

The legend of Christians who suffered and died at the hands of Roman persecutors persists to this day. The witness of these martyrs is especially important among Christian communities in nations and geographical regions where Christianity is either outlawed or socially taboo. In the accounts of multiple martyrdoms, the qualities of the persecuted persons are consistent: the presence of supernatural visions, belief in a cosmic struggle, preference of death over pardon and the witness of these martyr's deaths to those immediately around them.

The revelation of supernatural visions to those who are to be martyred serves several functions. Firstly, these supernatural revelations are considered a gift of God, comforting the persecuted with the promise of life after death. For the martyr Perpetua, these visions bring courage and confidence in the face of physical torment and also the assurance of eternal life. Perpetua's vision of a ladder, ascending into the heavens, flanked by a serpent at its base makes clear the idea that the suffering of the martyr is the means by which one comes to God. The serpent, representative of the satan, is an aid as Perpetua climbs the heavenly ladder. As Perpetua approaches the ladder, she commands the serpent; "it shall not hurt me, in the name of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> The serpent extends its head and becomes but another rung in the ladder extending towards Perpetua's heavenly destination.<sup>2</sup> In this way, usual notions of authority and social order are reversed when those who oppose the Christian martyrs actually become *helpers* in God's will. Those who would persecute the martyr's for Christian faith actually end up promoting the faith and the faithful.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Passions of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, ch.4

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

The role of the satan in Perpetua's vision is evidence of the cosmic consequences of the martyr's suffering and death. "For they kept before their view the escape from that fire which is eternal and never shall be quenched, and looked forward with the eyes of their heart to those things which are laid up for such as endure."<sup>3</sup> Martyrs understood their suffering as unity with Christ and in Christ's suffering.<sup>4</sup> Where the martyr was obedient unto death, as Christ was, so could that martyr expect external reward. At the same time, as Christ's death and resurrection were believed to be the final blow to the dominion of Evil on earth, so was the martyr's death a participatory event in the ongoing effort to banish the lasting presence of evil on Earth.

Because the martyr's death was an act of participation and identification with Christ, death at the hands of the persecutor was not something to be avoided or even despised. In fact, martyrdom was highly prized by many. A martyr's death included one in an elite group. Not that martyrs aspired to heroic status, rather previously martyred persons often appeared in the supernatural visions of those who were presently persecuted. In *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, the martyr, Saturus, describes a vision in which angels welcome Saturus and Perpetua into the heavenly realm, along with a whole host of martyrs who receive them. Saturus and Perpetua are taken into the very presence of God, where they receive God's blessing and are welcomed to enjoy paradise.

The martyr's death, then, was among the highest form of witness for second and third century Christians. All around those who were being persecuted and killed persons were accepting the Christian gospel and acknowledging the strength of God through Jesus Christ who empowered the martyrs to suffer so bravely. *The Acts of (Paul and) Thecla*

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<sup>3</sup> *The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna, Concerning the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, ch. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *The World Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Blackwell Publishing: Carleton, Australia, 2005) 20-21.

demonstrates the great impact the witness of the martyrs had on those around them. “And the governor issued a decree immediately, saying, “I release to you Thecla, the God-fearing servant of God... One is God who has saved Thecla!”<sup>5</sup> This is one of a minority of martyrdom accounts where the Christian survives.

Today, myths about Christian martyrdom empower those who are truly persecuted and serve rhetorical purposes for others who merely *feel* at odds with their culture. In nations where Christian scriptures and Christian worship is outlawed, accounts of early Christian martyrs serve the same function as the supernatural visions – giving strength, courage and the promise of eternal reward. For others, especially in America, Christian martyrdom is far from a reality and actual persecution might be considered a matter of perspective more than organized practice. Especially for those who make claims about a “liberal media” or a “homosexual agenda” the martyrdom accounts are misused and embolden an often radically oppressive agenda.

A common theme among the martyrdom accounts is the martyrs’ unwillingness, even inability, to deny their Christian belief. Like many members of American society, martyrs were asked to reject their central identifying quality. In modern America, homosexuals, Muslims and resident aliens all endure similar persecution to that of second and third century Christians. For all three, the dominant culture demands they deny their sexuality, religious identity or culture background in order to merge into the mainstream. As with early Christians, many stories of suffering and redemption emerge out of these communities which serve to empower and strengthen those who endure persecution in future generations.

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<sup>5</sup> R.S. Kraemer (translator), *The Acts of (Paul and) Thecla*, ch. 38.