

Martin Luther's fascination with Ethiopian Christianity

Luther's reforms weren't based solely on the early church.

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Baptism of Jesus, church in Axum, Ethiopia. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Adam Jones, Ph.D. - Global Photo Archive](#).

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(RNS) — This year marks the 500th anniversary of the launching of the Protestant Reformation in Germany. Commemorations will be held from Memphis to Mombasa to Mumbai to Munich.

Yet, most events and books on the Reformation explore it without any reference to African Christians.

This silence is profound, and I would like to break it by offering possible Ethiopian connections to Martin Luther and the Protestant movement.

Luther launched the Protestant Reformation in 1517, but he had begun that year fascinated with Ethiopian Christianity.

That will come as a surprise to many of today's Christians, even scholars, who are accustomed to discussing Luther and the Protestant Reformation as solely European subjects.

But Luther esteemed the Church of Ethiopia because he thought Ethiopia was the first nation in history to convert to Christianity.

Located far beyond the orbit of the Roman Catholic Church, this first Christian kingdom, according to Luther, served as an older, wiser, black sibling to the white Christian kingdoms of Europe.

In a sense, the Church of Ethiopia was the “dream” for Luther, a true forerunner of Protestantism.

As an ancient church with direct ties to the Apostles, the Ethiopian Church conferred legitimacy on Luther's emerging Protestant vision of a church outside the authority of the Roman Catholic papacy.

As a forerunner of the Protestant Reformation, the Church of Ethiopia embodied the gospel message more robustly and faithfully.

Ethiopian Christians practiced elements of the faith absent in Roman Catholicism, elements Protestants would later adopt: both bread and wine at Communion,

vernacular Scriptures and married clergy.

Absent from Ethiopian Christianity were practices Protestants would dismiss: the primacy of the Roman pope, indulgences, purgatory, and marriage as a sacrament.

Luther's theological fascination with the Ethiopian Church was illuminated in 1534 in his face-to-face dialogue with an Ethiopian cleric, Michael the Deacon, in which Luther tested out his theological portrait of the Ethiopian Church.

Recalling the dialogue with Michael the Deacon, Luther later stated: "We have also learned from him, that the rite which we observe in the use of administration of the Lord's Supper and the Mass, agrees with the Eastern Church. ... For this reason we ask that good people would demonstrate Christian love also to this (Ethiopian) visitor."

For his part, after having Luther's Articles of the Christian Faith interpreted to him, Deacon Michael proclaimed: "This is a good creed, that is, faith."

Luther extended full fellowship to Deacon Michael and the Ethiopian Church, an invitation Luther withheld from the Bohemian Brethren (the Hussites) and Reformed Churches connected to Ulrich Zwingli.

From his dialogue with Michael the Deacon, Luther must have been thrilled to learn that what he had rediscovered in his reading of the Scriptures was already present in the Ethiopian Church.

His reforms were based on more than the early church of his imagination. For Luther, the Church of Ethiopia was the historical proof that his reform of the church in Europe had a clear historical and biblical basis.

The revelation that Ethiopian Christianity possibly had links to Protestant Reformation is a game-changer for what is generally thought to be an exclusively European phenomenon.

The admission that this cross-cultural global exchange between Africa and Europe shaped early Protestantism disrupts the narrative that the Reformation was solely the product of Western civilization.

By recognizing the contribution of Ethiopian Christianity to the Protestant Reformation, we can join Luther in acknowledging Ethiopian Christianity as a

forerunner of the Protestant Reformation.

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