

Whose Meaning?: A Critical Look at Wax and Gold Tradition as a Unique Ethiopian Hermeneutics.

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Introduction

This essay is an attempt to assess wax and gold tradition as a philosophical foundation to Ethiopian hermeneutic. In the first part, I shall analyze the wax and gold tradition as a poetic and literary tradition. After exploring how this tradition shaped social and political interaction in the second part, the third part will show the implication of the wax and gold tradition to hermeneutics. I shall then make critical assessment of wax and gold tradition in the context of biblical interpretation before closing the essay with concluding remarks.

Wax and Gold Tradition Conceptualized

Donald Levine, an Ethiopianist from University of Chicago, defines wax and gold tradition as a ‘poetic form which is built on two semantic layers’. In other words, the apparent figurative meaning of the words is called *wax* while the hidden and ‘actual’ significance is known as *gold* (Levine 1972, p.5). Messay Kebede elaborates: ‘The prototype being the superposition within a single verb of the apparent meaning in the hidden significance, ambiguity, or a *double-entendre* pervades the whole style’ (Messay 1999, p. 180). Albeit its powerful manifestation in the Ethiopian literary system, it seems to have a metaphysical origin. That is, in the EOC theology and/or philosophy, dualism provides with a framework to understand the (created) reality. It is often believed that there is continuous tension (rather than coherence) between material and spiritual. Christians, it is often taught, ought to take a side with the ‘spiritual’ realm, rather than material realm which, according to this conception, has a close affinity with what is evil. That therefore is the reason why political and ecclesiastical authorities take spiritual ascription. As the result, ‘spiritual’ and pious people and authorities are considered to be untouchables. Hence, there was a little dichotomy, if at all, between political and theological decisions.

Even then, Wax and gold’s affinity with dualism seems to have served unintended purpose – ambiguity surrounding it, at times, seems to have provided a space to criticize people who, otherwise, are hard to reprimand. Consider an example. Aleka Gebre-Hana, a famous Ethiopian priest and *Bale-Qene* (= poet), was once invited by a friend for a dinner. While waiting for food to be served, he apparently was disgusted to see a rat jumping out of the *Mesob* (= a traditional breadbasket) where they put *Enjera* (= an Ethiopian equivalent of pancake) which is usually served with diverse sorts of stews and souses known as *wett*. However, the hosting family did not realize that Alaka G.Hana saw the unexpected (and understandably unpleasant) guest of the dinner party – *ayt* (= a rat). As a priest, Alalaka G. Hana, who had a reputation of unleashing scathing criticisms (often using wax and gold poetic system) even on the authorities, had to say words of blessing after the dinner. He then went on to employ wax and gold approach to his blessings saying:

Belanew tetanew ke enjeraw ke wetu

Egziabeher yestelegne ke mesobu *aytu*

The *hebere-qal* (the double layered word) in this poem is *aytu*. Its wax renders: I have enjoyed your dinner; and I pray that *you may not lack food from your table*. However, the gold (deeper meaning) of the *hebere-qal* has a completely different rendering which is very distant

from blessing as the word *aytu* can also mean 'that rat'. The gold therefore is intended to say: 'I have eaten your food but do not think that I have not seen 'that rat' *jumping out of the mesob*'. Hence, in disguise of blessing, Alaka G. Hana criticized his friend of serving him a hygienically poor food. Literatures, as well, are controlled by indirections, where they are 'suffused with parables and protracted symbolisms'. As the result, conversations are 'full of evasive remarks' (Levine 1988, p.25). Instead of what has been talked about, people would be looking for hidden meanings and motives behind the uttered words. Aesthetically, Levine has described wax and gold tradition as a 'genius of Amhara' – an ethnic group which is responsible for inventing and spreading this particular way of communication. But, Levine goes even further: wax and gold is not only a way of communication, it is indeed a way of life (Levine 1988, 28).

What is the historical background of such a poetic and literary tradition? Formal education, in Ethiopia, was started by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). The educational system had several departments often understood in a hierarchical fashion – the main being school of reading, liturgy, poetry and interpretation. Many of the schools are closely tied to tradition and dogma, and as such, they aim at maintaining (or reproducing), rather than creatively engaging, the existing theological and/or philosophical conceptions. However, *Ye-Qene Bet* (=School of Poetry) is different – it offers student to enhance their individuality in philosophizing and arts of presentation. Even then, it has to respect (at least, at the surface) the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian faith (including tradition and dogma).

Historically, Alexandrian church is the mother-church to the EOC. Philosophically speaking, it is no surprise that Platonism (alongside Traditional Religions (TR)) is the main sources of the wax and gold tradition. This is because the material aspect of reality is often used as a window to reach higher reality – the sacred. That, in the context of literary system, means that the spiritual and hidden meaning has an upper hand over what is laying at the surface – literal meaning.

Sociopolitical Implications

Levine and Messay accord on the fact that *semena worq* (=wax and gold) phenomenon is a highly distinctive contribution of Amhara (ethnic group) to the Ethiopian culture. However, these two scholars, being an American anthropologist and an Ethiopian philosopher, respectively, disagree on social and philosophical significances of the Wax & God tradition.

Levine outlines at least four social purposes of *wax & gold* phenomenon. First, according to Levine, it provides the medium for an exhaustible supply of humor. Second, wax and gold could serve as a means to insult one's fellow in a socially acceptable manner. Third, it can be one of the techniques of defending the sphere of privacy against excessive intrusion. Fourth, it could serve as a media to criticize authority (Levine 1972, p.9). Messay, who portrays that the wax & gold tradition as a 'poetic style that is deemed to be the crowning achievement of erudition in the traditional society', criticizes Levin's work for failing to acknowledge the place wax & gold tradition is supposed to occupy (Messay 1999, p.180). Messay reasons, first, Levine's argument gives more emphases on the pivotal place of authority and individualism than the poetic nature itself. Second, his list of the functions of the wax & gold tradition hardly fulfills people's way of life which, he thinks, is evident in this particular poetic tradition.

There is another scholar who seems to have added some spice to the debate between Levine and Messay: James Bruce – an 18th century Scottish traveler who reportedly spent more than a dozen years in North Africa and Ethiopia. Bruce remarks in his book *Travels to Discover the Source of Nile* (1790) that dissimulation and ambiguity is as natural as breathing among all ranks of people in Ethiopia (Bruce 1967, p.83). Messay therefore points out that

all Levine's argument can accomplish is anything but supporting Bruce's assertion, which Messay thinks is not fairly presented. He gives two reasons. First, Messay goes on to stress, the deep religiosity does not mesh with individualism that Levine's understanding of wax & gold tradition insinuates. This is because, according to Messay, 'the very survival of Ethiopia, this unfailing commitment to Christianity and to a long-standing sociopolitical system, militates against the importance attached by Levine to the 'cult of ambiguity'' (Messay 1999, p.181). Second, Messay argues authority in Ethiopia is never ambiguous or dissimulated. It rather is displayed and affirmed with great vigor and ostentation.

Messay then uses Albert S. Gerard – who describes the Ethiopian poetry as 'a unique kind of wisdom, dark and deep' and its philosophical significance as 'affording exercise in fathoming secrets it opens the mind and thereby enhances the student's ability to approach the divine mysteries' – as a spring board to launch his own social, religious and philosophical validity of the wax & gold tradition. This is because Gerard seems to be taking an initiative of connecting wax & gold method with Aristotelian claim that 'metaphor is the essence of poetry' (Gerard 1971, p.274). Interestingly enough, Messay then elaborates, the outer meaning (wax) does not only veils reality, but it also usurps the place of reality by passing itself off as the truth whereas the dark and deeper sense is dubbed to be propaedeutic to get into the religious truth. Messay then goes on to strengthen the connection between wax and gold tradition and Greek thought when he remarks that it is 'a method of grasping reality or truth in manner of Western thinking' (Messay 1981, p.181). Then using the analogy of Plato's simile of cave, Messay writes:

The simile presents the visible or the physical world as a projected and distorted image of the true world, which remains distinct. Knowledge consists in the ascent of the mind from appearance to reality. [...] The purpose of knowledge is to reinstate the truth by denouncing the usurpation and discovering the veiled, hidden reality. The method of wax and gold is quite reminiscent of this conception of things (Messay 1999, p.182).

Messay does not seem to be very far off target when he rejects Levine's suggestion that wax & gold tradition is all about protecting individual sphere, consolidating authority using ambiguity and dissimulation as a device. Simply, the tradition of wax & gold has more to it than merely promoting individualism, if individualism is the case at all. Nevertheless, Messay's portrayal of the wax & gold tradition as a 'crowning achievement of erudition' does not seem to be beyond contention either. Indeed, this poetic tradition might have originally been intended to serve as a means of erudition – albeit proving such a claim, by itself, could be a mammoth task. On the other hand, the elements that are mentioned by Levine – such as serving as a means of humor, avoiding intrusion, criticism and consolidating authority – are not seem to be completely foreign to wax and god tradition. Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe clear cultural (and probably professional) biases between these two scholars. Namely, Levine, as an American and anthropologist seem to have an intuition for simple objectivity and appetite for dividing aspect of wax and gold tradition as opposed to coherence and unity. On the other hand, Messay, as an Ethiopian and philosopher, seems to have exhibited a desire to see coherent place of wax and gold tradition in the Ethiopian culture and shown perceptible patriotic defensiveness which made him turn a blind eye to the negative legacies of the wax and gold tradition.

Beyond stark divergences in their conception of the wax and gold tradition, these two scholars seem to have one thing in common. Namely, they both seem to fail to question the adequacy of the philosophical drive behind the tradition itself: dualism. The noble status of the gold and destructive role of the wax is indisputably clear in Messay's argument. He has even gone to the extent of describing interpretive task as 'denouncing the usurpation' that is caused by the presence of the wax. Levine states that ambiguity and duplicity are an Ethiopian 'way of life' which is as natural as breathing. However, in addition to the fact that his

suggestion is clearly overstated, he never questions the, otherwise, 'no positive approach to life', to use Messay's words (Messay 1999, p.181).

The wax and gold tradition has its own merits. For instance, firstly, the wax and gold paradigm had a delicate awareness of the influence of religion on the public affairs. And, as such, it has used religion rather effectively in terms of shaping (for better or worse) the trajectory and cultural identity of the nation. There might be good reasons to question the way religion was applied. Nevertheless, the paradigm's intent not to overlook religion as a major social and political catalyst seems to be true to the human nature, of which, religiosity is an important part.

Secondly, it kept a profoundly diverse nation together by forging a national meta-narrative that is religiously tinged. Arguably, Ethiopia's extraordinary resistance to foreign occupation and eventual victory in the battle of Adwa (over the Italian force) was a living testament of the Ethiopian grand story. Moreover, with the exceptions of the political and social uprising that was triggered by political elites and leaders, Ethiopian ethnic groups are well known for a peaceful co-existence.¹ This therefore could be credited as a constructive legacy of the national meta-narrative created by covenantalist conception of wax and gold paradigm.

Third, this tradition has helped the nation to keep its peculiar identity and civilization. This includes, but not limited to, culture, writings, *fidel* (= alphabet) and uncommon number. This seems to be the reason why Ayele Bekerie argues, in his book *Ethiopic, an African Writing System 1997*, that the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) writing system is a gateway to the Ethiopian organization of thought pattern. Not only that, Ayele stresses, 'it may also enable us to probe the scope of human liberty that permits the creation of ways and means to improve and enhance 'beingness' and togetherness'. Hence, Ethiopic writings, according to Ayele, are rich sources of human intellectual activities including social order, history, philosophy and aesthetics (Ayele 1997, p.3). The wax and gold paradigm therefore seems to have capitalized on Ethiopian civilization as a reflection of unconventionality of Ethiopia among the African nations. Moreover, it seems to be quite difficult to understand Ethiopian-ness without understanding wax and gold paradigm.

However, the adverse legacy of the wax and gold paradigm are as glaring, if not more. Philosophically, notwithstanding the aesthetic significance of ambiguity which, at face value, seems to have a space for individual creativity, belief and ingenuity, wax and gold tradition is archaic and fixated. It might seem rather hazy to talk of ambiguity and fixation within the same knowledge system. This apparent paradox seems to steam away as soon as we closely look at the world that wax and gold paradigm created in Ethiopia. Let us bring the descriptions of two scholars to elucidate this apparent contradiction. When Nimrod Raphaeli describes the mindset of the EOC (wax and gold) paradigm, he remarks that it is 'a force currently resistant to change in any significant form' (Raphaeli 1967, p.424). The wax and gold paradigm, according to Raphaeli, is absolutely fixated. Conversely, however, when Teodros Kiros writes about the same society and mindset, he contends that literalism is not something that typifies Ethiopian philosophy. Rather, he writes, 'they (Ethiopians) adapt, modify, add and subtract' (Teodros 2004, p.186).

¹ This however is far from claiming Ethiopian has never experienced ethnic marginalization. However, amid some exhibited ethnic marginalization and exclusion, they seem to avoid a major inter-ethnic clash. This is partially because ethnic groups have a tradition of dealing with inter-ethnic conflicts in cultural and religious manner that helped to avoid sliding into major conflict against one another.

At face value, these two characterizations (from Raphaeli and Teodros) seem to be quite contradictory: Raphaeli talks about a philosophical category that is 'resistant to change' while Teodros talks about a philosophy which is reliant on adaptation and modification. However, a closer look at the tradition itself indicates the presence of such an enigma in the same wax and gold tradition. How come? Ethiopia, according to wax and gold tradition, has a preordained national meta-narrative. Questioning the meta-narrative was not negotiable, simply because it is considered to be sacrosanct. It therefore is fixed. In the mean time, the philosophers of this paradigm seem to have been aware of the fact that times change; and so do cultural norms and perceptions. And yet, any notion of change is often met by suspicion and resistance in this paradigm, precisely because it might create a kind of situation where 'time-honored' traditions become subjects of modern scrutiny.

Ambiguity therefore is used to tame the incoming (foreign) ideas and value systems to legitimize the populous grand story, rather than scrutinizing it. This is precisely because, beliefs, literatures and ideologies are adapted, modified, added and subtracted to fit the philosophical status quo. Interestingly, the wax and gold paradigm does not leave new ideas unaccounted for; it rather seems to be dealing with them in two ways: domestication and excommunication. Domestication, as it were, does not presuppose any significant change from the side of 'domesticator'. Its main intention nevertheless is cutting and tailoring the incoming ideas to fit the already existing conceptions. Therefore, any move of change in the wax and gold paradigm aims at nothing, but avoiding inherent change. If some body, or some entity, for that matter, insists on demanding certain change from the paradigm itself, it faces excommunication, or even extinction.²

The effect of uncritically accepted ambiguity of wax and gold philosophy on society and polity is not hard to detect. Levine's comparison (in his book *Flight from Ambiguity*) between the Ethiopian wax and gold social conception and the American culture is illuminating. The American way of life, Levine remarks, 'affords little room for cultivation of ambiguity'. But why is that so? 'The dominant American temper calls for clear and direct communication', Levine explains. 'The dominant philosophical orientation', Levine continues, 'are given to insist on the univocal definition of terms' (Levine 1988, p.28). In fact, according to Levine, very few American philosophers would question Kaplan's argument when he writes: 'Ambiguity is the common cold of the pathology of the language' (cf. Kooij 1971, p.1).

The Ethiopian wax and gold mentality, in contrast, is described as 'often indirect and secretive' (Levine 1988, p.25). The language, as Chaim Rosen observes, is a 'primary means of both self-defense and also of offense' (cf. Schwarz 2001, p.133). It even goes much deeper than that. Rosen writes:

One must live a long time in midst of Ethiopians, speaking with them [...], in order to begin to appreciate how much calculation is invested in each phrase. That he who desire to do harm may always be polite, that he who wish to deliver an insult may include it in a finely-wrought compliment, is a part of general understanding of human nature (cf. Schwarz 2001, p.133).

This also has a notable social and political implication. In a society where people are dependent on interpersonal and inter-ethnic interaction, transparency and trust is very vital. This is important not only in terms of economic justice (such as fair distribution of land), but also it is essential aspect of exchange of ideas, culture and beliefs. Wax and gold mentality

² The story of the so-called *Stefanosawiyān* (= Stephenites), who tried to reform the EOC and ended up being eliminated by both persecution and martyrdom, is a good example.

does not seem to help this though. In fact, as Levine remarks in his article *An Ethiopian Dilemma: Deep Structures, Wrenching Processes*, the ambiguity of wax and gold served as a source of deep distrust in the society. In other words, despite having a glamorous national meta-narrative which traces its root back in Solomonic bloodline (in ancient Israel), the small narratives beneath the societal pockets seem to have been pushed to the periphery.

Wax and Gold as a Hermeneutical Method

Recent hermeneutical discourse has witnessed a considerable amount of debate on whether or not reading and interpretation are completely different enterprises. The debate becomes even more significant as the place of presupposition in the interpretive endeavor gains a rather positive momentum. However, the EOC curriculum makes a clear demarcation between reading and interpreting, not only in the curricular timetable but also in the approach itself. Examples help. First, reading is given as early as the student joins the school – when the students are seven to twelve years old. The *Metsehaft Bet* (= School of Interpretation) however is undertaken in the same fashion as postgraduate studies in the West. Hence, there is huge time gap between reading and interpretation. This gap includes, five years of School of Song (*zema bet*), three years of School of Liturgical Dancing (*mergad*), five years of School of Poetry (*Qene bet*) and law (*Fitha Negest*) (Teshome 1979, p.11). Second, when it comes to the approach, the ladder of reading is strictly confined to memorizing and reciting. At this stage, therefore, the students are expected to be able to memorize the entire body of the book of Psalms in Ge'ez – liturgical language of the EOC.

Most of the students, according to Teshome Wagaw are proficient in the lower levels such as reading, *zema* (singing) and liturgical dancing. The real challenge however emerges when the students are introduced to *qene* – poetry. This is because, as Teshome remarks, *qene* is considered to be 'the gate way to Ge'ez and hence to the mysteries' (Teshome 1979, p.19). Interestingly enough, starting from the level of *qene*, the enthusiasm of the teachers to reveal their knowledge to their students begins to decline. Besides encouraging the students to reflect on their understanding of reality using poetry as a tool, the teachers test their (students') individual creativity and power of imagination (with regards to getting into the mystery) by allowing them to be engaged in fierce debate with their colleagues. Even after surviving this level, very few achieve a level of mastering interpretation and philosophy (Teshome 1979, p.19).

Two elements, according to Teshome, can be inferred as the main reasons. First, the students in the School of Books/Interpretation are looked up on as "a class apart", to use Teshome's words. They are usually deemed to be wise and the most respected members of the community of scholars with enough maturity to assume leadership. While some of them used to be hired by the wealthy lords to teach in their compounds, others have gone to the extent of being employed by emperors. Hence, beyond possessing reliable knowledge in history, tradition and dogma of the church, there seems to be an implicit urge for shrewdness, diplomacy and ambiguity. Second, the difficulty to achieve this level has to do with the notion of mystery itself. This is because mystery has a pivotal place in the wax and gold worldview, and therefore, it is never perceived as a hurdle to the process of unearthing meaning. Rather, it is cherished as a divine ordination which provides a space for deeper spiritual reflections. It therefore is this captivating combination of pursuit of power (the role of leadership) and the concept of mystery that seems to be serving as a fertile ground for a unique strand of allegorical interpretation in the EOC.

However, Roger W. Cowley, the only scholar (to my knowledge) to write a book on the *Ethiopian Biblical Interpretation* (1989), seems to be making a substantially different claim. In other words, Cowley argues that the EOC interpretive method does not have any underlying 'rules of hermeneutics' (Cowley 1989, p.373). Comparing the EOC interpretive

approach to that of Jewish *middot*³, which apparently has a number of hermeneutical rules, he maintains that the Ethiopian equivalent, *Amdemta*⁴ *Commentary* (*AC*), has no basic rules. Nevertheless, in the same breath, Cowley writes:

The AC does not contain such numbered list of rules, but it does exhibit methodological and formulaic parallels with the Jewish material [...]. It seems in any case, that Jewish and Ethiopian rules are generalizations arising from actual engagement in exegetical debate, rather than expressions of a philosophical interpretive system which has been separately constructed and then applied to the text. I am unconvinced that it is possible to construct a system, the application of which reveals 'the meaning of the text; attempt to do so appear only to raise the spectre (sic) of an infinite hierarchy of criteria of criteria by which the meaning of meaning which has been deduced may be further elucidated and evaluated (Cowley 1989, pp.374-5).

Cowley has more. He claims that the *AC* tradition stands in fundamental continuity with earlier hermeneutical traditions, especially those of the so-called Antiochene School of interpretation (Cowley 1989, p.375) – which used to adhere to literal interpretive tradition in contrast to Alexandrian allegorization.

Let me first try to deduce a couple of salient points from Cowley's argument. First, there seems to be an element of truth in Cowley's suggestion that the wax and gold tradition does not have a separately constructed interpretive system (in a sense that there were no formally documented sets of interpretive rules). Second, it is not hard to understand his concern that hermeneutical philosophy might end up wrestling with endless hierarchy of criteria of criteria before landing to the textual and practical domains. Even so, Cowley's pessimism concerning hermeneutical philosophy seems to be fairly over-driven. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the whole trajectory of Cowley's argument is incongruous for both historical and philosophical reasons. First, historically, Cowley does not seem to pay a due attention to the history of the EOC when he claims that the Ethiopian interpretive philosophy has close affinity with Antiochene School over against the Alexandrian School. For one, the objective historical facts show that the Alexandrian tradition, not the Antiochene, has a long lasting influence on the EOC tradition and teachings. Beyond being the mother-church of the EOC, the Alexandrian church used to provide patriarchs to the EOC until 20th century. Moreover, it is undeniable that EOC has espoused major theological positions – such as on Christology – that are directly imported from the Alexandrian tradition. Hence, in spite of the fact that it might have undergone a considerable amount of indigenization in order that it may fit the Ethiopian context, the influence of Alexandrian tradition in EOC's allegorical interpretive philosophy seems to be incontestable.

Second, it seems to be absurd to think that acquiring interpretive rules always hinges on explicitly constructed systems. For that matter, until recently, the EOC is said to have a very few or no systematically constructed theological treatise at its disposal. This is because liturgy (which is based on careful precision) and the lifestyle of the believers (i.e. prayers, fasting, helping et al) were/are the main theological documentations. It would therefore be interesting to ask if this (the absence of systematically construed theology) would be a good reason to portray the EOC as a church without theology and/or philosophy. These are indeed two prominent media which kept the theology of the EOC for over one and half millenniums with a very little alteration, if any. Hence, it is hard to see any reason why the same can not apply to its hermeneutical philosophy.

³ *Middot* is generally translated as exegetical principles or rules of interpretation

⁴ *Amdemta* is an interpretive method which allows as many spiritual meanings of a given text as possible the only exception being not contradicting dogma and tradition.

Third, his claim that constructed philosophy of interpretation offers nothing to get the meaning of the text not only shows his understanding of the EOC hermeneutics is misleading, but also his entire conception of hermeneutics seems to be suffering a lack of fluidity. This is evident when, after quoting from Paul Ricoeur in order to validate a claim that it is the meaning of the text itself (rather than the authorial intention, original readers, historical situations) that has to be appropriated, Cowley defines hermeneutics as the ‘study of the principles and rules of interpretation and understanding’ (Cowley 1989, p. 373). Fair enough! Then he argues: ‘Jewish and Ethiopian rules are generalizations arising from actual engagement in exegetical debate, rather than expressions of a philosophical interpretive system’ (Cowley 1989, p.374).

For one thing, it is ironic that he is clearly drawn into Ricoeur’s ‘philosophical interpretive system’ to demonstrate his skepticism about the feasibility of philosophical interpretive systems to discover the meaning of the text. For another, he seems to be paying a very little or no attention to the nature of the *Amdemta* tradition itself when he claims that EOC or *AC* does not have any undergirding interpretive philosophy. The etymological origin of the term *Amdemta* is the Amharic word *Aand* – which literally renders ‘number one’. *Andem* means ‘for one’ with obvious expectation of *lelam* which means ‘for another’. Hence, so far as the meaning of the text in question is spiritual and deep enough, *Amdemta* leaves no room for contention even when two parties come with completely different meanings of the text. Hence, hermeneutically, *Amdemta* is an interpretive tradition (or philosophy, for that matter) that opens the way for pluriformity of deeper meaning(s) by bypassing the material or literal meaning. For instance, the story of Isaac is interpreted as follows in *Qeddase Mariam* pp. 233-4:

Isaac is a likeness of this world; the sheep is a likeness of the Lord. Isaac is the likeness of the godhead, the sheep is a likeness of the manhood, the knife is a likeness of the authority of God, and the blade is a likeness of suffering and the death. The thought of Abraham is a likeness of the grave. Isaac is a likeness of the Lord. The fire is a likeness of the Holy Spirit, the wood is a likeness of the cross, and the two servants are likenesses of the two brigands.

Cowley also uses the same example, but, surprisingly enough, only to argue that this is an example of homiletic application rather than allegory proper. Application, as it were, has to do with relating ethical and religious principles (of the Scriptures) to the daily life of the readers. However, neither daily life situations nor ethical or theological principles are implicated in the above interpretation. Certainly, the above piece is not homiletically application. It rather is thoroughly allegorized exegesis. Hence, Cowley’s blatant denial of the presence of allegory in the *AC* tradition seems to be clearly short of hiding the presence of allegory in the EOC interpretive philosophy. This is because it is utterly inconceivable to assume that the story of Isaac as elucidated in the *AC* of *Qeddase Mariam* is a product of literal interpretation.

Another intriguing question is whether the *Amdemta* interpretive method implies that the EOC follows a full-blown pluriform fashion of interpretation as in the so-called reader-response method? Teshome’s argument rightly demonstrates that EOC has its own hermeneutical matrix through which they validate the meaning – tradition, authority and mystery. He even suggests that the Ethiopian literatures are criticized for being too much stereotyped and allowing very little scope for individuality. This is because any significant deviation is circumscribed by the force of tradition. He then points out that they rather have ‘served to buttress conformity by rekindling identification with the sacred symbols of the society. Ethiopian religious literature does not invite introspection; it is to be venerated and solemnly rehearsed’ (Teshome, 1979, p.17). Nevertheless, he seems to be certainly on target when he claims that the combination of the place of power and the notion of mystery play a very crucial role in the wax and gold interpretive philosophy.

Contentious Meaning

Interpretive philosophies, as it were, have origins and agendas. Likewise, the hermeneutic of wax and gold is a product of an ideology – the ideology that was prevalent in Ethiopia for more than a millennium and half. As an ideological tool it had agendas: legitimizing the divine origin of the authorities, portraying the church as an inseparable partner in power-share, unifying the nation under one king and one church, restricting the share of power to certain ethnicities (in the name of Solomonic Dynasty) and creating strictly hierarchical society. Therefore wax and gold hermeneutic had (and still has) its own Bible with its own peculiar meaning. Interestingly, the notion of covenant⁵ (as something that is perceived to be a crossroad to power and mystery) is used as a means of adjudication in the interpretive process. Then the term (covenant) becomes a political and ecclesiastical catchword. The use of the notion of covenant was a part of the intention to connect Ethiopia to the covenant of ancient Israel, and as a result, Ethiopian Christianity to ancient Judaism. Adrian Hastings' observation seems to be valid when he characterizes covenantal trajectory as something that [...] 'provides at one and the same time the justification for religious identity of Ethiopia as Israel, with all its Judaic practices, for the supreme authority of its kings as heirs of Solomon, and for the sacredness of wooden *tabot* (the Ark of covenant), central to the Ethiopian liturgy, whose original was in Axum sacramental replicas in every church throughout the country' (Hastings 1994, p.21). But, instead of being a social and religious platform for unity and coherence, the covenant became a breeding ground to domestic disunity and international isolation. Besides, Ethiopia, as a nation that was effectively resistant to foreign occupation, should have led Africa by example with regards to democratization. Instead, being heavily lenient on 'self-created bible' seems to have made the nation isolated from joining the global chorus of democratization and modernization.

Ironically, however, wax and gold tradition, also serves as unintended source of help, especially, for the ordinary Ethiopians. Firstly, it keeps people enchanted with the spiritual realm – an alternative source to listen. And, as the result, even when things seem to be unbearably hard, it provided people with a brighter understanding of their situation, and therefore, sense of optimism. This, on the one hand, helps ordinary people to break away from ideological mantra of the time, in favor of what is thought to be even more spiritual. On the other, it created an ethnic and religious tolerance amid living in a profoundly plural society. Second, in the context where individual amounts almost to nothing outside ethnic warmth, it creates a space for individuality in biblical interpretation as well as other areas of human endeavor. Third, as I remarked above, the same tradition has been used to deconstruct, to employ a postmodernist term, especially, the ideology behind the people who are at the helm of power. In fact, it was the only means to which the people used to turn to as a way of registering their discontent with political and ecclesiastical authorities – though in veiled and dissimulated manner. This is because the ambiguity provides them with a space to sing about justice, and preach about equality when direct demand of justice by itself proves to be a hazardous task. Even then, the 'hermeneutical space' created by wax and gold culture is profoundly based on deep sense of negation, contempt and suspicion towards material aspect of reality and powers (both political and ecclesiastic). That also seems to be adversely affecting the society.

⁵ Covenant has a special affinity to the Ethiopian society for several reasons. First, the nation is believed to have direct (blood) relationship with Israel of which the narrative of the Queen of Sheba (in the Old Testament) is the basis. Second, the nation is perceived to be, still, hosting the Ark of the Covenant and Christianity, side by side. These facts are thought to help Ethiopia to edge even Israel in contention of being a nation of covenant. Third, a dramatic eschatological blessing is a part of constant prayers even in the Protestant Churches in Ethiopia. This expectation is based on the promise of Psalms 68 – the promise that 'Ethiopia will stretch her hands unto God'.

Now let us revisit the question that I asked in the title of this essay. There are two parties using one hermeneutical tool (i.e. wax and gold) for different reasons – one to demand unconditional national and ecclesiastical unity, and the other, to realize her freedom. The same means of adjudication (i.e. covenant) is used by both parties: one to create a hierarchic society and the other to promote equality. Whose meaning is a legitimate one? I would answer this question, ‘None and Both’. There are some grains of truth in both persuasions, but none are convincingly complete. For instance, the former appeals to unity (both ecclesiastic and national); and yet, it leaves no room for individual, religious and ethnic freedom. Patriotism, ideology, dogma and tradition, in the name of covenant, trumped the value of individuals and individuality. The later rightfully demands individuality, equality and freedom. However, all the demands are not motivated by love; but it is marred by painful past, suspicion and contempt towards the others. A hermeneutic that is based on negation can be an effective tool to deconstruct the ‘power’. It nevertheless lacks a positive ground, tool and rhythm for reconstruction.

Biblical hermeneutics, I contend, should seriously account to human experiences such as repression, diverse fashions injustices, inequality, etc. Formulating a hermeneutic that is unconditioned by human experiences, as a way of repressing others in the name of dogma, unity and even scientific neutrality, is objectionable. However, I also think elevating human experiences as the ultimate horizons in the biblical hermeneutics is equally objectionable. Rather, biblical hermeneutics should take biblical worldview as the ultimate horizon. This horizon takes theology of creation (as the ideal intention of human relationship with God, fellow human persons and reality surrounding them) as a launching pad of hermeneutics. That means, it assumes that there is One Loving Father of one organic human race, whose love transcends race, gender and social status. Then I could be justified to claim, under One Father, we celebrate our differences, but not fragmentation, we cherish unity, but not patronization. One might surmise, ‘That is too idealistic.’ But, a biblical hermeneutics which takes biblical worldview as ultimate horizon recognizes the Fall and its sweeping consequences. Even then, it has one promise: redemption. The work of redemption, with its far-reaching spiritual and social consequence, takes love and justice as unshakable foundations. This therefore helps filter the counterproductive elements in human experiences; and further, it works to enhance forgiveness, as a substitute for bearing grudge and seeking revenge, it promotes equality and freedom, in place of suppression and patronization.

Concluding Remarks

The question, ‘Is your Bible my Bible?’, is (one of the) leading question of this seminar. It is an intriguing question, albeit a tricky construance. However, to my test, there seems to be too much interest to listen to differences, divergences and deviations from the traditional way of interpreting the Bible. (But the opposite also could be true.). But, if, in fact, the interest to promote divisions turns out to be true, the (post)modern cultures seem to have already provided us with probably more than enough sentiments to keep us divided – nationality, race, skin color, ethnicity, languages, cultures, genders, etc. After all, dividing might not take lots of effort, discipline and articulation. At times, it just seems to take following unarticulated intuitions and unsubstantiated cultural and religious impulses. Totalitarian unity, on the other hand seems to be no better. It sometimes takes nothing more than sheer force, violence and inflexible determination to reach one goal at the expense of everything and everybody.

However, no amicable biblical interpretation is one thing. It is a dogma – it has an anchorage. It is a science – it requires human imagination and hard work. It is an art – it takes sifting through delicate lines to keep the body of Christ united without destroying the beauty in diversity. It is progress (and development) – it accounts to changing political, economic and cultural situations. It is then, and only then, that we can overcome ideologies

which reduce richness of biblical teaching to single, social and political principle; and in the mean time, we can triumph over hatred, contempt, and as a result, social fragmentation.

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