

“What Harm Is There for You to Say Caesar Is Lord?”

Emperors and the Imperial Cult in Early Christian Stories of Martyrdom

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Recent scholarship on early Christian martyrdom tends to be sceptical towards the traditional picture according to which Roman emperors wanted to destroy the emerging Christianity and ordered numerous believers who did not take part in the imperial cult to be executed. The vast majority of sources are written from a Christian point of view; they are narratives of uncompromising commitment and the superiority of the Christian faith, not disinterested reports of what happened. No matter how slim the historical evidence on early Christian martyrdom, its ideological significance was remarkable – the sentiment of belonging to a persecuted minority was an important factor of Christian identity. Part of this ideology was to portray the emperor as an archenemy of Christianity, an agent of ultimate evil who is in constant warfare with the divine. Even though the emperors seldom appear in the trial scenes of martyrs, they have an important part to play in the stories of martyrdom. They are present through their officials and their decrees and it is these unjust imperial orders that result in martyrdom. Martyrdom, however, is seen as a God-given fate and the martyr as a triumphant hero, which makes the emperor, despite his apparent victory, an eventual loser. While the battle between the martyr and the emperor is cast on a cosmic level, the authority of the emperor and his entitlement to honours on the mundane level are not questioned.

The cry “The Christians to the lions!” was heard increasingly in every part of the city. At first not only did no one doubt that they were the real authors of the catastrophe, but no one wished to doubt, since their punishment was to be a splendid amusement for the populace. [...] Caesar wished to drown the memory of the fire in blood, and make Rome drunk with it; hence the flow of blood promised to be grand.¹

The vivid and passionate description of the persecution of Christians in Nero’s Rome in Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel *Quo Vadis* illustrates well how the history of

the nascent Christian movement has traditionally been understood.² From Tacitus’ brief mention that Nero made Christians scapegoats for the fire of Rome in order to direct suspicion away from himself,³ the pious imagination of Sienkiewicz and many others has painted a gruesome picture of how thousands of Christians were dragged to prisons and arenas to be exposed to wild animals, burnt alive and crucified. Being a Christian was life-threatening but the “surpassing measure of cruelty was answered by an equal measure of desire for martyrdom, the confessors of Christ went to death voluntarily, or even sought death [...]”⁴

Recent research on martyrdom tends to be sceptical towards this popular narrative. Even though there is little doubt that Christian populations experienced suspicion, hostility and outright violence, traces of any systematic persecution, especially before the middle of the third century, are scanty. Scholars frequently characterize measures taken against Christians as local, sporadic, and short-lived.⁵ Yet, they do not usually doubt that Christians were killed. The devastating events of recent, fully-documented history have shown that official, state-initiated persecution based on ethnicity or religion is entirely possible.⁶ What scholars do question is whether Christians were killed because they were Christians.⁷ Ancient evidence for the persecution of Christians mostly derives from Christian sources that have a strong ideological bias. The few non-Christian sources that we have do not shed much light on the question.

In this essay, I approach the topic of emperors and the divine from the perspective of the stories of early Christian martyrdom and ask how emperors are represented in them. A brief answer is that both emperors and the divine play significant roles in martyrdom but on opposite sides. Typically, these narratives portray the emperor and those who act on his behalf in an utterly negative light, as ruthless enemies of God and the Christian faith. Be that the mad Nero⁸ or the “accursed wild beast”

² The influence of the novel – which guaranteed to its creator the Nobel Prize in literature in 1905 – was greatly enhanced by its adaptation in film. The Hollywood spectacle *Quo Vadis* was released in 1951 and became a record-breaking success.

³ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44. In addition, Sienkiewicz has used several other ancient sources. The cry “Christians to the lions!” resembles Tertullian’s famous statement, “If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky is rainless, if there is an earthquake, a famine, a plague, immediately the cry arises, ‘The Christians to the lion!’” (*Apology* 40.1). The name of the novel *Quo Vadis* comes from the story of Peter’s martyrdom in the *Acts of Peter*.

⁴ Sienkiewicz 1897, 395.

⁵ One of the first scholars to argue this was Geoffrey de Ste Croix in his seminal 1963 article.

⁶ I am thinking of the victims of the Holocaust in particular but other examples could be given, too. It is not hard to imagine a historian of the fourth or fifth millennium working on incomplete source materials and claiming that the persecution of Jews in Nazi-Germany was “local, sporadic, and short-lived”. Such an analogy makes me reluctant to make strong historical claims that might diminish and disregard the sufferings of real people in the real past.

⁷ Castelli 2004, 35–39; Middleton 2006, 1–3; Moss 2013, 127–162.

⁸ Cf. Eusebius, *Church History* 2.25.2.

¹ Sienkiewicz 1897, 394.

Decius,⁹ or the “lawless and sacrilegious” Diocletian,¹⁰ the ruler of the Roman Empire is a satanic figure, second only to the devil himself. In the first part of the essay I illustrate that such portrayals are partisan caricatures and do not tell about actual emperors. I briefly outline why the present-day standard scholarly view has distanced itself from the traditional understanding of Roman emperors as personal foes of Christianity. Next I discuss the challenges pertaining to the use of martyrological accounts as historical sources and give my reasons for treating them as literature which tells more about Christian self-understanding than about Roman attitudes towards Christians. In the second part of the essay, I analyse the roles emperors play in these literary accounts.

My basic claim is a simple one: even though seldom present at the trial and death of martyrs, emperors are significant characters in the stories of martyrdom. They are indirectly present through their decrees and through their representatives, the local officials. Their involvement is needed, for the contest of the martyr is not a local battle against random local authorities. It is a cosmic warfare between God and his adversary, the devil. While martyrs represent God, the most suited agent of the supreme evil is the highest worldly ruler, the giver of laws and decrees that are in conflict with divine orders. This, however, is not the whole picture. Emperors have a double role to play: they are advocates of evil but simultaneously they are guarantors of orderly life. In the martyr stories, the emperor’s power and his entitlement to honours are not disputed, as long as they do not threaten the sovereignty of God. While martyrs are represented as the embodiment of uncompromising commitment, they can still appear as loyal to the empire.

My main sources comprise early Christian martyr acts that claim to report how men and women suffer and die for Christ because they do not submit to the imperial orders to sacrifice for the well-being of the emperors. In addition, I draw examples from some other texts, such as some apocryphal acts of apostles, which frequently end with a depiction of the apostle’s death as a martyr. Martyr accounts do not form a unitary body of literature; there are several types of accounts and they have been classified in different ways.¹¹ A basic distinction has been made between martyr *acta* in the strict sense, written in a form of an official report of a court hearing, and *passiones*, narratives describing the imprisonment, trial, and death (or some of these elements) of a martyr or a group of martyrs, but these categories are not clear-cut and sometimes these different forms are combined. For the sake of convenience, I refer to all of them as martyr acts. Dating this source material is difficult, at times impossible. The matter is further complicated by the fact that many of the martyr acts are compilations or otherwise heavily redacted documents, or extracts from a larger literary work, or known in several more or less divergent versions. In my analysis, I concentrate on ideological representations reflected in

⁹ Lactantius, *On the Deaths of the Persecutors* 4.

¹⁰ *Martyrdom of Dasius* 1.

¹¹ See, e.g., Musurillo 1972, I–lvii.

texts that serve as examples of a genre, not on historical questions related either to the events described in the stories or to their textual history. While it is true that the imperial power and the execution of the imperial cult did not continue unchanged over the centuries, much of the rhetoric against emperors remained the same.¹²

Did Roman Emperors Persecute Christians?

The negative picture of Roman emperors in the early Christian martyr literature tells very little about the emperors’ attitudes towards Christians. The answer to the question whether Roman emperors persecuted Christians depends on the way one defines persecution – and also on the way one defines Christianity. As several scholars have reminded us, persecution is not a neutral word; its use entails taking a stance, usually siding with the (alleged) victim. What from a non-Christian viewpoint counts as justified and reasonable prosecution of disobedient, disloyal, even criminal individuals, becomes in the Christian understanding unjust and irrational persecution of innocent victims.¹³ There are no simple answers to the question what ‘really’ happened, for historical understanding always entails meaning-making.¹⁴ A death only becomes a martyr’s death when so understood and so remembered.¹⁵

What is less frequently commented on in relation to early Christian martyrdom is the diversity of the early Christian movement.¹⁶ Not all who called themselves Christians were the same and not all approached martyrdom in a similar fashion. In early Christian texts there are both accusations of escaping martyrdom and of embracing martyrdom too eagerly.¹⁷ Even though martyr acts paint a picture of steadfast heroes who never compromise their faith, in reality there were also

¹² Cf. Flower 2013, 40–41, who makes the same point concerning late antique invective.

¹³ Cf. Moss 2013, 151, 162; Middleton 2015, 210–11.

¹⁴ Cf. Grig 2004, 14; Middleton 2006, 2.

¹⁵ Castelli 2004, 34. Similarly, Daniel Boyarin emphasizes that martyrdom is not simply the action of a violent death; it is a “discourse”. He explains: “For the ‘Romans,’ it didn’t matter much whether the lions were eating a robber or a bishop, and it probably didn’t make much of a difference to the lions, either, but the robber’s friends and the bishop’s friends told different stories about those leonine meals. It is in these stories that martyrdom, as opposed to execution or dinner, can be found, not in ‘what happened.’” Boyarin 1999, 94–95.

¹⁶ Cf. Lieu 2002, 226–228.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.24.6; 4.33.9; Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 1.5, 11, 13; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.10.76–77; *Testimony of Truth* (NHC IX,3) 33,24–34,6.

many Christians who were willing to sacrifice.¹⁸ There were several ways Christians accommodated their faith to the lifestyles and customs of their Roman society; the dividing line between “Christian” and “pagan” was not always clear-cut.¹⁹ One of the crucial aims of many martyr acts is to sharpen this distinction, to separate Christians from their non-Christian society, represented by the cruel torturers of the martyrs. Moreover, they often aim at constructing an image of true, “orthodox” Christians, obedient to their Lord even to the point of death, as opposed to their “heretical” rivals.²⁰ From a Roman point of view, there was no difference between “true” and “false” Christians and it seems that followers of Marcion and Montanus were put to death side by side with other Christians. From the Christian point of view, this made all the difference and those who died with false religious beliefs were not recognized as martyrs.²¹

The imperial assaults on Christ-believers are widely believed to have started with Nero in 64 CE. If we follow Tacitus’ report, Nero did not attack Christians because he opposed their religious beliefs but because of their (alleged) involvement in arson. Other sources further complicate the picture for Suetonius and Cassius Dio, both of whom tell about the fire and accuse Nero of starting it, do not mention Christians in this context.²² None of these authors was Nero’s contemporary, which makes it hard to evaluate the reliability of Tacitus’ narrative.²³ Did he know details which the others either did not know or considered too insignificant to mention? Be that as it may, the silence of other sources shows that blaming Christians for the fire was not knowledge which was shared by everyone.

Another early non-Christian source that describes Roman relations to early Christians is the famous correspondence between Trajan and Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia. It reveals that Christians faced trials, that their hearings involved torture, and that those who, after several hearings, insisted in refusing to venerate Roman gods were executed on the spot – apart from Roman citizens who were transferred to Rome. However, it also reveals that Pliny is uncertain

18 There is evidence for different ways of coping with the threat of a death penalty. Some fled, others obtained forged testimonies concerning sacrificing. When a certain Copres who was going to court about a property dispute found out that he would be compelled to sacrifice there, he gave power of attorney to a friend who went to court in his place. See Luijendijk 2008, 216–224. Another type of evidence can be found in Cyprian’s treatise *De lapsis*, where he tackles the question of what to do with those who had fallen away from faith (the so called *lapsi*, the “lapsed”). Cf. *Martyrdom of Pionius* (15, 20) which tells of a certain Euctemon and “many others” who chose to offer sacrifice.

19 Cf. Markus 1990, 27–43.

20 Cf. *Acts of Justin* 2.3; *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius* 14.3; *Martyrdom of Dasius* 3.

21 Cf. *Martyrdom of Pionius* 21.5; Eusebius, *Church History* 5.16.20–22; 7.12.

22 Suetonius, *Nero* 38; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 62.16–18. In addition, Pliny the Elder mentions the fire in passing (*Natural History* 17.1) without referring to Christians.

23 Tacitus and Suetonius wrote in the beginning of the second century, Cassius Dio approximately a hundred years later. Tacitus was probably born before the fire broke out – his birth is traditionally dated to the 50s CE – but he was a young boy presumably living in provincial Gaul at the time and was unlikely to have witnessed the fire himself. It is possible that he had heard stories about the fire from those who remembered it, but the same holds true for Suetonius, which makes the differences in their reports all the more noteworthy.

why Christians should be condemned. Does being Christian suffice or should the accused have committed crimes?²⁴ The Emperor’s reply appears moderate: those who are formally accused and found guilty must be punished, but Christians should not be actively sought out and anonymous accusations should be ignored.²⁵ Even though this seems to have been the main policy of the Roman officials toward Christians up to the middle of the third century,²⁶ Christian sources from this period have a totally different story to tell: they claim that an accusation that someone is a Christian is sufficient to earn a death penalty.²⁷

Around the middle of the third century, Decius issued a decree compelling everyone to sacrifice to traditional Roman gods and to taste the offering.²⁸ The text of the edict has not survived but there are a fair number of sources describing its effects.²⁹ Among the most important are the so-called *libelli*, which were issued as certificates that sacrifices had been performed. About fifty such papyrus documents have been found so far, all from Egypt and all dating to the same year, 250 CE.³⁰ All of them declare in a highly formulaic manner that the carrier of the document has constantly sacrificed to the gods and has now performed a sacrifice in the presence of an official witness, in accordance with the edict’s decree. Christian sources often claim that Decius’ edicts were directed against Christians, but this is far from clear. There is nothing in the *libelli* that would indicate that those who performed a sacrifice were Christians; on the contrary, the affirmation that the person “has always sacrificed to the gods” would be untrue in the case of a Christian. If, however, they were not Christians, who were they? Was everyone in the Empire tested in this way – including slaves and people of lower classes?³¹ Was it reasonable – or indeed possible – to demand a certificate from every one?³² If only some were tested, why were some people chosen to show their allegiance in this special way?

24 Pliny, *Epistles* 10.96.

25 Pliny, *Epistles* 10.97.

26 Barnes 2010, 10–11.

27 Cf. Justin, *2 Apology* 2.7, 9–20; *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 14.

28 Cf. Eusebius, *Church History* 6.41.10–13.

29 See, e. g., Cyprian, *De lapsis*. Even though Cyprian’s texts must be treated as conscious literary representations of a situation in which his own episcopal authority was at stake, they evince beyond doubt that the imperial decree caused turmoil in North Africa. Cf. Grig 2004, 27–33.

30 Luijendijk 2008, 157–174. She gives the number of *libelli* as forty-six and introduces four of them in more detail. These are the ones found in Oxyrhynchus.

31 According to the known texts, women and children were among those who performed the sacrifice.

32 Cf. Gruen (2001, 18–19), who argues that imperial edicts were more a demonstration of power than a basis for actual practices. In discussing the alleged expulsions of Jews from Rome he claims that in practical terms, the Roman officials “did little or nothing to discourage Jews from dwelling in the city”. Cf. Van den Lans 2015.

Recent scholarly opinions tend to construe Decius' decree not as motivated by any particular hostility toward Christians but as reflecting his attempt to consolidate political unity by demanding a unified religious practice.³³ It is fair to presume that Decius might have approved of Christians worshipping their God as long as they would have offered a sacrifice to the emperor along with it.³⁴ On the other hand, it is also fair to presume that there were more Christian victims after the issuing of the decree simply because not many other people would have had reasons to refuse to sacrifice.

Actions that threatened Christians continued in Valerian's reign in the 250s and, after a more tranquil phase, under Diocletian in the beginning of the fourth century. Again, there is no doubt that these were hard times for many Christians, but similar uncertainties and ambiguities concerning the motives behind imperial actions pertain to these periods, too. The only sources we have are written from a Christian point of view that depicts the emperors as the very embodiment of evil with the sole purpose of harassing the church. Compared to the many Christian accounts on persecution and martyrdom, the silence of non-Christian sources is all the more striking.³⁵ Christian bias is also evident in the name that is traditionally linked to Diocletian's time, "the Great Persecution". The name fits the drama of the Christian master narrative where the darkness is at its darkest just before the dawn, i.e., the most severe persecution takes place just before the times of trouble come to an end. In real terms, both the intensity and the duration of the persecution varied in different parts of the Empire.³⁶

Diocletian began his reign after a long period of political turbulence and his edicts can be seen as part of his larger reforms to secure tranquillity and social stability in his vast empire.³⁷ Christians, now grown in number, posed a threat to these intents by their unwillingness to take part in the civic religiosity. Yet, it is impossible to tell whether Diocletian acted specifically against Christians or whether Christians became victims only when they were not willing to compromise. Again, there were Christians who chose to comply with the orders of the edicts and there must also have been non-Christian victims – brutal treatment and the death penalty were common punishments for all kinds of crimes.

33 Rives 1999, 140–144; Selinger 2004; Castelli 2004, 27; Brent 2010, 117–49.

34 Rives 1999, 142.

35 This quantitative imbalance makes it easy to side with Keith Hopkins, who claims that "Christians needed Roman persecutions, or at least stories about Roman persecutions, rather more than Romans saw the need to persecute Christians". Hopkins 1998, 198.

36 In Britain, Gaul and Spain, for example, toleration seems to have been endorsed as early as 306, only three years after Diocletian's edict. Barnes 2010, 111–150.

37 Williams 1985, 174.

Martyr Acts as Historical Sources

Most torturing and killing would have happened without anyone reporting them. Even though there are numerous stories of martyrs, most scholars regard the majority of them as "unrealistic and anachronistic fiction".³⁸ At the same time, there is a persistent yearning for historicity. Many scholars hold fast to the reliability of a handful of stories, claimed to be more or less contemporary to the events they describe.³⁹ These include texts such as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written in a letter form but believed to contain an eyewitness report on Polycarp's hearing and execution; the *Acts of Justin and his Companions*, taken to be based on official court records; and the *Passion of Perpetua*, claimed to be partly written by the martyred woman herself. There probably was a Polycarp and he might have faced a violent death. There certainly was a Justin – if the *Acts of Justin* tell about the second-century apologist Justin Martyr, as is usually presumed – and there might have been a Perpetua, who chose to die for her faith despite the many pleas of her father and others. However, I side with those scholars who maintain that the stories of their trial and death are not eyewitness reports. At least, they are not only that. Their highly stylistic and ideological features show that they are products of a thorough process of meaning-making. No matter if written on the spot, some days or years after the events they describe, or completely fabricated, they all reflect common patterns of behaviour and reasoning in the past they are reporting.⁴⁰

My scepticism is not grounded on any outright denial of the possibility of first-hand testimonies. It is quite conceivable that Christians had the opportunity to make copies of official court records, as Timothy D. Barnes argues.⁴¹ However, the fact that this was possible does not mean that this is what actually happened.⁴² Similarly, it can be imagined that a late-antique woman with literary skills might have had the materials, means and time to write a diary even while in prison, but, again,

38 Barnes 2012, 19.

39 For example, Barnes lists nineteen "authentic or contemporary" martyr acts; Barnes 2010, 355–359.

40 As my colleague Anna-Liisa Tolonen reminds me, eyewitness reports are not necessarily more reliable than other types of sources but can be just as stylistic and ideologically charged.

41 Barnes 2010, 55; 2012, 18–19.

42 Barnes (2010, 58) himself notes how "writers of hagiographical fiction quickly learned how to use the documentary style".

not everything that is within the limits of the possible automatically happens.⁴³ My scepticism concerning the first-hand nature of these martyr acts is based on the texts themselves, their literary character, their contents, and their textual history.

The greatest challenge in using even the earliest martyr stories as historical reports is their conventional, literary style and their close intertextual links with other similar accounts.⁴⁴ Certainly, resemblance to other stories and a conventional style as such do not have to be signs of fabrication; perhaps dying martyrs deliberately imitated Christ or their predecessors.⁴⁵ The authors who penned their stories might have used culturally credible images and stylistic features that, according to their taste and experience, belonged to martyrological discourses. Many of the echoes of earlier literary models are no doubt intentional, as Thomas Heffernan notices in his recent commentary on the *Passion of Perpetua*.⁴⁶ However, the recurring, stereotypical elements and almost formulaic expressions easily conceal the unique – if martyr acts were images, they would resemble icons, not documentary photographs.

The idea of being unjustly killed for one's faith has been part of the Christian self-image from as early as we can tell. Partly this is based on the model of the sacrificial death of Jesus – and *imitatio Christi* might lead to a similar fate.⁴⁷ According to the Gospel story, Jesus predicted to his disciples James and John that “the cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be

43 The idea of hearing the *ipsissima vox* of a martyr – let alone a female martyr – is thrilling and several scholars are reluctant to let go of the authenticity of Perpetua's prison diary; see, e. g., Cooper 2013, 106; Heffernan 2012, 3–8; Castelli 2004, 85–92. Cf., however, Bowersock (1995, 34), who is generally rather optimistic about finding first-hand evidence in martyr acts, but states “Whether Perpetua's words, in whatever language, allow us to hear an authentic and distinctive woman's voice [...] is much more doubtful. How would we tell?” Other more sceptical voices are found in Kraemer & Lander 2000; Moss 2013, 117–124. One argument for the authenticity of Perpetua's text is the presence of personal details, such as her description of the pain in her breasts, engorged with milk; cf. Hunink (2010, 150): “Why would any other Christian author take the trouble of empathizing with Perpetua's worrying about the [...] pain in her breasts?” This is a curious detail but, in my opinion, it is just as hard to explain why an elite woman would describe her aching breasts in a text which is not a private diary but a literary composition with “a more deliberate reflective and occasionally allusive style” and “a deliberate thematic theology” (Heffernan 2012, 4). Whoever wrote this part of the text, be that Perpetua or someone else, created a representation of what she might have experienced and felt instead of describing her actual inner feelings and emotions. On the tendency to add “useless details” to create a “reality effect”; see Barthes 1986, 141–148.

44 An example of such frequently occurring literary elements are visions and dreams of the martyr. Polycarp has a vision three days before he is captured and understands that he will be burnt alive; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 5. Perpetua has a series of visions. Particularly her vision of her dead brother who suffers in a dark place (*Passion of Perpetua* 7) seems to be inspired by the story of the rich man and Lazarus in the Gospel of Luke; cf. *Luke* 16:19–31. Both stories include a plea for a brother/brothers, both depict the dead sufferers as thirsty and unable to get water to drink, and in both there is a great chasm separating the blessed and the damned.

45 Cf. Moss 2013, 85. “Just because a story is clichéd does not, of course, mean that it is necessarily untrue.”

46 Heffernan 2012, x.

47 Cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, where the narrator emphasizes how Polycarp accepted his fate “just as the Lord did” (ὡς καὶ ὁ κύριος) in order to show an example for imitation. On martyrdom as *imitatio Christi*, see Moss 2010.

baptized”, which was taken to mean martyrdom.⁴⁸ Similar self-fulfilling prophecies can also be found elsewhere in the New Testament. The suffering of Christians was seen in line with the conviction that true prophets have always been persecuted. As Jesus had taught: “Rejoice and be glad when people revile you and persecute you [...] on my account, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”⁴⁹

Martyrdom belonged to the religious and philosophical discourses that early Christians shared with others.⁵⁰ The idea of a morally superior victim opposing a cruel tyrant and choosing a noble death was a well-known literary and cultural paradigm in Graeco-Roman antiquity.⁵¹ A particularly interesting point of comparison for Christian martyr acts is the so-called *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, a set of papyrus documents found in Egypt that claim to record trials of some Alexandrians who opposed Roman rule and suffered for their conviction.⁵² Despite the fragmentary condition of these texts, it is easy to see that, like their Christian counterparts, they are not documentary records but literary products with an ideological agenda.

Early Christian martyrdom also shares several features with Jewish traditions.⁵³ Most prominent martyr figures in early Jewish texts include the three young men in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lions' den – even though these heroes did not die for their faith but were miraculously saved.⁵⁴ Particularly significant was the memory of the so-called Maccabean martyrs.⁵⁵ Stories were told about the elder Eleazar and seven brothers who, along with their mother, were killed by the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes because they refused to obey his orders to reject Jewish ancestral customs. When Eleazar refuses to eat pork, those in charge of the sacrifice pity him and give him another type of meat advising him to pretend that it was pork, but Eleazar refuses this and is beaten to death.⁵⁶ In a similar fashion, the seven brothers and their mother who refuse to obey the orders of the king are brutally tortured. Before their deaths, they give speeches about God's justice,

48 *Mark* 10:39. Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 4.9.75; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts* 26.

49 *Matthew* 5:12.

50 Grig 2004, 10–11.

51 Seeley 1990, 113–141; Moss 2012, 26–37; Middleton 2015, 217–224.

52 Grig 2004, 60–61; Moss 2013, 74–76. See the texts in Musurillo 1954.

53 Cf. however, Bowersock (1995, 28), who claims: “Martyrdom had nothing to do with Judaism or with Palestine. It had everything to do with the Graeco-Roman world, its traditions, its language, and its cultural tastes.” Such a dichotomy between “Judaism” on the one hand and the “Graeco-Roman world” on the other, is no longer tenable. Early Jewish stories of martyrdom – just like early Christian martyr acts – were born in the “Graeco-Roman world” (to use Bowersock's terminology) and cannot be separated from their broader cultural milieu. Cf. Boyarin (1999, especially 93–126), who emphasizes the “inextricably intertwined” religio-cultural histories of Judaism and Christianity.

54 *Daniel* 3:1–30 and 6:2–25 respectively. They can be compared to Thecla, who likewise was condemned to death (twice) but was saved through divine intervention. Yet early Christian writers remember her as a protomartyr, the female counterpart to the first male martyr Stephen.

55 Seeley 1990, 83–112. The story is told in *2 Maccabees* and *4 Maccabees*.

56 *2 Maccabees* 6:19–20.

their future vindication, and the punishments that await the tyrant and all those who fight against God.⁵⁷ Several Christian martyr acts are replete with allusions to these stories and literary features such as a tyrant's unjust decree, the believers' uncompromising commitment, and even the compassion of officials recur time and again.⁵⁸

Just like their non-Christian antecedents, Christian martyrs also show resolute persistence and steadfastness. Martyrs never hesitate or recant; they never express fear or anxiety. On the contrary, they gladly accept their sentence and go rejoicing to their death. A stereotypical feature in practically all martyr acts is the martyr's acclaim "I am a Christian".⁵⁹ Often this is the answer of the prospective martyr no matter what the interrogator asks.⁶⁰ It is clear that such stories are not disinterested court protocols but "tendentious speech-acts",⁶¹ reporting an ideal in which the martyrs boldly confessed their faith.⁶² Instead of presenting "how things really were" it represents "how things should have been".⁶³

In addition to such stereotypical features, another challenge related to ancient martyr acts – and ancient literature in general – is the fact that we know very little about their textual history. The manuscripts we have are medieval copies and it is often impossible to say what kinds of alterations the text has gone through in the transmission process. This is especially obvious with composite texts, such as the *Passion of Perpetua*, where her "diary" is incorporated into a larger whole edited by someone else. Even if we imagine that a person imprisoned to wait for her execution would write down notes – which seems fanciful, if we take the description of the conditions of the confinement seriously⁶⁴ – how much did the editor alter the text? Moreover, how intact did it remain in the copying process? All known manuscripts

are medieval (tenth century or later).⁶⁵ If Perpetua herself wrote anything in the third century, it is impossible to know how similar it was to what we now have.

Despite these difficulties, many scholars, Vincent Hunink among them, take as their starting point the "wise principle that the burden of proof rests on those who doubt or reject the textual data from antiquity, not on those who accept them".⁶⁶ While I agree that extreme scepticism leads to absurdity, I do nevertheless maintain that "the hermeneutics of suspicion" is needed, especially with such tendentious texts as martyr acts. Deep down, it is a question of how scholars weigh the often inconclusive and indirect historical evidence. Personally, I cannot help but wonder how much the readiness to accept Perpetua's diary as written by the martyr herself has to do with the fact that the majority of scholars working on the text, myself included, represent the western, Christian (or post-Christian) culture which makes Perpetua part of "our" heritage and "our" history. Would the conclusion be different if the *Passion of Perpetua* were, say, a story of an early Islamic martyr?

To summarize what I have said this far, the vast majority of our evidence of the persecution of early Christians comes from Christian sources. They tell about the deaths of Christians from a Christian standpoint; more particularly, from a certain Christian standpoint which claims to be the only true and orthodox view. A true Christian stays firm and accepts death gladly for his or her faith. Those who recant show by their actions that they were not Christians in the first place. The martyr acts are retrospective descriptions of a Christian ideal of unwavering commitment, a model to be followed by everyone who shares the same faith.⁶⁷ At the same time, they create a distinctive Christian version of the past; a version to consolidate the identity of true believers.⁶⁸

Emperors and the Imperial Cult in Martyr Stories

No matter how slim the historical evidence about early Christian martyrdom is, its ideological importance can hardly be overestimated. Sentiments to do with suffering and the threat of persecution were crucial elements of Christian identity formation.⁶⁹ The emperor and the imperial cult played a significant role in this process – despite the fact that the emperor himself is seldom an actor in the drama in early martyr texts. Imperial power and the demands of imperial veneration

57 Even though these stories were about Jewish martyrs who "died for the law" (cf. Rajak 1997), Christians adopted them so thoroughly that the brothers and their mother became Christian saints, revered both in the east and the west. For example, John Chrysostom maintained that the Maccabean martyrs "received their wounds for Christ's sake". See Mayer 2006, 125.

58 Explicit references to the Maccabean martyrs appear, e.g., in the *Martyrdom of Marian and James* as well as the *Martyrdom of Montanus and Lucius*. In both stories, the mother of the martyrs appears and rejoices "like the mother of the Maccabees" when she sees the persistence of her son.

59 The confession Χριστιανός (Χριστιανή) εἰμι / *Christianus (Christiana) sum* appears in practically every martyrological account in Musurillo 1972. Lieu (2002, 213) calls this the "determinative moment" of martyr acts.

60 Cf. the report of Sanctus' interrogation: "To all of their questions he answered in Latin: 'I am a Christian!' He kept repeating this again and again instead of giving his name, birthplace, nationality, or anything else; and the pagan crowd heard not another word from him." *Martyrs of Lyons* 20.

61 Grig 2004, 60.

62 Brent Shaw (2003, 553) has pointed out that the closest counterparts for such detailed depictions of court hearings are "found in the world of fiction", that is, in ancient novels. It seems to me that there is much in the acts of martyrs that indeed belongs to the world of fiction.

63 Cf. Perkins 1995, 200.

64 Perpetua describes her prison as dark, crowded and stiflingly hot; *Passion of Perpetua* 3.5–6.

65 There are altogether ten manuscripts, nine in Latin and one in Greek, helpfully collected, introduced and discussed by Heffernan 2012, 369–430.

66 Hunink 2010, 150.

67 Cf. Lieu 2002, 218.

68 It is noteworthy that early Jewish accounts of martyrdom, aimed at reinforcing Jewish identity, also begin to flourish at approximately the same time in late antiquity; Bowersock 1995, 9–10; Boyarin 1999, 115–119.

69 Perkins 1995; Lieu 2002, 211–231.

form the evil other against which the divine truth manifests itself. Even though the emperor has supreme worldly power and can use it to destroy Christians, there is no doubt who is the ultimate winner of the battle, and indeed several martyr acts employ military language to describe the contest (*ἀγών*) of the martyrs. Imperial officials appeal to law, order and piety and while in the worldview of the stories these are all good and praiseworthy, the highest law and true devotion do not belong to the emperor but to God. In the following, I give several examples of martyr texts and the roles which the emperor and the imperial cult play in them.⁷⁰ I first discuss how the absent emperor is made present in the stories through his decrees and his representatives. Next, I take up the topic of authority and the limits of imperial authority. Closely related to this are questions of piety, prayer, and sacrifice; the prospective martyrs repeatedly express their willingness to pray and sacrifice – but not to the emperor. They pray to God alone, but willingly on behalf of the emperor. Finally, I show how the evilness of the emperor is elevated to a cosmic level; the emperors appear as personifications of the devil. At the same time, their local representatives can show a more compassionate side trying to persuade Christians to change their mind. This, however, does not diminish their diabolic nature.

The Absent Emperor Made Present

In the earliest Jewish martyrological traditions, such as in the stories of the Maccabean martyrs, it is the king himself who interrogates the brothers and who orders them to be executed. Similarly, Daniel and the three men who were cast into the fiery furnace directly confront the king. Early Christian martyr acts differ from this model as the emperor is usually absent from the scene. One of the rare Christian stories where the dying martyr encounters the emperor himself is the account of the martyrdom of the apostle Paul. First, the emperor Nero interrogates Paul personally and sends him to be beheaded. Even though he is not present at the execution, he sends messengers to see if Paul has already died and receives the news that milk flowed from the body of the apostle at the moment of his death. Later, Paul appears to the emperor, as he had predicted, and threatens Nero with terrible punishments.⁷¹ In the description of the death of the apostle Peter, Nero is not personally involved, but when he hears that the prefect Agrippa has executed Peter, he becomes angry, for “he had intended to punish him the more cruelly and severely”.⁷²

The role of the emperor in most early Christian stories is more oblique and indirect. Typically, the name of the emperor during whose reign the event is taking place is mentioned, usually at the beginning of the story, sometimes at the end. In

⁷⁰ If not otherwise noted, the translations I use are from Musurillo 1972.

⁷¹ *Martyrdom of Paul* 4–6.

⁷² *Martyrdom of Peter* 41; transl. Elliott.

addition to Decius and Diocletian, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Geta, Valerian, Maximian, Gordian and others are also mentioned. Often they are accused of ungodliness, injustice and other vices. A reference to the emperor gives a flavour of historicity to the story. Moreover, it functions as a reminder for the martyrs and, even more importantly, for the readers and listeners of the story, that it is the emperor who is behind the ordeals of Christians. The emperor has the power to pardon⁷³ and it is the emperor who orders executions.⁷⁴ The imperial decree is such an important *topos* in martyr acts that it also appears in stories that claim to report incidents that took place at times when no such imperial decrees were issued. A case in point is the *Acts of Justin*, which situates the martyr's death “in the days of the wicked defenders of idolatry, [when] impious decrees were posted against the pious Christians in town and country alike”.⁷⁵

The emperor is also present through his image. Imperial images were sent and statues erected all over the provinces as symbols of the emperor's presence even in his absence. In some martyr acts, it is explicitly the image of the emperor that the prosecuted Christians must venerate.⁷⁶ Since offering sacrifice to gods is an imperial order, refusing to obey means blasphemy not only against gods but also against the “august emperors”.⁷⁷ The emperor is also present through his representatives, local governors or proconsuls, usually referred to with titles such as ἀνθύπατος, ἑπαρχος, ἡγέμων, *proconsul*, *procurator* or *praeses*. Sometimes a difference is made between the emperor and his local functionary. For example, the governor Perennis is persuaded by Apollonius' determination and tells him: “I should like to release you, but I am prevented by the decree of the Emperor Commodus.”⁷⁸ On the other hand, in his *Apology*, allegedly addressed to the Emperor Pius and the Roman senate, Justin Martyr recounts the martyrdom of Ptolemaeus and Lucius and differentiates between the unjust prefect Urbicus and the just emperor. According to the story, Lucius protests against the death sentence the prefect has passed on Ptolemaeus claiming that it “does not befit the emperor Pius, his philosopher son and the holy senate.”⁷⁹ More customarily, however, no difference is made between different agents. For example, in the *Martyrdom of*

⁷³ *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 1.

⁷⁴ *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.47; *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 45.

⁷⁵ *Acts of Justin* 1 (Recension B). The death of Justin must have occurred around the year 165, when there is no evidence of any such imperial decrees. Cf. my discussion above.

⁷⁶ E. g., *Martyrdom of Dasius* 7, 8; *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 7.

⁷⁷ Πολλὰ ἔασας σε φλυαρῆσαι εἰς βλασφημίαν ἡγαγον τῶν θεῶν καὶ τῶν Σεβαστῶν. *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonice* 21.

⁷⁸ Θέλω σε ἀπολύσαι, Ἀπολλῶ, κωλύομαι δὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ δόγματος Κομόδου τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος. *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 45.

⁷⁹ οὐ πρέποντα Εὐσεβεῖ αὐτοκράτορι οὐδὲ φιλοσόφῳ Καίσαρος παιδί οὐδὲ τῇ ἱερᾷ συγκλήτῳ κρίνεις. Justin Martyr, 2 *Apologia* 2.16.

Polycarp, the governor, the executioners, the “tyrant” (τύραννος) and the devil all merge together.⁸⁰

There is some variation in the stories concerning how the martyrs react to the imperial orders. In some cases, the accused at least claim that they do not know anything about these decrees. When the proconsul asks Crispina whether she is “aware of what is commanded by the sacred decree”, she denies this and the proconsul has to explain: “That you should offer sacrifice to all our gods for the welfare of the emperors, in accordance with the law issued by our lords the reverend Augusti Diocletian and Maximian and the most noble Caesars Constantius and Maximus.”⁸¹ In other stories, however, the martyr is not ignorant of the decrees. When the prefect refers to the imperial orders, Julius replies: “I am aware of them but I am a Christian and I cannot do what you want; for I must not lose sight of my living and true God.”⁸²

Both narrative solutions emphasize the superiority of Christianity in comparison to the Roman gods and their protector, the emperor. When the martyrs claim their ignorance, their indifference towards the worldly rule and worldly powers is underlined. On the other hand, Julius shows this indifference despite the fact that he is aware of the imperial orders. At the same time, the innocence and moral superiority of Christians is underlined. They have done nothing wrong; on the contrary, they live a “blameless life”,⁸³ just as any pious Roman would live, and yet they are convicted.⁸⁴ It does not make a difference whether Christians are aware of the command of the emperor, for they are also aware of the orders of God and act accordingly.⁸⁵

80 *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.4–3.1. Cf. *Martyrs of Lyons* 1.27.

81 *Anullinus proconsul dixit: Praecepti sacri cognouisti sententiam? Crispina respondit: Quid praeceptum sit nescio. Anullinus dixit: Ut omnibus diis nostris pro salute principum sacrifices, secundum legem datam a dominis nostris Diocletiano et Maximiano piis Augustis et Constatio et Maximo nobilissimis Caesaribus. Martyrdom of Crispina* 1.2–3. Cf. the bishop Fructuosus who declares, “I do not know their orders. I am a Christian.” *Martyrdom of Bishop Fructuosus and his Deacons, Augurius and Eulogius* 2.3.

82 *Praeses dixit: Numquid ignoras praecepta regum, qui iubent immolare diis? Iulius respondit: Non ignoro quidem; sed ego Christianus sum et hoc facere non possum quod uis, nec enim me oportet Deum meum uerum et uiuum obliuisci. Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 1.4.

83 ὁ ἑπαρχὸς Ἰουστίνῳ εἶπεν· τίνα βίον βιοῖς; Ἰουστίνος εἶπεν· Ἄμεμπτον καὶ ἀκατάγνωστον πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις. *Acts of Justin* 2.1–2.

84 Christians as “embodiments of innocence” (Castelli 2004, 47) is a recurrent *topos* in several martyrologies. For example, Speratus protests: “We have never done wrong; we have never lent ourselves to wickedness. Never have we uttered a curse [...]” *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 2; cf. *Martyrdom of Ptolemaeus and Lucius* 16; *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 4.

85 καὶ φησὶν ὁ νεωκόρος· Οἴδατε πάντως τὸ διάταγμα τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος ὡς κελεύει ὑμᾶς ἐπιθύειν τοῖς θεοῖς, καὶ ὁ Πιόνιος ἔφη· Οἴδαμεν τὰ προστάγματα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν οἷς κελεύει ἡμᾶς αὐτῷ μόνῳ προσκυνεῖν. *Martyrdom of Pionius* 3.2–3.

Limits of Imperial Authority

The worldly rules of the emperor clash constantly with the divine rule of God. Further in the narrative of the martyrdom of Julius we find the following exchange:

Maximus said: “If you do not respect the imperial decrees and offer sacrifice, I am going to cut your head off.”

“That is a good plan!” answered Julius. “Only I beg you, good prefect, by the welfare of your emperors, that you execute your plan and pass sentence on me, so that my prayers may be fulfilled.”

[..]

“You are being offered advice,” said Maximus. “For if you endured this for the sake of the civil law, you would have eternal glory.”

Julius replied: “I surely suffer for the law – but it is the divine law.”

Maximus said: “You mean the law given you by a man who was crucified and died? Look how foolish you are to fear a dead man more than living emperors!”⁸⁶

Faithfulness to the divine law is the reason for martyrdom in Jewish martyr texts.⁸⁷ It is also an important *topos* in many Christian ones. Both Julius and his interrogator speak of the law but they give it very different meanings. While the governor sees the civic law as the highest authority, Julius and other Christians emphasize that there is another, divine law that surpasses any imperial laws. Julius declares that he is prepared to suffer for the laws, but for the right laws. From the perspective of the Roman governor, however, dying for a crucified man is foolishness⁸⁸ and any sensible person would understand that the one to deserve honours is the living emperor, not a dead criminal. The governor’s words contain an ironic twist since the intended (Christian) reader knows that it is exactly this crucified criminal whose authority exceeds that of the emperor.

At the heart of the conflict lies, as Elizabeth Castelli has observed, a dispute over whose sense of order and justice prevails.⁸⁹ Some martyr accounts explicitly equate the divine law with the gospels. For example, in the Greek recension of the *Acts of Euplus*, the martyr comes to his hearing carrying “the holy gospels”, which are later identified as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The governor calls them “wicked” since they go “against the edicts of our emperors” but for Euplus they are the “law of the Lord my God which I have received from him”.⁹⁰

86 The key passage runs as follows: *nam si pro patriae legibus patereris, haberes perpetuam laudem. Iulius respondit: Pro legibus certe haec patior, sed pro divinis. Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 3.1–3.

87 In *4 Maccabees*, the word νόμος occurs approximately forty times; Rajak 1997, 53.

88 Cf. Paul’s declaration in *First Corinthians*: “We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor. 1: 23–24.)

89 See her insightful discussion in Castelli 2004, 33–68.

90 *Acts of Euplus* 1.2. Cf. *Martyrdom of Felix* 15.

The prosecuted Christian is usually ready to acknowledge the power of the emperor to a certain limit but it is crucial that this limit is not crossed. Martyrs are depicted as embodying the maxim “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”⁹¹ Thus, Apollonius declares that the Saviour has taught us to “obey any law passed by the emperor and to respect him”;⁹² and Polycarp is willing to “pay respect to the authorities and powers that God has assigned us”.⁹³ The emphasis, however, lies in the fact that it is God who has entrusted the emperor with worldly power. The emperor is fully human and has received his authority, God willing, from other humans. Thus, he is in no way comparable to God, whose “divine decree cannot be quelled by a human decree”.⁹⁴

Prayer and Sacrifice belong to God Alone

The insurmountable divide between God and the human emperor becomes clear in the following words of Apollonius addressed to his interrogator, the proconsul Perennis:

Would you want me to swear that we pay honour to the emperor and pray for his authority? If so, then I should gladly swear, calling upon the one, true God, the One existing before all ages, who was not fashioned by human hands, but rather appointed a human among humans to be ruler over the earth.

[...]

With all Christians I offer a pure and unbloody sacrifice to almighty God, the lord of heaven and earth and of all that breathes, a sacrifice of prayer especially on behalf of the spiritual and rational images that have been disposed by God’s providence to rule over the earth. Wherefore obeying a just precept we pray daily to God, who dwells in the heavens, on behalf of Commodus who is our ruler in this world, for we are well aware that he rules over the earth by nothing else but the will of the invincible God who comprehends all things⁹⁵

91 *Mark* 12:17 and parallels, explicitly alluded to in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 9: “Pay honour to Caesar as Caesar; but it is God we fear.”

92 [...] ἔτι δὲ νόμῳ τῷ ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ δοθέντι πείθεσθαι, βασιλέα τιμᾶν [...] *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 37.

93 δεδιδάγμεθα γὰρ ἀρχαῖς καὶ ἐξουσίαις ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ τεταγμέναις τιμῆν. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 10.2.

94 οὐ δύναται νικηθῆναι τὸ δόγμα τοῦ θεοῦ ὑπὸ δόγματος ἀνθρωπίνου. *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 24.

95 βούλει δὲ ὀμνῆναι με ὅτι καὶ βασιλέα τιμῶμεν καὶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ κράτους αὐτοῦ εὐχόμεθα; ἡδέως ἂν ὀμῶσαιμι ἀληθεύων τὸν ὄντως θεὸν τὸν ὄντα τὸν πρὸ αἰώνων, ὃν χεῖρες οὐκ ἐποίησαν ἀνθρώπων, τούναντίον δὲ αὐτὸς ἀνθρώπων ἀνθρώπων ἔταξεν βασιλεύειν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. [...] θυσίαν ἀναίμακτον καὶ καθαρὰν ἀναπέμπω κάγω καὶ πάντες Χριστιανοὶ τῷ παντοκράτορι θεῷ τῷ κυριεύοντι οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς καὶ πάσης πνοῆς, τὴν δι’ εὐχῶν μάλιστα ὑπὲρ ἀσωμάτων καὶ λογικῶν εἰκόνων τῶν τεταγμένων ὑπὸ τῆς προνοίας τοῦ θεοῦ βασιλεύειν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. διὸ καθ’ ἡμέραν κατὰ πρόσταγμα δικαίας ἐντολῆς εὐχόμεθα τῷ καταοικοῦντι ἐν οὐρανοῖς θεῷ ὑπὲρ τοῦ βασιλεύοντος ἐν τῷδε τῷ κόσμῳ Κομόδου, εἰδότες ἀκριβῶς ὅτι οὐχ ὑπὸ ἄλλου τινός ἀλλὰ ὑπὸ μόνης τῆς τοῦ ἀνίκητου θεοῦ βουλῆς, τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐνπεριέχοντος, ὡς προεῖπον, βασιλεύει ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 6; 8–9.

Apollonius is ready to pay honour to the emperor who is his rightful ruler in the world, but for him this means praying on the emperor’s behalf to God, the maker of heaven and earth. Christians are even willing to sacrifice but not to the traditional gods. Instead, they are ready to give themselves as a sacrifice to their God.

A similar ambiguity that takes place concerning the law also occurs in relation to sacrifice and prayer. Both Christians and their Roman prosecutors use the same language but they talk past each other. What from the Roman perspective represents the highest form of piety is for the Christian a sacrilege and vice versa; what Christians call piety, Roman officials call folly.⁹⁶ An example of how differently a martyr and her Roman interrogator understand what is pious and what sacrilegious is offered in the *Martyrdom of Crispina*:

“So our gods are not acceptable to you!” said Anullinus. “But you shall be forced to show them respect if you want to remain alive for any worship at all!”

“That piety is worthless,” replied Crispina, “which forces people to be crushed against their will.”

Anullinus said: “But all we ask of your religion is that you bow your head in the sacred temples and offer incense to the gods of Rome.”

“I have never done this since I was born,” replied Crispina; “I do not know how; nor will I ever do it so long as I live.”

“Do so now,” said Anullinus, “if you wish to escape unharmed from the sanctions of the law.”

“I do not fear anything you say,” replied Crispina. “That is nothing. But if I deliberately choose to commit a sacrilege, the God who is in heaven will destroy me at once, and I shall not be found in him on the last day.”

“You will not commit sacrilege,” said Anullinus, “if you obey the sacred edicts.”⁹⁷

The exchange between Crispina and her interrogator reveals how impossible it is for the interrogator to understand Crispina’s commitment, which to him is pure obstinacy. From his point of view, his demand is not unreasonable; on the contrary, by doing what he commands Crispina would show the right kind of obedience and piety. However, the edicts he calls sacred are for Crispina blasphemous.

Even though the martyrs share the language of their wider Roman culture, their speech remains unintelligible to their Roman partners in dialogue. From a Roman perspective, Christians are senseless in their refusal to take part in public piety since in this way they threaten the welfare of the whole society. The images of the emperors must be venerated for they guarantee the presence of the emperors who

96 ἐπηρώτησε: Τῆς μωρίας διδάσκαλος ἦς; ἀπεκρίθη: Τῆς θεοσεβείας. *Martyrdom of Pionius* 19.7; cf. *Martyrdom of Agapē, Irenē and Chionē* 6.

97 *Anullinus dixit: Ergo isti dii a te non sunt accepti? quibus cogere exhibere famulatum ut salua peruenias ad deuotionem. Crispina respondit: Nulla deuotio est quae opprimi cogit inuitos. Anullinus dixit: Sed ut iam deuota sis quaerimus, ut in templis sacris flexo capite diis Romanorum tura immoles. Crispina respondit: Hoc non feci aliquando ex quo nata sum, nec noui, nec facio usquequo uixero. Anullinus dixit: Sed fac, si uis a legume seueritate immunis euadere. Crispina respondit: Quod dicis non timeo; hoc nihil est: Deus autem qui est in caelis, si consensero esse sacrilega, simul me perdet, ut non inueniar in illo die uenturo. Anullinus dixit: Sacrilega non eris si sacris obtemperes iussionibus. Martyrdom of Crispina* 2.1–3.

“give us peace, give us our rations and every day concern for our every advantage,” as the commander Bassus explains to the martyr Dasius.⁹⁸ For this reason the Roman officials are hard put to understand the Christian stubbornness, which they interpret as a crime of treason against the emperor.⁹⁹

Emperors and Martyrs in a Cosmic Battle

Christian martyrs see it the other way around. Participation in the imperial cult would compromise their faith and jeopardize their future salvation. Crispina tries to explain that she cannot obey the imperial order for that would mean her destruction.¹⁰⁰ Emperors and their representatives who insist on demanding sacrifice are seen as diabolic. Roman authorities are not only repeatedly deemed lawless and impious but they are also portrayed as doing the devil’s work. It is the devil who is the ultimate agent in destroying Christians and who conspires with pagans – and sometimes also with the Jews.¹⁰¹ The executioners with their inhuman cruelty are *ministri diaboli* “the devil’s servants”¹⁰² and the real enemy of the Christians is not visible but the one “that cannot be seen with bodily eyes”.¹⁰³ Martyrdom is not only a combat between the emperor and Christians; it is a cosmic battle between the devil and God, where the deaths of the martyrs contribute to the final victory.¹⁰⁴

Curiously, the demonic Roman authorities are often also portrayed as showing compassion and pity toward the martyrs. In several accounts, the officials do their best to persuade Christians to submit and offer the required sacrifice, pleading with them time and again to be sensible and delaying the pronouncement of their sentence in order to give them time to change their mind.¹⁰⁵ A case in point is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, from where the citation in my title is taken.

98 Δεήθητι τοῖς εἰκόσι τῶν δεσποτῶν ἡμῶν τῶν βασιλέων τῶν τὴν εἰρήνην παρεχόντων καὶ ὄρωρμένων ἡμῖν τὰ σιτηρέσια καὶ ἐπὶ πάσῃ λυσιτελείᾳ ἡμῶν ἐφ’ ἐκάστης ἡμέρας φροντίδα ποιουμένων. *Martyrdom of Dasius* 7.1.

99 *Martyrdom of Agapē, Irenē and Chionē* 4.3.

100 *Martyrdom of Crispina* 2.2 (see footnote 97 above). Cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 11.2: “The fire you threaten me with burns merely for a time and is soon extinguished. It is clear that you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment and of the judgment that is to come, which awaits the impious.” Further references to the coming judgment can be found, e.g., in *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 42; *Martyrdom of Pionius* 4.16, 24: 7.4.

101 Cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12; 13; 17.2; 18.1; *Martyrdom of Pionius* 4.8; 13.

102 *Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 4.5.

103 *Martyrdom of Agapē, Irenē and Chionē* 1.1.

104 Middleton 2006, 6.

105 *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 1; *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 2, 7, 13, 45; *Martyrdom of Dasius* 10; 18–19; *Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 2.4–6; *Martyrdom of Pionius* 4.1, 5.3, 8.1–4, 15.2, 16.1, 17.1, 20.2.

The police captain Herod with his father Nicetes came up to meet Polycarp [...] [and] tried to persuade him, saying: “Now what harm is there for you to say ‘Caesar is lord,’ to perform the sacrifices and so forth, and thus save your life?”

At first, Polycarp would not answer them; but when they persisted, he said: “I do not intend to do what you advise.”

They then gave up their attempt to move him and spoke threateningly to him [...].¹⁰⁶

The governor tries the same. He first does his best to persuade the young Germanicus – who dies before Polycarp – by appealing to his youth and then the aged Polycarp by appealing to his old age. When persuasion has no effect, he continues with threats.

Such efforts by Roman officials may serve several narrative functions and readers may understand them in different ways. They might be taken as signs of calculation to diminish the troubles of the executors. They might also be taken as signs of sympathy, a tentative positive reaction to the Christian proclamation. Be that as it may, this more compassionate side of the Roman officials does not diminish their guilt and cruelty. On the contrary – they are asking the martyrs to recant and, thus, to be eternally damned. In so doing, they are acting in the devil’s service. Moreover, it underlines the injustice of the verdict – even the Roman officials know that the martyrs are innocent of any crime. It also shows the severity of the tortures; the martyrs suffer so much that even the wicked are moved. Most importantly, it serves as a sign of Christian determination. Nothing, be that reason or threat, can make them recant.

A martyr story typically ends with the martyr rejoicing over his or her fate and thanking God for it.¹⁰⁷ When Apollonius hears his sentence, he acknowledges the part the proconsul has played in it: “Proconsul Perennis, I also thank my God for this sentence of yours which will bring me salvation.”¹⁰⁸ Phileas takes one step further and thanks the emperors for his salvation: “I owe thanks to the emperors and to the prefect that I have been made a coheir of Christ Jesus.”¹⁰⁹ The emperor, without being aware of it, partakes in and contributes to God’s plan. The devil may delight in every martyr that is slain but what he sees as a victory is actually his loss.¹¹⁰ The ultimate agent of this cosmic drama is neither the emperor nor the

106 καὶ ὑπήντα αὐτῷ ὁ εἰρηνάρχος Ἡρώδης καὶ ὁ πατήρ αὐτοῦ Νικήτης [...] ἔπειθον [...] λέγοντες· Τί γὰρ κακόν ἐστιν εἰπεῖν· Κύριος Καῖσαρ, καὶ ἐπιθῆσαι καὶ τὰ τούτοις ἀκόλουθα καὶ διασώζεσθαι; ὁ δὲ τὰ μὲν πρῶτα οὐκ ἀπεκρίνατο αὐτοῖς, ἐπιμενόντων δὲ αὐτῶν ἔφη· Οὐ μέλλω ποιεῖν ὃ συμβουλευέτε μοι. οἱ δὲ ἀποτυχόντες τοῦ πείσαι αὐτὸν δεῖνὰ ῥήματα ἔλεγον [...] *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8.2–3.

107 Cf. *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 17; *Acts of Cyprian* 5; *Martyrdom of Crispina* 4.1–2; *Martyrdom of Pionius* 20.

108 Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου, Περέννιε ἀνθύπατε [...] καὶ περὶ τῆσδε τῆς ἐμοῦ σωτηριώδους ἀποφάσεώς σου. *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 46.

109 *Ego autem magnam ago gratiam regibus et praesidatui quoniam coheres factus sum Christi Iesu. Acts of Phileas* 8.2.

110 Cf. *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 47.

devil. It is God himself who shows through the steadfastness of his martyrs the superiority of true Christian faith.¹¹¹

Concluding Remarks: Emperors and the Divine in Early Christian Martyr Stories

“What harm is there for you to say Caesar is lord?” From the Roman interrogator’s point of view the question is purely rhetorical; there is no reason not to perform the required sacrifice, there is nothing to lose and everything to win. Christians can continue to worship their God as long as they fulfil their civic duties and participate in the imperial cult. The viewpoint promoted in martyr acts is completely opposite: there is everything to lose and nothing to win. Complying with the emperor’s orders means committing sacrilege and idolatry and being deprived of salvation. In the narratives, no compromise is possible and no compromise is made.

The traditional outlook of studies in early Christianity has taken this kind of dichotomy between Christian and pagan at face value and emphasized the differences between Christian beliefs and Greco-Roman cultural practices. The martyr acts, however, reveal that Christian ideology was deeply embedded in the structures and practices of Roman imperial society within which it was born.¹¹² They employ the same language and operate with similar concepts as were used in the broader late antique discourses. Moreover, they acknowledge the authority of the emperor on worldly matters and represent Christians as loyal to Rome as they can without endangering their loyalty to God. Despite their hostile rhetoric towards the emperor and his officials, martyr acts reveal a willingness to be part of the Roman society under the emperor’s rule.¹¹³ Martyrs are not only exemplary Christians, they are also exemplary subjects who do not challenge the emperor’s God given authority and who are willing to pray for the well-being of their ruler. Polycarp’s noble life is described as πολιτεία, citizenship,¹¹⁴ Speratus assures us that he has lived honestly and payed taxes for everything he has bought,¹¹⁵ and Julius the Veteran emphasizes his faithful military service.¹¹⁶

How can such a double strategy of representing the emperor both as the ultimate evil and as the rightful ruler be explained? Several scholars have pointed out that hostile language towards others in ancient texts is often a sign of unclear

¹¹¹ Cf. Bowersock 1995, 52.

¹¹² Perkins 2009, 3; Castelli 2004, 75.

¹¹³ Flower 2013, 63-67.

¹¹⁴ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17.1. While Polycarp’s πολιτεία refers to his life as a Christian, as a “citizen” of a Christian γένος (cf. Lieu 2002, 53, 222–223), connotations to the wider civic life can also be associated with it.

¹¹⁵ *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* 6.

¹¹⁶ *Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 2.1-2.

boundaries; in a situation where borderlines are fuzzy and undefined, they need to be strengthened on a rhetorical level. The black-and-white picture of martyr acts depicting Christians and pagans as two separate and easily recognizable groups did not coincide with the everyday reality where Christians did not always differ much from their non-Christian neighbours.¹¹⁷ Portraying the emperor in a diabolic light and placing him in the invisible battle against the divine helped to create a boundary that set Christians apart from others – and yet, as the boundary manifested itself on a mythical level, there was no need to compromise the everyday coexistence by erecting visible boundary markers.

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¹¹⁷ Markus 1990, 27–29; cf. Boyarin 1999, 16-19; Lieu 2002, 230.

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