

Comments on Tedla Worede's "Reason and the Sacred"

First of all, I would like to acknowledge that I lack sufficient knowledge on the subject of philosophy. Hence, the first part of my comment, I will confess, will be weak. But I thought I would highlight a few points with this limited knowledge of mine. Where I would like to feel better and show more confidence, will be in my comments on Book III.

Book I & II

The main objective of the book is best described by the author as "(a) *philosophical journey of considering the **necessity and power** of faith via reason*" (p9).

Argument: Reason is neither necessary nor does it carry power for faith to be attained.

Among the various definitions of reason, I am assuming that the one implied in the book is closer to the following definitions; *'the power of the mind to think and understand in a logical way'* (Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary) or *'the power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgements logically'* (Oxford Dictionary). From reading the first part of the book, I am led to believe that the position held is that the exercise of perception and reason [intellect/logic] is not only necessary but is of importance to be or to grow in faith; in the existence of God, his providence, his covenant etc... Thus, according to the statement on p104, the author says, "*Philosophy and Theology are two ends of the same stick*". Both fulfill the same aim and lead to the same destination.

I argue that the above does not hold true. Particularly when one adheres to the biblical definition of 'faith'. I was surprised not to find any reference (I apologize if I missed it) to the well known passage of Hebrews discussed in the book.

*"Now faith is **confidence** in what we hope for and **assurance about what we do not see**..... By faith [not by logical reasoning or intellectually ability] we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible..... By faith [not by logical reasoning or intellectually ability] Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did..... By faith [not by logical reasoning or intellectually ability] Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death..... By faith [not by logical reasoning or intellectually ability] Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family..... By faith Abraham [not by logical reasoning or intellectually ability], when called to go to a place he would later*

receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." Hebrews 11: 1-8

As described in the scriptures, in fact, faith acts counterproductive to reason, intellect, logic and/or exercise of perception. Furthermore, scripture does not use intellectual or perceptive ways to describe God or His attributes. It just states it. Now, it is quite understandable that logic, reason, intellect and exercise of perception make it easier for us human beings to grasp certain truth. Because, since our birth we were taught, trained and we relied on our sensory perception and intellect to see, regard, examine, understand, test, taste our world, our environment, our beliefs and values. As I am writing this down, I am reminded of the conversation between God and Moses on Mount Horeb (Exodus 3). We see that Moses needed clarification, logic, reasonable explanation while God was just making statements. "*So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt*" (v10) – Command. Moses replies "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*" (v11) – asking questions to understand, to make sense, to rationalize etc.. Again, when Moses asks another question to understand and also make his fellow Hebrews understand – "*Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?*".... God just makes another statement "I am who I am".

In fact, sometimes, I find that God takes away all the means for us to understand and to rationalize intellectually so we grow in faith. I personally believe that miracles happen for this purpose. In addition for being a means for God to visit and administer his grace to us through healing or provision, he uses miracles for us to believe that what took place, what was provided has its direct source from God and cannot be explained away. And when it cannot be explained the Glory will be His.

To add another example: it is stated in Hebrews and we see it when we follow the story of Abraham in Genesis; when God promised Abraham that he will make him the father of nations, Abraham, in all logical sense, was not able to conceive that this was possible. He was 75 years old. Even if by logical or intellectual reasoning, one can say that it is possible for a man to bear a child at that age (because we have seen it happen in our days); Sarah was past her conceiving age. In addition she was barren. Abraham was asked to have faith in God and his promise/his word despite his reasoning, logic, intellectual understanding, experience, and environment. Now the bible tells us that Abraham believed God and it was counted for him as righteousness (Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6). This is the kind of faith that the scripture encourages us to have (as per the passage in Hebrews where it enumerates all the saints mentioned in Hebrews 11 as "great cloud of witnesses" – chapter 12).

On page 109 we read, "*the role of reason is to show that what God has revealed is true and consistent with what is knowable by human effort.*"

Based on the above argument, although it might be possible to understand or reason intellectually some of the spiritual truth as revealed by God through scriptures, it is not

an absolute possibility. There are so many spiritual truths that can only be believed, maintained, confessed and/or professed through faith.

Now is philosophy or philosophical discourses helpful in religious or theological contexts? Possibly. Would philosophy add to understanding one's faith or explain his/her faith to others? Again possibly. But to maintain that it is **necessary** (meaning that without it faith cannot be attained) and **of importance** is fallacious.

We see no evidence of philosophy or reason being present in the Old Testament history. We also do not see this in the New Testament, in the initiation and establishment of the early churches (Acts or the Epistles). In the New Testament, in the gospels, we see that John the Baptists heralds the coming of the Messiah and prepare people with repentance. At the appointed time, Jesus starts his ministry and declares the Kingdom of God. No philosophical discourse but declaration of the Way, the Truth and Life of Salvation. After his ascension, his disciples follow the same process in declaring/proclaiming the Son of God. The introduction of philosophical discourse in Christian thoughts begins to be observed much later when the Gospel of Jesus the Christ reached the Greek cities and encountered interaction with the existing way of religious debate. We see a glimpse of this when Paul reached Athens and was debating the Greek philosophers (Acts 17). This development becomes more prominent from the 2nd Century onwards.

Book III Part I & II

The Fallacy of “absence of evidence implies evidence of absence” (P143)

The reason why I feel comfortable commenting on Book III of the “Reason and the Sacred” is because I have had the opportunity and privilege to research and read extensively on the subject of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church for the past 18 years or so. This research has culminated in two books; the first one published in Ethiopia in the early 2000s titled ታቦት ከቤተ መቅደስ ወደ ቤተ ክርስቲያን። And the second one የተሻለ እውነት በደብዳቤ, published in 2015. The first one is out of print and I am working on the second edition as we speak.

I found the above quoted phrase very intriguing and it led me to spend some time contemplating on the extent of its meaning and implication. Essentially, if we cannot find evidence as the basis for a belief system that we hold today, is the belief system acceptable, appropriate or correct? In the absence of evidence how much can we rely on tradition to hold the belief?

I, and I am sure the author of “Reason and the Sacred” are well aware of the *sola scriptura vs prima scriptura* debate and controversy and I would not dare invoke such debate here. However, based on some of the points that the book enumerated – mentioned below – I will attempt to discuss some of my perspective on the role of

tradition in Christian belief and dogma based on historical events in the Early Church. The relevant points referred to are found on page 143:

1. The Church kept much of its Messianic and Apolistic heritage in an elaborate church tradition.
2. Some of crucial texts were lost.
3. Many were destroyed.
4. Not everything was preserved and or translated into a language many, namely in the west, can read and understand [some are preserved in Ethiopian highlands written in Ethiopic – Geez].
5. There is an oral tradition in the Church [through which much has been preserved which is of the Christ and his Apostles] just as valid as the written tradition [eg. 2 Thessalonians 2:15].

As far as I am concerned, the debate of *sola scriptura* vs *prima scriptura* or the basis of scripture + tradition makes for true worship, dogma or belief system, arises to explain, justify and reinforce certain belief systems for which we do not find direct reference in the Bible.

At the outset, I would like to point out that the 66 vs 81 books debate is not the central issue here. I say this because, as it relates to the the rituals, ceremonies or dogma of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church that have been regarded as being contentious by other denominations in protestant/evangelical circles, we would not find any evidence in the apocryphal books to justify their origin or establishment.

For instance, if we take the tradition of the veneration & mediation of saints or angels, there is no definitive tradition that we can find in the apocryphal books to support how this is upheld in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church or any of the other Oriental Churches or Catholic tradition. None of the 15 or 16 Old Testament Apocryphal books shed any light on the origin of the ritual. This is particularly significant, I have been arguing, as it relates to the veneration of angels or their role in mediating the blessing of believers or the established practice of believers praying to angels. Why? Given that the existence of angels is well documented in the Old Testament, we do not see at any time where any of the Jewish believers pray to the angels. What we find is communication taking place between men and angels when the angels appear after being sent from God. At not time we find, a priest, a prophet, a layman addressing a prayer to angels for them either to carry it to Yahweh, to mediate or negotiate a prayer request, atonement of sins or in some extreme cases for them to answer the prayers (e.g. regarding protection) directly. All prayers that we find in the Old Testament are made to God directly. [The Book of Psalm is a book full of prayers and none of them are directed to angels or to 'saints']. Which begs the question – why is it then that we have this system

established after the revelation of the Christ? The Son of God who is the mediator of the salvation of men through the atonement on the cross?

We can collapse the 5 points mentioned above into 3 parts.

1. The Church kept much of its Messianic and Apolistic heritage in an elaborate church tradition / This oral tradition is as valid as the written tradition.

Now in the New Testament we find several passages where the notion of tradition, *paradosis* in Greek [παράδοσις] is mentioned. In some cases, tradition is discussed in the negative sense as in the gospels of Mathew and Mark. In others, it is mentioned in a positive light as in Corinthians and Thessalonians. The notion of *paradosis* refers to a teaching handed down from one generation to the next. So it is very important that a) the tradition that we talk about are surely passed down from Christ and the Apostles [Messainic and Apolistic] and b) as important as (a) it is not contradictory to the general message of the scriptures.

Let me use an example by putting one of the sacredly held tradition in the EOTC to test: The ritual surrounding the '*tabot*'. I chose this example for various reasons:

- i. I have had the privilege and opportunity to research extensively on the subject, including interviewing church officials in the EOTC and the Coptic Orthodox Church.
- ii. There are some traditional beliefs held among some clergies that Christ, at the last supper had used the '*tabot*' to administer the Eucharist – I guess with the aim of establishing Messianic and Apolistic tradition.

My argument is that the ritual, ceremony and dogma surrounding the '*tabot*' cannot have been a Messianic and Apolistic tradition. First and foremost, during the time of the Christ and the origin of the Christian church, the Jews and the first Christians did not have physical reference of the Ark of the Covenant as their temple was empty – either because the Ark was taken to Ethiopia at the time King Solomon as per the story of *Kebre Negest* or is hidden in some mountain by the prophet Jeremiah as described in the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees. I have to mention here, for the obvious reason that readers can deduce, the passage that talks about how Jeremiah was ordered by God to take and hide the Ark of the Covenant before the destruction of the temple by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in 2 Maccabees carries a completely different story in the Amharic version of the book [መቃቢያን ካልፊ]. In my research, I was able to find an old Geez bible that has the account of the Ark being hidden in the mountain. [This is fully discussed in my book ታቦት ከቤተ መቅደስ ወደ ቤተ ክርስቲያን]. Other Jewish traditions

stipulate that the Ark is hidden under the Temple as King Solomon had previewed the destruction of the temple and had built a secret cave. In any case, the Ark was not in the second temple and hence the Jews at the time of Jesus the Christ did not have a physical reference. Secondly, as we read from the Gospels, the last supper was an ordinary Paschal dinner held every year by the Jews. The tradition as we can see from 1 Corinthians continued as being a supper event where the congregation gathered to break bread together. Thirdly, if this tradition had originated from the Messiah and the Apostles, we would have had similar traditions and liturgical rites in other churches, at least in the Oriental churches as they share more closely liturgical and dogmatic principles. As we all know Ethiopia is the only church that has any such ceremony and ritual connected to the Ark of the Covenant. Furthermore, as it has been repeatedly taught, proclaimed and discussed by several prominent orthodox officials, Ethiopia in her own volition has chosen to fuse together Old and New testament rituals and orders [because these were existing in the country before Christianity].

What this means is that the tradition surrounding the Ark of the Covenant is for sure not a Messianic and Apostolic tradition. This is a great example of demonstrating absence of evidence as well as evidence of absence.

Several examples can be tested in the same way to demonstrate that so many of the traditions held today as being Messianic and Apostolic do not in fact originate with the Christ and the Apostles. On the contrary they can be traced back to a period much later in history and historical evidences can be provided to support such claims. The tradition of venerating the Saints and considering them of playing a role in the mediation of the salvation of believers, the veneration and role as mediatrix of Mary and so on. [this aspect of the EOTC is discussed in my second book የተሻለ እውነት በደብዳቤ].

2. Some crucial texts were lost and other books were destroyed

Historically this is a fact. We know during the first three hundred years of the rise of Christianity, the church was severely persecuted, its members were tortured and murdered and manuscripts were destroyed. Despite this event, the canonical books as we have them today [even including the apocryphal books] give us a complete account and message of Christianity, which in its central essence, declares Jesus as the Son of God who has come into this world to atone for our sins and through him that all believers will have a restored relationship with God and become children of God and hence heirs of His Kingdom.

At the same time, it is also very important to make note and take caution that there were so many written materials that had surfaced in the early years of Christianity that appeared to look like Christian teachings but had pagan influences; such as the gnostic writings. We read from Paul's letters and teachings that these had already begun to crop up in Corinth, for instance, where knowledge [gnosis] was the means and ultimate

end of Christianity. And of course, to claim legitimacy, such books carried the names of the known Apostles, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter etc... The only way that one can separate the wheat from the chaff is by relying on canonical scripture and avoid any contradictory teachings.

There is another point to discuss at this juncture which is claimed frequently when discussing this topic. John in his gospel message wrote, "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ***But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name***" (20:30-31). The *prima scriptura* defenders would use the first part of this passage to argue that there are many other miracles and teachings that were not recorded in the gospels and hence had either been transferred orally [*paradosis*] or were compiled in other writings that were lost or destroyed during persecution.

The fact of the matter, however, is that the passage, in view of the overall context of John's gospel and in writing his conclusion, is affirming that what he has recorded is sufficient for us to grasp the truth of God, the deity of Jesus Christ and uphold our faith in him so our salvation is made complete. In effect, we do not need anything more to base our Christian faith other than what has been recorded for us. The same view is portrayed by Luke in his introduction to the Acts of the Apostles.

Hence, even though it is a historical fact that the early church suffered extreme persecution and many of her manuscripts were destroyed, what is available today, what has been preserved as 'canonical', is complete and sufficient to firmly proclaim what the central tenet of the Christianity is and what is expected of believers.

3. Not everything was preserved and or translated into a language many, namely in the west, can read and understand [some are preserved in Ethiopian highlands written in Ethiopic – Geez].

This argument suggests that there are some manuscripts that are found today in languages that are not widely practiced in the world (e.g. Geez in Ethiopia). I am not sure what manuscripts were mainly being referred here but again some of the points discussed in the earlier section would apply to argue against this position.

In this section, one would list among the manuscripts preserved in languages the west cannot understand, the book of Enoch. We know that the complete manuscript is only available in Geez. However, if one argues that the reason why the book of Enoch was not included in the Canon was because it was not available anywhere other than Ethiopia and other copies were destroyed during the persecution, the argument would not hold for various reasons. One of the primary reasons being that the book of Enoch is related to the establishment of the Old Testament Canon; in which case, Enoch would

have been part of the Septuagint [if not the Masoretic Book of OT] – the Old Testament that was well established even before the birth of Jesus and the ensued persecution of Christianity. Furthermore, it would have been part of the canonical bibles of at least the Oriental Churches if not all Orthodox churches and even the Catholic Church.

The other important aspect to note as we discuss tradition is that in the absence of evidence and canonical scripture, historical evidence demonstrate to us that as early as the 2nd Century the books that were being considered as holding scriptural authority are more or less the canonical content that holds the 66 books. A couple of examples that can be cited here include the list of Melito of Sardis (around 170 AD) which has 38 books of the Old Testament and St Athanasius's list included in his Easter letter in 367 AD clearly identified the list of the accepted canonical books of the bible and except for the inclusion of Baruch instead of Esther the list is the same as the 66 canonical books accepted in evangelical/protestant circles. With regards to the apocryphal or deuterocanonical books he writes "*But for greater exactness I add this also, writing of necessity; that there are other books besides these **not indeed included in the Canon**, but appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness. The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd. But the former, my brethren, are included in the Canon, the latter being [merely] read; nor is there in any place a mention of apocryphal writings. But they are an invention of heretics, who write them when they choose, bestowing upon them their approbation, and assigning to them a date, that so, using them as ancient writings, they may find occasion to lead astray the simple.*"

Athanasius' list is significant, first of all because he is one of the well respected Orthodox fathers. Secondly, this was included in his official message to the whole Christian believers in his communication for Easter. The purpose of his message is also significant. In his own words, he set to present the list of divinely inspired books of the Bible because, " ... since some may be beguiled from their simplicity by the wiles of certain men, many read other writings which are called 'Apocryphal', and which ought not be mingled with the Scripture which is inspired by God, **it seems good to me to set down the Books which are known by us to be divine**"

In addition to the above reference can be made to the list of the Council of Laodicea, the canon list of Cyril of Jerusalem and the list of Gregory of Nazianzus all of which have almost identical canon list and different from the Catholic or EOTC canon.

So in conclusion, absence of evidence does mean evidence of absence; particularly when historical evidences demonstrate that what has been taught as being Messianic and Apolistic tradition are traditions that were not passed down from Christ to the Apostles to the Early Fathers and so on. Rather in the majority of cases, these supposedly held traditions have their origin much later in the history of Christianity.

Among these are, the veneration of saints [which finds its origin in the 3rd and 4th century and finds its theological basis in the notion of 'theosis' – the teaching that man becomes divine through illumination], the veneration and mediatrix role of Mary [which finds its origin after the Nestorian controversy on the nature of Christ in the 4th Century, and the veneration of icons which began in the 6th or 7th Century.