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Selection from Thomas Oden, African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition

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.

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[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 Africa[11]

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, Bénézet 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 Bénézet 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.