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Luther's Works in Ethiopian Languages

by SAMUEL DERESSA

Christianity was introduced to Ethiopia in the fourth century. Lutheran missions started in the late 1860s when the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) planted a mission station in Imkulu, in present day Eritrea. From there they trained and sent missionaries into Ethiopia, a few freed slaves both men and women and former Orthodox priests, to spread the gospel throughout the country. Today, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) is the largest and the fastest-growing Lutheran church in the world with over ten million members. From the very beginning, the EECMY's identity was shaped by Luther's writings, especially the *Small Catechism*.

Initial Mission Efforts and Translations

The translation and distribution of Luther's works started in Ethiopia with the arrival of the Swedish missionaries in the late 1860s. The SEM initially intended to spread the gospel to the Oromo, inhabitants of the southern part of Ethiopia and followers of Islam and traditional beliefs.¹ When the Swedes arrived in Eritrea, however, the Ethiopian king Tewodros II stopped them from going to the southern part. Therefore, the SEM decided to plant a mission station at Imkulu and evangelize the people living in Eritrea while waiting for a favorable time to reach the Oromo. Eritrea during this time, a part of Ethiopia, was controlled partly by Italians.

At the mission station in Imkulu, the Swedish Evangelical Mission established a school named "School for Freed Men" in 1870 where they began educating and evangelizing liberated slaves. Six years later in 1876, they expanded their vision and started a training center for freed slave women on the same campus.² The SEM wanted to educate freed men and women and send them back to their people as missionaries. The Swedish Evangelical Mission and Italian soldiers who controlled the area were the primary liberators

of the slaves who became enrolled at this school. The SEM missionaries also educated some exiled priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. According to Gustav Arén, the students were mainly composed of “liberated slaves, poor fugitives, and exiled reformers.”³ In addition to academic lessons, the school offered training in carpentry and metalwork. Arabic and Amharic were the languages of instruction. These languages, however, were not intelligible to most of the liberated slaves, since they were Oromo. So Bengt Peter Lundahl, one of the SEM missionaries, suggested translating and printing selected works. In order to accomplish this, he bought a manual printing press in 1882.

The first translation printed at Imkulu was an Oromo hymnbook with a title *Galata Waaqayoo Gofta Maccaa*. This hymnbook was published in 1886, and contained some of Luther’s hymns, such as “A Mighty Fortress” and “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” translated from Swedish into Oromo.⁴ The hymnbook also contained a liturgy, and was used for over one hundred years by Oromo-speaking Lutheran congregations in Ethiopia. The second book printed in Imkulu was a revised version of Ludwig Krapf’s Amharic translation of Luther’s Small Catechism. Krapf, a German Lutheran missionary who in 1866 had translated Luther’s catechism into Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, was never able to use it or distribute it among Ethiopians.⁵ His version was revised by the SEM missionary Anders Svensson and was printed in Imkulu in 1888.⁶ The schools for freed men and women in Imkulu used this Amharic translation as a main text for instruction. But only a few freed slaves who spoke Amharic, some converts from in and around Imkulu, and reformed Orthodox priests, could use this translation. For Oromo-speaking freed slaves, the Amharic translation was difficult to comprehend, but better than other European language translations. As the Lutheran confession also expanded to other parts of Ethiopia, particularly among the Amharic-speaking community, this translation was mainly used to instruct newly catechized believers before baptism. It was also used as a resource for youth instruction.

In 1899, Onesimos Nesib (1856–1931) translated Luther’s Small Catechism from Swedish into Oromo. When translating, Onesimos used Krapf’s Amharic translation to help support his work. His

translation was then printed in Chrischona, Switzerland, with the support of the SEM.⁷ This translation was reprinted in Imkulu in the early 1920s when Onesimos and other early indigenous missionaries lacked sufficient copies. The EECMY, after it was established as a national church in 1959, continued to reprint this translation until a new rendition by the Lutheran Heritage Foundation appeared in 2018, as discussed below. When translating the Small Catechism, Onesimos used Oromo traditional religious concepts to help the Oromo people understand the Christian faith. This approach of Onesimos, according to O. Eide, “laid the foundation for an indigenous interpretation of the Gospel. Scarcely any other external factor has had the same impact on Oromo ethnic consciousness or religious experience.”⁸ Through his translation, Onesimos was able to connect Christian theology with Oromo identity.⁹

Mission Among the Oromo

In the early 1920s, the door was opened for indigenous Ethiopian Lutheran missionaries to go to the Oromo community and start their mission work. The Swedes themselves, however, were not allowed into the country until twenty-eight years later. Onesimos and a few other local missionaries such as Gebre-Ewostatewos (a reformed Orthodox priest), Daniel Debela, and Aster Gano and Nasise Liben (two freed slave women who were trained in Imkulu) were the ones who started the first Lutheran congregations in the Western part of the country among the Oromo communities.

Their method of evangelism focused on educating people and giving them the opportunity to read and understand the Bible in their own language. They started schools along with the congregations that they planted. In both schools and congregations, they used the Oromo translations of Luther's Small Catechism and the Bible as resources. They mainly used the Small Catechism to instruct children and youth in the Christian faith.¹⁰ Those who wanted to confirm their faith had to study these books first and then were baptized if they had not been baptized as infants. These two translations (the catechism and the Bible) contributed to the development of the vernacular literature of most southwest people of Ethiopia.

As Johnny Bakke has indicated, this not only resulted in the start of a strong Lutheran church in Ethiopia, but also “gave the Oromo society in Wollaga an educated elite which has made its impact on Ethiopia ever since.”¹¹

Onesimos and Aster had a robust plan to translate more books into the Oromo language, including some other works of Luther. Among others, they planned to translate the Large Catechism, the Smalcald Articles, and *The Bondage of the Will*.¹² Their plan, however, could not be realized because of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church’s claim that it is improper to “present the Christian faith in a vernacular language like Oromo and Amariyna.”¹³ Since the Orthodox church worked hand in glove with the Ethiopian government, they were capable of blocking any effort that seemed improper in their eyes.¹⁴ Onesimos and other Lutheran evangelists were taken to court several times to stop their efforts to translate and teach in the vernacular. Orthodox church officials argued that only “Geez is the sacred language of the Holy Scripture.”¹⁵ The translation ministry that started in Imkulu was thus held back from further development at that time.

Bible Schools and Seminaries

From the very beginning, lay ministers were active in the life and work of the Lutheran church in Ethiopia. Indigenous lay ministers like Onesimos, Aster, and a few former priests from the Ethiopian Orthodox church played a great role in planting the first few congregations and schools. Still today, one of the characteristics of the EECMY is its emphasis on lay ministry. In EECMY congregations, lay ministers conduct more than half of the Sunday services. In the first Lutheran congregations in Ethiopia, the most important resource for instructing youth and new members was the catechism. The Oromo and Amharic translations of Luther’s Small Catechism were widely distributed and used in different parts of the country. As Eide has said, referring to the Oromo and Amharic translations, in the EECMY congregations “Luther’s *Small Catechism* has been the basis for the doctrinal teaching, enriched by references to the *Large Catechism*.”¹⁶

When the number of Lutheran churches continued to grow in different parts of the country, indigenous evangelists and leaders as well as missionaries felt the need for ordained personnel. In the late 1940s, the Swedish Evangelical Mission started the first theological school in Nadjo with seven students and one teacher.¹⁷ At this Bible school, the Amharic and Oromo translations of the catechism and the Bible were the only resources available for students to use. The theological training extended for three years with emphasis on Lutheran doctrine and its application. The main goal of the school was to graduate “pastors [with] a deep knowledge of the basic evangelical [Lutheran] doctrines and a mature judgment in practical congregational questions.”¹⁸ In addition to the Oromo and Amharic translations of Luther’s Small Catechism, the teachers used a hand-written Oromo translation of the Augsburg Confession along with the English edition of the *Book of Concord*. Students had to copy this translation by hand for their own use.¹⁹

Some missionaries, however, had concerns regarding the Amharic and Oromo translations of the catechism that were widely distributed throughout the country. Dietrich Wassmann, for example, a missionary from German Hermannsburg Mission to Ethiopia, was concerned that both Krapf and Onesimos had translated certain things from the Heidelberg Catechism,²⁰ a Reformed catechism, rather than from Luther.²¹ The two translations, however, are very close translations of Luther’s Small Catechism, but mostly using words that were commonly used by traditional believers (for the Oromo translation) and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (for the Amharic translation).²² Even the structure of these translated catechisms is far from how the Heidelberg Catechism is structured.²³ The new Amharic and Oromo translations of Luther’s Small Catechism by the Lutheran Heritage Foundation is also very similar to these two early translations except that more modern words and concepts were used to make them appealing to the new generation (see below). A possible explanation for why some missionaries disliked the translations (or connected these translations to the Heidelberg Catechism) could be the language used by the Ethiopian translators to contextualize or connect Christian thoughts to that of Ethiopians. Some missionaries were proposing a total disconnect

between African traditional religion and Christianity, but for the early Ethiopian leaders like Onesimos, it was impossible to translate Christian thoughts into those languages without using the religious language already in use.

In 1960, a joint theological seminary started in Addis Ababa. The Swedish Evangelical Mission and other mission organizations such as the German Hermannsburg Mission, the American Lutheran Mission, and the Norwegian Lutheran Mission cooperated to start this seminary to train competent pastors in accordance with an American and European standard.²⁴ As Bakke has stated, this seminary followed “largely a traditional seminary curriculum, but some specific Ethiopian subjects were added like Ge’ez and study of the EOC.”²⁵ At first, the idea was to use Amharic as the primary language of instruction while also using English as a secondary language. They planned to translate as many books and other resources as possible, including Luther’s works, and use them as instructional materials. Probably because of the projected cost of this project, or the need to hew to an international standard, they decided to use English instead as the primary language of instruction. Because of this decision, the need to translate Luther’s works into Ethiopian languages, particularly Amharic, became less important—and therefore was ignored by the seminary up to the present time.

The Lutheran Heritage Foundation

The Lutheran Heritage Foundation (LHF) has been engaged in the translation, publication, distribution, and introduction of multiple Lutheran books, especially since the strengthening of ties between the EECMY and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) beginning in the early 2000s. LHF works in more than 80 countries and has translated Luther’s works and other Lutheran literature into more than 100 languages.²⁶ The first Amharic translation done by the LHF was the *Book of Concord*,²⁷ including both catechisms and the Smalcald Articles by Luther, published in 2015. This was followed by Catechisms, Creeds, and Confessions in Amharic the same year. This book is a side-by-side Amharic/English volume, which includes the three ecumenical creeds, the Small & Large Catechisms, the

Augsburg Confession, and portions of the Formula of Concord.²⁸ LHF also printed the same translation of Luther's Small Catechism by itself in 2016. This was an exciting project for the EECMY as it was already expressing concern that Svensson's revised 1888 version of the Catechism had used some archaic Amharic words that were difficult for the current generation to understand. In 2018 the LHF also translated *The Bondage of the Will* into Amharic.

The Lutheran Heritage Foundation also translated Luther's Small Catechism into Oromo in 2018. This translation was needed because today's readers find it hard to understand some of the words and concepts used in Onesimos's translation—the one used for over a hundred years. Looking at the LHF's Oromo translation of the Small Catechism, one can see that the translators have heavily used Onesimos Nesib's creative language which he borrowed from the Oromo traditional religion—a language that has become a formal language of worship in the Oromo-speaking congregations. To give an example, the word *waaqeffannaa* for worship is adopted from the Oromo traditional religious understanding of worshipping *waaqa* the unknown God who reveals himself through creation. Other translations of Luther's works into Ethiopian languages by the LHF include Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation into Anuak and Nuer, languages of people in the Gambella region, the western part of Ethiopia.

With the Ethiopian pastor Dr. Dinku Bato serving as the new director of LHF Africa, there are plans to translate yet more works associated with Luther and Lutheran theology. An Oromo translation of Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation was published in July of 2019.²⁹ Expanding on Luther's explanations in his Small Catechism, this catechism contains other explanations that have been added by others on new and current questions and topics facing the current generation. What makes this translation different compared to the 2016 translation is that it also contains Luther's own commentaries on sections of the Catechism. Moreover, translation is well underway of the catechism into other Ethiopian languages, such as Hadiya and Kambata, two languages used in the southern part of Ethiopia.

LHF also collaborates with the EECMY's media wing, the Yemisirach Dimts (YD), also known as the Radio Voice of the Gospel.

YD was established under the EECMY in 1959 to work on Christian literature and on a literacy campaign in Ethiopia.³⁰ In the past, YD had translated much literature on the Lutheran faith into Ethiopian languages, but none from Luther's works. According to the new Director of YD, Gemechis Didi, YD now plans to translate Luther's works into Ethiopian languages, and is currently in the process of translating Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* into Amharic.³¹ Plans are being made to translate the *Treatise on Christian Freedom, On Secular Authority, On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and The Magnificat*, among others.³²

Conclusion

Relatively few works by Luther have been translated into Ethiopian languages. As indicated above, starting from the early history of the Lutheran movement in Ethiopia, the EECMY has given more emphasis to Luther's Small Catechism than to other writings of Luther. The *Small Catechism* shaped the life and ministry of this church more than any other work by Luther or any other Lutheran confessional writing. Little research has been done on the overall factors that shaped the life and ministry of the EECMY in the past one hundred and fifty years of its life. These factors include the rich history and teaching of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,³³ African traditional culture and values,³⁴ the legacy of mission organizations,³⁵ the charismatic movement,³⁶ and the influx of non-Lutheran evangelical believers into the EECMY when most of those churches were closed during the military government (1974–1991).³⁷ One specific area of study that needs the attention of African scholars is the significance of Luther's works in shaping the identity and ministry of the EECMY.

NOTES

1. The Oromo are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia.
2. Tasgaraa Hirphoo, *Abbaa Gammachiis (Onesimos Nasib) Biography: A Native of Oromiya, Enslaved, Freed and an Envoy of the Gospel (1856–1931)* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Asteer Aannoo Literature Society, 1999), 27. This was probably due to their recognition that women played a major role in African societies, particularly in educating their family. A

German woman named Rosa Van Hagen, who was married to the Swedish missionary Ola Mansson, played a key role in starting and also educating freed slave women at this school

3. Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Stockholm: EFS Förlaget, 1978), 212; Øyvind Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth & Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974–85* (Oxford: J. Currey, 2000), 82.

4. Onesimos Nesib, *Galata Waaqayoo Gofa Maccaa* (SEM: Imkulu, 1886).

5. Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 450. Amharic is a language mainly spoken by the Amhara tribe in Ethiopia. It is also a widely spoken language in Ethiopia since it is the only “working” language used by the Federal Government of Ethiopia.

6. Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 450.

7. It was printed together with Onesimos’s translation of the whole Bible into the Oromo language. Onesimos translated his work mainly from the Catechism as published in the Swedish language. See Hirphoo, *Abbaa Gammachiis (Onesimos Nasib)*, 37ff. Onesimos’s translation was also supported by the Amharic translation of Luther’s Catechism, “Die Württembergische Kinderlehre und das Confirmations-Büchlein ins Amharische übersetzt von Johannes Maier,” revised and edited by Ludwig Krapf in 1866.

8. Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 72. For details, see Johnny Bakke, *Christian Ministry: Patterns and Functions within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1987), 42, 127–128.

9. For detail, see Samuel Deressa. “Onesimos Nesib, Ethiopian Evangelical Pioneer,” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 32 (2018): 160–172.

10. Hirphoo, *Abbaa Gammachiis (Onesimos Nasib)*, 20, 37.

11. Bakke, *Christian Ministry*, 141.

12. Hirphoo, *Abbaa Gammachiis (Onesimos Nasib)*, 40–47.

13. Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 72

14. For details, see Arén, 71–77.

15. Arén, 72. Ge’ez is the main liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewa-hedo Church. It is no longer a spoken language, but only used by the church.

16. Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 81.

17. Johnny Bakke, *Christian Ministry*, 146–147. Teachers of the Nadjo Bible School include Lundgren (September 1949–May 1950), Starne (September 1950–December 1950), Arén (December 1950–May 1951), Stjarne (September 1951–May 1952), and Lundgren (September 1952–November 1952).

18. Bakke, *Christian Ministry*, 146.

19. Gemechu Danu, Oral Interview (May 23, 2019). Rev. Gemechu is a graduate of Nedjo Bible School in 1958.

20. The Heidelberg Catechism is the “protestant confession of faith compiled in 1562 by Z. Ursinus and K. Olevian, two Heidelberg theologians, at the instance of the Elector, Fredrick III.” F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 747.

21. Mentioned in Arén, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, 450.

22. See Onesimos Nesib, *Catechism in the Galla-Language* (St. Chrischona, Switzerland: 1899) and *Catechism in the Amharic Language* (Place of publication and publisher not identified, 1888). However, this is the same one translated by Krapf and later revised by the SEM missionary Anders Svensson and printed in Imkulu. Both translations can be accessed in the Tanner Catechism collection at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

23. 'The Heidelberg Catechism is structured as: Part I contained Misery (God's creation and justice), Part II Deliverance (God's righteousness and favor), Part III Gratitude (human response to God's grace and favor) whereas Luther's *Small Catechism* is arranged as The Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, The Sacraments, Confession.

24. Bakke, *Christian Ministry*, 193ff.

25. Bakke, *Christian Ministry*, 195.

26. According to the LHF website, "LHF has published the catechism in more than 90 languages with dozens more requested. In the past decade, LHF has published and distributed over 1,000 titles and 3 million Lutheran books to pastors, seminary students, missionaries and churches—all at no cost to them." See <https://www.lhfmissions.org/>; accessed September 28, 2019.

27. *Book of Concord* (Macomb, MI: Lutheran Heritage Foundation, 2015).

28. *Catechisms, Creeds, and Confessions* (Macomb, MI: Lutheran Heritage Foundation, 2015).

29. Oral Interview, Bato, May 2019.

30. Johannes Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa (1919–1991): With Special Reference to the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Addis Ababa Synod* (Münster: Lit, 2004), 126.

31. Oral Interview, Gamachis Dibi, May 19, 2019.

32. Oral Interview, Gamachis Dibi, August 3, 2019.

33. Bakke, *Christian Ministry*. Gudina Tumsa. *Witness and Discipleship: Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution. Vol. 1* (Hamburg: WDL, 2008). Fakadu Gurmessa, *Evangelical Faith Movement in Ethiopia: Origins and Establishment of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus*. Edited by Ezekiel Gebissa (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2009); Negaso Gidada and Donald Crummey, *The Introduction and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity in Qélém Awraja, Western Wälläga, from About 1886 to 1941* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University, 1972). See also *The Life, Works, and Witness of Tsehay Tolessa and Gudina Tumsa, the Ethiopian Bonhoeffer*, ed. by Samuel Yonas Deressa and Sarah Hinlicky Wilson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

34. Samuel Yonas Deressa, ed. *Emerging Theological Praxis: Journal of Gudina Tumsa Forum* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012). Paul Hoffman, ed. *Church and Society: Second Missiological Seminar on the Life and Ministry of Gudina Tumsa, General Secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (1966–1979)* (Hamburg: WDL-Publishers, 2011); Staffan Grenstedt, *Ambaricho and Shonkolla: From Local Independent Church to the Evangelical Mainstream in Ethiopia, the Origins of the Mekane Yesus Church in Kambata Hadiya* (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2000).

35. Olav Sæverås, *On Church-Mission Relations in Ethiopia 1944–1969: With Special Reference to the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and the Lutheran Missions* (Lund: University Press, 1974). Launhardt, *Evangelicals in Addis Ababa (1919–1991)*; Knud Jorgensen, *Equipping for Service: Christian Leadership in Church and Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012); Samuel Yonas Deressa, "Church and State in Ethiopia: The Contribution of the Lutheran Understanding of the Community of Grace," *Word & World* 37, no. 3 (2017): 281–291.

36. Gustav Arén, *Evangelical Developments after 1910* (Addis Ababa: Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, 1983).

37. Girma Bekele, *The in-between People: A Reading of David Bosch through the Lens of Mission History and Contemporary Challenges in Ethiopia* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011).