

ETHIOPIAN PHILOSOPHY:  
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION WITH BIBLIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Zera Yacob was born in 1599 near Axum, in northern Ethiopia, and as a youth received a thorough traditional education in poetry and scripture—Ethiopia had long been a literate and Christian country. Afterwards he spent several years teaching. In 1626 king Susenyos (r. 1607–32), under the influence of Portuguese Jesuits, converted from Orthodoxy to Catholicism, triggering a period of religious and civil unrest. Zera Yacob avoided taking sides, but his neutrality won him no friends. He was eventually denounced to the king and fled, taking with himself little more than a book of Psalms. He spent the next two years in seclusion in a cave near the Takkaze river, meditating and praying over the psalms. There he reflected on the disagreements between followers of different faiths, and this led him to reject all revealed religions as equally unsupportable, and to adopt instead a rational faith (Zera Yacob presents a simple, schematic form of the cosmological argument). He remained devout in his own way, convinced of God’s goodness and providential concern, for himself personally and for human beings generally.

In 1632 Susenyos abandoned his attempts to impose Catholicism on the country. He abdicated, and died not much later; his son Fasiladas (r. 1632–1667) lost no time affirming his commitment to the Orthodox faith, drawing the sectarian conflict to a close. Zera Yacob came out of hiding, finally making his way to the town of Enfraz, not far from Gondar and Lake Tana. Here he found employment doing writing for locals and teaching their children. One of these children was Walda Heywat. In 1667, with Walda Heywat’s encouragement, Zera Yacob wrote his short (roughly twenty-page) treatise, which was simultaneously the first autobiography and the first philosophical work in Ethiopian history. He died in 1692, but Walda Heywat later put down his own thoughts as well, very much in the same vein as those of his master, though marked by a less personal style, and at just slightly greater length. The two treatises (their common title, *hatata*, means something like ‘investigation’) are primarily concerned with showing the errors of various religions, and they correspondingly treat of various moral topics; they are also concerned to put confidence in God on a rational footing, and so to defend the goodness of God in the face of evil and injustice.

These two treatises are something very close to the only philosophical works produced in sub-Saharan Africa prior to the colonial period.<sup>1</sup> Although some writers have tried to portray Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat as belonging to some kind of Ethiopian or African philosophical tradition, no such traditions exist—more’s the pity.<sup>2</sup> What we see in these treatises is rather what in other circumstances might have been the *start* of a philosophical school.<sup>3</sup> As Claude Sumner has said, Zera Yacob’s treatise is “an absolutely original work,” and if philosophy in Ethiopia starts with Zera Yacob it also ends with Walda Heywat.<sup>4</sup>

To my knowledge there has been *no* discussion of Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat or their philosophy in English philosophy journals, though there are a few descriptions in handbooks and encyclopedias. And almost everything we have is due to one scholar: the aforementioned Claude Sumner, Addis Ababa University professor, “a Canadian by Birth, and an Ethiopian by choice.”<sup>5</sup> Although I cannot say I think that Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat have anything fundamentally new to offer us now, philosophically speaking, their work is inherently interesting, and deserves a place in the history of philosophy.

#### ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Enno Littmann (1904) offers an edition of the Ge’ez text of the treatises of Zera Yacob and Walda Heywat along with Latin translations. Hereafter I restrict myself to English-language materials.

Claude Sumner (1985) provides a translation of five nominally philosophical texts. Only two of these texts—our two—are philosophical in a strict sense. These two works are also printed together, along with the Ge’ez text and a discussion of the text and its authorship, in Sumner (1976b). Sumner (1978) then provides discussion of a more philosophical variety. These books are out of print and difficult to find, but selections from Sumner’s translation of Zera Yacob have been anthologized in Eze (1998). Dawit Worku Kidane (2012), “a close study of the Treatise of Zar’a Ya’aqob, giving particular attention to his ethical thought,” also provides a new translation of that work.

The other three texts included in Sumner (1985), which are older and more in the vein of aphorisms or “wisdom literature,” also receive more extended treatment in Sumner (1974b), Sumner (1974a), and Sumner (1976a). Other literature

<sup>1</sup>Islamic philosophy and theology of (ultimately) Platonic and Aristotelian provenance was studied, adapted, and produced in West Africa, including in sub-Saharan West Africa—see Diagne (2004). Western study of this material seems to be in its infancy.

<sup>2</sup>The tradition of relevance is simply Orthodox Christianity. For Zera Yacob, the religions of Christians, Jews, Muslims and Indians are nominally on a par Sumner (1985, p. 239), but his own view of God is shaped by the Abrahamic faiths. But Christianity was still a tradition he rejected. There would no doubt have been philosophical-theological reflection within the Ethiopian church—a distinguishing feature of that church is monophysitism. But Zera Yacob seems to have had little interest in disputes of that nature (p. 244).

<sup>3</sup>How tragic to see that “what I wrote in this book is very little; but in my cave I have meditated on many other such things” (p. 244).

<sup>4</sup>Sumner (1985, p. 225).

<sup>5</sup>Sumner (1986, p. 9). Sumner died on June 24th, 2012, at the age of 92.

dealing, in whole or in part, with oral or wisdom literature in the Ethiopian context includes Sumner (1986), Sumner (1995), Sumner (1996), Sumner (1999c), Sumner (1999b), Presbey (1999), and Presbey (2002). But hereon I restrict myself to Zera Yacob and Walda Hewat.

There is very little secondary literature. Brief (and to my mind not entirely satisfactory) encyclopedia-style accounts may be found in Sumner (2004) and Kiros (2004), or, even more briefly, in Sumner (1998) or Sumner (1999a).<sup>6</sup> Published articles are few and far between, but see Kiros (1996, 2001b, 1994) and Sumner (1999d). Sumner and Yohannes (2002) is a collection of articles by various scholars, though I am not familiar with the contents. Kiros (2001a) and Ayele and Sumner (1991) will likely be of some relevance. There are a few student (?) essays online: Cherinet (1993); Asfaw (2004); Bokora (2004). The only article I know of in a mainstream philosophy journal (the multilingual *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*) is Krause (2003), though it's in German. Kiros (2005) is a short book on Zera Yacob, but I cannot recommend it. I am not aware of any other book-length discussions in English, with the exception of the aforementioned Sumner (1976b, 1978) and Dawit Worku Kidane (2012). Finally, some interesting tertiary literature: on Claude Sumner and his work on Ethiopian philosophy, see Kiros (1995).

Substantial bibliographies listing older works and works in other languages may be found in Sumner (1985), Sumner (1976b), and Sumner (1978); Dawit Worku Kidane (2012) is probably a good bet as well. These are also the obvious books to start with. Finally, good and recent general histories of Ethiopia—a fascinating country—are Henze (2000), Pankhurst (2001), and Marcus (2002), while Harden (1926) is an introduction to Ethiopian literature (and includes a discussion of our philosophers).

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<sup>6</sup>Wikipedia has (presently underdeveloped) articles on [Ethiopian Philosophy](#), [Zera Yacob](#), [Walda Heywat](#), [Hatata](#), and [Claude Sumner](#).

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#### TEXTUAL SELECTIONS

This section presently contains chapters I–IV of Zera Yacob’s *Treatise*, and the preface and chapters I–III of Walda Heywat’s *Treatise*. The translations are from Sumner (1985). The notes are mine, although occasionally cribbed from Sumner.

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*Treatise of Zera Yacob, Chapters I–IV.*

I. In the name of God who alone is just. I shall describe the life, the wisdom and the investigation of Zera Yacob who said: “Come and listen, all you who fear God, while I tell you what he has done for me.” Behold, I begin.

In the name of God, who is the creator of all things, the beginning and the end, the possessor of all, the source of all life and of all wisdom, I shall write of some of the things that I have encountered during my long life. Let my soul be blessed in the sight of God and let the meek rejoice. I sought God and he answered me. And now you approach him and he will enlighten you; let not your face be ashamed. Join me in proclaiming the greatness of God and together let us extol his name.

I was born in the land of the priests of Aksum. But I am the son of a poor farmer in the district of Aksum; the day of my birth is 25th of Nahasye 1592 AD,<sup>7</sup> the third year of [King] Yacob.<sup>8</sup> By Christian baptism I was named Zera Yacob, but people called me Warqye. When I grew up, my father sent me to school in view of my instruction. And after I had read the Psalms of David my teacher said to my father: “This young son of yours is clever and has the patience to learn; if you send him to a [higher] school, he will be a master and a doctor.” After hearing this, my father sent me to study *Zemya*.<sup>9</sup> But my voice was course and my throat was grating; so my schoolmaster used to laugh at me and tease me. I stayed there for three months, until I overcame my sadness and went to another master who taught me *qenyē* and *sewesya*.<sup>10</sup> God gave me the talent to learn faster than my companions and this compensated for my previous disappointment; I stayed there four years. During those days, God as it were snatched me from the claws of death: for as I was playing with my friends I fell into a ravine, and I do not know how I was

<sup>7</sup>August 31st, 1599 in the Gregorian calendar. <sup>8</sup>r. 1597–1603; 1604–1606 <sup>9</sup>Sacred music.

<sup>10</sup>Roughly: poetry and Biblical exegesis.

saved except by a miracle from God. After I was saved I measured the depth of the ravine with a long rope and found it to be twenty-five fathoms and one palm [deep]. Thanking God for saving me, I went to the house of my master. After this I left for another school to study the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. I remained ten years in this type of study; I learned the interpretations both of the *Frang* and of our own scholars. Oftentimes their interpretations did not agree with my reason; but I withheld my opinion and hid in my heart all the thoughts of my mind. Having returned to my native Aksum, I taught for four years. But this period was not peaceful: for in the XIX year of King Susneyos,<sup>11</sup> while Afwons,<sup>12</sup> a *Frang*,<sup>13</sup> was Abuna,<sup>14</sup> two years [after his arrival] a great persecution spread all over Ethiopia. The king accepted the faith<sup>15</sup> of the *Frang*, and from that time on persecuted all those who did not accept it.

II. While I was teaching in my district, many of my friends came to dislike me. During this period there was no real friendship and as a result men became jealous of one another. I surpassed the others in knowledge and in love of one's neighbour and I was on good terms with all, even with the *Frang* and the Copts. And while I was teaching and interpreting the Books, I used to say: "The *Frang* say this and this" or "The Copts say that and that," and I did not say: "This is good, that is bad," but I said: "All these things are good if we ourselves are good." Hence I was disliked by all; the Copts took me for a *Frang*, the *Frang* for a Copt. They brought a charge against me many times to the king; but God saved me. At that time, a certain enemy of mine, Walda Yohannes, a priest from Aksum and a friend of the king, went [to bring a charge against me:] since the love of kings could be won by perfidious tongue. This betrayer went to the king and said this about me: "Truly this man misleads the people and tells them we should rise for the sake of our faith, kill the king and expel the *Frang*." He also said many other similar words against me. But being aware of all this and frightened by it, I took three measures of gold which I possessed and the Psalms of David, with which I prayed, and fled at night. I did not tell anyone where was going. I reached a place close to the Takkaze River, and the next day, as I felt hungry I went out in fear to beg the farmers for some bread. I ate what they gave me and ran away. I lived in this manner for many days. On my way to Shoa, I found an uninhabited location. There was a beautiful cave at the foot of a deep valley, and I said [to myself:] "I shall live here unnoticed." I lived there for two years until [King] Susenyos died.<sup>16</sup> At times I would leave [the cave] and go to the market or to the country of the Ahmara as they took me for a hermit who goes about begging and gave me enough to appease my hunger. People however, did not know where I dwelt. Alone in my cave, I felt I was living in heaven. Knowing the boundless badness of men, I disliked contact with them. I built a fence of stone and thorny bush so that wild animals would not endanger my life at night, and I made an exit through which I could escape if ever people searched for me; there I lived peacefully praying with all my heart on the Psalms of David and trusting that God was hearing me.

<sup>11</sup>r. 1607-32 <sup>12</sup>Alphonso Mendez, a Portuguese Jesuit. <sup>13</sup>A foreigner.

<sup>14</sup>Patriarch of the Ethiopian church. <sup>15</sup>Catholicism. <sup>16</sup>Susenyos died on September 7th, 1632.

III. After prayer, when I was not engaged in any kind of work, I used to meditate for whole days on conflicts between men and their depravity and on the wisdom of their creator who is silent while men do evil in His name and persecute their fellow men and kill their brothers. For in those days the *Frang* prevailed. And not only the *Frang* [were strong in their persecutions] but my own people were even worse than they. Those who had accepted the faith of the *Frang* would say: “The Copts have denied the rightful see of Peter, and are therefore the enemies of God;” and so they persecuted them. The Copts did the same in defence of their faith.

I said to myself: “If God is the guardian of men, how is it that their nature is thus deeply corrupted?” and I said: “How does God know, or is there anyone in heaven who knows? Or if there is one who knows, why does he remain silent on men’s depravity while they corrupt his name and act with iniquity in his holy name?” I said in my prayer: “O my Lord and my creator, who endowed me with reason, make me intelligent, reveal to me your hidden wisdom. Keep my eyes open lest they slumber until the moment of death. Your hands made me and moulded me; render me intelligent that I may know your precepts. My feet have nearly stumbled and the ground [under them] has nearly given way;<sup>17</sup> and the labour stands before me.” While I was praying in such and similar ways, one day I said to myself in my own thought: “Whom am I praying to or is there a God who listens to me?” At this thought I was invaded by a dreadful sadness and I said: “In vain have I kept my own heart pure” (as David says).<sup>18</sup>

Later on I thought of the words of the same David, “Is the inventor of the ear unable to hear?”<sup>19</sup> and I said: “Who is it that provided me with an ear to hear, who created me as a rational [being] and how have I come into this world? Where do I come from? Had I lived before the creator of the world, I would have known the beginning of my life and of the consciousness [of myself]. Who created me? Was I created by my own hands? But I did not exist before I was created. If I say that my father and my mother created me then I must search for the creator of my parents and of the parents of my parents until they arrive at the first who were not created as we [are], but who came into this world in some other way without being generated. For if they themselves have been created, I know nothing of their origin unless I say, ‘He who created them from nothing must be an uncreated essence who is and will be for all centuries [to come], the Lord and master of all things, without beginning or end, immutable, whose years cannot be numbered.’” And I said “Therefore there is a creator, else there would have been no creation. This creator who endowed us with the gifts of intelligence and reason, can he himself be without them? For he created us as intelligent beings from the abundance of his intelligence and the same one being comprehends all, creates all, is almighty.” And I used to say: “My creator will hear me if I pray to him,” and because of this thought I felt very happy. “I would pray to my creator with great hope and love, and with all my heart I would say: “You, Lord, know the thought of my heart from afar. Indeed you know all that was and all that will be; and all my

<sup>17</sup>Psalms 13:3-5, 72:2, 118:73. <sup>18</sup>Psalms 72:13. <sup>19</sup>Psalms 93:9.

paths you know beforehand.” Hence it is said: “You know from afar. For God read my thoughts before I was born”<sup>20</sup> and I said: “O my creator, make me intelligent.”

IV. Later on I thought, saying to myself: “Is everything is written in the Holy Scriptures true?” Although I thought much [about these things] I understood nothing, so I said to myself: “I shall go and consult scholars and thinkers; they will tell me the truth.”

But afterwards I thought, saying to myself: “What will men tell me other than what is in their heart?” Indeed each one says: “My faith is right, and those who believe in another faith believe in falsehood, and are the enemies of God.” These days the *Frang* tell us: “Our faith is right, yours is false.” We on the other hand tell them: “It is not so; your faith is wrong, ours right.” “If we also ask the Mohammedans and the Jews, they will claim the same thing, and who would be the judge for such a kind of argument? “No single human being [can judge:] for all men are plaintiffs and defendants between themselves. Once I asked a *Frang* scholar many things concerning our faith; he interpreted them all according to his own faith. Afterwards I asked a well-known Ethiopian scholar and he also interpreted all things according to his own faith. If I had asked the Mohammedans and the Jews, they also would have interpreted according to their own faith; then, where could I obtain a judge that tells the truth? As my own faith appears true to me, so does another one find his own faith true; but truth is one. While thinking over this matter, I said: “O my creator, wise among the wise and just among the just, who created me with an intelligence, help me to understand, for men lack wisdom and truthfulness; as David said, no man can be relied upon.”<sup>21</sup>

I thought further and said: “Why do men lie over problems of such great importance, even to the point of destroying themselves?” And they seemed to do so because although they pretend to know all, they know nothing. Convinced they know all, they do not attempt to investigate the truth. “As David said: “Their hearts are curdled like milk.”<sup>22</sup> Their heart is curdled because they assume what they have heard from their predecessors and they do not inquire whether it is true or false. But I said: “O Lord! who strike me down with such torment, it is fitting that I know your judgement. You chastise me with truth and admonish me with mercy. But never let my head be anointed with the oil of sinners and of masters in lying: make me understand, for you created me with intelligence.” I asked myself: “If I am intelligent, what is it I understand?” And I said: “I understand there is a creator, greater than all creatures; since from his overabundant greatness, he created things that are so great. He is intelligent who understands all, for he created us as intelligent from the abundance of his intelligence; and we ought to worship him, for he is the master of all things. If we pray to him, he will listen to us; for he is almighty.” I went on saying in my thought: “God did not create me intelligent without a purpose, that is to look for him and to grasp him and his wisdom in the path he has opened for me and to worship him as long as I live.” And still thinking on the same subject, I said to myself: “Why is it that all men do not adhere to truth, instead of [believing] falsehood?” [The cause] seemed to be

<sup>20</sup>Psalm 138:3–5. <sup>21</sup>Psalm 116:11. <sup>22</sup>Psalm 119:70.



the nature of man which is weak and sluggish. Man aspires to know truth and the hidden things of nature, but this endeavour is difficult and can only be attained with great labour and patience, as Solomon said: “With the help of wisdom I have been at pains to study all that is done under heaven; oh, what a weary task God has given mankind to labour at!”<sup>23</sup> Hence people hastily accept what they have heard from their fathers and shy from any [critical] examination. But God created man to be the master of his own actions, so that he will be what he wills to be, good or bad. If a man chooses to be wicked he can continue in this way until he receives the punishment he deserves for his wickedness. But being carnal, man likes what is of the flesh; whether they are good or bad, he finds ways and means through which he can satisfy his carnal desire. God did not create man to be evil, but to choose what he would like to be, so that he may receive his reward if he is good or his condemnation if he is bad. If a liar, who desires to achieve wealth or honours among men, needs to use foul means to obtain them, he will say he is convinced this falsehood was for him a just thing. To those people who do not want to search, this action seems to be true, and they believe in the liar’s strong faith. I ask [you,] how many falsehoods do our people believe in? They believe wholeheartedly in astrology and other calculations, in the mumbling of secret words, in omens, in the conjuration of devils, and in all kinds of magical art and in the utterances of soothsayers. They believe in all these because they did not investigate the truth but listened to their predecessors. Why did these predecessors lie unless it was for obtaining wealth and honours? Similarly those who wanted to rule the people said: “We were sent by God to proclaim the truth to you;” and the people believed them. Those who came after them accepted their fathers’ faith without question; rather, as a proof of their faith, they added to it by including stories of signs and omens. Indeed they said: “God did those things;” and so they made God a witness of falsehood and a party to liars.

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*Treatise of Walda Heywat, Preface & Chapters I-III.*

Preface. In the name of God who created everything, who is almighty and all-provident, who is and will be before all centuries and for ever and ever, who is the only perfect essence, whose greatness is infinite, I wrote a book full of wisdom, of inquiry, of philosophy and of counselling, composed by a great scholar of our country named Walda Heywat. Let the blessing of his God and the science of the secrets of our blessed creator and the following of his just laws be with all the children of Ethiopia now and forever. Amen.

I. You have heard what has been said of the ancients “Give the wise man the opportunity and he will give [you] of his wisdom.” Similarly I thought of writing what God taught me during my long life and what I examined with the rectitude of my intelligence, that this book serve as a guide in the counselling and the teaching of science to our children who come after us, as a stimulant for inquiry on the

<sup>23</sup>Ecclesiastes 1:13.

part of the wise, for understanding the works of God and for widening their wisdom. I do not write what I have heard from the lips of men or what I have received from the doctrines of men unless it is what I have examined and know to be good; but I shall write the things which appear to me to be true after I have examined and known them in the eyes of God, from whom I asked in constant prayers and supplications that he show me the truth, and reveal to me his secrets and the way he created man as an intelligent being whom he placed among other creatures which live in this world. O my brother, you who read this my book, know that I have written it in a great fear of God who absolutely guards me from telling lies; I do not fear men, nor am I frightened by their faces, nor have I anything to do with those who write and teach falsehood and vanity.

If anyone asks me: "Is it only you who know the truth; the others besides you, do they not know it also?" I answer: "No, not I alone, but many have known and loved the truth as I do, but they did not dare teach it openly because they feared the curse of blind men and expulsion from their congregation. But the rest of the people did not know, because they have made no research, no inquiry in order to distinguish truth from falsehood, but they accepted and believed what they heard from their fathers without inquiry. Hence the children of Christians are Christians, the children of Mohammedans are Mohammedans, the children of Jews are Jews; there is no reason for their faith other than this. They have heard from childhood that the faith of their parents is true, and they have believed in it without examination or [proper] knowledge. All fight for their faith affirming it is the true one. But it is not possible that all the faiths of men be true, because they disagree between themselves. It is possible, however, that all be false because falsehood is many, but truth is one."

II. All justice and all wisdom are from God: without God all wisdom collapses. As the sun is the source of light, so is God the source of science, and as the spirit is the source of life, so is God the source of all truth. Whoever does not have from God thoughts which are pure and free of all coarseness of this world will not find wisdom and cannot understand the truth. O my brother, lift up your mind to that perfect essence that created you with intelligence, and look at it with the eye of your intelligence, and recognize the light of science which your creator has shown you. Do not listen to the voice of those who speak ill of you and call you a denier of the creator if you reject the doctrine that they teach you; they do not know their creator, and there is no wisdom among them. Do not believe what men teach you before you have examined all they teach you and have distinguished the true from the false, because men can lie and you do not know whether they teach you the truth or falsehood. Similarly do not believe what is written in books until you have examined it and found it to be right. For books are written by men who are likely to write false things. If you examine these books, you will soon find in them a shameful wisdom which does not befit our God-given reason with which we seek the truth. I do not mean all men and all books are always false, but I say it is possible they are false. Therefore, you do not know whether they say the truth or not, unless you examine carefully what is said or written, that you may

clearly know what you ought to accept and that you understand the work of God; for inquiry is the door through which we have access to wisdom and reason is the key God gave us, with which we can open this door and enter the hall of his secrets and share the treasures of his wisdom. Then, we ought to examine all that men teach us and that is written in books. If we find [them] to be true, let us receive them most willingly; let us mercilessly cast away falsehood and protect ourselves against it. Falsehood does not come from the Lord, God of Truth, but from the error and deceit of men.

III. The basis of all faith, of all science and of all truth is to believe there is a God who created all, directs all, a perfect and infinite essence, that is and will be forever. All the teachers of men and the books of the whole world agree in this faith; We too should believe in it, and if we enquire about it, our reason teaches us it is true and cannot be false. We who live today, who were not yesterday and tomorrow will disappear, we were created and likewise all that we see in this world is transitory and created: how can it be created without a creator? For each creature is finite and weak; it has no power to create from nothing. Therefore there needs be one essence, that existed before all creatures, without beginning or end, that created from nothing all that is dense and thin, visible and invisible. After he has created all, he does not forsake his creation, but he takes care of it and guides it according to the necessity of each creature, and leads all according to the way he created them; there is no error in him who created all with great wisdom and placed all things in their respective order as befits each singular creature and guarded them along the ways by which they are perfected each day of their existence, respecting the limit of their service determined by the law of their nature. Do not listen to the fools who say each day: "This or that is not good; it would have been better if it had not been created." All that God has created is very good in the way he created it; in each creature something useful is to be found which must seek for our usefulness; he has put things clearly in front of the eyes of people in order that they seek and understand the wisdom with which they were created and find the utility which has been placed in them as the reason for their existence. How many things appeared as useless to our forefathers, which later on were found to be useful or how many things appear useless to us whose usefulness will be found after us? In the same way, everything is created to be of use to man or for the adornment of this world, the dwelling of man who is superior to all other creations. For man is exalted above all creatures of this world, and he is closer [than they] in intelligence to his creator; all that is created in this world has been created to embellish man's dwelling.