

Engaging the Theme

We've Come This Far by Haymanot

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The Gift of God

Faith is a gift from God. In the early 1400s, there was a Christian leader in Ethiopia who was named Giyorgis of Sagla. Giyorgis led a large Christian community, was well-versed in Scripture and wrote a systematic theology called the *Mashafa Mestir* (“Book of Mystery”). Giyorgis is the first identified author from Sub-Saharan Africa, and he was a Christian theologian! This testifies to the power of the Gospel that has been at work among all peoples, including African peoples, from our very beginnings. All throughout his book, Giyorgis constantly reminds his community of the importance of *haymanot* (HAY-man-not). The word *haymanot* is an ancient East African word used in various languages that has a very full meaning. It is most often translated as “faith,” but it is a very wholistic concept that can also mean “theology,” “doctrine,” “teaching,” “conduct,” or “lifestyle.” At one point in the book, Giyorgis was exhorting his community on the importance of the unity and equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As he was concluding his teaching, Giyorgis boldly declared that “on account of my belief (I am) of the people of the Nazrawiyan (Christians) and on account of my baptism, a son of the Apostles, a great Christian, girded by the power of haymanot and sealed by balm ointment. Glory to the Father and the Son and to the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.”¹ Giyorgis exhorted the believers of his day to both live

a godly lifestyle and to proclaim biblical doctrine. However, Giyorgis understood that *haymanot* is not something that originates with people—it is a power that girded him and came from the Lord.

The Apostle Paul also wrote to encourage Christians in his community about *haymanot*. After helping to establish the Church in the Asian city of Ephesus, Paul later wrote an epistle to this multi-cultural body of believers. Paul begins with celebrating the work that God has done in Jesus by making us alive through His Spirit. Furthermore, Paul clarifies that our salvation is through a *haymanot* that comes not from us, but from God: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”² In the preceding chapter, Paul outlines God’s initiative in restoring humanity to right relationship with Him through the sacrifice of Jesus and the filling of the Holy Spirit. God did this first through the Hebrews whom He chose in advance of the creation of the world to be His children through Jesus. He also gave His Spirit as a gift to the Gentiles, who are also adopted as children according to His divine purpose. As we delve into the theme of faith, the first thing that we should acknowledge is that faith does not come from ourselves; it is the gift of God.

1 Giyorgis of Sagla, *Mashafa Mestir*, ed. Yaqob Beyene, CSCO 515, *Scriptores Aethiopic* 89 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1990), 44.

2 Eph. 2:8–9. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are from the New Living Translation (NLT).

Haymanot Comes from Hearing

Faith is empowered by proclamation. In the mid-1400s there was an Ethiopian monk named Estifanos who started a reformation movement that spread across the empire. Estifanos was raised in a military family but responded to a call to ministry during his adolescence. Estifanos went to a monastery named Hanbar Godba, where he was ordained by the local bishop after being examined in his *haymanot*: “Then the saint (Estifanos) discussed with him (the bishop) on what concerned the subject of *haymanot* (faith), showing him his worship of the Creator who exists in a Trinity of persons without confusion or difference, presenting witnesses from the revelations of the Prophets and the teaching of the Apostles.”³ For Estifanos, his *haymanot* was the gift of the Holy Spirit that was confirmed and strengthened by the witness of Holy Scripture. It was his belief in the sole authority of Scripture that led Estifanos to defy the dominant church and the emperor of Ethiopia that led to his imprisonment, torture and death. However, Estifanos’ followers continued his teachings, and he is still revered today among many Ethiopian Christians. Estifanos refused to pray to saints or bow before the king or icons. He emphasized faith in God alone and the authority of Scripture over the teachings of the church. A century later in Europe, Martin Luther made similar arguments against the Catholic Church which ignited the Protestant Reformation. However, there was a reformation movement started by Estifanos a century earlier in Africa! Estifanos was led by his faith which was empowered by the proclamation of the Gospel as presented in Holy Scripture. Estifanos was able to stand against an empire due to his faith that was a gift from God and confirmed by the witness of the Word of God.

³The *Gèez Acts of Abba Estifanos of Gwendagwende*, ed. Getatchew Haile, CSCO 619, *Scriptores Aethiopici* 110 (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 2006), 21.

In his epistle to the believers in Rome, the Apostle Paul explains the necessity of faith for salvation. Paul then communicates God’s desire for His people to carry the message of salvation to the world: “But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, ‘How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!’” But not everyone welcomes the Good News, for Isaiah the prophet said, “Lord, who has believed our message?” So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.”⁴ God does not call humanity to place faith in Him with no foundation. God has given humanity reasons to trust in Him. Indeed, our goal is that this study guide will be yet another witness to God’s goodness that will strengthen your faith. God gives us the gift of faith through the proclamation of His Spirit, His Creation, His People, and His Word.

We Live by Haymanot

Faith is the way of life of the believer. Someone who taught this was an Egyptian theologian and monk named Shenoute of Atripe. Shenoute lived in the Southern Egyptian desert where he led a community of thousands of Egyptian and Nubian Christians in the early 400s. The monastery that Shenoute led was a wholistic example of the Gospel; the Christians there were discipling people in the Word of God, worshipping the Lord together, creating literacy, and vocations for the community, serving the poor, and calling the privileged to justice. The community also had a hospital for the sick, which is probably why Shenoute likened the sanctifying work of God to the process of healing: “As for our trust

⁴ Rom. 10:14–17 (cf. Is. 52:7; 53:1).

that we will be cleansed entirely of this disease (of sin) through his (Jesus') medicines, it is our perfect faith in him."⁵ Shenoute taught the early Egyptian Church that the lifestyle of a believer is characterized by godly character that is actualized by faith. Just as a patient trusts the doctor and her medicine in order to heal illness, the Christian trusts Jesus with "perfect faith."

Jesus' brother James also speaks of "perfect faith" in the Word. James said that "faith by itself...is dead and useless," and that it is alive when accompanied with a godly lifestyle: "Don't you remember that our ancestor Abraham was shown to be right with God by his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see, his faith and his actions worked together. His actions made his faith complete."⁶ Faith begins with God,

as it is His gift to give believers; faith manifests in the believer through obedience. As previously noted, faith comes from God and is not the result of human works. We are saved by faith, and not by works; we are saved by faith for works: "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do good things he planned for us long ago."⁷ The faithful lifestyle of the Christian is characterized by trust in the Lord, being guided by His Spirit and His Word, who fulfills the commandments of the Lord through our new way of life.⁸ Haymanot is the gift of God, the gift of a new way of being: "For we live by faith, not by sight." This way of life does not come from us; haymanot is God's gift that He makes complete in and through us.

5 David Brakke and Andrew Crislip, *Selected Discourses of Shenoute the Great: Community, Theology, and Social Conflict in Late Antique Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 140.

6 Jas. 2:17–22.

7 Eph. 2:10.

8 Rom. 8:4.

