Boston University

OpenBU **http://open.bu.edu**

Journal of African Christian Biography Journal of African Christian Biography: v. 9, no. 1

2024-01

Excerpt from We Believe: Experiencing the Creed Through Ancient African Christianity (Series 1; Book I)

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/51263

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

Book Series Highlight

Excerpt from *We Believe: Experiencing the Creed Through Ancient African Christianity (Series 1; 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 I)* 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.