translator Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq, he wrote a treatise on what makes people adopt one religion over another. Sidney Griffith has said of this text, "For Ḥunayn philosophy was a realm of discourse in which Jews, Christians and Muslims could all share".[48] While Christian scholars would routinely admit that some aspects of God transcend our understanding, they also thought that rational argument could establish the viability and even the necessity of Christian truth. In short, they accepted the invitation supposedly issued by the Muslim caliph al-Maʾmūn, "let everyone speak who has the wisdom to demonstrate the truth of his religion".[49]

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44 Mingana (1928); Heimgartner (2011).

45 For this example, see Noble and Trieger (2011, p. 381).

46 For examples, see Griffith (1992); Goddard (2000); El Cheikh (2004); Grypeou, Swanson, and Thomas (2006); Keating (2006); Tamcke (2007); and Rassi (2021).

47 Meyendorff (1964, p. 129).

48 In Tamcke (2007, p. 91).

49 Goddard (2000, p. 53).

4 Eastern Christian Philosophy and the *Ḥatäta* of Zärʾa Yaʿəqob

Now, Zärʾa Yaʿəqob does not just fit neatly into the pattern described above. The treatise ascribed to him is neither a translation nor a work of popular philosophy but an intellectually demanding and self-consciously original work that embeds philosophical reflection within an autobiographical narrative. Yet the *Ḥatäta* makes a good deal of sense as a *critical reaction* to the historical context and traditional concerns just surveyed. This is most obviously the case when we consider the author's attitude towards asceticism. His attitude may seem to be one of simple rejection, since the text includes several passages that inveigh against the practice of voluntary chastity (Chapters 9, 12, and 19), passages that indeed echo the sorts of argument that Ibn ʿAdī was concerned to rebut in his defence of chastity. At one point, Zärʾa Yaʿəqob even disparages the "ascetic monastic life" (Chapter 9). Of course, this would already make sense as a backlash against the monastic culture that was, as we have seen, important in religious, scholarly, and philosophical literature across Eastern Christianity and in Ethiopia in particular.

But in fact the text's lesson concerning asceticism is more nuanced than this. While it is forthright in rejecting sexual abstinence, it is also structured around a withdrawal from human society: the retreat from the cave, where Zärʾa Yaʿəqob makes his philosophical breakthrough. The image may bring Plato's *Republic* to mind for philosophical readers, but here the philosopher gains insight by going *into* the cave, not *out of* it. Closer to the mark would be the obvious Islamic precedent: Muḥammad received his first prophetic revelation while meditating in a cave. That story was probably already repurposed in *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, an earlier philosophical narrative by the twelfth century Muslim author Ibn Ṭufayl. Here, the title character's journey of philosophical discovery culminates in a retreat to a cave, where Ḥayy enjoys mystical insights. But for a Christian readership, Zärʾa Yaʿəqob's retreat would probably recall the example of the late ancient "desert fathers", albeit that their escape from society was voluntary, whereas Zärʾa Yaʿəqob's is forced upon him by political circumstance. It may thus be taken as a partial ratification of the age-old Christian ideal of ascetic withdrawal when we read our hero comparing the cave to the "kingdom of heaven" (Chapter 4) and saying "how much more have I understood while living alone in a cave than I understood when I lived with scholars?" (Chapter 15).[50]

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50 Abb215 19v. Translated by Zara Yaqob, Walda Heywat, Lee, Mehari Worku, and Belcher (2023, p. 92).

This same quotation brings us to another striking theme of the work, one that may display another reaction to the long tradition of Eastern Christian thought. This is Zär'a Ya'əqob's insistence on "thinking for himself", using his reason or intelligence (*ləbbuna*) to reach a fuller understanding of God and of morality (especially in Chapter 7, though this is a running theme). This fits rather well with the idea discussed in the previous section of the present paper, whereby rational argument was used to buttress and test religious doctrine. Many an Eastern Christian scholar could have proclaimed, like Zär'a Ya'əqob, to be rejecting scriptural interpretations on the grounds that they are "not in harmony with reason" (Chapter 2). To this, one may object that Zär'a Ya'əqob differs from the earlier Christian authors in two respects. First, he *begins* from reason and uses it to confirm or reject religious ideas, rather than beginning with a received dogma and using reason to defend it. Second, he arrives at a far more radical stance than anyone mentioned so far, by apparently departing from organised religion altogether (Chapter 23). Again, this could be read as a rebuke to the more sectarian tendencies of apologetic writings in Gə'əz.

This aspect of the work is, as far as I know, unparalleled in previous Eastern Christian philosophy. Indeed, it raises the question of whether Zär'a Ya'əqob can be described as "Christian" at all; but I will not wade into the difficult question of how to interpret this aspect of the text. Instead, I want to focus on the first point and deny that Zär'a Ya'əqob is in fact radically different from what had come before in "beginning from reason". This feature of the *Ḥatäta* has sometimes been taken as a basis for comparing its ideas to those of the Enlightenment, and thus for doubting the work's authenticity: for instance, Conti Rossini (who was, not incidentally, an expert on Ethiopian hagiography) suggested that such a work could not have been produced by Ethiopian culture, with its devotion to "blind faith".[51] But in fact plenty of pre-modern thinkers in the Near East and Africa were adamantly opposed to blind faith. There was even an Arabic word for it: *taqlīd*, which may be translated as "uncritical belief". It was often considered an intellectual sin, at least for members of the scholarly class.[52] Since Muslim and Christian theologians accused one another (and philosophers) of engaging in *taqlīd*, it was all the more important to show that one's beliefs were in accordance with reason. The sort of debate mentioned above, between Ibn ʿAdī and al-Kindī, perfectly illustrates this point.

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[51] Conti Rossini (1920, p. 214).
[52] I discuss *taqlīd* at length in Adamson (2022), especially Chapter 1; in Chapter 4 of the book, I briefly suggest its relevance as background for understanding Zär'a Ya'əqob.

In fact, if I had to name one text that is highly reminiscent of the *Ḥatäta*, it would not be a work of the enlightenment or post-enlightenment period. It would not even be a work by a Christian. I have in mind the *Deliverer from Error* of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111).[53] Most famous in Western societies as a critic of the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037), al-Ghazālī is revered to this day as a great theologian and religious teacher of Islam. Which makes it all the more salutary to notice that his *Deliverer from Error* is starkly opposed to blind faith. Like the *Ḥatäta*, it fuses autobiography with philosophical reflection. Al-Ghazālī tells of how, as a young man, he sought to break free of the bonds of *taqlīd.* In order to do so he relied upon his own judgement, for example, by satisfying himself of the genuineness of Muḥammad's prophecy. In a particularly striking parallel with Zär'a Ya'əqob (see Chapters 7–8), al-Ghazālī critically observes that adherents of different religions usually just adopt their family's faith without question, with Jews assuming the doctrines of Judaism, Christians those of Christianity, and so on.

Of course, I do not intend here to suggest that the author of the *Ḥatäta* was influenced by al-Ghazālī. My point is rather that both of them were reacting to the same cultural phenomena I discussed in Section 4. Al-Ghazālī and Zär'a Ya'əqob were faced with cultures of intra-and inter-religious debate.[54] Both thus emphasised the need to avoid blind faith and elected to depend on the god-given light of reasoning, albeit without moving outside a scriptural frame of reference (hence the extensive use of the Psalms in the *Ḥatäta*). So, for all his irreverence and independence of mind, Zär'a Ya'əqob was being neither innovative nor accurate when he boasted towards the end of his treatise (Chapter 23) that he had inquired into things never explored before.

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53 Translated in McCarthy (1980); Arabic edition in Jabre (1959).
54 For al-Ghazālī, the intra-religious debate pitted Sunni Islam against the Ismā'īlīs, whom he attacks in the *Deliverer from Error*; for Zär'a Ya'əqob, the clash is of course between the Ethiopian Church, the "Copts" (Egyptian Church), and the Catholics of Europe.