AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
vol. 2, nº 2 (2025) 340–344

African and European Collaboration:
Reading African and Latin European Crusader Sources Together

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY
Simmons, Adam. *Nubia, Ethiopia, and the Crusading World, 1095–1402*. Advances in Crusades Research. New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. xii+240. US$43.99.

Nathan Alexander SCOTT

ORCID: 0009-0006-8271-7313
Wycliffe College at The Toronto School of Theology,
Toronto, Canada
nscott590@gmail.com

The history of relations between Latin Christendom and Ethiopia during the Crusades is complex and confusing. One reason for this is that "Ethiopia did not identify as 'Ethiopia' until the arrival of the Solomonids. Neither was Ethiopia the kingdom commonly referred to as *Ethiopia* in Latin Christian texts" (x). Due to these points of confusion, the research on the Crusades has focused on the Latin Christians' relations with Muslim and/or Jewish communities to the exclusion of Northeast Africans. Adam Simmons aims to fill this scholarly gap by highlighting the role that Nubia played in the Crusades, as well as the context leading up to the Ethiopian embassy sent to Venice in 1402. His thesis is that "much more can be said of the entwined histories of Nubia, Ethiopia, and the Latin Christians than is currently the dominant scholarly narrative" (1). Developing this thesis is difficult given the scarcity and fragmentary nature of the primary sources about Ethiopia and Nubia before the emergence of the Solomonic dynasty in the thirteenth century. The Latin sources entail an unfortunate confusion over the name 'Ethiopia,' i.e., to which kingdom/region/people group it referred.

Simmons works through the available material to argue that "Nubians, and then later Ethiopians, were explicitly sought as allies by the Latin Christians but only engaged in their own terms with contrasting results" (9). He develops this argument over six chapters. First, he contextualizes the name 'Ethiopia' in all its complex uses in the twelfth–fourteenth centuries. He then presents the three groups (Latin Christians, Nubians, and Ethiopians) as they existed and interacted in the early twelfth century. He dedicates a chapter to the Prester

Published with license by ACTEA | DOI: https://doi.org/10.69683/8r7bff26

John myth, noting his location in Nubia and Ethiopia. The final two chapters focus on the Latin Christian requests for aid and the Nubian and Ethiopian responses. Thus, Simmons seeks to encourage more analysis of the source material not in isolation, but "to offer a reframing of the current corpus to provide a platform for future work" (10). This monograph has opened a new venue for research on this complex period of history, particularly showcasing the extent to which Africans were involved in the Crusade initiatives.

Simmons shows how the toponym 'Ethiopia' became associated with the north-eastern African country in the thirteenth century, as well as noting its diverse uses. He notes that "the Ethiopian adoption of the toponym initially confused matters for the Latin Christians" (15), since many Latin Christians associated 'Ethiopia' with Nubia. The first recorded use of the name 'Ethiopia' is from before 1200 BC in south-western Greece (15), and its etymology "remains obscure" (16). The reception of the Hebrew Old Testament word Kush (כוש) produced a conglomeration of 'Ethiopians' (16-17), though the Nubians recognized the term 'Kushite' when used by Latin Christians (21). Also, when the Crusaders first encountered 'Ethiopians' in distinction from Nubians, they knew them as Abyssinians (22-23). After the Solomonic Dynasty took over, the use of Abyssinia seems to have dropped away, and 'Ethiopia' became the norm in Latin records (31-3). Thus, the name 'Ethiopia' requires nuanced interpretation in the respective sources. Despite this complexity, there clearly was familiarity between Nubians, Ethiopians, and the Latin Christians during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.

Simmons next contextualizes the Latin Christian shift in perspective of Nubia and Ethiopia from the years before the first Crusade to after encountering the peoples. One of the reasons for their misunderstanding was a "physical and intellectual rupture in the seventh century" (47). Thus, for the first Crusaders, "neither Nubia nor Ethiopia were of concern," yet this radically changed after "the establishment of the Crusader States" in the twelfth century (51). This rupture manifests in the Crusaders' negligible desire to engage with Christians in the African Northeast until the 1160s, and that the 'Ethiopians' whom Latin Christians expected to encounter were enemies of Christendom, based on histories that perpetuated the pseudo-narrative of the 'Ethiopian' enemy (58). When they finally met and engaged with the Northeastern Africans, the Latin Christians' perspective quickly changed.

The third chapter aims to assess the way various individuals and texts contributed to the understanding and relationships between these groups. Simmons notes the many Jewish and Muslim sources that would have influenced and informed the Latin Christians. Thus, early Latin Christian understanding of Northeast Africans was mostly indirect, until the Crusaders

turned their focus toward Egypt and sought alliances with the African Christians. Unfortunately, the available sources are fragmentary. Simmons argues that "whilst the scale of Nubian or Ethiopian interaction with Latin Christians in Egypt cannot be detailed with any great specificity until the fourteenth century, it should not be overlooked" (85). Simmons shows evidence of Nubian and Ethiopian presence throughout Latin Christendom in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, noting that "the Latin Christian community was not racially homogenous by any means" (87). This interspersion of Northeast Africans' presence throughout Europe shows that there was engagement between these peoples, even outside of the Crusading lands.

According to Simmons, Prester John was said to live in Nubia until the thirteenth century when he seemed to move to Ethiopia. This shift coincides with the diminishment of Nubian power and the rise of Ethiopian (105). The name 'Prester John,' according to Simmons, likely originated from "a misinterpretation of the Gəʿəz word *ǧan*," even though the myth likely was first located somewhere in Asia, before Latin Christians began focusing on Northeast Africa (106). The myth involved a 'king of kings' who would lead the Crusaders to victory over the Muslims. Simmons locates the earliest account during the Fifth Crusade (AD 1217–1221) when the Crusaders heard of a powerful unnamed Nubian ruler. This person desired "to rise up, destroy Mecca, and scatter the bones of the Prophet Muhammad. A century later, Nubia was explicitly being recorded as the home of Prester John . . . The later Latin Christian myth of an Ethiopian Prester John merely developed on its Nubian foundations" (108). Simmons shows that some Nubian kings carried the name 'David' (e.g. David II r. 1268–1276), which amplified the messianic elements. As Nubian power waned and Ethiopian waxed, Prester John's home moved, so that from the 1360s he was explicitly identified as Ethiopian (117). As per Simmons's thesis, the Prester John tradition shows that the Latin Christians, at least by the mid-twelfth century, were deeply invested in relations with Nubia and Ethiopia.

In the fifth chapter, Simmons discusses how the Latin Christians used their growing understanding of the Northeast African Christians. One of the responses was to send missionaries to preach against their 'heretical' ways, since the Nubians and Ethiopians were Jacobites, and thus, assumed to be in need of 'conversion'. The earliest record of missionaries from Rome is in a letter sent by Pope Clement IV in 1267 to the Dominicans that identified the peoples to which they were sent as *Aethiopum* and *Nubianorum*. Another reaction to the knowledge of Northeast African Christians was political, which was largely impacted by the growing missionary efforts. As the Latin Christian missionary traffic increased, the Muslim rulers grew wary of a Nubian-Latin Christian alliance. According to later twelfth century sources, this alliance did not come to fruition. One such source recounts a Latin Christian fortress built on the

island of Jazīrat Fir'awn near Aqaba, which the Crusaders called Ile de Graye, and was built, according to Simmons, in 1160 and re-taken by the Muslims in 1171. This fortress account coincided "with early developing interest in the military prowess of Nubia and Ethiopia" (136) and was related to the "supposed 'raid' of Reynald of Châtillon on 'Aidhāb in 1182-3" (138). The raid was likely part of the growing relations among Latin Christians with Nubians and Ethiopians, and was ultimately a failure. Records like this are evidence of the interactions between these groups in the Crusading period, which is essential for properly understanding this period of history.

Simmons then "aims to contextualise the histories of Dotawo and Ethiopia between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries within a regional dimension which was not isolated from the arrival of the Latin Christians and the establishment of the Crusader States" (157). The Muslim powers in Egypt were already increasing their southern defences, i.e., toward Nubia, likely anticipating an alliance with the Latin Christians. Simmons discusses a late twelfth century Nubian plaque found in Attiri. This plaque "depicts a dismounted military saint on one side with a protection prayer in Old Nubian to St. Epimachos on the reverse" (162). Simmons argues that this plaque reflects engagement with Latin Christians. Although little can be said for certain about this plaque, "but it certainly deserves a reassessment" from the isolated examination it has received (162–163). Regarding the lack of late fourteenth century sources, Simmons notes that the plague commonly called the 'Black Death' that ravaged Europe in the 1340s and 1350s had a major impact on the records of interactions. Also, Simmons notes that "it could, or indeed should, be expected that the plague had a similarly profound effect on Dotawo, particularly in Lower Nubia" (180). During the fourteenth century, Latin Christian attention was shifting to Ethiopia. Thus, for the Latin Christians, "a 'new' Ethiopia had replaced the 'old' Ethiopia of Nubia" (193). Unfortunately, sources are limited, if not lacking.

Simmons argues for a new approach to the sources on Latin Christians and Northeastern Africans, i.e., conjunctive study, rather than in isolation from each other. S immons says that "these histories should no longer be viewed almost entirely in isolation and that the historiographical rejection of connections needs to be continually reassessed" (198). Simmons convincingly argues that collaborative study is needed on these sources, and that there is a substantial amount of textual support (albeit fragmentary and scattered) for relations between Latin Christians and Northeast Africans during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Therefore, anyone interested in the history of the Crusades should read this book.

On a critical note, as much as his primary aim is to promote deeper study in this framework, he is unable to say anything with certainty. The textual evidence requires more analysis before anyone can make definitive statements. Thus, this book, as much as it is important, is anti-climactic. Stylistically, many sentences are lengthy which requires more energy to engage with the flow of thought.

Despite those critical points, Simmons succeeds in his stated aims. I hope that scholars of the history of the Crusades build on this work and produce more collaborative analyses. This book has demonstrated substantial evidence of interaction between Northeast Africans and Latin Christians, which requires more study. I echo Simmons's hopes, namely, that more work would be done on these texts in conjunction and not in isolation.