

AUTHOR Q & A



Thomas C. Oden
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systematic theology.

The African Memory of Mark represents one of the many paths Tom Oden has traveled because of his involvement in producing the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. After the completion of the ACCS and, more recently, the *Ancient Christian Doctrine* series, scholars working with Oden began studying early Christian texts specifically from the African continent. In the process, they encountered a widely attested and perpetuated tradition—a memory, if you will—of the African origins, ministry and martyrdom of John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark. In *The African Memory of Mark*, Oden places the African tradition of Mark beside the biblical evidence and concludes that biblical references to Mark actually make more sense in light of the established African memory of Mark.

IVP Academic editor Jim Hoover will be presenting a full interview with Tom in a future IVP Academic Alert and has allowed us a sneak preview to that conversation.

What do you mean by “the African memory of Mark”?

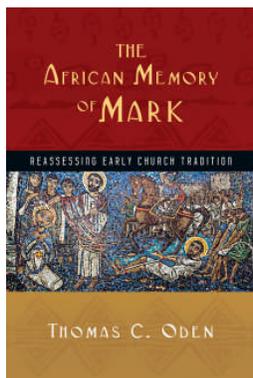
Tom Oden: *Memory* does not here refer to the contemporary African memory alone, but to a two-thousand-year-long history of a way of remembering. In the case of the African identity of Mark, his birth, life and death in Africa have been well known and the story retold in every part of the African continent, remembered in a similar way, with similar root sources, for nearly two thousand years in virtually all of the major indigenous languages of Africa.

Just how solidly would you say this tradition is anchored in Africa?

Tom: Deeply in the liturgy and the synaxaries celebrating the saints of the African continent where Mark is commonly regarded as the first African martyr and saint. Go to the middle Nile valley or to Ethiopia and ask lay Christians who John Mark was and where he first preached and died. Very few, if any, would not know this story.

Biblical passages Mark 14, Acts 2, 6 and 12, and 1 Peter 5:13 play significantly into the body of evidence you correlate to African traditions about Mark. How do these biblical references fit in with African tradition?

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Tom: In particular they fill out some of the familial relationships. Scripture attests that Barnabas was related to Mark (as either cousin or uncle). The African tradition holds that Barnabas was his uncle and that Peter's wife was a cousin to Mark's father and uncle Barnabas. This goes a long way in explaining what is widely held as a close relation between Peter and Mark even generally within Western scholarship. Simply put, there is nothing in *The African Memory of Mark* that is contrary to the Gestalt (complete body) of evidence in the canonical texts of Scripture.

Why do you think reassessing this tradition is so important?

Tom: Today it may seem to be a superficial academic debate. But for many it probes a deep well of faith, hope and love that reaches into the heart of world Christianity. Christians today around the world have been interceding and caring for Africa amid its ongoing tribulations. They have been providing food relief and economic assistance, building hospitals and supplying medicines for HIV/AIDS and malaria.

It is time now for world Christians to benefit from African Christianity, as they once did in ancient times. This story illumines Africa's venerated intellectual traditions. It introduces us to brilliant texts from early Christianity. It elicits in an unexpected way a courageous new freedom from the syndrome of diminished self-esteem in Africa that followed on the harsh heels of colonialism. The roots of African Christianity lie in Mark. His story is waiting to be told to those who have not heard it.