

BOOK REVIEW

Moss, Candida R., *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). xiv + 256 pp. Hdbk. US \$40.00.

Rarely does one still find an important division of historical theology as free of critical evaluation as the popular tradition of early church martyrdom. In *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, Notre Dame Professor Candida Moss fills this gap by advancing a case against a monolithic, orthodox stream of martyrological reality through the end of the second century. The curious problem in view is that 'in the study of ancient Christianity, no figure polarizes the scholarly world as effectively as the martyr. Study of the martyrs is as often a disdainful preoccupation as it is a preoccupying delight. The martyr commands attention, fascinates the skeptic, and confounds the rationalist' (p. 1). Moss creates an anticipation of correction that is followed by careful, focused and scholarly evaluation of the sources and context of early church martyrdom. She seeks not to delegitimize the voice of the martyrs but to deconstruct the notion of a singular ancient church that suffers persecution with any unified justification beyond simple belief and hope in Christ. Instead, the church hosted several different perspectives on its suffering, found different cultural reasons for its inspiration, and created a legacy based on its cultural struggles in the Roman Empire.

The work is laid out in two parts. An introduction of characterization, methodology and consideration of the assumptions of contemporary scholarly perspectives on martyrdom provides a starter that allows Moss to proceed on to a second part that evaluates sources from the first and second century in geographical fashion. The regions of Asia Minor, Rome, Gaul, Roman North Africa and Greek North Africa occupy separate chapters in which Moss carefully and insightfully examines the textual sources, traditions and contexts of the martyrological literature that has come to us.

Beginning with milestone scholars in the modern era, Moss identifies Bowersock as separating the philosophies of Christian and pagan martyrdom and so contributing to the notion of an innovative church phenomenon in which Christian martyrs were historically unique in their efforts, eclipsing prior notions of religious suffering. Such a view has contributed to a popular notion of radical faith heroism, with the Christians united in a cause. More recently, Judith Perkins has re-centered discussion of suffering on its significance in the ancient world and allowed for ‘multiple attendant interpretations’ of martyrdom (p. 24). Moss places herself squarely in this new tradition. Any scholar should identify the contexts for change in a martyrological text and track its literary strategies at work. ‘The art of connecting or disconnecting Christian martyrdom from non-Christian examples is a rhetorical strategy. The scholarly task of assessing the relationship between Christian martyrdom and everything else is distinct from this ancient Christian agenda. The uncritical reproduction of ancient taxonomies often obscures the rhetorical function’ (p. 26). Those taxonomies of assumption have created the need for Moss to view the sources with an eye for literary cause, a watchful reading for community agenda, and a critical evaluation of the manuscript tradition of each source.

The foundation of martyrdom rightly finds influence in Socrates, whose death ‘carried a cultural weight unmatched’ (p. 33). Eleazar Maccabee parallels this tradition, and his story utilizes *ekphrasis* to model religious obedience. Such conventions created a literary tradition of martyrdom—a genre—serving as a response to the community needs. ‘Narratives reinforced the structures of society, encapsulated social values in a pair of individuals, and subjugated personal attachment to the social structures’ (p. 46). Authors ‘adapted, subverted, rearticulated popular genres of fictive romance’ along with a reset of the stories in legally styled accounts of trials. The latter quality explains the many courtroom dramas of martyrdom accounts that can be considered for their form through narrative analysis. Meanwhile, notions of ‘noble deaths’ are found in non-Christian martyrdom accounts, such as dying for one’s city. Moss’s brief evaluation of the pre-Christian era foreshadows her work ‘not to homogenize but to provide context’ for Christian martyrs (p. 47). The brevity of Chapter 1 is functional as a foundation, but its analysis of a Jewish ideology of suffering and the broader Greco-Roman tradition of noble death could

have been further elaborated as important precursors to early Christianity.

Asia Minor hosts the earliest martyrdom accounts in which Christians are subject to specific legal conflict in the event of a public trial. The letters of Ignatius find a guilty subject in the martyr, theologically grounded in Eucharistic practices with a cathartic effect on the church and its followers. Unity, discipleship and imitation are at work. The *Polycarp* account 'inaugurated a new genre, a new linguistic category, and a new ideology' (p. 58). Moss's acumen for evidence is seen in her treatment of associated relics, which allows for an interpretive duel between a possible innovative episode versus a more established martyrdom tradition. The advanced theological conception of martyrdom in the work leads Moss to prefer a later dating of *Polycarp*. It is surprising that she chooses to expand her analysis as an argument for the date of the work, which makes her susceptible to challenges of begging the question: Was perhaps the advanced theology early?

Rome and Gaul reveal very different justifications for suffering. The fire under Nero became formative for self-perception of Roman Christianity for generations to follow. Rather than using a subset of the apocalyptic thinking seen in other areas, this zone of the empire employed a philosophical genre to describe martyrdom, in which suffering subjects followed the Greek cultural ideal. *Eusebia* characterized the martyrs, Rusticus acts stoically, and *martyrion* is adapted for philosophical purposes typified in Justin and his death account. Differently, the *Martyrs of Lyons* focuses on torture and bodily degradation, where pain and suffering are separated for the first time. More importantly, Stephen is a proto-martyr for the first time and the devil is identified by association with the persecutors. For Irenaeus, 'martyrdom is evidence of true doctrine' (p. 118), particularly against his theological enemies who deny Christ's crucifixion and any *imitatio Christi* through suffering. Whereas a distinct Gallic Christianity is endorsed by Moss, she is not prone to accept *Lyons* as chastely historical because of the editorial work of Eusebius. This treatment allows Moss to use her typical approach, considering the internal needs and goals of the community for a better reading of the account.

Finally, Roman North Africa provides a 'rugged ideological landscape' at work (p. 125). The *Scillitan Martyrs* is analyzed for intentions of legal documentation versus a theological promotion by the community. The *Perpetua* story does not seek 'borders and limits of a true

martyr' (p. 144), but does provide an ideal for suffering and Christian identity. Although Romans were accustomed to witnessing human death (for example at games for imperial celebrations and in child sacrifice) it would still be astonishing even to Romans to read about a suffering woman in a subhuman role who is the model of bravery, a participant in a bloody baptism and the victor in a hierarchical battle of authority. Illustrating how subtle schemas are present in these works, Moss posits that a reaction against flight from persecution may be at work in the *Perpetua* authorial persuasion.

In one of the more illustrative chapters of the book, Moss compares assumptions about three lines of martyrdom ideology in Alexandria that are commonly assumed by contemporary thinkers. She presents the gnostics as a supposed school of anti-martyrdom, Clement of Alexandria as someone with a moderate view of martyrdom, and Montanism as having a view of voluntary martyrdom. This excellent range serves as a survey of the attitudes that are often overstated as three norms in antiquity. The evidence for each is thoroughly examined in social and theological contexts, and any notion of competing, opposing strains is tempered. At the same time, these ideals about martyrdom remain evident in the sources and even overlap among the idealists. Clement and Valentinus share views about discipleship responsibilities in martyrdom, Tertullian and Valentinus allow flight under persecution, and *Perpetua* and the *Scillitan Martyrs* seek to persuade an audience that faithful discipleship leads to suffering. The best conclusion to make is that diverse opinions of response were at work in the church, alongside Moss's claim that 'general characterizations of martyrdom have misrepresented the subtle and diverse constructions of martyrdom and the many functions of martyrdom literature' (p. 143). At times, the reader is left uncertain of the exact determinations to be made in the claims of ancient authorial or community intent.

Although she is the author of the controversial *The Myth of Persecution* (2013), Moss makes worthy deconstruction efforts in *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* that neither attack nor demean the traditions or sources of early church martyrdom. In fact, one is hard-pressed to see here a strong foundation for comprehensively deconstructing the phenomenon of early church martyrdom, a deconstruction of which Moss has been accused. On the contrary, she legitimizes the historicity of many of the sources, and reinforces the values of the ancient stories of dying for Christ along the lines of early faith expressions, the testi-

monies among diverse lines of theological thought, and the Christian confrontation against a sometimes unfriendly society. If she intended to lay a foundation for stripping these stories of their historicity or their authenticity, I predict she would have a difficult task of advancing against a strong tradition of biblically-inspired martyrdom, other than by nuancing simple, uncritical contemporary assumptions about the topic. Any tone of animosity is absent as she has chosen here not to apply her data against the larger martyrdom tradition comprehensively. A claim for a later dating of *Polycarp*, an interrogation of the context of the writing of the Lyons martyrdom account, and a contestation of anything less than a Hellenistic reading of Clement of Alexandria is the most critically reconstructive she gets. In other words, Moss does not overreach.

As a result, Moss provides an insightful and important step in critical evaluation of martyrdom in the tradition of the church. The work is more illustrative of her method than a thorough treatise on any single first- or second-century source. The evidence she marshals each time is a propos, her challenges to tradition are guarded and balanced, and the overall case against a singular manufacturing of united early church suffering is accomplished. The work will not only serve as a continuation of the Perkins thesis needed in theological study, but will continue to advance a more critical reading of early Christian martyrologies.

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