

BOOK REVIEW

McDowell, Sean, *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015). viii + 302 pp. Hbk. \$119.95.

Stories of travelling with she-dragons and surviving immersion in hot oil discourage scholars from constructing historical treatments of the apostles. The challenge of formulating an evangelical perspective that is also historically critical makes the work by Sean McDowell all the more exceptional. The author is assistant professor of Christian Apologetics at Biola University and essayist of multiple volumes on contemporary social issues. This work treats all twelve post-resurrection disciples plus the apostles James the Just and Paul in fourteen separate chapters, examining the biblical, apocryphal and historical data in analytical fashion. While Matthias finds attention, Judas Iscariot does not.

Each chapter includes an historical survey of literature on the ministry, geography and history of each disciple, which provides the background for the evidence of their martyrdom. Four additional chapters introduce the disciples collectively, including an explanation of the centrality of the resurrection as impetus for ministry, the nature of ancient persecution and the apostolic lists in the gospels and Acts. This work seems to be part of a trend to revisit these individuals who are a source of inspiration and fascination to both parishioner and New Testament scholar. David Criswell's *The Apostles After Jesus* (North Charleston, SC: Fortress Adonai, 2013), Thomas Schmidt's *The Apostles After Acts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), Bryan Litfin's *After Acts* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2015) and W. Brian Shelton's *Quest for the Historical Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming) are among the most recent studies on the apostles. As McDowell follows in their path, his work is readable, thorough and focused on the diversity of apostolic traditions.

The mode of death is typically only covered in the second half of any chapter, with an equivalent amount of analysis provided for the ministry locale of each apostle as context for their martyrdom. A scale of authenticity provides a label ranging from ‘the highest possible probability’ to ‘not possibly true’ for each major element of ministry and martyrdom. For example, John’s ministry in Ephesus is deemed ‘very probably true’ while his experience of martyrdom is ‘improbable’. This concluding taxonomy of likelihood facilitates to clarify the author’s conclusions about the historicity of individual and key features in the apostle’s tradition.

Predictably, the figure of Peter constitutes the first apostolic chapter and functions as a standard with the most historical data and secondary source information available for evaluation. From the likelihood of a Roman ministry to his crucifixion on an inverted cross, most of the traditions surrounding Peter are deemed very probable. On the other hand, the apostles Simon the Zealot and James the Lesser provide the least amount of historical data, with a customary ministry outside Jerusalem ‘very probably true’ but a martyrdom ‘as plausible as not’. Thomas’s ministry in India is found to be credible, while McDowell considers James’ mission to Spain to be unlikely.

One challenge for any such evaluator of these martyrdom traditions is the nature and quality of the ancient sources. Legends found in apocryphal acts of the apostles can be fanciful and historical traditions can be contradictory. For example, Eusebius remarked that the *Acts of Andrew*, the *Acts of John* and other apocryphal acts should be ‘cast aside as absurd and impious’ (*Hist. eccl.* 3.25.6). In turn, the *Acts of Andrew* were condemned by Pope Innocent I but popularized by Gregory of Tours. Such is the difficulty of filtering the extra-biblical testimony of the apostles’ martyrdoms, often forcing a contemporary scholar to choose between conflicting traditions or weighing the gnostic tendencies of ancient works. McDowell maintains that the extra-biblical acts contain an historical core that was the basis of the construction of legends that historians and faithful followers should not entirely believe: ‘While [apocryphal acts] contain legendary accretion, they preserve the most reliable destination and fate for their respective apostles ... Although the writer of the various Apocryphal Acts had creative license, he or she was also bound by known tradition’ (pp. 182-83).

This method leads to the first of two criticisms of the work. Rarely is the core of any tradition precisely identified by McDowell, but this claim becomes a vague and regular assumption that appeals to historicity. Perhaps he comes closest to identifying the substance of a core in the example of Andrew: ‘The key question is whether or not the *Acts of Andrew* preserves a historical nucleus. Taken at its core, it reports the missionary travels of Andrew and his ministry and execution in Patras’ (p. 182). While this claim to a useable core is reasonable, the identification of that core is absent. At the same time, there is a difficulty in merely dismissing ancient traditions. When Emil Kraeling suggests Matthew’s martyrdom was an invention competing with other martyr traditions, McDowell remarks, ‘He should provide positive evidence to establish this as the most *reasonable* conclusion’ (p. 228).

One effective methodological principle employed by McDowell is that of ‘living memory’, based on the work of Markus Bockmuehl. Here, the writers of ancient histories ‘believed they were transmitting personal memory of events that trace back to the apostles themselves’ (p. 3). This retention extends from the era of the apostles to one generation beyond the apostolic audiences, about 200 CE (p. 96). This notion of ‘living memory’ functions as a measure of credibility in McDowell’s analysis of the martyrdom of the apostles, recognizing the greater reliability of the sources within reach of the apostolic era. For example, historical references to Matthew’s martyrdom establish a tradition that is outside living memory (pp. 225, 228). On the other hand, Dionysius’ statement that Peter and Paul ‘taught together in Italy and suffered martyrdom at the same time’ is a living memory at work in his writing to the church at Rome (p. 88). McDowell even establishes a boundary for the book in that it does not treat material earnestly beyond the scope of living memory (p. 113).

A second criticism of the work lies in the frequent references to the apostolic mission and sacrificial ideals that are projected onto individual disciples as a legitimization of their suffering, especially when the traditions surrounding a disciple are unavailable or limited. A statement such as ‘Jesus warned his disciples that they would suffer and be killed’ accompanied by gospel references hardly ‘weigh[s] in favor of the martyrdom’ of James, son of Alphaeus (p. 234). Likewise, the apostolic preaching under duress mentioned in Acts 5.17-29 is frequently marshaled as evidence that an apostle like ‘Thaddeus was

willing to suffer for his belief in the resurrection' (p. 238). Such principles are valuable, but do not compare to the data of the earliest church fathers on the martyrdom of the apostles and should not suggest proof of apostolic martyrdom.

At times, the text densely engages its sources, such as in the historical treatment of Bartholomew. Other middle-tier apostles such as Philip and Thomas are equally confusing to historians and require thorough analysis to discern the most reliable martyrdom tradition. In fact, Bartholomew's history in Phrygia, Egypt, Armenia and India consumes more pages than the historical treatment of his death. A case can be made that the nature of treating apostolic martyrology requires this historical establishment of apostolic ministry, but the extensive attention to ministry broadens the work beyond the intended focus on martyrdom.

None of these critiques detract from the extensive discussion of the history of the disciples, especially the modes of their deaths. Instead, McDowell has provided a great service that is unparalleled in contemporary scholarship. He shows acumen in interpreting early sources, he does not engage in uncritical apologetics to defend particular apostolic traditions and he fairly assigns a probability score to the primary legends. He filters the legends with brevity and accuracy, subordinating weak or late testimony to consistent and early testimony. Perhaps most of all, he recognizes the influence of Jesus' ministry, resurrection and discipleship as the primary impetus for apostolic suffering. Yet, even after all the traditions are evaluated, it sometimes feels like one must decide between church fathers like conflicting witnesses in a courtroom, leaving one to believe either Clement of Alexandria that Thomas died naturally or Hippolytus that Thomas died by spear. The primary sources must continually be weighed in pursuit of knowledge of the apostles. In the end, McDowell effectively illustrates his claim: 'It is difficult to imagine what more a group of ancient witnesses could have done to show greater depth of sincerity and commitment to the truth' (p. 265).

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