

# **The *Martyrdom of Polycarp***

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## **Abstract**

The story of Polycarp presents the challenge of steering a *via media* between hagiographical and demythologizing interpretations. The article explains the problems with regard to dating his martyrdom and the method of separating out the anachronistic and hagiographical details within the account. There is nothing in the *Martyrdom* that could not have been written in the mid-second century, and there is no compelling reason why it must be dated considerably later than the events it describes. At a time when the church was growing, Polycarp's fate was not just a story but also a sign and a pastoral encouragement.

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## **I. *The Origin of the Text***

**P**olycarp of Smyrna is one of the most fascinating, albeit little-known, fathers of the early church. His literary output was modest, consisting (as far as we know) of a single epistle to the Philippians, but his real claim to fame lies elsewhere. According to ancient tradition, he was ordained by the Apostle John and was himself the teacher of Irenaeus, whose great book *Against Heresies* is one of our chief sources for the theology of the post-apostolic church. If these claims are true, then Polycarp is one of the main links in the chain connecting the New Testament with the flowering of Christian literature in the latter half of the second century. But just as important as his life and teaching was his sacrificial death, which was immortalized in a letter written by his church at Smyrna to another congregation in the obscure city of

Philomelium.<sup>1</sup> It describes the heroic way in which the very old man faced execution for his faith in Christ, and its account helped to turn him into an example for later generations to follow.

That Polycarp became famous for his martyrdom at a time when the church was growing in strength (and consequently producing more martyrs) is universally accepted, but beyond that scholarly opinion is divided. At one extreme are the traditionalists, who take the *Martyrdom* at face value and resist all attempts to turn it into a hagiography with only a limited connection to historical facts. At the other extreme are those who believe that the account of Polycarp's death is a fiction invented by later generations of Christians who were looking for a heroic martyr figure and thought that he would be ideal for the purpose. In the middle are the vast majority of scholars who believe that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is based on historical facts, but that these have been embellished for didactic and hagiographical purposes. These scholars differ among themselves about where the line between fact and fiction should be drawn, but there is a consensus of sorts, to the extent that they all agree that it is impossible to know this for sure!<sup>2</sup>

What may be regarded as more or less certain is that the text as we now have it dates from a time considerably later than the events it describes. We know this because the concluding paragraphs of the extant versions tell us so. It appears that the original letter was written by a certain Evarestus, who must have been a scribe of the Smyrnaean church, and that it had been taken to Philomelium by a letter-carrier called Marcion.<sup>3</sup> A copy of it had apparently been kept by Irenaeus, and it was this copy that was later transcribed by an unknown Gaius. It was subsequently retranscribed by an Isocrates (or Socrates), and finally by Pionius, who is known to have been martyred on March 12, A.D. 250.<sup>4</sup> It is also generally agreed that Polycarp was put to death on February 22 or 23, a day that was described as “a great Sabbath,” again according to the witness of the text.<sup>5</sup> The uncertainty about

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<sup>1</sup> A city located about fifteen miles northeast of Pisidian Antioch, where Paul had preached the gospel. Its bishop attended the first council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, but it is otherwise virtually unknown.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed summary of the different positions, see Paul Hartog, ed., *Polycarp's Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 171–90. Most of the details and conclusions in this section are drawn from this study, which is now the most complete and reliable available. The English translation used for this article is J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and revised by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 131–44.

<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with the Marcion of Pontus who preached heresy in Rome in the mid-second century!

<sup>4</sup> *Mart. Pol.* 22.2–3.

<sup>5</sup> *Mart. Pol.* 21.

the exact date stems from the fact that we do not know whether the Sabbath in question was a Saturday or a Sunday.<sup>6</sup> That in turn means that Polycarp's martyrdom must have occurred in 155/156, 160/161 or 166/167, when February 22 fell on a Saturday. Earlier and later dates have sometimes been suggested, but most scholars now rule them out because it is harder to connect them to external events and to other people mentioned in the narrative.<sup>7</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, who quoted about half the text practically *verbatim*, claimed that the martyrdom occurred on February 23, 167, but the more usually accepted year is 156, a conclusion that is tentatively accepted by Hartog (among others), though he does not rule out the possibility that it may have taken place in 161.<sup>8</sup>

The chief problems associated with dating may be classified under the headings of "anachronism" and "hagiographical details." As far as anachronism is concerned, it has often been claimed that some of the language and assumptions of the *Martyrdom* reflect a later period of the church's development. For example, the word *katholikē* is used to describe the church, and there is a concern to dissuade Christians from offering themselves as potential sacrifices, a practice that is often thought to reflect an anti-Montanist emphasis.<sup>9</sup> There is also the question of the cult of the martyr's relics, which the *Martyrdom* appears to encourage and which is generally thought to have originated in the third century. Under the heading of hagiographical details may be included certain things that are not found in Eusebius's transcription, most notably the mention of the miracle of the smell of baking bread and the appearance of a dove in the flames of Polycarp's funeral pyre.<sup>10</sup> The suggestion has been made that details like these were post-Eusebian additions and thus evidence that the text was still being developed in the middle of the fourth century, almost certainly for hagiographical purposes.

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<sup>6</sup> If the *Martyrdom* was following Jewish usage it would have been a Saturday, and possibly called "great" because of an association with a Jewish festival like Purim. But if the authors were adopting Christian usage, it may have been a Sunday, since later Christians sometimes distinguished their day of worship from the Jewish one by calling it "great." But since Polycarp was arrested on a Friday, it seems most likely that he was tried and put to death on a Saturday, not a Sunday, making it February 22.

<sup>7</sup> For the details, see Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 191–200.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>9</sup> Montanism did not appear until somewhat later, though it was known at least from A.D. 172 onwards.

<sup>10</sup> *Mart. Pol.* 15.2; 16.1. Much has been made of these differences, but they are very minor. In total, Eusebius lacks only six words, and this may well have been a slip of the pen, either by him or (more likely) by the scribe who made the copy he was using. Certainly it is unwise to base any firm conclusion on such slender evidence.

In the nature of the case, there can be no definitive answer to questions of this kind. What can be said however is that there is nothing in the *Martyrdom* that could not have been written in the mid-second century, and so there is no compelling reason why it must be dated considerably later than the events it describes. Further research into the period and the evidence of parallel texts make it clear that the conditions surrounding martyrdom and the reactions of the church to it were more advanced by A.D. 150 than most early twentieth-century scholars thought, a fact that inevitably lends greater plausibility to the *Martyrdom* as an authentic account. Furthermore, some elements in the *Martyrdom* seem to reflect the second century more than the third. One of these is the role ascribed to Jews, who appear to be in collusion with pagans in their attempts to persecute Christians, and another is the apparent ease with which Christians could be accused and put to death without due process. The latter phenomenon, in particular, was severely criticized by Christian apologists such as Tertullian, writing around A.D. 200, and it is notable that known forgeries, like the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, were punctilious in their concern to portray the trials of Christians as procedurally normal, even if the accusations made against them were only dubiously legal. That the *Martyrdom* makes no attempt to hide the irregularity of the proceedings that led up to Polycarp's death may therefore be taken as evidence that it is faithfully reproducing historical circumstances that would have been much harder to present without comment in the mid-third century, when Pionius was copying the text that we now possess.

A third feature of the *Martyrdom* that would have seemed odd to later generations is the paucity of references to the New Testament, even though there are clear parallels to the suffering and death of Jesus. This reluctance to cite the Gospels is understandable in a mid-second century text, when their status as canonical Scripture was still new and unfamiliar, but it would have been almost unthinkable a generation later, as the evidence of both Irenaeus and Tertullian indicate. On the whole, therefore, a date for the *Martyrdom* that puts it before A.D. 180 (and perhaps as early as 156) seems preferable to any later alternative, and despite the acknowledged tradition of copying, there is no sign of any tampering with the evidence that would make such an early composition impossible.

Having said that, it is also clear that the *Martyrdom* is not a strictly historical account of events. Polycarp's death was not just a fact but a sign, and it is as a sign that it was regarded as particularly important. Quite why the church at Philomelium wanted to know about it is uncertain, but whatever their motive was in requesting an account of it, the Smyrnaeans made certain that they received ample instruction as to the deeper meaning of

Polycarp's sacrifice. Whether the words attributed to the saint are authentic is impossible to say, and some of them (such as his prayer) appear to be too carefully structured to have been spontaneous. However, by the standards of the ancient world, that does not necessarily compromise their genuineness, because literary convention almost always insisted that the speeches of great men should be recorded stylistically, rather than literally. In other words, thoughts appropriate to the occasion were put into their mouths and everyone took it for granted that that is what they should have said, whether they actually did so or not. So universal was this practice that anything else would have seemed abnormal to the Philomelians. Furthermore, there are plenty of incidental details surrounding the martyrdom which give it an air of authenticity and that must be taken into account when assessing the historical accuracy of the text.

Much more suspect from this point of view are the parallels drawn, explicitly or implicitly, with the suffering and death of Jesus. That Polycarp was imitating Christ was an unexceptional idea and would have been expected from any account of his death, but some of the details, such as his interrogation by a man called "Herod," seem to push the likelihood of pure coincidence beyond the bounds of credibility. Was there a conscious attempt by the Smyrnaeans to make Polycarp's sacrifice look as much like that of Jesus as possible, regardless of the actual facts? The best answer to this seems to be that the parallels between Polycarp and Jesus are not consistent—for example, the interrogator was called Herod, but the proconsul who condemned Polycarp was not named Pilate—and usually too trivial to have any theological meaning in themselves. It is much easier to assume that the author(s) of the *Martyrdom* drew parallels with Jesus as and when they noticed them (and that modern critics have suggested additional similarities that did *not* occur to the original writers) than it is to suppose that somebody deliberately sat down to remake Polycarp in the image of Jesus. Nevertheless, the existence of the parallels is a reminder that Polycarp's death was seen to have a theological significance that it would be unwise to ignore when attempting to interpret it.

Granted that the *Martyrdom* is more than a historical account, how should it be described? Here scholars appear to be at a loss for words. Some say that it is "theological," a general term that can mean many things but that (in the ancient context) usually refers to the development of Christian doctrine. The *Martyrdom* is the earliest known text to offer a spiritual rationale for the suffering of Christians as part of the divine plan, but although this is "theological" in a sense, it does not seem to be the main point of the letter. Others would call it "hagiographical," claiming that its purpose was mainly to

glorify Polycarp and uphold his example as a model for others to follow. In a sense, that is hard to deny, but the *Martyrdom* lacks the features of classical hagiography that would make this categorization definitive. There are extraordinary events surrounding Polycarp's death, but he performs no miracles, nor were his remains preserved for any such purpose. The strange things that occurred during his martyrdom were not so odd that no natural explanation is possible, and there have been scholars who have attempted to deal with them in that way—though admittedly without carrying much conviction.<sup>11</sup> It therefore seems best to conclude that the *Martyrdom* is hagiographical by accident rather than by design, even though that element remains significant.

Perhaps the best approach to the text is to think of it as primarily pastoral in intention. The Smyrnaeans were concerned not merely to glorify their deceased bishop but also to fortify the faith of those who might easily lose heart at the thought that the only fate that awaited them as Christians was persecution and an ignominious death. They wanted to make it clear that God had a purpose in allowing such things to happen, and that believers could rest secure in the knowledge that their potential sacrifice would not be in vain. This was the true meaning of Polycarp's martyrdom, and the aspect of it that appealed most to those who read and circulated the letter. As humbler folk, they could hardly expect to imitate Jesus to the degree that Polycarp apparently did, but their own sufferings were not in vain. Polycarp appears as a kind of intermediary between Jesus and the ordinary church member, and that, after all, was what a bishop and leader of the church was expected to be.

## II. *The Content of the Text*

As found in modern editions, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is conventionally divided into twenty-two chapters, most of which are further subdivided into sections, making a total of fifty-three in all (or fifty-four with the introductory inscription) and covering no more than seven pages of a paperback book.<sup>12</sup> The whole text could easily be read out loud in less than an hour, and that was probably what often happened. Eusebius's reproduction of chapters 8.1–19.1 (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.15.14–45) is almost

<sup>11</sup> See Hartog, *Polycarp's Epistle*, 174–75 for the details.

<sup>12</sup> There are also two extra “epilogues” in the Moscow manuscript, which give different endings to chapter 22. Hartog's edition takes up sixteen pages in both Greek and English, but the paragraphs are very well spaced and contain a copious *apparatus criticus* at the bottom of the Greek text.

word-for-word identical to the text, with only a few omissions and the occasional “correction” of a word to make it more literary. Thus, for example, we find the “proper” Greek *hekatontarchēs* for the more popular, but Latinate *kentyriōn* (18.1), and a few alterations to the tenses of certain verbs, but that is about all. Potentially more significant is the omission of the phrase “prepared for a sacrifice” and the words “he looked up to heaven and said, ‘Lord God Almighty ...’” in 14.1, particularly when combined with the omission of the words “blameless, on behalf of sinners” in 17.2. Taken together, this may suggest that Eusebius, or the copy he was using, was less definite about the nature of Christ’s atonement than the received text is, but this can only be a guess and as with other omissions of this kind, they may have been accidental.<sup>13</sup>

The *Martyrdom* takes the form of a letter, and the first chapter makes its purpose clear. The Smyrnaeans wanted the Philomelians to understand that the recent events in Smyrna, in which a dozen members of the church had lost their lives, had been intended by God as a witness to the gospel.<sup>14</sup> The episode was crowned by the sacrifice of Polycarp, whose death put an end to the persecution, probably (though this is implied rather than explicitly stated) because there was no more important figure in the church who could have been put to death. The letter stresses that Polycarp imitated the example of Christ, not just by his death, but even more by the way he patiently waited to be betrayed and did not seek martyrdom. It appears that for the Smyrnaeans, the most significant thing was that Polycarp knew that his first duty was to care for his flock, which he could not have done if he had put himself forward as a sacrifice on behalf of others. Staying alive and protecting the church was his primary task; only when the authorities came to get him did he surrender and accept that his imitation of Christ would lead to his death.

In the second chapter, we are reminded that all the martyrs of the past suffered according to God’s will. The chapter lists different kinds of punishments to which they were subjected, and reads very much like an elaboration of Hebrews 11:32–38.<sup>15</sup> Chapter three makes it clear that in the eyes of the writers, the anti-Christian attacks were the work of Satan, but that Satan did not have it all his own way. A man called Germanicus took on the wild animals set upon him, with some success before they finally overwhelmed him,

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<sup>13</sup> If it had been deliberate, we would expect that more of the text would have been omitted. The words themselves are so few, and so well integrated into the text, that it is hard to believe that they could have been added by a later hand.

<sup>14</sup> *Mart. Pol.* 19.1.

<sup>15</sup> Oddly enough, Hartog seems to have missed this. See *Polycarp’s Epistle*, 275–79. He quotes a number of biblical and apocryphal parallels, particularly from 4 Maccabees, but makes no mention of Hebrews.

a feat which amazed the onlooking crowd.<sup>16</sup> But however impressed the bystanders may have been with that, they did not sympathize with the victim. On the contrary, they cried “Away with the atheists,” by which they meant the Christians, who denied the existence of the ancestral gods, and demanded that Polycarp should be sought out and subjected to similar treatment.<sup>17</sup>

In sharp contrast to Germanicus was a certain Quintus, who had recently arrived in Smyrna from Phrygia and who had encouraged his fellow Christians to give themselves up voluntarily.<sup>18</sup> The proconsul tried to get him to recant too and succeeded, which to the authors of the letter was all the proof they needed to condemn Quintus’s original eagerness for martyrdom, of which they disapproved.

It is only in chapter five that Polycarp makes an appearance, and his behavior appears in sharp contrast to that of Quintus. Far from seeking martyrdom, Polycarp fled the city at the urging of the church. He went to a house in the country where he spent his time in prayer, but three days before his arrest he had a dream in which his pillow was set on fire, and he concluded that he would be burnt alive. That this knowledge came to him while he was deep in prayer was a reminder to all concerned that this was God’s will, though he did nothing to bring it about.

The sixth chapter explains what happened next. A posse had been sent out to find Polycarp and arrest him, so he fled to another house just before the one in which he had been staying was discovered. The soldiers realized that their quarry had escaped and seized two young slaves, one of whom confessed under torture. The writers of the letter had no sympathy for this, regarding the slave boy as a Judas who betrayed his master, a comparison that was made all the easier because the man who had sent the soldiers and to whom Polycarp was delivered when found bore the name of Herod.

Chapter seven recounts how the slave boy led the soldiers to Polycarp and arrested him on a Friday evening. Many have seen allusions to the arrest of Jesus in this account, but while there are some similarities, there are also important differences. For a start, Jesus was arrested on a Thursday, not a Friday, and the encounter between Polycarp and the soldiers was quite different from that between Jesus and his captors in the garden of

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<sup>16</sup> The Roman proconsul who ordered Germanicus’s death tried to make him recant by appealing to his age. Eusebius took this to mean that Germanicus was too young to die, and that if he had recanted, he could have been spared to live a long life. But it may equally mean that Germanicus was too old to be forced to endure such a punishment. See Heb 11:33.

<sup>17</sup> *Mart. Pol.* 3.2.

<sup>18</sup> This was a Montanist practice, and since the Montanists came from Phrygia, Quintus has frequently been linked to them. However, this is a supposition that has no support from the text, and the Phrygian connection may well have been accidental.

Gethsemane. Polycarp offered them a meal and asked for an hour to pray, whereas Jesus had already eaten his last meal with his disciples and was praying when he was arrested. The effect of Polycarp's behavior on the soldiers, as may be imagined, was powerful, and the *Martyrdom* relates that many of them realized that they were seizing the wrong kind of person, though there was nothing they could do about it.

The eighth chapter recounts how Polycarp was taken for questioning. It begins by telling us that he spent the hour of prayer allotted to him in intercession for the church throughout the world, a reminder that Polycarp understood that he was united with all Christians everywhere and that their welfare was more important than his own. Finally, he was put on a donkey and taken to the city for examination on the "great" Sabbath.<sup>19</sup> Herod, it turns out, was accompanied by his father Nicetas, possibly in deference to Polycarp's great age, since Nicetas would obviously have been closer to it and therefore have commanded greater respect. They tried to get him to recant and acknowledge Caesar as Lord by offering incense to him (not to one of the pagan gods), but he refused. They then became abusive and bundled him out of their carriage so fast that he scraped his leg—a detail that has the ring of authenticity—though he was too preoccupied with everything else that was going on to notice or feel the pain.

Polycarp's entry into the stadium, recounted in chapter nine, was preceded by a voice that called out to him from heaven, telling him to be strong and act like a man. The *Martyrdom* tells us that only the Christians heard this, which obviously calls the authenticity of its account into question, but it may be that there was a noise of some kind which the Christians, who were in tune with Polycarp's spirit, interpreted in the way that they did. In the circumstances, it could hardly have been he who explained it to them! Once again, Polycarp was invited to swear by Caesar and to cry "away with the atheists," by which the proconsul meant the Christians. Polycarp however, turned the tables on his accusers by agreeing to curse the "atheists," who in his eyes were the pagans!

The proconsul realized this of course, and so insisted that Polycarp revile Christ explicitly, but the latter replied in what are the most famous words in the *Martyrdom*: "For eighty-six years I have been serving him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?" (9.3). Most commentators have assumed that Polycarp was eighty-six years old at this point, which would mean that he was baptized as an infant, since he could not have "served Christ" before his baptism. Some have claimed

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<sup>19</sup> Here again, some commentators have seen an allusion to Jesus, who entered Jerusalem on a donkey five days before he was put to death, but the circumstances were completely different.

that he was baptized as a boy and so was in his nineties when he was martyred, but that seems unlikely, and it is easier to conclude that he was baptized as an infant, the first clear case of this in Christian literature.<sup>20</sup>

The tenth chapter continues the same theme, giving Polycarp the opportunity to confess that he was a Christian and to ask for permission to explain to the proconsul what that meant. In reply, the proconsul told him to persuade the crowd gathered to watch his execution, but Polycarp refused to do that. He claimed, quite correctly, that Christians were expected to give an account of their faith to rulers and judges when asked to do so, but that they were under no obligation to bend to the cries of an unruly mob.<sup>21</sup>

At this point the proconsul threatened Polycarp with the wild animals that had consumed Germanicus, but Polycarp refused to yield under pressure. He was then threatened with the stake, to which he replied that physical suffering for an hour was nothing compared to the fire of everlasting judgment, which he would have to face if he recanted. Whether this is an accurate account of what transpired is impossible to say, but it is not improbable, even if the account was clearly designed by the writers to remind the church that there was a fate worse than death that awaited anyone who might recant under pressure. What Polycarp was reported as saying was what most Christians thought, and there is no sign of anything miraculous or even extraordinary. The easiest solution must surely be to accept that something like this did take place and that Polycarp's words were used by the Smyrnaeans to teach other Christians an important spiritual lesson.

Polycarp's confession evidently produced a psychological release in him that the *Martyrdom* describes as being "filled with courage and joy." There was no going back now, and the knowledge that a great weight had been lifted from his conscience gave Polycarp the stamina he needed to carry on. The proconsul was taken aback at Polycarp's boldness and announced his confession to the crowd, who immediately called for him to be thrown to the wild beasts. But unfortunately for them, Philip the Asiarch, whose responsibility the execution was, had just abolished that form of punishment and so their preferred solution was impossible. When they realized that, the mob cried for him to be burnt at the stake, so fulfilling the prophecy which Polycarp had received in his dream.

An oddity about this is that the text says that the mob consisted of both Jews and pagans (12.2), even though it was the Sabbath day and the accusation

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<sup>20</sup> See Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church. History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 363, whose arguments to the contrary are weak.

<sup>21</sup> Scriptural support for this position can be found in Rom 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; and 1 Pet 2:13–14, though Polycarp does not quote any of these texts directly.

against Polycarp was that he had tried to destroy the pagan gods. Would Jews have been party to something like that? Observant ones surely would not have been, if only because they would have been resting on the Sabbath day, but not all Jews were observant, and there may have been some who joined in with the pagans on this occasion, seeing their opportunity to be rid of a man who was just as dangerous to them as he was to anyone else. We know that there were Smyrnaean Jews in the first century who eagerly persecuted Christians, and it may be that this was still the case a century later.<sup>22</sup> What the text does *not* say, however, is that the Jews incited the riot. That seems to have been the work of the pagans, with some Jews taking part, which is significant. The Jews were not exempt from all blame, but the text cannot be regarded as particularly anti-Semitic.

Chapter thirteen continues the persecution theme with the story of how the crowd built Polycarp's funeral pyre in a matter of minutes. Apparently there were some Jews who helped in this, but once again, they were not the instigators. Polycarp stripped naked in readiness for the fire, and the *Martyrdom* tells us that he took the unusual step of removing his sandals, something that he had never done before. The reason given for this is that his people were always eager to touch him as a sign of their respect for his holiness, something which he had never encouraged. Finally, when everything was ready, his executioners prepared to nail him to the stake, but he asked them to desist. Once more, there is a similarity of sorts with Jesus on the cross but also a great difference, because in Jesus's case the marks of the nails were to be proof after his resurrection of the genuineness of his death, whereas that consideration did not apply to Polycarp.

More significant are the details recorded in chapter fourteen, where Polycarp is compared not to Jesus but to the burnt offering of a ram in the Old Testament. This echoes the aborted sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham (Gen 22:13) and shows familiarity with other places in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>23</sup> Not only does this allusion reflect the nature of Polycarp's sacrifice, but it reminds us of the close connections that still existed between the church and the synagogue, where mention of such burnt offerings would have been familiar. The idea that they may have been transferred to Christian martyrs after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 could have been a factor motivating Jewish opposition to the claims made for Polycarp.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Rev 2:9.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Lev 5:15.

<sup>24</sup> The *Martyrdom* notes that Jews were particularly opposed to granting Polycarp's body to the Christians, and fear of how it might be used may have been a factor in this (17.2).

Most of the chapter is taken up with Polycarp's prayer, which deserves to be reproduced in full:

Lord God Almighty, the Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ,  
 through whom we have received knowledge of you,  
 the God of angels and of powers and of all creation and of the entire race of the  
 righteous who live before you:

I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour  
 to receive a portion in the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ,  
 unto the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body,  
 in the immortality of the Holy Spirit.

May I be welcomed before you today among them, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice,  
 just as you, the undecieving and true God,  
 prepared beforehand and revealed in advance and accomplished.

For this reason, and for all things, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you  
 through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son,  
 through whom be glory to you, with him and the Holy Spirit,  
 both now and unto the coming ages. Amen.<sup>25</sup>

The liturgical flavor of the prayer is unmistakable, as is its Trinitarian structure. Polycarp was a bishop and a man of prayer, and so would no doubt have been used to praying in this way, but it seems highly unlikely that an onlooker would have been able to record such a lengthy and complex text as this one. Virtually all scholars agree that it was composed for the purposes of the account, but even so, it probably reflects what Polycarp would have said if he could. It glorifies the Father, who has revealed himself in Christ and who is the Creator of all things. This is an implicit rebuke to the claims of the pagans and a pointed reminder to Christians that the God they worship is in control of all things. It also focuses on Polycarp as God's elect, especially chosen for the sacrifice that imitates that of Christ and gives the one who undergoes it eternal life in the Spirit. That in itself was reason for praise and thanksgiving, in spite of the apparent tragedy that was about to unfold.

Polycarp did not claim to have earned the right to die for his faith but rather that he had been counted worthy by God. He was aware of his inadequacy and prayed for strength and support as he faced the challenge before him. He was called to imitate Christ but not to replace him; Jesus remained the great high priest who bought our salvation with his blood, and for whom there could be no substitute. The prayer strikes a balance here—as a martyr, Polycarp is honored because he has been chosen by God, but he is not venerated because of his exceptional suffering.

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<sup>25</sup> *Mart. Pol.* 14.1–3.

Chapter fifteen describes the actual burning, which the Christian on-lookers described as “miraculous.” The fire did not immediately consume the martyr but arched over him in a way that made it seem that his body was like gold or silver being refined, giving off a sweet fragrance more like incense than ashes (v. 2). The received text adds that it was like the smell of baking bread. Some critics have regarded this detail as a later interpolation because it is not found in Eusebius, but it makes no difference to the overall impression being conveyed and its absence was probably a simple omission. More significant is what is recounted in the sixteenth chapter, where we are told that Polycarp had to be finished off with a dagger (or sword) because his body did not burn, and that when he was slain a dove emerged from his insides, along with enough blood to quench the flames.

Eusebius omits mention of the dove, perhaps because it was obviously not historically accurate, but he included the comment that enough blood flowed out of Polycarp for the fire to be quenched, something that was just as unlikely. Again, it is easier to posit an accidental omission than to regard these details as a later interpolation. What it sounds like is that the burning was botched by the executioners—a common enough phenomenon. The letter uses this to claim that it proved that Polycarp was a man chosen by God and a prophet whose words were fulfilled, which is no doubt the reputation that the Smyrnaeans wanted him to have. The idea of being refined like gold and silver was familiar from the Old Testament prophets, and there is no reason to look any further than that for the source of this portrait of Polycarp’s demise.<sup>26</sup> Comparisons with the death of Jesus are superficial—it may be true that Jesus was pierced by a spear on the cross, but he was already dead, and blood and water flowed from his side; there was no dove taking flight!<sup>27</sup>

Once Polycarp was dead, chapter seventeen tells us that the Christians were denied possession of his body, a refusal that the *Martyrdom* ascribes to the machinations of Satan. Apparently Nicetas (the father of Herod) argued with the proconsul that Polycarp might be worshiped instead of Jesus, which from his point of view would have been worse, because at least the bones of Christ were not available for veneration. At the same time, the *Martyrdom* uses this incident to remind its readers that Christians do not worship martyrs, however much they may honor them, because the glory of the martyrs resides in their loyalty and devotion to Christ, not in any achievement of their own.

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<sup>26</sup> Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2–3; and Isa 1:25. There are possible links with the New Testament as well. See for example 1 Pet 1:7; 4:12.

<sup>27</sup> John 19:34. As elsewhere, the echoes of Jesus’s suffering are audible but insufficient to justify the conclusion that the Smyrnaeans were deliberately imitating it in their description of Polycarp.

It was at this point, chapter eighteen tells us, that the centurion in charge ordered Polycarp's bones to be burned, and the charred remains were then scooped up by members of the church and buried. The *Martyrdom* adds that it was their intention to commemorate the day as Polycarp's "birthday" into the kingdom of heaven, and to use his example as a way to inspire others. Chapter nineteen tells us that although he was the twelfth person to suffer martyrdom in Smyrna, he was the only one who was a household name among non-believers as well as in the church. This was because he was a distinguished teacher and had died "according to the Gospel of Christ" (19.1), an obscure phrase that appears to mean that he died not voluntarily, but because he had been sought out and apprehended by the enemies of the church, just as Jesus had been.

This is the effective end of the story, because the last three chapters are really an appendix, explaining how it had come to be written up, when it had taken place, and how it had been transmitted.

### **III. *The Significance of the Text for Today***

In conclusion, it is clear that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* brings into focus one of the most important phenomena of the early church. Against all reason, Christians were being put to death for their faith, and both Jews and pagans seem to have had an interest in this. Christians were accused of failing to worship the genius of Caesar (*not* of ignoring the pagan gods), though nobody seems to have noticed that Jews were guilty of this too!<sup>28</sup> This was because Judaism was granted an exemption from the imperial cult, whereas many Christians were Gentile converts, and it was apparently felt that they should have been willing to swear allegiance to the state to which they belonged. It must have seemed to many pagans that Christians were using their religion as an excuse for disloyalty, a dilemma that could only be resolved if Caesar were to give up his pretensions to divinity. That eventually happened, but it was a victory for the church, which continued to demand that believers put it before the empire.

We may admit that Polycarp's martyrdom had some similarities to the death of Jesus, but it was in no way equal to it. It was much closer to Old Testament sacrifices, and it stood in a relationship to the sacrifice of Christ

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<sup>28</sup> The accusation made against the Christians is significantly different from the one recorded by Pliny the Younger in A.D. 111. Pliny claimed that because of widespread conversions to Christianity, pagan worship was being abandoned, but although he mentioned the imperial cult in passing, he did not make it the basis of his objection to Christianity. See Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae* 10.96.

that was not unlike theirs. What really mattered to the Smyrnaeans was that Polycarp had died as a church leader should. To the end, he put his people before himself and set an example for them. He was an extraordinary man and the events surrounding his death were sufficiently unusual to make people reflect on that, but he was not (and could not be) a substitute for Christ himself. To the end, he was a servant following his Lord and master, and that is how the church at Smyrna wanted his death to be understood.

For many centuries, martyrdom was a somewhat obscure and misunderstood phenomenon in the Christian church. With some exceptions, it died out after the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century and became a thing of the almost legendary past. Stories of the martyrs were amplified into hagiography, and their relics (or supposed relics) were collected and venerated as if they possessed special divine powers. Excesses and distortions of this kind alienated the sixteenth-century Reformers, who suppressed the cults they encountered and sometimes tried to prove that the stories on which they were based were essentially false. Protestants were certainly put to death for their faith from time to time, but no attempt was made to venerate them after their deaths.<sup>29</sup>

It was not until the twentieth century that martyrdom returned to the Christian theological agenda in any serious way. It is now known that more Christians have died for their faith in the century after 1914 than in the rest of the church's history combined, and at the present time Christianity is the most persecuted faith in the world. Not only Islamic fundamentalists, but Buddhists, Hindus and people of no religion are attacking Christians on almost every continent. Even in the supposedly enlightened democracies of the Western (and formerly "Christian" world) Christian believers now suffer discrimination on grounds of conscience of a kind that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. At present there is no sign that this situation will improve any time soon—on the contrary, the general feeling is that things are liable to get worse before they get better, if they ever do.

This unhappy situation is forcing Christians to reassess their roots as a community of martyrs. The early church was persecuted, but despite its sufferings, it thrived and eventually triumphed over its enemies. Something similar has occurred in recent times in countries that once lay behind the "iron curtain." There are now observers who suggest that the attacks on Christians by Islamic extremists may be counter-productive in the longer

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<sup>29</sup> The Oxford martyrs who were burnt at the stake in the reign of Mary I (1553–1558) may be a partial exception to this, but when the suggestion was made (in the nineteenth century) that a church should be erected to their memory, it failed to attract support. Instead, a martyr's memorial was erected, which still stands in St. Giles but is largely ignored by the passers-by.

term, and that the church will come out of its current distress stronger than ever, though that remains to be seen. What is certain is that martyrdom, once the stuff of ancient history, has become a contemporary reality once again. To become a Christian today is to take a risk and to invite opposition from a hostile world that may well take judicial and penal forms. In this climate, the church cries out for leaders of the caliber of Polycarp, men and women who will be faithful unto death and inherit the crown of everlasting life. It may be no accident that it is John's vision of the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2:8–11 that makes this point more forcefully than any comparable New Testament passage.

Just as the Smyrnaeans believed that the account of Polycarp's death was meant for the church at large, so the apocalyptic vision of John has a resonance for our time that grows louder by the day. The attacks of Satan against God's people will never cease, but just as the church at Smyrna was convinced that it would triumph in the end, so we too have the promise that if we are faithful to the teaching we have received and loyal to Christ and his gospel, the gates of hell will not prevail now any more than they did back then.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Matt 16:18.