

Ethiopian Humanists of the 1600s.

The highland areas of Ethiopia have a continuous cultural history going back at least three thousand years, although reliable written records only exist since the region adopted Christianity about 330 AD, about the same time as Christianity was adopted by the Roman Empire. Various records from the centuries before 330 AD make clear that Ethiopia, called Aksum at the time, had a series of states speaking a Semitic language, similar to Hebrew and Arabic, and interacting with ancient Egypt and other regional powers.

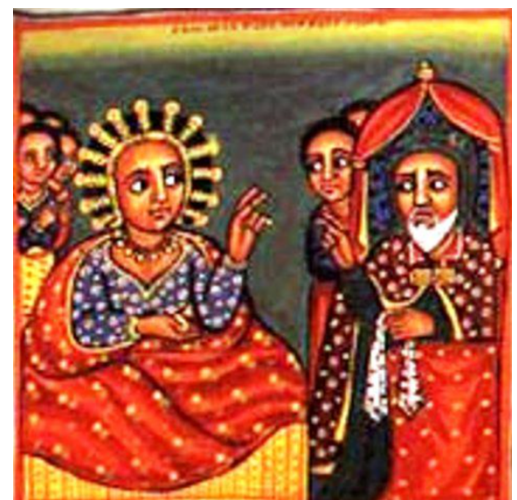
The most famous event of early Ethiopian history was the reported visit of the Ethiopian ruler known to the Jews as the “Queen of Sheba” to the Jewish king Solomon around 950 BC. In the Ethiopian version the queen, whose name was Makada, had a child with Solomon named Menelik who became the ancestor of modern Ethiopians, or at least the Ethiopian ruling class. Menelik even stole the Ark of the Covenant from his dad! In traditional belief, the Ark is still hidden in Ethiopia today, and, no, they won’t show it to you.



Ethiopia/Aksum trade before the Islamic expansion

Whatever the truth of the old stories, Ethiopia was closely connected to the eastern Mediterranean for at least a thousand years before the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 639 AD. The Muslim expansion built a barrier between Christian Ethiopia and the rest of the Christian world which lasted for almost 1000 years.

Despite its isolation, Ethiopia remained Christian, fighting off numerous Muslim attacks over the centuries, and developing its own tradition of religious scholarship, written in the traditional language of Ge’ez. In the 1600s, two scholars in this tradition, Zara Yakob and his student Walda Heywat, developed a highly rationalist philosophy. It never became a mass religion. We only know about it from two books both called *Hatata* (Inquiry) written in Ge’ez around 1668 and 1693.



**Makada and Solomon
Modern folk art**

We know almost nothing about these authors other than the content of their surviving books.

Hatata Walda Heywat (~1693) - Chapter 5: My Inquiry Regarding Religious Faith

Concerning what remains – human teachings and books – we should not believe them hastily, without inquiry. Rather we should [only] accept these teachings intentionally, after extensive investigation, as long as we see them as being in harmony with our intelligence. That is to say, our intelligence will be the measure of whether we should believe in them, and what our intelligence affirms as untrue we should not believe. Neither should we hastily say, ‘It’s a lie’ – for we don’t know whether it’s true or false. Instead, because of this [ignorance] let’s say, ‘We won’t believe it because we don’t understand it’

If people say to me, ‘Why don’t you believe everything that is written in books, as those before us did?’

I would reply to them, ‘Because books are written by human beings who are capable of writing lies.’

If people further say to me, ‘Why don’t you believe?’

I would reply to them, ‘Tell me why you believe? After all, no reason is needed for not believing, but it is needed for believing. What reason do you have to believe in everything that is written? You have no reason except this alone that you have heard from human mouths that what’s written is true. But don’t you understand? [Just] because they tell you, “What’s written is true”, doesn’t mean they [actually] know whether it’s true or false. Rather, just as you heard this from them, they too heard it from those before them. In the same way, all those ancestors believed in human words, even though they might have been lies, and not in God’s words. [And regarding that speech.] God does not speak to you except through the voice of your intelligence’.

If people say to me, ‘It’s not like that! Rather God has spoken to human beings and revealed his truth to them!’

I would reply to them, ‘How do you know that God has spoken with human beings and revealed his truth to them? Isn’t it rather that you heard it from human mouths, who testified that they heard it from [other] human mouths? Must you always believe human words, even though they could be lies? Whether it’s true or false, you believe [it] unthinkingly’.

So, inquire! Don’t say in your hearts, ‘We are steadfast in our religion, what cannot be false!’ Pay attention! For human beings lie about religious matters, because religions are utterly inconsistent. Human beings don’t give reasonable explanations about what is right for us to believe. So they put an inquiring heart into a total quandary.

Look, one tells us, ‘Believe in the religion of Alexandria!’

Another tells us, ‘Believe in the religion of Rome!’

And a third tells us, ‘Believe in the religion of Moses!’

And a fourth tells us, “Believe in Muhammed’s religion, Islam!”

Further, Indians have a different religion!

So do Himyarites and Sabeans, and many [other] peoples.

They all say, ‘Our religion is from God!’

But how can God, who is righteous in all his actions, reveal one religion to one group, and another to another group? And how can all these different religions be from God? Which of them is true, requiring us to believe in it?

Tell me if you know, because I don’t know! I will only believe what God has revealed to me [if it comes] through the light of my intelligence. That way I won’t be misled in my religious faith.

If someone should say to me, ‘Unless you believe, God’s judgement will fall on you!’

I will say to them, ‘God can’t order me to believe in lies. And he can’t judge me for a religious faith that I have rejected because it doesn’t seem true to me. For he gave me the light of my intelligence to distinguish good from evil, and truth from lies. This intelligent light reveals absolutely nothing as to whether all human religions are true, but it does clarify for me that all religions arise from human error and not from God. Thus, for this reason I have rejected them [all]!’

The other books make similar arguments and explicitly reject large portions of the Bible which fail the authors’ test of making sense. For example all rituals and arbitrary rules regarding food and sex are rejected. Only ideas such as “thou shalt not kill” which exist in similar form in many traditions and make sense are considered valid.

While the *Hatata* manuscripts had been collected in Ethiopia by Catholic missionaries around 1850 and stored away in the French National Library, it appears that no one in Europe actually read them until 1903. They were immediately controversial. Imperialists, especially Italians who wanted to justify Italian conquest of Ethiopia, refused to believe that Africans could be so logical.

At first, it does seem unusual that ideas Europeans might associate with the Enlightenment or perhaps Confucius would appear independently in Africa. For Zara Yakob and Walda Heywat the explanation is simple. If the same ideas should occur independently to Voltaire, Confucius, and Ethiopians of the 1600s, that is powerful evidence that the ideas spring directly from human reason, and are therefore, unlike the Bible, from God.