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## Article

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# ***The Mirror of Intelligence* and the Controversy on Christ's Unction in the Ethiopian Church\***

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## **Introduction**

This survey aims to examine the doctrinal work *The Mirror of Intelligence* (*Maṣḥeta Ləbbunā*, CAe 1986),<sup>1</sup> evaluating its position in the controversy about Christ's anointment that took place in the Ethiopian Church from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> For this purpose, other doctrinal and historical sources

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<sup>1</sup> *The Mirror of Intelligence* is part of a two-volume edition of Ethiopic theological works of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries, edited by Enrico Cerulli in 1960. The work is transmitted in a single manuscript preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, as part of the d'Antoine d'Abbadie collection (MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Éthiopien, d'Abbadie 53). It is a well-preserved parchment codex, written in two columns of 14 lines each. The text appears clearly legible, and the few holes in the codex (ff. 11, 12) precede the writing. A unique decorative element of the codex is a thin ornamental strip at the end of the text (f. 31). The copyist uses red ink for Mary's name, the incipit of the second chapter, and the words *ḥatatā* (question) and *fəkkāre* (answer, explanation) that punctuate the text. The additions *supra lineam*, not noted by Cerulli in the edition, appear to have been inserted by the same hand that wrote the body of the text. The date of *The Mirror of Intelligence* (the year 7114 of the world, 1614 of the Incarnation, 1338 of the martyrs = AD 1621), the only work transmitted by the codex, and the use of *tašdīd* to indicate doubled consonants would confirm, according to Cerulli, the dating of the manuscript to the seventeenth century. See Cerulli 1958–1960, II, xiv.

<sup>2</sup> The adjective 'Ethiopian' is used here to refer to the Ethiopian and Eritrean Churches before their separation in 1993. The official title of the two churches today is 'Ethiopian Orthodox Tawāḥədo Church' and 'Eritrean Orthodox Tawāḥədo Church'. The term *tawāḥədo* originates from the verb *tawāḥada*, signifying 'be one, be united with each other'. Meaning

will be considered to investigate the context of the debate and the voices involved. Additionally, the figures of speech adopted (or not) as a medium in the theological treatises will provide insights into the Christological reflection that took place during the seventeenth century in the Ethiopian Church.

### **The controversy on the Unction of Christ**

As the editor Enrico Cerulli explains, *The Mirror of Intelligence* reflects a peculiar position in the dialogue on Christ's anointment. The treatise was written between 1621 and 1622, during the reign of Emperor Susənyos (r.1607–1632), when interactions with Jesuit missionaries kept raising discussions on doctrinal matters.<sup>3</sup> The anonymous author, expounding some central points of the Christian faith, condemns heresies and attacks part of the local clergy, divided at that time, over the role of Christ's anointment and how it was performed. The mention of this debate is essential for framing the controversy: although the chronological limits remain unclear, it is assumed that by 1621–1622, questions on Christ's unction had already been raised.<sup>4</sup>

'oneness, unity, union', it aligns with the Greek term ἑνωσις and bears profound theological significance, epitomizing the union of divinity with humanity within the person of Christ after the Incarnation. See 'Təwəḥədo', *E Ae*, IV (2010), 873b–875b (Tedros Abraha).

<sup>3</sup> The Jesuit mission in Ethiopia began in 1555 and ended officially in 1632 with the definitive expulsion by order of Emperor Fäsiladas. A central moment was the conversion of Emperor Susənyos to the Catholic faith in the 1620s, an event that further encouraged proselytising and a wider spread of Catholicism. For a general overview, see 'Jesuit', *E Ae*, III (2007), 277a–281b (L. Cohen and A. Martínez d'Alòs-Moner). For a more detailed study on the subject, see Cohen 2009. For an analytic bibliography on the topic, see Cohen and Martínez D'Alòs-Moner 2006. See also Martínez d'Alòs-Moner 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Identifying the starting point of the dispute on Christ's unction is not easy because some of its aspects appear as a continuation of the theological debate started in the Ethiopian Church (and in all the Christian world) from the first centuries of its history. As various scholars have argued, locating the controversy's genesis to the Jesuits' arrival could be reductive. However, looking at the Ethiopic sources, the theme of Christ's anointing assumes a central role from the seventeenth century onwards, leading to the subsequent definition of the three different doctrines (*Kärrä*, *Qəbāt*, *Şaggā*). According to Ignazio Guidi, the starting point of the controversy can be traced back to the interpretation of Acts 10:38: 'How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power'. For Guidi, the Jesuits could have used this passage to demonstrate the distinction of the two natures in Christ, connecting the unction to the humanity of Jesus. The passage, thus understood, would be denied by part of the Ethiopian clergy who began to argue that the anointing of the Holy Spirit performed the union of divinity with humanity in Christ. In the edition of some late opuscles on the controversy, Yaqob Beyene agreed with Guidi's reconstruction, even though one of the pamphlets published postpones the start of the dispute to the Gondarine period (Guidi 1922, 189;

In the last part of the treatise, the author, after having briefly listed some wrong statements on the matter,<sup>5</sup> explains what the unction is, when it occurs and the role it plays:

The anointing took place in the Virgin's womb, and the chrism, which was upon him, was the Holy Spirit, so the name anointing (*qəb'*) is interpreted as permanence (*hədrat*) because it (the Holy Spirit) dwelt upon him (Christ) for his becoming a man. As St Paul said in his second (letter) to the Corinthians, in chapter 30:3, 'Know the grace of the Lord that he, being rich (*bā'l*), became poor for your sake that you might become rich through his poverty (*banədyat*)'. This is the beginning of his poverty: to receive the Holy Spirit, although they are consubstantial.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, according to this interpretation, the anointing of Christ occurs in Mary's womb, the ointment he receives is the Holy Spirit, and the anointer is the Father as the sentence 'the Father is the anointer, the Son is the anointed, the Holy Spirit is the ointment' indicates in another passage of the text.<sup>7</sup> On the function of the anointing and why Christ received it despite being equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, the author makes it clear: it is for humans' sake that the Son of God becomes poor, where the concept of poverty designates his incarnation and anointment.<sup>8</sup>

However, connecting Christ's unction to the project of salvation for humanity was not the only possible way to explain it. As anticipated, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the significance of Christ's anointing became a heated point in the theological discussion, involving and dividing the local clergy for two centuries or more.

Yaqob Beyene 1977, 5). Concerning the conclusion of the controversy, most scholars considered the Council of Boru Medā (May 1878), which determined the affirmation of the *Kārrā* doctrine, as the last act of the dispute. Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie questions this position (Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013, Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2014). For the version of the Council of Boru Medā narrated by the supporters of *Kārrā* and *Ṣaggā*, see Yaqob Beyene 1977, 31–59. For a short overview of the theological controversy in Ethiopia see Yaqob Beyene 1976, 1–5.

<sup>5</sup> 'Divinity was the anointing to humanity', 'Humanity was the anointing to divinity', 'The union of humanity with divinity is the anointing', 'The anointing took place in the Jordan River', Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 159 (ed.); Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 184–185 (tr.).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Text: '*ab qabā'i wald taqaba'i wamanfas qəddus qəb'*'. Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 160 (ed.); Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 185 (tr.).

<sup>8</sup> It is the concept of *kénōsis* as Cerulli pointed out in his introduction to the text. See Cerulli 1958–1960, II, xiv.

Looking briefly at the different positions assumed over the years in the debate, three doctrines have been identified by scholars as principal voices:<sup>9</sup>

The *Qəbāt* (*qəbāt*, Amharic, lit. '(an)ointment', from Gə'əz *qəb'at*, followers: *qəbātočč*) affirmed that the unction, received by Christ in the womb, made him the natural Son of God and determined the union between humanity and divinity in Christ.

The *Kārrā* (*kārrā*, Amharic, lit. 'knife, scimitar', followers: *kārročč*) argued that Christ became the Son of God by the union of divinity with humanity. For them, the union takes the place of the unction to Christ's body. They refused the formula 'The Father is the anointer, the Son is the anointed, and the Holy Spirit is the ointment' and affirmed that Christ is not only the 'anointed' but also the 'ointment' and the 'anointer'.

The *Šaggā* (*šaggā*, Amharic, lit. 'wealth, gift, honour etc.', from Gə'əz *šag-gawa* 'to give, to grant'; abbreviation of *yašaggā ləḡ* 'Son of Grace', followers: *šaggočč*) professed that, while Christ's body was honoured by the union with the divinity, which made him the natural Son of God, through the unction of the Holy Spirit, Christ became the firstborn, priest, prophet, and king. The anointing was not for Christ's behalf but for human beings. The *Šaggā* faction, like the *Qəbāt*, accepts the formula 'The Father is the anointer, the Son is anointed, and the Holy Spirit is the ointment'.

<sup>9</sup> The names listed here are polemical names attributed to each doctrine by their opponents. The coexistence of different names and the polemical tone of the discussion contributed to creating confusion in the secondary literature that deals with or mentions the dispute over Christ's unction (on this topic, see also Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2013). From a certain point onwards, different factions claimed the title 'Tawāḥədo' to affirm themselves as the orthodox doctrine of the Ethiopian church. It is evident in a pamphlet written by Kidāna Wald Kəfle, a *šaggočč* supporter, who points out that the name of 'Unionists' is to be attributed to the house of Takla Hāymānot (called by their opponents *yašaggā ləḡḡ*), while the other faction that claims the same title is to be called *Kārrā*. On the other side, for the exponent of the *Kārrā*, who wrote an opuscle about the Council of Boru Medā, it is the *Kārrā* doctrine that deserves the title 'Tawāḥədo' (See Yaqob Beyene 1977, 45). However, after the Council of Boru Medā (May 1878), which led to the establishment of the *Kārrā* creed, the title 'Tawāḥədo' is almost exclusively associated with this group and its doctrine. For the definition of *Tawāḥədo*, see above note 2; for an overview of the three doctrines, see 'Karra', *E Ae*, III (2007), 348a–349a (Getatchew Haile); 'Qəbat', *E Ae*, IV (2010), 267b–270a (Tedros Abraha); 'Šägga', *E Ae*, IV (2010), 873b–875b (Tedros Abraha). An appendix, written by Kidāna Wald Kəfle (supporter of the *Šaggā* doctrine), containing the definitions of the three doctrines and some theological concepts, is inserted by Yaqob Beyene at the end of the edition of opuscles on the anointment controversy. See Yaqob Beyene 1977, 63–81.

Applying these distinctions already from the beginning of the controversy, Getatchew Haile refers to *The Mirror of Intelligence* as a work written by an exponent of the *Qəbāt* doctrine.<sup>10</sup> On the other side, Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie considered *The Mirror of Intelligence* ‘the earliest and possibly even the foundational *Şāga Ləğ* treatise’.<sup>11</sup>

However, the attempt to connect the treatise to any of the factions listed above appears fruitless because these positions crystallised over a longer period and at a later date compared to the moment when *The Mirror of Intelligence* was composed. Thus, it may be more helpful to investigate the context in which the work was conceived.

In this regard, two sources stand out as relevant to examine the position of *The Mirror of Intelligence* in the emerging debate on Christ’s anointing: the *Chronicle of Susənyos* (CAe 3951) and *The Faith of the Uctionists* (*Haymānot Masiḥāwit*, CAe 1583).<sup>12</sup>

The first is relevant for its report on the council held by Emperor Susənyos (r.1607–1632) in Fogarā, the land extending east of the shores of Lake Ṭānā.<sup>13</sup> This assembly occurred in the early 1620s at a very particular moment for the

<sup>10</sup> Getatchew Haile followed the regent idea of the time that only two factions existed at the beginning of the controversy: the Uctionists, corresponding to the *qəbātočč*, and the Unionists, the *kāročč*. Then, since the author of *The Mirror of Intelligence* refuses the unionist formula ‘The union of humanity with divinity is the anointing’, he should be, for the scholar, an exponent of the *Qəbāt* doctrine. See Getatchew Haile 1986, 207.

<sup>11</sup> Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie argued that all three doctrines were active from the beginning of the seventeenth century and that the error in the reconstruction of the debate arose because both *kāročč* and *şaggočč* claimed for themselves the name of ‘Unionists’. See Kindeneh Endeg Mihretie 2014, 59. Despite the uncertainty on the subject, Donald Crummey also seemed to lean towards the early emergence of the *Şaggā* doctrine. See Crummey 1972, 23.

<sup>12</sup> For an edition of the *Chronicle of Susənyos*, see Pereira 1892 (ed.), Pereira 1900 (tr.); for *The Faith of the Uctionists*, see Getatchew Haile 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Fogarā is a land in the Amhara Region characterised by its flat topography, sparse vegetation, and marshy terrain. It is traversed by several rivers feeding into Lake Ṭānā, prominent among them being the Gumara and the Reb. In 1619, Emperor Susənyos established his encampment in this area. In May 1622, following a victorious campaign against the Oromo, the Emperor participated in the church council convened in Fogarā, where ecclesiastical factions engaged in theological debates, focusing on Christ’s unction. According to the *Chronicle*, the council took place during the fasting period (*şom*) and saw the participation of many monks and anchorites who ‘came from the lagoon, from the mainland, and from all over the country of the King’s dominion’ (Pereira 1892–1900, II, 182). The council did not quell the controversy, as discussions persisted at the council of ‘Aringo thirty years later. See, ‘Fogāra’, *Eae*, II (2005), 555b–556a (Mulatu Wubneh); for the narration of the council, see Pereira 1892–1900, II, 182–184 (tr.).

Ethiopian Church, the period of closest contact with the Catholic faith.<sup>14</sup> According to the *Chronicle*, the council witnessed the presence of two opposing groups deliberating on the nature of Christ's anointing: one sustained that the union of divinity and humanity in Christ was instead of the unction; the other defended the three roles of the Father as anointer, the Son as anointed, and the Holy Spirit as the ointment and recognised the unction as the moment in which Christ received the grace of the Holy Spirit to give it to all humankind.<sup>15</sup>

The council of Fogarā, as per the *Chronicle*, determined the victory of the second position, endorsed by Emperor Susānyos, who ordered the expulsion of the dissidents.<sup>16</sup> The theological standpoint, approved in the council, highlighting the three distinct roles within the Trinity and interpreting Christ's anointing as a crucial act for human redemption, echoed the doctrinal position witnessed in *The Mirror of Intelligence*.

The second work to consider, *The Faith of the Unctionists*, is a theological treatise that contains the profession of faith pronounced at the council of

<sup>14</sup> Emperor Susānyos's reign was characterised by a marked inclination towards the Catholic faith, evident in his active patronage of the translation of Catholic texts into Gə'əz. His religious inclination was further underscored by his reception of communion from Father Pedro Páez, eventually leading to his conversion to Catholicism. See 'Susānyos', *EAE*, IV (2010), 770a–772a (L. Cohen). Concerning the councils held during the reign of Emperor Susānyos, Getatchew Haile writes, 'Two unofficial chronicles record two ecclesiastical councils, *guba'es*, as having taken place during his reign, one in 1605 or 1606 EC (=1612/14 AD) at Ačāfār and the other in 1612 EC (=1619/20 AD) at Fogāra, EMMML 6285, f. 91v and f. 92r, respectively'. See Getatchew Haile 1990, II, vii, note 3.

<sup>15</sup> According to the *Chronicle*, one of the two leaders promoting the first interpretation was Kəfla Krəstos ('Christ's Portion'), called Kəfāle Krəstos ('divider of Christ') by his opponents. One might wonder whether this nickname is related to the genesis of the name for the doctrine *Kārrā*, meaning 'knife', later associated with this doctrinal position. In the pamphlet published by Yaqob Beyene, Kidāna Wald Kəfle, defending the doctrine of the *Ṣaggā*, interpreted the name *Kārrā* as an indication of the immortality of Christ, devoid of mortality as a single-bladed, incorruptible knife (Yaqob Beyene 1977, 30). Among defenders of the second doctrinal position, the *Chronicle* reports the names of *Abba* Fatla Šəllase, *Abba* 'Askāl of 'Atkanā, *Abba* Ləbso of Gonḡ, *Abba* Batro and *Abba* 'Əstifānos. See Pereira 1892–1900, I, 239 (ed.), Pereira 1892–1900, II, 182 (tr.). Another testimony for the occurrence of the council of Fogarā is an extract edited by Ignazio Guidi (Guidi 1889, Guidi 1893, Guidi 1900).

<sup>16</sup> In defending the second faction, the emperor argued that 'The unction of our Lord and our Savior Jesus Christ was the grace of the Holy Spirit, which was given to him in his humanity on the occasion of the union of his humanity with divinity. While giving grace to all in his divinity and his equality with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he took grace in his humanity to give to Adam's children, his brothers. But the grace that he took from the Holy Spirit was not by measure, which was like the prophets and the apostles, but it was without measure'. See Pereira 1892–1900, I, 237 (ed.).

'Aringo.<sup>17</sup> This event took place in 1655, during the reign of Fāsīladas, the emperor who restored the official status of the traditional Ethiopian Church, rejecting the Catholic faith embraced by his father.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Another possible translation of the title *Haymānot Masiḥāwit* is 'The Christian Faith' (*hāymānot*, 'belief, creed, faith, religion', Dillmann 1865, 14–15); *masiḥāwi*, fem. *masiḥāwit*, 'Christian', Dillmann 1865, 177–178). Getatchew Haile, translating 'The Faith of the Uncionists', emphasises the etymon of the name 'Christ' ('the Anointed') and underlines the author's affiliation to the *qəbātočč*. This title is conveyed in the colophon transmitted by two (A and B) of the four manuscripts considered by Getachew Haile for the edition of the treatise. Codex A (John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Ethiopian MS 1, fols 2r–35v), used as the base manuscript for editing the text, also transmits a second title, *Təmhārta Haymānot* ('doctrine of the faith'), on folio 2ra, added by a later hand (Strelcyn 1974, 1). For Stephan Strelcyn, who catalogued this manuscript, the colophon bearing the date and circumstance of the composition of the text (the council of 'Aringo) have been reworked: the original colophon from the fifteenth century, the time when the text was written, was modified in the seventeenth century when the text was copied and reused. In the description of manuscript B (MS Miṭāq Takla Hāymānot Church, Šawā Province, EMLL 2163, fols 15b–36a), the second transmitting the colophon, the cataloguers refute Stencyl's dating hypothesis for the text: 'It (the *Haymānot Masiḥāwit*) could not have been composed in the fifteenth century as Strelcyn thought because *qeb 'at* was not a theological problem during that time. Furthermore, all the personalities mentioned in the colophon can be identified as having lived during the reign of Emperor Fasīdalas. Moreover, Aringo became a place of importance only during the Gondarite period' (Getachew Haile and Macomber 1982, 271). The other two manuscripts that preserve the text, K (MS Ṭānā, Kəbrān Gabrə'el, Ṭānāsee 53, ff. 100v–103r) and C (MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Éth. 149, 98r–113v), dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, do not transmit the colophon, nor any other indication about the origin of the work. Getachew Haile judged C and K reworked versions of the text, copied and modified by exponents of a different theological doctrine, the *kārrōčč* (Getachew Haile 1990, II, xiii–xv). In the catalogues describing the manuscripts K and C, the theological opusculum is recorded as an anonymous, untitled collection of testimonies and prophecies relating to Christ, the Messiah, extrapolated from sacred and patristic writings. As already said, the two codices do not transmit the colophon referring to the council of 'Aringo, and the body of the text also appears reduced compared to that transmitted in A and B (for manuscript K, see Hammerschmidt 1973, 206; for manuscript C, see Zotenberg 1877, 252b). It is worth pointing out that, in the introduction of the edition, Getachew Haile refers to manuscript C as MS 'Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Éth. 119 (Zotenberg no. 149 = C)', but the numeration given by Zotenberg is the current one, so the manuscript in the Bibliothèque nationale de France that contains the theological text is not Éth. 119, but Éth. 149. Considering the dating of the manuscripts and the information conveyed by the colophon, there seems to be no basis for dating the text to the fifteenth century. However, it cannot be excluded that the author of the *Haymānot Masiḥāwit* used or reworked collections of sacred quotations and arguments on the mysteries of the faith that were already circulating.

<sup>18</sup> For information on the life and reign of Fāsīladas, see 'Fasīlādās', *EAE*, II (2005), 499b–502b (E. J. van Donzel).



This work, like *The Mirror of Intelligence*, starts by explaining the mysteries of the Trinity and Christ's incarnation and articulates, in the second part of the work, what is considered the correct creed about Christ's anointing. The writer uses a long list of quotations from the Holy Scriptures and, at the end, to clarify the context, he adds:

The reason for collecting these testimonies from the Old and New Testaments and from all (these) books was the occurrence of a great controversy and a serious disturbance among many teachers on the question of ointment (*nagara qəb*). There are some who say, 'The Only-Begotten Son is not anointed on his own behalf by God his Father. And the anointing of the Holy Spirit is nothing for him. [...] He is anointed to give us, who believe in his name, (power) to become children of God by grace. [...] And his flesh which he assumed from the Virgin he made the Son of (God) the Father, living, king and Lord by union with himself'. There are others who say, 'He is anointed on his own behalf [...] when the Son became man, he was anointed for himself according to the dispensation of the humanity; and through it he became (Son), king, priest, and prophet by grace'.<sup>19</sup>

These words capture a different step of the debate: the dispute has shifted from the definition of the unction, the argument discussed in the council of Fogarā, to the function of the unction, probably central points debated at 'Aringo. In this phase of the controversy, the questions seem to be: Why did Christ receive the anointing? Was it on humans' or Christ's behalf? Following the declaration reported by the author of *The Faith of the Unctionists*, the clergy assembled in 'Aringo established that 'The Son was anointed for himself' and that 'With this anointing, he became the natural Son, natural king, and high priest'.<sup>20</sup> After this explanation, a new series of quotations emphasises the power and glory of Christ, his divine essence that makes him equal to God the Father.

The position appears quite different from the creed affirmed in the council of Fogarā and expressed by the writer of *The Mirror of Intelligence*, even though one element remains common to the two views: the roles attributed to the persons of the Trinity. In the last part of *The Faith of the Unctionists*, the author writes:

That the Word was anointed on his own behalf is known from his name, for Christ means anointed; he is not called (so) for another matter does not pertain to him. Furthermore, the name of Christ leads (us) to three

<sup>19</sup> Getatchew Haile 1990, II, 24–25 (tr.).

<sup>20</sup> Getatchew Haile 1990, II, 26 (tr.).

names, which are: Father, the Anointer; Son, the Anointed; and the Holy Spirit, the Ointment.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, while both treatises seem to recognise in the anointing the act of permanence of the Holy Spirit upon Christ and the distinct roles for the three persons of the Trinity,<sup>22</sup> concerning the function of this act, the two works (and councils) diverge: *The Mirror of Intelligence* presents the unction as a medium between God the Father and humanity through Christ and his incarnation; in *The Faith of the Uctionists*, the unction creates a boundary between God the Father and Christ, making Christ the natural Son of God, king and high priest. In this second case, the relationship between Christ and humans is neither involved nor mentioned.

### Figures of speech in *The Mirror of Intelligence*

In *The Mirror of Intelligence*, the figurative language helps to convey the doctrinal contents. By evaluating how the figures of speech are used, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the choices made by the author in leading the theological discussion.

Starting from the title, *The Mirror of Intelligence* (*Maṣḥeta Ləbbunā*) is a metaphor to indicate what is required to investigate the matters of faith: the mirror represents the Bible—as the author explains—but also the work itself, which could reflect God’s aspect and actions, if the reader employs the ‘eye of intelligence’. Thus, sacred texts, explicitly, and metaphorical language, implicitly, seem invested from the beginning to play the role of mediator between worshippers and God on the path of the Christian doctrine.

If we move to the content of the work, starting with the first theme, the mystery of the Trinity, two similar images are employed together with scriptural quotations to explain the distinction and unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the first simile, drawn from the work of a ‘Gregory’, probably Gregory of Nazianzus,<sup>23</sup> the sun represents the unity of God, while its three attributes, light, heat,

<sup>21</sup> Getatchew Haile 1990, II, 31 (tr.).

<sup>22</sup> In *The Faith of the Uctionists*, the meaning of the anointing appears ambiguously expressed: first, it is stated that Christ receives ‘his own spirit’ (almost approaching the concept of unction as the union of humanity and divinity), but then the distinction between anointer, anointed, and ointment is maintained, at least formally. This example shows how misleading it can be to research and rely on the fixity of formulas and positions.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus uses the image of the sun to explain different theological concepts in his *Orationes*. The simile mentioned in *The Mirror of Intelligence* could derive from the theological oration *On the Holy Spirit* (CPG 3010.31), where ‘sun, beam, and light’ are

and disc, are the three persons of the Trinity.<sup>24</sup> In a second image, maybe elaborated by the author himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are compared to three agents, operating simultaneously without confusion: the light and the heat of the sun and the blowing of the wind. In this case, unity is not represented by a single source that emits the three entities but by the person who feels them. The human body, which can perceive simultaneously the light, the heat, and the blowing, is the unifying factor, as the divine essence (represented by the sun) was in the first example.

With regard to the theme of the incarnation, the concept of unity remains at the centre of the discussion connected to the notion of the coexistence of divinity and humanity in Christ.<sup>25</sup> In dealing with this mystery of the faith, the author makes different choices: defining the incarnation as an 'ineffable' act, he adopts quotations from Holy Scriptures but not figures of speech to explain it.<sup>26</sup> Declaring that humans are unable to know their nature deeply, the writer wonders how he can claim to comprehend the union between divine and human nature in Christ. The author seeks support in the words of the Bible and, quoting the incipit of the Gospel of John, he admires how the evangelist explains the generation of the Son from God by merely defining what happens ('In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God') and how he describes the incarnation in the same, simple way ('The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us').<sup>27</sup> Praising this clear and straightforward approach to the mystery of the incarnation, the author defines figurative language as 'similes of scattered words' and refuses it.<sup>28</sup>

So, not knowing how human nature is constituted prevents the author from finding suitable images to represent it; at the same time, defining the simile as a

mentioned as possible elements to explain the mystery of the Trinity. However, Gregory appeared sceptical in adopting this image because, from his point of view, it could lead to conferring 'substance' only to the Father (the sun), reducing the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father's emanations (beam and light). The analogy of the sun to represent the Trinity can be found in other patristic works such as the treatise *On Heresies* by John of Damascus (CPG 8044), where he wrote: 'The Father is a sun with the Son as rays and the Holy Ghost as heat'. For these works in the *Patrologia Graeca*, see Migne 1858, 169–170; Migne 1864, 779–780.

<sup>24</sup> The 'divinity' (*malakot*) is considered the 'substance' (*tabāyā*) of the three hypostases and their unifying feature. See Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 170 (tr.).

<sup>25</sup> To talk about the human and divine natures of Christ, the author uses the nouns *tabāyā* ' and *bāhray* as interchangeable terms. See Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 155–156.

<sup>26</sup> Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 155 (ed.); Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 180 (tr.).

<sup>27</sup> John 1:1; John 1:14.

<sup>28</sup> Text: *qālāt zərəwān*. Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 155 (ed.); Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 180–181 (tr.).

figure ‘of scattered words’, he designates this rhetorical tool as a threat to the unity of Christ, the core of the miaphysite Christological doctrine.<sup>29</sup>

This choice reveals the author’s thinking on the potential influence of figurative language as a medium for explaining doctrinal issues and, then, for establishing a connection between God and humans. Similes are adopted together with the Holy Scriptures as media to explain the mystery of the Trinity, while, moving on to the theme of Christ’s incarnation, they are explicitly avoided. The author seems to believe that using images to represent the union of humanity and divinity in Christ might weaken the theological explanation, leading worshippers down the wrong path of faith, perhaps that of dyophysitism.

### Figures of speech in other doctrinal treatises

During the seventeenth century, the Ethiopian Church was engaged in a dialogue with the Jesuits, and, in this context, explaining how Christ could be both human and divine was a sensitive issue. Thus, the position adopted in *The Mirror of Intelligence* might be interpreted as a prudent choice to escape any misinterpretation and accusation. Yet it seems an original one. If one looks at other doctrinal works, even those written during the seventeenth century, traditional images from sacred and patristic texts were adopted in Ethiopic texts to explain Christ’s incarnation. Among the most common to describe the union of humanity and divinity in Christ were, for example, the association of human body and soul transmitted from the Ethiopic version of excerpts of Cyril of Alexandria or the image of the union of fire and iron in the *Hāymānota* ‘*Abaw*’ (‘Faith of the Fathers’).<sup>30</sup>

In the *History of the Four Councils* or *Treasury of the Faith*, another theological opusculum edited by Cerulli, both similes are employed to describe the co-presence of two natures in Christ, and a third image is added to them: the union of light and the eye.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> For the Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox Tawāḥədo Church, Christ is one after the incarnation in the womb of Mary, one single person indivisible in each of his actions. For the Christological doctrine in the Ethiopian Church, see Mebratu Kiros Gebru 2010; ‘Tāwāḥədo’, *E Ae*, IV (2010), 873b–875b (Tedros Abraha); ‘Christology’, *E Ae*, I (2003), 728a–732b (J. L. Bandrés and U. Zanetti); Lössl 1993.

<sup>30</sup> For this metaphor in the Ethiopic texts of Cyril of Alexandria, see Weischer 1977.

<sup>31</sup> Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 1–65 (ed.); 1960, 69–101 (tr.). This is another creative example where the human body (or parts of it) is used to explain the divine in theological treatises. The human body is involved in metaphors as part of reality, which can be accessed to create new images, but also as the central element in the mystery of Christ’s incarnation. Concerning how the body of Christ is conceived in *The Mirror of Intelligence*, the idea of his humanity as clothing and covering of divinity, a concept which is also found elsewhere in Ethiopic religious literature (see, for example, Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 231), could justify the

In another short text, whose title is not transmitted, written in old Amharic, probably during the seventeenth century, the author develops the concept of Christ's union against Nestorius, Leon, and Eutyches with these words:

The subtle person of the Word (and) the gross person of the flesh became one person (and) one nature as soul and body become one person (and) one nature, without the soul losing its subtlety nor the body losing its grossness, as St. Cyril likened it for us saying, 'like the union of the soul and the body'.<sup>32</sup>

This extract insists on the unity of Christ by resorting to the traditional Cyrillian image of the union of body and soul, stressing the physical opposition between the two natures of Christ. The 'subtle' and 'gross' natures are united in one person, without change or fusion: just as the human being is one despite having two components, so is Christ.<sup>33</sup>

In the opusculum entitled *The Ten Questions*, also contemporary to *The Mirror of Intelligence*,<sup>34</sup> the author adopts the common association of divinity and light to describe how Christ became human, although maintaining his divine nature. In the first image, the divinity of Christ is associated with the solar light, which, without separating itself from the sun (the Father), penetrates the house, representing the womb of Mary. In the second case, the incarnation is explained by the phenomenon of kindling: the divinity of the Son, light intangible and limitless, is embodied in wax, wick, or other material objects to become visible to humanity.

The same association of divinity-light to explain the incarnation occurs in *The Faith of the Unctionists*, the theological treatise mentioned above.<sup>35</sup> In this case, the humanity of Christ is embodied by the gem, while the light of this precious object is his divinity. This image fits perfectly into a well-established tradition that was not afraid to represent the unity of Christ through different metaphors:

Do you not know that duality has no unity and unity nullifies duality?  
However, we shall be silent and let the gem talk to you, for what lacks

passage 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and did hide from us', as the manuscript transmitted it, instead of integrating the sentence as Cerulli did, 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and did [not] hide from us'. See Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 155 (ed.); Cerulli 1958–1960, II, 181 (tr.).

<sup>32</sup> Getatchew Haile 1986, 225 (tr.).

<sup>33</sup> About the concept of 'unity of action' in the Ethiopian Christological doctrine, see Lössl 1993, 301–302.

<sup>34</sup> This opusculum, the last in the volume edited by Cerulli, is described as a popular treatise. The work has no chronological indications, but according to the editor, it is chronologically close to *The Mirror of Intelligence*. See Cerulli 1958–1960, II, iv.

<sup>35</sup> See pp. 114–116.

rationality is better than you as regards speaking. It makes the mouth of you who are rational dumb, although itself is dumb like all dumb (objects) are. Ask it about the mystery of unity. Is it not itself one out of two (things), its light and its gemness? Do you find the light without the gem? And do you find the gem without the light? For its entirety is gem and its light is its entirety.<sup>36</sup>

The cases presented so far testify to how other authors, even during the seventeenth century, used figurative language in explaining the mystery of Christ's incarnation. Drawing on the repertoire of the patristic tradition or re-elaborating the surrounding reality, they tried to reproduce the encounter between the material and immaterial, humanity and divinity through various images (body and soul, eye and light, wick and light, gem and light).

In contrast, the refusal in *The Mirror of Intelligence* to adopt figures of speech to express Christ's incarnation represents an original and solitary stance.

## Conclusion

From this analysis, it emerges that, concerning the controversy on Christ's unction, *The Mirror of Intelligence* expresses the same creed established at the council of Fogarā (1620–1622): the recognition of the autonomy between unction and union, the three distinct roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the interpretation of anointing as the grace received by the Holy Spirit to the Son for humans' sake.

If one compares these positions with those expressed at the Council of 'Aringo (1655), transmitted by the treatise *The Faith of the Uctionists*, they do not correspond perfectly. Even though the roles of the Father as anointer, the Son as anointed, and the Holy Spirit as an ointment are maintained, in this second council, it is affirmed that the unction is acted not for humans' sake but on Christ's behalf, to make him the natural Son of God after his incarnation.

Another difference between the two works is how the incarnation is explained: in *The Mirror of Intelligence*, it is the moment in which God becomes human, and being human, his nature cannot be explained nor divided. The author does not use figures of speech and describes this rhetoric tool as an image of 'scattered words', virtually a menace to the inexplicable and concrete unity of Christ, who must remain one: divine like the Father, but corporal like a man.

<sup>36</sup> In this part of the text, the author polemises with the Catholics: the continuation of this excerpt is an accusation against Pope Leo, 'the wolf in sheep's clothing', and protagonist of the Council of Chalcedon, stage of the fracture of the Christian world over the natures of Christ. See Getatchew Haile 1990, II, 11–12 (tr.).

In *The Faith of the Unctionists*, in contrast, the author does not refuse the 'scattered words' of figurative language and describes Christ's unity with the metaphor of the gem: the light is the divinity, unified with the materiality of the precious stone. The mystery of the incarnation becomes imaginable and explicable again, but, in this process, Christ's body appears different from that of humans, assuming precious materiality: the image of the gem emphasises Christ's belonging to another world, a world of light, far from humanity. In the same way, the anointing becomes an occasion to strengthen the relationship with the Father and to reaffirm Christ's being the Son of God, king and high priest, who is above humans and not like them. Thus, the function of the anointing defended in these two works appears connected to different Christological conceptions, which differ in giving space to his divinity or humanity and in representing Christ's body.

Additionally, the complex historical moment that the Ethiopian Church underwent at the beginning of the seventeenth century, during the Jesuit presence, could have had repercussions on the author's literary choices, inviting more attention to explaining sensible doctrinal points in the period of closest contact with Catholic doctrine, during the reign of Susənyos.

To sum up, how the figures of speech are used (or not) in *The Mirror of Intelligence* and other treatises reveals their role in expressing theological concepts and connecting the reader to God. At the same time, they are also valuable tools for investigating the process of literary creation and its relation to the historical context.

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### Summary

The present article examines the theological treatise *The Mirror of Intelligence* within the context of the controversy about Christ's unction in the Ethiopian Church during the seventeenth century. The introductory section offers an overview of the early phase of the debate, presenting the diverse positions involved and tracing the evolution of the theological dispute. The subsequent two sections delve into the use of rhetorical devices in *The Mirror of Intelligence* and other contemporary theological works. Through this analysis, the article explores the intersection of creativity and religious reflection in literary production, shedding light on the pivotal role of figurative language as a medium of theological discourse.