

Oden, Thomas C. *The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011. 279 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0830839339.

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Having brought to completion a compendious systematic theology as well as a massive commentary series devoted to early Christian interpretation of the Bible, Oden has now reinvented himself late in life as a scholarly champion for early African Christianity. This is but one of three related books published in short order. The first appeared in 2007, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*. A similar volume also appeared in 2011, *Early Libyan Christianity*. In the preface to this book, he situates such work as part of his role as director of the Center for Early African Christianity at Eastern University.

Reviewers of the earlier *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* often criticized Oden for not substantiating his claim that ancient Christianity was centered in and emerged from Africa more than any other place. In other words, reviewers saw the post-colonial and ecumenical value of Oden's call to recover the African roots of Christianity, but they did not find Oden making this case historically. In many ways, *The African Memory of Mark* is an attempt to answer that challenge. Oden essentially attempts to defend the historical plausibility of the hagiography about John Mark as found in the *Martyrdom of Mark* (3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> century), the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius (4<sup>th</sup> century), as well as Coptic liturgies (especially the synaxaries) and historians (especially the 10<sup>th</sup> century Sawirus and 12<sup>th</sup> century Girgis). Oden does cite various texts from the New Testament, yet he obviously reads these earliest texts in light of much later formulations.

As this story goes, John Mark was not only an early disciple and apostle of Jesus, a missionary companion to Paul and Barnabas, and the first to write a Gospel in Rome under Peter's patronage. He was also born in Cyrene to a Jewish-African family (hence his personal acquaintance with Simon, Alexander and Rufus). Local political troubles in Cyrene forced his family to relocate to Jerusalem. The upper room where Jesus kept Passover belonged to Mark's family, and this was also the room where the earliest house-church gathered in Acts. Before he wrote his Gospel, Mark preached and did miracles in the Pentapolis and founded the church in Alexandria. He returned to Rome just in time to witness

and survive Nero's persecution of Christians, and stayed just long enough (four years) to witness and survive the executions of Peter and Paul. Finally, he hastened to Alexandria, where he was martyred.

The same story was explored just fifteen years ago in a book written by the Coptic Pope Shenouda III (of blessed memory). While Oden praises Shenouda's book and benefits from it, he writes from a completely different vantage and for very different reasons, which he does not attempt to hide. For Oden, Western culture is decadent and decaying, and the scholarly methodology of doubt has overtaken and ruined much of Western Christianity. The future of Christianity is not in Europe or the United States, but in Africa. On this note, Oden nowhere mentions Philip Jenkins' seminal 2002 work *The Next Christendom*, which analyzes the demographic trends of global Christianity and argues that a Christianity of the southern hemisphere will soon dominate. Oden's whole project seems predicated on the shift that Jenkins substantiates and projects.

Oddly post-colonial *and* paleo-Orthodox, Oden claims solidarity with champions of Afrocentrism while also scolding them. He urges them to stop reading European philosophy, sociology, and psychology and instead go back to their African (Christian) roots, namely, the writings of Clement, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, and Cyril. Oden presumes the existence of a monolithic Africa over the last 2,000 years and, in this vein, insistently claims that all of Africa has always believed the same legend about John Mark. Routinely succumbing to anachronism and over-generalization, Oden's post-colonial treatise has a very colonial feel. He seems intent to redress the messy and often nasty history of Western European, Christian colonialism by bypassing it and repristinating a foundational, permanent and unchanging Afrocentric Christianity.

Scholars who attend to the complexity (diversity) and inter-connections (unity) of early Christian *centers* of influence can and will do more for post-colonial scholarship, as well the future of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic church wherever it thrives. No amount of scholarly effort will prove that Christianity was founded and centered in Africa because it is simply not true. Still, Africa was home to vitally important *centers* of early Christianity, as was Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. Palestine can claim the footprints of Jesus, Syria his language, Asia Minor most of the texts in the New Testament, Greece the *lingua franca* of the earliest Christians, and Italy the remains of Peter and Paul. In the (post-colonial) interest of scholarship and the Church, these claims ought never be exclusive.

On a closing note, there is no little irony in the fact that the very hagiography of Mark that Oden defends as foundational for Afrocentric Orthodoxy shows Mark living and working among many of the centers of early Christianity, even while bound to African soil in his birth and death. He was a Catholic saint, after all.