

JOURNAL OF
AFRICAN
CHRISTIAN
BIOGRAPHY

Vol. 9, No. 1 (Jan. 2024)

Focus: Early African Christianity

Quodvultdeus of Carthage; Hadian of
Canterbury; Giyorgis of Salga;

T. Oden and CEAC; A. Walls; L. Sanneh



A publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

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A quarterly publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian
Biography* (www.DACB.org)



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The DACB is a digital project of the Boston University Center for
Global Christianity and Mission



JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

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Boston University School of Theology
745 Commonwealth Avenue,
Boston, MA 02215, U.S.A.

ISSN 2572-0651



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Established in 2016

Quarterly publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

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The Surprising Discovery of Early African Christianity: Rethinking Traditional Historical Narratives

By Michael Glerup¹

This issue of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* focuses on the early Christian era in Africa. It highlights the influence of Thomas Oden and the Center for Early African Christianity (CEAC) on the study of the Early Church in its relationship to Early African Christian history. In his work, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, Oden proposes a thought-provoking hypothesis: the direction of intellectual leadership in early Christian history predominantly flowed from South to North, from Africa to Europe, challenging the common misconception of a North to South trajectory. Oden acknowledged that this hypothesis had yet to be fully substantiated, nevertheless he remained convinced that a proper examination of the evidence will not only affirm this theory but also profoundly “reshape” the modern identity and motivation of African Christians.

Since some *JACB* readers might be unfamiliar with Oden, a brief biography might be helpful. Thomas Oden (1931-2016) was born in Altus, OK, and was the former student leader of the communist party at Oklahoma University (B.A., 1953). He received his Ph.D. from Yale Graduate School in 1960 under the direction of H. Richard Niebuhr. Tom taught at Yale University, Southern Methodist University, and Phillips University before joining the graduate school faculty at Drew University in 1970. It was here his dean and highly respected colleague, Will Herberg, challenged him. He told Tom he was “densely ignorant of Christianity, and he simply couldn’t permit [him] to throw [his] life away. Holding one finger up, looking straight at [him] with fury in his eyes, he said: ‘You will remain theologically uneducated until you study carefully Athanasius, Augustine, and Aquinas.’”²

Tom took up the challenge and began a ten-year reading regime of the early Christian writers. Ultimately, he emerged with what he described as a changed heart. Persuaded by the great minds of the ancient Christian tradition, he made a 180-degree change in course. During his tenure at Drew, he produced over 80 articles and book chapters, 31 books for publication, and served as the General Editor for ten volumes. After retirement, he wrote 15 additional books and was the General Editor for 35 volumes. Tom died in December 2016. *The Songs of Africa: The Ethiopian Canticles*, published in 2017, was his final research and editorial publication.

Almost fifteen years ago, Oden with the ACCS leadership core founded the Center for Early African Christianity, which is now under my directorship since 2016. The Center is a collaboration of scholars, which began with the research and publication of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS)*. The two decades process of

¹ Michael Glerup, PhD, is Executive Director of the Center for Early African Christianity and General Editor of the *Ancient Christian Texts* series published by InterVarsity Press.

² Thomas C. Oden, *A Change of Heart* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014): 136-137.

translating, editing, and publishing the twenty-nine volume *ACCS* pointed us towards a significant and enlightening turn: the consideration of Early African Christianity's contributions to the formation of Western Christianity. This journey unveiled a surprising discovery—the substantial percentage of texts from Africa, or those influenced by African writers, within patristic commentary across Scripture. Oden reflected on this revelation, noting, “Many leading themes of the widely read homilies by John Chrysostom, Theodoret, and Ambrose were found to echo the insights of Origen, Didymus, and Cyril in specific details.”³ Over the years dedicated to investigating patristic texts for the commentary's editing, this emerged as one of the Center's most unexpected findings.

As an example, our research comparing scriptural commentary side-by-side demonstrated the profound influence of Origen's comprehensive Scripture studies on figures such as Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, as well as how Augustine's exegesis left a lasting impression on Leo the Great and Gregory the Great. This endeavor enabled us to trace the intellectual and spiritual journey from Africa to fourth-century centers of Christianity in Syria, Constantinople, and Rome.

Moreover, our exploration identifies five pivotal centers of Early Christianity in Africa—Carthage & Numidia (*Afi* and *Punic*), Cyrene & Libya (*Greek* and *Libyan*), Alexandria & Egypt (*Greek* and *Egyptian*), Ethiopia (*Aksum* and *Sabaeen*), and Nubia (*Nubian* and *Egyptian*). These centers, through their unique linguistic and cultural encounters, underscore two critical insights. First, as scholars like Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls have articulated, Christianity has been a world religion since its inception. Second, the discussion of Early African Christianity acknowledges the inherently multicultural nature of African Christianity.

Our goal at the Center for Early African Christianity is to shed light on the foundational role of African theologians in shaping Christian thought but also to invite a reevaluation of the historical narratives surrounding the development of early Christian doctrine and practice. Our hope is that our collaborative efforts stand as a testament to the rich, diverse, and impactful heritage of Early African Christianity, offering new perspectives for both scholarship and faith communities worldwide.

In this issue, Andrew Walls's introductory article sets the stage by describing the many ways Early African Christianity is important for the global church today. In the biographical section, two new early African biographies will be added to the esteemed ancestors already found in the DACB: Quodvultdeus of Carthage and Hadrian of Canterbury. Both figures were born in Africa but fled the continent under religious persecution and, for the latter, the threat of enslavement. Though neither was able to return to the continent, both profoundly impacted their new communities of faith. Quodvultdeus was celebrated in Naples, and Hadrian was a distinguished contributor to the intellectual and spiritual formation of the church in England. A third biography is included on Giyorgis of Selga, the 14th-century Ethiopian Abba. This complements the biography that already exists in the DACB classic collection. A selection of early

³ Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007): 45-46.

African Christians from the DACB collection are showcased here as well. We also included a short section on the Gospel writer John Mark later in the issue. This excerpt from Oden's 2011 book the *African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition* (InterVarsity Press.) also includes an important historiographical concept—that of *African memory* and how it contrasts with Western memory.

This volume includes three resources made available by CEAC to JACB readers: the abovementioned lecture by Andrews Walls, a transcript of an interview with Lamin Sanneh, and a selection from *We Believe*, an Early African commentary on the Nicene Creed. This work, written by Christopher Hall and commissioned by Oden, illustrates the intellectual and spiritual wisdom of the early African church. These resources affirm and complement Oden's historiographical legacy.

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Does Early African Christianity Matter Today?

By Andrew F. Walls⁴
(April 21, 1928 – August 12, 2021)

Introduction

Thank you, Rector, for your extremely kind and generous introduction. It is always a joy to be at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute and to share in its ministry of the furtherance of Christian Scholarship. The strange times in which we are currently living have caused a longer physical absence from the Institute for my wife and myself, a loss which we both felt deeply, though we have had some consolation in occasions like the present which enable us to connect and interact in what might be called disembodied form. We have been particularly heartened by the emergence of the Center for the Study of Early African Christianity as the latest of the Institute's nuclei for research, and we look forward to it under the able leadership of [its director] Dr. Rudolf [K.] Gaisie, becoming a force of creative activity.

It was, therefore, not only with joy but with a high sense of the honor and privilege involved that I accepted the invitation to give the Center's inaugural public lecture. But only a few days ago did I realize the extent of the honor done me, as I find that not only has my name been attached to the series of lectures which it opens, but it has linked there with two other names of the highest distinction those of Thomas C. Oden and Kwame Bediako.

Thomas Oden, more than anyone else living or dead has answered the question that I raise in the title of this lecture; he more than anyone else has demonstrated how Early African Christianity shaped the theological inheritance of Western Christianity, how it molded, and to good effect, the thinking and spiritual perceptions shared by the most influential and determinative traditions of Christian thinking – that we are increasingly learning to call 'Classical Christian Thought'.⁵ It is a delight to find that the Oden Center [for Early African Christianity (CEAC)] in New Haven, Connecticut under its energetic director, Dr. Michael Glerup, is co-sponsoring this lecture. But along with Oden's name, the lecture series bears the name of my dear friend of many years, Kwame Bediako, founder of this Institute (ACI), but also, by any reckoning, one of the formative representatives of African theology in modern times. Kwame Bediako enthusiastically forwarded the study of Early African Christianity; and in the early days

⁴ "Does Early African Christianity Matter Today?" by Andrew F. Walls (April 21, 1928 – August 12, 2021). Lecture delivered on 14 April 2021 for the maiden Walls-Oden-Bediako Lecture in Early African Christianity jointly organized by Center for Early African Christianity, New Haven, CT, USA and the now Andrew F. Walls Centre for the Study of Early African Christianity, Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana. © Published with kind permission from the widow, Dr. Ingrid R. Walls.

⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2007).

of the Institute, I had the privilege of sharing with him in the teaching of the course [Studies in Early African Christianity in the First Six Centuries]. His own theological thinking was steeped in the literature of the early Church, and in his best known book, he traces how second and third century Christian thinkers were wrestling with concerns essentially parallel to those of the African theologians of the twentieth century.⁶ That is, what was God doing in our own ancestral cultures to prepare humanity for the Incarnation when He was preparing Israel to be its vehicle?

If Oden showed how Africa has shaped the modern Western Christian mind, Bediako has shown the relevance of the quest of early Christianity to the concerns of modern African. With these mighty exemplars in mind, I hope to show that early African Christianity does matter today. And for that purpose, we may begin in the New Testament.

The New Testament Beginning of Early African Christianity

The Acts of the Apostles is a carefully constructed book. Its prospectus is laid out in the opening verses where the risen Lord tells His disciples after the resurrection that when the Spirit has come, they are to be His witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth [Acts 1:8]. And so, the early chapters of Acts introduce us to that witness in Jerusalem and all Judea and in Samaria, and then, with pointers from the stories of Philip and Cornelius and the conversion of Saul, we are led to the mission to the Gentile world, the world beyond Israel. As these stories progress we realize that Luke particularly wants us to note the westward movement of the Gospel, from its beginnings on the fringes of the Roman Empire to its climax in Paul's preaching the Gospel in Rome itself – from the Palestinian point of view this progress could count as one to the ends of the earth, and Paul preaching in Rome represents not only the end of Luke's narrative, but its high point.

There is one exception to this concern with the spread of the Gospel westward; it is in Chapter 8, with the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, whom we last see as a baptized believer rejoicing on his way back into the heart of Africa. We hear no more of him; Luke clearly does not know what happened when he got home, and the Spirit caught Philip away and took him somewhere else. It is as though Luke is telling his readers: yes, my story is about the westward spread of the Gospel, but not all roads lead to Rome. There are other stories of the Kingdom of God, other stories about other highways along which the Gospel travels to the ends of the earth. One day those highways will join up.

Differences in Early and Modern North Africa

When Luke wrote a substantial part of Africa lay within the Roman Empire, the sphere in which the mission of Paul represents, and during the early Christian

⁶ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999).

centuries those provinces – forming what today we think of as Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, north of the Atlas Mountains, together with parts of Morocco were major Christian centers, with strong churches and active Christian communities. We must remember that they are different from the countries of today in the makeup of their population. The Arabs had not arrived from Arabia until the seventh century. The cities – including major metropolitan centers such as Alexandria and Carthage and the peri-urban populations shared in Roman imperial culture; Greek speaking in the East, Latin speaking in the West. Empires usually have a globalizing, centralizing tendency. But there were also vernacular speaking communities not fully assimilated to the dominant culture, such as Copts and Berbers and we will need to consider their special place in the Christian story.

Another crucial difference from later times is that camels were not yet in use in North Africa, and as a result, there was not yet an easy trans-Saharan route to the West to the West African savannahs; nor were there oceangoing vessels operating south of the Sahara. Roman territorial ambitions ended at the Atlas Mountains.

But Luke's story in Acts 8 points in another direction to Africa up the Nile valley and the peoples along that valley known in Egypt for centuries past. The high official that Philip met was, we are told, in the service of the Kandakē [Candace]. This is a Nubian term associated with the independent African Kingdom of Meroe, located in what we now call the Sudan Republic. As we shall see, there was to arise a Christian state in Nubia for a thousand years. A still stronger Christian history, still continuing with vigor in our own time, lies in the complex Christian story of Ethiopia with a Christian history far stronger and longer than my own country [Scotland] can boast.

Early Christian Africa was thus to a very considerably in extent and population, concentrated in a thick band across North Africa and along the Nile Valley, with a notable presence in the heart of eastern Africa. Immediately it strikes us that the greater part of the area covered by this early African Christianity is not immediately associated with Christianity today. The parts of Africa where Christians are most notable today were unknown or inaccessible to most Christians of the early centuries. There are, of course, exceptions: Egypt can no longer, as in the early Christians centuries, be seen as essentially Christian territory, but it still has a substantial Christian population and a continuous Christian history since the early centuries of which it remains very conscious. In conversation with a Coptic bishop today it is very easy to get the impression that Athanasius may be waiting in the next room. In Ethiopia the sense of continuity with the early church is even stronger; every department of life seems to have been impacted by Christian themes, Christian reflection, Biblical language. Ploughs and working tools are covered with Christian themes of Scriptural allusions. Even butchers' meat is slaughtered with the invocation of the Holy Trinity. Here an ancient Christian tradition took local form, with a unique language for worship and a body of sacred learning and monastic institutions to preserve and transmit it. During worship in the Ethiopian Orthodox [Tewahedo] Church, the sounds, the music, the odors recall those described in the Old Testament accounts of the Jerusalem Temple. In an Ethiopian Orthodox church, I have half expected to see the Seraphim. In Ethiopia early Christianity appears very close.

But, given all this, and given that most of us find our calling in other parts of Africa or indeed other parts of the world, does the existence of this ancient Christian history have any real significance for us today? Is it worth the while of modern African Christians to spend much time considering these early centuries?

Why Early African Christianity Matters Today

I wish to suggest several reasons why it seems abundantly worthwhile. The first is that early African Christianity matters because it points to an Africa that was Christian not only before the White man came there, but before Islam came there or indeed had been established; an Africa that is historically Christian, whose Christian thinking was carried out and formulated long before the now existing nations of the West had come into being.

In this connection, let us consider the particular significance of Ethiopia, which can claim a Christian history stretching back unbroken at least to the early fourth century. In Ethiopia, we see an Africa historically primordially Christian, defined in Christian terms with a religious history in which the currents that created Western Christianity as we now know it have played little or no part. It is striking how often African Christians of modern times have found inspiration from the Christian history of Ethiopia, especially at times when they have found aspects of Western Christianity, or the behavior of Western Christians intrusive or oppressive. In the nineteenth century, when some African Christians found Western missionary dominance intrusive or offensive, they founded what they called Ethiopian Churches. Ethiopian Baptist Churches or Ethiopian Methodist Churches had no quarrel with Baptist or Methodist doctrine or polity as represented in mission practice; what they sought was freedom to express perceptions which they held to be both Christian and African; and Ethiopian churches and orders of Ethiopia sprang into being in many places.

When in the twentieth century Africans of the diaspora in the Americas burdened with the bitter historical and cultural legacy of slavery, oppression, discrimination, exploitation, and belittling, sought an expression of Christian faith that would truly reflect their dignity and identity, they seized on the name of Ras Tafari [Makonnen], Emperor [Haile Selassie I] of Ethiopia; one of the only two independent African nations then in existence, and one that had not been colonized, and one that reflected a Christian history that was both ancient and essentially African.

Bible Translation and Biblical Scholarship

Let's move to consider some particular aspects of Christian activity and where the experience of early African Christianity is worth studying. Africa has a special place in the early history of Bible translation. It was in Africa, in Alexandria in Egypt, that the most influential of all early Bible translations was made, initially among Alexandrian Jews beginning in the second century before the Christian era. This was, of course, the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek; the Bible that Paul knew and the Apostolic Church used. The driving force for the translation lay in

migration; Jews leaving Palestine and settling in the Greek speaking world, and while first generation migrants might continue to use Hebrew later generations, with less and less familiarity with the language needed to be able to read the Scriptures in Greek. But while the Septuagint seems to have had a missionary function for Jews it came to have a still greater one for Christians. The philosopher Justin is just one of the educated Greek speaking pagans who became captivated by the writings of the prophets as translated into Greek. Justin was led to Christ by his encountering the Septuagint translation of the prophets. Had he first met the New Testament writings, it is possible that he would not have been unduly impressed – philosophers like him engaged with the writers of centuries past, such as Plato, Aristotle, the Stoic pioneers. For them, the New Testament was a book from the day before yesterday, too recent to be worth closer study. But the prophets, and Justin found that Isaiah had lived before Plato, opened a new world for him. He comes to the Gospels by way of the prophets, and he was able to do this because of the translation into Greek had a century or two earlier been carried out in Egypt.

Africa was also the source of some of the earliest translations of the New Testament scriptures that we know of. The two earliest that have survived come from different parts of Africa and we know them to have been particularly influential. The first of these is the translation into the Sahidic dialect of Coptic, a language deriving from ancient Egyptian and spoken across upper Egypt, an area where Christianity early flourished and spread into rural as well as urban areas. We will see it becoming a center of Christian revival, stimulated by the reading and hearing of the Scriptures in Sahidic.

The second translation, especially even influential, was into African Latin. Among the languages spoken across North Africa in what we now call Tunisia and Algeria, Latin had a degree of primacy. It was, of course, spoken in other parts of the world and other Latin versions of Scripture appeared in Italy and elsewhere; but African Latin came to have a huge importance since it so deeply penetrated the minds of three African thinkers: Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine who between them were to have an immense effect on the development of Christian theology and their work made possible by the African Latin translation.

We have spoken so far only of translations in Egypt and North Africa. There were many others as Christianity spread to the Nile Valley and into Nubia and in what is now the Sudan Republic, and as it emerged in Axum in Tigray and moved to the Ethiopian High Plateau.

But the history of language is not static. With hindsight, we can now identify an African language that does not seem to have received an early translation. A failure, which may have had severe consequences all the time.

We have seen that Latin was indeed an African language in the early Christian centuries. It was the official language in North Africa and widely spoken there, but much of the population was ethnically Berber, and Berber is a language in its own right. We know that there were many Berber Christians, as the archeologically based work of the late William [H. C.] Friend has shown; but, so far as can be discovered now, no Berber translation of the Scriptures was ever made. Times change; for several centuries Latin was the language of the North African Church, which was using Latin at a time

when the church in Rome was using Greek. (The first bishop of Rome to introduce Latin, as far as we can see, was Victor, who was an African by birth.) But the time came when Latin disappeared in North Africa to be replaced by Arabic, and the Berber are still there, and very few of them are now Christians.

For the time that remains, I would like to point to a number of aspects of the life of the Church that the experience of Early African Christianity may be worth reflection on today. In doing so, I am taking for granted the demonstration that Thomas [C.] Oden has already made concerning the theological legacy of Early African Christianity, and especially of the insights which derive from its long and often agonizing debates on the Doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. Those debates arose from issues that go to the heart of Christian faith. The relation between two statements: first, that there is one God; and second that the proper response to Jesus the Christ is “my Lord and my God” [cf. John 20:28]. The popular religion of the Hellenistic world where Christianity grew up had plenty of stories about divine beings begetting children by human mothers, but one cannot understand the Christ of the Scriptures in terms of half gods like Hercules. Christians had to dig deeper and the theology of Godhead, which emerged in early Christian centuries with Africa as its first major battleground and African theologians to the fore remains, as Oden showed, foundational for Christian thinking. In accepting this, I point to some other areas of early African Christianity which may have relevance today.

Rural Christianity

Let us reflect that African Christianity is one of the first areas in which we encounter rural Christianity. The picture we get from the Acts of the Apostles of Paul's missions is that they are essentially urban directed; the communities of Christians that we meet in his letters and for that matter the letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation is that these are city dwellers. Early African Christianity had its cities too. Alexandria and Carthage are clearly crucial to the Christian story. But early African Christianity has another story too. The Lower Nile area and the life of Antony. May we just think of that story for a moment.

One of the striking aspects of Antony's story to me is the fact that though he grew up in an age of persecution – he was born in about 250 A.D. – the community to which he belonged seems to have been substantially Christian. It even seemed to have a church building; when Antony is brought there by a friend, battered and lacerated after his conflict with the devil the whole community comes to the church and stays until everyone falls asleep. On his rare visits to Alexandria, Antony encouraged those on their way to martyrdom, but the long arm of the Roman state does not seem to have stretch to his home community. He came from a relatively prosperous land owning family, but he never learned Greek, never participated in urban culture. People who visited him from the Greek world after he had become famous needed to have an interpreter.

The earliest writings that have survived in his language, Coptic, are spells and charms to drive away evil forces; the second oldest writing is the New Testament scriptures in their Sahidic translation.

For all the importance of the rapid urbanization of Africa today, rural Christianity, with village life at its heart, is still vitally important for Africa. And the story of rural Christianity in the Nile Valley may still have relevance.

Monastic Movements

The story of Antony has significance in other respects too. Antony represents one of the first expressions movements of Christian renewal and revival. Antony belongs, as we have seen, to a settled Christian community with its own local organization (it has not only a building used for worship, but a body of women devoted to good works). Antony is a young man, well-endowed in local terms in relation to the property his family owned. He hears rather than reads the New Testament in his mother tongue as it is read in the service. He hears the words that Jesus spoke to a would-be disciple, “sell all that you have and give to the poor” [cf. Matthew 19: 21]. The command is clear and Antony follows it literally, for he wants to be a disciple of Jesus. Then he hears Jesus say, in the Sahidic Gospel, “be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” [cf. Matthew 5:48]. That message seizes him; he wants to be not just a disciple of Jesus, but a perfect disciple. It sends him on a path which leads to a movement among other Christian young men, to seek complete devotion to Christ. Antony is not converted from paganism. His family was already Christian. The temptations that he received as described in his life contain no temptation to apostasy. Antony is converted from ordinary Christianity and those who followed his example were seeking radical renewal. They did not all follow the same path. Antony valued solitude. Though he also recognized the usefulness of consideration of Scripture with others and mutual encouragement. Pachomius [d. AD 348] from a similar background who had been a soldier, believed in organizing a community of radical Christians and his work marks the beginning of the monastic movement, which was to have a huge effect throughout the church as an evangelistic and missionary organization and one that provided Christian hospitality, care for the poor and sick, education and Christian scholarship. It is a long and complex history, but in origin it was a radical movement of Christian renewal, and it began in Africa.

Theology of the Powers

The story of Antony reminds us also that early African Christianity took spiritual powers seriously. We have noted that the earliest Coptic writings are spells and charms for driving off evil spirits. In Christian times these writings of this sort did not survive; but Antony in his search for perfect discipleship has a very strong sense of the reality of the demonic. He undergoes much spiritual conflict. Antony fights with the devil; when he moves to the desert, and makes his home in the abandoned graveyard of a deserted village, he is not seeking to escape the world; he is consciously choosing to challenge

the devil on his own territory. The story of that combat is a special feature in Antony's biography; the establishment of Christian worship in what was once the devil's own country is the sign of God's victory through Antony's work.

Early African Christianity had thus an awareness of the powers of evil and the costs of conflict with them and of the resources that God supplies for overcoming them.

With modern enlightenment, Christianity has, generally speaking, lost those concerns. But a huge part of the contemporary Christian world does not operate in an Enlightenment universe with a closed frontier between the empirical world of the things we can see and touch and the transcendent world of spirit. They live with an open frontier between those worlds, constantly crossed in both directions. That many New Testament Christians lived in just such a world is evident from Paul's letters. But we have currently no coherent operating theology of the powers. Western theology is disabled from supplying it; African theologians may have a special vocation for its modern development.

The lively sense of the powers displayed in some aspects of early African Christianity may act as an inspiration for this.

Theological Education

There is much more one could say; let me confine myself to one last theme where early African Christianity may offer guidance for today. It is theological education. I had hoped to include a section on suggesting the different ways in which the different branches of theological education, as we know it, developed in the early African church and perhaps to pay some particular attention to the discipline of practical or pastoral theology. But let me conclude with the issue of theological education. It is arguable that theological education was first comprehensively developed in Africa and that its true model is the Catechetical School of Alexandria.

Here we must recall how early Christians took over and adapted the existing institutions of the weaker Roman world for their own purposes.

In an age when persecution might burst forth at any time, church buildings and public meetings were not feasible on any regular basis. Christians adopted the philosophical school which anyone could set up and use the model for Christian teaching. In many places, this is basically the preparation for church membership giving attention to both elementary doctrinal and moral concerns. But in Alexandria, in particular, the Catechetical School, under a succession of remarkable directors, Pantaenus and Clement both originally professional philosophers, converted to Christ and, above all, Origen brought up in a Christian home and soaked both in biblical teaching and in pagan philosophy, moved to a more complete form of Christian education.

Let us notice that theological education developed in early African Christianity, designed not as is common today to train ministers, it is to train Christians. It was addressed to the whole church. Alexandria was a major intellectual center with a famous university and a famous library. Its huge Jewish community boasted major

Hebrew Biblical scholars, philosophers of every kind, enlightened and bogus, religions of every sort from every part of the world. Esoteric cults that offered secrets of life jostled each other for a hearing. Those who inquired about Christian faith might already have been trying one or more, or many of these other paths. Their minds might be full of the resultant material. The Catechetical School sought to teach Christian faith and life in this setting bringing Biblical Christianity into the mix. And in the background there was always the threat of the renewal of persecution; the alleged theological education had to prepare people for potential martyrdom.

With no time to explore the successive contributions of Pantaenus, Clement and Origen, let us just note one or two items with the foundations of theological education as we know it were being laid. Origen, who had a double career in Egypt and Syria, lays the foundations for the textual study of the Bible. Few Greek speaking scholars of his day knew Hebrew. Origen learned it and produced a remarkable document, the Hexapla. It set out the text of the Hebrew Bible in parallel columns containing a transliteration of that Hebrew text into Greek, the Greek alphabet, and all the other Greek translations known at that time, together with some other manuscripts of the Psalms.

We see that in early African Christianity, the emergence of the Bible commentary, the first Bible commentaries that we know of come from Africa and Origen was to take this to a new peak. We may, even if we were following the Origen story, look to the beginning of Christian publishing. His partnership with a man named Ambrose, who provided a series of shorthand writers who took down Origen's lectures and sermons, and a set of copyists who, in effect, brought them to publication. I would that we had time to consider so much else and above all, it seems ineffective to miss out the towering figure of Augustine, another North African theologian whose greatest work the *City of God* is not only a comprehensive study of Christianity and society, but a dialogue with the primal religions of his own day. But we must move to a close and for this purpose, I return to Origen.

Conclusion

We are fortunate in having both an account of Origen as a teacher from one of his distinguished pupils, Gregory Thaumaturgus, and a letter from Origen to Gregory, encouraging him to devote himself to theology and not get side-tracked by thoughts of the wealth and prestige that might follow from a life devoted to law or politics.

He illustrates the way forward by a meditation on Scripture. Consider, he says, the Old Testament account of the setting up of the tabernacle in the wilderness, where did the Israelites get the gold from to make the figures of the cherubim? Or the accessories such as the pot, the gold pot that held the manna? The answer, of course, is that the Israelites had spoiled the Egyptians; it was Egyptian gold that adorned the house of God and the curtains of the first tabernacle must have been made of Egyptian cloth. It is our business as Christians, Origen concludes, to take the things that are misused in the heathen world and to fashion out of them things which are for the worship and service of God.

It is a path which Origen goes on to warn Gregory has built-in dangers; some people in the process have set up idols, but the obligation to pursue it remains.

It seems also a valid challenge on the part of an early African Christian scholar, thinker and writer to his successors today, whether they be in Africa or elsewhere.

Thank you.

Map of Ancient Africa



Source: <https://dacb.org/sort/stories/ancient-church-index/>

Biographies

Quodvultdeus of Carthage

390 – 454 CE

Ancient Christian Church

Tunisia

Quodvultdeus (whose name means “What God wills”), the fifth-century Bishop of Carthage, is a remarkable figure in early Christian history whose life and works have left an indelible mark on the theological landscape of his time. Born in the turbulent period of the decline of the Western Roman Empire, and harassed by the Vandal invasions of his native North Africa, Quodvultdeus navigated the treacherous waters of religious strife, persecution, and political turmoil.

Little is known about Quodvultdeus' early life, but he may have been born in Carthage around the year 390 CE. His later writings reveal a rigorous education in theology and classical studies, which laid the foundation for his future role as a bishop and theologian. Quodvultdeus is first known through an exchange of letters with Augustine of Hippo in 428–429 CE. Then as a deacon in Carthage, Quodvultdeus entreated Augustine to compose a book on heresies for use by the Carthaginian clergy. Augustine at least conceded and produced *On Heresies, to Quodvultdeus*, which traced heretical groups from Simonian Gnosticism up to the Pelagians of Augustine's own time.

Scholarly debates over the authenticity of texts ascribed to Quodvultdeus complicate the reconstruction of the remainder of his life, but there is a general consensus that he moved from deacon to assistant bishop of Carthage around 435 CE and then succeeded Capreolus as bishop of Carthage around 437 CE. It was likely during the mid 430s that Quodvultdeus produced three creedal homilies for catechumens in defense of the Nicene Creed against challenges from Jews, pagans, and heretics (particularly Arians).

This period of Quodvultdeus' life was marked by religious controversies and disputes. The Carthaginian church already faced significant internal dissent as a result of the Donatist Controversy, and by the time Quodvultdeus became bishop, Gaiseric and the Vandal armies had already swept across much of North Africa (Augustine's city of Hippo had fallen to them in 430 CE). The Vandals posed a political threat, but the theological threat from the Vandals, who were Arians, was just as real in the eyes of Quodvultdeus.

In 439 CE, Gaiseric violated a treaty with the Roman Empire and launched an assault on Carthage and the Roman navy docked in its port. He conquered the city and removed all non-Arian Christian leaders. Quodvultdeus, unwilling to renounce his faith or compromise his beliefs, chose exile over submission. According to the bishop and historian Victor of Vita, Quodvultdeus and the other clergy who refused to submit or convert were placed naked in leaky ships and sent out to sea. The intent was likely for them all to drown, but Quodvultdeus' ship miraculously arrived safely in the port

of Naples. Naples welcomed him with open arms, and there he found refuge to continue his theological pursuits for the remainder of his life.

His most famous work is the *Book of Promises and Predictions of God*, typically dated around 450 CE. This influential work of interpretation organizes biblical testimonia into three periods: before the law (of Moses), under the law, and under grace. The first two sections present numerous Old Testament figures and events as types of the Christ to come, while the final section argues that many Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in the New Testament. This story of God's "promises and predictions" was meant to encourage believers to be confident in God's future faithfulness in fulfilling the remainder of his promises. It should be noted that his authorship of this work, alongside other treatises and sermons attributed to him, is still questioned by a few scholars.

Quodvultdeus' death in Naples is commonly dated to 454 CE. He has been identified as a figure in a fifth-century mosaic in the Catacombs of San Gennaro on the slope of Capodimonte in Naples, which may indicate that he was buried there. He also became revered as a saint, for by the ninth century, a feast of St. Quodvultdeus was included in the local liturgical calendar.

Quodvultdeus disappeared from history for many centuries. Until the early eighteenth century, the *Book of Promises and Predictions of God* was incorrectly attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine. Similarly, his close association with Augustine led to a number of his works being attributed initially to Augustine, then later to Pseudo-Augustine. Careful work by textual critics in the twentieth century at last restored Quodvultdeus to his rightful place as a significant author of the period. He was a prolific writer and addressed a wide range of theological and pastoral concerns. Some historians have suggested that if Augustine was the North African church's great theologian of the fifth century, then Quodvultdeus was its great pastor in a period of uncertainty and upheaval. His unwavering commitment to the Nicene Creed and his fearless defense of orthodox Christianity in the face of great danger have earned him a lasting legacy in the annals of Christian history.

David L. Eastman

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This biography, received in February 2024, was written by Dr. David L. Eastman, Joseph Glenn Sherrill Chair of Bible, The McCallie School; Research Fellow, University of South Africa; Faculty Fellow, Universität Regensburg. It was initially published in the *Journal of African Christian Biography*, Vol. 9, issue 1 (Jan. 2024).

Hadrian of Canterbury

b. 630-637 / 709

Ancient Christian Church

Libya

A Scholarly Journey from Africa to England

Hadrian of Canterbury, a figure of immense historical significance in the development of the English church. Bede introduces Hadrian with the statement that he was born in Africa (*uir natione Afir*). Scholars make the case he was born in the region now known as Libya's Cyrenaica sometime between 630 and 637. His early years were marked by a rich education.

Life took a dramatic turn for Hadrian when the threat of enslavement loomed over him. In a bid to escape this dire fate, he sought refuge among the Greek community in the Byzantine controlled Naples, Italy (possibly around 644-45.) It was there, near Campania, that he embraced the monastic life, becoming a dedicated monk and diligently delving into the study of Latin, biblical texts, and the patristic traditions.

During Hadrian's time, a devastating epidemic swept through Europe, creating a significant leadership vacuum within the English church. Deusdedit, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, had passed away, and Wighard, a priest with administrative experience, was sent to Rome to be consecrated as the new Archbishop. Tragically,

Wighard died (possibly of the plague) shortly after his arrival in Rome, leaving the position vacant.

Pope Vitalian, faced with the urgent need for a new Archbishop of Canterbury, turned to Hadrian. The Pope described Hadrian as a man of great learning, hailing not far from Naples, possibly from the monastery of Niridano (or Hiridano/Nisidanum) on the island of Nisida. Hadrian was known for his deep knowledge of scriptures, as well as his extensive experience in ecclesiastical and monastic administration.

Hadrian's scholarship was unparalleled; he was fluent in both Greek and Latin, a testament to his dedication to learning. When Pope Vitalian initially asked Hadrian to assume the role of Archbishop, he excused himself, believing that he was not suited for such a high position. Instead, he recommended Andrew, who declined due to health reasons.

Pope Vitalian persisted in his quest for a suitable candidate and eventually was directed to Theodore, a native of Tarsus in Cilicia, who resided in Rome. Theodore possessed an exceptional breadth of knowledge, encompassing sacred and secular literature, and was proficient in both Greek and Latin. At the age of 66, his proven integrity and scholarly background made him an ideal candidate.

The Pope agreed to appoint Theodore as Archbishop of Canterbury on the condition that Hadrian would accompany him. Hadrian's knowledge of the road from his previous missions was valuable, ensuring a safe journey. Moreover, his presence was intended to prevent Theodore from introducing Greek customs into the English church.

The consecration took place on March 26, 668, and the following day, they set out for Britain. Their route took them by sea to Marseilles, followed by a road trip to Arles. There, they presented a papal letter to Archbishop John and awaited a travel permit from the local mayor. The winter was spent in the archdiocese of Sens, while Theodore stayed in Paris. Finally, Theodore were escorted to the port of Quentavic by Egbert, where he boarded a ship bound for Britain.

Hadrian's journey was not without its challenges. He was detained in Gaul by Ebroin, under suspicion that he was conducting an embassy for the emperor. Eventually, he was released and joined Theodore in Britain, where he was appointed abbot of the monastery of Saints Peter and Paul.

Hadrian's impact on the English church was profound. He traveled throughout the island, engaging with the local populace and imparting his vast knowledge. His teachings attracted numerous students, whom he instructed in sacred and secular literature, poetry, astronomy, and the calculation of the church calendar. Some of these students, as noted by Bede, remained proficient in both Latin and Greek, as well as their native English tongue.

Bede makes an interesting statement in the second chapter of his *Ecclesiastical History*: "From that time also the knowledge of sacred music, which had hitherto been known only in Kent, began to be taught in all the English churches." Bede is clear that this knowledge of sacred music was transferred after Hadrian and Theodore were established. As result, it fair to say that the "fathers" of English sacred music were Hadrian and Theodore.

After an illustrious life, Hadrian passed away in 709, buried in the monastery church. His legacy lived on through his successor, Abbot Albinus, who was trained by Hadrian and possessed a deep understanding of Greek and Latin, along with his native English tongue. Hadrian's influence on the English church and culture extended well beyond his lifetime, making him a true pioneer and foundational figure in the history of England.

Michael Glerup

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This biography, received in February 2024, was written for the JACB by Dr. Michael Glerup, Executive Director of the *Center for Early African Christianity*, and General Editor of the *Ancient Christian Texts* series published by InterVarsity Press.

Giyorgis of Sagla

1364 - 1424

Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Ethiopia

There have been other Ethiopian figures from the fourteenth century with the name Giyorgis that have been confused with one another at various points. However, the author of the *Maṣḥafa Məṣṭir* (“Book of Mystery”) has been considered by most to be Giyorgis of Sagla, or Gasecha. The *Maṣḥafa Məṣṭir* provides minimal information about the life and ministry of Giyorgis. However, a fifteenth-century *gadol*—or “biography”—of Giyorgis provides more detailed information about his life. This volume presents the first English translation of the *gadol* of Giyorgis as well.

Giyorgis was born during the mid-fourteenth century in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia to a nobleman named Hezba Seyon and a woman from the Walaqa region named ‘Emmena Ṣeyon. Indeed, Giyorgis’ Christian father was renowned for his knowledge of the Bible, a trait that likely passed to Giyorgis. Hezba Seyon was a part of the imperial court and had connections to the chief priests in the capital city. It is perhaps for this reason, that Hezba Seyon was able to take Giyorgis to the *abuna* of Ethiopia to ordain Giyorgis as a deacon. However, Giyorgis is remembered in Ethiopian tradition as being slow to theological education in the beginning. Giyorgis’ father brought him to the famous monastic community at Lake Hayq, during the leadership of Ṣaraqqa Berhan, the ‘Aqabey Sa‘āṭ (“Head Monk”) of the Estifanos Monastery. Giyorgis struggled academically and was very discouraged at first, for the rigorous Ethiopian monastic system of theological education relied on memorization of Scripture and theological writings.

However, Giyorgis continued to pray to the Virgin Mary, who appeared to him and counseled him to continue his study with diligence. Giyorgis had “little knowledge” of the Scriptures, a trait that was destined to highlight the glory of God who gave Giyorgis miraculous intelligence. The glory of ‘*Ēgzi ‘abher* (“God”) would be manifest in spite of Giyorgis’ lack of intelligence, much like the blind man who was given sight for the glory of Jesus in John 9. The theological renown of Giyorgis resulted in his invitation to the imperial court. However, Giyorgis retired from the capital to take up the ascetic life in order to avoid the emperor’s constant attempts at betrothing Giyorgis to the princess. Nevertheless, Giyorgis remained a close advisor and mentor to the leadership of Ethiopia. He returned to his native Sagla and began to compose his own writings.

Other than the *Maṣḥafa Məṣṭir*, the most famous composition of Giyorgis was his *Sa‘atat* (“Hours”). Until this work from Giyorgis, the Ethiopian Church relied on the Coptic *Horologion*. Giyorgis adapted and expanded the Coptic liturgical hours to include indigenous Ethiopian saints that were absent from other liturgical compositions. Giyorgis also wrote the *Arganon Weddāse* (“Harp of Praise”), a hymn in

honor of the Virgin Mary, the *Hohəta Bərhān* (“Portal of Light”), the *Wəddāse Masqal* (“Praise of the Cross”), a hymn in honor of the cross.

After his tenure at Lake Hayq, Giyorgis lived at the Debre Damo monastery where he eventually served as the Nebura Ed (“Chief Abbot”). Giyorgis educated the children of Emperor Dawit I (1382-1413 CE) and enjoyed the support of the Emperor for many years. However, this dynamic shifted when a theologian named Bitu began to teach a dissident theology from that of Giyorgis. Dawit eventually favored Bitu and the tension between the two theologians resulted in the imprisonment of Giyorgis. The *Gadla Giyorgis* claimed that Giyorgis’ imprisonment was due to false claims by Bitu that Giyorgis called the emperor a heretic.

During the time of Emperor Tewodros (1413-1414 CE) and Emperor Yeshaq (1414-1429 CE), Giyorgis was freed from prison and Bitu was struck dead by *’Əgzi’ abher*. Giyorgis then continued the ascetic lifestyle at the famed Debra Damo monastery for a time and was then sent to Debra Libanos by Emperor Yeshaq. Much of Ethiopia was embroiled in a theological controversy regarding Sabbath observance during this time. The community of Debra Libanos embraced an opposing view of that of Giyorgis, which led to his departure from this monastic community. Giyorgis entered and eventually became the head of another monastery during the last years of his life.

Giyorgis became ill and died at 60 years old. It was during these years that he composed the *Maṣḥafa Məṣṥir* with the aid of multiple scribes. He was buried in a church that he built in anticipation of his death, at the site of the martyrdom of the Ethiopian saint, *’Abba Baṣlotā Mika’eyl*. He died in the year 1424 CE during the reign of Emperor Yeshaq.

Vince L. Bantu

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This biography, received in February 2024, was written by Dr. Vince L. Bantu, the Ohene (President) of the Meachum School of Haymanot and Assistant Professor of Church History and Black Church Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary.

A Selection of Early Christian Figures from the DACB Collection, 1st-6th c.

First Century

Simon

1st century

Ancient Christian Church

Libya

The very first African worthy of recollection in a “Dictionary of African Christian Biography” is the relatively unknown Simon of Cyrene. He is remembered as the one compelled by the Roman authorities to assist in the crucifixion of Jesus by carrying His cross to the place of execution. We can interpolate, from the consistent Synoptic record of the presence of this person and by the gentilic which defines him, not merely his place of origin but also his relative age, and from his name itself that he was most probably a Hellenized Jew who had come to Jerusalem for the annual Passover festival.

But it is also noteworthy, that, when the memory of this historical event from 7 April 30 A.D. was first structurally narrated at a time some three decades later by Mark the Evangelist, this same Simon was then uniquely identified by reference to his two sons, Alexander and Rufus (15:21; Carrington 1957: II. 206). Of these two the role of the former within the incipient Christian community cannot be certainly identified (though one might consult Acts 19:33 or 1 Timothy 1:20 or 2 Timothy 4:14), while that of the latter seems most likely among those now “eminent in the Lord” to be greeted at Rome (Romans 16:13; Carrington 1957: II. 150). A “Rufus,” identified only as “bishop of Thebes,” is included in the list of the “seventy” attributed to Hippolytus [ANF V (1885) 256].

Whether identifiable or not, it is to be recalled that some like these three, along with a number of others from “those parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene” recorded among early Christians by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (2:10), form a constituent core within the church of the first generation. That we learn so little more than names may be regrettable, but within that little, the brief memories and glimpses of family connections tell us something of how the faith came to be spread to another continent.

Clyde Curry Smith

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This article, received in 2001, was researched and written by Dr. Clyde Curry Smith, Professor Emeritus of Ancient History and Religion, University of Wisconsin, River Falls. Prof. Smith wrote more than sixty biographies of early Christian figures for the DACB, always choosing minor figures out of respect for African scholars who, he believed, should have the honor of writing the stories of the major figures.

The Eunuch of Ethiopia
1st century
Ancient Christian Church
Ethiopia

The Eunuch of Ethiopia, the treasurer of Queen Candace, was converted to Christianity through Philip the Deacon (Acts VIII, 26-40). Perhaps he was an “Ethiopian” Jew or an “Ethiopian” Jewish proselyte who had come to the Temple of Jerusalem to offer a gift. According to a tradition of the Ethiopian Church, he became the first Christian missionary to Ethiopia.

Ephraim Isaac

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2nd – 3rd Centuries

Speratus

2nd century

Ancient Christian Church

Tunisia

Robert McQueen Grant has observed that “the churches of [the Roman province of] Africa first came to the attention of the state in 180, when, according to Tertullian, the proconsul Vigellius Saturninus ‘first drew the sword upon us’ and put to death the twelve Christians at Carthage” [1970: 187, citing Tertullian *Ad Scapulum *3.4 = ANF 3 (1885) 106; cf. Carrington 1957: II.290]. While persecution at various levels under diverse circumstances within distinct communities can be traced back throughout early Christian history to its origins, this specific episode began within weeks of the accession as sole emperor of Lucius Aelius Aurelius Commodus [161-192; co-emperor from 177 with his father Marcus Aelius Aurelius Verus (121-17 March 180)].

The date of their specific execution by beheading (a punishment normally reserved for Roman citizens, witness the tradition with respect to the Apostle Paul in contrast to that of the Apostle Peter) occurred on 16 kalends of August (which we render as 17 July), dated to the consulship of Praesens for the second time along with Claudian as his colleague (= 180 A.D.; cf. Musurillo 1972:87 n.2). William Hugh Clifford Frend has stated that these twelve were “drawn from the purely native, non-citizen classes of the [North African] population” (1952:88), but he ignores the mode of execution.

Among exacting accounts of the witnessing (in Greek *marturein*) of Christians before an imperial officer, “The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs’ is our earliest dated document from the Latin Church and the first to make mention of a Latin Bible” (Musurillo 1972: xxii). This document conveys by its brevity and lack of frills the impression of a primitive court record wherein is met a cluster of twelve named individuals, seven males and five females, headed by Speratus who alone speaks more than once (for a total of nine curt replies to interrogation). Five others (two men: Nartzalus and Cittinus; three women: Donata, Vestia, and Secunda) make no more than one responsive comment, and the other six (four men: Veturius, Felix, Aquilinus, and Laetanius; two women: Januaria and Generosa) simply get identified in the concluding indication of the total of those sentenced. [See the Latin text and English translation of Musurillo 1972:86-89; separate entries are given for each of those named.]

This is little enough to go on relative to personality, individually or collectively considered, though one senses – at least speculatively – that, while no age is adduced, we may ascribe to each beside Speratus a probable youth appropriate to their level of enthusiasm for this witnessing to their Christian identification. Moreover, Philip Carrington has observed that “the record reminds us of the Acts of the Martyrdom of

Justin and his companions in Rome, so that Speratus with his simple answers and his New Testament books may have been a teacher like Justin, witnessing to his faith with his pupils" (1957: II.292; for an edition of "The Acts of Justin and Companions," see Musurillo 1972:42-61). One might also recall from Eusebius (c.260-340) the listing of seven students of Origen who were martyred [H.E. 6.4]; of these "at least five were unbaptized or lately baptized" (Lawlor 1928:193), where the issue against the Christians might also appear to be the law against proselytism, a charge especially obvious within catechetical schools. This "enthusiasm" of youth is also apparent in the witnessing of the African martyr Perpetua, a young mother of age 22, where her companions are specifically identified as "*adolescentes catechumeni*" (literally "adolescent catechumens," not yet baptized; cf. Carrington 1957: II.425)!

However, Tertullian (c.160-220) had known of others caught up in this same persecution with those from Scillium. Carrington thought it began at a country town named Madauros in Numidia, where the "first martyr" was a native African with the Berber name of Namphanio [Maximus in his letter to Augustine sneeringly calls Namphanio "*archimartus*"; Augustine in response explains the Punic meaning of the name – cf. Letter of Augustine 16 and 17; NPNF ser.1 1.233-235, both dated 390], and a group of companions with equally non-Roman names – Lucitas, Mygdon (Miggin), and Samae (Saname), for whom no court record survives (Carrington 1957: II.291; see the entries for each). We may perceive therefrom the breadth but not the depth of this Christian community in the larger region about Carthage, where later persecution will catch up with even more noteworthy persons, such as the episcopal author, Cyprian (c.200-258). [For him are preserved "The Acts of St. Cyprian," covering from his confession before the proconsul Aspasius Paternus until his final hearing and execution under Galerius Maximus – that is, from August 30, 257 to September 14, 258; cf. Musurillo 1972:168-175 (Latin text and English translation), which deserve to be read as companion piece to this slightly earlier and much briefer material. Agobard archbishop of Lyons (c.779-840) asserts that the relics of Speratus, with those of Cyprian, were translated by Charlemagne's orders from Carthage to Lyons (cf. DCB 1887: 4.593, with reference to PL CIV 349).]

Because Speratus is most preeminent within these "Acts," noteworthy are several of his affirmations: while holding "our emperor in honor" and committing no acts of wickedness, Christians, however, do not "swear by the genius of [the] lord emperor," to whom the proconsul required their acquiescence, since we "do not recognize the empire of this world," rather we serve "that God whom no man has seen." Speratus can affirm recognizable examples from "the Ten Commandments"; but the basic is simply "I am a Christian" (thrice affirmed, twice by Speratus, once by Vestia)! When asked what he has in his "case," the response is "Books, and letters of a just man named Paul" – a significantly early indication of the achievement of their collection as anticipated from Paul's own instructions (Col. 4:16) or the comment found in Second Peter (3:15-16).

While the proconsul would offer reprieve for thirty days, neither Speratus nor his students require any more time to accept their sentence, which, like the original policy set by Marcus Ulpianus Trajanus (53-117, emperor from 25 January 98), in

written reply to the interrogative letter with its fundamental questions of propriety concerning the handling of Christians asked by Pliny the Younger in 110 A.D. [cf. Letters of Pliny 10.96 and 97], still proceeds to find guilty by virtue of their having “persevered in their obstinacy” going each to death with a “*Deo gratias*” (“Thanks be to God”) perhaps spoken in unison (citing throughout from the translation by Musurillo 1972:86-89). Within a listing of “saints” this group is collectively commemorated as “the Scillitan martyrs” with a feast day on that of their hearing and execution (PDS 303). Already in the era of Augustine, as examples of his sermons display, the group was recalled on their “birth day” (Grant 1970:309), which explains the title of Augustine’s “Sermon XVI,” “*In Natali Martyrum Scillitanorum*” (preserved in PL XLVI 869-874).

Clyde Curry Smith

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Generosa
2nd century
Ancient Christian Church
Tunisia

One of the eleven youthful companions (“pupils”) of Speratus in the “Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs” (the earliest dated document from the Latin Church) brought before Vigellius Saturninus, the proconsul of the Roman province of Africa, who is not recorded to have spoken during the interrogations. She was beheaded on 17 July 180 A.D., and is collectively commemorated among “the Scillitan martyrs” [cf. Musurillo 1972:89; PDS 303]. For what few other details can be indicated on the basis of the minimal sources, see the entry “Speratus.”

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Secunda
2nd century
Ancient Christian Church
Tunisia

One of the eleven youthful companions (“pupils”) of Speratus in the “Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs” (the earliest dated document from the Latin Church) brought before Vigellius Saturninus, the proconsul of the Roman province of Africa. She is recorded, in bearing witness (“martus”), to have said: “I wish to be what I am.” She was beheaded on 17 July 180 A.D., and is collectively commemorated among “the Scillitan martyrs” [cf. Musurillo 1972:89; PDS 303]. For what few other details can be indicated on the basis of the minimal sources, see the entry “Speratus.”

Clyde Curry Smith

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Origen (A)

Alternate Names: Origen of Alexandria

185-255

Ancient Christian Church

Egypt

Origen was born in Alexandria in 185 AD. A brilliant student, he was given the best education and the best Christian upbringing then available and was a student of Clement of Alexandria. From his earliest years he was very conversant with the Bible. His father, Leonides, was martyred as a Christian during the persecution of Emperor Septimius Severus. Only the intervention of his mother prevented Origen from presenting himself to share his father's fate. His family property was confiscated by the authorities. During the persecution, the catechetical school in Alexandria was disbanded.

In 202 A.D., although Origen was only eighteen years old, he was appointed by Demetrius, bishop of Alexandria, not only to reopen the disbanded school but to head it. The school had been left vacant by the withdrawal of Clement. It is interesting to note that Origen likened himself to Pantaenus. In addition to teaching subjects relating to Christian studies, Origen taught secular subjects and acknowledged pagan philosophy. Among his students was Heraclaus, later the successor to Demetrius as bishop of Alexandria. Origen eventually handed over the teaching of the catechumens to him.

Meanwhile Origen focused his energies on the more advanced students and sought to equip himself for his future work by attending the lectures of Ammonius Saccas, a distinguished exponent of neo-Platonist philosophy as Plotinus would become a few years later. His success as a teacher was remarkable and attracted heretics and pagans as well as catechumens. Origen was incomparably the greatest scholar and theologian of the Eastern church in the early centuries and his fame as a teacher spread far and wide.

In 214 A.D. he made a journey to Rome where he met Hippolitus. Soon afterwards, he continued his tour and visited the pagan governor of Arabia at the governor's request. He returned to Alexandria only to be expelled a few months later when Caracalla (Elagabalus) allowed his troops to sack the city in 218 A.D. Origen took refuge in Caesarea where, at the request of Theoktistos, the local bishop, he taught catechumens and also gave Biblical lectures. Jealous of the growing reputation of his protege, Demetrius, his bishop, recalled him to Alexandria, very angry because Origen, a layman, had expounded theology to bishops in Caesarea.

In 229 A.D. Origen was invited to Athens to help the church there to deal with a Valentinian Gnostic heretic and went without Demetrius's permission. In 230 A.D. some Palestinian bishops, his Episcopal friends, ordained Origen to the presbyterate. Demetrius was incensed, maintaining that this was flouting his authority. At a synod of Egyptian bishops he secured Origen's condemnation and banishment on the grounds that he had been ordained without reference to the proper authority,—in other words, Demetrius himself.

Demetrius was prepared to allow Heraclaus rather than Origen teach a number of people at Alexandria. He may also have felt it was out of order for the bishops of Palestine to ordain Origen. Demetrius might have deliberately sought to prevent Origen's teaching in the church. Origen's views,—the fruit of advanced thinking for the time,—could be potentially explosive as seen in the ensuing controversy and for this, Demetrius felt him to be unsuitable.

In Origen's case, a specific objection was made manifest in later years during the Arian controversy, at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Applying Matthew 19:12 literally ("For there are eunuchs who have been so right from their birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made so by men and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it"), Origen had allegedly castrated himself in his youthful zeal. Consequently, Demetrius considered Origen's ordination illegal and improper on technical grounds. Was Demetrius motivated by jealousy? Although Demetrius might have been envious—and there is no doubt that he was,—he nevertheless had a case against Origen mainly on two grounds.

1. That a man should not be ordained outside his own diocese.
2. According to Canon Law, Origen had excluded himself by self-mutilation in order to become a eunuch.

When Origen returned to Alexandria he was opposed by Demetrius who convened two local councils which condemned Origen and commanded him to leave. This decision, nevertheless, was rejected in Palestine. So, in 230 A.D., Origen established himself in Caesarea. On the death of Demetrius, Heraclaus, a former pupil of Origen, became bishop of Alexandria but continued to persecute Origen as Demetrius had done.

Origen never returned to Alexandria but made his home in Caesarea, teaching and writing. Among his pupils were Firmilian, bishop of Cappadocian Caesarea and Gregory Thaumaturgus. Origen travelled extensively and on two occasions was invited to Arabia as a theological arbitrator. In spite of his widespread fame, he was imprisoned during the persecution of Emperor Decius and cruelly tortured. Although Origen was released, he was physically broken and died in 254 A.D.

Origen's Teachings

Origen was incomparably the greatest scholar and theologian of the Eastern Church in the early centuries as well as a prolific writer. His learning and his works were encyclopaedic. He is reputed to have written about 6,000 books. The first scientific theologian, Origen was a man ahead of his age, particularly in terms of Biblical scholarship and criticism.

In 218 A.D., Origen began his written works for Ambrosius, a wealthy friend who provided him with a staff of seven stenographers, seven copy writers and girls to make fair copies. From 223 A.D., there followed an amazing succession of works. It has been remarked that he "wrote more books than others had time to read" on textual criticism, exegesis, doctrines. He also undertook the *Hexapla*, a gigantic work on the

Old Testament which has been lost apart from the Septuagint (LXX) part of the text. He also wrote the *Scholia* and other homilies and commentaries.

His great doctrinal work is *De Principiis* (“Concerning First Principles”), a masterpiece of which only an inaccurate Latin translation survives. His rule of faith was largely that of the Apostle’s Creed to which all the Christian churches would subscribe. Anything contradictory to such a statement of faith was heresy and he mentioned that Gnostic groups belonged to this category.

There were, on the other hand, open questions on which Origen gave his own opinion. For example,

- i. Is the Holy Spirit begotten?
- ii. Are the sun, moon, and stars animate?
- iii. What is the origin of the soul?
- iv. What is the existence of a succession of the world’s past and present?

His Writings

For our purposes, the principal writings of Origen’s prodigious literary output may be divided into four groups:

1. Biblical

Origen’s biblical scholarship was outstanding. In an age in which versions and translations were multiplying he saw the pressing need for an accurate text of the Bible. In order to provide this he constructed the massive *Hexapla*, a critical edition of the Old Testament, which occupies a place apart in his body of work.

The *Hexapla* was arranged in six columns in which were placed side by side the Hebrew text, a transliteration into Greek characters, and the four Greek versions of Aquila, Symmachus, the *Septuagint* and the Theodotion. For some parts of the Bible other versions were added. The texts were compared with each other and the Septuagint was marked with symbols drawing attention to points at which it appeared to deviate from the original Hebrew. Important variations were found, for example, in the translation of Aquilla, all written in the margins. It is probable that many copies of the *Hexapla* were made, but the original remained in the library at Caesarea where Jerome had access to it over a century later. The *Hexapla* could be found in some libraries in Caesarea many centuries after it was written but only a small portion of it has been preserved up to the present day. This monumental work provided the manuscript foundation for Origen’s exegetical work which constituted the greater part of his writings.

Origen wrote a vast series of Scriptural commentaries in the Caesarean period about 230 A.D. but most of the ones which survived are in small fragments. In these commentaries Scripture was interpreted allegorically. Origen taught that every text in the Bible could be read at three levels,—the literal, the moral and the spiritual level,—the spiritual level, discovered by means of allegory, being the most important. He has

been severely criticized for this view—a view no doubt due to his indebtedness to Platonism.

Origen's teaching generated controversy even during his own life and led to his banishment by Demetrius, bishop of Alexandria. After his death the battle over his ideas (known as the Origenist controversy) ensued and led to the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. False teaching was ascribed to him, especially on his views on the Godhead which tended toward sub-ordinationism. Origen's teaching on the Godhead, or rather on the relationship within the Godhead, was in fact taken to its logical conclusion by Arius in the Arian controversy which led to the decision of the council of Nicaea of 325 A.D. We shall now consider, however briefly, the Origenist controversy as it affected Jerome.

2. Theological

Only one work need be considered under this heading, his *De Principiis* (or "First Principles") in which Origen sought to expound a coherent system of Christian teaching about God and the Universe. *De Principiis* only exists in a Latin version of the original Greek which was made by Rufirius in 398 A.D.

Origen began with the Platonic tenet that God was the Absolute Being though in place of the passive qualities of beauty and goodness he asserted the active quality of love. He tried to work out the correlation between God's threefold nature in Christian and Biblical revelation and Platonist philosophy. He spoke of the divine realm in three ranks:

1. Divine transcendence—the Good or the One.
2. Emanating from the One was the divine mind, which contains various ideal forms of the Platonic scheme.
3. World Soul emanating from the divine mind.

This scheme as worked out by the great neo-platonic, Plotinus, refers to three hypostases. Where platonic philosophy spoke of three hypostases, Christianity refers to three divine beings, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Origen taught that below the divine world there was a world of spirits who became "sated,"—too satisfied with the adoration of God—and fell by their neglect, turning away from God to what was inferior. The material world was then created by God as a realm where man, who was involved in the Fall, might be educated and trained and turned back to his maker. To this end Christ, the divine Logos, came into the world to be man's guide and educator. According to Origen, the universe will end as it began. In the last days, evil will be conquered and all beings will return to their primitive state. In the final victory of good over evil, the Devil will be saved. We shall then attain complete conformity with God and reach the state where God will be all in all.

The first two hypostases of three ranks in the divine realm were notions derived from Greek philosophy and the third from Christian tradition. In Christian tradition, God the Father is supreme and transcendent and Scripture calls the Son truth and life. This is like the divine mind of the Platonist scheme. The Son has all the divine attributes

expressed in human good and in the Son, divinity is accessible to men. Therefore if the Son is begotten of the Father, the Father is eternally begetting.

Origen could speak of the Son as the writer of the book of Proverbs who said, "The Lord created me." (Prov. 8:22). "Me" in that context, Origen contended, refers back to wisdom. The Son is the archetype of created things and the fact of creation necessitates wisdom (Mind of God). Origen insisted that the essential goodness of God required the existence of creatures. Not only is the divine word eternal, but all rational creatures are eternal.

There is little room in Origen's thought for the genuine Christian view of judgment, sin and forgiveness. He described the process of the Fall and redemption much like the philosophers, though he found a place for the characteristically Christian concept of divine love in creation and redemption. It should be emphasized that more decisively Christian in Origen's position is his insistence that all knowledge comes from Christ and that the Bible remains the all-important support and guarantee of the structure of theological thought.

In Origen's system, however, there is no adequate or satisfactory place for the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, he recognized that the Holy Spirit has a very important place in baptismal confession and in church worship. The doctrine of the Trinity becomes fully evident. Thus to Origen, it is a trinity of a hierarchy of divine persons. He spoke of three hypostases or three entities,—Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The first two, Father and Son, do not pose much problem in contrast to the Holy Spirit. And of the three, there is a Platonic hierarchy: God the Father is very much like the Supreme Being, the one who is at the top, then comes the Son followed by the Holy Spirit. Origen used Scripture, particularly John 3, to support this view. The characteristic relation of the Trinity is that the Father acts indirectly upon all things, the Son or Word acts in all beings and the Spirit is in all things reasonable and sanctified.

3. Apologetic

Origen's one major work in defence of Christianity against pagan criticism was the *Contra Celsum* (or "Against Celsus"), which was written between 245 and 250 A.D. to satisfy his wealthy patron Ambrosius. Celsus had written in the second century a devastating criticism of Christianity. Although contemporary Christian apologists did much to defend Christianity against Celsus, it was not until Origen that there was a reasoned or sustained reply to his attack.

Celsus was the first known pagan philosopher to realize the potential threat of Christianity to the empire. He indicted Christians for being haters of the human race, a charge based on alleged Christian aloofness and unsociability. Celsus saw Christianity as an off-shoot of an already corrupt system, Judaism. He believed that because of its link with Judaism, Christianity, as Judaism before it, perverted the old concept of the Logos of Greek philosophy.

Origen's *Contra Celsum* contains lengthy quotations from Celsus's work and detailed answers to his arguments. Origen's main points are as follows:

1. That Celsus's objection to particular incidents and passages of Scriptures would not stand. Origen placed great emphasis on prophecies, the miracles and the words of Jesus which Celsus had attacked. These, he argued, were consistent with what we would expect of God.
2. The case of Christianity, argued Origen, finally rests, on the strength and force it displays in the moral reformation of mankind. He consistently appealed to the strength of Christ's power in the lives of Christians, who, he said, shine as stars in the world.
3. The crucial question underlying the two previous arguments concerned whether, within a Platonic metaphysic, it is possible to speak of freedom in God or whether "God" is only another name for the impersonal process of cosmos. Celsus thought "God" was only a name for the impersonal process, but Origen asserted that God is free to take initiative in the world. He regarded this idea of freedom as a characteristically Christian emphasis which justifies and explains the spontaneity of the coming of Christ and the possibility of moral change in man.

4. Exegesis

Biblical studies took the paramount place in the scheme of Origen's work. It has been said that he lived in the Bible to the extent that no one else before Luther rivalled him. The great mass of his literary work was concerned largely with Biblical criticism and exposition, the *Hexapla* occupying a central place.

The *Hexapla* was not the only work of criticism which Origen undertook. He examined particular problems such as the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. This letter was unlike those of St. Paul. "But who wrote the epistle," Origen declared, "in truth God knows." He did mention nevertheless, that Clement of Rome and Luke had both been named as possible authors.

Origen's critical labours on the text of the Bible formed the basis of his exegetical work. He wrote a commentary on almost every book of the Bible. In his exposition he vindicated the allegorical method against the literalist method and established two canons of interpretation, namely that the Bible is a unity, every text needing to be treated in the light of the teaching of the Bible as a whole, and that the key to every passage in the Old and New Testament alike is Christ. For Origen every text in the Bible could be read at three levels,—the literal, the moral and the spiritual level.

- i. The literal meaning commonly was useful but on occasion it had to be set aside. For instance, Christ could not have seen "all the kingdoms of the world," and, at a literal level, we can make nothing of the text, "Let the dead bury their dead."
- ii. The moral meaning involved drawing out some lesson for the edification of ordinary Christians.
- iii. Origen maintained that the primary purpose of Scripture was to convey spiritual truth. He drew here upon his understanding of Platonism which taught that beyond the visible world lay the spiritual world—of which all

things here are an image and a reflection. For Origen everything in the Bible in a similar way reflected the spiritual order beyond the ordinary material world. Thus, for instance, Jerusalem, Zion, Carmel, and a host of other places, ceased to be geographical locations and expressions and became mirrors of heavenly truth.

Indeed Origen's surprisingly modern canons of interpretation saved the method from some of its vagaries. Nevertheless, the great church historian of the twentieth century, Von Campenhausen commented quite aptly that Origen "remains the prisoner of the assumptions of his Platonising and Gnosticising outlook" in his exegetical work (see H. Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church* p. 49).

(...)

Origen's Indebtedness to Platonism

Origen's dependence on Platonic thought may be detected in his approach to the Bible. Origen had little feeling for history and undervalued the Bible's historical and literal meaning. For him every scriptural text was to be interpreted allegorically so that it might reveal the spiritual order beyond this visible world. The historical world of the Bible was a reflection of the spiritual world beyond. This is similar to Platonism which says that the most abstract is the most real.

Origen's doctrine of God also betrays his debt to Plato. God is the One, the Absolute. The Word or Son is the exact image of God and co-eternal with him, but remains distinct from him. The Word or Son is the link between God and the world. The Holy Spirit is the first of the beings created by the Word and so is a lesser being than God and the Son. The view of the divine hierarchy has clear analogies with the characteristic Greek view of God as the unknowable, immutable, absolute, linked with the created order only through a graded series of beings.

Origen believed that the soul of man pre-existed its union with the body and will be enhanced when the body decays. The resurrection of the body, a fundamental tenet of Christian doctrine, had no place in his system. This denial of the unity of man's body and soul was typical of the Platonizing and the Gnosticizing tendency of Origen's thought.

In view of his obvious debt to Platonism, it seems rather strange that Origen should have spoken coldly of the contribution of Greek philosophy to the development of Christian philosophy and doctrines. It has to be admitted that he was deeply influenced by the intellectual currents he loved to disdain, but he himself was most aware of his points of departure from Platonism.

In any estimate of Origen's philosophical and theological thought, the fundamental Christian themes in his writings must be regarded—his Bible-centered teaching, his concept of divine love in creation and redemption, and his emphasis on the exercise of God's freedom in the intervention of Christ. Origen was a Christian before he was a Platonist.

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4th Century

Frumentius (C)

Alternate Names: Abba Salama I or Abba Salama Kasata Berehan

4th century

Ancient Christian Church

Ethiopia

Frumentius (F'ré Menatos), who flourished in the 4th century AD, also known as Abba Salama I, or Abba Salama Kasata Berehan, was the first bishop of Ethiopia, and is widely regarded as the man who introduced Christianity to Aksum.

The first version of this claim comes from Tyrannius Rufinus (circa 345-410/11), the Roman-trained writer and theologian, who heard it from Frumentius' brother, Aedesiu. The account is also carried by many other analysts, such as the Byzantine church historian Socrates (circa 380-450), the theologian bishop Theodoret of Gyrrhus near Antioch (circa 393-circa 458), the Greek church historian Sozomen (circa 400-circa 450), and the Byzantine historian Nicephoras Callistus Xanthopolous (circa 1256-circa 1335).

The story goes that a merchant of Tyre, Meropius, traveled to India, accompanied by his young brothers. On the return journey, the ship put in at a port on the coast of "India" (evidently Eritrea), which was perhaps the Aksumite port of Adulis (modern Zula, a village 30 miles, or 48 km, south-southeast of Massawa), and which had suspended its treaty relations with Rome. Meropius and the ship's crew were massacred, but the boys were handed over to the ruler of Aksum, who was so impressed with them that he made Aedesius his cup-bearer and Frumentius his steward. When the ruler died, his queen, who was the regent for her young son, asked the brothers, particularly Frumentius, to join her as co-regents. Frumentius used the opportunity to build churches in the country.

When the young boy reached his majority, Aedesius obtained leave to visit his relatives in Tyre, while Frumentius was permitted to go to Alexandria in Egypt to obtain a bishop for the country. Saint Athanasius (circa 293-373), the ecclesiastical statesman, who was to defend Christian orthodoxy against the Arian heresy, had just become Patriarch of Alexandria, in 328, and decided to consecrate Frumentius himself as the bishop.

Frumentius then returned to carry on his work at Aksum, the traditional date for this event being 333. When Frumentius returned to Aksum as bishop, the Emperors Abreha and Asbeha were on the throne, and it seems reasonable to suppose that these names referred to the brothers Ezana (*q.v.*) and Sayzana (*q.v.*).

In 356, when the Arian schism had split Christendom, the pro-Arian Emperor Constantius II, sole ruler of the Roman Empire from 353-61, who had recently deposed Athanasius and sent him into exile, wrote a letter to the two rulers of Aksum, Ezana and Sayzana. In the letter he asked them to send Frumentius, bishop of Aksum, to Egypt, for his faith to be tested. There is no record that they complied with his request, and nothing is known of Frumentius's later activities.

The Ethiopian version of these events is contained in the *Sinkessar* ("Synaxarium"), the collected biographies of Ethiopian Orthodox saints, compiled in the fourteenth century. It agrees substantially with Rufinus's account, but adds that when the brothers arrived, the ruler of Ethiopia was Emperor Ella Alada, or Ella Ameda, the latter form being attested in inscriptions as being the name of the father of Ezana.

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Monica (B)

331/2 – 387

Ancient Christian Church

Algeria

The mother of Augustine (November 13, 354 - August 28, 430) (q.v.; cf. Q 4.342-462), bishop of Hippo, remains one of the few non-imperial women of the fourth century about whom there is nearly sufficient material upon which to compile a full biographical perspective. Moreover, she is revealed to portray a dominant, almost domineering, personality, quite at odds with her assumed status within either the Christian church or the Roman society of her time. She may be compared and contrasted with the equally well-known mother, Nonna, and sister, Gorgonia, of the greater Greek theologian Gregory of Nazianzen, or with the grandmother, Macrina, mother, Emmelia, and sister, Macrina the Younger, of the comparable Greek theologians Basil of Caesarea and his brother Gregory of Nyssa, or with those feminine correspondents, Paula and one of her five children, Eutochium, of Augustine's contemporary, Jerome (cf. Alexandre 1994:409-444; van der Meer 1961:217-225).

Monica was born of Berber stock in Thagaste within the Roman province of (North) Africa subsequent to the Christianization of the imperial government, during the later administration of Constantine the Great [17 February 17, 274 - May 22, 337, reigned as co-Augustus from spring 307 and alone from 324]. Every indication is that she was a Christian from her youth. Of her ancestry there is no record. As noted by Aline Rousselle, "Roman law fixed the age at which a daughter given to a spouse by her father officially became a matron, a recognized spouse with all the privileges set forth in marriage law. That age was twelve years" (1994:302) – at which age Macrina the Younger was betrothed to a fiancé, who died before the marriage was consummated such that she remained a virgin. A comparable age for Monica may be calculated, since Augustine specifies that she died at the age of fifty-six when he was thirty-three years old (Confessions IX.11).

Again, as was common under Roman law, marriage entailed that "the bride left her father's household to take up residence with her husband" whereat she was also "welcomed by his mother and father" (Zaidman 1994:360, 364), which is precisely the account given by Augustine, with the accompanying affirmation that Monica had fit in well such that in spite of how "hot-tempered a husband my mother had to cope with" nothing indicated "there had been any domestic disagreement between them, even for one day"; and moreover while "her mother-in-law was at first prejudiced against her by the tale-bearing of malicious servants," Monica "won the older woman over by her dutiful attentions and her constant patience and gentleness" (Confessions IX.9). As defined within Graeco-Roman custom was the difference in age between men and women at marriage – him being some fifteen to twenty years older (Zaidman:365); and the respective years of death for Monica and her husband would bear this commonplace out.

We do not learn the names of any of Augustine's grandparents, nor of both his two sisters, nor of his mistresses, but only that he had at least one brother, Navigius

(q.v.), and but one son, Adeodatus (q.v.); Monica's husband, his father, was named Patricius (q.v.), but he died two years before Augustine was nineteen (371; Confessions III.4), and Monica did not remarry (Frend 1988:135-151; van der Meer 1961: passim). Within that early household Augustine tells us he learned Latin "without being forced by threats of punishment . . . , not from schoolmasters, but from people who spoke to me and listened when I delivered to their ears whatever thoughts I had conceived," which was in marked contrast to the way he "was forced to study Homer" and thereby learn with great distaste the Greek language and its literature (Confessions I.14).

By the age of sixteen (370), Augustine also studied at nearby Madaura (Confessions II.3) under the tutelage of the "pagan" Maximus, with whom, in correspondence exchanged at a much later date (390), reference was made to their both being Africans with a common heritage and education in the Punic language of ancestral Northwest Africa [Letters ##16-17 = NPNF ser.1 1.233-235]. But as William Hugh Clifford Frend has observed, "Augustine was first and foremost an African, and was influenced throughout his life by the Berber (as distinct from the Punic) background of his upbringing," though of his later sermons it could be said they were "in a faultless Latin without trace of barbarism" (1952:230, 57-58, 327). Clearly, the home situation under Monica's guidance was multi-lingual. Moreover, as observed by Rousselle, "the division of responsibility between husband and wife would continue throughout the child's upbringing, which was left in the charge of women until the child reached the age when its sex and social needs determined what course further education would take" (1994:368).

Monica was instrumental in the conversion of her husband to Christianity not long before his death (Confessions IX.9), and in the instilling within her son the seeds of such a possibility, in spite of the postponement of his baptism, long before these took root and grew into his statured role (Confessions I.11). Augustine's own career took him from higher education in Carthage, as determined by his father, whereat he studied philosophy and rhetoric (Confessions III), from whence he became a teacher of rhetoric first at Thagaste (375; Confessions IV) and then at Carthage (376-383), before voyaging via Rome to take up a comparable position at Milan (384) where he not only encountered Ambrose (Q 4.144-180) but was joined by Monica (385) for the remainder of her days. Of Monica's own intellectual capacities beyond its focus upon Bible and the cult of martyrs, Frend has noted that "while lacking any formal literary education, (she) was able to hold her own in a philosophical discussion" (1988:143).

She died at the Roman port of Ostia as they were returning to Africa, but not before witnessing the baptism into the "Catholic" church (Confessions IX.6) of Augustine and his son Adeodatus, along with Augustine's friend and colleague Alypius (q.v.; Confessions VI.7-12) on Holy Saturday, April 24, 387. Her ultimate influence upon her incomparable son is the other side of his own "confessional" autobiography. Her own cult developed in the later Middle Ages; her supposed remains were transferred from Ostia to Rome in 1430 by Martin V (pope November 11, 1417 - February 20, 1431; ODP 239-240).

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5th and 6th Centuries

The *Sadqan*

Alternate Names: The Righteous Ones

5th – 6th centuries

Ancient Christian Church

Ethiopia

The *Sadqan* (“The Righteous Ones”) (perhaps fl. late 5th - early 6th century A.D.), were an unknown number of unnamed saints who came to Ethiopia from “Rom” about the same time as the Nine Saints, perhaps late in the 5th century A.D. Although their exact number is not known, they are said to have been as numerous “as the army of a king,” and to have come to Ethiopia inspired by religious zeal to preach the Gospel there and also to escape from the licentiousness and worldly vanity rife in their country of origin, somewhere within the Roman Empire. They are believed to have first gone on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and then to have proceeded to Ethiopia. On their arrival in Aksum it seems that they began their missionary activities at once, splitting into small groups and setting out to proselytize different areas. According to hagiographical tradition, their activities extended from Baqla, in northern Eritrea, to Lasta. They are particularly associated with Bur or Mätära, Bäräknähä, and Berahto in Eritrea, and in Tegré with Bétä Mek’eya near Agamé, with Mänquraweya in Tämbén and with Hawzén.

The *Sadqan* are believed to have lived in a community and to have led a most austere, ascetic life. Their hagiography indicates the belief that they subsisted only upon grass and whatever they could glean from the fields, abstaining from other foods, even bread. It appears that in their work they aroused strong opposition from the local pagan populace. A well-known tradition records the persecution they suffered at the hands of the inhabitants of Bur, now known by the name of the nearby village of Mätära. Tradition had it that the Emperor Kaléb set out on an expedition from Aksum to avenge the *Sadqan*; with the aid of divine intervention, the earth miraculously opened and enabled Kaléb’s army to pass through a subterranean passage from Aksum to Mätära. There his army put many of the populace to the sword, took others captive and destroyed the city. It is of interest to note that archaeological excavation has confirmed the violent destruction of the ancient settlement. In the history of Christianity in Ethiopia, this is the first recorded instance of bloodshed in a clash with adherents of a pagan cult, traditionally believed to have been the Bälāw-Kälāw, of Béja origin.

From the traditional sources available thus far, it appears that Kaléb’s expedition did not put an end to the sufferings of the *Sadqan*. After the return of the Emperor to Aksum, persecutions were renewed with even greater ferocity at Mätära and also extended to other centres in the area. A terrible massacre is said to have taken place in which most, if not all, of the *Sadqan* suffered martyrdom. Today, at the sites of many of these early settlements, heaps of bones are preserved which are believed to date from this holocaust and which are objects of veneration to the devout.

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Aragawi, Za-Mika'el (B)

Alternate Names: Arägawi, Zä-Mika'él

5th – 6th centuries

Ancient Christian Church

Ethiopia

Zä-Mika'él 'Arägawi, or 'Arägawi Zä-Mika'él, *Abba*, was one of the Nine Saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church who came from various parts of the Roman Empire to escape persecution after the Council of Chalcedon (451). The Nine Saints, *Abba* 'Afsé, *Abba* 'Aléf, *Abba* Gäräma, *Abba* Guba, *Abba* Liqanos, *Abba* Päntäléwon, *Abba* Sähma, *Abba* Yäm'ata and *Abba* Zä-Mika'él 'Arägawi were learned monks who revitalized Christianity in Ethiopia and to whom the Ge'ez version of the New Testament is attributed. The account of the life of Zä-Mika'él 'Arägawi, contained in a *gädl*, or *Acts*, of the late fifteenth century, emphasizes the miraculous, is somewhat contradictory, and reflects the prejudices of Däbrä Damo. The son of Yeshaq and 'Edna of the royal family in Rome, he became a monk at the age of fourteen with Pachomius (d. 348) in the Thebaid, and it was the latter who called him Zä-Mika'él. His fame attracted the other eight, who remained many years with him and Pachomius. 'Edna too joined him as a nun. Seven years after Pachomius' death, Zä-Mika'él returned to Rome and then proceeded to Aksum, which he found already evangelized, whereupon he invited the others to join him there. Along with Yeshaq and 'Edna, they were welcomed by Emperor 'Al'améda (Emperor 'Ellä-'Améda II) in the fifth year of his reign, and then by his successor, Emperor Tazén.

The Nine Saints lived at the court for twelve years, but in the sixth year of Tazén's reign they separated, each to go to his own way. Zä-Mika'él and 'Edna, with a disciple called Mattéwos, went to Eggala, Tegré, where the hill Damo was chosen for a monastery and he established the Pachomian or coenobitic monastic life. In Ethiopian iconography Zä-Mika'él 'Arägawi is often portrayed with a serpent, for, when unable to find a path up the rocky site, he held fast to the tail of a serpent and was pulled up to the summit. His *gädl* claims that Emperor Kaléb consulted him before setting out to attack Dhu Nuwas. The monastery of Däbrä Damo was erected by Emperor Gäbrä-Mäsqäl in the eleventh year of his reign on a spot indicated by Zä-Mika'él, and a large community of monks gathered around him, 'Edna, and a disciple, Pétros. His death took place on 14 *Teqemt* (24 October), after he had appointed Mattéwos as his successor.

A. K. Irvine, Otto F. A. Meinardus and Seifu Metaferia

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Edna ('Edna)
5th – 6th centuries
Ancient Christian Church
Ethiopia

'Edna, was the mother of Zä-Mika'él 'Arägawi, in whose company she is said to have come to Ethiopia. She was with him when he chose Däbrä Damo as the site for his monastery.

A. K. Irvine

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Interview

Transcript of a video interview with Lamin Sanneh on the legacy of *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* by Thomas Oden. Interview on August 14, 2018, Yale Studio, New Haven, CT.

To say a few words about the work of Thomas Oden, his work on the ancient Christian commentaries, but particularly his work on *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*. Where Tom is concerned to indicate the African roots, the African sources of Christian theological and spiritual reflection in the early centuries of the faith. A period that tends to be rather hidden from most Africans in sub-Saharan Africa.

That work of Tom Oden in reminding us of the African heritage of early Christianity going back to North Africa, in Egypt and Ethiopia and Nubia, etc., is extremely important for developments that are current in African Christianity. Why in the first place? Christianity is not a relic. Christianity is not something to be recovered. Christianity is a living religion. That means that the ancestors of the faith who lived in North Africa and Egypt and went through experiences not too dissimilar from the experiences of contemporary Africans are extremely important for us to acknowledge.

Secondly, the work that Tom Oden did and the course to which he devoted his energies towards the second career of his life is a reminder to us that the task of Christian scholarship in Africa is to join the story of Christianity in Africa with the story of those early Christians in North Africa who are also grappling with the same issues of faith, of integration, of devotion or faithfulness, and carrying on a tradition that they believe is worth passing on to posterity.

In other words, these ancient Christian writers and scholars and theologians were absolutely convinced that the faith they lived and practiced was a faith for the whole world and for all time, not only for their time, but only for themselves. That is a lesson we need to learn. But it seems to me another important dimension of this work is how the early Christians were concerned with developing Christianity in terms of its civil status.

What I mean by this is that Christianity had been under the hammer from political authorities and political powers. Christianity had to go underground in the catacombs in order to survive. When it emerged, it came up for air, as it were. It did so in the lives of monasteries, monks, and devotees in the South who came out believing very much that they must live a life of obedience and devotion, a life of honesty, a life of discipline that was worthy of the God whom they believe had called them to service.

We need to learn, therefore, the importance of faith and obedience in terms of the God who not only makes these things important for us but gives us the grace, and the power, and the spiritual energy to live up to those values, to live up to those virtues. And it seems to me, therefore, that African Christianity has a very long hinterland in history that we can claim that Christianity is not just happening in Africa, as it were, from the missionary movement of the 19th century.

Christianity has a very long history, and the work of the Oden is a reminder to us of the gratitude of the debt we owe to those who came before us. And finally, I did hint at this theme in my earlier comment about how we must take responsibility for their faith for posterity. We must look to the future.

We must look to how we shape our communities and our societies in the light of religious teaching, in the light of the call of the Gospel to a God who is a living God, a God who has overcome the constraints and the dangers of living, a life of helplessness, a life of peril of danger, and yet emerge and giving life's lessons of hope, humility, faith, generosity, forgiveness, reconciliation.

All those values in which believers are called to help those in need, to tell their neighbors to help those who are helpless, to help those who are on the margins. To help those who are excluded and so forth and so on. A life of ethical living and ethical service. And to go back to the roots of Christianity and see this ethical principle we inherited from Judaism.

Religion is not only about how you feel. Religion is about how you treat your neighbor, about how you treat the other. And it seems to me that Tom's work is a reminder to us that we owe an obligation not only to ourselves but to those who came before us and to those who will succeed us. And so our thanks should be really emphasized in terms of what Tom's legacy has been for African Christianity.

I don't know when he began his work because I only met Tom towards the end of his life. But it seems to me that he really anticipated the remarkable way that the developments that are current and contemporary in African and contemporary society in Africa will be immensely enriched and deepened by the legacy of Tom's work on *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*. ❖

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Book Highlight

Selection from Thomas Oden, *African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 21-24 (chapter 1) and 27-29 (chapter 2).

A boy is born named John Mark (chapter 1)

Around the beginning of the new millennium (early first century a.d.) a boy was born to a Jewish family of Cyrene. His father's name was Aristopolus (or variously Aristobulus, Aristobolus, Aristo-Paulus), and his mother's name was Mary. They were of the tribe of Levi. Closely adherent to Jewish customs, they returned to Jerusalem, if possible, several times a year for seasonal feasts. The boy's name signaled his multicultural family background. It was John Mark. That name brought together a Hebrew name (John) with a Latin name (Mark, variously Marcus, Marcos). When wars, pillaging and civil disturbances came to Cyrene early in the first century, this boy's family was forced by encroaching marauders to move from Africa to Palestine.

We hear of Mark next in Jerusalem, where his mother had access to a spacious place of residence (Acts 12:12), possibly with an upper room as African memory understands, the same upper room as noted in Mark 14:15 and Acts 1:13. As a young man, Mark and his mother joined the followers of Jesus. They became a part of a culture-transforming movement within Judaism. Later Mark would be the first among the disciples to write the good news of the coming of this incomparable person who changed his life entirely. Mark's story about Jesus became the oldest of all the surviving written efforts to tell non-Jews of the good news of the beginning of Christianity. Mark became the pattern for all subsequent reports of the history of Jesus.⁷

This boy who grew up in Africa was also remembered as the first one to take the good news of Jesus, Son of God, back to Africa. This is why he is so much loved and honored by Christians in Africa today. I want to retell this story just as it has been told over centuries on the African continent—how John Mark, according to these traditions, came from and returned to Africa to become the first person sent by Jesus' followers to teach firsthand of Christianity on the African continent. This story will clarify how and why this boy became proficient in several languages, and how those gifts and cultural experiences shaped his calling to return to Africa. John Mark's mother would be chosen by Jesus himself to offer hospitality to the earliest disciples. Mark's life would end in the most populous city of Africa: Alexandria on the coast of the Nile delta. Out of this city, the most influential intellectual center of the whole

⁷ For recent discussions of technical issues on Mark's Gospel, see Ernest E. Best, *The Gospel as Story* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983); John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2002); W. R. Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark, New Testament Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

Mediterranean world, came the first Christian school. It was a catechetical school, designed to communicate the gospel to the world. Its distinctive learning process, from apostolic texts and in dialogue with culture, was born in Africa. Out of Mark's life and death came an enduring gift to all early Christians: the emergence of African Christianity.

Some differences between African and western perceptions of Mark

While the African memory, as we will see, holds that Mark was born in Cyrene and died in Alexandria, the rest of the world has seldom listened. Despite the neglect, African memory is beginning to be reread and reconsidered. Meanwhile ordinary African Christians hold Mark close to their hearts as one of their very own—as the first witness to Christian faith in Africa. Western scholars have tended to treat Mark as one who shows up frequently throughout the New Testament but is probably Palestinian in origin, and almost never regarded as African. The problem: African popular memory of Mark is very different from the Western memory. The African narrative is often pigeonholed as unsupported by reliable textual evidence and thought to be naive, since accompanied by miracles, dreams and visions.

It deserves to be read as what it is: the story of a saint.⁸ It asks to be read through the eyes of those who conveyed it, not through modern eyes alone. This is a different genre than that of much modern historical inquiry. The reading of this genre of literature requires what Paul Ricoeur calls a “second naiveté”⁹—second in the sense that the reader has been disillusioned by modernity from the first stage of naiveté where belief was the source of immense energy. Having been obscured through empirical criticism, it is being rediscovered.

The birthplace and martyrdom of Mark the apostle provides a stunning case in point where there are stark differences between European and African perceptions of both the data and the interpretation of the documents. If the outcome of this inquiry turns out to be a bit contentious at points, it hopes to be stimulating for the right reasons and with guarded positive results.

My first task is to clarify specifically what I mean by African memory.

⁸ For discussions of Egyptian and other African martyrs and saints, see Theofried Baumeister, *Martyr invictus* (Münster: Regensberg, 1972); Hippolyte Delehaye, “Les martyrs d’Égypte,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 40 (1922): 5-154, 299-364; De Lacy O’Leary, *The Saints of Egypt* (1937; repr., Whitefish, Mont: Kessinger, 2005); Tito Orlandi, “Hagiography,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz S. Atiya, 8 vols. (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991), 4:1191- 97; idem, “La patrologia copta,” in *Complementi interdisciplinari di patrologia*, ed. Antonio Quacquarelli (Rome: Città Nuova, 1989), 457-502; idem, *Storia della Chiesa di Alessandria*, 2 vols. (Milan-Varese: Istituto editoriale Cisalpino, 1968-70); C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity from Its Origins to 451 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967); cf. Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer, 1990).

Defining African Memory (chapter 2)

What do I mean by the term African memory? The African memory is the characteristic way of looking at history from within the special experience and outlook of the continent of Africa. Memory does not here refer to the contemporary African memory alone, but to a two-thousand-year-long history of a way of remembering. It is memorable because it embraces a long-shared tradition of intellectual vitality. This tradition has borne extensive literary fruits over many centuries. It has produced an astonishing history of textual output. It has a literary history that has had decisive effects upon subsequent human history. It is how Africans, taken as a whole, have historically viewed events and persons, and how they still characteristically remember them.¹⁰ To qualify under the rubric of “African memory,” an alleged event must have these characteristics:

- The event has been commonly remembered on the continent of Africa
- The event is remembered in the same or very similar ways
- Consent to the event is uncoerced
- The event has been remembered over many generations of Africans
- The narratives of the event have been told in many of the indigenous languages of the African continent

In the case of the African identity of Mark, his birth, life and death in Africa have been:

- Well known and the story retold in every part of the African continent
- Remembered in a similar way with similar root sources
- With full and free voluntary consent
- For nearly two thousand years, six centuries prior to Islam
- In virtually all of the major indigenous languages of Africa¹¹

It takes both space and time to make a memory. This memory is identified in a succession of revered sacred and secular texts stretching out over many centuries, cultures and languages. Continent-wide African Christianity is best understood through this textual history that begins with Mark.

The characteristic African memory of Mark is not vague or indefinite. It is concretized in known texts, long subject to critical examination and passionate expression: philosophical, liturgical, musical and moral. The chief sources of all these narratives of Mark, of course, are those texts of the New Testament that were written by or about Mark. The African narrative of Mark conforms to this canonical base text without overt revisions but with amplifications and applications. When I speak of “the

¹⁰ For recent discussions of a characteristic African memory/story/imagination, see works in the bibliography by Ernest Best, Bénédzet Bujo, Ogbu Kalu, Lamin Sanneh and David E. Wilhite.

¹¹ For recent African discussion of African identity and culture, see works in the bibliography by Bénédzet Bujo, Kwame Bediako, James L. Cox and Gerrie ter Haar, Lamin Sanneh and Tite Tiénou.

African narrative of Mark,” I am referring compositely to the melded picture of Mark derived from early African sources of the earliest Christian centuries.

It includes the ancient liturgy of St. Mark and the primitive editions of the Synaxary, a calendar of recollections of saints. The African memory of Mark is found not only in the Gospel according to St. Mark and the Acts of the Apostles, but also in the anonymous primitive Urtext of the third century, *Martyrium Marci*, and the writings of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius and Cyril—all to be later investigated. These and other documents, and many others now unheralded, fed into the history of Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa, bishop of Al Ashmunein, sometimes referred to as Severus.

Similarly, we might speak of the characteristic American memory of Thomas Jefferson as writer of the Declaration of Independence. The Jeffersonian memory is concretized in texts which can be examined, pondered and grasped. The African memory, as I use the term, takes into account the full weight of cumulative evidences coming out of the African continent over the length of centuries, including evidences from archaeology, epigraphic and literary sources, as well as oral traditions and stories of the saints.¹²

Much divides Christians in Africa, but the memory of Mark unites them. They are divided by (1) Protestant suspicions and stereotypes that Coptic liturgy is out of date or worse, phony, (2) long-standing conflicts since the fifth century between Catholics and Copts, and (3) Coptic pride that hesitates to concede any measure of apostolic authorization to either Protestants or Catholics.

Despite these differences, all of them are in basic agreement that Mark was the first apostle to Africa. This is a fact that makes Mark:

- Foundational for the Coptic patriarchal history
- Honored and celebrated in explicit annual Catholic and ecumenical liturgical recollections of Mark as the first Christian martyr of Africa
- Viewed by almost all varieties of African Protestants, despite their diversity, with great pride and joy as their earliest apostolic ancestor
- The delight of both African Pentecostals and Orthodox in celebrating the outpouring of the Spirit at the house of Mary the mother of Mark as the setting of the original Pentecost in Jerusalem

Those who are looking for an ecumenical beginning point for bringing together diverse Christian viewpoints of African Christianity will turn naturally to Mark. Mark’s life and mission embodied the unity of the body of Christ. Mark remains a fixed point of reference for virtually all Christian believers in Africa today. ❖

¹² For recent African discussions of African origins of religion, including Christianity, see works in the bibliography by Paul Bowers, María Elena González Galván and Filipe Miguel Oliveira Resende, Yosef Ben-Jochannan et al., John H. Johnson and Ogbu Kalu.

Book Series Highlight

Excerpt from *We Believe: Experiencing the Creed Through Ancient African Christianity (Series I; Book I)* by Christopher Hall, the former Director of Academic Spiritual Formation and Distinguished Professor of Theology at Eastern University, St. Davids, PA.

Introduction

What should readers expect in the pages to come? In the *We Believe* series of booklets, sponsored by the Center for Early African Christianity, we will focus on the African church fathers (Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine, and others) and their contributions in thought and practice to the formation of the Nicene Creed. Though these church fathers lived long ago, the Christian community readily affirms their lasting importance. As the Mafa proverb teaches us, “Even when your father is old you can still stand in his shade.”¹³

Let’s briefly review some of the key personalities you’ll encounter in the *We Believe* series.

Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150-215): Clement, a convert to Christianity, immigrated to the city of Alexandria in Egypt. Around 200, he became the head of the Alexandrian school for catechumens. Clement is known for his works: *Christ the Educator*, *Excerpts from Theodotus*, and *Miscellanies*. When you read Clement, you’ll notice how well he blends insights from Greek philosophy with his understanding of the Christian faith.

Tertullian (c. AD 160-225): Tertullian was a lay theologian and apologist from the North African city of Carthage. Tertullian wrote in Latin and was the first African Christian to write on key Christian themes and concerns. Among his works are *To the Heathens*, *On the Shows*, *Against Marcion*, *On Prayer*, *On Patience*, *On Baptism*, *Against Hermogenes*, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, and *The Flesh of Christ* (among many others). Tertullian is never boring. He had a fine legal mind and enjoyed engaging the opponents of the faith in a lively and sometimes fiery manner. You may be interested to learn that it is Tertullian who was the first Christian writer to use the term “Trinity” and “New Testament.”

Origen (AD 184-253): Origen is quite likely the greatest biblical scholar and exegete (biblical interpreter) in the church’s history. Probably a child prodigy of sorts, Origen demonstrated a lively faith from an early age and was deeply affected by the martyrdom of his father Leonidas, who was martyred in Alexandria when Origen was 18 years old. Throughout Origen’s life the Scriptures remained the center of his existence and life as a Christian. The Bible was his food and drink. Origen possessed a deep reverence for the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament Scriptures, urging his students to set aside a significant part of each day for study, meditation, and prayer. He devoted much of his life to making the Bible in its entirety accessible to the church.

¹³ Jusu, John. *Africa Study Bible: New Living Translation*. 2017, 317.

While the Old Testament frequently troubled Origen when he tried to interpret it literally, he affirmed, against Gnostic opposition, that the entire Bible was the book of the church. Thus, much of Origen's life was devoted to a study of the textual tradition and content of the Hebrew Scriptures. In 250 Origen was arrested and tortured by the Roman government; a few years later he died as a result of the severe injuries he suffered. He is one of the faithful African martyrs of the church.

Cyprian (c. AD 210-258): Cyprian was bishop of the North African city of Carthage from roughly AD 248-258. The ten years of his episcopate were a rough, troubled, trying time for the church, a period of intense suffering during both the Decian and Valerian persecutions. A good place to start in your study of Cyprian would be to read his book *On the Unity of the Church*. In this book Cyprian pulls no punches. He insists that schism in the church finds its root in the demonic. It is the devil's work, "a new fraud" that employs "the Christian name to deceive the incautious." Schism, Cyprian teaches, is especially deceptive because those who break away from the church believe they do so in the name of Christ. Indeed, "they still call themselves Christians, and, walking in darkness, they think that they have the light, while the adversary is flattering and deceiving." Cyprian is another of the great African martyrs; he was beheaded by Rome on September 14, 258.

Lactantius (c. AD 250-325): Lactantius was born in Proconsular Africa (modern-day Tunisia) and was converted roughly 40 years after his birth. He knew the pagan religions of his day well and is one of the great African apologists for the Christian faith. If you're interested in studying ancient Christian approaches to apologetics, take a look at Lactantius's well-known work the *Divine Institutes*, a treatise in which Lactantius argues for the reasonableness of Christianity against its pagan critics.

Marius Victorinus (c. AD 290-364): Victorinus, an African by birth, was a gifted Roman grammarian, rhetorician, and philosophy. He like Lactantius, converted to Christianity "at an advanced old age" according to a comment of Jerome. The conversion of Victorinus greatly impressed Augustine, who mentions it in Book 8 of his *Confessions*. Augustine comments that

Victorinus was an old man of great learning, with a profound knowledge of all the liberal sciences. He had studied a great many books of philosophy and published criticisms of them. He had been master to many distinguished members of the Senate, and to mark his outstanding ability as a teacher, he had even been awarded a statue in the Roman forum – a great honor in the eyes of the world . . . yet he was not ashamed to be the child of Christ and to become an infant at your font, submitting his neck to the yoke of humility and bowing his head before the ignominy of the Cross.¹⁴

We will occasionally turn to Victorinus's treaty on the *Trinity*, written to defend the Nicene Creed's key affirmations of Christ's divinity. He also wrote a number of commentaries on Paul's letters.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.2.

Arnobius of Sicca (c. AD 255-330): Arnobius, like Lactantius, was born in Proconsular Africa and was of Berber stock. And like Lactantius, his student, Arnobius was a gifted Christian apologist. Jerome writes that Arnobius's conversion was related to a dream, though the reliability of Jerome's testimony has been disputed. We do know that Arnobius proved to be an effective defender of the faith and wrote a seven-volume apologetic work titled *Against the Nations*.

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. AD 295-373): There were no neutral responses to Athanasius. His friends would have willingly given their lives for him. His enemies longed to see him and his memory erased from the earth. Some mocked him as "the black dwarf." Within Athanasius burned a lively intelligence and a heart on fire for God, the God who had freely and miraculously entered human history to rescue humanity, becoming what we are to rescue us from what we had become. Athanasius wrote two significant theological works – *An Oration Against the Heathen* and *On the Incarnation* – before the age of twenty. By the age of thirty-three he was bishop of the church in Alexandria. It was not to be an easy job. Over the course of the next forty-five years Athanasius was exiled from his church in Alexandria five times, largely because of his opposition to the ideas of Arius, an Alexandrian presbyter who denied the divinity of Christ. Arius argued that the Son of God was an exalted creature. Athanasius responded with a consistent defense of the proposition that true God had genuinely entered into union with human nature in Jesus Christ. The battle between the two and their followers would wax and wane throughout the years the Nicene Creed was formulated.

Didymus the Blind (c. AD 313-398): Didymus the Blind, a student of Origen, taught for around fifty years in the church at Alexandria. Didymus, like Athanasius, consistently opposed the ideas of Arius. He was well-known for his memory skills, necessitated by the onset of blindness when Didymus was four years old and unable to read. He creatively helped other blind people to read, and experimented with wooden letters, much like the Braille system widely used today. Though Didymus was blind, Jerome – one of Didymus's students – called him "Didymus the Seeing."

Augustine (AD 354-430): Augustine grew up in Northern Africa and is generally recognized as the greatest theologian of the African fathers. He is someone you will want to get to know well. I suggest you begin by reading his *Confessions*, the story of his conversion and related issues. Then, try reading *City of God* and *The Trinity*. These are big books, yet accessible if you take your time. Both contain wonderful insights into many of the topics we find addressed in the Nicene Creed.

Antony the Great (AD 251-356): Antony the "Great" is one of the great figures in the history of Christian spirituality; he lived most of his life in the Egyptian desert as a Christian monk. Athanasius's *Life of Antony* had a profound effect on the shaping of the African Christian mind and heart and was influential in the conversion of Augustine. Augustine relates in his *Confessions* how Antony's life story helped bring Augustine to a point of Christian commitment.

For I had heard the story of Antony, and I remembered how he had happened to go into a church while the Gospel was being read and had taken it as a counsel addressed to himself when he heard the words Go

home and sell all that belongs to you. Give it to the poor, and so the treasure you have shall be in heaven; then come back and follow me.¹⁵

Antony was a strong supporter of the Nicene Creed and sharp opponent of Arius's insistence that Christ was an exalted creature, but not God.

Optatus of Milevis (d. AD 397): Optatus served as bishop of Milevis in Numidia, an ancient North African Berber kingdom and occasional Roman province in what is present-day Algeria and a smaller area of Tunisia. We will turn to the thought of Optatus in later booklets, especially when we study the African fathers on the nature of the church and the Nicene Creed's statements on "one holy Catholic and apostolic church."

We ask many questions in the *We Believe* series: How did ancient African Christians connect their understanding of the triune God, baptism, the resurrection of the dead, the nature of the church, and the life of the world to come to issues of spiritual growth and formation? How can we emulate these ancient African Christians as we study, learn, meditate, worship, and live, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God at work in us, we might become more and more like Jesus? As our knowledge of the Nicene Creed expands, how might our love for God and our neighbors grow in tandem?

In these short booklets, we explore together the ancient African church and its leading representatives. What did these African Christians believe, and how did their belief in the full revelation of God the Father through the incarnation of his Son Jesus shape their spiritual life and formation? As we ponder these ancient Christians, we will ask ourselves this question: As God's image-bearers (*Gen* 1:26-27), how can we be ever more fully formed into the image of the great image-bearer (*Col* 1:15ff), Jesus himself, so that we more consistently love God and neighbor? The African church fathers invite us to discard our false images of God for a loving, holy, personal relationship with the living Christ and the eternal Trinity. ❖

Source:

From the book series: *We Believe: Experiencing the Creed Through Ancient African Christianity (Series 1; Book 1)* by Christopher Hall. These books were published by ICCS Press, New Haven, CT. These may be purchased through Amazon.com or *for a discounted rate through iccspress.com*. Please email info@odenhouse.org for further information.

¹⁵ Mt 19:21; Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.

Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa

Compiled by Beth Restrick, Head, BU African Studies Library

Aquilina, Mike. *Africa and the Early Church: The Almost-Forgotten Roots of Catholic Christianity*. Emmaus Road Publishing, 2023. \$22.95 (hbk) www.amazon.com. ISBN-10: 1645852598; ISBN-13: 978-1645852599.

Description: When we survey the history of the Faith, it is undeniable that the lands of northern Africa were profoundly influential in the development of early Christianity. The faith arrived early in Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, and the territories we now call Eritrea, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. African Christians made decisive contributions in theology, liturgy, biblical studies, and culture. With the Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries, much of this history was lost to Europe, though the marks of ancient influence remained.

Africa and the Early Church: The Almost-Forgotten Roots of Catholic Christianity uncovers that lost history for interested modern readers, telling the story as much as possible in the words of the great figures in antiquity. To acknowledge these Christians and their churches is to complete the historical picture—and to remember what was once common knowledge.

Eastman, David L. *Early North African Christianity: Turning points in the development of the church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021. \$20.84 (pbk). www.amazon.com. ISBN-10: 1540963675; ISBN-13: 978-1540963673

Description: An internationally recognized scholar highlights the important role the North African church played in the development of Christian thought. This accessible introduction brings Africa back to the center of the study of Christian history by focusing on key figures and events that influenced the history and trajectory of Christianity as a whole. Written and designed for the classroom, the book zeroes in on five turning points to show how North African believers significantly shaped Christian theology, identity, and practice in ways that directly impact the church today.

Pignot, Matthieu. *The Catechumenate in late antique Africa (4th-6th centuries): Augustine of Hippo, his contemporaries and early reception*. Leiden: Brill, 2020. \$225.00 www.amazon.com. ISBN-10: 9004431896; ISBN-13: 978-9004431898.

Description: “In *The Catechumenate in Late Antique Africa (4th-6th centuries)*, Matthieu Pignot explores how individuals became Christian in ancient North Africa. Before baptism, converts first became catechumens and spent a significant time of gradual integration into the community through rituals and teaching. This book provides the first historical study of this process in African sources, from Augustine of Hippo, to canon of councils, anonymous sermons and 6th-century letters. Pignot

shows that practices varied more than is generally assumed and that catechumens, because of their liminal position, were a disputed and essential group in the development of Christian communities until the 6th century at least. This book demonstrates that the catechumenate is key to understanding the processes of Christianisation and conversion in the West"—from Publisher

The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Christian North Africa. Volume 1, The Bible in Christian North Africa; Part I: Commencement to the Confessions of Augustine (ca. 180 to 400 CE.) Edited by Anthony Dupont and Jonathan Yates. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020. \$168.76. www.amazon.com. ISBN-10: 1614517568; ISBN-13: 978-1614517566

Description: This handbook explores the formation of Christianity in Northern Africa from the second century CE until the present. It focuses on the reception of Scripture in the life of the Church, the processes of decision making, the theological and philosophical reflections of the Church Fathers in various cultural contexts, and schismatic or heretical movements. Volume one covers the first four centuries up until the time of Augustine.

Open Access Resources

Atukosi, Johnmacartan Abuchi. *The Coptic Separation from the Universal Church: the Causes and the Effects. Igwebuike: an African Journal of Arts & Humanities*. Vol. 7 No. 4, 2021. <https://www.acjol.org/index.php/iaajah/article/view/1427>

Abstract: The seed of Christianity planted in the land of Egypt in 68 AD by Evangelist Mark sprouted and recorded a gigantic growth. Egypt became the powerhouse, the theological and catechetical centre of the universal church, at the height of which she prided herself above other churches, and separated from the agreed Christological definition arrived at by the universal church. As a lone church vulnerable to external aggressions, she fell prey to the Islamic jihadists who conquered her in 641 AD. The write up closely looks into the effects and causes of the separation. It discovers that the remote cause of this evil that bedeviled the Egyptian Church was pride and arrogance; and the pitfall should serve as a lesson to the contemporary Christian Churches.

Helleman, Wendy Elgersma. *New Horizons in the Study of Early African Christianity. Miscellanea*, Vol. 81, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.31743/vp.12958>

Abstract: Teaching early Christianity in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa since 2002, has convinced this author how important it is for African Christians to know of the deep roots of Christianity in Africa, and recognize the important early African theologians, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius and Augustine, just to name a few. This argument has a significant precedent among 19th century African Christians encouraged by the unbroken presence of Christianity from antiquity in Ethiopia. In the US, Thomas Oden promoted the study of pre-Islamic Christian Africa through the *Centre for Early African Christianity*, and publications like the series, *Ancient Christian*

Commentary on Scripture. This Centre has also encouraged universities in Africa to get involved in deciphering archeological materials and documents from North African sites as evidence for Christianity from its earliest days; the study of such documents has recently been established at the University of Jos (Plateau State, Nigeria). These initiatives are doubly significant because Christianity is growing phenomenally throughout Africa and is often accused of being “a mile wide and an inch deep.”