

## **Martyrdom in Early Judaism and Early Christianity**

### **1. Martyrology as Literary Genre**

- “Martyrology” is the term used for a genre of Jewish and Christian tales of the deaths of Jews and Christians for their beliefs.
- As a genre, these texts draw on 2 Maccabees 7, often featuring speeches of the dying to the persecuted defending the faith, extensive and gory descriptions of their torture, exhortations about their courage in the face of death, explanations of how martyrdom differs from other deaths, and consolation for others facing religious persecution, often in the form of promises about the special afterlives granted to martyrs (e.g., ascent to heaven).
- Central to these texts is an inversion of the usual understanding of divine justice: the most righteous suffer the most. Typically, this logic seems articulated in response to shock that Empires that Jews and Christians saw as cruel and impious (e.g., Babylon, Rome) seem always to flourish in this world, even despite their polytheism and their animosity to Jewish and Christian beliefs in God as the One who created and rules over, not only Jews and Christians, but these nations as well.
- Consistent with the meaning of the term “martyr” (i.e., witness), they are described as witnessing to the religious truths for which they and others are persecuted; their deaths are thought to point to the truth of these beliefs, inasmuch as some were even willing to die rather than recant them; often, texts describe the effect of this witnessing as stretching even to their persecutors!
- In both Jewish and Christian martyrologies, martyrs are likened to sacrifices: their deaths are said to atone for the sins of others, their suffering to ransom others from God’s punishment, and their blood to cleanse the impurity of the whole community (for Jews, Israel; for Christians, the church).
- Within early Christianity, martyrdom was also seen as a special way to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

### **4 Maccabees: Martyrdom and Philosophy in Hellenistic Judaism**

- 4 Maccabees is a Jewish martyrology, written in Greek, probably in Alexandria, Egypt, around the first century CE. As with many early Jewish texts, it considers the events of its own day (likely = increasingly tense situation in Egypt in the time leading up to the Jewish Revolt in Israel) by retelling past events of suffering and triumph. In this case, the past event is the Maccabean Revolt.
- 4 Maccabees extends the account of martyrdom in 2 Maccabees 7 and gives it a Hellenistic Jewish spin, defending Judaism as a philosophy. It appeals both to righteous deaths of biblical heroes and to persecution of ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates as paradigms for Jews of its own day.
- Like Wisdom of Solomon, Philo, and other texts from Alexandria, 4 Maccabees presumes the immortality of the soul (see Segal 386-87). Unlike 2 Maccabees, Daniel, Revelation, and other earlier treatments of the fate of the martyr, it denies the resurrection of the body; all souls, even evil ones, are immortal, albeit punished eternally. The souls of martyrs rise to heaven and become stars.

### **Bar Kokhba Revolt and Ten Martyrs in Rabbinic Judaism**

- Within early Judaism, the main experiences of persecution were related to the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 CE), a rebellion growing from a messianic movement around “Bar Kokhba” that seems to have even involved early Rabbinic Jews like Rabbi Akiva (more on Rabbinic Judaism next week).
- After the revolt, the Emperor Hadrian seems to have outlawed circumcision and other Jewish religious practices as well as banning Jews from entering Jerusalem and turning Jerusalem into a pagan city (“Aelia Capitolina”).
- After this revolt was quelled by Rome, tradition says that many were martyred, including famous Rabbis like Akiva and Ishmael—the tale of their martyrdom (Story of the 10 Martyrs) was told in liturgical poetry and retold and expanded within Jewish tradition at other times of persecution, esp. Crusades in Middle Ages and the Holocaust in modern times; even now it is included in the liturgy for Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), consistent with the association of martyrdom and atonement. Traditions about the 10 Martyrs include tales of R. Ishmael’s ascent to heaven: here, a martyr gains access to heavenly knowledge (in this case about God’s justice), just like apocalyptic sages of old.

## Early Christian Martyrdom

- Persecution seems to have been part of the reality of life for early Christians as well. Official state-sponsored Roman persecutions of Christians did not begin until the third century with the first major persecution of Christians under emperor Decius (249-251 CE), then resuming under emperor Valerian (257-260 CE) and beginning again, in most virulent form, in 303 CE under Diocletian.
- Even in the second century, however, Christians experienced local persecutions. Many died for their beliefs in Jesus as Messiah, and many texts were written celebrating martyrs. Some of the most famous early “Church Fathers” (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian) were Roman pagans who converted to Christianity after seeing a martyr be killed in total lack of fear in the face of death and total defiance, until the end, of Roman power. Many “Church Fathers” went on to die as martyrs themselves (e.g., Polycarp, Justin Martyr) and to be much celebrated for it.
- The letters of Ignatius (second century CE) gives us a first-hand account of a bishop who is a leader of the early Church. Interestingly, he not only has to deal with holding together a church in which many leaders have been killed, but he himself yearns for martyrdom as an opportunity to walk in the path to eternal life (in this case: resurrection) walked first by Jesus.
- *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is an early example (second century CE) of a story told about a martyr. The connection between martyrs and Jesus is made at every level of the story. Both by explicit statements and by literary parallels with the Gospels, the text communicates how the martyr’s death is a path following Christ into death, resurrection, and eternal life.
- *Passion of Perpetua* is another martyrology, which shows how women as well as men were celebrated as martyrs in the early Church (e.g., just as Hannah was celebrated in Jewish texts like 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees for her martyrdom)—they too overcame suffering, were brave in the face of death, etc.; at times, this was even depicted as a way that women (seen as categorically inferior in the ancient world) could become like men. During her martyrdom, Perpetua (like Rabbi Ishmael) is said to ascend to heaven and see the divine court at which sins are judged.