

# Whose Meaning? The Wax and Gold Tradition as a Philosophical Foundation for an Ethiopian Hermeneutic

Mohammed Girma

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**Abstract** This essay is an attempt to assess critically the wax and gold tradition as a philosophical foundation of Ethiopian hermeneutics. In the first part, I shall analyze the wax and gold tradition as a poetic and literary tradition. After exploring how this tradition has shaped social and political interaction in the second part, in the third part I will show the implications of the wax and gold tradition for hermeneutics. I shall then make a critical assessment of the wax and gold tradition as an interpretive philosophy before closing the essay with concluding remarks.

**Keywords** Ethiopia · Wax and gold · Hermeneutics

## Wax and Gold Tradition Conceptualized

The wax and gold tradition, what is it? Literally, wax is a natural secretion of gold that is produced in the process of purification. It is an element that covers the gold; in order to get the purest gold, it has to undergo the process of melting in fire. It is this metaphor, therefore, that is applied to a literary system that is given as a compulsory course in secondary and high schools in Ethiopia: *Sen-ena-Werq* (= wax and gold). As a literary system, the wax and gold method plays with double-layered meaning. While the apparent meaning, on the surface, is known as *Sem* (= wax), the underlying true, and, at times, spiritual meaning, is known as *Werq* (= gold).

Donald Levine, an Ethiopianist from University of Chicago, defines the 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 1965, p. 5). Messay Kebede elaborates: ‘The prototype being the superposition within a single verb of the apparent meaning on the hidden significance, ambiguity, or a *double-entendre*

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M. Girma (✉)

International Institute for Development and Ethics, Billitonstraat 12, 2585 TZ Den Haag,  
The Netherlands  
e-mail: telosgm@gmail.com

pervades the whole style' (Messay 1999, p. 180). Despite its powerful manifestation in the Ethiopian literary system, the wax and gold trope seems to have a metaphysical origin. That is, in the theology and/or philosophy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), dualism provides a framework to understand (created) reality. It is often believed that there is continuous tension (rather than coherence) between the material and the spiritual. Christians, it is often taught, ought to take sides with the 'spiritual' realm rather than with the material realm, which, according to this conception, has a close affinity with what is evil. This therefore is the reason why political and ecclesiastical authorities are believed to have their roots in the spiritual realm rather than in a human electoral process. As a result, both political and ecclesiastical leaders, and, at times, spiritual and pious people are considered to be too holy to criticize. That is, because of the supposed spiritual nature of their authority, their grip on power does not hinge on human approval or disapproval. As a consequence, there was little dichotomy, if at all, between political and theological decisions.

Even then, wax and gold's affinity with dualism seems to have served an unintended purpose—the ambiguity surrounding it, at times, seems to have provided a space in which 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 the food to be served, he, as the story goes, 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 sauces known as *wett*. However, the hosting family did not realize that Aleka G. Hana had seen the unexpected (and understandably unpleasant) guest at the dinner party – *ayt* (= a rat). As a priest, Aleka G. Hana, who had a reputation for unleashing scathing criticisms (often using the wax and gold poetic system) even on the authorities, had to say words of blessing after the dinner. He then went on to employ the 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 for 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 the disguise of a blessing, Alaka G. Hana criticized his friend for serving him unhygienic food. Literature, as well, is controlled by indirections, where they are 'suffused with parables and protracted symbolisms.' As a 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 that is responsible for inventing and spreading this particular kind 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 EOC. The educational system had several departments often understood in a hierarchical fashion—the main ones being the school of reading, of liturgy, of poetry and of 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, the *Ye-Qene Bet* (= School of Poetry) is different—it offers students the chance to enhance their individuality in philosophizing and arts of presentation. Even then, the student has to respect (at least on the surface) the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian faith (including its traditions and dogma).

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

### Sociopolitical Implications

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

Levine outlines at least four social purposes of the wax and gold phenomenon. First, according to Levine, it provides the medium for an inexhaustible supply of humor. Second, wax and gold could serve as a means to insult someone in a socially acceptable manner. Third, it can be a technique for defending the sphere of privacy against excessive intrusion. Fourth, it could serve as a medium to criticize authority (Levine 1965, p. 9). Messay, who portrays the wax and gold tradition as a ‘poetic style that is deemed to be the crowning achievement of erudition in the traditional society,’ criticizes Levine’s work for failing to acknowledge the place that the wax and gold tradition is supposed to occupy (Messay 1999, p. 180). Messay reasons that, first, Levine’s argument places more emphasis on the pivotal place of authority and individualism than the poetic nature itself. Second, Levine’s account of the role of the wax and gold tradition neither fits the Ethiopian way of life nor the nature of the literary tradition very well.

There is another scholar who seems, though the dates do not mesh, to have added some spice to the debate between Levine and Messay: James Bruce—an eighteenth 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 are 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 legitimizing Bruce’s unfair representation of the Ethiopians. He gives two reasons. First, Messay stresses that deep religiosity does not sit well with the individualism that Levine’s understanding of the wax and

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 that 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 wax and gold tradition 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 springboard to launch his own social, religious and philosophical understanding of the wax and gold tradition. This is because Gerard seems to be taking the initiative of connecting the wax and gold method with the Aristotelian claim that ‘metaphor is the essence of poetry’ (Gerard 1971, p. 274). Interestingly enough, Messay then elaborates the idea that the outer meaning (wax) not only veils reality, but also usurps the place of reality by passing itself off as the truth, whereas the dark and deeper sense is considered to be propaedeutic to getting into the religious truth. Messay then goes on to strengthen the connection between the wax and gold tradition and Greek thought when he remarks that it is ‘a method of grasping reality or truth in the manner of Western thinking’ (Messay 1999, 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 the wax and gold tradition is all about protecting the individual sphere, consolidating authority by using ambiguity and dissimulation as a device. Simply, the tradition of wax and gold has more to it than merely promoting individualism, if individualism comes into the matter at all. Nevertheless, Messay’s portrayal of the wax and gold tradition as a ‘crowning achievement of erudition’ does not seem itself 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 the wax and gold trope serving as a means of humor, avoiding intrusion, criticism and consolidating authority—do not seem to be completely foreign to the wax and gold tradition. Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe clear cultural (and probably professional) biases between these two scholars. Namely, Levine, as an American and sociologist (with a visible interest in Ethiopian cultural anthropology), seems to have a preference for simple objectivity and an appetite for dividing the aspects of the wax and gold tradition. On the other hand, Messay, as an Ethiopian and philosopher, seems to have exhibited a desire to see a positive and coherent role in the wax and gold tradition in Ethiopian culture, and has shown notable patriotic defensiveness. This has made him turn a blind eye to the negative legacies of the wax and gold tradition.

Beyond the 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 the destructive role of the wax are indisputably clear in Messay's argument. He has even gone to the extent of describing the 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' that is as natural as breathing. Certainly, his claim that ambiguity is as natural as breathing among the Ethiopians is overstated. Besides, even if his claim is accurate, his account of the wax and gold paradigm, for one, falls short of critical assessment, and for another, does not propose any alternative to the tradition that was described as having 'no positive approach to life,' to use Messay's words (Messay 1999, p. 181).

The wax and gold tradition has its own distinctive merits. For instance, first, the wax and gold paradigm had a delicate awareness of the influence of religion on 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. The way in which religion was used in the wax and gold tradition at times could have been questionable. However, its intention to tap into religious elements as a way to address deeper issues in society has helped the tradition to account for the fact that religiosity is one of the human conditions.

Secondly, it kept a profoundly diverse nation together by forging a national metanarrative that is religiously tinged. Arguably, Ethiopia's extraordinary resistance to foreign occupation as well as eventual victory in the battle of Adwa (over the Italian forces) was a living testament to the Ethiopian grand narrative. 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.<sup>1</sup> This, therefore, could be given credit as a constructive legacy of the national metanarrative itself created by a covenantalist conception of the wax and gold paradigm.

Third, the wax and gold tradition has helped the nation to keep its peculiar identity and civilization. This includes, but is not limited to, culture, writings, the *fidel* (= alphabet) and an uncommon number system. 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 patterns. 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 is a tradition that shows the unconventionality of Ethiopian civilization, culture and identity among the African nations. Moreover, it is quite difficult to understand 'Ethiopian-ness' without understanding the wax and gold paradigm.

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

However, the adverse legacy of the wax and gold paradigm is as glaring as its positive legacies, if not more so. Philosophically, notwithstanding the aesthetic significance of ambiguity, which at face value seems to have a space for individual creativity, belief and ingenuity, the wax and gold tradition is archaic and fixed. It might seem rather hazy to talk of ambiguity and fixity within the same knowledge system. This apparent paradox seems to evaporate as soon as we closely look at the world that the 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 Ethiopian Orthodox Church (the major proponent of the wax and gold paradigm), he remarks that it is ‘a force currently resistant to change in any significant form’ (Raphaeli, Nimrod 1967, p. 424). The wax and gold paradigm, according to Raphaeli, is absolutely fixed. 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).

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 that 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. Why? Ethiopia, according to the wax and gold tradition, has a preordained national metanarrative. Questioning the metanarrative was not negotiable, simply because it is considered to be sacrosanct. It therefore is fixed. In the meantime, 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 popular grand story, rather than scrutinizing it. This is precisely because beliefs, literature 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 on the part of the ‘domesticator.’ Its main intention nevertheless is cutting and tailoring the incoming ideas to fit the already existing conceptions. Therefore, any move to change in the wax and gold paradigm aims at anything but avoiding inherent change. If somebody, or some entity, for that matter, insists on demanding a particular change from the paradigm itself, it faces excommunication, or even extinction.<sup>2</sup>

The effect of uncritically accepting the ambiguity of the wax and gold philosophy on society and polity is not hard to detect. Levine’s comparison (in his book *Flight from Ambiguity*) of the Ethiopian wax and gold social conception and 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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

temper calls for clear and direct communication,' Levine explains. 'The dominant philosophical orientation,' Levine continues, 'is 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). 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 the midst of Ethiopians, speaking with them [...], in order to begin to appreciate how much calculation is invested in each phrase. That he who desires to do harm may always be polite, that he who wishes to deliver an insult may include it in a finely wrought compliment, is a part of the 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 are very vital. This is important not only in terms of economic justice (such as fair distribution of land), but also it is an essential aspect of the exchange of ideas, culture and beliefs. The wax and gold mentality 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 has served as a source of deep distrust in the society. In other words, despite having a glamorous national metanarrative that traces its roots back to the 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 role as well as significance of pre-understanding or presupposition is an important catalyst in this discussion. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church curriculum makes a clear demarcation between reading and interpreting, not only in the curricular timetables, but also in the pedagogic approach itself. Examples help. First, reading is taught as soon as the student joins the school—when the students are 7 to 12 years old. The *Metsehaft Bet* (= School of Interpretation), however, is undertaken in the same fashion as are postgraduate studies in the West. Hence, there is huge time gap between reading and interpretation. This gap includes, 5 years of the School of Song (*zema bet*), 3 years of the School of Liturgical Dancing (*mergad*), and 5 years of the School of Poetry (*Qene bet*) and law (*Fitha Negest*) (Teshome 1970, 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—that is, in the 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 *gene*-poetry. This is because, as Teshome remarks, *gene* is considered to be ‘the gateway to Ge’ez and hence to the mysteries’ (Teshome 1970, p. 19). Interestingly enough, starting from the level of *gene*, 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 engage in fierce debate with their colleagues. Even after surviving this level, very few achieve the level of mastering the art of interpretation and philosophy (Teshome 1970, p. 19).

Two elements, according to Teshome, can be inferred to be the main reasons. First, the students in the School of Books/Interpretation are looked up to as ‘a class apart,’ to use Teshome’s words. They are usually deemed to be wise and are the most respected members of these higher graduates 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 about the history, tradition and dogma of the church, there seems to be an implicit urge for shrewdness, diplomacy and ambiguity. Second, the difficulty of achieving 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 that 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 fertile ground for a unique strand of allegorical interpretation in the EOC.

However, Roger W. Cowley seems to be making a considerably 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 the Jewish *middot*,<sup>3</sup> which apparently has a number of hermeneutical rules, he maintains that the Ethiopian equivalent, the *Amdemta*<sup>4</sup> *Commentary* (AC), has no basic rules. Nevertheless, in the same breath, Cowley writes:

The AC does not contain such a 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;’ attempts to do so appear only to raise the spectre of an infinite hierarchy of criteria by which the meaning of meaning which has been educed may be further elucidated and evaluated (Cowley 1989, pp.374-5).

<sup>3</sup> *Middot* is generally translated as exegetical principles or rules of interpretation

<sup>4</sup> *Andemta* is an interpretive method that allows as many spiritual meanings of a given text as possible, the only exception being not contradicting dogma and tradition.



Cowley has more to say. He claims that the *Andemta Commentary (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 a 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, his concern that hermeneutical philosophy might end up wrestling with an endless hierarchy of criteria of criteria before resolving any real problem on the ground seems to be somehow warranted. Even so, Cowley's pessimism concerning hermeneutical philosophy seems to be fairly over-driven. Moreover, 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 due attention to the history of the EOC when he claims that the Ethiopian interpretive philosophy has close affinity with the Antiochene School over against the Alexandrian School. For one, the objective historical facts show that the Alexandrian tradition, not the Antiochene, has had a long-lasting influence on the Ethiopian tradition and way of life. Beyond being the mother church of the EOC, the Alexandrian church used to provide patriarchs to the EOC until the 20th century. Moreover, it is undeniable that the 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 to fit the Ethiopian context, the influence of the Alexandrian tradition on the EOC's allegorical interpretive philosophy seems to be incontestable.

Second, it seems absurd to think that acquiring interpretive rules always hinges on explicitly constructed systems. For that matter, until recently, the EOC has been 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, etc.) were and are the main theological documentations. It would therefore be interesting to ask if this absence of systematically construed theology would be a good reason to portray the EOC as a church without theology and/or philosophy. Liturgy and lifestyle are indeed two prominent media that have maintained the theology of the EOC for over one and a half millennia with very little alteration, if any. Hence, it is hard to see any reason why the same cannot apply to its hermeneutical philosophy.

Third, Cowley's claim that constructed philosophy of interpretation offers no means to get the meaning of the text not only shows that his understanding of the EOC hermeneutics is misleading, but also that 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 and 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 Cowley is clearly drawn into Ricouer'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 very little or no attention to the nature of the *Amdemta* tradition itself when he claims that the EOC or *AC* does not have any undergirding interpretive philosophy. The etymological origin of the term *Amdemta* is the Amharic word *Aand*—which literally means 'number one.' *Andem* means 'for one' with the 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 up 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 manhood, the knife is a likeness of the authority of God, and the blade is a likeness of suffering and 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 of 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 a homiletic application. It rather is a very 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 the *Qeddase Mariam* is a product of literal interpretation. It is allegorical through and through, even if the allegories themselves are fairly opaque. This is because it is not totally clear what the audience should make of the allegories at the end of the sermon.

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 the EOC has its own hermeneutical matrix through which they validate the meaning—tradition, authority and mystery. He even suggests that the Ethiopian literature is 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, 1970, 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 plays 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 a half. As an ideological tool it had agendas: legitimizing the divine origin of civil authorities, portraying the church as an inseparable partner in power sharing, unifying the nation under one king and one church, restricting the share of power to certain ethnicities (in the name of the Solomonic Dynasty) and creating a strictly hierarchical society. Therefore, the wax and gold hermeneutic had (and still has) its own Bible with its own peculiar meaning. Interestingly, the notion of covenant<sup>5</sup>—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 the wooden *tabot* (the Ark of covenant), central to the Ethiopian liturgy, whose origin was in the 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 for domestic disunity and international isolation. Besides, Ethiopia, as a nation that was effectively resistant to foreign occupation, should have led Africa by example with regard to democratization. Instead, being heavily reliant on a 'self-created bible' seems to have made the nation isolated from joining the global chorus of democratization and modernization.

Ironically, however, the wax and gold tradition also serves as an unintended source of help, especially for the ordinary Ethiopians. First, it keeps people enchanted with the spiritual realm—an alternative source to listen to in a world full of democratic rhetoric. And, as a result, even when things seem to be unbearably hard, it provides people with a brighter understanding of their situation and therefore a sense of optimism. This, on the one hand, helps ordinary people to break away from the ideological mantra of the time, in favor of what is thought to be even more spiritual. On the other hand, it created an ethnic and religious tolerance amid living in a profoundly plural society. Second, in the context where the individual amounts to almost nothing outside ethnic warmth, it creates a space for individuality in interpretative philosophy as well as other areas of human endeavor. Third, as I remarked above, the same tradition has been used to deconstruct, to employ a

<sup>5</sup> Covenant has a special affinity to the Ethiopian society for several reasons. First, the nation is believed to have a direct (blood) relationship with Israel, based on the narrative of the Queen of Sheba (in the Old Testament). Second, the nation is perceived to still host the Ark of the Covenant and Christianity, side by side. These facts are thought to help Ethiopia to edge by even Israel in the claim 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.'

postmodernist term, especially the ideology behind the people who are at the helm of power. In fact, it was the only source that the people used to turn to as a way of registering their discontent with political and ecclesiastical authorities—though in a veiled and dissimulated manner. This is because ambiguity provides them with a space to sing about justice and preach about equality when a direct demand for justice by itself would prove to be a hazardous task. Even then, the ‘hermeneutical space’ created by the wax and gold culture is profoundly based on a deep sense of negation, contempt and suspicion towards the material aspect of reality and powers (both political and ecclesiastic).

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 obedience, and the other to realize their freedom. The same means of adjudication (i.e., the covenant) is used by both parties: one to create a hierarchical 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 a covenant, trumped the value of individuals and of their individuality. Individuals rightfully demand individuality, equality and freedom. However, all the demands are not motivated by love, but rather are marred by a 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.

Hermeneutics, I contend, should seriously account for human experiences such as repression, diverse fashions of 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, elevating human experience as the ultimate horizon in a hermeneutical endeavor is equally objectionable. Hermeneutics rather should have an ultimate horizon in which responsible relationality is maintained not only among human persons, but also between human persons and reality. This means, it assumes that there is One Loving Source of one organic human race, whose love transcends race, gender and social status. Then I could be justified to claim, under such a horizon, that we celebrate our differences without sliding into fragmentation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

There may be too much interest today in listening to differences, divergences and deviations, which can keep us divided by nationality, race, skin color, ethnicity, languages, culture, gender, etc. This does not take much effort, but at times, just seems to follow assimilated cultural and religious impulses. Totalitarian unity, on the other hand, is not any better: it uses sheer force, violence and inflexible determination to reach one goal at the expense of everything and everybody.

However, the value of a hermeneutical philosophy should be measured by the level of conformity to the nature of hermeneutics itself. That is, hermeneutics is a

science, requiring human imagination and hard work. It is an art—it must sift through delicate lines to keep the human race united, for good causes, without destroying the beauty in diversity. As it develops, it accounts for changing political, economic and cultural situations. Then and only then can we overcome ideologies that reduce the rich vein of creational dynamics to single, ideological and political principles, and in the process, overcome hatred, contempt and social fragmentation.

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