

Qunna le-Simie Metteria

A Philosophical Book by Amha Asfaw

Getatchew Haile

It is only when I came to know Ato Amha Asfaw, the author of *Qunna le-Simie Metteria*, that I realized the true meaning of the Ethiopian, and partly biblical, saying, “Philosophers and prophets are not recognized in their own country and time.” In these troubled times, in our troubled country, it seems we Ethiopians are feverishly searching our history in hopes of discovering among our ancestors men and women of ideas who can inspire us and of whom we can feel proud. We look to the past, not the present, and the sentiment expressed in the saying blinds us to the treasure that exists all around us. My friend Amha once mentioned that after his first book, *Yilalla Denebo*, a collection poems, did not sell well, he could not find enough people to whom to give copies away for free. Indeed, “philosophers and prophets are not recognized in their own country and time.” It is quite clear to me that there will come a time when his books are highly sought-after collectors’ items.

I sincerely hope that this generation will break this tradition of postponing recognition and recognize Ato Amha Asfaw now. I have known Amha for over four decades, and can say, quite simply, that he is one of the great thinkers of our time and our world. My admiration of Amha is such that I titled one of my books, a collection of articles (awaiting publication), *Ethiopian Studies in Honor of Amha Asfaw*, a one man *Festschrift*. I chose to do this, rather than to take the more customary route of just dedicating the book to him, because I wanted Amha’s name to be a part of the title. That is, I did not want his name to simply (dis)appear inside the cover of the book. Rather, I want his name to be mentioned each and every time an article in the collection is quoted, because that is the level of recognition a man of his ability and significance deserves.

Amha is a poet with his own distinct style. His short lines are rhythmic but they do not always rhyme. It is not clear to me how he developed this style, which deviates from the tradition of Amharic poetry in which lines always rhyme. But knowing Amha, I can assuredly say, this is a style of his own creation. As a traditionalist, at first I had difficulty recognizing his work as poetry. So, I chose to concentrate on the messages they convey rather than their format. And the messages are wonderful: they contain philosophical observations which I have found deeply illuminating. The poems invite readers to open their eyes and hearts to ideas and truths that are often overlooked.

Qunna le-Simie Metteria, Amha’s present book, contains all the poems he has composed over the years, as well as a number of philosophical treatises that deal with social problems, again written over the years.

In addition, there are also scholarly articles on Amharic grammar and Ge'ez numerals, originally published in academic journals. There are also some translations, notable among these his translation of Langston Hughes' poems which read as if they were originally composed in Amharic. Amha is a brilliant writer, and his writing is enhanced by characteristics and assets that make him truly extraordinary: modesty and pride, honesty and the integrity to say what he thinks has to be said, and a rare ability to admit mistakes. He cherishes his freedom, never allowing himself to be indebted to anyone, not even to God. It is worth noting that the title of the book, *Qunna le-Simie Metteria*, is an expression of his modesty. As the oral tradition has it, once upon a time, a wretched woman wove a small grass basket (*qunna*, in Amharic), and said "I wove a basket for the memory of my name." Amha did not want to proclaim to the world, here is "A Philosophical Book, by Amha Asfaw"; he preferred instead to present it to us, his readers, as a small offering that just happens to carry his name as its author.

I conclude this note with the poem from which Amha took an excerpt for the back cover of his book:

ጉልበት

“ሃይለኛ እየሄደ ያስገብራል የትም ፣
መሬት የሁሉም ነች ባለቤት የላትም” (“እርሮ” ፣ ከበደ ሚካኤል ፣ 1944 አም)

ይህ መሰረታዊ እውነት ነው ፣
አለም ከተጀመረ ያልተጣሰ ፣
የፍጡር መተዳደሪታ ፣
ወደደም አልወደደ ።

እንዲህ ተፋልሶ የማያውቅ ህግ ፣
በጊዜ የተፈተነ ፣
የሰነፍጥረት ሁሉ መሰረት ነው ፣
የተከበረ የታመነ ።

፩ እና ፩ ሁለት መሆኑ ፣
አለመጣሱ እንጂ ፣ አለመፋለሱ ፣
ከዚህ የጠለቀ እውነትነት የለውም ፣
ሁለንተናዊ የሆነ ፣
አለም ስታልፍ የማያልፍ ፣
የበቃ የተፈፀመ ።

ስለዚህ ላለንበት አለም ፣
የእውነት መለኪያችን ፣

አለመፋለስ አለመጣስ ነው ፣
የይግባኝ ማቆሚያችን ።

ላለማችን ፣ ለምናውቀው ፣ ጉልበት ፣
መሰረቱ ነው የእውነት ፣
ስለወደድን የማናነግሰው ፣
ስለጠላን የማናረክሰው ፣
ጥንትም የነበር ፣ አሁንም ያለ ፣
ያልተጣሰ ነው ፣ ያልተገሰሰ ።

ውብ ነገር ምንድን ነው?

የሚወስነው መመሪያ ፣
ጉልበተኛ በአምሳሌ ፣
ውብ ይባላል ፣ ውብ ይሆናል ፣
ከዚያም አያልፍ ነገሩ ።

ዴሞክራሲስ?

የሚፈራሩ ሰዎች ፣
የሚያደርጉት ስምምነት ፣
የሚፋቅ ነው ፣ የሚሰረዝ ፣
ሚዛኑ ያጋደለ ለት ።

የጉልበት መስፈሪያው ሲያደላ ፣
ሲያዘነብል ወዳንዱ ፣
ተፈጥሮም እኩልታውን ይቀይራል ፣
መከበር አለበትና ህጉ ፣ የሚዛኑ ።

ጥሩ መጥሮ ፣ ክፉ በጎ ፣
የሚባል ነገር የለም ፣
የማይሸረው ጉልበት ከቶ ።

ስለዚህ ፣

ጉልበት የናንተ ስትሆን ፣
እውነትን ስትፅፉ ፣
ስታሸንፉ ብቻ ሳይሆን ፣
ስታሰገብሩ ስትግዙ ፣
ጭቆናው ሲከብዳችሁ ፣
ስታነቡ ስታለቅሱ ፣

ያኔም!!

ያኔም ይህንን ህግ አስታውሱ ፣

ይህንን ህግ እንዳትረሱ ።

Power

"The powerful roams the earth and subjugates others

*The earth belongs to all; it does not have a master." (From *Errorro* by Kebed Michael, 1944 EC)*

This is a fundamental truth that has not been violated since the beginning of time
Creatures live accordingly, whether they like it or not
Such a law that has never been contradicted and a law that stood the test of time
Is the bases of all science, held with respect and trust

1 and 1 is two
For it has never been otherwise
The deeper truth we seek is neither universal nor exists
Its purity is not absolute that does not end with time and space.

Therefore, our measure of truth for the world we live in
Is the absence of contradiction, beyond which we cannot appeal.
For this world we know,
Power is the pedestal on which truth stands
That we cannot crown out of love
Or desecrate out of hate

It was always true, now and then
Violation or contradiction never occurred.

What is beauty?

Directions set by the powerful in his image
Would be called beautiful and nothing more or nothing less

What about democracy?

It is an agreement made by people who are afraid of each other

That will be dismantled when the scale favors one of them

When the balance of power slides and tilts to one side,

Nature will revise its equation, for the law of the scale has to be obeyed.

Good and bad moral and immoral

Are ideas that do not exist outside of power

Thus

When power enables you to define truth

When you are victorious and subjugate people under your rule

Not only then, but when oppression descends, forcing you to cry and sob

Then too,

Remember this law

And forget it, not.