



BOOK NOTE REVIEW

Krebs, Verena. *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft and Diplomacy with Latin Europe.* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Pp. xvii + 308. € 99.99 (hardback), € 99.99 (paperback), € 85.59 (ebook).
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Most of my medieval studies in church history have never alluded to any form of Christian spirituality that was going on in Africa in the medieval period. The main emphasis of those studies was on the history of the church in the Latin West. Therefore, most of the theological students in Africa, including myself, grow in their theological studies with the impoverished view of what is transpiring in the African community on the relationship between the Latin West and Africa at large and let alone Ethiopia. This book, therefore, written by Verena Krebs, who is a historian and the director of Mediterranean studies at Ruhr University in Germany, introduces the reader to the diplomacy between the Medieval Ethiopian kings and the Latin West in the early fifteenth century. In this book, Krebs examines historical documents and challenges the traditional interpretation which asserts that the Solomonic royals engaged with the Latin West because they were looking for military equipment and support from the West. However, Krebs asserts that the historical sources demonstrate that the Solomonic royals established a relationship with the Latin west to acquire religious materials such books, liturgical objects, craftsmen, and ecclesiastical fabrics. The main question which this book seeks to answer is *Why did generations of nāgāst (Gə‘əz: ‘kings’; singular: nəguś) initiate diplomatic contacts with different princely and ecclesiastical courts in Europe in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries?*

To answer the main research question, the book is structured on a chronological methodology that seeks to examine the diplomacy of the Ethiopian mission in the Latin West. Consequently, the second chapter surveys the diplomatic missions under the leadership of *aṣe* Dawit II in the fifth century (*aṣe* is a Gə‘əz “honorific term of address” used before the names of Ethiopian kings and emperors; xi). In this chapter, Krebs provides the historical data which facilitate the genesis of diplomacy between the Ethiopian royals and the Latin west. Krebs is dogmatic in this chapter about her thesis that the Ethiopian

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Solomonic royals were concerned solely with the religious treasures such as ecclesiastical articles, garments, and artisan-craftsmen. She repeats this argument throughout every chapter emphasizing her thesis statement. This depicts some form of religious quest and zeal from the Solomonic royals that is often seen and interpreted as only coming from the Latin West. Krebs interweaves some of the historical narratives that demonstrate this religious quest, such as the attendance of the council of Constance by some of the Ethiopian delegates in 1416–1418 and visitation to Jerusalem. The chapter attempts to answer the question of what was the quest for linking with the Latin West? Furthermore, Krebs postulates that some of the diplomacy was motivated by the longing to experience some of the sacred sites. This led to building some of the beautiful churches in the Solomonic royal places in Ethiopia. The third chapter refocuses on the sons of Dawit, especially *aṣe* Yesḥaq and *aṣe* Zār‘a Ya‘əqob, focusing on the second phase of diplomacy. Many scholars such as Taddese Tamrat and Charles Buckingham have interpreted this phase of diplomacy as motivated by military relations. However, this is the main issue that Krebs tries to debunk in this chapter and in the whole book. Krebs argues that the European crusades that were common in this phase did not derail the Ethiopian interest in religious issues and sacred sites. *Aṣe* Dawit’s sons followed the footsteps of their father by trying to strengthen this relationship, which was solely built upon religious quest and building of religious sites in Ethiopia.

During the last half of the fifteenth century till the sixteenth century, Ethiopia reached its climax of economic prosperity and cultural enrichment (122). Chapter 4 is grounded in this period, exploring key three Ethiopian embassies with the Latin West. Krebs argues that the prosperity of the late fifteenth century did not derail the Ethiopian royals from their religious quest and the building of churches and religious sites. Furthermore, this chapter also shows the interrelationship between European powerhouses and Ethiopian Solomonic royals. Portugal, to be specific, was eager to build a lasting relationship with the churches in the Horn of Africa that were led by the Solomonic royals. In chapter 5, Krebs surveys recent scholarship on the relation between the Ethiopian royals and the Latin West, which, according to Krebs, fails to interpret the historical documents well because they were motivated by a Eurocentric approach and rooted in the colonial history.

The question that this reader asks after reading this book is: *What other historical issues about Africa are rooted in the colonial history?* This narrative, written by Krebs on the diplomacy between the Ethiopian Solomonic royals and the Latin West, is one of the many that the colonial lens has been and still is used to interpret these documents. Krebs strongly rejects colonial narratives and asserts that it was Latin West that was seeking military support from the Solomonic royals in Ethiopia. This book therefore has a liberation motif which seeks to unravel the historical truth from the colonial historical documents.