

What Do Fiction, Mass Crucifixions and Killer Seals¹ Add Up To?

Summarizing Breakthroughs in
Martyrdom Scholarship Since 1990

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Written fifty years ago, W. H. C. Frend's *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* was in a short time received as the definitive book on the topic. It held sway with such authority for more than a generation and is still cited often today. But within the last twenty-five years so much new scholarship on martyrdom in the first five centuries of the common era has been produced that Frend's work now is in many circles cited primarily as the best summary of how not to think about the topic. Indeed, current scholarly conversation has shifted so completely that current scholarship has more than several scholars suspecting that martyrological discourse in the first centuries may well have been a defining dimension of the emergence of Christianity itself.

This paper is meant to survey the last twenty-five years of work related to topics of Jewish and Christian martyrdom as our Christianity Seminar enters the fray of this dimension of the writing of the history of early Christianity. It is done primarily to provide snapshots of this recent work, both for those of us who have forgotten what has been done on this subject or who have not had a chance to keep up. I apologize in advance for the inevitable missing of important scholarship in this review and for the ways my summaries do injustice to so much valuable, indeed ground-breaking, insight and research. I have also chosen to do this review in relationship to particular subject matter, which has become the focus of these recent studies, rather than more straightforward summaries of each author's work. This choice has also (with some predictability) aimed to integrate advances in scholarship and resulted in some presumption on my part.

Imperial Violence in Relationship to Ideas and Events of Martyrdom

Seleucid and Roman imperial violence are boldly inscribed in the very portraiture and events of Jewish and Christian martyrdom. Although these two

1. Cf. n. 31 below for the story of a "martyr" and killer seals.

historical imperial phenomena play large parts in the imaginal and narrative vocabularies of martyrdom within eventual Jewish and Christian literature, critical attention to both the historical and imaginal relationships have only become focused in the last several decades. The fields of empire-critical NT studies and gender studies have paid most attention to the historical roles of Seleucid and Roman violence with regard to the plethora of stories of executions at the hands of these empires.

Empire-critical NT scholarship has called important attention to Roman imperial violence in relationship to emerging notions of at least rhetorical resistance by first- and second-century Christ followers to Rome. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was almost certainly the first to raise this in her 1985 volume on the Revelation to John, where she takes very seriously the violent vocabulary of this book as directly critical of and resistant to Roman violence.² She was almost certainly the first in a now long list of studies to see the Revelation to John's aggressive and barely subliminal critique of Rome's portrait of the great prostitute of Babylon and its destruction in chapters 17 and 18. Similarly, and more directly to the point, her work inaugurated direct links between Roman imperial violence and both the "souls of those under the altar who had been killed for the *martyrion* . . . crying in a loud voice, "How long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, before you will give judgment and avenge our blood" (6:9–10), and the 144,000 standing with the Lamb (14:1–5).

Both 2 and 4 Maccabees have extensive narratives of the noble deaths of leaders and spokespersons of late Israel, particularly concerning the persecutions of late Israel by the pre-Maccabean rule of the Seleucid empire. Second Maccabees is substantially earlier than 4 Maccabees, and the rhetoric and theological perspectives differ somewhat. But beginning with George Nickelsburg's studies,³ the Maccabean portraits have been seen as pivotal developments in the function of stories of voluntary death by those resisting the Seleucid empire. Burton Mack⁴ and his former student David Seeley⁵ took up Nickelsburg's work and elaborated it powerfully into a much broader consciousness in NT studies of the connection between the framing of Maccabean martyrological meaning⁶ to a wide swath of Pauline and gospel meaning-making about the death

2. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*.

3. Nickelsburg, "The Genre and Function."

4. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*; and *Who Wrote the New Testament*.

5. Seeley, *The Noble Death*.

6. Daniel Boyarin has observed that there are very large differences between the meanings made of martyrdom in Maccabean literature and the later second- and third-century Jewish and "proto-Christian" martyrological meanings. For Boyarin the Maccabean literature portrays martyrdom as resistance to an imposing and violent empire (Seleucid or Roman), whereas the later period has more to do with an assertion of identity. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 94–118, 187–92.

of Jesus. The most accessible application of this emergent meaning of a noble (Maccabean style) death to Jesus' death is from Stephen Patterson's *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (2004).

A wide range of empire-critical study of the NT has brought new emphasis to imperial violence through its explicit attention to Roman methods of torture, military slaughter and cruelty, and state terror against civilian populations. Primary leadership⁷ in this more graphic portrayal of Roman violence belongs to Richard Horsley and Warren Carter. Their attention to the overlapping imperial strategies of widespread crucifixions, mass slavery and incarceration, and demonstratively cruel battlefield tactics have helped understand Jesus' crucifixion as part of much broader violence.

Similar in subject matter but focused mostly on public monumentalism of Rome throughout the empire, the ground-breaking work of Davina Lopez and Brigitte Kahl has placed a wide range of NT vocabulary in direct contact with and rebuke of Rome's graphic sculpture and facades' picturing of gruesome military conquest and degradation of conquered populations. Lopez's study of the hyper-masculinized Roman images of cruelty to conquered nations represented as humiliated and raped women⁸ broke crucial ground in the study of Paul. Kahl's opus on ancient conversation between Paul's letter to the Galatians and the Great Altar of Pergamon has been appropriately called the most significant Pauline scholarship since Karl Barth's commentary on Romans.⁹ Most recently, Celene Lillie's newly minted dissertation¹⁰ on the rape of Eve among the documents from Nag Hammadi within the context of a wide spectrum of Roman rape stories looks at both monumental images and stories charting an additional large aspect of imperial violence.

Before this recent attention to Seleucid and Roman imperial violence, martyrdom literature made a somewhat bizarre impression whose very horror seemed so ensconced in layers of Christian piety that it was rarely understood as real violence within systems of state terror. Indeed, the pastiche of huge European canvases of white tortured bodies gazing heavenward overlaying the

7. Prior to the strong new scholarship by the likes of Horsley and Carter, Martin Hengel's somewhat flawed yet gripping monograph, *Crucifixion* (1977), on the socio-historical practice of crucifixion in the Mediterranean and Near East prefigured the recent focus on state terror by the Romans and Seleucids. Horsley's extensive work in this vein includes *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (2002); *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea* (2007); *Hearing the Whole Story; Jesus and the Powers* (2001); *Religion and Empire* (2003); *Paul and Empire* (2004); and, *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (2000). Carter's extensive work on this subject includes *The Roman Empire and the New Testament* (2006); *John and Empire* (2008); *Matthew and Empire* (2001); and *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* (2003).

8. Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*.

9. Robbins, review of *Galatians Re-Imagined* (by Brigitte Kahl).

10. Lillie, "The Ruler's Rape of Eve."

iconic single crucifixes in churches and various manifestations of intolerance of religion throughout the world often produces something between incredulity and teenage horror flicks when one reads martyrological literature. The renewal of attention on the systematic practices and policies of the Seleucids and Romans has helped cut through the later pieties and the imaginative character of many early Jewish and Christian narratives in order to consider the effects of insistent state terror as a dimension of martyrdom scholarship.

Historical Reassessments of Martyrdom Narratives

At the same time that empire-critical scholarship has helped resurface consciousness of systemic imperial violence in the ancient Mediterranean world and its sponsorship of mass and/or spectacle-like executions, scholars have also undertaken close readings and intertextual study to assess the likely historicity of martyrdom stories. Important assessment has been done by Daniel Boyarin, Judith Lieu, and to some extent Candida Moss. Perhaps one of the most cogent, careful, and relatively short summaries is that of Elizabeth Castelli:

Paul himself made use of the authority that came from imprisonment by the Romans, laying the groundwork for a complex martyrological tradition that would accrue to him in the decades and centuries after his death. . . . The first narrative of the church, Luke-Acts, made the predictions of persecution an organizing feature of the triumphant story it told. The gruesome portraits of righteous suffering and vindication in the book of Revelation wrote the story of Christian suffering within the broadest framework imaginable with a driving apocalyptic beat establishing the rhythms for understanding historical experience in cosmic terms. . . .

Christian sources routinely portray the Christian communities that emerged around the Mediterranean basin as embattled enclaves of right teaching and innocent practice positioned amidst profound and hostile error. Although the rhetoric may be the fruit of a propagandistic impulse, it is also likely that these texts reflect the fierce and alienated sentiments of members of these small, sectarian communities—even as the same texts generate and sustain such sentiments. . . . Most centrally, the Christian tendency to generate identity through rhetorical strategies of differentiation and assertions of radical superiority intersected with the social and political realities implied by quite small numbers and significant social marginality. . . . Read through Christian lenses, the story of Christian encounters with their Roman others is a cosmic battle narrative in which the opposition embodied by the Roman authorities takes on demonic auras and resonances. Read through the Roman lenses, this same story is often an incidental account of a minor set of skirmishes with unruly subjects—or indeed, a story that does not even merit being recorded.

Historians of the conflict between Christians and imperial authorities generally agree that, prior to the mid-third century, violence against Christians was sporadic, decentralized, and the product of primarily local conditions and

hostilities. Local authorities possessed considerable latitude in applying very general principles to the circumstances that obtained in their jurisdictions. The year 250, meanwhile, is generally considered a pivotal point in the periodization of Roman persecution and Christian martyrdom, marking the occasion of the decree of Decius. This decree required that everyone in the empire offer sacrifice to the gods and secure a receipt affirming that one had done so. For obvious reasons, Decius's decree presented a peculiar challenge to Christians and resulted in the first centralized persecution of Christians. Significantly, a certain percentage of the Christian evidence for this persecution produces a portrait not of Christian constancy, but of accommodation, evasion, and failure. Moreover . . . the decree of Decius was aimed more centrally toward religious reform within the Roman world, grounded more in Decius's desire to unify diverse and local religious observances around a common practice (e.g. sacrifice) than in the persecution of Christians per se. The Valerian persecution (257–260) and the so-called Great Persecution of Diocletian and others in the early years of the fourth century (303–314) followed Decius's decree. . . .

Diocletian had inherited a broad set of political instabilities from his predecessors, and these inspired sweeping military, economic, and administrative reforms alongside an intensification of conservative religious and moral programs. Christians were growing in numbers and influence, and the anti-Christian edicts that were issued in 303 and 304 were aimed at containing the threat this growth represented. . . .

Central to any reconstruction must be the recognition of how thoroughly Roman law, civic identity, and religious obligation overlapped in the ideology of empire. . . . In forming the tetrarchy, itself a pragmatic gesture aimed at restoring some stability to the succession of emperors, Diocletian named himself not only Augustus but also son of Jupiter, aligning his political role and his imperial persona with the deity responsible for order and law. . . . Christian affiliation served as a serious challenge to the religious traditions that assured order, stability, and peace. . . .

In the traditional periodization of persecution, the year 250 operates as a watershed. But even after 250, the shift to more top-down and systematic attempts at suppression did not result in wholesale violence against all Christians everywhere. This observation does not mean to diminish the sufferings of those who did endure torture and execution, but it suggests that these experiences were likely those of a very small minority within the minority communities of Christians. . . . [T]his is to . . . provide a context for interpreting it (as a historical experience) and understanding how that experience figured into Christian attempts to render it meaningful. Indeed, one might argue that the capriciousness of state violence . . . performed a critical kind of psychological work for all manner of subjected peoples, Christians included. . . . It may be precisely because of the unpredictability of persecution as a practice that it came to loom even more largely in the Christian imagination.¹¹

11. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 36–38.

Judith Lieu, whose case for martyrdom as a central characteristic of early Christian identity¹² is somewhat stronger than Castelli's,¹³ nevertheless also hesitates to assign too much historicity to stories of the martyrs. In her concluding chapter of *Neither Jew nor Greek?* in which she makes a sudden and assertive turn toward the role of martyrdom, she takes pains to distinguish the historical record from the portrait of martyrs in story and literature:

Implicit in all I have said . . . is that the martyrs as I have been speaking of them, and as they construct Christian identity, are themselves constructs, constructed by the texts which tell their story and by the survival of those texts. . . . Imperiously plagiarizing the prologue of I John, the author of the *Passio Perpetuae* declares:

And so now that which we have heard and have touched, we proclaim also to you, brothers and little children so that you also who took part may recall the glory of the Lord, and who now learn through hearing may have fellowship with the holy martyrs and through them with our Lord Jesus Christ (*Pass. Perpet.* 1.6).

The martyrs there act as mediators of Christian identity for a new audience, but they do so only through their textualization.¹⁴

Daniel Boyarin's assessment of the historical accuracy of martyrdom stories is similarly nuanced and more interested in the stories about martyrs than their historical lives.¹⁵ The other major contribution Boyarin makes relative to historicity is his striking paralleling of Jewish and Christian martyr stories/events in the second century CE. Although his treatment is so deft that he never actually says that there were some Jewish and Christian martyrs, and he nuances in significant ways how Jewish and Christian labels are not mutually exclusive in the second century, it seems clear to me that Boyarin does think that there were some actual executions of "Jewish" and "Christian" leaders in the second century CE.¹⁶ This Jewish-Christian overlap (both in terms of discourse and history) complicates in crucial ways any formulation of martyrdom as a significant

12. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 211–31. I will take this dimension of her scholarship up directly later in this essay.

13. Castelli and Lieu make similar cases but with different nomenclature. Whereas Lieu seems to be the first scholar in this latest generation to appeal to the category of "Christian identity" (and has been followed in this regard by Karen King, Hal Taussig, and Phil Harland, and critiqued as well by Harland and Maia Kotrosits), Castelli has proposed another highly useful and creative, yet less followed, category of "early Christian culture making." Given Kotrosits and Harland's more recent reservations concerning the category of "early Christian identity," I can see our Christianity Seminar seriously considering Castelli's term as the more theoretically complex and useful.

14. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 218.

15. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 22–41, 93–111.

16. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 95–125.

factor in the emergence of Christian culture. Strictly in terms of issues of historicity, Virginia Burrus has a similar nuanced and complicating examination of martyrdom as she examines women and men as martyrological subjects.¹⁷

Candida Moss's *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (2013) sensationalizes the above near consensus of recent martyrdom scholars in terms of how broad and frequent actual executions of "early Christians" occurred. When read closely amidst her rhetorical bombast, Moss actually acknowledges the general position of the most recent generation of martyrdom scholars that executions were not all that frequent and that the stories themselves are about something else than a recording of events. But her hyperbole and her eagerness to make comparisons between the ancient world and various current events of the last decade short-circuits the larger historical task of understanding what the martyrdom stories do during the crucial second through fourth-century emergence of Christian cultures.

Discursive Martyrdom

More or less all recent scholarship on martyrdom establishes and assumes that the stories of Jewish/Christian executions in the second through sixth centuries participate in discursive reality. In the same vein as Lieu's distinction between textualized and historical martyrdom, these scholars of the last three decades speak of martyrdom that belongs to larger discourse. For all of them, this distinction is less a put down that these events did not occur and more a way to think with larger discursive categories to understand what are the meanings/realities within and behind the stories.

Approached from the perspective of discursive martyrdom, the work of Nickelsburg, Seeley, Mack, Patterson, and Arthur Dewey about noble death in relationship to first-century applications of Maccabean portrayals of executions to the meaning of Jesus' death is both very significant and, according to most recent scholars,¹⁸ quite different than later martyrdom literature. Here it is simply important to see what discursive functions the Maccabean and early Jesus death stories have when considered through the Nickelsburg optic.

Firstly, the discursive field of noble death is significant. Emerging first in early Greek military stories and adeptly shaping the stories of Socrates' death, this discourse maps a world in which a human being volunteering to die and/or not resisting being killed becomes noble and exemplary. As Daniel Boyarin points out, here the human that dies does so voluntarily mostly as a gesture of resistance. So noble death discourse plots ways of responding to coercive power

17. Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame*.

18. Cf. Boyarin's review in *Dying for God*, 93–130.

and violent subjection so that some threatened way of life negotiates survival. In addition, Burton Mack and David Seeley spurred further discursive understanding of noble death in their suggestions that noble death also functioned etiologically. Here the death of the noble executed one helps establish a foundational story for those threatened by coercive and violent power. The nobleness of the death establishes terms for living courageously into the future for those who claim the legacy of the one who died. The deaths of the Maccabees and Jesus function discursively at least through the end of the first century CE as pivotal markers for how to live amidst danger in the traditions of Israel. The way the stories are told focus on the noble way the protagonists faced death (e.g., courage, resistance, compassion, and loyalty), creating and participating in a discourse that undergirds the character of the hearers in the face of imperial violence.

Boyarin distinguishes this Maccabean resistance discourse from later second century CE stories of proto-rabbinic and rabbinic martyrdom¹⁹ discourse. In these stories Boyarin finds less of a resistance modality and more of an affirmation of the particular teacher's lively and deep relationship to Torah. That is, the stories seem more to focus on who the teacher is when facing violence or death. It is the depth of the teacher's devotion to God in often brash demonstration of public teaching of Torah that is the heart of the story, rather than the death itself. Boyarin's larger point in his entire book, *Dying For God*, is that there is a strong lineage of such stories paralleling the more famous Christian stories of the second through fourth centuries.²⁰ I will return later to his important characterizations of storied Jews and Christians facing death in the section of the various subjectivities in these later martyrological narratives.

Judith Lieu and Boyarin have made similar points about the shift in discourse from the second century on in distinguishing the more resistance-centered discourse about the Maccabees from the later stories' concentration on the identity of those dying. Lieu's case about the Christian stories focuses on the explicit confessions of a "Christian identity" in the stories. In making this case, she reveals her own surprise at this discovery in those stories: "This essay was not scheduled as a discussion of the martyr literature, but as exploring the 'beginning' of 'Christian' identity."²¹ Lieu stumbled upon what she has

19. Boyarin tends to place this kind of martyrological story before the Bar Kochba rebellion, rather than in the later second and early third century when he finds similar Christian stories of the same character. Cf. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 118–25, 208.

20. While still also interested in some differences between the Jewish and Christian martyrdom stories, much of Boyarin's larger case is that scholars have erred in portraying the Christians as the martyrological heroes and Jews as the compliant and collaborative characters relative to Roman threats of death and violence.

21. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 226.

seen as the first self-identifications of “Christians as Christians” in this literature, and lays it out²² in the last chapter of her thesis on the historical process of “constructing early Christianity.”²³ She cites a series of stories of Carpus, Tertullian, Perpetua, Ignatius, Vettius Epagathos, Alexander of Phrygia, Lucius, Agathonike, Sanctus, Polycarp, Germanicus, and Justin²⁴ in which either the one executed or an observer of an execution uses the phrase “I am a Christian” at or near the moment of an execution.

So for Lieu the discourse in which (at least in story form) the martyrs rest contains a perhaps first, and at least an enduring, emergence of Christianity identity:

[I]t is the textualizing and memorializing of the trials, the often extended suffering, and the deaths of believers which becomes determinative not only of the idea of “the martyr” and martyrdom, but also of what it is to be among those who can say, “I am a Christian.” . . . [T]hose who go to their deaths are not victims but the central actors in a drama through which a new way of understanding is created and maintained. . . . [T]he individual identity of Christian belongs to the martyr.²⁵

Yet Lieu does not overestimate the meaning of this alliance between stories of martyrdom and understanding the character of martyrological discourse. In fact, as she explores this connection she discovers ironies and ellipses that make it clear that the martyrdom-Christian formula contains as many contingencies around Christian identity as affirmations.

Central is the act of public affirmation: we might suppose this implicitly conveys allegiance—to Christ; association—with others who claim the same allegiance; adherence—to articles of belief and behavior. Yet for the most part these implications are not exploited, except perhaps in the refusal to sacrifice which is conceived more as a refusal to negate that affirmation than as part of a[n] articulated system of belief. The association with others is ambiguous: they—the churches, the readers—draw their identity from the martyrs, not vice versa; the martyrs do not die for Christianity or for the church; neither, as in the Jewish tradition, do they represent the restoration of a way of life against those who sought, even from within, to mutate it. The expanding concentric circles from local to universal are united only by their common gaze and by the refusal to allow any alternative construction of what they see; their unity is ensured by the unadorned *christianus/christiana sum*.²⁶

22. Lieu comes then to propose that these confessions “set[s] the martyrs and the memorializing of their deaths at the centre of the construction of Christian identity.” Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 211.

23. This is the name of her book’s subtitle, with the main title of *Neither Jew nor Greek?*

24. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 213–25.

25. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 212–13.

26. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 228–29.

So discursive martyrdom, including the link between execution and the label “Christian” in Lieu’s analysis, does not mark or contain the arrival of Christian identity per se, but marks a contingent alliance among the readers, the textualized martyr, and the writer. There is a partial tie between the “local” and the “universal,” which in Lieu’s reflection also contains some other elements, even if they too have primarily a resistant, rather than affirmative, character:

The exclusivity built into the martyr’s confession and its consequences coalesces with the opposition to society and the world. It is an opposition which subverts the social reality within which it perforce exists by refiguring both of them. We have seen the construction of an alternative set of values, a diametrically opposed interpretation of experience, a pattern of symbols which invert those that are familiar. Such a construction draws boundaries which are unmistakable and indisputable—against the lawless, the violent, those bent on and destined for destruction.²⁷

Perkins’s larger agenda in *The Suffering Self* attends also to martyrdom as discursive. As she puts it, “discursive focus in the second century on the suffering body contributed to Christianity’s attainment of social power by helping to construct a subject that would be present to its call.”²⁸ Although her scope is significantly larger than martyrdom, it is important that “[t]he Apocryphal Acts, like the Martyr Acts, encoded for Christians a “happy ending” that entailed death that was both personal and social and scripted for Christians a life centered on death and suffering.”²⁹ She takes special note that martyrdom stories specifically feature the transformation of bodies.³⁰

One of the most compelling analyses of discursive martyrdom in the last two decades is Elizabeth Castelli’s examination of the figure of Thecla in her *Martyrdom and Memory*. Dripping with irony and creativity, the lively development of Thecla in Castelli’s chronicle and analysis includes at least five centuries of active elaboration of this figure. Perhaps most stunning is that technically Thecla never was a martyr. That is, even from her very popular beginnings in the late first or early second century through wide-spread devotion to her in painting and objects, she is never executed. The earliest stories have her thrown to the wild beasts in the arena³¹ and on a burning pyre, but in each case she escapes death to live a long life as a colleague of Paul, a healer, and a teacher. Yet by the fifth century she is represented visually primarily as a martyr with

27. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 229.

28. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 4.

29. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 30.

30. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 34.

31. When the lions, bulls, bears, and other wild beasts are unable to kill Thecla, she is forced toward a great pit of water full of killer seals (?!), who themselves are killed by lighting when Thecla throws herself into the water to baptize herself.

her hands tied behind her back amidst the wild beasts and is listed among the martyrs. Castelli reflects on the discursive breadth and power of Thecla:

The (fifth century) *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla* documents the emergence of a particular piety devoted to Thecla's intercessory power, but it also offers compelling testimony to the role of collective memory in generating a useable past for Christians out of a story that incorporates compelling episodes of innocent suffering and eventual vindication. Meanwhile numerous other early Christian texts recall the story and example of Thecla, emphasizing variously her averted martyrdom, her ascetic fervor, and her role as healer, traveling evangelist, and apostle. Together with the visual testimony of artistic representations—some produced contemporaneously but most in later periods—these texts amplify and transform earlier traditions about Thecla, creating a new set of memories through processes of association, displacement, consolidation, and expansion. In the hagiographic elaboration of the founding narrative, the diegetical scaffolding remains largely in place, while the discursive elements of the story broaden and take on more responsibility for bearing the increasing weight of the account's theological message. . . . [B]oth the literary and the artistic remnants stage different modes of memory work, reframing and reformulating the Thecla story in terms that render it into a useable past.³²

With Castelli's analysis one sees that discursive martyrdom can claim as a central figure someone who never was a martyr and who was at the same time one of the central meaningful characters of the broadest spectrum of veneration of martyrs.

In addition to these efforts to think about the kind of discourse in which martyrdom occurs, several scholars have paid attention to the drama of martyrdom as a part of its discursive character. Virginia Burrus examines the Revelation to John, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the *Martyrs of Lyon*, and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* as improbable enactments that often present unexpected and sometimes even inverted characteristics of the main personae.³³ Especially in his treatment of Jewish "trickster" stories on Jews threatened with state violence and execution, Boyarin describes the performance of these highly comic³⁴ tales with "plots"³⁵ as dramatic portraits of negotiative events of resistance and accommodation. Castelli examines the theatricality and dramatic narratives of the martyr Euphemia, "whose suffering and . . . rejoicing at her death recalls the familiar trope of the martyr whose performance answers back to the spectators in an audience-disappointing (or transforming) refusal of the more conventional script of execution."³⁶ Lieu

32. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 135–36.

33. Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 19–33, 28–35, 67–80.

34. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 55.

35. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 50–51.

36. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 131.

points out that the character of the crowd in the martyrdom stories plays on several levels, so that the drama of the crowd watching the execution (and its active responses of repulsion, spontaneous claims in the crowd of becoming “a Christian,” and admiration of the courage and resolve of the one executed) almost certainly prompts the readers (who in the Mediterranean world of the second through fifth centuries almost always “read” as a public) to respond like the crowd in the story.³⁷

Both Castelli and Burrus study the highly designed theatre of the Roman arena as it turns executions into spectacles. Depending on a wide range of scholarship of the arena as spectacle,³⁸ Castelli shows the wide range of public functions that the arena spectacle performs. And she notes how especially second-century early Christian writers (Athenagoras, Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom) condemn Roman spectacle, portraying Christians in contrast “as ascetic, violence deploring, and deeply moral.”³⁹ She probes more deeply, however, as the genre of martyr stories develop, finding in the martyrology itself an appreciation of the spectacle and a development of a spectacular narrative style:

[W]hat is . . . striking is the degree to which Christian accounts of martyrdom nevertheless highlight the spectacular nature of the events they recount. Of course they do so with rhetorical and didactic goals in mind, attempting both to shame the fictive audience for its bloodlust and to offer up exemplars of courage and virtue in the figures of the martyrs. But these rhetorical and didactic goals require graphic descriptions to assure their achievement. . . . Many readers have observed that as the past of Christian suffering recedes, the spectacular quality of martyrdom intensifies. The more distant the events being narrated, the more gruesome and detailed the accounts and the more blood-saturated the representations seem to become. The bodies of the martyrs are increasingly on display, not only for the audience in the narrative, but for the readers/hearers of the narratives as well.⁴⁰

Although too vast to chronicle properly here, it is here where Burrus, Boyarin, and others⁴¹ have found complex counterscripts in the more spectacular martyr stories, especially counterscripts that complicate and in some cases model new kinds of femininity and masculinity. Boyarin especially finds in both the “Jewish” and the “Christian” martyr stories a positive feminization of the male martyrs and a gender-bending of both men and women in their following

37. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 211–19.

38. Cf. Castelli’s two-page long footnote on this scholarship in chapter 4 (*Martyrdom and Memory*, 248 n. 6).

39. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 112.

40. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, 120–21.

41. Cf. also Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 24–28, 113–18, 206–9, for her attention to the stories of courage and strength of women martyrs and how that shifts the valence of gender relations and identity.

God's Torah or the emerging Christian gesture of dying. Burrus shows how the portrayal of women killed or threatened in the arena take a gladiatorial pose in ways that reconfigure both the women and the men as more complex agents. Particularly, Burrus underlines how the shame of women in the arena is itself⁴² reworked in the martyr stories to give women more agency and to reframe their shame into something powerful and exemplary. In this way she notes how "masculinity is itself queerly rendered malleable and unstable with its explicit link with the suffering endurance of women."⁴³

Who Were the Subjects of Martyrdom?

The last generation of scholarship has been very interested in who were the subjects of discursive martyrdom in the context of Seleucid and Roman executions and the literary work of Jewish and Christian writers between the second century BCE and the sixth century CE. Of course, when raised from this theoretical and literary perspective, the question becomes more complex and the interpretive stakes become higher. The issues here circle around three questions: (1) the relationship of the readers and writers of the martyr stories to the characters in the stories; (2) what the terms "gentiles," "Jews," and "Christians" mean on the levels of both those executed and the writers, readers, and protagonists of the martyr stories; and, (3) the largely unaddressed categories of the wider range of persons (beyond the semi-biblical categories of Jews and Christians) executed by Roman imperial agents.

In terms of the relationship of martyr stories' readers, writers, and protagonists, scholarship has generally moved its focus from an historical imagination of and interest in actual events to the attention to what the stories do for the readers/hearers of the stories. For instance, relative to early Christian martyr stories (as well as a broader range of phenomena), Perkins has:

a particular preoccupation in the discursive climate of the early Roman empire . . . the human self as a body liable to pain and suffering. . . . This representation challenged another, prevailing, more traditional Greco-Roman repre-

42. Castelli also comments at length on these gender dynamics: There are various elements of the Christian appropriation of spectacle that I want to stress in particular here. First, the narrative elements of performance, theatricality, and stage-managing that emerge out of various martyrological texts invite readers to understand the contest that is staged to have multiple layers of resonance and significance—and to begin to see the performative as itself a source of Christian commemorative counterscripts. Second, this negotiation with spectacle often involves a troubling of the received cultural conventions of gender in at least two ways. The masculine ideal of stoic fortitude dominates the arena, and it is so crucial to Christian claims to virtue that women can provisionally embody it—sometimes quite literally. And when this happens, Christian polemics against gender confusion—in the liturgy, certainly, but all the more in the spectacles—dissolve into praise for the woman who has managed to transcend superficial elements of sexual difference.

43. Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 32.

sentation of the self as a soul/mind controlling the body. I intend to try to locate the “triumph” of Christianity within the discursive struggle of these representations. It would be around one of these representative “subjects,” the suffering self that Christianity as a social and political unity would form and ultimately achieve its institutional power.⁴⁴

In this optic, then, subject(s) of Christian martyr stories is/are primarily the “Christian” readers and writers, rather than the protagonists of the stories. As she points out, “The Apocryphal Acts, like the Martyr Acts, encoded for Christians a ‘happy ending’ that entailed death that was both personal and social and scripted for Christians a life centered on death and suffering.”⁴⁵ One would wonder in terms of Perkins’s attentiveness to the rise of Christian social and political unity whether the subject of the martyr stories also included people who came from beyond “Christianity” from a variety of peoples, but for some of whom the martyr stories were attractive stories.

Boyarin and Lieu ask respectively very similar questions of the complex intersection of “Jews” and “Christians” in the second through fifth centuries. Both assert that Christians and Jews produce martyr stories as ways of thinking about violence and as ways of negotiating their relationships with Roman domination.⁴⁶ In this regard Lieu and Boyarin each are eager to concentrate primarily on the subjects of the readers and writers rather than the historical personae of the stories’ protagonists. Both also see minor dimensions of the stories serving the writers and readers/hearers to negotiate emerging differences between Jews and Christians in the Roman context. But particularly Boyarin presses to see martyr stories as vehicles by which Jews and Christians primarily worked on their self-understanding(s) in the context of Roman domination. He insists that these respective Jewish and Christian martyr stories provided both self-understandings that Jews and Christians (relatively unconsciously) shared and self-understandings that at several particular junctures also included differences between Jew and Christian.

Burrus and Castelli actively assume that the subjectivity of the readers/hearers and writers of the martyr stories are primary. Moss’s focus is on who did or did not do what, and in this regard thinks mostly about the protagonists of the martyr stories. Methodologically, she consults issues around who the writers and readers/hearers of the stories are in order to debunk various historical assumptions about the stories’ protagonists.

In terms of the second significant issue of how the terms “gentiles,” “Jews,” and “Christians” connote, confuse, and/or signify the subjects of martyrdom,

44. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 4.

45. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 30.

46. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 93–126; Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 211–32.

both Lieu and Boyarin again contribute similar and complementary analyses in terms of the ambiguities of distinctions between “Christians” and “Jews” in the first through at least the fourth centuries. Lieu sums her position on this up right after she has laid out a case for martyr stories featuring “I am a Christian” as an important stage in the development of Christian identity:

When and of whom may we use the label “Christian”? The New Testament, notoriously, is far more sparing with the term than most of those who teach and write about it. And, our problem is born out of the tension between, on the one hand, a literature which either does address, or which we have been schooled into reading as if it did address, both individuals and communities as self-consciously involved in the creation of “a new people”, and on the other, a growing historical and social sensitivity which drives us toward seeing both the non-communicating diversity within and beyond the “New Testament churches”, and the capacity to encompass diversity, perhaps even that diversity within first-and second-century “Judaism.” . . . It seems to me equally justifiable to “construct” “Christianity” in opposition to “Judaism” at the moment when Jesus “cleansed the Temple” at least in the literary representation of that event, and to think of that separation only in the fourth century, stimulated by dramatic changes in access to power. . . .

What we think of as “early Christian literature”, particularly but not only that enshrined within the New Testament—but what makes it non-Jewish—constructs for us, and suspect for its readers, an identity. . . . Certainly we cannot imagine that first Jesus, the apostles, or Paul founded a religion. . . . [T]he literature participates in the attempt to give shape and content to the inchoate experiences and conflicting currents of practice which *we* label early Christianity.

The Martyr Acts offer us a glimpse into this process, perhaps more, because they are so highly rhetorically constructed, they invite us into it.⁴⁷

Boyarin works on a similar proposal, but with much more attention to the actual parallel and divergent martyr stories from second- to fifth-century “Jewish” and “Christian” sources. He is most convincing when he quotes “Jewish” and “Christian” sources, taking very similar positions relative to the possibility of being executed by Roman authorities, and then parallels such comparisons with partial evidence that some Jewish teachers may have been somewhat more accommodating in relationship to Roman pressure.⁴⁸ So it is clear in Boyarin and Lieu that martyr stories of “Judaism” and “Christianity” manifest strong martyrological subjectivity of the readers/hearers writers, but that the readers/hearers/writers’ subjectivity is often, but not always, enmeshed in conglomerate Judaism/Christianity.

A similarly mixed result also results when one looks carefully at the third issue of overlapping subjectivity of “gentiles” and “Christianity.” One sees

47. Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek?*, 226–28.

48. Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 22–40, 42–61, 63–66, 93–116, 119–25.

such overlapping subjectivity in two kinds of recent scholarship. First of all, the assumption in much empire-critical study of imperial violence is that both Christians and gentiles were being executed according to the same Roman military standards, laws, and jurisprudence.⁴⁹ The empire-critical cases portraying Christ movements as expressing resistance against deportation, torture, slavery, and crucifixion base themselves on the links between NT/early Christian texts and Roman practice and legal legitimization of violence and execution. In this regard one must take seriously Pauline, gospel, and apocalyptic texts as understanding their protest against Roman torture as pertaining to the wider population of the nations beyond Christ movement victims.

Although in a completely different vein is Perkins's brilliant case that the "Christian" suffering self relies deeply on pre-Christian and non-biblical literary portraits, sensitivities, and anthropologies. In other words, the subtlety of Perkins's portrait of the early Christian openness to suffering and pain lies to a large degree in her strong case that such openness in Christianity depends to a significant degree on non-Christian and non-Jewish "gentile" insight and writing.⁵⁰

Concluding Observations

The telling and writing of early Christian history has from its beginnings in the Luke/Acts early epic and Eusebius' various efforts to set everyone straight on what happened contained a strong diet of martyr stories. More or less all later frames of reference in religious elaborations or modern histories have also included substantial doses of martyr stories. Despite the steady salute of early Christian martyrdom throughout both Christian lore and critical scholarship, it seems to me that there are quite significant developments in the way scholarship of the last twenty-five years has approached and treated the stories and subjects of early Christian martyrs. Likewise, it seems to me that these recent decades of scholarship—although not because it has either solved the puzzles of this ancient literature and history or has unified the field methodologically—provide extremely valuable resources for Westar's Christianity Seminar.

Much more clearly than Frensd's famous work fifty years ago, the field of early "Christian" martyrdom studies today brings important nuance to the complex questions of historical record and significant ancient meaning-making relative to the martyr stories. This has much to do with the progress of discursive analysis for the many martyr stories. The strong shift away from seeing the martyr stories as either a basic, if somewhat flowery, historical record or

49. Cf. Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, chap. 1.

50. In many ways this is the entire thesis of the book, and examples occur throughout the whole work; e.g. Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, 157–214.

curiously pious folklore has opened up ways to study these stories as valuable representations of emerging identity and social expression in the first five centuries CE. Perhaps most promising in these regards is a new way of doing history of early Christian history that is not primarily deconstructive and is instead characterized by interest in social history rather than more bald historical events or personalities.

It is my opinion that serious advance has been made in the comparisons and contrasts of noble death martyrdom from the second century BCE through the first century CE and later stories of the Acts genres of the second through fifth centuries. The field seems perched on the edge of seeing this whole period as connected but with serious shifts from the early era to the latter.

Finally, the last twenty-five years of scholarship has found its voice to do technical studies of specific texts and culture-making, even while speaking in broader terms that allow swaths of portraiture of what discursive martyrdom was. This scholarship is perhaps one of the first elements of writing early Christian history in the past century that allows social history and constructionist methodology to flourish.

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