



**MATTHIAS FLACIUS ILLYRICUS:
A DISCIPLE OF LUTHER**

**MATTHIAS FLACIUS ILLYRICUS:
UM DISCÍPULO DE LUTERO**

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a brief introduction to life and work of Matija Vlačić Ilirik (the Latin form of his name is Matthias Flacius Illyricus), a Croatian born Lutheran reformation of sixteenth century. Some biographical data are presented, as well as the main themes of Flacius' theological thought. This article therefore is a contribution to the field of sixteenth century studies.

KEYWORDS

Lutheran Reformation; Sixteenth century studies; Matthias Flacius Illyricus; Flacian controversy; Theology.

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta uma breve introdução à vida e obra de Matija Vlačić Ilirik (a forma latinizada de seu nome é Matthias Flacius Illyricus), um reformador luterano croata do século XVI. Alguns dados biográficos são apresentados, bem como os principais temas do pensamento teológico de Flacius. O artigo, portanto, é uma contribuição ao campo de estudos do século XVI.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Reforma luterana; Estudos do século XVI; Matthias Flacius Illyricus; Controvérsia flaciana; Teologia.

1. CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

Matija Vlačić Ilirik (Matthias Flacius Illyricus) was born as the youngest of six children in Albona (now Labin), close to the Adriatic Sea on the Istrian Peninsula in present-day Croatia, on March 3, 1520. His mother was Jacobea Luciani, daughter of a wealthy and powerful Albonian family. His father was Andrija Vlačić, a small landowner who died when Matthias was twelve years old. At the age of sixteen Flacius departed for Venice where he spent the next three years at the school of San Marco under the teaching of the prominent Renaissance humanist Egnazio, Giambattista Cipelli (ca. 1473-1553) (NACINOVICH, 1886, p. 3. See also MARSHALL, 1977, p. 62). Egnazio was a scholar and a friend of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1486-1536), with whom he kept correspondence¹. He published brief biographies of Roman, Byzantine, and Medieval Western emperors and perhaps Flacius' later love for history was born already in Venice. While Flacius was studying for the priesthood in Italy, his uncle, Baldo Lupetina (1502-1556) gave him to read Lutheran literature².

Flacius's education continued in Basel, where he enrolled at the university on May 1, 1539 as *Matheus de Franciscis de Albona Polensi Diocesi in Illyrico sub Venetorum ditione, pauper*³ – the last adjective exempting him from paying registration and tuition fees. Because he arrived in Basel with very little money, professor Simon Grynaeus⁴ (1493-1541)

¹ For the relationship between Egnazio and Erasmus, see Lowry (1986, v. 1, p. 424-425). For more information about Egnazio's life, see Ross (1976, p. 521-566).

² Baldo Lupetina was a Catholic friar on the island of Cres and later on a Franciscan presbyter in Venice. He converted to Lutheranism and advised Flacius to go to Germany and study theology. Lupetina was imprisoned in 1542 for his Protestant faith and died as a martyr, being drowned by the Inquisition. See Olson (1993, p. 7-18).

³ When a poor student registered at the university, he was listed as a *pauper* in contrast to the *nobiles* who could pay their own way. See Spitz & Tinsley (1995, p. 15).

⁴ For Grynaeus, see Bietenholz (1986a, v. 1, p. 142-146).

took him into his home. Even though Flacius stayed only one year in Basel, the influence of his professors upon him was profound. Johann Oporinus (1507-1568) taught him Greek and a new love for linguistics was born in Flacius; in professor Oswald Myconius (1488-1552) he saw deep faith and in professor Grynäeus he saw practical love and commitment to the students and the reformation cause. From Basel he moved on to study at Tübingen. There he was received into the house of a fellow countryman, Matija Grbac (Matthias Garbitius Illyricus)⁵, who was a professor of Greek. After hearing only German for a full year, Flacius was now able to converse in his mother tongue and to talk about his childhood, his beloved home country and its natural beauties. Grbac introduced Flacius to many important people, among others to Joachim Camerarius (1500-1574), who was a close friend and the first biographer of Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560). Camerarius and Grbac saw a tremendous potential in Flacius. Together they decided to send him to Wittenberg to continue his studies there. It was not only that other people recognized the for ministry in Flacius, but he also experienced it personally at an early age as he himself testifies:

Even before I learned Luther's doctrine I felt in myself the peace of conscience and the joy in the Holy Spirit, loved the religion and the Holy Scripture and often with my whole heart wished to contribute something in theology, so that I could advance in the Holy Scripture and serve the church of Christ some time and then be able to return to the Lord (ILLYICUS, 1549a)⁶.

⁵ Matthias Garbitius Illyricus (1511-1559) is the first known Protestant from the Balkans. He came to Germany as a teenager to study at the newly founded gymnasium in Nürnberg under Joachim Camerarius (1500-1574). From there he went to the University of Heidelberg, and in the year 1534 he was Melanchthon's student in Wittenberg. After receiving a master's degree, Melanchthon recommended him to the newly founded University of Tübingen, where he became professor of Greek language, literature and Ethics. From 1556 until his death Grbac was the dean of the Philosophical Faculty (*facultas atrium*) in Tübingen.

⁶ Also quoted in Olson (2002a, p. 28-29).

2. IN THE LUTHERAN BASTION

Flacius met Martin Luther (1483-1546) for the first time when he was 22 years old. He came to Wittenberg as a student in 1541 to study for a master's degree in the Greek and Hebrew languages. In his own autobiographical writing called *Apologia* he explains what happened when he first met Luther face to face:

At the end of my third year, when I was living in the house of Dr. Friedrich Backofen in Wittenberg, who was then a church deacon, evil was encroaching upon me and I was sure that I would die soon; he noticed that because of my internal anxiety I could not study at all. He urged me to confide in him and tell him what bothered me until I told him what was wrong with me. He affirmed me with counsel and prayer and then succeeded in convincing Doctor Pomeranus⁷ to take me to D.D. Martin Luther. Luther then comforted me by sharing his own example as well as through the word of God, and when the congregation [at St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg]⁸ had prayed for me, the torment lessened from day to day until a year later I was well again⁹.

By the time young Flacius met Luther he had already been in Germany for three years, far away from his beloved Istria, learning German and struggling to adjust to a comple-

⁷ Pomeranus is the nickname of Dr. Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558), who was a city pastor and a professor at Wittenberg University. He was born in the Pomeranian village of Wollin, near Szczecin in today's Poland, and is considered to be the third most famous Wittenberg reformer, immediately after Luther and Melanchthon.

⁸ Cf. Olson (2002, p. 85).

⁹ Cf. Illyricus (1549b): "Sub finem anni tertii, cum Vitimbergae cohabitarem D. Friderico Backofen, tunc Ecclesiae Diacono, malumque adeo crevisset ut non dubitarem, quid mihi brevi pereundum esset, cerneretque is me adeo perturbatum esse, ut studere non possem, cogebat tandem me confiteri, quid mali haberem. Intellecta reconstolabatur me diligenter, orabat mecum, efficiebat, ut Doctor Pomeranus me perduceret ad D. D. Martinum Luth. Qui, cum proprio exemplo aliorumque et verbo Dei me consolatum esse, Ecclesiaeque pro me preces fecisset, coepi indes melius habere, ita ut in uno anno mediocriter convaluerim". Also quoted in Mirkovi (1960, p. 52).

tely different culture and climate. He had many doubts about his newly acquired Lutheran faith and as he did not share his internal struggles with anyone, he grew disillusioned. He experienced something similar to what Luther calls *Anfechtung*, thinking that God was angry with him and that He wanted only to judge him because of his sin. In the above mentioned *Apologia* he says that he thought constantly of death and felt the wrath of God upon himself, also experiencing the power of the devil upon him. It was in such a state of mind that he first met Luther personally. Later on in his life Flacius said that this encounter with Luther eye to eye in his study changed him completely. He saw in Luther a man like himself, with human doubts and insecurities, which troubled him just like they haunted him. Luther was not a man above others for him anymore; he was different from what he was behind the pulpit or in the classroom. Flacius saw in him simplicity of faith and a desire to help and pastor others. Most importantly, he felt that he was becoming more self-confident after that first meeting with Luther.

As a student, Flacius lived between his room, school and church and became known for his utter devotion to research and serious scholarship. In Wittenberg he had the reputation of a lonely man but always kind and helpful to his colleagues. Luther had hopes that Flacius was the one who would continue his work, and wrote of him in 1543: *nostris notissimus homo et magnae fidei* (He is a man well-known to me and of great faith) (cf. PREGER, 1964, v. 1, p. 24)¹⁰.

In 1544 Flacius received his appointment to the chair of Hebrew language at the faculty of philosophy in Wittenberg (cf. FRIEDENSBURG, 1914, p. 302-9). A year later he married Elisabeth, the daughter of Pastor Michael Faust from Dabrun, near Wittenberg. Luther attended his wedding and that meant recognition and respect for Flacius. From that moment on, Flacius felt that his family was under the shelter of the most important man in the city. Unfortunately for Flacius, four months after his wedding in November 1545, Luther died. On February 25 1546 (only eight days after Luther's death in Eisleben), Flacius received a master's degree in phi-

¹⁰ In the following footnotes I will be using the reprinted edition of Preger's work.

losophy. According to Köstlin (1890, p. 18) he graduated as the best of his class of 39 students.

In Wittenberg Flacius

became a confirmed Lutheran and entered into a new period of his life, a period characterized by a violent hatred of the papacy and a passionate defence of what he considered to be the pure Lutheran doctrine (HOHL Jr., 1967, p. 954).

He stayed loyal to the teachings of Luther for the rest of his life, often at the price of bitter fights with anyone who he thought had departed from the orthodoxy of the great reformer. He was involved in many theological controversies with, among others, Melanchthon, Andreas Osiander (1498-1552), Caspar von Schwenckfeld (1484-1561), Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Caspar Olevianus (1536-1587) and Victorin Strigel (1524-1569). The issues ranged from the doctrine of justification by faith, original sin, proper understanding of the Sacraments and religious compromise, which Melanchthon was willing to make with the Roman Catholic Church, the so-called “adiaphora,” which means indifferent matters. Throughout his life Flacius “was persecuted by his enemies and forsaken by his friends, moving from one place to another” (NATTERER, 1995), and often with his big family (he married twice and had eighteen children) in order to stay alive and out of prison.

The events of the fatal year of 1546 for the Lutherans in Germany affected the young Flacius family greatly. In July of that year the emperor Charles V (1500-1558) issued the ban against the two Protestant leaders, John Frederick the Magnanimous, Elector of Saxony (1503-1554), and Philip, Landgrave of Hesse (1504-1567). This was the beginning of the Schmalkaldic War which soon impacted Wittenberg. Namely, on November 6 the university was closed because the troops of Duke’s Mauritz of Saxony (1521-1553), occupied the city. Matthias and Elisabeth moved immediately to Braunschweig as refuges, where their first child was born, Matthias junior in the autumn of 1547¹¹.

¹¹ Matthias Flacius Jr. (Braunschweig, 12.9.1547 – Rostock, 27.04.1593) was a philosopher and a doctor of medicine.

3. MINISTRY, WRITINGS AND WANDERINGS

Flacius became professor of Hebrew in Wittenberg at only 24 and stayed there teaching for five years. As a relatively young man and as a foreigner he claimed a very high social status, receiving a good salary and having a stable job. This certainly increased his self-confidence and security. He married a pastor's daughter, a woman born in a Lutheran family who proved to be a great support to him during the nineteen years of their marriage. She died while giving birth to the twelfth of her children, of whom eight survived.

He published his first theological work at the age of 29. The title was *De vocabulo fidei* ("About the word 'faith'"), a treatment of the term on the basis of its Hebrew derivation. The foreword to the book was written by Melanchthon himself. It was a modest work, which he kept revising and to which he added new materials. The fourth edition from 1563 included an explanation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

As a result of the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims, which were religious laws imposed by Emperor Charles V on the Lutheran territories, Flacius resigned his professorship at Wittenberg and left for Magdeburg around Easter of 1549, which was at the time not occupied by the imperial army. There he started publishing pamphlets and tracts from Magdeburg soon after he arrived, against Melanchthon and his followers, who had signed the Interim law¹². Flacius stayed in Magdeburg for eight years, where he began the first great Protestant work on the history of the church, known as the *Magdeburg Centuries*. The project was done by a group of Lutheran scholars gathered around him and the work was divided by centuries. They used primary sources in order to prove that throughout the ages there had always been a true church which stayed loyal

¹² The imperial edict forbade the printing of anti-Interim publications, but the courageous printers of Magdeburg defied the ban, and they published more than one hundred pamphlets of resistance literature from throughout Germany between 1549 and 1551. The city of Magdeburg became known for their bravery as "des Herrgotts Kanzlei" (our Lord God's chancery). See Diener (1979, p. 46) e Kaufmann (2003).

to the original apostolic faith. The first three volumes were published in 1559, while volume XIII came out in 1574. Unfortunately, Flacius died the following year so volumes XIV and XV were never published. His second major work was a compilation about various Christian witnesses who stayed true to the Scriptures and opposed the papacy. His *Catalogus testium veritatis* was first published in Basel by Oporinus in 1556. Apart from writing these two works of lasting value, Flacius became a leader of all those Lutherans who were dissatisfied with the compromise that Melanchthon had made with the Catholic Church. Melanchthon's concessions included a major departure in Protestant understanding of soteriology and ecclesiology. The Interim "document taught that man's love, his good works, play a role in justification, and it taught that the bishop of Rome held supreme power in the church" (KOLB, 1978, p. 77). Another issue that was important for Flacius was the independence of the church from the secular authorities. The Imperial Interim stated that the government had the right to decide what constituted church practices. Flacius believed that the church should be free from state control and argued for the separation of church and state. His pamphlets of opposition against Melanchthon and the Interim law put him at the helm of an emerging resistance movement. Because of this, he and colleagues in Magdeburg were named Gnesio-Lutherans (from the Greek γνήσιος; true), a term which was used to describe orthodox followers of Luther. The opposing party, the Philippists, accused Flacius of being a false brother and a seducer of souls. The irenic Melanchthon even called him the "Illyrian Viper" (BRETSCHEIDER, 1840, p. 532).

Flacius always emphasized the importance of holding on to one's principles uncompromisingly and was zealous for the right doctrine, which he understood to be the backbone of the Church. Contrary to what is often taught, Flacians were not alone in attacking the Augsburg Interim. John Calvin (1509-1564) also wrote against it and

when in mid-1549 Melanchthon became embroiled in the adiaphoristic controversy, Calvin sent Melanchthon a less than friendly letter. Calvin insisted that so many things ought not to be conceded to the papists (WENGERT, 1999, p. 35-6).

During Easter in 1557, Flacius moved to Jena in order to start a new faculty of theology. He had been asked by the dukes of Weimar to establish a university that would match the one in Wittenberg. Apart from having professorial responsibilities, Flacius also became a general superintendent for the churches in the whole of Thuringia. He brought three theologians to Jena with him, who were his friends and co-workers for the colossal work of the *Ecclesiastica historia*. Immediately at the beginning of his new job, Flacius started having problems with the two professors, who were residents of Jena and were assigned to teach alongside of Flacius and his colleagues. Reasons for friction varied, but the two main ones were that Flacius' salary, as well as that of his three friends, was almost double what the two local lecturers were earning. His enemies also constantly used against him the fact that he was a Slav (HERMANN, 2000, v. 2, p. 146). Neither was Flacius German, nor were any of the three professors he had invited Thuringian. This created enmity at the university. In the five years he spent in Jena, Flacius did not write any significant work and almost everything that he tried to accomplish failed. In the end he was dismissed from his job and prohibited from teaching further in the territories of Thuringia and Saxony. The major reason for Flacius' banishment was his statement at the public disputation in 1560 that original sin is a substance of man, for which he was accused of propagating the ancient heresy of Manicheism. The ensuing theological quarrels over the doctrine of sin became known as the Flacian controversy in church history.

Consequently, Flacius needed to move, and this time he went south to Regensburg. While there, he published his theology of original sin and free will under the title *Disputatio de Originali Peccato et Libero Arbitrio*. He also wrote probably his greatest and most systematic work, *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* ("Key to Sacred Scripture"); about which philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1927, p. 219) said that it is the "first scientific work of biblical interpretation since the days of disputes between Alexandrian and Antiochian theologians" (see also KORDI, 1992, p. 161) while Hans-Georg Gadamer (1966, p. 215) called it "the first important work of hermeneutics" (also quoted in OLSON, 2002a, p. 89). During this

time Flacius also published some works in the Croatian and Slovenian languages together with his former student in Jena, Sebastijan Krelj (1538-1567), who was a preacher in Ljubljana (cf. DEUTSCH, 1988, p. 113).

In 1566 Emperor Maximilian II ordered the city of Regensburg to cancel their asylum to Flacius, so he took to the road once again. However, his family stayed behind. This time he went to Antwerp, where he became an advisor to the Lutheran movement in church matters. He was invited by the city's senate, with the knowledge of Prince William of Orange, but his stay in Antwerp lasted only a short time. While he went to collect his family the city was taken over by a Catholic army and all Lutherans were forced to leave. The following year, in 1567, he changed places of residence three times: he was in the Netherlands until March, then in Frankfurt am Main until December, and finally he settled in Strasbourg, where he spent the following five years.

Flacius' last great work, published in 1570, is the Greek text of the New Testament. His redaction was placed alongside Erasmus' Latin translation with corrections and supplements written by Flacius. Three years later the Strasbourg city council decided to refuse further hospitality to him because of theological controversies that surrounded him and he was expelled. He found a hiding place in a women's cloister in Frankfurt am Main, where he died on March 11, 1575 surrounded by his family and a few friends. The place of his grave is unknown.

4. CONCLUSION

As a result of the Flacian controversy, Flacius lost his leadership in the church and those pastors and theology professors who supported him were persecuted and dismissed from their posts. The price to pay for following in the footsteps of Flacius in those days was sometimes high. Many were excommunicated, imprisoned, and to a number of followers even a Christian funeral was denied. Flacius himself was denied a proper burial in Frankfurt am Main.

In 1580 the Formula of Concord was published, which was a doctrinal document of the Lutheran church. Its purpose was to bring peace to a heavily divided second generation of Lutherans and to settle theological disputes, which arose after Luther's death. In it both Melanchthon's and Flacius' views were rejected (even though their names were not explicitly mentioned) as the Formula tried to find a middle ground between the two extremes.

Flacius' most lasting contributions to Protestantism lie in his outstanding hermeneutical achievements, for which he has been referred to as one of the pioneers in the field, his work in the area of church history, and his theological opus. In the massive work *Clavis Scriptura*, Flacius was the first to establish that any passage of the Bible should be interpreted considering the purpose and the structure of the whole chapter or a given book, as well as the rule that the literal sense of the text should have a priority over allegories and metaphors. While living in Magdeburg, Flacius thought of a grand plan, which was writing a church history consisting of primary sources in order to prove that throughout the ages there had always been a true church which stayed loyal to the original apostolic faith. He organized a group of scholars and a result was a thirteen-volume church history known as the *Magdeburg Centuries*. Flacius also published *Catalogus testium veritatis* which consisted of documents together with his commentary describing the plight of people throughout history who were striving to preserve the New Testament faith and resisted the Antichrist (Rome). Through close to 400 "witnesses" Flacius tried to show that the Reformation was not something which Luther or Zwingli started, but that there had always been people who wanted to be free from central authority and the politics of Rome and who longed to be able to read and interpret Scriptures in their own homes and communities instead of being given a set of dogmas from Rome.

As a theologian Flacius tried to stay loyal to Luther and to his emphasis on the slavery of the human will.

Following Luther more than Melanchthon, Flacius was convinced that the correct theological differentiation is not that of the scholastics between "word" and "spirit", but rather the

differentiation of the two voices apparent in both testaments: that of the “law”, which speaks judgment, and the “gospel”, which speaks forgiveness (FABINY, 1998, p. 245).

A lot of Flacius’ theological writing was done in the context of polemics as he tried to defend and protect what he considered to be the truth. Accordingly, most historians of doctrine do not see Flacius as a heretic, but they all admit that Aristotelian terminology, which he employed, produced theological confusion. Karl Barth (1980, p. 27) says that his

doctrine of original sin, that after the fall of man sin had become man’s very substance, was not so unreasonable and unacceptable as it was represented by its opponents and later in many histories of dogma.

He continues by saying that Flacius rightly rejected the thesis of the synergists that man’s sin is only an *accidens*, and concludes with the statement:

That Flacius could be so execrated by his Lutheran contemporaries because of this thesis shows how little Luther’s most important insights were understood even within his own Church, and how thoroughly they had been forgotten only two decades after his death (BARTH, 1980, p. 27).

During his lifetime Flacius wrote and published about 300 books and pamphlets and had possibly the largest library in the sixteenth century. In 1577, two years after he died, his wife Magdalena married Heinrich Petreus (1546-1615), who is said to have made a fortune by selling Flacius’ library to Duke Heinrich Julius of Braunschweig (1564-1613) in 1592. It was Flacius’ collection of books which led to the creation of one of the largest libraries of that day, started by Duke August (1579-1666). Today the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, Germany is considered to be one of the best libraries in the world for medieval and sixteenth century printed works and manuscripts, and for that Flacius is to be credited.

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