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Review: How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity

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Luke as interpreter. Here, he seeks to materials and social conventions" (p. additions. Concerning pagan traditions, physiognomy ("the association of outer 3). Here, Parsons relates the concepts end at midnight in Luke 11:5-8. For his mines the character of the lame man in ; read into the narrative (e.g. "the lame outward physical sign of his inner weak

of Jewish tradition. Here the particular redefinition of the traditional Jewish y, and second to the Jewish tradition might relate to the Ethiopian eunuch. : employs existing Jewish attitudes, im for the existence of the Christian

interpreter of Christian traditions er from Acts. In the example from les in the Lukan travel narrative. In tual of Paul in his epistles with the at in both examples Luke has taken n the service of his narrative. While ons's examples, his conclusions are

ises on Luke as evangelist. Here, he ent as a light for revelation to the !" (p. xii). Parsons analyzes Luke's asis for reconstituting the people of f Luke and the covenants and an (in the sense of his acceptance of that, "In Acts, the Christian sect rrent that recognizes that through Abraham and are a vital part of the

ought-provoking, even when one uthor clearly presents and cogently seful to those who are already well- uing academic research in the area. astors might find the introductory ably find the exploratory nature of is, for readers whose interests lie in venues for further exploration into ngelist.

Charles H. Savelle
oint Bible Institute, Greenville, TX

How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity. By Thomas C. Oden. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008, 204 pp., \$ 19.00, hardcover.

Thomas Oden, an accomplished scholar in systematic and historical theology, and retired professor at Drew University, has offered a compelling and positively provocative work in *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*. A work of scholarly repentance, he ably repudiates the posture of western theologians and historians (i.e. Harnack, Bauer, Schleiermacher) toward Africa's theological legacy (pp. 57-59). His present work is the fruit of thirty years of reading the early African fathers, and in the last fourteen, he has served as the general editor of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. From this rich background, Oden develops the book's resounding thesis: African theology (facilitated by Clement, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Athanasius, among others) is the "seedbed"—an appropriate Tertullianism—of western Christianity and thought. Unlike his mentors at Yale (p. 130), Oden takes a servant's posture in telling the African story. Receiving encouragement from African theologians like Tite Tiénou (p. 36) and circulating the manuscript to three dozen African scholars prior to publication (pp. 85-86), it is appropriate that the dust jacket endorsements come from African scholars Tiénou and Lamin Sanneh.

A concise, well-written, and accessible work, Oden's introduction highlights the unprecedented growth of modern African Christianity, while arguing that its patristic tradition is largely unknown to Africans and has been ignored by Europeans. In chapter one, "A Forgotten Story," he further raises the issues of Africa's forgotten status and makes the case for writing the book. In chapter two, "Seven Ways Africa Shaped the Christian Mind," he winsomely argues for Africa's primal influence on western Christian thought. Chapters three, four, and five—"Defining Africa," "One Faith, Two Africas," and "Temptations"—raise the important question of Africa's definition and identity, particularly in light of modern Afro-centric readings of Africa's history. In chapter six, "The Opportunity for Retrieval," Oden confronts the post-Enlightenment worldview and hermeneutics of suspicion that have effectively diminished Africa's theological heritage. Chapter seven, "How the Blood of the Martyrs Became the Seed of European Christianity," proposes Africa's history of martyrdom and the exodus event as alternatives to a Christian view of history marked by power. In chapter eight, "Right Remembering," Oden asserts that orthodoxy is not a prize awarded to theological victors, but rather the fruit of correctly remembering the apostles' teachings. In chapter nine, "Seeking the Reconciliation of Christianity and Islam through Historical Insight," he makes a case for the risky but necessary endeavor of engaging African Muslims in dialogue over their Christian heritage. In the appendix, Oden moves from being a scholar to an activist, laying out a strategic plan to implement his vision for recovering Africa's theological legacy, which includes the website www.earlyafricanchristianity.com and the *Journal of African Christianity*. The book concludes with a helpful "Literary Chronology of Christianity in the First Millenium," including key personalities, writings, and movements in the period.

Perhaps the most relevant set of works to *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind* is Oden's own *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Western theological hegemony has also been challenged in Ott and Netlander's *Globalizing Theology*, particularly through articles by Tiénou and Vanhoozer. Some similar themes in early African Christianity have also been explored by Francois Decret,

whose French work will be available in English in late 2008 under the title *Early Christianity in North Africa* (Wipf & Stock).

Four areas of strength in Oden's work are particularly noteworthy. First, supported by his years of studying patristic texts, he makes a winsome case for Africa's significant theological legacy. Chapter two is particularly compelling and could serve as an introductory essay to a multi-volume work. On a personal note, though I was initially skeptical of Mark's historical relationship to the Egyptian church—dismissing it as "Coptic tradition"—Oden's repeated use of first- to eighth-century sources, which place the evangelist in Egypt, won me to this view (pp. 18, 97, 125, 158–59, 194).

Second, by raising more questions than answers, the book is a stimulating invitation for scholars, especially African students, to "dig beneath the sands" (pp. 39–40) and engage Africa's theological legacy. An exercise that should strengthen the present African church, as noted, it also provides a basis for meaningful dialogue with African Muslims (p. 39).

Third, the final "Literary Chronology" (pp. 157–97) is helpful and further supports Oden's overall thesis. A great resource for students and professors, it almost reads like a narrative genealogy—a device used in the Scriptures, but also one that connects with many of Africa's cultures.

Finally, Oden ably engages the question, "What is Africa?" and challenges Pan-African readings of African Christian history (pp. 16, 62–77, 91–92). In particular, he is not willing that "Africa" should be defined by race. After reading chapter three, I recalled attending a stimulating lecture on the same subject, given by a prominent Ghanaian Christian leader addressing African Christian leaders at a conference in South Africa in 2000. The presenter carefully argued that "Africa" included Iranian immigrants in Tanzania, white Africans in Southern Africa, Arab and Berber peoples in North Africa, and, of course, a mosaic of black African peoples, including his own tribe. He also referenced Tertullian in a brief review of African Christian history. In short, Oden's argument finds support among prominent African church leaders.

While I generally have praise for Oden's work, a few critiques are in order. First, his arguments and accompanying map (pp. 52–53) regarding the origins and progression of monasticism—from Egypt to Gaul to Ireland back to Africa—lack adequate support. Are we able to establish through the literature and archaeology, the origins of the Hadrumetum monastery? How did Augustine adopt some of his Pachomian monastic values? Perhaps intending to raise questions about these unresolved areas, his assertions are nonetheless communicated in a conclusive manner.

Second, in his summary of martyrdom in chapter seven (pp. 117–22), he makes reference to this phenomenon only in the pre-Constantine period. How are the Donatist and Circumcellion martyrs of the fourth and fifth century to be regarded? What about catholic clergy and believers who died at the hands of the Circumcellions or during the Vandal siege? Is martyrdom confined to a unique period? A key issue in African Patristic studies, and addressed thoroughly by Decret and Frend (*Martyrdom and Persecution*), Oden's brief treatment of martyrdom fails to address the issue adequately.

Finally, though Oden asserts that "this project is not intended primarily for a small elite group of university scholars or sociological experts" (p. 153), his plan for implementation (pp. 143–55) is limited to printed and electronic means, which is exclusive. What about those who do not read? Within the last thirty years, missionaries serving in primarily oral contexts have embraced storying as a key evangelistic approach (cf. Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story to Ministry*). One North

African preaching not an oral

Critique of undergraduate studies, a generation

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African pastor recently commented that this approach was also necessary in preaching and discipleship. While Oden's strategy includes the less educated, should not an oral approach for predominantly oral cultures also be in order?

Critiques aside, Oden's significant and timely work ought to be read by undergraduate and seminary students studying early Christianity, intercultural studies, and historical and systematic theology. It will surely be a catalyst for future generations of scholarship.

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The UBS Greek New Testament: A Reader's Edition. Compiled by Philip H. Towner. Edited by Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce Metzger. Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft / Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007, 704 pp., \$69.95, hardcover.

Philip H. Towner, Director of Translation Services for the United Bible Societies, claims in the preface of *The UBS Greek New Testament: A Reader's Edition* (hereafter, *Reader*) that, "Much of the focus in university and seminary teaching of the Greek New Testament today is on delivering to the students (by way of software and disjointed, abbreviated teaching strategies) analytical tools mainly designed to give access to dictionaries and commentaries" (p. 7). The *Reader* seeks to wean students from this methodology by providing a resource that gives the "assurance that there will be those who can actually read the text without undue dependence upon 'tools'" (p. 7). Thus, simply stated, "The motivation behind this tool [is the] reading [of] the Greek New Testament" (p. 7).

The *Reader* seeks to accomplish this goal by replicating the well-known UBS fourth edition of the *Greek New Testament*, minus the textual apparatus. In place of the apparatus, the *Reader* provides a "Running Greek-English Dictionary" (p. 9) compiled by Barclay M. Newman that corresponds chronologically with the biblical text and defines each word contextually. This dictionary provides all vocabulary words that occur thirty times or less and grammatically identifies irregular word forms. Words occurring more than thirty times are listed in a lexicon at the end of the *Reader*. This source, then, allows a student to read the Greek NT, to view infrequent vocabulary immediately below the text, and to access a more exhaustive lexicon at the book's end.

Towner claims the following advantages that the *Reader* has over similar tools. First, "it employs the best available scholarly Greek text (the text of the UBS *Greek New Testament* which is identical with the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*)" (pp.7–8). Second, "it offers the reader who has a first-year level, working Greek vocabulary ready access to those words occurring thirty times or less in the Greek NT, as well as additional help with the identification of certain rare lexical and grammatical forms" (p. 8). Finally, "the glosses . . . aim to be contextually relevant to aid the student in the reading process" (p. 8). Its primary advantage, unmentioned in the preface, is that it allows the student the unhindered joy of rapidly reading extended sections of the Greek text prior to mastering Greek vocabulary.

The *Reader* provides a needed resource to the Greek student's library. Towner, in the preface, however, overstates the benefits of the *Reader*. He declares that it "helps with the familiarity with grammar . . . [and the] mastery of syntax" (p. 8). Other than offering "rare lexical and grammatical forms" (p. 8), it is unclear how