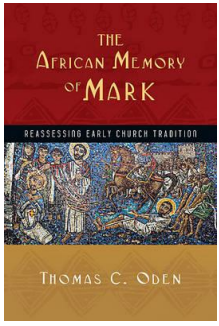
The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition, by Thomas C. Oden



Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011 | 279 pages | ISBN: 978-0-8308-3933-9 (softback) $22.00

As director of the Center for Early African Christianity at Eastern University, Thomas C. Oden offers a fascinating exploration of the traditions about Mark as the founding figure of the African Church. In his preface Oden dedicates his study to African scholars and affirms the importance of the story of Saint Mark as remembered by Christians in Africa across denominational lines, a story unfamiliar to many Western laypersons and scholars alike. After touching upon John Mark's African roots in chapter 1, Oden asks western readers to suspend their critical suspicions and adopt a "second naiveté" in order to give this story a fair hearing (23). He frequently repeats this sharp contrast between long-established African memories of a saint and modern western historical scepticism regarding hagiography.

The first part of the book introduces the distinctly African memory of Mark. In chapter 2, an event is classified under "African memory" if it is

remembered throughout the African continent, in the same or similar ways, with common consent without coercion, over several generations, and in the many indigenous languages of Africa (27–28). Although some scholars take their cue from Acts 12:12 on John Mark's origins in Jerusalem, chapter 3 narrates the African account of Mark's birth in Cyrene in the Libyan Pentapolis to a wealthy Jewish family including his father Aristopolus (Aristobulus), his mother Mary and his uncle Barnabas before they emigrated to Palestine. Moreover, Mark shares a familial bond to Peter through the apostle's marriage to the cousin of Aristobulus. Chapter 4 covers the literary sources: the liturgical synaxaries of saints and martyrs, *The Martyrdom of Mark* (*Martyrium Marci*), the tenth-century compilation of traditions under the direction of Sawirus ibn Al-Muqaffa, and the work of the current patriarch of the See of St Mark Anba Shenouda III.

Part 2 interprets the New Testament from an African hermeneutical lens. Chapter 5 constructs a portrait of Mark as a Levite, based on the description of Barnabas in Acts 4:36–37 and an interpretation of Mark's nickname "stump-fingered" (*kolobodaktylos*) as a reference to his self-mutilation to avoid the priesthood. Mark often visited Peter's house in Capernaum in his youth and was a participant in the gospel narrative, found in the self-effacing description of himself as the naked young man who took flight in Gethsemane (Mark 14:51–52) and possibly the young man in white at the empty tomb (16:5–7). Chapter 6 identifies the house of Mark and his mother Mary as the location of the Last Supper with Mark as the one carrying the water jug, the gathering place of the post-Easter church when the Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, and the safe house where Peter hid from Herod (cf. Mark 14:13–15; Luke 22:10–12; Acts 1:13; 12:12). Oden even supports the identification of the site with St. Mark's Monastery. According to chapter 7, Mark had a much more active role in the early church than one might deduce from the first brief reference to him in Acts 12:12. Before travelling with Paul or Barnabas (cf. Acts 12:25; 13:5, 13; 15:37–39), Mark also safely escorted Peter to "another place" (Acts 12:17) and Oden makes the case that this was not Rome but Babylon of Egypt (later Old Cairo; cf. 1 Pet 5:13).

Part 3 continues past the New Testament and early patristic witnesses to the traditions of Mark's ministry in Africa. Chapter 8 recounts Mark's call to Africa, his reunion with Peter in Rome where he wrote the gospel, his successful ministry in the Pentapolis, his initial planting of the seeds of apostolic Christianity in Alexandria and appointment of Anianus as his successor in the episcopal chair of Alexandria before he escaped back to the Pentapolis,

and his final torture and martyrdom in Alexandria. Chapter 9 lists the various archaeological sites that correspond with key events of Mark's ministry and Mark's tomb which was venerated as early as the last martyr of Egypt, Peter of Alexandria, before the peace of Constantine. He also points to the succession of ten bishops between Mark and Demetrius (62–189 CE). Other records failed to survive the passing of time and onslaught of persecution, but Oden is adamant that the consensual memory of these locations and names could not be an invention and that, "Apostolic validation is more than a cultural fantasy or social legitimation" (171).

A single chapter in part 4 is dedicated to substantiating the historical reliability of the African tradition. Chapter 10 turns the attention towards the patristic sources. Particularly pertinent is the discovery by Morton Smith of the letter of Clement of Alexandria to Theodore that may supply the missing link as it confirms Mark's presence in Alexandria and how he entrusted the Alexandrian church with safeguarding his writings in their archives before his death. The tradition of Mark as the founder of the Alexandrian church is firmly in place by the time of Eusebius of Caesarea. Finally, part 5 ties up some loose ends. Chapter 11 adduces three lines of circumstantial evidence supporting the overall case: the reference to "my son Mark" in 1 Peter 5:13, Peter's decision to go to Mary's house after his miraculous escape from prison in Acts 12, and the information supplied about Peter's mother-in-law in Mark 1:29–32. Chapter 12 reiterates the dichotomy between Western historicism as exemplified by Bultmann and the form critics versus an appreciation of consensual church tradition, though he concedes, "My conviction is that the truth lies in some position in between the Western and African views" (233). Chapter 13 highlights Mark's impact on the catechetical school of Alexandria and on African iconography, liturgy and theology and the conclusion warns that to dismiss it as a myth of origins is to harm the self-esteem of African Christians, to neglect their contribution to global Christianity and to intensify their estrangement from the rest of the world.

As a study of reception history, Oden's valuable contribution should be read alongside other excellent studies such as C. Clifton Black's *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* (1995) or Brenda Deen Schildgen's *Power and Prejudice: The Reception of the Gospel of Mark* (1999). I am less persuaded by his argument for the historicity of the tradition. It may be unfair to imply that criticism is rooted in "silent cultural conceits and prejudicial assumptions" or "cultural egocentrism and nativism" (137), since there are most probably other common beliefs or practices in Africa that Oden has not incorporated

into his own worldview. Instead, his case might have been strengthened if he engaged with recent anthropological studies of oral transmission or psychological research on memory. At times he relies explicitly on theological presuppositions that a scholar must adopt before she or he can begin to entertain the argument as, for example, the statement, "The same Spirit is at work in both the consensual exegesis of Scripture and its subsequent doctrinal expressions, as remembered ecumenically by the tradition of believers in Africa as well as in Europe and in the Near East" (55–56).

As it is, Oden provides no criteria to sift between older traditions and later developments. For instance, the much earlier testimony of Papias explains Mark's lack of *taxis* (order) on the grounds that he was neither a hearer nor follower of the Lord but only of Peter (cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39.15), but Oden infers that Papias was just unaware of the widespread conviction in Egypt of Mark as a personal eyewitness of Jesus (191). Clement of Alexandria, and possibly Papias before him, seems to have interpreted "Babylon" in 1 Peter 5:13 (cf. Rev 17–18) as a euphemism for Rome (cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.15.2; Clement, *Adumbrationes ad I Pet. 5:13*). Oden accepts the modern academic consensus on Markan priority (22, 75), but this runs against the nearly unanimous patristic support for Matthean priority and especially the judgment of the African theologian Augustine on Mark as the abbreviator of Matthew (*De Consensu Evangelistarum* 1.2.4). If a critic is not quite convinced about the late traditions of Mark in Alexandria, this is no different than the critical questioning of whether Thomas travelled to India, that Paul fulfilled his intent to go to Spain (Rom 15:24, 28; cf. *1 Clem* 5:7), or even, notably by the late Michael Goulder ("Did Peter Ever Go to Rome?" 2004), that Peter was the first bishop of Rome. If its historicity cannot be verified by the usual historical-critical methods, this need not detract from the theological richness of a narrative that has "shaped the spirit of African Christianity" (238).

There is also the question of the ideological function of securing a stable line of apostolic succession in Alexandria through Mark's connection to Peter and Rome. Oden opposes this line of thought yet is similarly dismissive of "the non-consensual followers," who attempt the same strategy for Marcion or the Alexandrian Basilides or Valentinus (cf. Clement, *Str* 7.106) (174), although this also may read back the ultimate victory of proto-orthodox (or centrist) Christianity over its rivals back into second-century Alexandria. However, there may be a false dichotomy between acceptance of the tradition or accusations of conscious deception. Another option, depending upon

whether or not one judges the controversial letter to Theodore to be authentic, is that Clement of Alexandria and his opponents sincerely believed they had an alternate version of Mark's gospel which the evangelist left in Alexandria and the story may have grown from there. Regardless if one is sceptical about a historical core behind it, this reader is grateful to Oden for retelling the theologically profound African story of Mark and opening scholars to a neglected aspect of the reception history the Gospel of Mark.

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