

MARTYRDOM AND ROME

G. W. BOWERSOCK

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1995

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1995
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Bowersock, G. W. (Glen Warren), 1936–
Martyrdom and Rome / G. W. Bowersock.

p. cm. – (The Wiles lectures given at the Queen's University
of Belfast)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 46539 7 (hardback)

1. Persecution – History – Early church, ca. 30–600.
2. Martyrdom (Christianity) – History of doctrines – Early church, ca. 30–600.
3. Rome – Politics and government – 30 BC–476 AD.

I. Title. II. Series: Wiles lectures.

BR1604.2.B68 1995

272'.1–dc20 94–28665 CIP

ISBN 0 521 46539 7 hardback

ISBN 0 521 53049 0 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	page xi
I. The making of martyrdom	1
II. The written record	23
III. The civic role of martyrs	41
IV. Martyrdom and suicide	59
 Appendixes	
1 Protomartyr	75
2 Ignatius and iv Maccabees	77
3 Great Sabbath	82
4 Asia, Aphrodisias, and the Lyon <i>Martyrium</i>	85
 <i>Select bibliography</i>	 99
<i>Index</i>	103

I

The making of martyrdom

Towards the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Commodus, in the last years of the decade of the 180s AD, a Roman governor in the province of Asia was conducting his normal judicial activities when a throng of excited people pushed forward to stand before his tribunal. Without provocation or prior accusation they all voluntarily declared themselves to be Christians, and by this declaration they presumably showed themselves unwilling to sacrifice to the Roman emperor – a test to which governors regularly put professing Christians. The pious mob encouraged the governor to do his duty and consign them all promptly to death. He obligingly had a few of them led away to execution; but, as the remainder clamored ever more loudly to be granted the same reward, he cried out to the petitioners in exasperation, “You wretches, if you want to die, you have cliffs to leap from and ropes to hang by.”¹ The Roman official, who was a well-known member of a famous senatorial family at Rome, would hardly have confronted Christians for the first time on this occasion. He must have known their enthusiasm for death at the hands of the Roman administration. The philosophic emperor Marcus Aurelius had, not long before, wondered to himself in his *Meditations* why it was that the Christians were

¹ Tertull., *ad Scap.* 5. The exasperated proconsul was C. Arrius Antoninus in the reign of Commodus: B. Thomasson, *Laterculi Praesidum* 1 (Göteborg, 1984), col. 232, no. 162.

so unreasonable and disorderly.² Marcus, as a good Stoic, deplored irrational suicide, and he certainly could not comprehend it when others were expected to deliver the fatal blow.

The scene in the province of Asia, an administrative region which corresponds roughly today with the central portion of western Turkey, was recalled by the great patristic writer Tertullian in an address to a Roman governor in North Africa early in the third century. Tertullian eloquently threatened that the scene might be repeated in Carthage:

If you think that Christians should be persecuted, what will you do with thousands and thousands of men and women of every age and every rank presenting themselves to you? How many fires and how many swords will you need? How will Carthage itself tolerate the decimation of its population at your hands when everyone knows relatives and friends who have been removed, when everyone sees even men and women of your own senatorial order and aristocratic leaders of the city, relatives and friends of your own friends?³

The rush to martyrdom was presented by Tertullian as an ever-present danger to the Roman government.

Tertullian himself had, at a stage in his career, imbibed the sentiments of one of the great leaders of an early Christian sect in Asia Minor, a certain Montanus, through whom the Holy Spirit was alleged to have pronounced the following dire injunction: "Desire not to die in bed, in miscarriages, or soft fevers, but in martyrdoms, to glorify Him who suffered for you."⁴ Suffering and death at the hands of persecuting magistrates so elevated the status and presumably future prospects of martyrs that, by the late second century, there

² Marc. Aur., *ad se ipsum* 11.3. Cf. the perplexity of the younger Pliny earlier in the second century, when confronted by Christians who refused to acknowledge the divinity of the Roman emperor: *Epist.* 10.96.

³ Tertull., *ad Scap.* 5.

⁴ On Tertullian's Montanist period, see T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 131-42. For the command of the Holy Spirit, Tertull., *de fuga* 9, *ad fin.*

The making of martyrdom

were many Christians (although it is impossible to say just how many) who actively courted their own deaths as martyrs. This phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom was by no means an eccentricity of the period: it continued for more than a century. The ecclesiastical historian Eusebius reports that he saw Christians condemned to death in massive numbers in Upper Egypt in the early fourth century, and he indicates that most of these were volunteers, who, as soon as one of their number had been condemned, leapt up one after another before the judgment seat to confess themselves to be Christians.⁵ In Sicily at about the same time another governor was astonished to hear a man walk past and cry out, "I wish to die, for I am a Christian." The presiding officer courteously responded, "Come in, whoever said that. And the blessed Euplus [for such was his name] entered the courtroom, bearing the immaculate Gospels." The blessed Euplus's wish was soon fulfilled.⁶

Voluntary martyrdom astonished the pagans, as well it might. Marcus Aurelius was not the only thoughtful person of the age who contemplated with incredulity what he saw going on around him. Celsus, the author of a highly sophisticated and detailed tract on the Christians, came to the conclusion that the Christians were simply out of their minds – insane – because they "deliberately" rushed forward to arouse the anger of an emperor or a governor in order to bring upon themselves blows, torture, and even death.⁷ Half a century later the Christian apologist Origen attempted to answer this criticism of Celsus, but he found very little to say because such conduct was widespread and, in many quarters, admired.⁸

Although Origen claimed that the Christians were doing

⁵ Euseb., *Hist. Eccles.* 8.9.5.

⁶ *Acta Eupli, ad init.* (both Greek and Latin recensions). On voluntary martyrdom, see G. E. M. de Ste Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?," *Past and Present* no. 26 (1963), 6–38 (particularly 21–4).

⁷ Celsus, *apud Orig.*, *contra Cels.* 8.39, 41, 55, 65. ⁸ Orig., *contra Cels.* 8.65.

nothing “contrary to the law and word of God,” the spread of voluntary martyrdoms had become so alarming to many thoughtful churchmen that they gradually developed a sharp distinction between solicited martyrdom and the more traditional kind that came as a result of persecution. Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, and Lactantius, all great spokesmen of the early Church, attempted to stop this enthusiasm and reserve the ranks of the martyrs for those who endured suffering and death in the face of persecution.⁹ But the efforts of leading intellectuals and dignitaries did little to stop the enthusiasm. By the end of the fourth century the Christian writer Sulpicius Severus observed wryly that the martyrs of the early Church desired death even more eagerly than clergymen desired a bishopric.¹⁰

It seems evident that the earliest authentic martyrs suffered torture and death at the hands of Roman officials who were determined to enforce the traditional worship of the Roman emperors and to root out what seemed a seditious new cult.¹¹ Those martyrs had received much recognition and were believed to have found so great a reward in death that others clearly wanted to emulate them. As Gibbon remarked with a characteristically pungent turn of phrase, “The assurance of a lasting reputation upon earth, a motive so congenial to the vanity of human nature, often served to animate the courage of the martyrs.”¹² For true martyrs were forgiven their sins and did indeed acquire a lasting reputation upon earth.

Although voluntary martyrdoms are hardly so common in modern times as they were in the days of the Roman empire, the fact and the concept of martyrdom continue to be a powerful force at the intersection of religion and politics even

⁹ See, for discussion and reference, G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian*, vol. 1 (New York, 1984), pp. 303–4.

¹⁰ Sulp. Sev., *Chron.* 2.32.4: ... *multoque avidius tum martyria gloriosis mortibus quaerebantur, quam nunc episcopatus pravis ambitionibus appetuntur.*

¹¹ See de Ste Croix, “Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?”

¹² E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. 16 [vol. 2, p. 110, Bury].

today. Martyrdom was not something that the ancient world had seen from the beginning. What we can observe in the second, third, and fourth centuries of our era is something entirely new. Of course, in earlier ages principled and courageous persons, such as Socrates at Athens or the three Jews in the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar, had provided glorious examples of resistance to tyrannical authority and painful suffering before unjust judges. But never before had such courage been absorbed into a conceptual system of posthumous recognition and anticipated reward, nor had the very word martyrdom existed as the name for this system. Martyrdom, as we understand it, was conceived and devised in response to complex social, religious, and political pressures, and the date and the circumstances of its making are still the subject of lively debate.

“Martyr” is now, after all, a technical term and a powerful one. An honorable or glorious death has nothing like the resonance of martyrdom, which has inspired sophisticated and untutored persons alike to plunge eagerly into the after-life. “Martyr” is in origin the Greek word μάρτυς, which becomes μάρτυρος, μάρτυρες, in the oblique cases, and this is a word that simply means “witness.” It has a long and interesting history in the Greek language from earliest times in that sense. It was naturally part of the legal language of the Greek courts, and it could be used metaphorically for all kinds of observation and attestation.¹³ But, until the Christian literature of the mid-second century AD, it had never designated dying for a cause. When it finally assumed that sense, its meaning of “witness” began to slip away, so that the word “martyr” in Greek and the same word borrowed in Latin came more and more to mean what it means today. When Gibbon, in chapter 38 of his *Decline and Fall*, took note that the

¹³ Cf. for example, B. W. Frier, *American Journal of Legal History* 36 (1992), 389, reviewing P. Cartledge, P. Millett, and S. Todd (eds.), *Nomos: Essays in Athenian Law, Politics, and Society* (Cambridge, 1990).

Catholic Sigismund had acquired the honors of a saint and martyr, he paused to exclaim in a footnote, "A martyr! How strangely that word has been distorted from its original sense of a common witness."¹⁴

There can be no doubt that among the Christians an intense and seemingly irrational desire to die at the hands of persecutors antedated the creation of the terminology that transformed the common word for "witness." Consider, for example, Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century. He would undoubtedly qualify as a voluntary martyr in terms of his actions. When he was taken from Antioch on the Syrian coast to Rome for execution, he was allowed to stop in Smyrna in Asia Minor. There he communicated with the principal churches of the region, and he wrote a letter to the Christians at Rome begging them not to do anything that would prevent his being given to the wild beasts when he arrived there.¹⁵ He displayed in his writing what has been described as a "pathological yearning for martyrdom."¹⁶ But his language nowhere includes the word. He says that he is in love with death, and he anticipates with joy the tortures that lie ahead: "Come, fire and cross, and encounters with beasts, incisions and dissections, wrenching of bones, hacking of limbs, crushing of the whole body."¹⁷ In one of his most famous metaphors he expressed his hope of being "ground by the teeth of wild beasts" into "the pure bread" of Christ.¹⁸ Yet with all this, Ignatius betrays no knowledge of the language or concept of martyrdom. But he certainly longed for death.

The origins of the phenomenon have long excited scholarly and theological debate. In his book on pagans and Christians, Robin Lane Fox asks (and attempts to answer) the question,

¹⁴ E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, ch. 38 [vol. 4, p. 121, Bury].

¹⁵ Ignatius, *Epist. ad Rom.* 5.2 and 8.1-3.

¹⁶ De Ste Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?"

¹⁷ Ignatius, *Epist. ad Rom.* 5.3.

¹⁸ Ignatius, *Epist. ad Rom.* 4.1.

The making of martyrdom

“How had this powerful idea of the martyr been constructed?”¹⁹ The new *Oxford History of Christianity* observes, with admirable restraint, “The Christians called heroes of integrity, ‘witnesses,’ martyrs. Why this word was specially chosen has been the subject of scholarly controversy.”²⁰ And that unimpeachable German repository of classical learning, Pauly-Wissowa’s encyclopaedia, declares in its article on martyrs, “The origin of this designation continues to be controversial.”²¹ Thirty years ago a young German theological student devoted 250 large pages to this subject – very well, I may add – but in a work that hardly anyone reads because of its elephantine traversal of the jungle of sources.²² I am under no illusion that the subject will be less controversial when I have finished this chapter, but I dare to hope that its outline and issues will be clearer.

As the case of Ignatius reminds us, one must consider the desire for death in conjunction with the concept of martyrdom. But they are not the same. Pathological desire comes first; but, despite modern claims to the contrary, there is no reason to think that anyone displayed anything comparable to martyrdom before the Christians. The only antecedent parallels that are customarily cited are the death of Socrates at the very beginning of the fourth century BC and two episodes in the history of the Maccabees in Palestine during the second century BC. The story of the fiery furnace had a happy ending and hardly constitutes anything like martyrdom, despite claims that it does. Neither the case of Socrates nor that of the Maccabees demonstrates that the idea of martyrdom should be attached to earlier societies. I want to argue that martyr-

¹⁹ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987), p. 436.

²⁰ J. McManners (ed.), *Oxford History of Christianity* (Oxford, 1990), p. 41, from the experienced pen of Henry Chadwick.

²¹ Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* 14.2 (Stuttgart, 1930), col. 2044.

²² Norbert Brox, *Zeuge und Märtyrer: Untersuchungen zur frühchristlichen Zeugnis-Terminologie* (Munich, 1961).

dom was alien to both the Greeks and the Jews, and the position I take here is close to that of Delehayé and von Campenhausen among the many scholars who have discussed this subject.²³

Socrates certainly is, in the modern sense, one of the greatest martyrs of western civilization; but, if we apply the word "martyr" to him, it is only retrospectively with full knowledge of what a real martyr was like. Socrates was courageous, holding to his principles in the face of unjust condemnation, and he hoped (but was certainly not sure) that things might be better after he drank the hemlock. A real martyr knows that things will be better, at least for him or for her. Let us recall, for example, the magnificent ending of the *Apology* of Socrates, as Plato has recreated it for us:

But you, men of the jury, must be of good hope when it comes to the matter of death. Consider this one point to be true – that a good man cannot suffer evil either when alive or when dead and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods. Whereas what has happened to me occurred by accident, this much is clear to me: that it is better for me to die and to be set free from these troubles.

The *Apology* goes on to conclude with the celebrated words, "Now it is time to go away, for me to die and for you to live. Which of us will have the better fate is unclear to everyone except to god."²⁴

It is perfectly true that, for a time in the history of the early Christian Church, Socrates was mentioned as a kind of pre-Christian martyr, although eventually the Church deplored such citations of non-Christian examples, and of Socrates in

²³ H. Delehayé, *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires* (Brussels, 1921); H. von Campenhausen, *Die Idee des Martyriums in der alten Kirche* (Göttingen, 1936). For an altogether different perspective, see T. Baumeister, *Die Anfänge der Theologie des Martyriums* (Münster, 1980). A useful survey of recent literature on the theology and origins of martyrdom appears in Boudewijn Dehandschutter, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der röm. Welt* II.27.1 (1993), pp. 508–14.

²⁴ Plato, *Apol.* 41c–42a.

The making of martyrdom

particular.²⁵ The recorded martyrdoms of Apollonius in the second century and Pionios in the third both cite Socrates as an example,²⁶ but it is fair to say that these allusions occur in the context of persuading incredulous pagans that what the martyrs are doing is not irrational. It is a rhetorical argument and admittedly one of considerable force. It does not constitute a statement that Socrates was, in the Christian sense, a martyr. And, needless to say, Socrates nowhere speaks of himself as a martyr, nor does anyone else. The word turns up in the *Apology* only in its proper sense of "witness" in order to affirm that the god Apollo at Delphi can attest to the wisdom of Socrates. "He, the god," says Socrates, "is the witness I shall give you."²⁷ It is obviously an elevated form of the purely judicial use of the word.

The so-called martyrdoms in the history of the Maccabees are another matter altogether. In many treatments of this problem they have served as the basis for ascribing the whole concept of martyrdom to the Jews. Both Christians and Jews in late antiquity and the Middle Ages considered the episodes of courage in the Books of the Maccabees as examples of martyrdom. But they are not described as such there. More important, the whole concept of martyrdom in Judaism, as expressed by the phrase *qidduš ha-shem* (sanctification of the name), does not occur until after the Tannaitic period – not until late antiquity at the earliest.²⁸ The alleged martyrdoms at Masada in the first century or of Rabbi Akiva in the second are all retrospective constructions of a posterior age, an age sub-

²⁵ G. M. A. Hanfmann, "Socrates and Christ," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 60 (1951), 205–33; K. Döring, *Exemplum Socratis* (Wiesbaden, 1979), ch. 7: "Das Beispiel des Sokrates bei den frühchristlichen Märtyrern und Apologeten," pp. 143–61. Also see G. W. Clarke, *The Octavius of Marcus Minucius Felix* (New York, 1974), pp. 240–1.

²⁶ *Mart. Pionii* 17; *Acta Apollonii* 41. ²⁷ Plato, *Apol.* 20e.

²⁸ S. Safrai, "Martyrdom in the Teachings of the Tannaim," in T. C. de Kruijf, H.v.d. Sandt, *Sjaloom* (Arnhem, 1983), pp. 145–64. On the whole subject, see J. W. van Henten (ed.), *Die Entstehung der jüdischen Martyrologie* (Leiden, 1989).

stantially later than that of the first Christian martyrdoms. Now let us look at the Maccabean episodes in detail.

Among the books of the Biblical Apocrypha is a moving account of the resistance of the Maccabees to the strenuous efforts of the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV to force Jews into a Hellenic way of life. These struggles took place a little before the middle of the second century BC. What we now possess are abbreviated versions, known as epitomes, of an allegedly longer account that is lost. In the so-called second book of Maccabees, two powerful stories are told of resistance to the royal order that Jews should eat pork.²⁹ These two stories are absent from the account in the first book of Maccabees, and there is good reason, both textual and historical, to believe (as most scholars now do) that at least the second story is a later insertion into the narrative given in the second book of Maccabees. It is possible that the first is an addition as well. In a work that celebrates in almost every chapter the Second Temple at Jerusalem (destroyed in AD 70) as still standing, doubtless reflecting an obsession of the longer original text, the two tales of resistance utterly lack any reference to the Temple. And the second tale puts the Seleucid king in Palestine when he was not there.

Both of these intrusive stories received dramatically amplified treatment at an unknown date in the work that we know today as the fourth book of Maccabees. There can be no doubt that this latter work was written under the Roman empire. Although current opinion puts the second book a century or more earlier,³⁰ it could equally be of Roman imperial date (although before 70). It is often forgotten that the first allusion to the extant books of the Maccabees does not appear until the writings of Clement of Alexandria in the late second century.³¹

²⁹ 11 Macc. 6–7.

³⁰ Cf. Chr. Habicht, 2. *Makkabäerbuch*, *Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, vol. 1 (Gütersloh, 1976).

³¹ Clem. Alex., *Strom.* 5.14.97 (ἡ τῶν Μακκαβαίων ἐπιτομή).

The making of martyrdom

The stunning resemblance of the resistance shown in the two stories of the second and fourth books to the resistance shown in various Christian martyrdoms has led many to believe that these accounts reveal a Jewish tradition that surfaced here to provide the inspiration and model for what came later. Certainly one can readily admit that they were a primary justification for including books of the Maccabees in the Biblical Apocrypha, and they were undoubtedly much appreciated by the apologists of the early Church. But since there is no reason to think that the two accounts reflect the historical time of the Maccabees, what time they do reflect is anyone's guess. Inasmuch as they do not make reference to the Temple and seem to be additions to the narrative, they could even be associated with the Roman empire after AD 70.

The first story concerns the aged Eleazer, who refused to eat pork and refused equally to engage in a subterfuge proposed by his friends and well-wishers to extricate him from the difficult situation in which he found himself. He stood by his principles with courage and eloquence. He declared that, if he escaped the punishment of man, he would then be subject to the punishment of the Lord, which he could escape neither in life nor in death. The author of Second Maccabees said that he preferred death with glory to life with pollution, and consequently he went voluntarily (αὐθαιρέτως in Greek) to the execution block. At the end of his narration the author observes that he left behind an example of nobility and a reminder of virtue for generations to come. Nowhere in the Greek of Second Maccabees (nor in the considerably more elaborate account in Fourth Maccabees) does the word "martyr" appear. Eleazer is presented as a shining example of death with glory (ὁ μετὰ εὐκλείας θάνατος),³² a death as old as the *Iliad*.

The second story carries an even greater impact because it

³² II Macc. 6.19.

involves an entire family – a mother with her seven children. Each of the children in turn refuses to cooperate with the royal order and goes to his death. Finally the mother herself ends her life after her children. This powerful narration is, like the account of Eleazer, vastly amplified in the fourth book of Maccabees. But again the word “martyrdom” does not appear, although in one passage in the later Fourth Maccabees διαμαρτυρία is used in a conventional judicial sense.³³ Protestations of the sons and what the author of Second Maccabees calls “the excessive torments” they suffered inevitably recall the Martyr Acts and constitute a parallel to them. The question is, quite simply, whether or not the accounts of Eleazer and the mother with her sons antedate the concept of martyrdom as it was shaped by the Christians.

As we have seen, no one believes that any of the books of the Maccabees are actually contemporaneous with the events they describe. If the narratives of Eleazer and the mother with her sons are insertions into the second book of Maccabees by the epitomator (or subsequently by someone else), there is no indication that these two stories must belong before the middle of the first century AD. The only thing of which we can be certain is that the narratives in the second book of Maccabees must precede the more amplified versions in the fourth, which could have been composed at any time down to Clement of Alexandria. This leaves us with a possible date for the stories of Eleazer and the mother with her sons in the second half of the first century, in other words, in the time when the New Testament documents were coming into being and the zealous Ignatius was growing up.

This was the time in which we first glimpse, in a chronologically secure context, the new concept of martyrdom, although still without the word. So if the two stories in the books of the Maccabees have nothing to do either with the

³³ IV Macc. 16.16.

The making of martyrdom

authentic history of the Maccabees or with the lost original text that recounted it, it may be suggested that they have everything to do with the aspirations and literature of the early Christians. There are some indications that the Greek text of the story of the mother with her sons in Second Maccabees was translated from a Hebrew or Aramaic original.³⁴ This intimation of a Semitic source for the heroic tales that the Christians soon absorbed into their own tradition makes it reasonable to suggest that they arose in the world of mid first-century Palestine or slightly later.

Consideration of the so-called Maccabean martyrs brings us, therefore, precisely to the period and language of the New Testament. It is through the texts preserved there that we must look for possible allusions to the idea and terminology of martyrdom. The earliest appearance of the words "martyr" and "martyrdom" in the clear sense of death at the hands of hostile secular authority is the martyrdom of Polycarp in Asia (western Asia Minor) in about 150. The narrator says:

We are writing to you, dear brothers, the story of the martyrs and of blessed Polycarp who put a stop to the persecution by his own martyrdom [διὰ τῆς μαρτυρίας] as though he were putting a seal upon it . . . Blessed indeed and noble are all the martyrdoms that took place in accordance with God's will . . . For even when [the martyrs] were torn by whips until the very structure of their bodies was laid bare down to the inner veins and arteries, they endured it, making even the bystanders weep for pity.³⁵

The account of Polycarp's martyrdom is not likely to have been written very much after the event. Accordingly it looks as if the concept of martyrdom was constructed by the Christians in the hundred years or so between about 50 and 150, and the word adapted in the second half of that period. The coincidence with the composition of the New Testament would suggest that the stories of Jesus's life and death were

³⁴ Cf. Habicht, 2. *Makkabäerbuch* (n. 30 above), p. 171.

³⁵ *Mart. Polycarpi* 2.

related in one way or another to this extraordinary development.

The Greek word μάρτυς appears frequently in the New Testament, but nowhere can it be shown without question to be used in any sense other than that of "witness."³⁶ In the Gospels and particularly in the Acts of the Apostles, the word is used to designate those who witnessed Jesus's suffering and those who witnessed his resurrection. Hence the word is in many cases simply another way of describing an apostle. In the Apocalypse (the book of Revelation) Jesus himself appears as a faithful witness (ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός), a striking phrase that may even reflect John's deep knowledge of classical Greek since that expression can be traced back to the poet Pindar.³⁷ It is obvious that Jesus bore witness to the glory of God, and there is nothing to suggest here that John refers to him as a martyr who died at the hands of the Roman authorities.

There are only two passages in the entire text of the Greek New Testament that could conceivably be interpreted as using the word μάρτυς in the new sense of martyr. But the improbability of such a use even in these instances is underscored by the many cases in the New Testament in which the word means simply "witness." Nonetheless, these two passages could have provided a solid foundation for any subsequent redefinition of the word. Both involve persons who were put to death. Hence the ambiguity of their being described as μάρτυς. John, in the second chapter of the Apocalypse, makes reference to an otherwise unknown Antipas whom he describes, curiously, in the same words that he actually uses for Jesus himself, "a faithful witness," in this case qualified with the possessive "my faithful witness": "Antipas was my faithful μάρτυς [witness], who was slain

³⁶ Cf. W. Bauer, K. and B. Aland, *Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 6th edn (Berlin, 1988), s.v. μάρτυς, cols. 1001-2.

³⁷ Apoc. 1.5, 3.14. Cf. Pind., *Pyth.* 1.88.

The making of martyrdom

among you."³⁸ He was not a μάρτυς *because* he was slain, but a witness who was slain.

The other case is better known and more amply described in the New Testament: it is the story of Stephen, stoned to death after delivering an eloquent speech in response to an accusation of blasphemy. The speech concludes with Stephen's literally bearing witness, as he declares that he sees the heavens opening before him and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. At this point his audience "cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him."³⁹ Later in the book of Acts Paul alludes to the stoning of Stephen by the words, "When the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed."⁴⁰ Only a few verses earlier Paul had referred to God's choice of himself as "a witness to all men" of what he had seen and heard,⁴¹ and so it is hard to believe that in his reference to Stephen, almost immediately after, the sense of witness would be any more loaded than it was in the reference he made to himself. Stephen was a witness of the glory of the Lord and could legitimately be called "your witness." On the other hand, since he did suffer a violent death (albeit at the hands of his fellow Jews) and the shedding of his blood is linked to his being called witness, his witnessing could obviously be construed as consisting in that death. This, in my view, is the one passage in the entire New Testament that might have effectively encouraged the sense of martyrdom as it was to develop. The allusion to Antipas could then have been construed in a similar way.

We have already observed that, when Ignatius was craving to be burned, eaten, and ground up into the pure bread of Christ, he never once availed himself of the term "martyr," and he was certainly writing after the composition of the Acts.

³⁸ Apoc. 2.13. ³⁹ Acta Apost. 7.56-8.

⁴⁰ Acta Apost. 22.20: ὅτε ἐξεχύνητο τὸ αἷμα Στεφάνου τοῦ μάρτυρός σου.

⁴¹ Acta Apost. 22.15: μάρτυς . . . πρὸς πάντας ἀνθρώπους.

His example suggests that, although the sacrifice and death that we associate with martyrdom was already appreciated and sought after, it had not yet received a name. The example of Jesus himself, to say nothing of Stephen, Antipas, and others, must surely have constituted the ultimate background for the development of aspirations such as those of Ignatius. It is worth comparing parallel developments in secular history of the same period (the second half of the first century). This was an age in which philosophers as well as Christians stood up to the tyrannical authority of Rome and its emperor, even to the point of exile and death. Their resistance, documented in traditional classical texts as well as modern discoveries on papyrus, shows a spreading desire for liberty and for freedom from the oppressor that, in those terms, has a deep and memorable history across the centuries and particularly in the Old Testament. None of these *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, as some of these narratives have been called, has the characteristics of Christian martyrdom except insofar as they oppose the ruling authority.⁴² The Stoics were particularly famous for resisting the emperor, and a well-known group of Stoic philosophers at Rome earned everlasting fame for their outspoken resistance.⁴³ Nor were the Stoics alone in this. The fabulous wonder-worker, Apollonius of Tyana, was a Pythagorean, who showed no less courage, it seems, before the tyrant Domitian.⁴⁴

Early in the second century the philosopher Epictetus in his *Dissertations* proclaimed that the philosopher was called by Zeus to be his witness. The language of Epictetus has long been seen to provide an interesting parallel with the language of the New Testament. Zeus sends evil to test men, and he uses philosophers to instruct them, says Epictetus: "The philo-

⁴² Cf. H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* (Oxford, 1954).

⁴³ See Ch. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge, 1960).

⁴⁴ Philostr., *Vit. Apoll.* 7.32-4.