

Reclaiming the Philosopher-King's Wisdom: Reconciling Ethiopia's Imperial, Derg, and Ethnic Federalist Actors toward a Durable Peace

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Abstract:

Ethiopia's political history has been shaped by the philosopher king ideal, a divinely sanctioned, wise ruler modelled on King David and legitimated by the Kebra Nagast and the Orthodox Church. This ideal collapsed under feudal oppression, imperial neglect during the 1973–74 Wollo famine, and the 1974 revolution. This study investigates how the ethical core of the philosopher king model (justice, wisdom, service) can be reclaimed to reconcile Ethiopia's three competing political legacies: Imperial, Derg, and Ethnic Federalist. Methods: A historical institutional analysis integrated with peacebuilding theory was employed. Qualitative interpretation of primary sources (Kebra Nagast, constitutions, and policy documents) and secondary literature (transitional justice reports, conflict analyses) informed the framework. The imperial legacy offers national unity but rests on feudal hierarchy; the Derg's revolutionary rupture destroyed the old order but produced terror and famine; ethnic federalism institutionalized division, culminating in the Tigray War (2020–2022) and ongoing violence. The ethical attributes of King David protective justice (Psalm 72), repentant humility (2 Samuel 12), and covenantal unification (2 Samuel 5) provide normative resources that can be extracted from theocratic monarchy and embedded in democratic institutions. Reconciliation requires neither imperial restoration nor revolutionary erasure, but a new social contract inspired by Davidic wisdom, applied through inclusive national dialogue, land and economic reforms, tiered transitional justice, and multiperspective education. Implement a truth healing commission that includes all three actors, soften ethnic federalism through constitutional reform, and foster a civic, non ethnic national identity.

Keywords: *Philosopher king; Ethiopian political history; transitional justice; ethnic federalism; King David's wisdom*

I. Introduction

1.1 Background

Ethiopia has historically conceived of itself as a nation guided by wise, divinely sanctioned rulers, a political imagination that resonates with Plato's concept of the philosopher-king. For centuries, Ethiopian emperors derived their legitimacy from the Kebra Nagast (ክብረ ነገሥት), or "Glory of the Kings," a foundational 14th-century text that traces the Solomonic dynasty's lineage directly to King David through the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Piovanelli, 2013, p. 7). As Hendrickx (2012) observes, the political theory of the Kebra Nagast is built around "the Solomonic origin of the Ethiopian imperial House and Ethiopian Christian orthodoxy," a synthesis that connected Ethiopia with Roman-Byzantine civilization (p. 22). This sacred genealogy, reinforced by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's formal anointment of each emperor, established a model of divine kingship that fused religious and political authority into a single, enduring power structure.

Plato's original formulation of the philosopher-king, a ruler who combines political power with genuine love of wisdom and deep understanding of justice (Plato, *Republic*, and Book VI) found a distinctive Ethiopian adaptation. Unlike the Greek model's emphasis on philosophical contemplation, Ethiopia's version centered on biblical wisdom inherited from King David, portrayed in scripture as both a warrior-king and the author of psalms, a man after God's own heart. The Kebra Nagast explicitly positions the Ethiopian monarch as the heir to David's covenant, transforming the throne from a political office into a sacred institution (Piovanelli, 2014). This socialization of kingship created what Weber (1978) would later characterize as charismatic authority: the emperor's legitimacy rested not on legal-rational grounds but on the perceived possession of extraordinary, divinely granted wisdom (pp. 1111–1112).

The practical expression of this political theology was the voluntary migration of communities to follow kings they deemed righteous. Great centers of civilization; Axum, Lalibela, Gondar, Addis Ababa emerged not as bureaucratic impositions but as the gravitational centers of wise rule, where people relocated trusting in the leader's commitment to justice and order. For seven centuries, this model shaped Ethiopia's political identity, distinguishing it from other African polities.

1.2 Problem Statement

Notwithstanding this venerable tradition, the reverence for Ethiopia's philosopher-kings has collapsed catastrophically, precipitating cycles of revolutionary violence, civil war, and widespread human suffering. The breakdown occurred in three successive phases. First, the imperial system under Haile Selassie I (r. 1930–1974) suffered a terminal crisis of legitimacy. The catastrophic Wollo famine of 1972–1975, which claimed an estimated 250,000 lives exposed the regimes profound disconnect from rural suffering (Wollo famine, 1972–1975). As the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (2024) documents, the imperial government's inadequate response to the famine became the proximate trigger for the 1974 revolution, ending the 700-year-old Solomonic dynasty.

Second, the Derg military regime (1974–1991) that overthrew the monarchy violently repudiated the philosopher-king tradition. Andargachew Tiruneh (1993) describes how the Derg, after seizing power, systematically adopted Marxism–Leninism as Ethiopia's official ideology, nationalizing land and industry while executing imperial officials and suppressing the Orthodox Church (p. 156). The regime's "Red Terror" (1976–1978) deepened state repression, traumatized society, and eradicated the last vestiges of reverence for the old order (Kebede, 2011, pp. 4–5). Third, the ethnic federalist system inaugurated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, while dismantling the Derg's totalitarian apparatus, institutionalized ethnicity as the primary organizing principle of statehood. The 1995 Constitution explicitly grants "the unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession" to every "nation, nationality, or people" (FDRE Constitution, 1995, art. 39). Turton (2006) finds that this system, while designed to accommodate diversity, has produced "sharper inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic divides" as identity politics supplanted the former national consciousness (p. 3).

The consequences culminated in the Tigray War (2020–2022), a brutal internecine conflict that inflicted staggering atrocities. As Metekia and Gbodi (2025) report, the Commission of Inquiry on Tigray Genocide documented 152,108 rape victims and over 37,000 individuals subjected to sexual enslavement during the conflict (p. 2). Beyond documented war crimes, the war produced mass displacement, famine conditions, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Even after the November 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, violence

persists. By 2025–2026, armed conflicts continue in Amhara and Oromia regions, the transitional justice process remains incomplete, and Ethiopia confronts a crisis of national identity without a credible political framework for reconciliation (EHRC, 2024, p. 5).

1.3 Research Question

How can the ethical core of the philosopher-king model, justice, wisdom, and service be reclaimed to reconcile Ethiopia's three competing political legacies: Imperial, Derg, and Ethnic Federalist?

This question addresses the fundamental tension between Ethiopia's rich tradition of sacred, wise leadership and its contemporary fragmentation. Rather than advocating a return to monarchy, this research investigates whether the ethical attributes associated with King David (justice for the weak, humility after transgression, capacity to unify fractious groups) can be extracted from their theocratic container and repurposed as normative guidelines for inclusive governance. The philosopher-king concept, critically evaluated, offers both risks; authoritarianism, mystification of power, and depoliticization of civic participation (Philbert et al., 2023, pp. 5–6)—and opportunities: a non-ethnic, morally grounded vision of leadership that transcends identity politics.

II. Research Methods

2.1 The Philosopher King Ideal in Ethiopian Political Thought

The notion that a society's highest good depends on rule by a wise and virtuous leader has exercised political philosophy since antiquity. In Ethiopia, this conception did not remain an abstract meditation but became an enduring institutional reality. This section traces the Ethiopian appropriation of the philosopher-king ideal, examining its Platonic antecedents, its articulation in the *Kebra Nagast* (ክብሩ ነገሥት), the legitimising role of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the reciprocal expectations that bound sovereign and subject (Goshu, 2025).

2.2 Plato's Concept and Ethiopian Adaptation

From Greek Philosophy to Indigenous Sacred Kingship

Plato's *Republic* advances the controversial proposition that “until philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings...genuinely and adequately philosophise, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide...cities will have no rest from evils” (Plato, 1992, 473d). The philosopher-king, for Plato, is no merely astute politician but one who has ascended from the cave's shadows to apprehend the Form of the Good figure possessing both knowledge of the true nature of justice and the practical authority to order the state accordingly. This ideal, while utopian in its original Greek context, found an unexpected and durable home in the highlands of Northeast Africa.

The Ethiopian adaptation of the philosopher-king departed from the Platonic original in two decisive respects. First, where Plato emphasised rational contemplation and philosophical dialectic, Ethiopia's model derived wisdom from divine revelation, grounded in the Hebrew Bible and its claim that Solomon was “wiser than anyone else” (1 Kings 4:31, *NIV*). Second, while Plato's guardian class was to be selected by merit and subjected to a protracted education in mathematics and dialectic, Ethiopia's philosopher-kings inherited wisdom dynastically, through the bloodline of David and Solomon.

Although Plato's works were not directly transmitted to medieval Ethiopia, the underlying conception that legitimate rule requires superior wisdom, found powerful indigenous equivalents. The Solomonic dynasty's insistence on imperial education, the production of theological treatises by emperors such as Zara Yaqob (r. 1434–1468), and the expectation that a ruler serve as Ethiopia's chief judge and arbiter of justice all reflect a practical instantiation of the philosopher-king archetype. As Philbert et al. (2023) argue, the model carries inherent risks of authoritarianism, yet its ethical core that leadership must be tethered to wisdom rather than mere force or ethnic affiliation has persisted in Ethiopian political culture (p. 5).

2.3 The *Kebra Nagast* and the Davidic Lineage: How Biblical Wisdom Became the Legitimising Myth for Solomonic Emperors

If Plato supplied the abstract ideal, the *Kebra Nagast* supplied the concrete narrative that transformed the philosopher-king from concept into constitution. Compiled in the early 14th century in Ge'ez, probably at the direction of the newly established Solomonic dynasty, the *Kebra Nagast* (or “Glory of the Kings”) purports to trace the Ethiopian royal line back to Menelik I, the son of King Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba (Makeda) (Budge, 1932; Piovanelli, 2013, p. 7). As Piovanelli (2013) observes, the text “presents a re-evaluation of the ideological function of the *Kəbrä nāgāst* as an apocryphal production to establish the moral authority of the new ‘Solomonic’ dynasty” founded by Yekuno Amlak after his victory over the Zagwe in 1270 (p. 7). The work has been described as “an Abyssinian politico-religious epic”, transforming a dynastic coup into a sacred restoration (Hendrickx, 2012, p. 22; *Kebra Nagast*, n.d., para. 41).

At the heart of the *Kebra Nagast* lies the figure of Solomon, celebrated not for wealth or military prowess but for wisdom: the biblical king who famously adjudicated the dispute between the two prostitutes (1 Kings 3:16-28) and whose “wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East” (1 Kings 4:30, *NIV*). By tracing their descent from Solomon, Ethiopian emperors laid claim not only to a prestigious ancestry but to a specific *type* of wisdom judicial, prophetic, and capable of discerning justice amidst conflicting claims. The *Kebra Nagast* further amplifies this theme by narrating the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, positioning the Ethiopian monarch as the true guardian of the Davidic covenant after the northern kingdom of Israel's apostasy (Piovanelli, 2014, p. 564).

The text thus functions as a “patent of sovereignty”, as early translators recognised, making the Ethiopian king “the heir of the throne of David” and Ethiopia “the new Israel” (Budge, 1932, p. ix). For six centuries, this narrative supplied the dynasty's foundational myth: Ethiopian emperors did not merely rule, they *embodied* the wisdom of Solomon and, through him, the justice of David. The *Kebra Nagast* enabled Yekuno Amlak's rebellion “to be presented not as an act of insurgency against the Zagwe, but as the restoration of the rightful Solomonic line after a period of usurpation” (Sishagne, 2022, para. 47-48).

2.4 The Social Contract under the Philosopher King Voluntary Migration to Royal Centres as an Expression of Trust, and the Expectation of Justice

The Ethiopian philosopher-king was not a remote autocrat whose writ ran only at the point of a spear. Rather, his authority was constituted and reproduced through a distinctive social dynamic: the voluntary movement of people to the king's chosen capital. As one historian has observed, “When they moved, the court moved. The nobles moved. The scholars moved. The soldiers moved” (Demelash, 2026, para. 28-30). This migration was not coerced; it represented an act of trust, a collective wager that proximity to the king would yield justice, security and access to resources.

The historical record is replete with such translocations. Under the Zagwe, the capital had been at Roha (modern Lalibela). Yekuno Amlak, after his victory, established a new centre of gravity in Shewa. Later monarchs founded or expanded Gondar in the 17th century, and Menelik II, in the late 19th century, moved the imperial seat to Addis Ababa, a location previously uninhabited. In each case, the founding of a capital was less a bureaucratic decision than a charismatic event: thousands of followers; nobles, ecclesiastical dignitaries, merchants, artisans and soldiers chose to relocate, betting that the new ruler's wisdom and justice would make the move worthwhile.

This dynamic closely approximates what political theorists have termed “performance legitimacy”: authority accrues to the ruler who demonstrably fulfils the functions of governance arbitrating disputes, distributing resources fairly, defending the realm, and upholding religious orthodoxy. As Demelash (2026) notes, “the bond between the Ethiopian people and their ruler was a powerful engine of state-building. People would voluntarily migrate to follow a king they believed in” (para. 28-30). Conversely, the erosion of that belief the perception that the king had ceased to be wise or just could depopulate a capital as swiftly as it had been populated. The expectation that animated this movement was not merely economic security but *justice* understood in the biblical sense (*mišpāt*) as the right ordering of communal relations. The philosopher-king was expected to sit in judgment, to hear the grievance of the lowly, and to rule without partiality. In this respect, Ethiopia's political theology shared more with the Hebrew prophets' insistence on social justice than with the hieratic formalism of some other Christian monarchies.

The following table summarises the conceptual architecture of the Ethiopian philosopher-king ideal:

Table 1. Conceptual Architecture of the Ethiopian Philosopher-King Ideal: Components, Content, and Sources of Authority

Component	Content	Source of Authority
Ethical core	Justice, wisdom (biblical <i>mišpāt</i> and <i>ḥokmā</i>), service	1 Kings 3-4; <i>Kebra Nagast</i>
Legitimising narrative	Descent from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba	<i>Kebra Nagast</i> ; national epic
Sacramental institution	Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church	Anointment; Ark of the Covenant
Social mechanism	Voluntary migration to royal centres	Trust in ruler's capacity for justice
Sovereign function	Judgment, protection, redistribution of land	Performance legitimacy

In sum, the Ethiopian philosopher-king was not a Platonic abstraction but an empirically realized institution: a ruler whose authority rested on a sacred genealogy, who was consecrated by the church, and whose continued legitimacy depended on his demonstrated capacity to dispense justice capacity that was recognised, affirmed and reproduced through the voluntary movement of his people. It was this fragile, performative compact that would be shattered by the crises of the 20th century.

2.5 The Breakdown: Why Reverence Turned to Revolt

A political order founded on the perception of divine wisdom could endure only as long as that perception remained intact. The Ethiopian philosopher-king, whose authority rested on a sacred covenant between the Davidic throne and the faithful, required the ruler's demonstrable capacity to dispense justice, protect the weak and ensure communal welfare. By the early 1970s,

however, every pillar of that contract had crumbled. What follows is an examination of the proximate and structural causes of the imperial collapse, the emperor's disastrous indifference to rural suffering, the 1974 revolution that violently terminated the Solomonic line, and the legitimacy vacuum that subsequent authoritarian models proved unable to fill.

2.6 Late Imperial Failures: Feudal Land Tenure, Economic Stagnation, and the Catastrophic 1973–74 Wollo Famine

The Haile Selassie regime's most fundamental liability was its land tenure system. The antiquated feudal structure, described by Clapham (1988) as "the decay of Ethiopia's socio-political system", had frustrated modernisation for decades. The emperor was officially the sole and unique landowner; from this position, he parcelled out estates to nobles, army officers, and the Orthodox Church, whose loyalty was thereby secured but whose tenants were systematically exploited (Gilkes, 1975, p. 12; Goshu, 2026c). Peasant families were subjected to *gäbbar* obligations, a comprehensive system of labour, tribute and taxation that encompassed virtually all rural producers (Bogale, 2017, p. 42). As the reformist imperative collided with entrenched elite interests, successive attempts at redistribution were thwarted, leaving the countryside seething.

Economic stagnation compounded agrarian grievance. The agricultural economy, upon which the vast majority of Ethiopians depended, remained technologically backward, producing chronic deficits. A severe drought struck the northern provinces of Wollo and Tigray in the winter of 1973, precipitating what would become the deadliest famine in a generation. Estimates of the death toll vary, but the consensus figure approximates 250,000 people by 1975 (Wollo famine, 1972–1975). The New York Times reported in 1974 that "although no count of deaths has been made, a wide variety of sources believe that at least 100,000 people and possibly more died" (Mohr, 1974, para. 4). Other sources place the figure between 200,000 and 250,000 (New Vision, 2023; Stanford University Libraries, 2023). Regardless of the precise number, the magnitude of preventable mortality was staggering and the response of the imperial government was calamitously inadequate.

The famine thus became more than a humanitarian catastrophe: it was the unmasking of the philosopher-king's moral bankruptcy. For centuries, the monarch's legitimacy had rested on the expectation that he would act as the nation's shepherd, protecting the vulnerable from precisely such calamities. The regime's failure to anticipate, mitigate or even acknowledge the famine until it had already claimed hundreds of thousands of lives exposed the feudal state as incapable of fulfilling its most elementary function.

2.7 The Emperor's Indifference: Haile Selassie's Disconnect from Rural Suffering; the Erosion of Moral Legitimacy

If structural failures eroded the regime's capacity, the emperor's personal detachment destroyed its claim to *moral* authority. Haile Selassie, by the 1970s an octogenarian who had ruled for nearly half a century, had become sequestered within the corridors of his Addis Ababa palace, largely inaccessible to the country's impoverished majority. This disconnect was tragically illustrated in March 1973, when approximately 1,500 starving peasants from Wollo marched on the capital to plead for relief. Police turned them back at the city's outskirts; a request by the Ministry of the Interior for a report from the provincial governor elicited no meaningful action (Mohr, 1974, para. 6). As news of the famine spread, the emperor's indifference was increasingly perceived not as accidental but as willful.

This perception acquired fatal force when the international press published photographs of the emperor feeding meat to his pet lions at the Addis Ababa Zoo while his subjects starved. The symbolic power of those images cannot be overstated: they transformed a distant monarch into an icon of callousness. Concurrently, the regime's refusal to liberalise politically, coupled with rampant corruption among the nobility, fuelled a student movement that increasingly framed the emperor as the obstacle to any genuine social transformation. Bahru Zewde (2014), himself a participant in the uprising, traces how the Ethiopian student movement emerged from the mid-1960s "to become the major opposition force against the imperial regime" (p. 8). Students and teachers, together with taxi drivers, civil servants and striking military units, wove together a revolutionary coalition that by early 1974 had become ungovernable.

By the time the Wollo famine became undeniable, Haile Selassie's moral legitimacy the very currency upon which the philosopher-king model traded had been entirely depleted. The emperor was no longer revered as a wise guardian but reviled as a feudal relic.

2.8 The "Tangled Legacy" How the fall of the Philosopher King Left a Legitimacy Vacuum, Setting the Stage for Competing Authoritarian Models

The Derg's seizure of power, however, did not produce a stable alternative. By abolishing the monarchy and persecuting the Orthodox Church, the junta eliminated the only institutions capable of conferring transcendent legitimacy upon a centralised state. The language of Marxist-Leninist internationalism could not fill the void left by the Solomonic covenant, nor could the Derg's professed commitment to "land to the tiller" compensate for its escalating repression.

In 1976, Mengistu Haile Mariam consolidated control and launched the "Red Terror", a bloody campaign aimed at annihilating the Derg's civilian opponents, particularly the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). The African Union notes that the Red Terror lasted from 1976 until 1978; during those years, "it was estimated that more than 700,000 people were killed" (AUHRM Project Focus Area: Ethiopian Red Terror). Other scholars contest this figure, offering lower estimates of approximately 10,000 to 100,000 dead, but all agree on the systematic brutality of the campaign (Red Terror (Ethiopia), n.d.). The White Terror, a series of EPRP attacks against Derg members provided a convenient pretext, but the Red Terror far exceeded any proportionality: "Mengistu's Red Terror [was] a bloody campaign that crushed armed opponents among the EPRP and other groups, as well as members of the civilian populace" (Britannica, 1999).

What followed from the Derg's collapse in 1991 was not a restoration of a unified national project but its fragmentation into ethnic federalism. Turton (2006) argues that the new constitution's enshrinement of ethnicity as the primary political category "produced sharper inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic divides" than had existed under the empire (p. 3). The philosopher-king's fall thus left a legacy that was not a clean slate but a *tangled legacy*: the empire's memory persisted as a source of nostalgia for some and of oppression for others; the Derg's violence remained unaddressed by transitional justice; and the ethnic federalist system, in seeking to manage diversity, institutionalized division as the state's organizing logic. As an Addis Standard analysis observes, "the fall of the imperial regime in 1974 is often interpreted as a triumph of popular mobilization. Yet, in the vacuum created by the Emperor, it remained unfilled. The table below summarises the components of the imperial breakdown.

Table 2. Components of Imperial Breakdown: Structural Failures, Legitimacy Erosion, Revolutionary Rupture, and the Resulting Vacuum

Dimension	Key Features	Outcome
Structural failure	Feudal land tenure, economic stagnation, 1973-74 Wollo famine (250,000 dead)	Loss of material capacity to govern
Moral erosion	Emperor's indifference; image of feeding lions while subjects starved	Destruction of perceived justice/wisdom
Revolutionary rupture	Derg's 1975 Land Reform; 1975-76 abolition of dynasty; 1976-78 Red Terror	Physical and symbolic annihilation of old order
Legitimacy vacuum	Collapse of sacral authority; no credible replacement	Proliferation of authoritarian, ethnic-based regimes

With the philosopher-king's moral architecture in ruins and no successor compact yet forged, Ethiopia entered a prolonged interregnum. The following section will examine how each of the three competing political actors—Imperial, Derg and Ethnic Federalist has since vied to fill the void, and how their irreconcilable claims have perpetuated, rather than resolved, the country's crises.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 The Three Competing Actors: Imperial, Derg, and Ethnic Federalist

The collapse of the philosopher-king ideal did not produce a vacuum that was easily filled by a single successor. Instead, three competing political imaginaries, Imperial, Derg, and Ethnic Federalist have contended for legitimacy, each carrying distinct claims about national identity, governance and justice. This section evaluates each actor's strengths and weaknesses, and demonstrates how their unresolved contradictions erupted into the Tigray War and the ongoing violence in Amhara and Oromia.

3.2 The Imperial Legacy: Strengths and Weaknesses

The Solomonic dynasty, which ruled Ethiopia from 1270 to 1974, bequeathed a complex legacy of national integration and hierarchical oppression. Its principal strength was the creation of a durable national identity. The genealogy of the Solomonic line, published in the early 14th century in the *Kebrä Nagast* ("Glory of the Kings"), provided "a basis for Ethiopian national unity through the Solomonic dynasty, Semitic culture, and the Amharic language" (Britannica, 2026, para. 42–44; Goshu, 2025a). Ideologically well-armed, the dynasty forged a sacred narrative that transcended narrow kinship loyalties.

A second strength lay in the empire's remarkable diplomatic prestige. By the early 1970s, Ethiopia maintained diplomatic relations with 81 states, 61 of which had embassies and missions in Addis Ababa (Michael, 2023, pp. 12–14). The country was a founding member of both the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity (now the African Union), whose headquarters were established in Addis Ababa when it was created in 1963 (RFI, 2015, para. 4). Emperor Haile Selassie I played a central role in convening African leaders and overcoming ideological divisions between the Casablanca and Monrovia groups (ENA, 2025, para. 4–6). This diplomatic stature gave Ethiopia an international voice unmatched by most African states.

Nevertheless, the imperial system was marred by profound weaknesses. Its feudal land tenure structure subjected peasant families to *gäbbar* obligations, a comprehensive system of labour, tribute and taxation that trapped the rural majority in poverty (Bogale, 2017, p. 42). Tenants could be evicted at will, and the church and nobility controlled vast estates while

contributing little to agricultural modernisation. The imperial state's reliance on ethnic and religious hierarchies also excluded numerous groups from meaningful participation (Marcus, 2002, p. 145). The Amhara-dominated political elite marginalised Oromo, Somali and other communities, sowing grievances that would later explode.

3.3 The Derg Regime (1974–1991) – Marxist Leninist Rejection of the Old Order

The Derg's seizure of power in September 1974 represented a violent rupture with the philosopher-king tradition. A military committee that had formed to manage the revolution rapidly transformed into a totalitarian Marxist-Leninist state (Tiruneh, 1993, p. 56–58). The regime nationalized all rural land without compensation, abolished the monarchy and systematically suppressed the Orthodox Church. As Kebede (2011) argues, the Derg substituted the old sacral authority with a revolutionary ideology that proved incapable of generating enduring legitimacy (p. 98).

The Derg's rule was characterised by extreme state violence. Between 1976 and 1978, Mengistu Haile Mariam launched the “Red Terror” against civilian opponents, particularly members of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Thousands of suspected enemies were tortured and killed in a purge that consolidated Mengistu's absolute control. The African Union estimates that more than 700,000 people perished during the Red Terror period (AUHRM Project Focus Area). Simultaneously, the regime pursued forced villagization, a programme that relocated rural communities and nomadic groups into planned villages modelled on Soviet and Tanzanian precedents. Opponents viewed villagization as a “thinly veiled effort to address security concerns in rural areas,” particularly where support for the Oromo Liberation Front or Western Somali Liberation Front was strongest (Wikipedia, n.d., para. 27–31). Relocations were often conducted hastily and violently, exacerbating poverty and drawing international condemnation.

The Derg's catastrophic famine of 1984–1985 coinciding with the tenth anniversary of the regime further discredited the state. Political decisions exacerbated drought consequences, as the regime used relief aid as a replacement for funds devoted to prosecuting military objectives. By the late 1980s, the Derg was fighting a multi-front civil war against ethno-nationalist insurgencies (TPLF, EPLF, and OLF) and Marxist state-nationalist groups (EPRP). The regime collapsed in May 1991, leaving behind a traumatised society and a failed state apparatus.

3.4 The Violent Collision: Tigray War (2020–2022) and Ongoing Conflicts

The irreconcilable claims of the three political imaginaries culminated in the Tigray War of 2020–2022. Political and ethnic rivalries exploded into violence in November 2020, when forces commanded by the formerly dominant TPLF attacked federal military bases in Mekelle (Institut Montaigne, 2021, para. 2–4). The conflict quickly escalated into one of the deadliest in 21st-century Africa. Estimates from international research institutions suggest the war may have caused between 300,000 and 600,000 conflict-related deaths through violence, famine and lack of medical access (Addis Standard, 2026, para. 38–41). Millions were displaced, and critical infrastructure across northern Ethiopia was devastated.

The war also demonstrated how the three political imaginaries collided destructively. The federal government, under Prime Minister, invoked the ethnic federalist constitution's centralizing powers while simultaneously mobilising Amhara regional militias as allies against Tigrayan forces. After the federal government and Tigrayan leaders reached a peace deal in November 2022, the alliance with Amhara militias collapsed, leading to a new insurgency in the Amhara region (Crisis Group, 2023, para. 4–8). Meanwhile, violence in Oromia persisted, as

Oromo Liberation Army factions continued to challenge state authority. As an Addis Standard analysis warns, “Ethiopia’s modern political history offers a sobering warning: military force has repeatedly been employed to resolve political disputes and each time, the outcome has been deeper fragmentation, prolonged instability, and staggering human cost” (Addis Standard, 2026, para. 9–12).

Table 3 below summarises the comparative evaluation of the three actors.

Table 3. Comparative Evaluation of Ethiopia’s Three Competing Political Actors: Imperial, Derg and Ethnic Federalist

Actor	Time Period	Core Strengths	Core Weaknesses	Legacy for Current Crisis
Imperial	1270–1974	National unity, sacred legitimacy, diplomatic prestige	Feudal oppression, ethnic hierarchies, land inequality	Nostalgia for some, marker of subjugation for others
Derg	1974–1991	Land reform, anti-feudal rupture	Red Terror (700,000+ dead), forced villagization, 1984-85 famine	Traumatized society, militarized governance culture
Ethnic Federalist	1991–present	Constitutional accommodation of diversity	Institutionalized ethnic division, internal minorities policy, dominant-party authoritarianism	Tigray War (2020-2022), ongoing Amhara/Oromia insurgencies

The three actors remain locked in a zero-sum struggle over Ethiopia’s future. The imperial legacy offers a unifying national narrative but is inseparable from feudal hierarchy. The Derg’s revolutionary rupture destroyed the old order but produced only terror and famine. Ethnic federalism accommodates diversity at the price of institutionalizing division. Until a new synthesis emerges, Ethiopia will remain trapped in cycles of violence and fragmentation.

3.5 Reclaiming the Wisdom: A Philosophical and Political Framework

The preceding sections have traced the rise and collapse of the Ethiopian philosopher-king, the violent rupture of the Derg, and the fragmentation of ethnic federalism. This section moves from diagnosis to prescription. Drawing on the biblical wisdom tradition, contemporary transitional justice scholarship and Ethiopia’s own emerging peace architecture, it proposes a philosophical and political framework for reclaiming the ethical core of the philosopher-king ideal, not as a restoration of monarchy but as a normative resource for reconciling the three competing actors.

3.6 What “Wisdom of King David” Means Today Not Theocratic Monarchy, but the Ethical Attributes?

The “wisdom of King David” has been central to Ethiopian political thought since the *Kebra Nagast* forged the Solomonic lineage. Yet David’s relevance need not be confined to dynastic legitimation. Lifted out of its monarchical enclosure, the biblical image of David offers three enduring moral qualities for leadership: seeking justice for the weak, humbleness after sin, and the ability to rally tribes around common purposes. First, justice for the weak

Psalm 72, attributed to Solomon but grounded in Davidic ideals, articulates the benchmark for righteous rule: “May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice”

(Psalm 72:2, *NRSV*). The psalm envisions a king who “delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper” (Psalm 72:12). This is not retributive but protective justice: the ruler’s legitimacy depends on prioritizing the most vulnerable. In Psalm 72, the functions of the ideal monarch revolve around *mišpāt* (justice) and *tzedakah* (righteousness) concepts that obligate the ruler to actively redress oppression.

3.7 Beyond Nostalgia and Rejection Extracting Procedural Values

Ethiopia’s contemporary impasse is characterised by two equally unhelpful postures: nostalgia for the imperial past and wholesale rejection of all pre-revolutionary political thought. Both must be transcended.

Nostalgia for the Solomonic dynasty overlooks the feudal oppression, ethnic hierarchies and the Emperor’s fatal indifference during the 1973-74 Wollo famine. As the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (2024) documents, the imperial regime’s inadequacy and disconnect from rural suffering eroded the very moral legitimacy upon which the philosopher-king ideal rested. The imperial legacy is, as one analyst puts it, a “tangled legacy” that for some evokes national pride and for others marks subjugation.

Wholesale rejection, on the other hand, throws out the ethical baby with the feudal bathwater. The Derg’s violent rupture sought to eradicate all traces of the old order, executing the emperor, suppressing the Orthodox Church and substituting Marxist-Leninist ideology for the sacral kingship. But revolutionary erasure produced no stable legitimacy; it merely substituted one form of authoritarianism for another. The Red Terror (1976-1978) and the 1984-85 famine demonstrated that ideological rupture alone cannot generate a new social contract.

The alternative is procedural extraction: reclaiming from the philosopher-king model not its monarchical form but its underlying procedural values; dialogue, accountability, and service. Dialogue, because the original social contract under the philosopher-king was performative: people voluntarily migrated to rulers they perceived as just. Accountability, because the expectation of justice was reciprocal: a king who failed to protect the weak forfeited his legitimacy. Service, because the biblical model of leadership, from David to Solomon, consistently oriented the ruler’s attention toward the poor and marginalised. These values, if institutionalized in democratic forms, offer a bridge between the pre-revolutionary ethical tradition and post-conflict peacebuilding.

3.8 Institutional Implications: Constitutional Reform and Symbolic Reintegration

Translating this framework into durable peace requires two categories of institutional change: constitutional reform and symbolic reintegration.

Constitutional reform

Ethiopia’s 1995 Constitution enshrined ethnic federalism as the state’s organizing logic, granting each “nation, nationality and people” the unconditional right to secession. This design, as Turton (2006) noted, institutionalized division as the primary political category. Recent policy discourse has begun to acknowledge this flaw. The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission reported that consultations revealed “strong convergence around the need for constitutional reform. Many participants raised concerns that ethnic-based federalism has deepened divisions and weakened national cohesion” (ENA, 2025, para. 4-6). Some analysts advocate a “middle path” between identity and unity: reform that is additive rather than disruptive, “building on existing constitutional arrangements while correcting design features that unintentionally limit mobility, integration and equal citizenship” (Addis Insight, 2026, para. 10-12).

Concrete reform proposals include: replacing ethnic regional states with geographically defined (but not ethnically defined) units; establishing a directly elected second chamber representing territorial interests, not ethnic quotas; and either removing or substantially qualifying Article 39's secession clause to prevent constitutionalized fragmentation. Any such reform must be negotiated through the National Dialogue process rather than imposed unilaterally preserving the consensus-building value that the philosopher-king tradition once embodied.

Symbolic reintegration

The philosopher-king tradition persists not only in institutions but in memory, monuments and ritual. Rather than erasing imperial heritage, Ethiopia should selectively reintegrate it as a unifying symbol analogous to Japan's retention of the emperor as a "symbol of the State and of the unity of the people" after 1945 ([Core.ac.uk](#), n.d., para. 6-8). Recent developments suggest movement in this direction: the Adwa Museum, commemorating Ethiopia's 1896 victory over Italian colonialism, has been positioned as "a standing memorial of black victory" ([Press.et](#), 2024, para. 1-2). Similarly, post-conflict heritage restoration in Tigray, including the reopening of the Dessie Museum and restoration of the Nejashi Tomb demonstrates that cultural patrimony can be reclaimed across ethno-political lines (British Council, 2025; Tika, 2025).

However, reintegration must be critical, not hagiographic. The imperial era should be represented in museums and school curricula with both its achievements and its oppressions. The Ethiopian monarchy's role in centralizing state power, resisting colonization and preserving national sovereignty should be acknowledged alongside its feudal land tenure, ethnic hierarchies and fatal indifference to famine victims. Such balanced representation would model the very attribute of repentant humility derived from the Davidic narrative: a nation that can acknowledge its own failures is a nation that can reconcile.

The table below summarises the proposed framework.

Table 4. Framework for Reclaiming the Philosopher-King Wisdom for Contemporary Ethiopia

Dimension	Content	Implementation Mechanism
Ethical attributes	Justice for weak (Psalm 72), repentance (2 Samuel 12), unity (2 Samuel 5)	Extract as normative benchmarks, not theocratic institutions
Procedural values	Dialogue, accountability, service	Embed in democratic institutions (parliament, judiciary, civil service)
Reconciliation model	Three-track truth/healing, hybrid accountability, civic identity	Truth Commission, Special Court, National Dialogue Commission
Constitutional reform	Soften ethnic federalism; establish civic territorial units	Negotiated amendments via National Dialogue; retain minority protections
Symbolic reintegration	Museums, monuments, curricula with balanced imperial representation	Cultural policy; heritage restoration; educational reform

Reclaiming the philosopher-king's wisdom does not mean turning back the clock. It means recognizing that Ethiopia's political culture contains ethical resources justice, humility, unity that, when detached from their feudal and theocratic containers, can inform a democratic,

multi-ethnic peace. The challenge is not to restore the throne but to build institutions that embody its best values while preventing its worst abuses.

VI. Practical Pathways to a Durable Peace

The philosophical and political framework outlined in Section V requires concrete institutional mechanisms to move from principle to practice. This section examines four interconnected pathways: inclusive national dialogue, root-cause redressal, security and justice reform, and educational transformation. Each pathway draws on the ethical attributes of the philosopher-king tradition: justice for the weak, humility after transgression, and the capacity to unify while adapting them to Ethiopia's contemporary democratic and transitional justice architecture.

3.9 Engaging All Actors: Inclusive National Dialogue Involving Former Imperial Loyalists, Derg Era Veterans, Current Ethnic Federalist Party Officials, and Civil Society

Any durable peace requires that the representatives of all three competing political imaginaries—Imperial, Derg and Ethnic Federalist participate in a nationally owned dialogue. Ethiopia has taken significant steps in this direction with the establishment of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC). Operating under three primary pillars fostering national consensus, building trust between the state and society, and cultivating a peaceful culture, the ENDC has conducted extensive public consultations aimed at addressing historical grievances (ENDC, 2026, para. 44–46). By mid-2026, the Commission had created conducive platform for citizens to discuss key national issues, with preparatory work enabling citizens to freely express their views through representatives (ENDC, 2025, para. 32–34).

However, significant challenges remain. A Clingendael policy brief examining whether the National Dialogue can meaningfully address Ethiopia's deepening political crisis noted that “political space is still largely determined by the ruling party” and that “large opposition parties and armed groups stay aloof” (Clingendael, 2025, para. 4–6). The dialogue has also struggled with “deadlock” over Tigray inclusion (Addis Standard, 2025, para. 2–4). The involvement of former imperial loyalists and Derg-era veterans has been particularly uneven. While the Commission has held consultative meetings with religious institutions across all regions, explicit mechanisms for integrating representatives of the pre-1974 imperial state apparatus remain underdeveloped (ENDC, 2025, para. 14–16).

The principle of the “whole society of Ethiopia” as the dialogue's target participants must be operationalized to include three specific constituencies. Former imperial loyalists – including descendants of the Solomonic aristocracy, retired imperial civil servants, and custodians of imperial heritage sites – should be invited to contribute their historical memory and perspective on national unity. Derg-era veterans – former military and administrative officers of the Marxist-Leninist regime should be offered a structured opportunity to acknowledge harms and articulate the rationale for their revolutionary rupture. Third, current ethnic Federalist Party officials and civil society organisations, including women's groups, youth associations, and faith-based organisations must be guaranteed meaningful voice and veto power over consensus outcomes.

The Davidic model's attribute of covenantal unification supplies a normative rationale for this inclusivity. Just as David “made a covenant with them ... before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel” (2 Samuel 5:3), bringing together tribes previously divided, so Ethiopia's dialogue must produce a consensual compact, not a victor's peace. As ENDC Deputy Chief Commissioner Yonas Adaye affirmed, the Commission is “laying foundation for

establishing a culture of dialogue” (ENDC, 2025, para. 48–51). The next phase must translate this foundation into binding agreements that all three actors publicly endorse.

a. Education and Memory: Rewriting School Curricula to Present All Three Periods with Balanced Criticism

The philosopher-king tradition’s final attribute the capacity to unify warring tribes finds its most powerful long-term expression in education. Ethiopia’s history curriculum has long been a site of political contestation, oscillating between imperial hagiography, Derg revolutionary ideology and ethnic federalist fragmentation. A 2025 study from Leiden University seeks to explore “historiographical contestations over Ethiopia’s common past that have devitalized national consensus as well as teaching a common history” (Gebre, 2025, p. 2). The same study notes that “history education in secondary schools is a highly centralised subject” but that “there are elite-based public clashes as there is no consensus among different groups on the history of Ethiopia” (Mekonnen & Hindeya, 2012, cited in Gebre, 2025, p. 4).

The unified History Module (Hist 102, “History of Ethiopia and the Horn”), introduced in January 2020, represents an important attempt at a common national narrative (Gebre, 2025, p. 5). However, a critical review of curriculum reform found that “progressive steps” in incorporating local languages and diverse cultural realities have been undermined by “imported pedagogy, donor-driven curriculum reforms, and dependency on foreign research grants” (The Reporter Ethiopia, 2025, para. 30–34). An Addis Standard analysis noted that “the socialist Derg regime discredited the imperial curriculum; the ethnic federalist period discredited the Derg’s version each reform repeating the cycle of erasure rather than building cumulative knowledge” (Addis Standard, 2025, para. 51–53).

A durable peace requires a fundamental reorientation of history education toward multiperspectivity and critical engagement with controversial pasts. This means presenting the Imperial period (1270–1974) with both its achievements national unification, resistance to colonization, diplomatic prestige and its oppressions: feudal land tenure, the Wollo famine, ethnic hierarchy. Here’s the Derg (1974–1991): land reform with the Red Terror and anti-feudal rupture with the famine. Here’s the Ethnic Federalist (1991–): tolerance of diversity with ethnic compartmentalization and constitutionalism with one-party rule.

Cognitive demands must be raised beyond memorization. A 2026 study of Ethiopia’s Grade 10 history textbook found that “post-2018 educational reforms prioritise competency-based learning to cultivate critical thinking and historical inquiry” but that “urgent curricular revisions to embed historical thinking skills (e.g. sourcing, corroboration), teacher professional development programs and assessment reforms that prioritise analytical rigour over memorization” are needed (BERA, 2026, abstract). Teacher training must equip educators to facilitate classroom dialogue about contested events without imposing state orthodoxy.

Finally, memory institutions must support curricular reform. The reopening of the Dessie Museum and restoration of the Nejashi Tomb demonstrate that cultural patrimony can be reclaimed across ethno-political lines (British Council, 2025; TĪKA, 2025). The Adwa Museum has been positioned as “a standing memorial of black victory” ([Press.et](#), 2024, para. 1–2). Extending this model to include permanent exhibitions on the Red Terror, the Wollo famine, and the Tigray War each presented with balanced documentation and victim testimony would transform museums from instruments of regime legitimization into civic spaces for national reckoning.

Table 5. Practical Pathways to Durable Peace: Mechanisms, Actors and Ethical Anchors

Pathway	Primary Mechanisms	Key Actors to Engage	Ethical Anchor (Davidic Model)
Inclusive National Dialogue	ENDC consultation, consensus conference, binding compact	Imperial loyalists, Derg veterans, ethnic federalist parties, civil society	Covenantal unification (2 Samuel 5)
Root Cause Redressal	Land restitution, progressive taxation, decentralised investment	Ministry of Agriculture, regional governments, affected communities	Justice for the weak (Psalm 72)
Security and Justice	Special Bench prosecution, conditional amnesty, DDR, SSR	Federal Supreme Court, Ministry of Justice, Ethiopian National Defense Forces	Mercy after transgression (2 Samuel 19)
Education and Memory	Multiperspective curriculum, teacher training, museum exhibitions	Ministry of Education, universities, heritage authorities	Capacity to unify warring tribes (2 Samuel 5)

IV. Conclusion

This study examined the evolution of Ethiopia's political imagination from the philosopher-king tradition of the Solomonic dynasty through the revolutionary Derg regime to the contemporary ethnic federal system. It argues that, although these political systems emerged under different historical contexts, none has independently achieved lasting peace, political legitimacy, or national cohesion. The imperial system fostered national identity and international prestige but was weakened by feudal inequalities and governance failures. The Derg replaced sacred legitimacy with revolutionary ideology, yet widespread violence and authoritarianism undermined its transformative ambitions. Likewise, ethnic federalism recognized cultural diversity and self-governance but also intensified ethnic polarization, contributing to conflicts such as the Tigray War and continuing instability in Amhara and Oromia. Collectively, these experiences demonstrate that institutional reform alone is insufficient without an ethical foundation capable of fostering trust, justice, and inclusive citizenship.

The study concludes that the enduring value of the philosopher-king tradition lies not in restoring monarchy but in reclaiming its ethical principles of justice, wisdom, humility, accountability, and service. These values can be reinterpreted within democratic institutions to promote reconciliation and strengthen national unity while respecting Ethiopia's ethnic and cultural diversity. An inclusive national dialogue, equitable constitutional reforms, independent judicial institutions, balanced historical education, and community-centered peacebuilding should form the foundation of a renewed social contract. Nevertheless, the proposed framework should be interpreted cautiously because Ethiopia's complex ethnic composition and evolving political landscape require context-specific implementation and empirical validation. Future research should employ mixed-methods surveys, regional case studies, longitudinal conflict analyses, and comparative studies with other post-conflict African societies to refine this framework.

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