

In *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, the reader encounters a collation of scholarly essays from some great minds of twentieth century New Testament scholarship whose vast learning is evident with each turn of page. However, for those wanting an integrated understanding of the issues canvassed, this work should be supplemented with studies that take more of a synthetic and biblical-theological approach and which consider a more complete range of relevant texts.

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Shelly Matthews. *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. viii + 226.

Bryan M. Litfin. *Early Christian Martyr Stories: An Evangelical Introduction with New Translations*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014. Pp. vii +180.

Both of these volumes tell the stories of early Christian martyrs, but from different angles. While Shelly Matthews focuses on Stephen, Bryan Litfin deals primarily with the church fathers. While Matthews explores early Jewish opposition, Litfin uncovers the widespread antagonism of the Roman Empire. While Matthews is greatly skeptical about the historicity of Stephen's account, Litfin is much more confident about the historical reliability of the sources. Finally, Matthews deals with the canonical Acts but places it in a second century setting and interacts with patristic interpretations of Acts. Litfin, apart from a foray into the Maccabean Martyrs, deals with Christian martyrs up to the time of Augustine, paying attention to the integration of the Bible in these accounts.

Matthews is now a professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School. Besides her focus on New Testament studies, she also has interest in Patristic studies. Her involvement in the Jesus Seminar is perhaps reflected in some of the views argued for in *Perfect Martyr*, such as her skepticism toward the historicity of Stephen's account and the emphasis on Jesus's teaching on love for enemies. The research of her book grew out of her involvement in a group of the Society of Biblical Literature, studying violence and the publication of *Violence in the New Testament* (2005) of which she was one of the editors.

Matthews proposes new and radical views on a topic not often dealt with, the martyrdom of Stephen. Some of her proposals challenge well established

ideas in Acts scholarship, which she finds ungrounded. Building on recent attempts to date Acts in the second century, she suggests even a later mid-second century date (pp. 5–6). Given that the martyrdom of Stephen is found only in Acts, its historicity is questionable. The name Stephen itself, meaning “crown,” might have merely a symbolic meaning in relationship to martyrdom (pp. 65–66). The author argues that Acts promotes a pro-Roman apologetic tone and an anti-Jewish stance. Thus, in light of other martyrs’ stories (ch. 3), the narrative of Stephen’s martyrdom downplays Roman involvement and overplays the antagonism between Christians and Jews (p. 77; for “Jews as Christ killers” in Acts, see pp. 58–59).

Matthews’s analysis is well argued, well documented (showing deep familiarity with Acts scholarship), and not without nuances. For instance, while she argues that Acts defines Christian identity by antagonizing Jews, she rejects anti-Semitic charges against Acts since it opposes Jews on “religious,” not “racial” grounds (p. 31). Also, while expressing concerns about the “rhetoric” of Acts, she does not want to ascribe “malicious intentions” to its author (p. 133). Further, the author makes a helpful distinction—being sensitive to the genre of martyrdom—between “persecuted prophet (an in-group phenomenon)” and “martyrdom (death at the hands of an external enemy)”; Stephen’s partakes of both and marks a transition from Judaism to Christianity (p. 133, cf. p. 85). A last example is the treatment of the textual crux of Luke 23:24a as background for Acts 7:60. The author tends in the direction of accepting Jesus’s prayer as part of Luke’s text (pp. 101–3), but does not consider it an “*ipsissima verba* of Jesus” (p. 186, n. 75).

A few points of criticism are in order. First, though a mid-second century date is argued here by a series of considerations and is carried by the wind of recent scholarship (e.g., Richard Pervo), a few factors against such a late date can be advanced. Stephen’s martyr story differs from later full blown martyr stories (p. 5). The affinities between Acts and the Acts of Paul are questionable (p. 6). She contends that Luke-Acts responds to “marcionite ideas” before Marcion (pp. 43–47, esp. p. 46; for Marcion’s influence on Luke-Acts, see the earlier works by John Knox), but is not arguing for the early presence of heresy (following the lead of Walter Bauer) opening the door for an earlier date for Acts? Irenaeus and Tertullian’s use of Luke-Acts to combat Marcion does not necessarily mean that this double work was written in reaction to him (p. 45). In general, some of Matthews’s arguments about the date of Luke-Acts are based on broad patterns rather than specifics.

Second, one major element of the study is to show that Stephen’s prayer, “Father, forgive them” (ch. 4) serves primarily to characterize Stephen’s

perfection. Thus, “love for enemy” is as an identity marker that distinguishes Christians from Jews, especially Christian martyrs (p. 119). It can only be suggested by contrast that such a prayer, in the eyes of the author of Luke-Acts, had some positive effects in conversions (Luke 23:43, 47; and Paul’s conversion; cf. Acts 2:37; this contrasts with Matthews’s statement that “this prayer has no merciful effect,” p. 82). Stephen’s episode is clearly pivotal in the plotline (pp. 73–75), yet greater insistence could be placed on its role in the spread of the gospel (Acts 1:8). Is not the author of Luke-Acts more concerned about this than Jewish antagonism? Another concern of the book is the use of Isaiah 6 in Acts 28 as a call to Jews to turn to Jesus rather than a call to repent of sins (p. 33). Again, if we follow the logic of Luke-Acts that Jesus is the promised Messiah, Jews ought to repent for not acknowledging him. Note that the exclusivist tendencies of Luke-Acts are all the more problematic for Matthews because she seems to understand Paul as teaching two ways of salvation, one for the Jews and one for the Christians (p. 176, n. 50).

Third, the question of the historicity of Luke-Acts requires some comments. Matthews has a point when she states that “each decision about what is kernel and what is chaff seems in the end arbitrary” (p. 19). In other words, it is difficult to distinguish between redaction and supposedly more reliable historical sources. However, should we conclude that Stephen is a mostly fictional character (p. 15)? The more basic question is whether Luke-Acts is reliable or not. Matthews contends that the preface of Luke-Acts “conforms quite closely to what an elite male Romanized reader would wish such origins to entail” (p. 22), thus, “surety” and “truth” are interpreted in the way that does not require much in terms of historicity. A more traditional understanding of Luke 1 leads us to expect greater historicity in Luke-Acts. “Among us” (v. 1) implies that the author was writing in a time not too distant from the events. Verse 2 implies contacts with “eyewitnesses [*autoptai*]” and others (“ministers of the word,” *hupēretai tou logou*) knowledgeable about the events, possibly apostles (cf. Ned B. Stonehouse’s work). The purpose of the work is to produce “certainty [*asphaleian*]” (v. 4).

While consideration of the preface is relevant for the question of historicity, it is also pertinent to the question of purpose. Matthews proposes that the twofold volume helps to define Christians as the people of God (contra the Jews, p. 36), serves as an apologetics for Romans (pp. 42–43), and counters “marcionism” (p. 47). Recent studies indeed suggest multiple purposes for Luke-Acts, but the apologetic one should not be overemphasized. Further, the emphasis of Luke 1:4 on certainty might suggest a pastoral purpose. Could it be that Stephen’s account, in addition to helping forge

Christian identity and explain the spread of the gospel, provides pastoral instruction for future martyrs?

The second book, *Early Christian Martyr Stories*, is an anthology, written by Bryan Litfin, professor of theology at Moody Bible Institute, who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia. Specializing in patristics, he studied with Robert Wilken. He previously wrote a popular introduction to 10 church fathers, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers* (2008). In contrast, this new book offers longer selections of texts. Also, while other anthologies of church fathers exist, this one is unique in its focus on martyr stories. The title and subtitle of the work reveal much about its scope and content. The “evangelical” side indicates the orientation of the author and of the intended audience, and that this history of martyrdom is presented from a theological perspective. As an “Introduction,” the book does not deal in scholarly issues, and the “New Translations” by the author are in a casual, accessible, and attractive style.

The texts selected constitute a unified and self-contained narrative, from the Roman opposition to the early church to the reconciliation of Empire and church by the time of Augustine. The selection includes significant episodes for Western culture and the identity of the universal church. We find Peter’s question to the Lord, *Quo vadis?* before his martyrdom (p. 33), the martyrdom of Polycarp (p. 62), the moving story of the young noble woman martyr Perpetua (ch. 8), the famous saying of Tertullian about the blood of martyrs in its proper context (pp. 121, 123), and Constantine’s famous vision of the cross in the sky (p. 154).

A few areas of possible improvements could be noted. The relationship of the *Acts of Peter* to Gnosticism could be clarified (pp. 29–30). Many consider such Acts as reflecting ascetic anti-Gnostic tendencies. The translations are readable and the historical and theological notes helpful, but the reader would also benefit from specific references to the original texts upon which these translations are based. By starting with the story of a missionary martyred in Lebanon (p. 1) and asserting that “the martyrs belong to Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox alike” (p. 174), the author hints at the broader relevance of these stories; the book, however, is unfortunately more focused on a North American Evangelical audience.

A strength of the work is its elucidation of the Roman context (Litfin might have benefited here from his teacher, Wilken; see, e.g., p. 7, n. 6). The introduction helpfully clarifies that persecution in the first three centuries was more sporadic than constant (pp. 3–6). It also shows that Christianity clashed with the religious worldview of the Empire (pp. 6–10). While this feature makes the Roman context distant from that of the West today, it

would be worth exploring how in many countries persecution of Christians is by religious people and that even in the West secular philosophies hostile to Christianity are not without religious commitments. Another aspect of Roman culture is the prevalence of courage in the face of violence and suffering. This is reflected in the story of Perpetua and Tertullian's argument that "the martyrs' deaths are as noble as pagan examples" (pp. 121–22).

To appropriate these early martyr stories, one has to consider their diversity. The theme of the burial of martyrs highlighted in the introduction (pp. 11–16) illustrates this diversity and the potential for further reflections. In the *Acts of Peter*, Peter is indifferent to his own burial, showing a distorted view of Christianity (p. 35). By contrast, Polycarp's bones were treasured by his followers (p. 63). At times, persecutors desecrated the martyrs' bodies, like those of the martyrs of Gauls (pp. 85–86). The Peace of Constantine also addressed the question of Christian cemeteries (p. 165). While reverence for the martyrs' bodies could unhealthily be turned into a cult, this respect teaches about the Christian's hope of the resurrection and union with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. The various views and experiences of early Christian martyrs can thus assist in addressing current issues.

Both works provide a better understanding of early Christian martyrs. Matthews focuses on Stephen, but also deals with John the Baptist and James, the brother of Jesus. She includes a discussion of extracanonical and patristic texts. One could consider other New Testament texts to provide a more comprehensive picture of early persecution; for instance, a discussion of Hebrews, which has been compared with Acts 7, would be worthwhile. Litfin's work documenting Christianity's acceptance in the Empire after severe opposition from the Romans complements Matthews's focus on Christianity's parting from Judaism and her comment (p. 173, n. 22) that "the notion that evangelical witness concerning Jesus leads to death is clearly expressed" in Acts 22:20 encapsulates the witness/martyrdom theme.

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Robert Bartlett. *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. Pp. xviii + 788.

The saint industry may be on the wane in the Western world, with Christianity under the cosh of secularism, and in the Muslim world images and other monuments being wiped out wherever extremism is in control. The