

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 105

**Christianity in  
Early Africa**  
Ancient traditions,  
profound impact





# Did you know?

FASCINATING FACTS AND FIRSTS FROM THE EARLY AFRICAN CHURCH

## BORN IN WATER, CARRIED BY PRAYER

Africa is the home of many Christian “firsts.” To **Tertullian of Carthage** we owe the earliest Christian treatise about the sacraments, *On Baptism*: “But we, little fishes, after the example of our ΙΧΘΥΣ Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water.”

Tertullian also wrote a famous treatise on the Lord’s Prayer, reminding us that “Even the Lord Himself prayed; to whom be honor and virtue unto the ages of the ages!” (For more on Tertullian, see “See how these Christians love one another,” pp. 29–33. Bold-face names and places will be found on the map, pp. 22–23.)

## MONEY AND MUSIC

Then there is **Clement of Alexandria**. The first Christian treatment of economics is his “Who Is the Rich Man that Shall Be Saved?” He also wrote the oldest Christian hymn whose authorship is known, in about AD 200. Usually translated “Shepherd of Tender Youth,” it reads in part,

Thou art our holy Lord,  
The all-subduing Word,  
Healer of strife:  
Thou didst Thyself abase,  
That from sin’s deep disgrace  
Thy mightest save our race,  
And give us life.

## SERPENT REPELLENT?

Finally, we owe many “famous firsts” to **Augustine**. His *Confessions* represent an early example of how to give testimony to encourage other believers.

He also was essentially the first to define original sin as the guilt that we inherited from Adam and Eve and to argue that baptism is needed to wash it away, no matter the age of the recipient. He wrote in *On Merit and the Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Infants*: “As infants are by the sacrament of baptism conformed to the death of Christ, it must be admitted that they are also freed from the serpent’s poisonous bite.”



This also led Augustine to articulate a view of predestination that would dominate later Western Christianity, in which God graciously chooses to save some of the mass of human beings guilty of original sin.

### NEED A SCORECARD?

Making your way around early African Christianity means learning about Christian groups new to many Westerners. Early Africa included both Latin-speaking (Western) and Greek-speaking (Eastern) Christians. The Eastern or "Byzantine" half of the Roman Empire, headquartered at Constantinople in Asia Minor, spoke Greek. Eventually, its churches and the churches headquartered at Rome divided.

But long before that, early Christians were debating issues regarding the divinity of Christ and the relationship between his human and divine natures in ecumenical councils where church leaders came together. One, at Chalcedon in 451, wrestled with how Christ's human and divine natures related. It declared that although Christ was one person he had two distinct natures.

Some Christian traditions, whose stories we tell in this issue, rejected Chalcedon, declaring that Christ had a single nature which was both human and divine. Today, you will sometimes hear these churches called "Oriental Orthodox." They

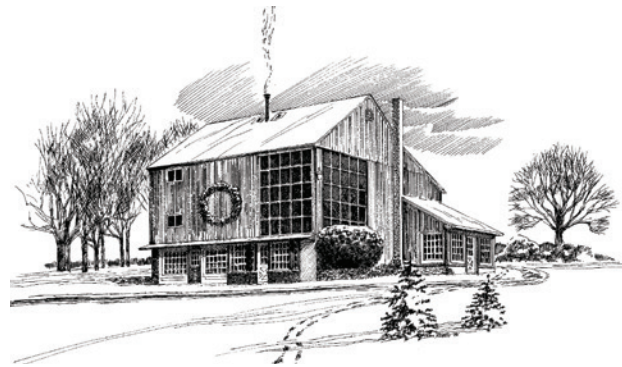
**FACES OF THE AFRICAN CHURCH** *Left page:* The "Nine Saints," pictured in this mural, spread Christianity through Ethiopia. *Above left:* This Debre Damo monk lives on a high cliff. *Above right:* St. Mary of Egypt was a famous female monastic.

are separate from the Eastern Orthodox Church (which accepts Chalcedon) and include churches in both Egypt and Ethiopia (see "From Abba Salama to King Lalibela" pp. 18–21, and "Some others you should know," pp. 36–37).

### HARD TO GET TO

Monks at Debre Damo have a long climb. This Ethiopian monastery, in continuous use since the sixth century, contains many priceless artifacts. It can only be reached by rope. Male visitors tie a rope around their waist and are pulled up the cliff by a monk at the top. Women are permitted to pray only at the bottom. Female animals are also forbidden on the grounds. ☒

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# Editor's Note

**CHRISTIANITY IS OLD.** Really old.

I think we all know this. We know that Christians have been at this for over 2,000 years. We, if we are Westerners, know that the setting into which Christianity was born looks very little like the setting we find ourselves in today.

But most of the time our Christian walk is based on the things we hold in common with the first Christians—the doctrines that have endured through time that we confess each Sunday.

Sometimes it helps us to think about the context in which those doctrines were first confessed. In 2003 *Christian History* did an issue (no. 79, *African Apostles*) on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century explosion of Christian missions in Africa—a story with high drama, many heroes, and much faithful witness.

But many of us are here because mission went out from Africa in the first place. So many early church fathers and mothers, so many martyrs, so many writers, so many worshipers came from the African church.

## STORIES OF THE FAITHFUL

From cities like **Carthage, Alexandria, and Hippo**, and the regions that are now **Ethiopia, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya** came heroes, martyrs, bishops, monks, and theologians—**Tertullian, Augustine, Cyprian, Origen, Perpetua, Anthony, Maurice, Frumentius, and Synclitica**.

If you don't know their stories yet, you will find them here. (And if, like me, you are bad at holding maps in your head, you will find one of those here, too, on pages 22–23. Throughout the issue, people and places on the map are indicated in **bold**.)

In this issue, we will walk through everything from ancient archaeological ruins to modern-day worshipping communities of Coptic Christians as we regain touch with the African context. And we will hear how this heritage is being rediscovered and promoted today.

The lessons from these stories are many, but two stand out. The first is the high regard in which early

African believers held the Bible. Allegorical interpretation of Scripture was born in Alexandria, and it was born out of a desire to emphasize that the whole Bible—Old Testament and New, easy parts and hard—speak of our life in Christ. (For an example of this in action, see “The Bible’s story is our story,” pp. 24–28.) Later, **John Cassian** (see “Become completely as fire,” pp. 15–17) divided this allegorical approach into no fewer than three senses that complemented the literal meaning.

## WHOLE BIBLE, WHOLE CHURCH

“Jerusalem,” on this model, is all at once the literal city, the church, the human soul, and the heavenly city we all desire. The whole Bible was for the whole Christian and the whole church.

The second lesson is the high regard in which early African believers held the Church—with a capital “C.” Christ’s command for unity was serious, visible, and structural.

Schism would not only (before Christianity was tolerated) make resistance to persecution harder, but it was also a theological problem (“See how these Christians love one another,” pp. 29–33). It broke the bonds of love and doctrinal accountability.

“Catholic” meant “universal,” and it meant that precisely because these Christians desired the church to be visibly universal and comprehensive, where the bishops of every city would see themselves and their teachings as accountable to each other.



We may look back and say it was an impossible ideal—but before we do so, we should be challenged by these African believers’ deep assumption that it was not only possible, but necessary.

Read on and be challenged.

Jennifer Woodruff Tait  
*Managing Editor*

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY



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# Listening to the African witness

TWO MODERN SCHOLARS REFLECT ON CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA, THEN AND NOW

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**CHRISTIAN HISTORY SAT DOWN** *separately with church historians Lamin Sanneh and Jacquelyn Winston to discuss what the stories in this issue have to teach us. We asked them about the value of the African Christian tradition in the development of world Christianity and the lessons modern Americans need to hear from these stories.*

**Jacquelyn Winston:** As a historian of early Christianity, I believe African Christianity is one of the most important foundations of Christian faith and practice. African church fathers gave us classic formulations of the problem of evil, the philosophy-faith connection, the Trinity, and other key questions.

We often ignore the African origins of some of the most important church fathers, including **Augustine, Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Athanasius.** As an ordained African-American

minister, when I was confronted with a young black man who felt the Christian faith was irrelevant to his life and saw it as the religion of the oppressor, I was able to point to the rich history of African Christianity to prove that Christianity is not just “a white man’s religion.”

## NURTURED IN AFRICA

**JW:** From its inception, Christianity was nurtured on the African continent. The Jewish sensibilities of the first-century church were not simply Greco-Roman, they were also shaped by the religious and intellectual currents that flowed from Egypt. African Christianity is too often viewed as a brand of Christianity that has suddenly become en vogue, rather than the deep foundation of Christianity that it is. Without it, Christianity would not be the same in any substantial way.

The Middle Eastern and African origins of Christianity emphasized the communal nature of the Christian faith. The unrelenting strain of individualism

PALM SUNDAY PARADE—© KEVIN O'HARA / AGE FOTOSTOCK

**AN ANCIENT FAITH** Palm Sunday parade in Aksum, Ethiopia, which was the capital city when Ethiopia became officially Christian in the fourth century.

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at the core of American evangelicalism would benefit greatly if it embraced the corporate character of an embodied African faith.

Ultimately, we are part of a body for whom Christ died. While we may appreciate the saving work of Christ individually, it is only in our connection to the rest of the church that we can usher in the now-but-not-yet character of the Kingdom of God.

### THEY DIED FOR THEIR FAITH

**JW:** No one modeled this relationship more than the African fathers and mothers who were martyred for their faith in the earliest days of Christianity. Their sacrificial lifestyles, models of mutual care, and pursuit of an embodied spirituality continue to teach modern Christians.

We can easily access their truths by reading writings of the early Christian martyrs like the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (see “The hunger games and the love feast,” pp. 6–8) and experiencing the moral struggles of Augustine’s *Confessions* or the spiritual struggle to be conformed to the image of Christ seen in the writings of the desert fathers and mothers (see “Become completely as fire,” pp. 15–17).

**Lamin Sanneh:** As we still do today, early African Christians wrestled with intersections of faith and reason, temple and synagogue, Jew and Gentile, truth and faithfulness, justice and mercy, frugality and charity, church and state, commitment and tolerance, difference and diversity, men and women, and a Christian society in a non-Christian state.

The context of the Roman Empire is similar to the context of the establishment of churches by modern empires in Africa. In both cases Christianity persisted as the religion after the empires fell.

The great tradition of philosophy and theological scholarship that distinguished **Alexandria** in the age of Origen and Clement (see “The Bible’s story is our story,” pp. 24–28) was swept away by the invasion of Islam in the seventh century, while elsewhere in North Africa, Christianity left only relics and fading memories as Muslim forces moved in to assert control.

### MONKS AND MANUSCRIPTS

**LS:** But two groups—Coptic Christians in Egypt and their Ethiopian counterparts (see “From Abba Salama to King Lalibela,” pp. 18–21)—escaped that fate. Coptic Christianity emerged from popular rural roots without the learning and refinement of Alexandria and Roman and Byzantine North Africa. Perhaps learning and refinement are not enough safeguard against decline.

I was struck on a visit to the sixth-century monastery of Debre Doma in Ethiopia by how much the church is steeped in the soil and culture of the countryside, with a remarkable history of unbroken continuity of faith practice. There are few places in Christian history where monks, manuscripts, and monasteries have persisted that well and that long.

### THINK GLOBAL, PRAY LOCAL

**LS:** As Christianity expanded across ethnic and national boundaries, people continued to adapt it to their circumstances. The roots of present-day Christian resurgence are still to be found in sticking close to local sources and cultures.

In his thought-provoking book, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, Peter Brown shows how Scripture and the devotional life helped to unify the faith and practices of Christians in the long stretch between the fall of Rome and the onset of the Middle Ages across barriers of geography, nationality, language, and communication.

Today many Christians trapped in remote rural areas as well as in deprived, marginal parts of the urban landscape have forged similar bonds of togetherness. The evidence of such indomitable faith, in the early period and today, reveals the perennial strength and force of Christianity’s message.

### AFRICA TODAY

**LS:** While Africa seems remote culturally and geographically, historically and theologically it is close to America’s self-understanding. The presence of Africans in the New World, slave and free, challenged the United States’ founders to acknowledge members of another race and culture, once remote and distant, whose destiny now was folded with America’s.

Where they failed, America’s early evangelical awakening combined with the antislavery movement. They planted churches and free settlements in sub-Saharan Africa as a bulwark against the slave trade and argued for the end of slavery and racial exploitation. That initiative opened a new chapter in the history of missions and of modern Africa.

Think back to the biblical story. When reports reached the Jerusalem church that the Spirit had brought the Gentiles to faith, the disciples exclaimed that conventional rules and taboos cannot and must not impede the Christian movement. They demanded to know how anyone could deny God was at work in new unfamiliar places (Acts 10:47). ☐

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# The hunger games and the love feast

PERPETUA'S MARTYRDOM ACCOUNT GIVES US A WINDOW INTO NORTH AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY

*Edwin Woodruff Tait*

ON MARCH 7, 203, the Roman colony of Carthage celebrated the birthday of Geta Caesar, 14-year-old son of Emperor Septimius Severus. Severus was an African—an ambitious provincial from the lesser aristocracy who had fought his way to power in a civil war 10 years earlier. Just the previous year, he had waged a successful campaign in Africa. Roman power had been vindicated, the barbarians had been driven back, and peace had been confirmed.

## RULING ROMANS

Roman Carthage was founded in conquest, literally built on the ruins of Rome's greatest rival. The province of Africa contained at least three different ethnicities—the descendants of Roman colonists, the native "Libyan" or "Berber" inhabitants, and the "Phoenicians," whose ancestors had once fought Rome for control of the Mediterranean. These three groups intermarried frequently, and many major figures from Roman Africa (including Augustine) were of mixed Roman and Berber ancestry.

Romans normally took control in a massive display of brutal force and then assimilated the population to Roman culture. Over time, the descendants of Rome's enemies could become Roman citizens and share the privileges of the Roman elites. Even the local gods became Roman.

They had a strong conviction of their own superiority and divine mandate, but governed their empire with a minimum of bureaucracy and with respect for local customs. Yet this "benevolent" aspect of Rome's rule depended on the repeated reaffirmation of Rome's supremacy through "games." These doubled as popular entertainment and divinely sanctioned violence that propped up Roman authority.

Professional gladiators, themselves often slaves or criminals, fought each other and wild animals. But gladiators were expensive. To vary the menu, large numbers of unskilled prisoners were brought into the arena. These helpless victims were unlikely to entertain the crowd by bravery or fighting skill, so it required considerable creativity on the part of the managers of the games to make their deaths interesting. This vast machinery of spectacular and creative bloodshed soon swept up a small but growing group—dedicated to the



**CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST** The Passion looms large in North African spirituality, from the scene of Perpetua's death in Carthage's amphitheater (*left*) to this modern Ethiopian tapestry (*below*). *Right*: Perpetua and Felicitas share a mosaic.



worship of a crucified criminal, Jesus, who had died in the province of Judea 200 years earlier.

It is easy for us to overestimate how important Christians were to the Romans. With the major exception of the fourth-century persecution under Diocletian (emperor 284–305), Romans did not specifically set out to target Christians. Christians were unpopular, and their practices lacked legal protection, but they were often left alone. Only if they came to the attention of Roman authorities would they be ordered to renounce their superstitions and executed if they said no. But this happened relatively rarely—almost casually.

On this occasion, though, Christians were among the victims on the menu for the birthday of the emperor's younger son. And today the pomp and spectacle of Geta's birthday in Carthage on that day in 203 is known only because one of those victims recorded it as the occasion of her impending martyrdom. An unknown editor preserved her account for the ages.

### SUFFERING OF THE FLESH

**Vibia Perpetua** was a 22-year-old married woman from an aristocratic Roman family with a baby not yet weaned. She was arrested along with four other young catechumens (people who were preparing for baptism), two of them slaves. One of her brothers, also a catechumen, was not arrested.



Perhaps Perpetua volunteered herself for martyrdom, as some early Christians were known to do. (The slave **Felicitas**, pregnant when arrested, was afraid that she might not give birth in time to be martyred,

since the Romans drew the line at executing pregnant women.) Perpetua saw her arrest and impending death as a triumph, rather than a humiliating spectacle. She received baptism after her arrest, knowing quite well what she was in for: "The Spirit told me," she said, "not to expect anything from the water other than the suffering of the flesh."

In a dark dungeon, trying to breast-feed her infant son, listening to pleas of her pagan father, awaiting a death designed to humiliate and degrade her, Perpetua passed from one aristocracy to another. Her Christian brother, calling her "lady sister," suggested that she now had the power to ask God for a favor. Why not request a vision to see whether she and her fellow martyrs would be killed or released?

"I'll do that and tell you the answer tomorrow," she responded, like any courtier with special access to the royal presence. The resulting vision—a ladder with swords and axes instead of rungs, and a dragon coiled underneath—made it clear that she was in fact going to die. In another vision she saw her unbaptized brother wandering in a land without water, and by the power of her confessor's prayer she obtained his salvation. In a third, she fought against an Egyptian gladiator.

### WRESTLING WITH THE DEVIL

For Perpetua, the spectacle in which she was about to participate had reversed its meaning. Yes, she



**BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST'S DEATH** A baptistry at Cape Bon in modern Tunisia is inscribed to “the holy, most blessed bishop Cyprian.”

would suffer, but she would suffer as a warrior, not as a passive victim. The gladiator against whom she would wrestle was the devil, revealed as a dragon. Her fellow-captive Saturus warned her in the vision to be careful of the dragon, and she responded, “It won’t bite me, in the name of Jesus.” She ultimately defeated her enemy by stepping on his head (echoing Genesis 3:15). In the gladiator dream, she was stripped just as she knew she might be in the arena. But rather than holding her up to shame as a weak woman, the stripping turned her into a man.

This startles modern readers. But the point was that she was overcoming through Christ the weakness that Roman culture associated with femininity. Even as she was being treated in ways in which a well-born Roman woman should never be treated, Perpetua was accomplishing something that no Roman woman should be able to accomplish. As she awoke, she realized that, when she entered the arena, “I was to fight not with beasts, but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory.”

### THE WOMAN THEY COULD NOT KILL

The martyrs were given a last meal, and they turned it into a Christian agape supper. As the pagans crowded around to watch them, Saturus told them, “Mark our faces well, so that you will know us at the day of judgment.” When brought out for execution, the Christian men were so defiant that the people demanded they be whipped before they were killed.

The women did not behave as fiercely, but they found their own ways of resisting. Initially, they were stripped naked and covered in nets to be gored by a cow. This stripping was the Roman way of showing that these brave and determined women, who had already defied all the male authority figures in their lives, were not only sexually loose but unnatural. But the audience revolted, and the women were given clothing.

When the cow attacked, Perpetua pulled her torn robe together to cover her thigh—more concerned, says the narrator of the account, about modesty than

pain. As Felicitas fell, Perpetua held her up. When the attack was over, she encouraged her remaining companions. All the martyrs, in the end, exercised control over their own deaths. Only Saturus was killed by an animal, and it was the leopard he had prophetically chosen. A human executioner killed the others.

And, as it turned out, he wasn’t very good at his job, wounding Perpetua and causing her to cry out in pain for the first time. Then she guided the swordsman’s clumsy hand so that he cut her throat properly. Perhaps, the narrator adds, a woman whom the devil himself feared could not have died unless she chose to.

### “SAFE AND WASHED”

The story of Perpetua’s martyrdom stands out for the dramatic role played by its heroine and for the prominence of dreams and visions. Along with other North African martyr accounts, it has a particularly fierce and militant tone.

Early North African Christians were particularly likely to see the Christian life in terms of warfare against the devil and to see their deaths as blood sacrifices imitating and participating in the sacrifice of Christ. When Saturus was bitten by a leopard, the pagan audience cried out, “Safe and washed, safe and washed,” which the narrator saw as a recognition that Saturus had been baptized in his own blood—a common early Christian interpretation of how martyrdom saved the martyr.

There in the North African sun, on the very site of Rome’s complete victory over its greatest enemy, on the birthday of the emperor’s son, in a spectacle in which they were intended to be passive victims, these Christian martyrs saw behind the façade of Roman power ordained by the gods only a terrified, helpless dragon, only a demonic gladiator rolling in the dust.

Their fierce anticipation of divine judgment—their lack of any expression of forgiveness for their persecutors—is not the meekness we expect. The demonization of one’s enemies would have disturbing consequences both within North African Christianity (see “See how these Christians love one another,” pp. 29–33) and down the long years of Christian history.

But it would be inappropriate for comfortable twenty-first-century American Christians to pass judgment too quickly on these dregs of the Roman Empire—who found in the Holy Spirit the power to make their last meal a love feast, and claimed dignity and courage where the rules of the game mandated that they find only terror, humiliation, and despair. ☒

*Edwin Woodruff Tait is a frequent contributor to Christian History.*



# A tour of ancient Africa

WHAT ARCHAEOLOGISTS CAN TELL US ABOUT THE LANDSCAPE OF EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

*Niall Finneran*

IT IS THE MORNING of November 30 in the small town of **Aksum**, nestled in the high mountains of northern Ethiopia not far from the Eritrean border. In the past few days Aksum has been overrun by pilgrims making their way from all corners of the Ethiopian highlands and from Ethiopian communities overseas. They have come to celebrate the Feast of Maryam Zion.

## SITTING IN THE ANCIENT SEAT

Last night the devout thronged round the eucalyptus-shrouded compound of the Old Cathedral of St. Mary of Zion, which, at a distance, looks rather like a castle. At the all-night service the air was thick with incense, much banging of drums, and the rhythmic chant of ancient liturgy in the Ge'ez language.

In the morning, with the sun warming the chill highland air, the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (called *Abba* or *Abuna*, meaning "father") is enthroned ceremonially. He is seated in front of a

**BANG THE DRUMS** The Ethiopian Orthodox patriarch is enthroned at the Feast of Maryam Zion, one of the holiest days in the church calendar.

granite memorial slab, or *stela*, commemorating one of Ethiopia's last pre-Christian kings. Every year it is a strange combination: the head of one of Africa's most ancient churches seated next to a pagan funeral monument from the great Aksumite Empire.

That empire dominated this region of East Africa from approximately 100 BC to AD 600. It became Christian in 340—when Christianity in the British Isles, already limited to a small number of people under Roman rule, was about to disappear into almost 300 years of Anglo-Saxon paganism.

Christianity was established in northeastern Africa well ahead of most of the Roman world, and this is no better witnessed than at Aksum. Aksum is to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church what Rome, Canterbury, or Constantinople are to Catholics, Anglicans, and Eastern Orthodox: the home of the Mother Church.

What can archaeology tell us about this ancient, diverse expression of the Christian faith? Archaeology is not history. Archaeologists do not rely upon the written text alone to make sense of the past, although it is a valuable tool. Archaeologists deal with tangible things—rubbish, it is often unfairly said. But they also

**VERY DEEP WATERS** *Below:* The rich mosaic decorations of this Timgad baptismal font suggest the great importance attached to the sacrament of baptism.



deal with people, by allowing ancient objects to speak on their own terms.

Regarding early African Christian history, archaeologists have rich and diverse materials to work with. There are written inscriptions, called “epigraphic.” There is architecture such as church buildings and baptismal fonts. There are funerary remains—Christian burials, with their east-west orientation and lack of objects buried with the deceased, are very distinctive. Finally, there are smaller items such as crosses, prayer books, and frescoes (wall paintings done on fresh plaster).

### STORIES IN STONE

Let’s take a tour of African Christianity from north to south and look at its material remains in North Africa and Egypt—some of the earliest and most magnificent examples of Christian art and architecture on the African continent.

Nowadays we think of North Africa (the “Maghreb,” including **Algeria**, **Libya**, and **Tunisia**) as solidly Islamic. But Islam reached these areas only in the seventh century. Prior to that time North Africa was home to one of the most dynamic, vibrant, and numerous Christian populations anywhere in the Roman Empire. We know this today through the work of archaeologists who have described an impressive picture of daily life in North African communities.

Christianity was an “underground” religion in much of the Roman Empire, and this is reflected in the relative invisibility of early Christian archaeology. Small house churches rather than great monumental statements in stone were the norm for at least the first three Christian centuries.

Many of these archaeological remains tell stories of martyrdom. Prior to the Edict of Toleration (311), which agreed to treat Christians with benevolence in the Roman Empire, Christians were at considerable risk of dying for their beliefs. Massacres of Christians were common and keenly felt in North Africa.



### MEMORY OF THE MARTYRS

This force of memory was particularly strong for the Donatists, a breakaway Christian group that emerged in the fourth century (see “See how these Christians love one another,” pp. 29–33). Donatist inscriptions on their own churches directly stress their own holiness and that of their martyrs, which they perceived to exceed that of the mainstream church.

When Christianity became tolerated, Christians began to build large buildings. At the city of **Timgad** in Algeria, and in other ancient Roman cities such as **Carthage** in Tunisia, and Sabratha and Lepcis Magna in Libya, huge and well-appointed basilicas date from the fourth century onward, much like those found in any Roman city.

The basilica is a standard church plan, possibly derived from Roman secular buildings, used in the building of churches today all over the world. It features a central nave, or open space, with aisles along the sides and an altar at the east end. The altar is often within a semicircular alcove.

Ancient North African basilicas have large, many-sided, well-decorated baptismal fonts. Rich mosaic work, drawn from a strong classical (Roman) tradition yet with recognizable Christian imagery, covers these grand structures.

### EGYPT VS. CONSTANTINOPLE

While the rich Christian culture of northern Africa disappeared in many areas after the Arab conquest of the seventh century, Christianity survived and

TIMGAD BAPTISMAL FONT—MICHAEL GLERUP



**WORSHIP AND PRAISE** Above: Severan Basilica, Leptis Magna, Libya, is a well-preserved example of a Roman basilica.

**SUFFERING FOR CHRIST** Left: Crispina Martyrium, Tebessa, Algeria. This shrine commemorates a Christian woman who met her death during a persecution.

briefly flourished in one area: Egypt.

According to apostolic tradition, **St. Mark** brought Christianity to Egypt in the 40s (see “Some others you should know,” pp. 36–37), and he is still reckoned as the first pope of what would become the Coptic Church. “Coptic” comes from the Arabic term for “Egypt,” *qibt*, which is used interchangeably to mean “Christian.”

The Copts of Egypt rank among the great survivors of history. Along with the churches of Ethiopia and Syria, the Coptic church was regarded historically by the mainstream church as heretical, since it did not agree with the complex definition of the nature of Christ put forth at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This definition was advanced by the Byzantine Empire (the eastern half of the Roman Empire, still in existence after the western empire had collapsed) and its Greek-speaking churches, the ancestors of those churches we today call Eastern Orthodox.

Part of the issue was political. The Byzantine Empire was based in Constantinople, while the Copts saw themselves very much as Egyptians. The Arab conquest brought matters to a head, and the position of the Greek-speaking Christians in Egypt massively eroded after the Arab conquest, although small populations remain today in **Alexandria** and **Cairo**.

Initially Copts thrived under Islamic rule. Their craftsmanship as architects and wood carvers was in great demand by the Islamic conquerors, and many early mosques in Cairo show the workmanship of Christian artisans.

The Coptic language soon died out in everyday use, though it remained a liturgical language. In medieval Bibles and missals (liturgical texts), Arabic and Coptic appeared side by side.

### GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

In Alexandria, Egypt’s first city, which had a large Jewish population, Christianity had long found a ready environment in which to flourish. After Constantine’s Edict of Toleration, large churches were established on the sites of pagan temples. Christian burials dominated the underground catacombs, marked in many cases by simple crosses. Christian names, such as Paul, became widespread.

Out in the Egyptian countryside, an impulse toward the monastic lifestyle was growing (see “Become completely as fire,” pp. 15–17). **Anthony** (ca. 251–356) and Paul (d. 341) are regarded as the first Christian hermits. But their desire to get away from the cares of society and lead a devout life dedicated to God was influenced by much earlier pre-Christian practice of looking for the divine in the desert.

The lingo of early African monasticism evokes its severe landscape. *Hermit* derives from a Greek word for wilderness; *ascetic* from another Greek term for spiritual training. An *anchorite* was an individual who departed for the countryside to get away from urban life and its distractions. Remains of small cells and caves are still found all over Egypt, and the depictions of Anthony and Paul in frescoes and icons in churches attest to the fame of these early Christian spiritual superstars.



**AWASH IN A SEA OF ART**

*Left:* Interior of the Hanging Church in Cairo, so called because it is partially suspended over a gatehouse.

*Below:* This St. Menas ampulla, with distinctive pictures of the saint, once held oil or holy water.

But it wasn't all about the solitary life: the desert also produced communal monasticism, which we recognize today as the more conventional form of Christian ascetic life.

**St. Pachomius** (ca. 292–348), a former soldier, became a hermit and then founded at Tabennisi and later at Pbow communal monasteries. By the time of the Arab conquest in the mid-seventh century, monasticism was widespread in Egypt. Today archaeologists are still digging up large and important monastic sites at Bawit, Saqqara, and Anba Hatre.

Common features of these sites include cells, refectories (cafeterias), gardens, and oil presses, as well as a number of monastic churches. These monasteries were often surrounded by large enclosing walls, initially to keep the outside secular world at bay, but later as a defense against attack by desert tribes. Soon wary monks added massive castlelike *ksars* (fortified towers).

Today we can still walk through these historic ancient monasteries in the Wadi Natrun, just to the south of Alexandria, and over by the Red Sea. The large monasteries of St. Paul and St. Anthony still attract devout pilgrims and a small flow of young Christian men eager to follow in the ancient monastic tradition of Egypt.

**“OLD CAIRO”**

At **Kellia**, just to the south of Alexandria, a hybrid of solo and group monastic life developed. Here, from the fourth

century until the ninth, monks lived in small compounds, each with one or two living rooms, a small kitchen, wells, a garden, and a chapel. The monks ventured out on weekends to communal churches to celebrate the Eucharist.

Other ancient Christian sites in Egypt also bear witness to the African heritage. Cairo is a relatively recent city built on Islamic foundations, but the churches of “Old Cairo” still usher visitors and worshipers into more ancient, and distinctively Egyptian Christian, spaces.

Their sanctuaries are closed off behind a screen crowded with icons. Men and women are segregated in the main body of the church.

In **Bagawat** we can see how Christians were buried by looking inside Christian mud-brick tombs (*mausolea*, from which we get our word “mausoleum”) decorated with painted ceilings showing Old and New Testament scenes.

Rising from the desert of Mareotis, southwest of Alexandria, is the great monastic city of **Abu Mina**. Once, before the Arab conquest, Abu Mina was one of the greatest pilgrimage centers of the Christian world.

The shrine of the martyr St. Menas forms its heart. The folk memory of martyrdom is so strong in Egypt that Copts reckon the start of their calendar from the date that



HANGING CHURCH—WIKIPEDIA / DIEGO DELSO  
ST. MENAS AMPULLA—WIKIPEDIA / GILIO 20



Diocletian, one of the worst of the anti-Christian Roman emperors, came to the throne in 284.

Menas's simple burial chamber soon became enriched with the addition of a huge basilica over the shrine, paid for by Emperor Justinian (482–565). Excavations by the German Archaeological Institute uncovered a range of structures such as *xenodochia* (“guest houses”; see issue 101, *Healthcare and Hospitals in the Mission of the Church*), hospitals, and palaces where officials and churchmen lived.

Pilgrims to the shrine brought back oil or holy water in *ampullae* (small earthenware flasks). Digs have turned up these bottles from the eastern Mediterranean, throughout much of the European continent, and as far northwest as Meols near Liverpool in England.

## ALONG THE NILE

We may read another story written on the landscape of the modern-day Sudan, beyond the Roman world of North Africa and the Nile. There, three medieval states once existed: Nobadia, with its capital at **Faras** in the north; Makhuria, with its capital at **Old Dongola**; and furthest south Alwa, with its capital at **Soba** (see map, pp. 22–23). In the 1960s Lake Nasser flooded the area, but before that, extensive archaeological work by a Polish team uncovered a city with a number of churches. Tradition tells us that Nobadia was evangelized by representatives of Emperor Justinian's wife, Theodora, who was an anti-Chalcedonian Christian despite her high-ranking position in the Byzantine Empire.

The large cathedral at Faras, now destroyed by flood waters, contained a wonderful cycle of many-colored frescoes depicting a range of Old Testament characters, as well as a local princess and local bishops.

Further south at Old Dongola, the remarkable Church of the Granite Columns, the cathedral at Soba, and a monastery all bear witness to the flourishing of Christian culture here from 500 to 1200, when Islam finally drove Christianity from the middle Nile.

**IN THEIR CELLS** *Left:* At Kellia monks lived a hybrid of hermit and communal life.

**SERMONS IN STONE** *Above:* Beautiful columns give the church of Old Dongola its name: Church of the Granite Columns.

Christian communities survived, though, in the Ethiopian highlands, where King Ezana of the Aksumite Empire had been converted to Christianity by a Syrian Christian in 340 (see “From Abba Salama to King Lalibela,” pp. 18–21). Funeral inscriptions proclaiming allegiance to the Christian God replaced the older-style granite *stelae* at Ethiopian gravesites. Coins that bore the motif of a king holding a fly whisk beneath a crescent moon (symbol of the moon god, Almaq) gave way to a king holding a cross.

Perched on a mountain top east of Aksum, where we began, is the ancient restored church of the monastery of Debre Damo, bearing witness to a strong and still-living monastic tradition developed here in the sixth century. In time, Aksumite churches gave way to another strong Ethiopian cultural tradition, the rock-cut church (see “From Abba Salama to King Lalibela”).

But the most intriguing Christian artifact in all of Ethiopia, and perhaps all of Africa, is found in the little monastery of Abba Garima near the town of Adwa not far from Aksum. Here, an illuminated biblical manuscript, written on goatskin parchment, has recently been dated to between 330 and 650. It is thus one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest, Christian illuminated manuscripts anywhere in the world. Through it we hear a distant echo of a storied past—the ancient, culturally rich tradition of an African faith that still lives today each year as drums bang and incense wafts to God, the Lord of Nations. ☒

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**FROM EPISTLE TO APOCALYPSE** *Below:* The Nag Hammadi texts were dated by analyzing papyrus scraps used to strengthen their leather bindings.

**NOW, THAT'S OLD** *Right:* The fragile and fragmentary Papyrus 90 dates from the 2nd-c..



# Saved from the compost heap

RESCUED TEXTS ILLUMINATE THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

*Niall Finneran*

NAG HAMMADI was a fairly unknown city in Upper Egypt until one day in 1945. Egyptian farmers knew that ancient papyrus would enrich their fields, and a farmer out digging for compost discovered 12 codices (bound books) in a sealed jar. No one immediately recognized the importance of the books. In fact, some were used as kindling for fires. One found its way to a Belgian antiquities dealer, from whom the Carl Gustav Jung Institute in Zurich purchased it in 1951.

## HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Scholars eventually analyzed over 50 different works from the Nag Hammadi texts written in Coptic and theorized that they were probably hidden by monks from a nearby monastery in the mid-fourth century, possibly after reading a condemnation of noncanonical New Testament sources by Athanasius (see "Some others you should know," pp. 36–37).

The Nag Hammadi codices are sometimes termed the "Gnostic Gospels," though they include a variety of genres. They most recently came to popular attention

through Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*. The orthodox strand of early Christianity did not exist in a vacuum, and the Nag Hammadi texts illuminate the beliefs and practices of popular ancient groups known broadly as "Gnostics."

These groups, widespread across the early Christian world, drew much inspiration from pagan philosophy. (See CH issue 96, *The Hunger for Secret Knowledge*.) They emphasized the power of learning and the wickedness of the world around them. They believed that one could only find the true God and escape the evils of the material world by attaining to special knowledge (*gnosis* in Greek).

## ONE PERSON'S TRASH...

Nag Hammadi is not the only place in Africa where archaeologists have dug up buried history. The town of Oxyrhyncus (modern el-Bahnase in Egypt, south-west of **Cairo**) was an important Roman settlement.

Excavations in 1896 by Oxford archaeologists Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt yielded a great number of papyri from the town rubbish dumps, most of them very well preserved by the dry climate.

Many of the texts relate to daily secular concerns: bills, receipts, tax records, even spells. Some are works of literature. But a significant number are copies of Old and New Testament sources as well as noncanonical texts.

The New Testament sources are especially noteworthy for their age. Some date from the second century AD, and the codices are the largest category of New Testament papyrus documents anywhere in the world. "Papyrus 90," currently in the Sackler Library in Oxford, England, was dated to around AD 150 on the grounds of writing style. It contains a fragment of the Gospel of John (18:36–19:7).

Other noncanonical texts include the so-called Gospels of Thomas, James, Peter, and Mary, as well as the *Shepherd of Hermas*, an important text for Christians in the second and third centuries which is full of symbolic and allegorical writing. Some of the documents in this huge trove are still in the process of being translated. ☐







# “Become completely as fire”

EARLY EGYPTIAN MONASTICS LEFT AN ENDURING LEGACY OF INTERIOR WATCHFULNESS AND PRAYER

*Michael Birkel*

*A MONASTIC ASKED AN ELDER, “What good work is there that I should do?” And he said to him, “Are not all works equal? Scripture says that Abraham was hospitable, and God was with him. And Elijah loved contemplative silence, and God was with him. And David was humble, and God was with him. So whatever you see your soul desire in accordance with God, do that, and maintain interior watchfulness.” (Early monastic story)*

While early Christians from Syria, Palestine, and Cappadocia (in modern Turkey) made significant contributions to the monastic ideal, Egypt holds pride of place in legend and history. Ancient literature describes the monastic life as a return to Eden and a foretaste of the life to come.

Monks lived both as hermits and in community. Our most famous testimony of the hermit life comes in the *Life of Anthony* by **Athanasius** (ca. 296–373). This book by an early bishop about his ascetic friend became

**PRAYING IN ANTHONY’S CAVE** Admirers had many names for early monks: physicians of the soul, teachers, athletes, spiritual combatants, equals to angels, and heirs to the prophets and martyrs.

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an ancient bestseller: high drama, exotic creatures, and the triumph of good over evil.

A pious but illiterate orphan, **Anthony** (ca. 250–ca. 356) inherited money and a younger sister to provide for. On his way to church one day, he thought about how the Christians in Acts sold all their possessions and gave them to the apostles to distribute to the poor. When Anthony arrived at church, the gospel reading was Matthew 19:21, in which Jesus counsels the rich young ruler to do the same.

Anthony entrusted his sister to the care of a community of virgins and took up a life of renunciation and constant prayer. He went to live among the tombs, where the *Life* says a multitude of demons attacked him, appearing in the form of lions, bears, serpents, scorpions, and wolves. Later he withdrew further into the desert.

After 20 years of solitude he emerged with divine equanimity, graced with powers to heal the body and



console the soul. His cell became surrounded with cells of other monks, and strangers visited him seeking spiritual counsel.

Anthony exhorted Christians to prefer the love of Christ above all else: “The presence of holiness is manifest in joy and interior tranquility.” He left his beloved desert twice, once to seek martyrdom (without success) and once to combat the Arian heresy in **Alexandria**.

### HEALING EGYPT

Otherwise he remained in the remote wilderness, though the *Letters* attributed to him show that he was well acquainted with sophisticated theology. Athanasius summed up Anthony’s life: “It was as if a physician had been given by God to Egypt.” Soon translated into Latin, the *Life* was as popular in the West as in the East. Hearing Anthony’s story read played a crucial role in the conversion of **Augustine**.

Others soon began living the contemplative life in community. **Pachomius** (ca. 292–346) established monastic settlements along the Nile. He drew thousands to join him and composed the first rule ever to govern the monastic life.

Original monastic motivations varied: to seek holiness, flee the law, escape from arranged marriages, or evade military conscription. But all early monastics faced common challenges to their life of prayer, introspection, manual labor, self-denial, and intimacy with Christ.

Some carried austerity to extremes, but the wiser ones realized that external practices were only means to achieve interior watchfulness and clear away distractions. Humility, sound judgment, hospitality, and love of neighbor outweighed renunciation of the world.

Along with living went teaching by word and example. The *Sayings* of the early Egyptian ascetics, probably

**THE PRESENCE OF HOLINESS IS JOY** *Left:* St. Anthony and St. Paul are pictured on a Coptic icon.

**DESERT MOTHER** *Above:* Righteous Syncletica of Alexandria was a 4th-c. female monastic.

gathered in the sixth century, preserves the wisdom of the earliest monastic centers in Nitria, Scetis, and Kellia (along the west side of the Nile delta).

### GOD USES CAMEL DRIVERS

Larger-than-life characters leap from the pages of the *Sayings*: **Macarius** of Egypt, former camel driver and smuggler; Moses the Ethiopian, once a highwayman; Aresenius, who had lived in the lap of luxury in the imperial court; and more. Present as well are women ascetics, such as Sarah, Theodora, and Syncletica—but not in proportion to their influence. Women actually participated by the thousands in this movement.

One famous story regarding *Abba* (“Father”) Macarius recounts that one day he was going from Scetis to Nitria with a disciple. On the way the disciple went ahead and insulted a pagan priest, who promptly beat him up. Soon Abba Macarius met the priest and said, “Greetings! May you be well, weary one.” The shocked priest said, “What good do you see in me, that you have greeted me like this?” Macarius said, “I see you wearing yourself out, without knowing that you wear yourself out in vain.”

The priest replied, “I have been deeply touched by your greeting, and I realize that you are on the side of God. But a wicked monk met me and insulted me, and I beat him almost to death.” Then the priest fell at Macarius’s feet and said, “I will not let you go until you have made me a monk.”

**SEEKING WISE COUNSEL** *Right:* A medieval image of Cassian. Originally from the Egyptian desert, he influenced Western abbot Benedict of Nursia and his Rule.

The story concludes: "They made him a monk, and many pagans became Christian through him. So Abba Macarius said, 'One evil word makes even the good evil, but one good word makes even the evil good.'"

## PRACTICAL ADVICE

Another influential monk, **Evagrius Ponticus** (ca. 345–399), came from Iborra (in modern Turkey) to settle in Kellia. His treatise *Praktikos*, a practical spiritual manual, elaborates eight demonic temptations threatening the soul. The first three temptations threaten the soul: gluttony, sexual lust, and avarice. The second group afflicts emotions: anger, sadness, and *acedia*, or a restless, itching, listlessness. The third grips the whole person: vainglory (delight in empty human praise) and blasphemous pride.

The *Praktikos* offers insight into these temptations. Anger is "most persistent in the time for prayer, when it seizes the mind with the face of the one who has given offense." Vainglory is "subtle and easily attacks those who are proficient in virtue."

Evagrius urged his readers to look for patterns in tempting thoughts. Such "spiritual fire drills" would help them respond mindfully rather than be caught off guard. The goal was freedom from slavery to the passions, leading to love.

The *Praktikos* was the first in a trilogy describing how the spiritual adept passed from knowledge of self to knowledge of the inner meanings of Scripture and of the created world, then on to knowledge of God. Evagrius's later books drew on **Origen's** teachings (see "The Bible's story is our story," pp. 24–28), and for these he was declared a heretic at the Second Council of Constantinople (553).

Not all Christians shared this estimation; Syrian, Coptic, Armenian, and Georgian churches hold him in high esteem. In his influential *Chapters on Prayer* he wrote that "through true prayer, a monastic becomes the equal of angels, longing to see the face of the Father who is in heaven." The goal for Evagrius was a prayer without images of God, yet full of joy.

## UNION WITH GOD

**John Cassian** (ca. 360–435) influenced both East and West. As a young man he lived among the monks of the Egyptian desert. Later, in Massilia (modern Marseilles), he composed his *Institutes* and *Conferences*.

The *Institutes* discusses spiritual temptations. The *Conferences* claims to transcribe conversations with



elders of the Egyptian desert—but interpreted through Cassian's own considerable experience and theology.

Cassian recommends anchoring the mind prayerfully in Scripture, focusing on Psalm 70:1. This prayer would triumph over temptations and prepare the soul for wordless devotion—leading to moments of fiery, illuminative ecstasy, and, beyond that, an imageless vision of Christ in his divinity.

In the end, this was the goal of all these monastics—male and female, hermit and in community. Or as the *Sayings* puts it:

*Abba Lot went to Abba Joseph and said to him, "Abba, insofar as I can, I say my prayers, I keep my little fast, and I pray and meditate and practice contemplative silence, and insofar as I can I purify myself of distracting thoughts. Now what more shall I do?"*

*The elder stood up and stretched his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, "If you wish, become completely as fire."* ☩

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# From Abba Salama to King Lalibela

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS IN ETHIOPIA ARE AMONG THE OLDEST IN THE WORLD

*Tekletsadik (Tekle) Belachew*

**BIBLE TRANSLATORS AND PREACHERS** This detail comes from a mural of the “Nine Saints” in the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum.

WHEN WESTERNERS ENTER a worship service among the Ethiopian Orthodox—as one Westerner has said—they enter an experience of “delighted disorientation . . . the opulent vestments, the sumptuous processional ‘parasols,’ the grand elaborate liturgies, the ornate gold crosses, the vivid icons, the drums and sistrums and ritual dance and mesmerizing pentatonic [five-note] chant.” This spellbinding worship experience expresses a very ancient faith, practiced today as it has been for centuries in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church. (The word *Tewahido*, or “one,” refers to this church’s belief in Christ’s single nature, both human and divine.)

The historical roots of Christianity in Ethiopia can be traced back to the time of the apostles. Prior to the adoption of Christianity, Judaism was practiced in many places in Africa, and Ethiopian Christianity grounded itself firmly on those Jewish roots, valuing creation and celebrating the witnessing community.

The book of Acts tells how an African from Cyrene (modern-day Libya) and Egypt was present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). And Acts 8:26–40 recounts the famous story of the God-fearing Ethiopian eunuch: “Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship

and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah” (Acts 8:27–29). Philip interpreted the Scripture and its fulfillment in Christ for the eunuch before baptizing him.

Early church historian Eusebius describes the impact of this encounter: “Tradition says that he (the eunuch) who was the first of the Gentiles to receive from Philip by revelation the mysteries of the Divine word and was the first fruits of the faithful throughout the world, was also the first to return to his native land and preach the Gospel of the knowledge of God of the universe and the sojourn of our Savior which gives life to men, so that by him was actually fulfilled the prophecy which says, ‘Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God’ (Ps. 68:31).”

## LOST AT SEA

But the most significant turning point for Christianity in Ethiopia happened later, almost unintentionally, as the result of a shipwreck near the mouth of the Red Sea around AD 316. Two young brothers aboard the ship were Syrian Christians from Tyre (modern-day Lebanon). Their uncle and mentor, the philosopher Meropius, was killed. But **Fruementius** (or Fremnatos, ca. 300–ca. 380) and his younger brother, Aedesius (Edesius), survived. Soldiers brought the boys to the



**A RICH VISUAL TRADITION** Above: Crosses on a manuscript book at the Bilbala Q'iros Church in Lasta are typical of Ethiopian ornamentation.

**APOSTLE FOR ETHIOPIA** Left: St. Frumentius (Abba Salama) preaches before Aksumite kings.

royal palace in the city of **Aksum** in northern Ethiopia. There, the young survivors demonstrated integrity, virtue, and wisdom and won favor with King Ella Mida. While Aedesius served as a cupbearer, Frumentius was put in charge of the royal records. Both apparently spread Christianity among the emperor's subjects. Shortly before Ella Mida's death, he set the boys free.

The young brothers then stayed in the city to assist the widowed queen until her son, the prince regent Ezana, was mature enough to rule. Aedesius later returned to Tyre to visit his parents. There he shared his story, and that of his brother, with Rufinus Tyrannius of Aquila (d. 410), a Christian historian.

Meanwhile, Frumentius went to visit **Athanasius**, the patriarch of the See of St. Mark in **Alexandria** and thus head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, to report on the status of Christianity in Ethiopia. In his report, Frumentius testified to the work of God and begged Athanasius to send a bishop to Ethiopia.

### FATHER OF PEACE

After listening to Frumentius, Athanasius declared to the priests, "We will find no one [to be bishop] who is better than he." He told Frumentius: "What other man can we find than you, who has already carried out such

works?" Athanasius then consecrated Frumentius as the first bishop of the Aksumite Empire (much of modern-day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia). Frumentius took the ordination name Abba Salama I, meaning "Father of Peace." He was also known by the honorary name Kessate Berhan (Revealer of Light, or the Illuminator).

Upon his return to Ethiopia, Abba Salama spread the faith, beginning with the former crown prince he had tutored. King Ezana became the first Christian convert to serve as emperor in Ethiopia. As a result, Ethiopia became one of the earliest nations to officially adopt Christianity, doing so in the first half of the fourth century.

Frumentius was revered and, after his death, celebrated as a saint on the twenty-sixth day of the month of Hamle (July and early August in the West). A homily in his honor is read every year in commemoration. Taken from the *Synaxarium*, the book of the saints, it declares: "This was the good yeast that came to the land of Ethiopia. He was the first to illuminate the land of Ethiopia. He was the one whom God sent as the Apostle for the land of Ethiopia. He was the first [Christian] religious leader."

Another turning point for Christianity in Ethiopia was the "Second Evangelization" in 480. A group of monks known as the "Nine Saints" (*Teseatu Qidusane*), who hailed mainly from Syria and also from Egypt and





**STEEPED IN THE WORD** *Left:* This Ethiopian Orthodox Bible was written in Ge'ez on goat skin. The brown coloring comes from the hands of priests turning the pages over hundreds of years.

**SWEET SONG OF SALVATION** *Above:* Yared and some of his disciples perform for King Gebreme.

**CARVED IN STONE** *Right:* St. George's Church in Lalibela (the city named in honor of the king) was hewn from solid rock.



- His Apostles are your stars,  
the lamps of your First-Born.
- c. Should we call you a garden?*  
Your Son is the vine tree;  
His Apostles are your vines,  
the branches of your First-Born.
- d. Should we call you a ship?*  
Your Son is the captain;  
His Apostles are the crew,  
The chosen ones of your First-Born.
- e. Should we call you a castle?*  
Its builder is your Son;  
His Apostles are your household,  
the faithful of your First-Born.
- f. Should we call you an altar?*  
Your Son is a high priest;  
His Apostles are your deacons,  
The disciples of your First-Born.
- g. Should we call you a golden basket?*  
Your Son is the bread of life;  
His Apostles are your stewards,  
the sacrificers of the body  
of your First-Born.
- h. Should we call you a chalice?*  
Your Son is the wine of worship;  
His Apostles are your priests,  
the preparers of the blood  
of your First-Born.

Ethiopian Christianity is rich not only in oral traditions but in visual expressions. One of the most famous came from **King Lalibela** in the twelfth century. Revered as a saint, he was the visionary behind the construction of 11 rock-hewn churches, which he called a "New Jerusalem." Each of these churches was carved from a single piece of rock as a symbol of inward spirituality and humility. Although hundreds of other rock-hewn churches exist in Ethiopia and around the world, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela are particularly famous for their beauty.

Catholic and Protestant churches both on the African continent and in the Diaspora, the dispersed community of Africans throughout the world, rightfully share the legacy of this rich history of Christianity on African soil. Unfortunately, however, many are oblivious to much of the wealth of Ethiopian Christianity, as the story has traditionally not been told in Western textbooks. And yet, if historians and scholars remain quiet about Ethiopian Christianity, even the stones will cry out! ☩

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# North Africa: how Christianity flourished





From Hippo to Carthage to Alexandria to Aksum, and up and down the Nile, North Africa was the home of great Christian thinkers, passionate martyrs, and dedicated monastics. Places and people indicated in **bold** elsewhere in this issue appear on the map below. For a more extensive timeline, see Tom Oden's *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*. Photographs courtesy of Michael Glerup.





# The Bible's story is our story

HOW ALEXANDRIA SHAPED THE EARLY CHURCH'S WAY OF READING THE BIBLE

*Joseph Trigg*

**IT WAS THE YEAR 240.** At the church in Jerusalem, the reader stood up to read the Sunday lesson from the Septuagint, the early church's Greek translation of the Old Testament. Starting where he had stopped the week before, he read through four episodes from the story of Saul and David (our 1 Samuel 25–28, though they had neither chapter nor verse numbers). The story ended with Saul's visit to a necromancer—a woman inspired by a demon.

## HOW CAN THIS BE EXPLAINED?

The ending of the reading puzzled the congregation. Did a necromancer actually summon up Samuel from hell, and if so, what in the world was the prophet doing there? What would their distinguished guest preacher, **Origen**, say?

As a scribe trained in stenography took notes, Origen led the congregation step by step through a carefully constructed argument ranging over the whole Bible. He

## BUILT ON THE ROCK, THE CHURCH SHALL STAND

This Coptic Orthodox cathedral, most recently rebuilt in the 19th c., is said to be located on the site of the church founded in Alexandria by St. Mark in AD 60.

argued that, unlike other “tough passages” (such as the story of Lot's incest with his daughters), this one touches all of us. It calls into question our hope

after death. Samuel was in hell? But Samuel was a great saint, twice mentioned in the same breath with Moses (Psalm 98:6 and Jeremiah 15:1). If Samuel went to hell, what hope do we have?

Previous Jewish and Christian interpreters had said that the necromancer must have brought up a demon impersonating Samuel. But Origen disagreed.

First, he said, the Holy Spirit had consistently inspired the biblical author to state that Samuel appeared. Secondly, Samuel told Saul something no demon could have. No demon could know about David's kingship, an event in God's saving plan that came to fruition in Jesus. Samuel himself must have appeared to Saul. But how did this fit into the larger biblical message?

Well, Origen argued, what people seem to find hardest to believe about Jesus is not his glory, but his humility. John the Baptist testified to Jesus' glory since he was in his mother's womb; but when he heard in



prison about Jesus' humility, he sent messengers asking Jesus if he was the one who was to come. Peter recognized that Jesus was the Messiah, but he objected to the cross.

In his humility, *Jesus* died and descended into hell. So why should a prophet not be in hell? Anyone who needed Jesus needed the prophets too. Furthermore ever since Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise, all the patriarchs and prophets were in hell, awaiting Jesus' death and resurrection.

Origen concluded that this story was no stumbling block to faith. In fact, now that Jesus has come, we can, unlike Samuel, hope to avoid hell and be in paradise.

### FEEDING ON THE WORD

What does this sermon tell us about Origen as teacher and biblical interpreter—one of the greatest **Alexandria** produced? First it shows his intellectual honesty and reverence for the Bible. We cannot arbitrarily interpret a difficult passage to mean what we choose, but must take the time to look at it in terms of the Bible's message as a whole.

The sermon also reveals Origen as a teacher who sought to meet his hearers where they were and to lead them deeper. He did not just *tell* them how he interpreted the passage; he *showed* them how.

Origen believed that to bring people into a deeper understanding of the Bible was to share Jesus with them, because the Bible is an embodiment of the Word. When Jesus ordered his disciples to feed 5,000 hungry people, he was commissioning his followers to share him with others by teaching.

**DISTINGUISHED SPEAKER** *Left:* Origen's gaze still transfixed.

**TEACHING BY PREACHING** *Right:* Origen's *Homilies on the Psalms*. This Greek text was rediscovered in 2012.

Alexandria, where Origen was born around 185, was a uniquely favorable place for the formation of a great teacher. After conquering Egypt, Alexander the Great founded the city in 331 BC where the Nile flowed into the Mediterranean.

Alexander's successors, the Ptolemies, ruled Egypt from Alexandria, constructing a harbor and lighthouse. In Origen's time, it was the capital of Rome's richest province. Trade and ideas flowed back and forth between Alexandria and the interior of Africa via the Nile; Arabia and India via the Red Sea nearby; and Europe and the Near East via the Mediterranean.

### WHERE THE ACTION WAS

Alexandria was also the foremost intellectual center of the ancient world. The Ptolemies founded Alexandria's great library and encouraged scholars who developed techniques of literary criticism that we still use. When Origen identified the narrative voice of 1 Samuel as the person of the Holy Spirit, and when he showed that the words attributed to Samuel were appropriate only to a prophet, he was employing those techniques.

Philosophy, science, and mathematics flourished in Alexandria. Alexandrians constructed the first steam engine, accurately calculated the circumference of the earth, and discovered the "precession of the equinoxes"



**GUARDING THE FAITH** Above: This early icon pictures Clement of Alexandria, the foremost teacher in Alexandria when Origen was young.

**SEARCHING THE HEAVENS** Left: Pagan mathematician Ptolemy (ca. 90–168) helped make Alexandria a center of learning.

(the slow process by which constellations appear, over a long time, to shift in the sky).

Jews settled in Alexandria in large numbers. They translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, creating the Septuagint; and they used Alexandrian literary tools to study the Bible and connect it with Greek thought. Philo, a first-century Jew from Alexandria, wrote treatises in elegant Greek demonstrating the compatibility of the Torah and Platonic philosophy.

### “IN THE KNOW?”

Origen learned about Plato from another Alexandrian teacher, the pagan philosopher Ammonius Saccas. But he did not only study with pagans; he mentions a Jewish teacher who taught him about the Seraphim in Isaiah 6 and may also have instructed him in the Hebrew language and in Jewish mystical interpretation of Ezekiel’s chariot vision.

And Origen *also* refers to a Christian teacher whose doctrines he rejected. That man, Paul, otherwise unknown, probably followed second-century teachers like Basilides, Valentinus, and Marcion—the first two from Alexandria. They taught that the God of the Old Testament, who created the world and gave the Torah to Moses, was different from and inferior to the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

They argued that the Old Testament God was arbitrary and bloodthirsty and did not come close to the standard of goodness set by the merciful Father of Jesus. They also devised elaborate systems of doctrine to explain the Christian message in these terms, often claiming these were Jesus’ secret teachings. Those who knew their teachings were “in the know” (see “Saved from the compost heap,” p. 14, and *CH* issue 96, *The Hunger for Secret Knowledge*).

### THE RULE OF FAITH

**Clement of Alexandria** (ca. 150–ca. 215), the preeminent Christian teacher at Alexandria in Origen’s youth, believed the church’s “Rule of Faith” excluded such teaching. The Rule, which developed later into creeds such as the Apostles’ Creed, was the list, often in narrative form, of accepted “Christian facts” against which all teachings were to be measured.

**Tertullian**, Clement’s contemporary at Carthage and a formative teacher for the Latin-speaking church, also shared that belief (see “See how these Christians love one another,” pp. 29–33). Clement and Tertullian saw in the Bible an unfolding plan of salvation in which the same God worked from the beginning to the end.

Clement found it important that Jesus was, in Greek, God’s incarnate *Logos*—a word meaning not



## THE SON HAS RISEN

*Left:* This early Christian mosaic depicts Christ as the *real* “sun god.”

*Right:* St. Athanasius and St. Cyril share an icon.



so much “word” but “reason.” Another word for this is “wisdom.” God created the physical and moral order through the Logos. Through the prophets, God’s Logos had prepared the Hebrew people for the coming of Jesus. That same Logos, speaking through Greek philosophers (“wisdom-lovers”), also prepared the Greeks.

Clement’s chief work was *Stromateis* (an untranslatable title). There he upheld the Rule of Faith against teachers like Valentinus and treated Greek and biblical texts as complementary.

## CLEMENT VS. ORIGEN

Clement set forth two basic principles for biblical interpretation: the result had to be consistent with the church’s Rule of Faith, and it had to be worthy of God. People like Valentinus objected to the God of the Old Testament, Clement thought, because they did not understand the Old Testament properly.

*Stromateis* was fascinating but bafflingly obscure—by design. Clement announced that he was deliberately hiding within it his more advanced teachings for those who were ready for them and would have the patience to figure them out.

There was almost nothing in Clement’s teaching that Origen did not develop further, but Origen never mentioned Clement. This may be because of one serious disagreement they had over the issue of martyrdom. Clement valued the disciplined life of holiness as the normal path to God. By contrast, Origen had a visceral admiration for martyrs.

We can see why. In the early third century when Origen was a teenager, Roman emperor Septimius Severus sought to stop the spread of Christianity by putting to death converts and those who taught them.

One victim was **Perpetua** (see “The hunger games and the love feast,” pp. 6–8). Another was Origen’s father. The Romans confiscated his property, leaving

Origen, the oldest son, to care for his family.

Fortunately they could not take away the splendid education that enabled Origen to make a living as a teacher of Greek literature. Soon wealthy admirers enabled Origen to spend his life studying the Bible. He convinced one of them, Ambrosius, to abandon the teachings of Valentinus and his friends.

## TAUGHT BY HIS STUDENTS

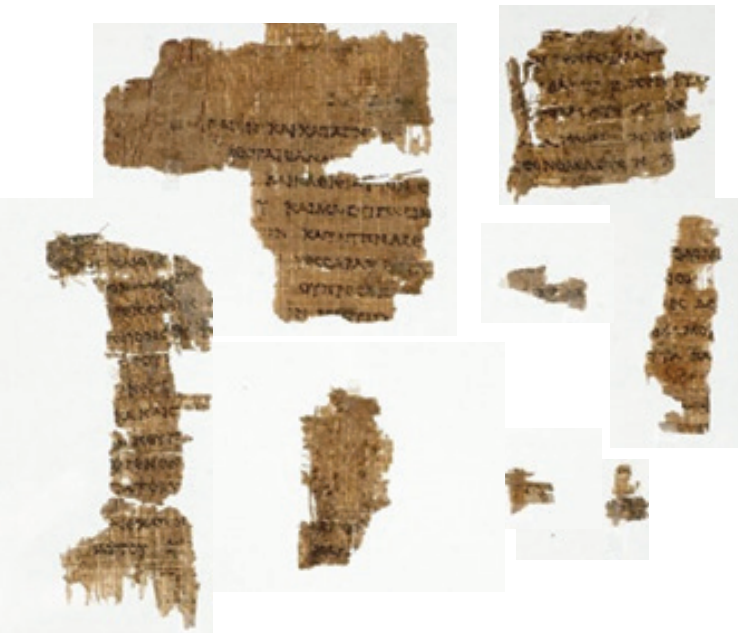
Meanwhile, the martyrs’ courage spurred conversions. But, perhaps because Clement had left town for Caesarea, no teacher was available to prepare converts for baptism. The converts sought out instead the young Origen.

Roman authorities arrested some of his students and put them to death. At the risk of his own life, Origen taught them and attended their trials. He emerged with the conviction that he had the gift of teaching mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. That conviction would shape his life.

Ambrosius, recognizing Origen’s gift, encouraged him to write books and provided him stenographers and copyists so that he could compose by dictation. Thanks to him, we have Origen’s surviving works.

Origen soon began a massive *Commentary on Genesis* and a *Commentary on John* which he would work on throughout his life. All we have today of the Genesis commentary is a fragment regarding Genesis 1:14, in which the stars are created as “signs.” In the fragment Origen refuted astrology. The stars may be signs, he said, but we will never read them accurately because of the precession of the equinoxes.

Origen also addressed issues of biblical interpretation in *On First Principles*, where he sought to show how Christian doctrine makes systematic sense. Origen’s thinking about the Trinity and the person of Christ provided the basis for the definitions of those doctrines by ecumenical councils in the fourth and fifth centuries. As far as the Trinity was concerned, his concept



**READING MATERIAL** This 2nd-c. Septuagint manuscript contains fragments of Deuteronomy.

of “eternal generation” allowed **Athanasius** (ca. 297–373), bishop of Alexandria, to uphold the Nicene Creed against fierce opposition (see “Some others you should know,” pp. 36–37).

### MARY HAD A BABY

Theologian and bishop **Cyril of Alexandria** (ca. 376–444) also relied on Origen’s thought to uphold the complete union of Christ’s human and divine natures. These natures took on each other’s properties, making the Virgin Mary the Mother of God. Christ did not just show his astonishing humility by dying and descending into hell, Origen reminds us; he also did so by becoming a human baby.

On *First Principles* upheld two essential principles: human freedom (the necessary basis of human responsibility) and the goodness of God. Origen believed that God’s punishment is always for our good and never simply retributive. Thus, like Clement before him, Origen denied the eternity of hell. His view of the afterlife, absent his belief in universal salvation, would much later influence the doctrine of purgatory.

The issue of God’s goodness had led Valentinus and Marcion to deny that the God of the Old Testament was the God of the New. Origen argued that, instead of saying these are different gods, we should interpret the problematic passages symbolically.

After Septimius’s death, persecution died down and Origen’s reputation as a teacher spread among Christians and pagans, even as far as the imperial court. Eventually Origen came into conflict with Demetrius, the bishop of Alexandria in his day.

During the course of the second century, Christians, concerned about teachings contrary to the Rule of Faith, had gradually adopted an organizational structure in

which a single man, the bishop, determined the teaching and governance of the church in each town. Demetrius is the first bishop we know of in Alexandria.

The foundations he laid would give his successors, including Athanasius and Cyril, enormous influence. Demetrius may have objected to some of Origen’s ideas, particularly his rejection of eternal punishment. He may also have had little use for a world-famous teacher who ascribed his own authority to a gift of the Holy Spirit.

At any rate, around 231, Origen left Alexandria and settled in Caesarea, the capital of Roman Palestine. Most of Origen’s surviving works, all showing a close attention to biblical interpretation, were written at Caesarea. There he composed *Against Celsus*, in which he responded in learned fashion to pagan objections to Christianity. He also completed a massive edition of the Old Testament comparing the Hebrew text word for word with the Septuagint and other Greek translations.

### THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE


Taken in isolation Origen’s symbolic interpretations may seem arbitrary, but they have remarkable consistency. The Bible’s story is also the story for each of us. We find ourselves captives to Nebuchadnezzar, that is Satan, in a place where we do not belong. We can return to Zion through Jesus, who is himself the Way.

In 251, after 40 years of peace, the emperor Decius instituted the most systematic persecution Christians had yet faced. Origen was imprisoned. Rather than execute him, his captors tried to make him deny his faith under torture. His subsequent reputation would probably have been better had he been executed. He soon died, but was not considered a martyr.

The controversy that drove Origen from Alexandria follows his memory to this day. Because of it, most of his works were lost or survive only in Latin translations. His work is far too influential, though, for Origen simply to be dismissed. Jerome, who turned against him after trying to imitate him, credited him as “the teacher of the church after the Apostles.”

He taught Christians how to read the Bible closely, word by word, and how to read it as a whole. He laid the foundation for the doctrinal legacy of the early church. He also showed how it was possible to be a devoted follower of Jesus *and* a tireless scholar, following the light that enlightens everyone as far as it leads. ☒

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CARTHAGE This city on the Mediterranean gave to the Roman Empire bread, olive oil, pottery—and first-class theologians.

# See how these Christians love one another

HOW CARTHAGE IN NORTH AFRICA GAVE THE EARLY WESTERN CHURCH ITS EMPHASIS ON UNITY

*J. Warren Smith*

IN ANTIQUITY “North Africa” was a province of the Roman Empire where today we find **Tunisia**. Its capital was **Carthage**. We may think of Rome as the center of the Roman Empire. But while many roads of culture and society met in Rome, many also ran through Carthage as a major center of imperial trade. Destroyed but then rebuilt by the Romans, Carthage was called “the granary of the empire.” Carthaginians made beautiful pottery and traded figs, grapes, olive oil, and beans with the interior of the African continent and much of the rest of the known world. And along with all this, Carthage was the cradle of Latin theology.

## ON THE OFFENSIVE

The first great North African theologian was **Tertullian** (ca. 160–220). Raised in a pagan family, he was educated in Latin grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy—the standard curriculum for boys who wished

to become lawyers or civil servants in the Roman government. Sometime in middle age he converted to Christianity and was ordained a presbyter (i.e., priest or elder) in Carthage.

Tertullian is now called the “Father of Latin Theology,” but he was not the first theologian of the West. Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165) and Irenaeus (flourished second century), bishop of Lyons, preceded Tertullian, but they wrote in Greek—the primary language of commerce and philosophy in the eastern part of the empire.

Tertullian was the first major theologian who wrote extensively in Latin—bringing new challenges to the theological enterprise. His earliest works defended Christian beliefs and practices that pagans often misunderstood.

Ever the lawyer, Tertullian the apologist subscribed to the view that the best defense is a good offense. His treatises *To the Gentiles* and *Apology*



**AGAINST THE PAGANS** *Left: Tertullian composes an argument.*

**BRING ME THE INCENSE** *Above: This pagan altar shows a Roman emperor sacrificing a bull.*

directly attacked pagan beliefs and practices as superstitious and immoral, and argued that the Christian life as taught in Scripture and practiced in the church was morally superior. He imagined pagans looking at Christians and saying, “Look . . . how they love one another (for they themselves [pagans] hate one another); and how they are ready to die for each other (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).”

### **BLOOD OF THE MARTYRS**

Tertullian believed that Christianity would unavoidably conflict with pagan society, leading to resentment and persecution. In the face of persecution, Christians should imitate Jesus and accept martyrdom; to Tertullian we owe the oft-quoted line that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Stressing the moral superiority of Christianity led Tertullian to advocate moral rigor and a strict ethical code, which included not wearing jewelry, remarrying, or attending the theater (since pagan rites were practiced there). He also encouraged virgins to keep themselves veiled.

He had no patience for laxity; certain moral lapses after baptism, especially adultery and murder, were for him the same as rejecting and abandoning the Christian faith, or apostatizing. They could not be forgiven except through enduring a martyr’s death.

Tertullian was also suspicious of any Christian theology that seemed to rely too much on pagan philosophy, famously writing, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” (Mixing the two was, he said, like mixing cheese with chalk.) Our knowledge of God, he insisted, comes from God’s special revelation to Israel, from the teachings of Moses and the prophets, and ultimately from the Incarnation. Pagan reason had nothing to do with it.

Pagan philosophy was filled with errors and at odds with the Gospel—how could it be used to explain the logic of Christian faith? He wrote, “The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed—because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is immediately credible—because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain—because it is impossible.”

Tertullian did not ignore philosophy. He employed elements of Stoicism in his theological arguments and wrote in his treatise *On Repentance*, “There is nothing which God . . . has not foreseen, arranged and determined by reason; moreover, there is nothing he does not wish to be investigated and understood by reason.” But he felt philosophy could never be used as the foundation of Christian faith. The truth of the Gospel and the faith of the believer could not rest upon philosophical proofs.

### **SHALL WE LET THEM BACK IN?**

The second great North African theologian in this era was **Cyprian of Carthage** (200–258). He, like Tertullian, was not born into a Christian home; he converted from paganism sometime in his mid-forties and distributed some of his money to the poor.

He began as an orator and teacher of rhetoric; a priest in Carthage recognized his talents and encouraged him to enter the priesthood, which he



**VIOLENT GAMES** *Right:* This 3rd-c. mosaic depicts Christian martyrs.

**RENEWER OF PAGANISM** *Below:* The emperor Decius appears on a coin minted during his reign.

did shortly after his baptism. Not long after his ordination, he was elected bishop of Carthage.

Cyprian had just been consecrated when a great crisis arose. The emperor Decius (249–251), seeking to restore Rome’s pagan religion, issued a decree in 250 that all citizens must perform public sacrifice to the gods of the Roman pantheon.

But for Christians, to offer sacrifices—sprinkling incense before a statue of the god or goddess—was idolatry. In fact, it was apostasy, the denial or betrayal of Christ. Some Christians refused to perform the sacrifice and were imprisoned or executed.

Instead of facing martyrdom, Cyprian went into hiding and directed church affairs in secret through letters. The great pastoral question he faced was what to do with “lapsed” Christians who had performed sacrifices but now sought to be readmitted to the Christian community.

Some priests believed that performing sacrifices could never be forgiven. Others were willing to accept their repentance and take the lapsed back into communion. One priest, Novatus, who had refused to sacrifice and was therefore imprisoned, claimed that his endurance of persecution had gained him authority to forgive the lapsed.

## THE QUEST FOR UNITY

Cyprian, though, decided to wait for a council of all the North African bishops to discuss the question. Novatus and his fellow confessors refused to wait for Cyprian and began issuing letters of pardon to the lapsed. This threatened to divide the North African church.

In the Easter season of 251, a council finally met at Carthage. Cyprian’s address to the council, though, did not focus on the lapsed, but on the division Novatus created in the church. This speech survives and is known as *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*.

Cyprian argued that, although the devil wages external war on the church through persecution, the more dangerous threat comes from the deceptive war he wages through heresy and schism. The question of forgiveness for the lapsed must take a back seat to the greater problem of division.



Although made up of many individual congregations, the church is one, and Cyprian compared it to many beams of light from one sun: “The Church, bathed in the light of the Lord, spreads her rays throughout the world, yet the light everywhere diffused is one light and the unity of the body is not broken.”

For Cyprian this unity was not merely an ideal, but a concrete reality: the church catholic—universal and comprehensive of all true Christians and overseen by the bishops. How could one identify the one true church?

The answer for Cyprian was the doctrine of apostolic succession. Cyprian argued that the authority to forgive sins, preach the Gospel, and govern the church given to a bishop at ordination was ultimately derived from Christ and the apostles.

Since Christ gave the authority to forgive sins to Peter and the other apostles, the only bishops who had that authority were those who received it in a line of succession passed from the apostles. Those people who claimed to be bishops but did not receive this authority do not in fact have the power to forgive sins.

Cyprian thus famously declared, “There is no salvation outside of the Catholic Church,” for he saw the church as comprehensive of all Christians. He added, “If you leave the Church of Christ you will not come to Christ’s rewards; you will be an alien, an outcast, an enemy. You cannot have God for your father unless you



have the Church for your mother. If you could escape outside Noah's ark, you could escape outside the Church."

Since Novatus and his fellow presbyters had set themselves up in authority rather than being consecrated as bishops at the hands of other bishops, they did not have true episcopal authority: "Nor can he be reckoned as a bishop, who, succeeding to no one, and despising the evangelical and apostolic tradition, sprang from himself. For he who has not been ordained in the Church can neither have nor hold to the Church in any way."

### MARTYRED IN THE END

Ultimately the North African bishops sided with Cyprian. The lapsed were to be allowed back into communion if they sincerely repented, though at first those who had participated in heathen sacrifices were only allowed back at the point of death, and lapsed clergy were not allowed to resume their functions. Novatus's fate is actually unknown.



In 257 the persecution resumed. This time Cyprian did not go into hiding. By month's end, he was arrested. When he and other clergy refused to sacrifice, the emperor Valerian threatened them with execution. Cyprian would not submit to the emperor's demand and was martyred. When the proconsul read out the sentence of beheading, Cyprian responded, "Thanks be to God."

Despite the legacy left to us by Cyprian and Tertullian, perhaps no North African Christian

**PASSING ON THE FAITH** *Left:* Cyprian's arguments helped lay the groundwork for the church's teaching on apostolic succession. *Below:* Emperor Diocletian launched the Great Persecution.

influenced the church, at least in the West, more than **Augustine of Hippo** (354–430)—second only, perhaps, to Paul. Just like Tertullian and Cyprian, Augustine had to confront disputes about the purity and unity of the church. The controversy rocking the church of his era was the Donatist schism.

By 391 Catholic Christianity was the minority church in North Africa. In the majority was a faction called the Donatists. Under the Great Persecution (303–305), Emperor Diocletian (244–311) had ordered clergy to hand over Bibles and other sacred books to be burned. Some priests did and so were called *traditores*, meaning "the ones who handed over the book" (hence our modern word *traitor*).

Then the persecution ended, and the *traditores* wished to continue functioning as priests. The church now faced a troubling question: Does a priest's apostasy render his sacraments invalid? Does the effect of the sacraments depend on the moral purity of the priest?

The North African church split. Some followed the priest Donatus, from whom the movement took its name. He insisted that the purity of the church depended on the purity of its priests and bishops. He considered baptism or Eucharist performed by a morally impure priest invalid, and he included apostasy in that impurity.

Augustine shared Cyprian's convictions about unity. He was appalled by the Donatists' division of the church and the grounds they based it on. He even went so far as to sanction measures by the state to suppress the Donatists (particularly a violent sect known as the Circumcellians).

### GOD'S HOLINESS OR OURS?

Beginning in 400, Augustine also launched a theological attack on the Donatists. The power of the church's sacraments, he insisted, does not come from the priest, but from God. It is the Spirit who confers Christ's forgiveness in baptism and who grants the healing and sanctifying grace of Eucharist.

The priest was only the Spirit's instrument, an earthen vessel dispensing the grace of Christ. Therefore, sacraments performed in the name of the Trinity and using the proper form are valid regardless of the character of the presider. God's holiness, not ours, is the source of our sanctification.

Ironically, the very act of schism was, for Augustine, a sign of the absence of the Holy Spirit from the Donatists. He argued that God binds Christians to himself and one another by "the love of God poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5). For

THE EPISCOPAL CONSECRATION OF ST. HERMAGORAS IN ROME BY ST. PETER (FRESCO), ITALIAN SCHOOL (12TH CENTURY) / THE BASILICA, AQUILEIA, ITALY / HIRMER FOTOARCHIV / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY



**WHERE AUGUSTINE SAT** *Above:* Ruins at Hippo.

**AND WHAT HE SAID** *Right:* Augustine argues with Donatist bishop Felicianus.

Augustine, schism was completely antithetical to the love of God, and the Donatists were anti-Christians who undermined the church by promoting division.

Since the Spirit unites us in Christ's love, whatever differences exist—even in doctrine—should not divide Christians. Rather Christians must remain united and love one another in spite of their differences until the differences are resolved. Thus the love of the Spirit would preserve harmony within the community of believers.

### BREAKING THE BONDS OF LOVE

Little practical difference existed between Donatists and Catholics. They made the same confession of faith in Christ and the Trinity. They had the same sacraments and read the same Scriptures. So why, Augustine asked, should they separate? He claimed that the Donatists must have lacked a patient and forbearing love for those who did not conform to their ideal of holiness.

And in lacking love for fellow sinners, they showed that they lacked the love given by the Holy Spirit. Augustine claimed that true believers and followers of Christ would not leave the church. If love was the sign of being born of God by the Spirit in baptism, the Donatists' failure to love indicated that they were never born of God. Augustine derived this claim from his interpretation of two verses in 1 John: "He who has been born of God does not sin" (3:9) and "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1:8).

How can we be born of God so as to be without sin, and yet be lying if we claim to have no sin? Augustine



said that, although Christians fall into minor sins, there is one sin that no true Christian can commit: hatred for a brother or sister.

Ultimately in June 411 a council of 284 bishops met at Carthage to resolve the controversy. The verdict: the Catholic Church was the only true church. The Donatists were forced into union with the Catholics.

Controversies over church unity in North Africa almost two millennia ago may feel alien to modern Christians who live in a church broken and divided between Protestants, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox Churches (see "Did you know?" inside the front cover).

Yet Augustine and his North African brethren remind us that the early Christians saw the church as intended by God to be one. Its unity comes from a common confession of faith, maintained by a mutual love. The ideal of being the church is about a way of loving God and neighbor that resists, even in the face of great difference, the willful impulse of schism. ☒

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# Breaking bread for the church

LESSONS FROM AUGUSTINE'S DAILY LIFE AS A PASTOR AND A BISHOP

*Ed Smither*

**WHEN AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354–386)** is studied in universities and seminaries, it is most often as Augustine the philosopher or Augustine the theologian. But what about Augustine the pastor? Without a doubt, the African church leader was one of the greatest thinkers in Christian history. However, his “day job” for nearly 40 years was serving first as priest and then bishop in the church at **Hippo Regius** (modern Annaba, **Algeria**) in North Africa.

## **WHEN THE BISHOP CALLS**

In 391 Augustine traveled from his hometown of **Tagaste** (modern Souk Ahras, Algeria), where he had established a type of monastery, to Hippo, where he considered establishing another. Having only been a baptized Christian for around four years, Augustine did not appear to be on a path toward ordained min-

**MAN FOR ALL SEASONS** The earliest-known image of Augustine is in the Lateran University Library in Rome, with a caption reading, “Various [church] Fathers said various things, but this Father said everything.”

istry. But when Augustine visited the church at Hippo, its bishop, the aging Valerius, challenged him to put his gifts of teaching and communicating to work and become a priest. Accepting the challenge, Augustine quickly entered into this new ministry.

As priest and bishop, Augustine’s primary task was preaching. Unraveling difficult texts through the aid of allegory and communicating with the skills of a trained orator, Augustine may have preached as many as 10,000 sermons in his lifetime. Likening this work to breaking bread for the church, he declared to his people, “I feed you on what I am fed on myself . . . I set food before you from the pantry which I too live on.”

Community engagement was also important. According to Roman law, bishops were expected to serve as judges and mediators in the courts. Though Augustine expressed frustration at how much time this took, he accepted the role so that he could apply Christian understandings in the public square.

## **PASTOR TO PASTORS**

Augustine also participated in African church councils that shaped churchly practices and doctrine. He was the key voice in as many as 22 of these gatherings. Finally, through letters, personal visits, and mentoring church leaders in the monastery at Hippo, Augustine served effectively as a pastor to other African pastors.

A large element of Augustine’s ministry was a commitment to community. When he was struggling to come to faith, he learned from Simplicianus and Ambrose (ca. 340–397), church leaders in Milan. After his conversion and call to ministry, he initiated monastic communities where communal prayer, shared meals, Scripture study, and spiritual accountability shaped Christians’ life together. In the context of church ministry and church councils, his disciples worked alongside him and learned from his example.

Today’s leaders can learn from this to be intentional about pursuing authentic community. Every Christian leader should seek out a mentor and be transparent about the spiritual life, including personal sin and the painful burdens of ministry. Every leader should have a friend like Alypius—Augustine’s lifelong friend and bishop of Tagaste—whom Augustine affectionately called “my heart’s brother.” ☒

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CH issues 15 and 67 featured Augustine.

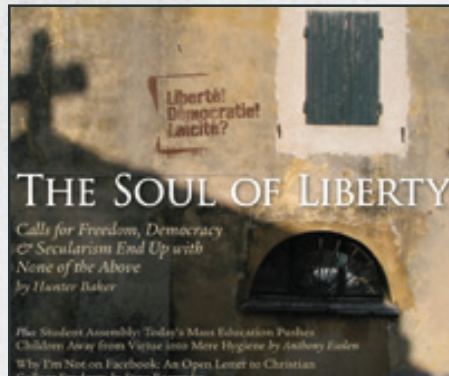
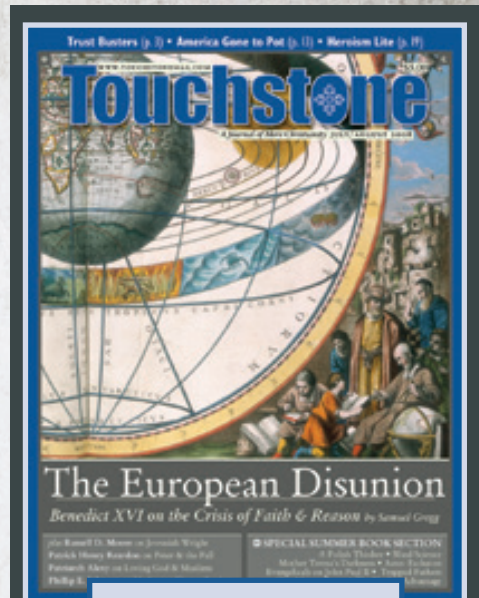
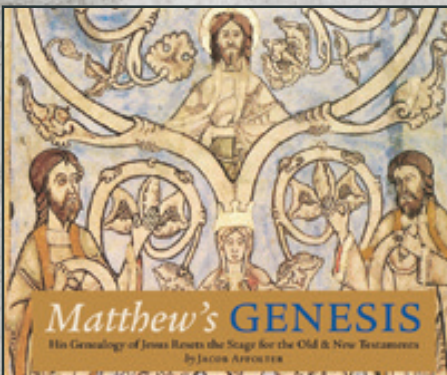
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# HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY

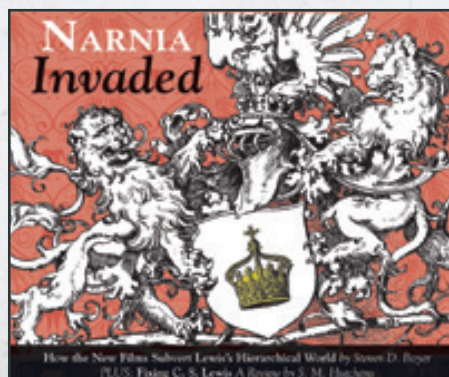
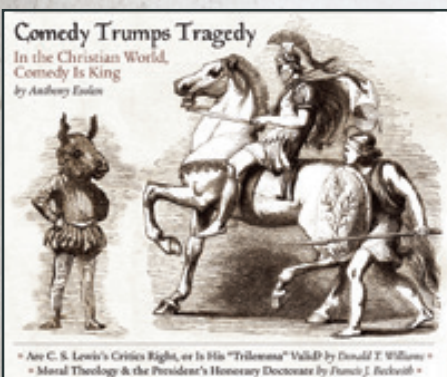
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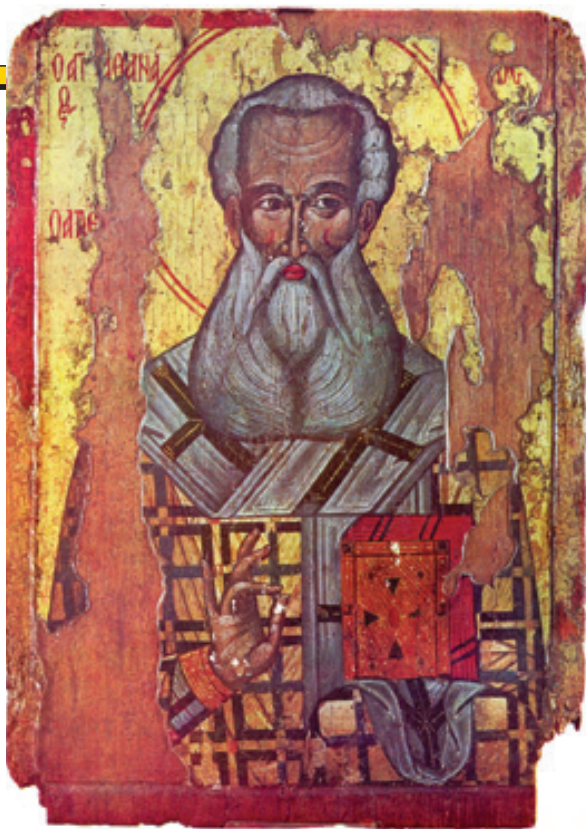
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**ICONIC TEACHER** To Athanasius we originally owe the statement, “The Son of God became man so that we might become God.”

disciples, who used their home a number of times: for the Passover meal, as a hiding place after the death of Jesus, and as a meeting place for prayer at Pentecost.

Following the missionary journeys described in Acts, Mark visited Rome during Paul’s first imprisonment. Not long after, Mark returned to his birthplace—sharing the Gospel, performing miracles, and establishing the church in Libya. Next he traveled to **Alexandria** where he evangelized Anianus, a local craftsman, who was baptized along with his family.

The church in Alexandria quickly expanded. Sensing danger from pagan opposition, Mark ordained Anianus as bishop and three others as presbyters before departing. After the death of Peter, Mark wrote “his” Gospel and then returned to Alexandria. Shortly thereafter Mark was martyred. He was dragged through the cobbled streets of Alexandria until he died (April 26, AD 68) and then was buried in a cow pasture that later became the site of the most important church in Alexandria.

**MAURICE,  
EGYPTIAN  
MARTYR**

Eucherius, bishop of Lyons (ca. 443–450) wrote in a letter 150 years after the deaths of Maurice and the Theban legion: “We often hear, do we not, a particular locality or city is held in high

honor because of one single martyr who died there, and quite rightly, because in each case the saint gave his precious soul to the most high God. How much more should this sacred place, Agaunum, be revered, where so many thousands of martyrs have been slain, with the sword, for the sake of Christ.”

How accurate Eucherius’ story was, modern scholars question. But as he tells it, Maurice was the commander of the legion stationed in the garrison of the Egyptian city of Thebes. Around AD 285 Emperor Maximian Herculeus of Rome ordered the legion to march to Gaul (modern-day France and most of Switzerland) and join in suppressing a peasant revolt.

Maurice and his soldiers succeeded, and the emperor ordered all his troops to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods to commemorate their victory. His order included the killing of local Christians. The legion under Maurice’s leadership refused to comply; they withdrew near the Roman town of Agaunum (now the Swiss city Saint Maurice-en-Valais, named for Maurice).

# And some others you should know . . .

THE AFRICAN CHURCH GAVE CHRISTIANITY LEADERS, THEOLOGIANs, MARTYRS, AND ITS SHARE OF CONTROVERSIES

*Michael Glerup*

**MARK, APOSTLE IN AFRICA**

According to the New Testament, **Mark** was a cousin of Barnabas and accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. He was also a companion of Peter (1 Peter 5:13). By the second century Christian writers identified this Mark as the author of the Gospel that bears his name and as a faithful interpreter of Peter, his apostolic source.

Some Christian historians from the fourth century onward provide an extensive, though unverified, account of Mark’s activities in North Africa as the founder of the church in Alexandria—activities that earned him the name “The Apostle in Africa.”

Mark, these histories tell us, was born in **Cyrene** in Cyrenaica (modern **Libya**). His family immigrated to Jerusalem about the time Jesus began his public ministry. His mother dedicated significant resources to Mark’s education, and he was well versed in Hebrew and the major trade languages of the day—Greek and Latin. Mark’s family had close ties to Jesus and the

Outraged, Maximian ordered that every tenth soldier be killed. They still resisted, and Maximian ordered the remainder of the unit—over 6,000 men—to be executed.

They replied: “Emperor, we are your soldiers but also the soldiers of the true God. We owe you military service and obedience, but we cannot renounce Him who is our Creator and Master. . . .

“We readily oppose your enemies whoever they are, but we cannot stain our hands with the blood of innocent people. . . . We have taken an oath to God before we took one to you. . . . You commanded us to execute Christians. Behold, we are such.”

Their martyrdom was celebrated throughout Europe. Agaunum became a pilgrimage site, and in 515 King Sigismund founded an abbey to commemorate the martyrs. In the thirteenth century a statue of Maurice was erected at the Cathedral of Magdeburg. Both the Coptic Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches honor him as a saint today.



**AFRICAN HEROES** *Left:* This statue at Magdeburg represents Maurice as a 12th-c. knight. *Above:* An Egyptian ivory sculpture depicts “Mark and his successors.”

### ATHANASIUS, INFLUENTIAL BISHOP

Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, noticed **Athanasius** (born ca. 295 in Egypt) playing on the beach, virtually adopted him from his Greek-speaking pagan parents, and thereafter supervised his education.

Young Athanasius attended the Council of Nicaea (325) as Bishop Alexander’s secretary. After his mentor’s death in 328 Athanasius was elected bishop of Alexandria. His hasty ordination raised the suspicions of his rivals, who claimed it was invalid. The challenges were repudiated at an Egyptian synod held in 338.

But controversy plagued Athanasius throughout his ecclesiastical career. Soon after his ordination his adversaries within Egypt formed an alliance with prominent opponents outside of Egypt. The alliance brought charges of illegal and immoral conduct against Athanasius in the court of the emperor.

Initially, Athanasius successfully defended himself against these charges, but later he was ousted at the Council of Tyre and exiled to Trier (Germany) by Constantine. Soon after the death of Constantine, Athanasius was allowed to return, but it was short-lived. Again he was forced to leave, this time fleeing to Rome. Over the next three decades Athanasius was exiled five times by four different emperors. His last exile ended in 366, after which he remained in Alexandria until his death on May 3, 373.

Athanasius’s theological influence on core Christian doctrines—the nature and divinity of Christ, the nature

of salvation, the Trinity—are well documented. Typically underreported is his ability to win the hearts and minds of those he encountered. During his exiles in Trier and Rome, he won support from western churches. He also gained the personal loyalty of influential monastic communities in Upper Egypt, which resulted in their defense of Nicene authority, despite their suspicion of ecclesiastical authority and the pageantry of imperial churches.

### MELETIUS, RIGOROUS LEADER

**Meletius**, the bishop of Lycopolis in Egypt, was concerned about those who had lapsed during the Diocletian persecution. He considered the standards of readmission set by Peter, the bishop of Alexandria (ca. 300–311), far too low.

Whether concerned for pastoral oversight or motivated by more exacting standards, Meletius ordained clergy, even outside his jurisdiction, who supported his more stringent view. Some called them the Church of the Martyrs. His actions were seen as an attempt to undermine the authority of Peter, who promptly excommunicated him. This split persisted after the persecution ended in 313.

The Council of Nicaea affirmed the bishop of Alexandria’s oversight. But Nicaea was more lenient than Meletius himself. The council allowed Meletius’s clergy to continue in their pastoral duties and made provision to incorporate his bishops. Meletius also retained his position. ☒

*Michael Glerup is executive director of the Center for Early African Christianity.*

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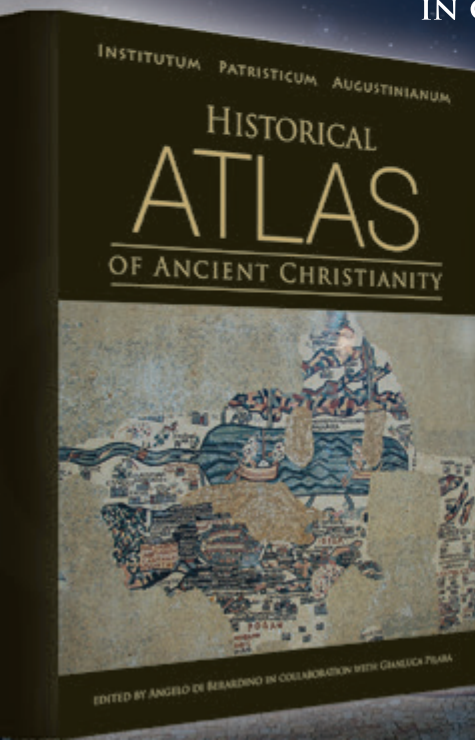
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# Telling the African story

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN *CHRISTIAN HISTORY* AND THOMAS ODEN OF THE CENTER FOR EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY, ON HOW AFRICA FORMED EARLY CHRISTIAN TEACHING

**CH:** *How did your initial desire to make the biblical wisdom of the church fathers available in the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS) evolve into the mission of promoting early African Christianity?*

**TO:** Through 20 years of working on the ACCS, our editorial team saw how so much important Christian exegesis came out of Africa. In textbooks, the earliest Christian writers in Africa are viewed as either Romans or Greeks—ideas moving down into Africa. But ideas were actually moving from Africa to the north. Why were the African layers of early exegesis so important? Why were they ignored?

**CH:** *You've shared this mission with people both on the African continent and here in the United States. What kind of response have you received?*

**TO:** The Africans we've talked with—Catholic, Coptic, Pentecostal, mainline Protestant, evangelical—have had a response of joy. In the African American audience it's somewhat different, because of the history of colonialism in modern Africa. So we get a question we face honestly: why are white people reading about black history?

**WORDS OF LIFE** Coptic monk at the church of Na'Akuto La'Ab displays an ancient Christian text.

We feel that classical Christian teaching about Jesus Christ and his incarnation and resurrection does not depend in any way on the color of one's skin. We simply want to let people know how deeply African-born voices impacted world Christianity.

**CH:** *What will people read in global Christian histories of the present and future that they haven't before, especially in the West, because of the research you've been doing?*

**TO:** Teaching about the Trinity was strongly formed in Africa. Now, that took formal shape at the Council of Nicaea. But the battles that enabled **Athanasius** to so rigorously defend orthodoxy were fought in Africa before they were fought in the north. Sabellianism, Arianism—these were contested mostly in **Egypt, Libya**, Proconsular Africa (northern **Tunisia**), **Numidia**, east **Algeria**.

I have little interest in heresy except that it helps define what orthodoxy is not. Doctrinal definitions of orthodoxy emerged through a conciliar process that began in Africa. Ultimately all of the most important ecumenical decisions had the consent of all three parts of Christendom—the African cultural crossroads of **Alexandria** as well as Latin Rome and Greek Antioch. But Africa was first.



**CH:** *So the conciliar impulse—to gather under the leading of the Holy Spirit, to understand and interpret together—was an African impulse.*

**TO:** These processes are deeply rooted indigenously in African cultures. The great monastic centers of the middle Nile and upper Nile are a big part of that.

Out of the African ethos also came a great hunger to follow the consensus of the canonical writers. The biblical canon was written all around the Mediterranean, but the canonization process took place as a result of decisions made in Africa by Athanasius and **Augustine**.

**CH:** *What can those who have a concern for ecumenism in the church today learn from this?*

**TO:** Ecumenism today often consists of bureaucrats deciding what meets modern criteria of acceptability. Early African ecumenists wouldn't recognize that method at all.

They read the texts of Scripture constantly, in their liturgy and their meetings. They memorized them. Many monks memorized all of the Psalms, and some memorized the whole Bible. The focus was on the text. When the text seems to say different things, how do you resolve those differences? You look at the whole sense of Scripture, the meaning of one text in relation to the meaning of a thousand other texts that illuminate the one confusing text. **Origen** practiced that with great skill.

If a passage of Scripture seems ambiguous, you look at it in relationship to other passages. You don't solve every problem of textual interpretation by extracting that text out of its larger context—social context, historical context, or scriptural context. We could learn from their ways of interpreting Scripture.

**CH:** *What else do you think modern American Christians need to recover? And how?*

**TO:** Don't start with modern secondary sources. Start with primary sources. If you can read Latin, Greek, or Syriac, do that, but most people can't, so start with English sources, well translated. Open any book and you will get the sense of a profound spirituality.

If you care about the unity of the body of Christ, you're going to care about how questions of heresy were answered. Find out what the apostolic witness from Africa says about the catholicity, the universality of the faith. The question of structural unity is crucial.

Or take politics: Augustine's *City of God*. When we think politically as modern people we think of the city of man. That's not the most important city. We are citizens of a community that celebrates the grace of God in every generation, and we are called to be finally accountable to that community before God in the last judgment. American Christians today are almost totally ignorant of that communal pattern of thinking.

**GATHERING TOGETHER** *Far left:* The Council of Nicaea (325) proclaimed the Son was equally God with the Father.

**FOUNDED ON JESUS** *Near left:* This mural of Christ comes from an Egyptian monastery at Bawit that may have housed 500 monks.

**CHRIST CONQUERS ALL** *Right:* A Chi Rho mosaic from **Tebessa** in Tunisia. This was one of the earliest artistic symbols used by early Christians for the name of Christ.

Why don't African Americans know more about Augustine's political wisdom, his sense of justice, and his care for the poor? African American theology in the last few decades has, with a few exceptions, very little about patristic Christian teaching.

Our project is not Afrocentric—the view that Africa is the center of all Christian knowledge. We're talking about a universal Christian history first uncovered and explained on the African continent.

**CH:** *You mean a sense that the God story, the Christian story, is the world story?*

**TO:** Arguably Africans were among those Christians most intent upon saying, "We are citizens of a cosmopolitan community, a community that stretches all around the world." They focused on what God was doing for the whole world in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. We have not mastered this in modern ecumenism.

You can read this in prayers, in hymns, in the liturgy itself. Africa contributed deeply to the Western liturgical tradition. Monastics gave their whole time, their whole day, their whole life, their whole soul to embodying this life (see "Become completely as fire," pp. 15–17).

**CH:** *You talk about the impulse for unity. There is also, as you pointed out, a history of significant schism. What are cautionary lessons?*

**TO:** Often territorial conflicts had a huge impact upon the separation of cultures rather than their finding a unity in Christ. The Donatist controversy was really fought out in Africa (see "See how these Christians love one another," pp. 29–33). The Donatists never quite got it. They were willing to create separate churches in the same little towns in Algeria. There must have been a thousand of them, and they lasted for centuries.

**CH:** *What about other areas of ecclesiastical life?*

**TO:** In church leadership—courage. There's a huge witness of people willing to risk their lives for the faith from Africa. In missions there's Pantaneus, who taught **Clement of Alexandria**, who taught Origen. There is a credible tradition of him going all the way to India. There was a universal sense of mission.



African Christianity also planted seeds that in the eighth and ninth centuries bore fruit in the conversion of Europe. Think of monasticism. You could never have had Benedict without **Cassian** and Rufinus and the people who visited the monastic movement in the **Nitrian Valley** and told people what they saw.

**CH:** *What other projects are you working on?*

**TO:** We are beginning a children's biography project. We want to tell, for children, these stunning, moving stories, many of them about martyrdom, having to do with great courage in the face of huge obstacles.

We are also very interested in undiscovered African texts. Archaeological data and the means of discovering texts are improving immensely. We are interested in finding new papyri that pertain to the interpretation of Scripture and make a legitimate scholarly contribution.

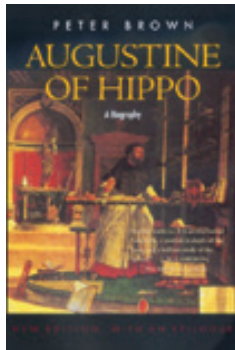
There are an enormous number of great African Christian texts that only a few very adept, highly linguistically trained patristic scholars even know about. I was looking at a collection of writings just last week from Ethiopia and we are trying to identify who wrote them. There's an awful lot to be done. ☒

*Tom Oden is professor emeritus at Drew University, Madison, NJ, general editor of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, and director of the Center for Early African Christianity.*

# Recommended resources

HERE ARE A FEW BOOKS, WEBSITES, AND PAST *CHM* ISSUES RECOMMENDED BY CHRISTIAN HISTORY INSTITUTE STAFF AND THIS ISSUE'S AUTHORS AS GUIDES TO THE LANDSCAPE OF EARLY AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY.

## BOOKS AND ESSAYS

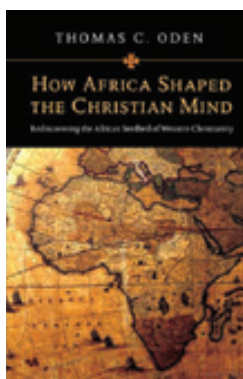
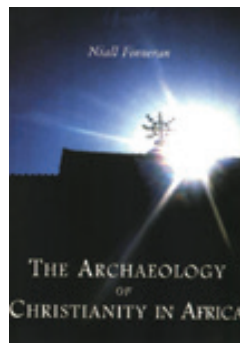


*Two Millennia.*

- Timothy Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*. Introduces Tertullian's life and thought.
- Gerald Bray, *Holiness and the Will of God: Perspectives on the Theology of Tertullian*.
- Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*. Classic biography of Augustine.
- Massimo Capuani, *Christian Egypt: Coptic Art and Monuments through*

• *Classics of Western Spirituality* series published by Paulist Press. Includes volumes containing writings of Augustine, John Cassian, Origen, and Jewish North African philosopher Philo of Alexandria.

• Niall Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*. Takes a comprehensive look at African Christianity all the way from ancient Egypt to modern western missionary activity.



• Thomas Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. Newly translates this important text of early African martyrdom.

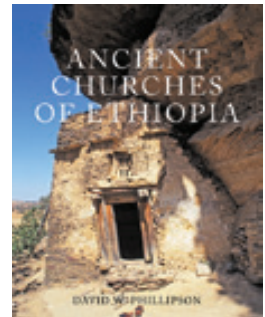
• Margaret R. Miles, "Roman North African Christian Spiritualities," in *Rereading Historical Theology*. Surveys both mainstream and alternative groups for common themes.

• Thomas Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*. Surveys "the decisive role of African Christians and theologians in shaping the doctrines and practices of the church of the first five centuries." Also *The African Memory of Mark*, which explores the belief that Mark founded the church in Alexandria; and *Early Libyan Christianity*.

• Eric Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*. Provides a comprehensive introduction to Clement's theology. Also his *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*.

• Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. While not without controversy, this is the classic study of the texts discovered at Nag Hammadi.

• D. W. Phillipson, *The Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*. Gives "a comprehensive account of Ethiopian Christian civilization and its churches—both built and rock-hewn—from the Aksumite period to the thirteenth century."



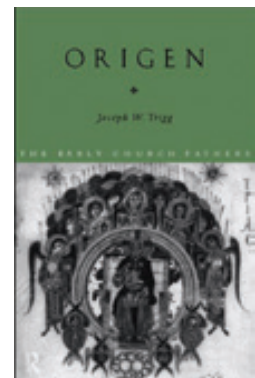
• Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. *Prophecy in Carthage: Perpetua, Tertullian and Cyprian*. Discusses the writings of these three early Christians, focusing on their roles as prophets and visionaries.

• Michael Sage, *Cyprian*. Explores Cyprian's social and political context.

• Edward Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders*. Examines the lessons we can learn today from Augustine's pastoral career.

• Maureen Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*. Portrays martyrs from one of the schisms that afflicted the early African church. Also her essay, "The Collapse of a Collegial Church: North African Christianity on the Eve of Islam."

• Agostino Trape, *Augustine: Man, Pastor, Mystic*. Tells the story of Augustine's life.



- Joseph Trigg, *Origen*. Origen's theology with translations of a number of his writings, showing how he "provided a lasting framework for Christian theology by finding through study of the Bible a coherent understanding of God's saving plan." Also his *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church*, an intellectual biography.

- Frederick Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*. The classic study of Augustine in his church context.

## WEBSITES

- Center for Early African Christianity, [earlyafricanchristianity.com](http://earlyafricanchristianity.com).

- The Tertullian Project, [www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org). Everything you ever wanted to know about Tertullian but were afraid to ask.

- "Augustine of Hippo" at [www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine](http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine) and "Finding Augustine" at [www.findingaugustine.org](http://www.findingaugustine.org) illuminate the life and teachings of Augustine.

Texts by and about many of the people discussed in this issue can be read at "Christian Classics Ethereal Library," [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org); New Advent's, "The Fathers of the Church," [www.newadvent.org/fathers](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers); and "Early Christian Writings," [www.earlychristianwritings.com](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com).

Biographical sketches of memorable Christians of the past appear at [justus.anglican.org/resources/bio](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio), which includes biographies and prayers celebrating the lives and ministries of Perpetua, Clement, Cyprian, Pachomius, Anthony, Athanasius, Augustine, and Cyril.

English-language websites of churches in the Oriental Orthodox tradition include:

- The Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, [www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica](http://www.coptic.net/EncyclopediaCoptica).
- The Coptic Church Network (linking Copts in North America), [www.copticchurch.net](http://www.copticchurch.net).
- Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, [www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/indexenglish.html](http://www.ethiopianorthodox.org/english/indexenglish.html).
- Eritrean Orthodox Diocese of North America, [www.tewahdo.org](http://www.tewahdo.org).

Bibliographies for the study of theology by Fr. William Harmless, S.J. of Creighton University appear online at [moses.creighton.edu/harmless/bibliographies\\_for\\_theology/Patristics\\_0.htm](http://moses.creighton.edu/harmless/bibliographies_for_theology/Patristics_0.htm). In each case Harmless identifies the two or three best titles to start with on the topic. The lists include:

- "Origen and the Rise of Biblical Scholarship," incorporating Clement, Tertullian, Cyprian, and gen-

eral North African Christianity

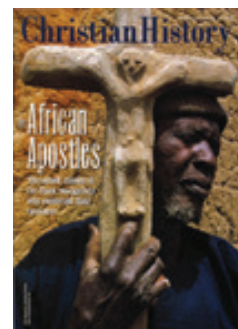
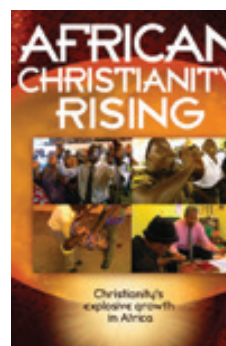
- "Athanasius and the Trinitarian Controversy"
- "Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy"
- "Augustine"
- "Anthony and Early Monasticism"

## RELATED DVDS FROM VISION VIDEO

- *Augustine: A Voice for All Generations*
- *Perpetua, Early Church Martyr*
- *Polycarp and Perpetua*
- *Pioneers of the Spirit: Augustine of Hippo*
- *Torchlighters®* episodes for children on Perpetua and Augustine
- *The Dawning: Christianity in the Roman Empire*
- *Trial and Testimony of the Early Church*
- *An Empire Conquered*, on early Christian martyrs
- *Against Great Odds*, on the survival and growth of a modern Ethiopian church
- *African Christianity Rising*, on the current African church

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- 64: *Anthony and the Desert Fathers: Extreme Faith*
- 67: *St. Augustine: Sinner, Bishop, Saint*
- 74: *Christians and Muslims*
- 79: *African Apostles: Black Evangelists in Africa*
- 80: *The First Bible Teachers*
- 85: *The Council of Nicaea: Debating Jesus' Divinity*
- 96: *The Gnostic Hunger for Secret Knowledge*



Back issues of *Christian History* can be read in full at [www.christianhistorymagazine.org](http://www.christianhistorymagazine.org). DVDs and print copies of many back issues of *Christian History* magazine are available for purchase at [www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/storefront](http://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/storefront).

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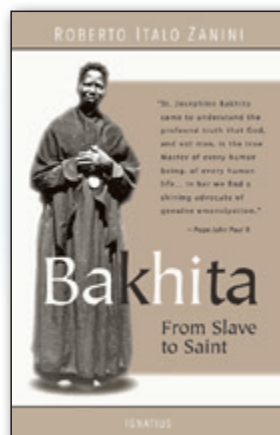
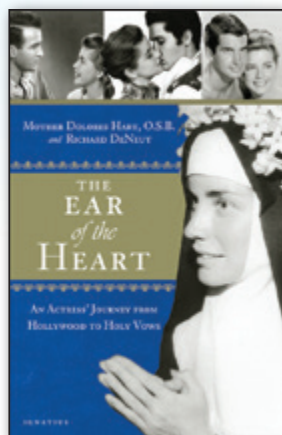
*10 Steps to Truth* — **Peter Kreeft**

**T**here are ten important questions everyone should ask. Well-known Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft tackles each of these 10 questions step-by-step, like climbing the rungs of a ladder. Kreeft answers these fundamental questions in an imaginary conversation between two very different people who meet at the beach. Kreeft's characters begin at the beginning, at the bottom of the ladder, which is the passion for truth. The passion for truth does not stop there, however, but carries the reader from one page to the next in this adventure of the mind. The topics that Kreeft's characters delve into include: Does truth exist?, What is the meaning of life?, What is love, and why is it so important for our lives? If there is a God, what proof is there for his existence? And many other important questions and topics to help readers climb the ladder to the truth about life.

"Lift this joyous chalice to the lips of your soul and drink deeply. It is satisfying indeed!" — **Mark Shea**, author, *By What Authority?*

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**Roberto Italo Zanini**

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encouragement as she went about her tasks as cook, doorkeeper, nurse, etc. Immediately graces and miracles attributed to Bakhita's intercession began to be reported. This book, based on Bakhita's autobiography, the canonization files, and many other sources, presents the life, virtues, and miracles of this daughter of Africa.

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"A gripping drama of ordinary human beings caught in a web of ethical confusions and moral complexities. A biopsy of the sickness of Western society, and more importantly a sign that we are not abandoned in the midst of it, and that good can triumph against all odds." — **Michael D. O'Brien**, author, *Father Elijah*

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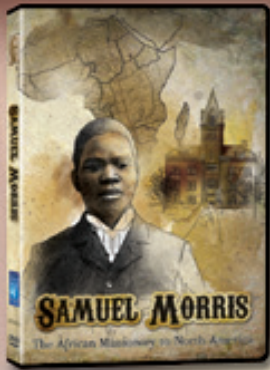
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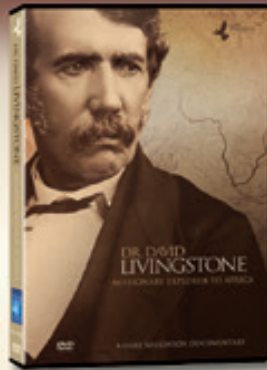
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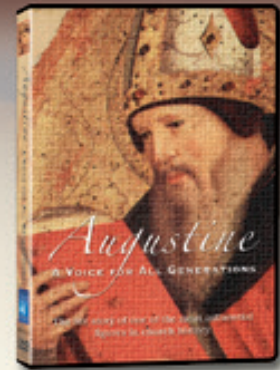
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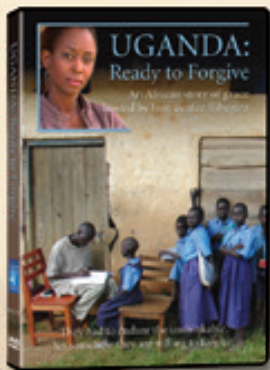
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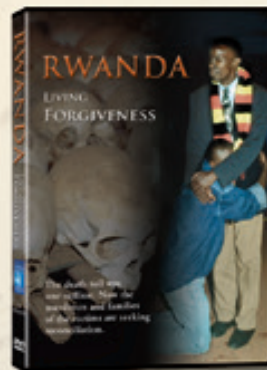
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This is an African story of God's amazing grace. Through 20 years of war, the Acholi people of northern Uganda endured rape, torture, and child abduction. Many were displaced in squalid camps. Thousands died, and others are still missing. Despite all of this, the Acholi are united in a belief that the only real solution is reconciliation and forgiveness. This program is hosted by Rwandan genocide survivor Immaculée Ilibagiza. We witness powerful stories of loss, death, and disease told by young and old. We see and hear songs and affirmations of faith among the Acholi people. 60 minutes.

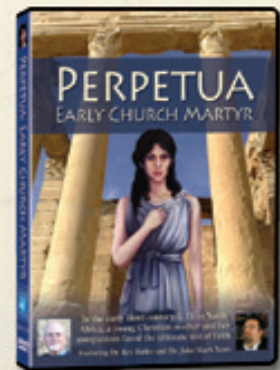
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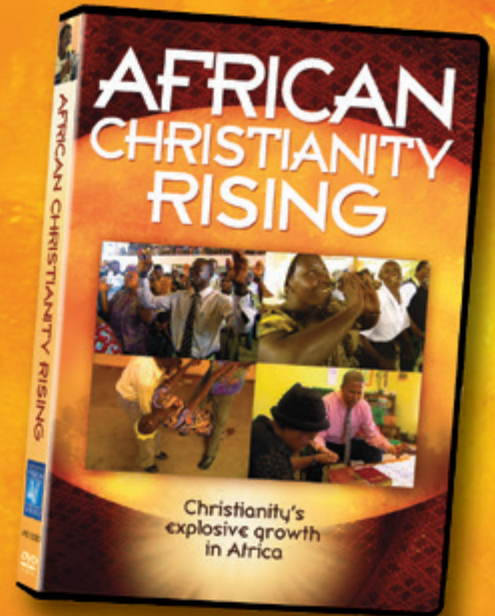
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