

Evidence of Early Christianity in Libya: A Documentary Survey

Reuben Kigame

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Introduction

The Jewish Encyclopedia tells us that the name “Libya” was often used by the ancients, sometimes to designate the whole of northern Africa with the exception of Egypt, and sometimes to denote a single province west of Egypt.¹ There are many volumes published on the history of ancient Egypt and inclusive studies of North Africa, but discussions on Libya tend to concentrate on recent occurrences. Again, a lot has been written on Roman North Africa, Pharaonic Egypt and the Arab conquest of the region, but little attention is given to the religious history of the Maghreb before 600 A.D. The biggest loser historically in this whole discussion remains Libya.

When Libya is mentioned today, what tends to dominate discussion is terrorism, anti-western rhetoric, religious persecution, the legacy of Muammar Gaddafi or the huge oil deposits in her soils. The discussion of religion in Libya is not given prominence and when it is, emphasis is given to the Islamic conquest of the region with the assumption that Libya was largely pagan until the arrival of Islam. Early Libyan history before the Arab conquest of North Africa in the 7th century A.D. is silent on Christianity. For instance, the *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East* (2009) does not discuss Christianity in Libya at all. In his paper titled “The Impact of Islam on Urban Development in North Africa”, Dr.R. Saoud (2004) moves from discussing North African urban centres before the common era as economic, administrative and religious bastions of Roman rule against the backdrop of a primitive Berber civilization to the arrival of the Muslims as the urbanizers of the region. Although there is a clear Christian presence in Libya before the Islamization of the Maghreb, it remains a neglected heritage in both African and Western scholarship.

¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com> Accessed 13th of April, 2015.

In this paper I will examine some historiographical concerns that inform our knowledge and perceptions about Africa, highlight biblical and historical evidence for early Christianity in Libya between 30 and 600 A.D. and then conclude by showing how this evidence impacts African scholarship on the place of Christianity within the African society. The consolidation, analysis and reappraisal of this evidence is critical to modern scholarship and the apologetic mandate of the Church because it brings to light some neglected information and answers some objections to Christianity as an African religion. By using the historical method and critical discourse analysis, we shall trace and systematize the record of Libya as a nation under God's watching eye and eternal plan. To do this we shall outline several passages in the bible that show God's interest and activity in Libya and make brief comments within a revised historiography that is more accommodating to the universal nature of the Church. We will also restate the urgency of retelling the story of Early Christianity in Africa as challenged by Thomas Oden (2007) in his book *How Africa Shaped The Christian Mind and* his two other works on the subject, i.e. *The African Memory of Mark* and *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition*. Some special attention will be given to Oden's comprehensive study on Libya given that he remains the lone voice in this concentration. We will endeavor to show the significance of Early Libyan Christianity in confirming the Gospel as an African heritage and attempt to show the theological value of reading the concept of Christ becoming "flesh" as an inculturation motif that makes Africa what Ogot and Welbourne (1966) and Andrew Walls (1996) call "a place to feel at home."²

Historiographic Concerns

² F. B. Welbourne & B. A. Ogot, *A place to feel at home: a Study of two independent Churches in Western Kenya*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, Scotland (1653-1716) is credited with saying, “Let me make the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.” In understanding what historiography is all about, I would borrow from this and add, “Show me who writes the history of a people, and I will show you who shapes their identity.” A society’s identity is deeply shaped by what its people believe about themselves, where they came from and what they hold as valuable to them. Those who tell the story of a people are involved in a process that influences how the rest of the world views them. By historiography I mean how a people’s history is defined, crafted and communicated, by who and for what ultimate reason. Historiography carries with it motives, objectives and ideological consequences. To cite an example, for a long time many African schools transmitted an education whose epistemology was shaped by a colonial perspective that presented information from a Western angle. It was taught, for instance, that Mount Kenya, Mount Kilimanjaro and River Nile were discovered by Western explorers and that South Africa was established by a Dutch man called Jan van Riebeck. This implied that it is the British explorers and Dutch who define the history of East and South Africa’s past including their origins. Jochen Petzold (2001) aptly observes that both colonial governments and the white minority government in South Africa used their power to create official versions of a country's past to justify their position of control over the Black community. He cites freedom fighter and activist Steve Biko who explained in 1973 that black history in South Africa "is often presented as a long succession of defeats. Petzold observes that this kind of thinking comprises “an official historiography that is clearly aimed at discouraging the development of a black nationalism and its anticipated claim to the franchise.”³

³ Jochen Petzold, “In Search of a New National History: Debunking Old Heroes in Robert Kirby's *The Secret Letters of Jan van Riebeck*.” *Research in African Literatures* Vol. 32, No. 3, Nationalism (Autumn, 2001),

Similarly, telling the story of Early Christianity in Libya and the whole of North Africa is made difficult by many factors, chief of which, in my opinion, is approaching the narrative with a defective historiography. The reduction of Christianity to a European colonizing agent by a number of African scholars has largely led to disinterest in Libya's Christian past because it was hinged on a strong Roman tradition. Indeed, because of this, the Early African Church fathers such as Augustine, Tertullian, Cyprian and Athanasius are viewed as European. Most scholars would be shocked to learn, for instance, that Augustine was a Berber Christian from Algeria.

Second, the telling of the story by Muslim scholars becomes challenging to rely on because of how they view the Arab occupation of North Africa. They tend to view it as depicting the superiority of Islam over Christianity and other religions and hence the total neglect of any other faith tradition. In other words, in the eyes of Islamic historians, anything before the 7th century was pagan, pre-modern and therefore insignificant. Scholars such as R. Saoud (2011) tend to recount North African history by moving from the stone age period to an antiquity that is dominated by Graeco-Roman and archaeological discussions that assume a total absence of a Judeo-Christian tradition before 600 A.D. Saoud categorically states that the Berbers were excluded from the Graeco-Roman urban culture and continued to live in the countryside areas of North Africa. To quote him:

...The rebellious Berbers preserved their environmental way of life ... the famous Queen of Al-Kahina who was the only Berber leader to resist Islam causing considerable trouble for Uqba ibn Nafi'. He adds that by the fall of Rome, the region was ravaged by the Vandals and the Byzantine invaders between 429 and 533 A.D. respectively, resulting in the exhaustion of the economy and the creation of political instability. He says this led to

“social unrest and sectarian strife” until the arrival of the Muslims in Tunisia in 670 A.D. and then the rest of North Africa.⁴

Note that Saoud admits the strong urbanization process by the Romans right from after the Punic wars but concludes that it is the Muslims who executed true urbanization based on the Quran and the directions given to Muslims in the Hadiths. The Cyrenaican urbanization complete with one of the greatest libraries is given a natural blackout because of its Judeo-Christian heritage and Southern anti-Muslim resistance from Nubia neglected in preference for an Arabocentric interpretation of history. Certainly, it is not only the Queen of Al-Kahina that gave the Muslim soldiers a hard time. Christian Nubia, for instance, remained a great thorn in the Muslim occupation between 500 and 1500 A.D. The Nubian resistance is completely neglected and Soud, in fact, tends to exclude Sudan from his definition of North Africa in his paper. This may well give us a hint on what drives the attitude of modern Islamic governments towards Early Christian artifact history in the Nile valley and may partly explain the silent reason behind the recent massive investment in the construction of dams along the Nile to wash away and bury under much water past critical historical artifacts that would confirm the early presence of Christianity in the Nile Valley and the Maghreb. Coupled with centuries of hostility to Christianity lasting to the present, these scholars bypass the first five hundred years of our Common Era as if nothing significant happened. Oden sums this up well. He says.

Equally familiar is the widely assumed premise in North Africa that Islam has more authentic claims to Africanity than Christianity. This has the false but common premise that Islam arrived in Africa before Christianity and is more native to African soil than

⁴ R. Saoud, *The Impact of Islam on Urban Development in North Africa*: Manchester, (UK: FSTC Ltd, 2004), 4. Accessed on 6th April, 2019 from <http://www.fstc.co.uk>

Christianity. The simple reason for this common mistake is that Christianity is viewed as a European product.”⁵

Third, Western historians make the same mistake of reading Libya’s Early Christianity as non-African. The Roman connection alluded to earlier tends to give them the impression that the liturgy and intellectual sophistication within the North African Church was European because of Alexander’s conquest of the region. They ignore the growth of independent Christian traditions farther South in Nubia, Ethiopia and Congo. David E. Wilhite (2017) has recently added a Western voice to Thomas C. Oden’s (2007, 2011 and 2012) crusade against seeing African Christianity as an appendage of European proselytizing, liturgy and ecclesiastical expression. He states:

Too often the fact that Africa was a western Roman province has meant that scholars can categorize African Christian history into the history of western Christianity, without paying closer attention to the uniqueness of Christianity in this region. While there are many commonalities between ancient African Christians and ancient Italian Christians, for example, there are also many differences. These differences are important. Just as one could not adequately understand the apostle Paul without identifying his commonalities with Greeks, so one should also identify his differences from Greeks.⁶

Wilhite explains that one could be many things in one without losing real identity just like Paul who described himself as the “apostle to the Gentiles” in Romans 11:13 could become “all things to all people” in order to reach them.

African Christian theologians may equally be tempted to make the same mistake by imagining that this North African tradition was African through and through without any external contribution. My point here is that any exclusive historiography that tends to elevate one

⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition*, (Intervarsity, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2012), 33.

⁶ David E. Wilhite: *Ancient African Christianity: An Introduction to a Unique Context and Tradition*. (Routledge, New York, 2017), 3.

interpretation over all the other contributions is defective and must be reconstructed to reflect objective facts. This is what we will attempt to do in this documentary survey, beginning with the biblical record and weaving it into other available historical and theological resources at our disposal. Christianity is a world religion and any attempt to view it exclusively as a regional faith is as mistaken as denying its presence in a particular region.

In my discussion of Christianity as an African religion (2018), I have shown how an Afrocentric interpretation of Christianity without regard for Christianity as a global faith is as misleading as Eurocentric Christianity. It is my belief that a wrong historiographical foundation yields a wrong history and, if I may dare add, a history based on a faulty historiography is unsustainable and hence unreliable.

Biblical Evidence

Let us begin by reviewing several biblical references to Libya in a bid to establish the veracity of Early Christianity in Africa. As we do this, it is important to note that, although Libya is referred to several times, the biblical record employs different names which are subject to both linguistic and historical examination. The reason is that some names overlap while others are employed erroneously. In some cases there is a confusion between specific and generic references e.g. the Graeco-Roman tendency to call all Africans beyond Egypt “Libyans” (Wilhite 2017) meaning a people with sun-burned faces, or Ethiopian (people with dark skin.) In a few cases, there is clear laziness on the part of certain scholars to dig up identities of persons or groups associated with certain words, e.g. the pronouncement that “Put” refers to a mysterious Egyptian group whose identity is not known, when historical records clearly point out that Put or Phut is associated with the ancient people of the Somali coast who had strong connections with Pharaohs such as Queen Hatshepsut of the 18th dynasty. For this reason, as we discuss the

biblical portrait of Libya, it will be necessary to make some historical and textual comments to make our argument clearer.

In the Bible, Libya appears variously as Put, Cyrene, Lebu or Lubim. In some references e.g. Genesis 10:13, Libyans are referred to as Lehabites, a people descending from Mizraim. Genesis 9:18-19 tells us that the sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham and Japheth and that Ham was the father of Canaan. Verse 19 tells us that these were the three sons of Noah, and from them came the people who were scattered over the whole earth.” In Genesis 10:4-15, we are given the names of the descendants of Ham from whom Libyans and other African peoples came. Verse 6 tells us that Ham’s four children were Cush, Mizraim (Egypt), Put and Canaan. Verse 13 mentions that Mizraim was the father of the Lehabites (often translated as Lebeans or Lubim). The Lehabites will thus be our centre of interest in this regard.

Let us dispense with the occasional confusion with reference to the Punites (biblical Put) who are sometimes confused with Libyans. King and Hall (1906) observe that the word “Punt” is always written without the hieroglyph determinative of a foreign country, which shows that the Egyptians did not view the Punites (or the people of Punt) as foreigners. They conjecture that it looks as if the Punites were “a portion of the great migration from Arabia, left behind on the African shore when the rest of the wandering people pressed on northwards to the Wadi Hammamat and the Nile.” They further observe that it is possible that the modern Gallas and Abyssinians (Ethiopians) are descendants of these Punites.⁷

From the above passage, we can deduce that, if Mizraim (or Egypt) was the father of the Lehabites, it follows that the Libyans (descendants of Lebu or Lubim if you are referring to their

⁷ L. W. King and H. R. Hall, *History Of Egypt, Chaldaea, Syria, Babylonia And Assyria*. (Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities In The Light Of Recent Discovery, British Museum, 1906), 38-41.

plurality as a people) were the second generation from Ham. It would imply that Libyans are of Egyptian descent and so must not be confused with the Punites or Puntians who, according to B. A. Ogot (2016) and J. Ki-Zerbo (2000) are of North-Eastern African origin. Hence, while Cush is clearly associated with the Nubian community, Mizraim with the Egyptians and Canaan with the communities that God destroyed using the Israelites to fulfill the curse Noah had pronounced on him, Put (or Punt) is of Somali descent from the Horn of Africa and, evidently, in possible connection with the populations of the upper regions of Aden as well as the lower East African people groups. Thus, it is misleading for the Revised Standard Version (British and American) to replace the reference to Libya with Put in Jeremiah 46:9, Ezekiel 30:5 and 38:5.

In chapter 6 Section 2 of *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus suggests that the Ethiopians came from Chus (the progenitor of the Chusites or Cushites), the Egyptians from Mesraim and the Libyans from Phut. He titles chapter 6, “How every nation was denominated from their first inhabitants” and traces the Hamite origin of the African community as follows:

The children of *Ham* possessed the land from Syria and Amanus and the mountains of Libanus, seizing upon all that was on its sea-coasts; and as far as the ocean; and keeping it as their own. Some indeed of its names are utterly vanished away; others of them being changed, and another sound given them, are hardly to be discovered: yet a few there are which have kept their denominations intire. For of the four sons of Ham, time has not at all hurt the name of *Chus*; for the *Ethiopians*, over whom he reigned, are even at this day, both by themselves, and by all men in Asia, called *Chusites*. The memory also of the *Mesraites* is preserved in their name. For all we who inhabit this country [of Judea] called Egypt *Mestre*, and the Egyptians *Mestreans*. *Phut* also was the founder of Libya, and called the inhabitants *Phutites*, from himself: there is also a river in the country of Moors which bears that name. Whence it is that we may see the greatest part of the Grecian Historiographers mention that river, and the adjoining country, by the appellation of *Phut*. But the name it has now has been by change given it from one of the sons of Mesraim, who was called *Lybyos*.⁸

⁸ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*. Accessed from http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/00370103_Flavius_Josephus_The_Antiquities_Of_The_Jews_EN.pdf

My preference for interpreting Put as Punt and as North-East Africa rather than the region West of Egypt known today as Libya is in view of the elucidations by J. Ki-Zerbo in the Unesco General History of Africa project which establishes this from an archaeological perspective. Ki-Zerbo observe that an ancient Egyptian text dating from 2000 B.C. at the beginning of the 12th Dynasty gives precise data about the maritime activities of those days such as navigation in the Red Sea and trade expeditions to the East African coast including royal trade connections with Punt. Ki-Zerbo states:

Queen Hatshepsut, who occupied the throne of Egypt for twenty-one years (1504-1483 before our era), organized several trading expeditions, including one in the ninth year of her reign to the land of Punt on the Somali coast. The expedition is portrayed in the magnificent bas-reliefs at Deir al-Bahri in Upper Egypt.⁹

The Egyptians as descendants of Ham felt connected not only to Cush, Canaan and Lebu but also to Punt. King and Hall observe that the Egyptians always had “some idea that they were connected racially with the inhabitants of the Land of Punt or Puenet, the modern Abyssinia and Somaliland.” They add that during the time of the 18th Dynasty the Egyptians depicted the inhabitants of Punt “as greatly resembling themselves in form, feature, and dress, and as wearing the little turned-up beard which was worn by the Egyptians of the earliest times,” which was reserved for the gods in the 4th Dynasty.¹⁰

Returning to our survey, the Bible is replete with references to African nations and their relationship with Israel. Sometimes African nations fought against Israel individually or by forming alliances. One such alliance to fight King Rehoboam’s troops includes the coming together of Egypt, Libya and Cush (or Nubia). In 2 Chronicles 12:1-3, we read:

⁹ J. Ki-Zerbo (Ed.), UNESCO General History of Africa Vol 1: Methodology and African Prehistory, (Berkeley, CA, 2000), 92.

¹⁰ King and Hall, *History of Egypt*. 113.

After Rehoboam's position as king was established and he had become strong, he and all Israel with him abandoned the law of the LORD. Because they had been unfaithful to the LORD, Shishak king of Egypt attacked Jerusalem in the fifth year of King Rehoboam. With twelve hundred chariots and sixty thousand horsemen and the innumerable troops of Libyans, Sukkites and Cushites that came with him from Egypt, he captured the fortified cities of Judah and came as far as Jerusalem.

Later in chapter 16, God rebukes King Asa of Judah for entering a treaty with King Benhadad of Syria to go against King Baasha of the Northern Kingdom. God uses a Seer called Hanani to tell Asa that he had done a foolish thing and should remember what the Libyans and Cushites did to Israel in the past. The Lord tells Asa: "Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen? Yet when you relied on the LORD, he delivered them into your hand." Nahum 3:8 sets a broader context for the rebellion and punishment of the Nile Valley civilizations. He asks Nineveh, "Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her? The river was her defense, the waters her wall." That the Nile Valley civilizations were great military powers is not debatable. The Bible acknowledges Libya's place in this alliance and, most significantly, God's dealing with her within the wider community of African nations. Talk about God punishing Nile Valley nations would be empty unless He was deeply interested and in control of their history and ultimate destiny. The exilic reference and the punishment of the region's nobles in verse 10 entrenches this sovereign control by God over all the nations.

In most Bible passages that speak of the Nile Valley nations, whether in military alliances, commerce or the endowment of natural resources, Egypt, Libya and Cush are mentioned together. Even when Daniel prophesies the plunder of the nations, he views the three nations as a tripartite unit.¹¹ From history, we can deduce that Daniel was referring to the

¹¹ See Daniel 12:42-43.

Roman conquest of North Africa. The verse tells us that the treasures of Egypt, Libya and Cush would go to a Roman ruler.

Ezekiel 30 is a prophecy against Egypt which the Lord says He will bring down using the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. Verses 4-6 indicate that Cush and Libya would fall along with Egypt. Ezekiel says:

“A sword will come against Egypt, and anguish will come upon Cush. When the slain fall in Egypt, her wealth will be carried away and her foundations torn down. Cush and Libya, Lydia and all Arabia, Kub and the people of the covenant land will fall by the sword along with Egypt. “This is what the LORD says: “The allies of Egypt will fall and her proud strength will fail. From Migdol to Aswan they will fall by the sword within her, declares the Sovereign LORD.”

When Ezekiel prophesies God’s ultimate victory over the nations that war against Israel in chapter 38, reference is made in verse 5 to Cush and Put, once again depicting the continuing confusion in translating Libya and Punt in the Bible days. This same reference and confusion is carried in Jeremiah’s prophecy against Egypt in verse 9 of his 46th chapter.

In the New Testament, reference is made to both Libya and Cyrene. On the Day of Pentecost, the multi-national crowd that witnessed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Disciples included people from Egypt and Libya. Luke records this for us in Acts 2:5-10:

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome.

Thomas Oden speculates that what the Jews from Cyrene spoke at the Day of Pentecost was the Punic language spoken in Cyrenaica. He writes:

What language did they speak at Pentecost? The language of their homeland was Libyo-Punic. It was likely their heart language that was being understood when the Spirit descended as with tongues of fire upon the earliest church. Since Luke's narrative was in Greek, and since Greek was already noted or assumed among the languages

active at Pentecost, it would have been redundant if it were Greek, in listing speakers of other languages at Pentecost.¹²

A few weeks before this incident, Jesus had been condemned to death through crucifixion. All the three Synoptic Gospels record a unique Libyan connection to the crucifixion. Matthew tells us in chapter 27:32 of his Gospel that on the way to crucify Jesus, the Jews "... met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross." Mark in verse 21 of his 15th chapter, proceeds to give us some family information about Simon by giving us the names of his children. He says: "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross." The only new detail Luke adds in chapter 23:26 is that Simon carried the cross following behind Jesus.

Besides Luke's mention of Jews from Libya in the regions near Cyrene being in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, he gives us one of the most peculiar evidences of early Christianity in Libya by citing the presence of some believers from Cyrene in Antioch who had already received the faith and were now preaching it to the Greek community which had been neglected by the Jewish Christians. In Acts 11:19-21 we read:

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 13:1 suggests that the Cyrenaic believers continued to minister in Antioch. Two of them are mentioned by name. One is Lucius and the other "Simeon also known as Niger." The word "Niger" is translated as "black," hence Simeon the Black (Oden 2012). A good connection guess is that this is the same person the Synoptic gospels refer to as Simon of Cyrene and who

¹² Thomas C. Oden, *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 35.

Mark says had two children, Alexander and Rufus. If we were to follow both Jewish and Roman systems of making reference to people, one was named according to where he came from, what he did or the family name. Thus, the New Testament gives us references such as Paul of Tarsus, Jesus of Nazareth, Mary of Magdala, and in this case, Simon from Cyrene.

Richard Westall observes that according to normal Greek usage, the Gentile adjective or noun signified the place from where a person came from and hence the community he belonged to.¹³ He further conjectures that although Simon was a Jew residing in Cyrene or a Jew with Libyan citizenship, the name of his first son, Alexander, signifies Greek culture and Rufus his second son, the Roman culture. The fact that Cyrenaican Jews were part of the Pentecost crowd and part of the proselytizing group that was reaching the Hellenistic community in Antioch, proves that the Judeo-Christian tradition was in Libya quite early, perhaps as early as the days of Jesus' teaching. Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 for the disciples to go into "all the ends of the earth" becomes significant when one imagines that Jesus would have had, not just Europe and Asia, but Africa which was considered one of the most southern points of the then known world. He had told them as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 to go into the whole world and make disciples in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all He had taught them. He added that He would be with them to the end of the age.

The Early Church Fathers on Early Libyan Christianity

St Irenaeus who is said to have lived between 120 and 202 A.D. strongly believed in the unity and universality of the Church. In his treatise, *Against Heresies* (Section 651, p. 30), He indicates that the Church is one in the person of Christ and doctrine, whether in Europe, Asia, Africa, or

¹³ See paper by Richard Westall, "Simon of Cyrene, a Roman Citizen?" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 59, H. 4 2010), Franz Steiner Verlag, 489-500. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25758325> Accessed on 31-01-2019.

any part of the known world then. Since this is one of the rarest acknowledgements of the existence of Christianity in Libya, we cite Irenaeus as clear evidence that there were Christians in Libya as early as the first and second centuries. Notice that Irenaeus says that, whether in Europe, Asia or Africa, the faith is the same and is maintained as such in spite of the distortion from heresy:

As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world. But as the sun, that creature of God, is one and the same throughout the whole world, so also the preaching of the truth shineth everywhere, and enlightens all men that are willing to come to a knowledge of the truth.¹⁴

Thomas Oden, commenting on the reference in this passage to “central regions of the world” supposes that by this Irenaeus was referring to “apostolic believers somewhere in the interior of Africa,” perhaps all the way to Somalia, Numidia, Ethiopia or even as far as Kenya and the Congo. He supports this by pointing to linguistic and geographical sequences. However, his argument is far-fetched, especially if one also factors in the possibility of the Middle East. Again, any reference by scholars to Libya and the regions south of it would normally apply the term “South” instead of “central.”

To further prove the presence of a strong Church in Libya, we are told that St Athanasius wrote the *Epistle to the Bishops of Egypt and Libya*, in the summer of 356. The *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* tells us that in this epistle Athanasius “offers a summary of the anti-Arian

¹⁴ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies”, In *Ante-Nicene Fathers* Edited by Alexander Roberts. Accessed from <http://gnosis.org/library/advh1.htm>

polemic of the Discourses against the Arians and exhorts the bishops not to sign any profession of faith different from that of Nicaea, the only valid profession of faith.”¹⁵ Athanasius was constantly in trouble with the Arians who sometimes would slander him, leading to his flight from Alexandria, sometimes hiding in Libya. In refuting Arianism and other heresies of his day, Athanasius declared:

And strange it is, that while all heresies are at variance with one another concerning the mischievous inventions which each has framed, they are united together only by the common purpose of lying [1178] . For they have one and the same father that has sown in them all the seeds, of falsehood. Wherefore the faithful Christian and true disciple of the Gospel, having grace to discern spiritual things, and having built the house of his faith upon a rock, stands continually firm and secure from their deceits.¹⁶

In *The City of God*, St Augustine refers to Libya at least three times, first to give a geographical description of its location, second to discuss her relationship with the philosophy of Ancient Greece and lastly to discuss the consecration of the temple of Hermes on the mountains of Libya. In Section 9, he talks about Platonism fondly, describing it as “that philosophy which has come nearest to the Christian faith.” He acknowledged the possibility of Libyans having God’s truth and the ability to exercise good philosophy as long as such philosophy acknowledged the supremacy of God over all creation. He wrote:

Whatever philosophers, therefore, thought concerning the supreme God, that He is both the maker of all created things, the light by which things are known, and the good in reference to which things are to be done; that we have in Him the first principle of nature, the truth of doctrine, and the happiness of life,--whether these philosophers may be more suitably called Platonists, or whether they may give some other name to their sect; ... whether also we include all who have been held wise men and philosophers among all nations who are discovered to have seen and taught this, be they Atlantics, Libyans, Egyptians, Indians, Persians, Chaldeans, Scythians, Gauls, Spaniards, or of other nations,--we prefer these to all other philosophers, and confess that they approach nearest

¹⁵ Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity, 517.

¹⁶ St Athanasius the Great, Epistle to the Bishops of Egypt and Libya, <https://www.elpenor.org/athanasius/bishops-egypt.asp?pg=2>

to us.”¹⁷

Thomas Oden

The most comprehensive work on early Libyan Christianity is by Thomas C. Oden. He is the only scholar I came across who has devoted a whole book on the subject, i.e. *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition*. Oden gives us several explanations for how Christianity may have reached Libya. First, he says that the Libyan group that Luke writes about in Acts 2:10 as being present at Pentecost could have returned to Libya as early as the 30s A.D. A second possibility is that Cyrenians we read about in Acts 11 who were involved in the mission to Antioch “could have returned to Cyrene by the 40s A.D.” Thirdly, he suggests that the Christians of Libya “could have been native-born Libyans who, upon traveling to any of the ports of the Mediterranean, could have heard the good news and brought it back to Libya.”¹⁸ Lastly, he suggests that Mark “preached in the Pentapolis before his death in Alexandria, with numerous converts and the appointment of an apostolic successor, then the arrival of Christianity in Libya could have been in the range of A.D. 40 to 68.”¹⁹

To these I may add the speculation that the Ethiopian Eunuch to whom Philip preached in Acts chapter 8 may have introduced the possibility of the Gospel getting to Libya from the South, i.e. from Cush where there Candace ruled. Not only was this Gospel as close to the disciples’ message given that Philip was its propagator, but there is evidence of royal influence given that the Eunuch worked in the palace. There is evidence that he was learned because he

¹⁷ Aurelius Augustine, *The City of God*, Vol. 1. Edited by Marcus Dodds. (Project Gutenberg 2014). Accessed on September 3rd, 2018. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45304/45304-h/45304-h.htm> , 227.

¹⁸ Thomas C. Oden, *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

¹⁹ Ibid.

was reading in his chariot and was keen on understanding because he sought from Philip the explanation of the Isaiah 53 passage he was reading. It is he who asks Philip to baptize him, meaning that he had heard about certain key elements of the Christian faith. In any case, Oden has a convincing case to the effect that Christianity must have reached Libya in the 30s and not the 300s as commonly proposed.

Oden argues that part of the early presence of Christianity in Libya was the immigration of Jews from Palestine to Cyrenaica and that this immigration continued right into the 1st century that saw Messianic Jews practice their faith by regular pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Cyrenaica refers to the region surrounding the old city of Cyrene in North-East Libya. It is these Messianic Jews that Oden associates with the ministry to the Greek community in Antioch in Acts 11. In other words, only a strong Christian presence in Cyrene could account for the Antioch mission. These Cyrenaic Jews were so convinced of the faith that they became missionaries of the Gospel to other lands. Besides Simon of Cyrene and his two sons, Alexander and Rufus, Oden discusses an obscure piece of evidence that connects Early Libyan Christianity to the apostolic office. He writes:

Then there is an important leader in early Christianity called Lebbeaus, whom Matthew names as the tenth of the twelve apostles. Lebbeaus (Greek Lebbaios), whose surname was Thaddaeus (Mt 10:3),⁶ who may have been the same person as Jude or "Judas son of James," (Nwv, or "James's relative Judas," Weymouth; or "Judas the brother of James," KJv). This individual is mentioned in both the apostolic lists of Luke 6:16 and Acts 1:13. Early African tradition holds that he was numbered among the seventy disciples. The name itself may refer to a Libyan origin or familial connection (from Leba or Libu, ancient name for Libya). According to early African tradition, Lebbeaus was sent to preach the gospel in Libya and became the first bishop of the Pentapolis under the apostolic direction of Mark himself.²⁰

Oden then observes that there were Cyrenaic Christians at the trial and stoning of Stephen. His reference is to the Jewish community described in Acts 6:9. Luke reveals to us that these Jews

²⁰ Ibid.

had their own synagogue which was described as the “Synagogue of the Freedmen.” Verse 1 of this chapter gives us the hint that these Jews had adopted the Greek language and culture. In verse 9, it is stated clearly that some of them were from Cyrene and Alexandria. Whether they had believed the message the disciples were teaching or not is not our interest here although there is good reason to believe that some of them had become Christians. Most importantly, it is clear that, being from Cyrene and Alexandria, they were exposed to Stephen’s preaching about Christ and were exposed to the charity of the Early Church as seen in the distribution of resources to the poor. This confirms an important point, i.e. that there were believers in Christ this early – shortly after Pentecost – in Libya and Alexandria.

The next line of evidence for Early Christianity in Libya by Oden points to an interesting possibility that links the apostle Paul to Rufus and Alexander as well as their mother. While this needs further investigation, it forms a convincing case. Oden says that by the time of the writing of Paul's letter to Rome, there were a number of believers living in Rome. He observes that Paul announced his travel plan to them to go to Spain and visit them, i.e. the Roman Christians on the way as seen in Romans 15:28. One of them was named Rufus. He states:

Whether this is the Rufus, son of Simon of Cyrene, mentioned by Mark and Luke is conjectural, but need not be ruled out...More explicitly, in his letter to Rome, Paul affectionately greeted "Rufus, chosen in the Lord." He also spoke personally and warmly of the mother of Rufus, "who has been a mother to me, too" (Rom 16:13 NIV).

Oden then raises a question and answers it:

Why would Paul speak of the mother of Rufus of Cyrene as if she were a mother to him? The personal warmth of this greeting suggests some very close relationship that may have prevailed between Paul and the Cyrenaic circle of messianic Jewish families in Jerusalem before the crucifixion. This makes it tempting to imagine that Mark's mother and Rufus's mother and Paul could have been joined together by deep ties of either friendship or family.

Oden concludes that North African Messianic Jews led the way to the “uttermost parts of the earth” which Jesus had prophesied during His Commission to the disciples in Acts 1:8. He justifies the possibility of the visit to Libya when he states that:

...since distant Spain was already on Paul's itinerary, there is no reason to think it impossible that Paul or Mark or Lebbeaus or Barnabas might have also had in mind the even less distant coast of Africa for evangelization. Libya was as accessible by sea as Spain. Christians were already residing in Rome before Paul and Mark arrived in Rome in the mid-60s A.D. There is no compelling reason to rule out the hypothesis that Christians were arriving in the port cities of Libya-closer than Rome to Jerusalem-near the same time or shortly after, which could be anytime between A.D. 45 and 65.”²¹

Our last focus of evidence for Early Christianity in Libya is post-apostolic. Oden pulls out a number of personalities and events that solidly establishes this presence. He calls our attention, for instance, to a Libyan Pope in Rome called Victor the African, to the great theologian Tertullian, the heretics Sebellius and Arius and a philosopher-bishop called Synesius. Oden tells us that the pontificate of Pope Victor I began in A.D. 189 and lasted until 198, which he describes as a time of crucial changes in the relation of the Greek East and the Roman West. He says that it is likely that both Victor and Emperor Severus came from Leptis Magna in Libya and “studied or served for significant times in or around for the church, Severus for military service.” Thus, while it seems impossible today to imagine the possibility of an African being Pope, history tells us that this already happened between 189 and 198 A.D. Oden says that Pope Victor

...was born of an elite African Roman family, Gaius, and is generally acknowledged by secular historians as of African birth and descent...is best known for his role in the crisis of the dating of Easter- in particular, insisting that it should always fall on the Sunday following 14 Nisan rather than on 14 Nisan itself, as it was observed in the East.²²

He adds that Christian tradition remembers him as bishop of Libya and that Jerome ascertained that Pope Victor was the first major Christian author to write in Latin. According to Oden, Pope

²¹ Ibid, p. 36.

²² Ibid, p. 46.

Victor was key in introducing Latin as the language of liturgy instead of Greek and that he fought hard for the unity of the Church.

In closing, we cite the role of Tertullian in refuting the heresies of Sebellius and establishing a strong interest in understanding Christology. Later Church fathers like Athanasius and Augustine would continue in the same spirit of seeking the purity of doctrine. Thus, Africa, and especially Libya, led the way in shaping interest in doctrinal purity and certitude.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion on Libyan Christianity is only a tip of the iceberg in light of the amount of historical evidence unearthed by scholars such as Thomas Oden and the various organizations that are now interested in Early Maghreb Christianity. There is also keen emerging hermeneutical interest that requires separate studies to elucidate the socio-cultural contexts of Libya's early faith in Christ. We can however establish/deduce that nomenclature and geographical analyses may yield some useful results in understanding Early Libyan Christianity. We cannot say enough of the need to conduct intensive archaeological work in Libya and the Maghreb at large to uncover several missing links in the narrative of Early North African Christianity.

It may be helpful to close our discussion by briefly outlining the significance of the evidence of Early Libyan Christianity to African scholarship and Church history. First, the overwhelming nature of this evidence is disturbing given that African history, including that of the Nile Valley and North Africa in general, does not pay much attention to this unique strand of data. One wonders if it is neglected simply because it is Christian, most of the scholars having frowned at the faith as a Western religion! Even veteran scholars of the region such as Professor Bethwell Ogot do not give any space to this discussion. One asks, if African scholars will not

write this strand of history, who will do it for them or who could write it better than them? It is disturbing that it has taken Western scholars like David Wilhite and Thomas Oden to tell our own African story.

Second, the African Church is sitting on a jewel that could overturn her challenge in reaching skeptics of the faith on the continent. This is because evidence of Christianity as a fully African religion and the discovery of how Africa shaped world Christianity can be used as a useful apologia in silencing the hostility often levied against the Gospel on the pretext that it is European missionaries who brought the faith to Africa and used it as an agent of colonial domination. Once this notion is corrected, a major obstacle for many African students and scholars would have been removed, giving them a clearer look at Jesus the Messiah.

Lastly, it is clear that this evidence calls for the urgent task of reconstructing the perception of Christianity in African scholarship. The animosity and ridicule that is visited upon Christianity by Africa's post-colonial writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe and Okot P. Bitek is uncalled for. These writers need to be responded to by tabling such evidence and their publications challenged on account of their accuracy in defining Christianity as a late entry on the African continent. A polite plea might be suggested here for the a possible retraction in order to accord Africa's posterity a more balanced view of history by grounding the story of Christianity in Africa in facts instead of unwarranted bias. Western scholars also need to wake up to the realization that their historiography is no longer sustainable in the face of massive data that tells a different story.

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