

Martyrdom: Reading the Tales of the Martyrs

Christianity was certainly opposed by leaders in the Jewish community as we saw last week. The difficulty in pursuing their opposition at an official level was that, though ethnic communities could be self-governing in some respects, they could not impose significant punishments against persons and their property. That was something only the Roman governor or the representative of the Roman state could do. When an ethnarch (leader of an ethnic community) exceeded their limits, he and his community could be subject to serious sanctions by the Roman government.

- See e.g. the account of the death of James (NE 1) and the punishment of the high priest Ananus by Albinus.
- The Jewish plot to kill Paul at Damascus (Acts 9:23-25) was probably similar and, if carried out and later brought to the attention of the Roman authorities, might have result in capital punishment or other severe sanctions against member of the Jewish community.
- It should be pointed out that the Romans had a relatively thin tolerance for disorder in ethnic communities, particularly when this unrest began to impact the broader society. Note e.g. the expulsion of the Jews in Rome for unrest in NE 1-2.
- The lack of sympathy for foreign practices could also lead to the charge of atheism being leveled at Romans who were sympathetic to Jewish practices; see NE 6 on the persecution by Domitian in 96 of such citizens.

The first reported persecution (64 AD; as reported by Tacitus in NE 2-3) seems incidental. Some Christians are seized on the basis of "hatred of humanity" (probably because they announced a judgment coming against non-members; compare *Seeds*, 30) and were set on fire (the punishment for magicians, who wished harm to others [cf. NE 291, #255.6], but perhaps also responding to Christian claims of punishment by a divine fire of judgment; see e.g. Mt. 18:8; 25:41; Jude 1:7; etc.)

By the time we get to Pliny in 112 (NE 18-19), Christians are coming to public awareness as a novel cult and, to avoid later accusations of error, Pliny, who does not have a regular appointment as a governor, confirms with the emperor what is to be done.

- Here Christians appear to be targeted due to (1) their obstinacy (resisting the authority of the Roman state), (2) their competition with the traditional cults, and (3) their recruitment of both sexes (women requiring state protection) and (4) their unauthorized meetings.
- Trajan takes Pliny to task for pursuing anonymous accusations (which could be based on nothing more than spite) and also refuses to set a policy so as to preserve administrative flexibility. This essentially made Christianity ignorable until definite public problems made dealing with it unavoidable.
- A similar pattern under Hadrian (NE 21-22), with the provision that accusations proved false, should result in punishment of the one making unfounded accusations. (A similar view may be attributed to Marcus Aurelius in NE 158.).

In the second century, persecution and legal penalties tend to fall disproportionately upon publicly visible Christians, particularly bishops, catechists and persons of high social status who were well known in the broader community.

See e.g. the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (NE 23-30). Because of the power and position of such persons,

- the broader society sought to make an example of them by punishing them and
- the Christian community sought to make an example of them by remembering and commemorating their heroic willingness to suffer for the faith, following after their Lord, who similarly suffered at the hands of others ("the Lord might once again give an example of the martyrdom which resembles the Gospel story...Now blessed are all the martyrdoms which have taken place in accordance with the will of God...And who could fail to admire their nobility and endurance and love for their master?...So, giving heed to the grace of Christ, they despised the torments of the world, by a single hour purchasing eternal life...that he might be made a partner of Christ,...and that his betrayers might undergo the punishment of Judas himself"). Compare also *Seeds*, 30: "The martyrs were thankful because they were sharing in the Passion of the Lord" and *Seeds*, 101 "They shouted all sorts of insults at him, as if he was Christ himself"; 104 Blandina, tied to a post with her arms out, an image of Christ on the Cross)
- Boldness, however, might lead one to suffer when seized (like Jesus), but not to surrender oneself (cf. Mt. 10:23 and the negative account of Quintus in *Mart. Polyc.* 4.1; contrast the positive accounts in the *Martyrdom of Ptolemy and Lucius* in NE 31 and in Tertullian in NE 159; note the description of the law of the church by Cyprian in *Seeds*, 70)

As Paul Schrodt has noted,

- "If the martyrs are deemed 'holy' and worthy of imitation because they imitated Jesus and therefore enjoy closeness to God, none can be accounted more so than these saints who have witnessed to Christ through the shedding of their blood. They have followed Jesus in the ultimate sacrifice of self, martyrdom--the exchange through pain and suffering of temporal life for life eternal..."
- "What motivated the martyrs to become the saints they are was not any type of death cult, but the proper ordering of love in their lives. They preferred love of God to any further possibility of sweetness or beauty in this earthly life. 'Behold how beautiful are all the things one beholds with the eyes of the flesh: the heavens, the earth, the sea...but these are lovers of the creator...So love that you may love him the more. I do not wish that you may have nothing of love, but an ordered love ([Augustine], s. 335C)"

(quotations taken from Schrodt, "Saints" in Allan D. Fitzgerald [ed.], *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999, 748)

- For further reflection on these themes, see the handout Carole Straw, "Martyrs" in Fitzgerald, 538-542, which makes some excellent and edifying observations that go beyond what can reasonably be discussed in this class.

Note the supernatural phenomena involved in Polycarp's martyrdom

- His martyrdom is included within God's plan and he receives advance supernatural notice by way of visionary/prophetic phenomena (compare *Mart. Perp. Fel.* in *Seeds of Faith* 16-17, 20-21, 24-25; Cyprian in *Seeds*, 71, 80, 83).

- Polycarp is supernaturally strengthened by God to confess the faith even unto death (compare Felicity in *Seeds*, 27).

Because of the martyr's identification with Christ and Christ's strengthening of the martyr, the martyrs (and after their death, their bodies) were perceived as trophies of grace by the faithful, signs of the victory that Christ had through his saints, who even after their martyrdom continued to be advocates with Christ for the well-being of the Christian community.

- the graves of the martyrs as places of reverence/the martyr as intercessor for the faithful (cf. *Mart. Polyc*, 18.2-3 in NE 28; *Seeds*, 70; and perhaps *Mart. Just.* 6 in NE 34; contrast the Roman authorities degradation of the bodies and their refusal to surrender them in NE 42=*Seeds*, 109-110).
- the transformation of the *refrigerium* (commemoration of and honor shown to the dead within the family) into the commemoration and honor of exemplary spiritual ancestors within the family of faith (i.e. the church)

Note also the constant interventions of deacons and other members of the Christian community toward the martyrs in *Seeds*, 19, 27, 28, 65 and the public presence of Christians in *Seeds*, 71-73, plus the encouragement of Alexander in *Seeds*, 107.