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 il Mulino

From Jesus to Polycarp: Reflections on the Origins of Christian Martyrdom

1. Introduction

Early Christian martyrdom has drawn the attention of current scholarship especially in view of its role in the process of Christian self-definition and the «parting of the ways»: the death of the martyr is seen as serving claims of self-legitimation before external and internal opponents. This essay will focus on some aspects of the preliminary issue of the relationship between the death of Jesus and the persecution of his post-Easter followers.

The chronological limits of the origins of the Christian concept of martyrdom are easy to detect. The date of the composition of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, where this concept has achieved maturity, posits the *terminus ante quem*, around the year 160. The *terminus post quem* is Jesus' preaching. Background material is to be found in the OT and apocryphal literature dating from the second century b.c.e.¹

¹ Bible quotations are from the NRSV. I am responsible for the departures from it. The Greek quotations from the letters of Ignatius and from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* are from A. Lindemann and H. Paulsen, *Die Apostolischen Väter*, Tübingen 1992. Primary sources abbreviations follow the *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, ed. by P.H. Alexander et alii, Peabody (Mass.) 1999. Secondary sources abbreviations not listed in the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* are from the *Handbook*.

2. Recent Research on Martyrdom

A brief overview of recent scholarship will provide the background against which to set this enquiry. In 1992 a book by Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor surveyed evidence in Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian sources from the Hellenistic period up to Augustine.² Greco-Roman literature presents various positions, ranging from the Pythagorean rejection of voluntary death to the inclination of some Cynics to accept it in face even of the slightest provocation. Acceptance of voluntary death was linked to a number of factors, which regulated this phenomenon. The understanding of voluntary death in Jewish literature underwent a considerable shift when beliefs in afterlife and immortality replaced the idea of the finality of death. The policy of compulsory Hellenisation carried out by Antiochus IV was met with resistance: the death of those who refused compliance came to be seen not as their defeat, but as the beginning of their vindication by God. The righteous was to be rewarded in the judgement at the end of time (Daniel, 1 and 2 Maccabees). Moreover, death could represent vicarious atonement and even usher God's intervention.

This new understanding of voluntary death was employed by early Christians to interpret Jesus' death. In strictly historical terms, his death was «a tragic failure»³ as it failed to bring about the restoration of Israel and the realisation of the kingdom of God. However, Jesus' followers interpreted their master's death in the light of the idea of vicarious atonement and eventually turned it into a paradigm, which determined Christian conception of martyrdom. Even though the number of Christian martyrs was by far inferior to what is traditionally recognised and persecutions were largely facilitated by the martyrs' self-accusation, martyrdom emerged an important ideal for Christians.

The phenomenon of self-accusation was examined by Anthony R. Birley in an essay written in the year 2000.⁴ Birley has shown that of-

² *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*, San Francisco 1992.

³ *A Noble Death...*, 115.

⁴ *Die »freiwilligen« Märtyrer: Zum Problem der Selbst-Auslieferung*, in *Rom und das himmlische Jerusalem: Die frühen Christen zwischen Anpassung und Ablehnung*, hg. v. R. von Haehling, Darmstadt 2000, 97-123.

ten Christians brought themselves to the notice of the authorities in order to be executed. This phenomenon began in the early decades of the second century, was intensified by the Montanists, and is attested until the ninth century.

In the meantime, discussion on martyrdom had been enriched by the publication of a series of lectures given in 1993 by classical historian Glen W. Bowersock.⁵ Bowersock took issue with theories such as those of William H.C. Fremd's seminal study, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*.⁶ Fremd and Bowersock are the major representatives of the two leading reconstructions of the origins of Christian martyrdom. According to Fremd, this is almost exclusively indebted to Jewish understanding of martyrdom. Bowersock argues that Christian martyrdom should be seen only in the light of Roman traditions and that it found its origins in Asia Minor. Bowersock's thesis was briefly touched by Fremd in a recent work, in which he points out that pagan martyrs died especially for political reasons and that pagans disdained Christians' voluntary martyrdom.⁷

A new look at the origins and significance of martyrdom is in Daniel Boyarin's stimulating book *Dying for God*.⁸ Boyarin is mainly interested in the parting of the ways between Jews and Christians, which, he argues, took place in the fourth century. The discourse on martyrdom played an important role in the making of Judaism and Christianity as two different identities. Its specific interpretation of death emerges from the Jewish traditions common to rabbinic Judaism and Christianity and developed through continuous interaction between the two groups. It also benefited from elements taken from the profane world: the Roman generals' *devotio*, with its Greek analogues, chaste Greek and Roman wives (and virgins) threatened with rape, Maccabees, gladiators, Socrates, Jesus on the Cross, even Carthaginian child sacrifice.

⁵ *Martyrdom and Rome*, Cambridge 1995.

⁶ *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, Oxford 1965.

⁷ *Martyrdom and Political Oppression*, in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 2, ed. by P.E. Esler, London 2000, 815-839, and mostly 818-819.

⁸ *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford 1999.

«The *invention* of martyrdom, far from being evidence for Christian influence on Judaism or the opposite, is most plausibly read as evidence for the close contact and the impossibility of drawing sharp and absolute distinctions between these communities or their discourses throughout this period».⁹

The theories of Bowersock and Fremd were tested on Josephus by Steve Weitzman.¹⁰ As a leading Jew at the Flavian court, Josephus seems a most promising source of information, but the conclusion of this study is that, apparently, no conclusion can be reached. Josephus held very ambiguous views regarding voluntary death, since the court both cherished it in keeping with Roman values and feared it as an uncompromising rejection of its power. This ambiguity may reflect the double nature, both Jewish and Roman, of the phenomenon of voluntary death.

The role martyrdom played in the making of Christian identity is underscored in the introduction to a selection of ancient texts compiled by Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie.¹¹ They recall the consensus achieved among scholars that the meaning «martyr» of the Greek term μάρτυς appears for the first time in Christian literature from 150 c.e. Furthermore, they propose a functional definition of martyr based on Jewish and Christian sources: «a martyr is a person who in an extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with a demand of the (usually pagan) authorities».¹²

4. The Approach

The origins of martyrdom have been connected to the theme of discipleship.¹³ The earliest text employing the word μάρτυς and cognate forms in technical sense is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which

⁹ *Dying for God...*, 117.

¹⁰ *Josephus on How to Survive Martyrdom*, in JJS 55 (2004) 230-245.

¹¹ *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, London 2002, 3-8.

¹² *Martyrdom and Noble Death...*, 3.

¹³ For example, see K. Bommes, *Weizen Gottes: Untersuchungen zur Theologie des Martyriums bei Ignatius von Antiochien* (Theoph., 27), Köln 1976, 41-49.

says that the martyrs are «disciples and imitators of the Lord», who is «their own king and teacher» (*Mart. Pol.* 17.3).¹⁴ The theme of imitation and discipleship is already in Ignatius (*Eph.* 3.1; *Magn.* 10.1; *Rom.* 4.2-3; 5.1-3; 6.3), according to whom Christ is the only teacher (*Magn.* 9.1-2; *Eph.* 15.1). The two passages in which the Antiochene bishop refers to Jesus as the only teacher are among the clues suggesting that he knew Matthew's Gospel (23:8; cf. 10:24-25) or some common tradition. Since the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is influenced by Ignatius,¹⁵ it is possible to detect a line running from Matthew to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which may enable us to see how the concept of martyrdom was developed in association with the theme of Jesus the teacher. Other texts may also be employed in studying the origins of Christian martyrdom, such as the Gospel of John and Revelation, but this particular approach through Matthew, Ignatius and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* has the advantage of relying on a clearly identifiable tradition.

5. Discipleship and Persecution in Matthew: Matthew 10

Matthew 10:24-25 reads:

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 24a | A disciple (μαθητής) is not above his teacher (διδάσκαλον), |
| 24b | nor a slave above his master; |
| 25a | it is enough for the disciple (μαθητή) to be like his teacher (διδάσκαλος), |
| 25b | and the slave like his master. |
| 25c | If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, |
| 25d | how much more will they malign those of his household! |

¹⁴ I use the translation in B.D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers* (LCL 24), I Cambridge (Mass.) 2003.

¹⁵ See for instance T. Baumeister, *Die Anfänge der Theologie des Martyriums* (MBTh 45), Münster 1980, 300-301.

Matthew 10:24-25 is made out of at least two different logia, verses 24-25ab and 25cd. Taken in isolation, verses 24-25ab might be understood in different ways, but with the addition of verse 25cd they point to the challenge of persecution which is dealt with in Matt 10:16-23. Probably, verse 25cd is not a Matthean creation since it presupposes a text that comes only later (Matt 12:22-27)¹⁶ and has Aramaic features.¹⁷ This verse may come from a Jewish-Christian setting.

Verses 24a and 25a come from Q as the parallel in Luke 6:40 shows: «A disciple (μαθητής) is not above the teacher (διδάσκαλον), but everyone who is fully qualified will be like his teacher (διδάσκαλος)». The passage in Matthew may preserve the original or at least the older form because κατηρτισμένος δὲ πᾶς looks like a stylistic improvement on the part of Luke.¹⁸

For what concerns verses 24b and 25b, there is some reason to believe that they are Matthew's addition, though not his own creation,¹⁹ their content being traditional.²⁰ The nominative ὁ δοῦλος replaces an expected dative parallel to τῷ μαθητῇ and hence may be the sign of an non-harmonised insertion. Furthermore, the pair δοῦλος and κύριος matches the pair οἰκοδεσπότης and οἰκιακοί, which Matthew added. Through these additions, Matthew was able to move the focus from

¹⁶ U. Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus (8-17)* (EKK 1/2), Zürich-Neukirchen-Vluyn 1990, 118-119.

¹⁷ The tense of ἐπεκάλειν may reflect a Semitic perfect. «Beelzebul» seems to stem from a wordplay, since the Aramaic term בעל בעל means «lord» and the Hebrew term זבול «house», or more precisely, «heavenly house», «temple». See R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (WUNT2, 7), Tübingen 1981, 258; Luz, *Evangelium...*, 119 n. 8.

¹⁸ F. Bovon, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc (1,1-9,50)* (CNT[N] 2/3a), Genève 1991, 326.

¹⁹ There are diverging opinions on the redaction history of this text. According to W. D. Davies and D.C. Allison, Matt 10:24-25 forms a unit and is dominical (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 2, Edinburgh 1991, 194-195). Riesner thinks of two dominical logia joined together by Matthew (*Jesus*, 257). A.F. Zimmermann (*Die urchristlichen Lehrer: Studien zum Tradentenkreis der διδάσκαλοι im frühen Urchristentum* (WUNT², 12), Tübingen 1984, 191-192) and R.H. Gundry (*Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, Grand Rapids (Mich.) 1994, 195) believe that verses 24b and 25b are Matthean additions.

²⁰ Bill 1:578.

the realm of teaching to that of household (cf. also 10:36), where the inequality between master and servants is patent. This shift leads to the phrase πῶς μᾶλλον in verse 25d: Jesus' disciples are warned that they will not have a better fate than their master.

The Q setting of Matt 10:24-25 is difficult to ascertain, because the context is redactional not only in Matthew but also in Luke.²¹ Therefore, we must be content with finding out the meaning which Matthew attaches to this saying. Since Matthew thought it necessary to remind the missionaries (cf. 10:16) of Jesus' fate, he must have been dissatisfied with their attitude towards mission and persecution. This is confirmed by Matt 10:5-15, which is a window opened onto their world. Their task consists in healing, raising the dead, cleansing the leper, casting out demons (10:8) and, we may add, teaching (Matt 28:20). Matthew radicalises the requirements for missionaries in comparison to the parallel texts in Mark 6:8-11 and Luke 10:3-12. For instance, in the list of prohibited remuneration and travelling accessories (Matt 10:9-10), money passes from the last position (last but one in Luke) to the first and is associated with gold and silver. Contrary to Mark, the Matthean missionary is forbidden to have a staff and sandals.²² The question of riches and mission was of great consequence in early Christianity. A missionary who was worried about money, food and clothes was somebody who had not put all his trust in God (Matt 6:25-34) and who, therefore, had little chance to stand persecution (Matt 10:16-23). By altering his source in Matt 10:9-10 and adding Matt 10:25cd, Matthew makes it clear that a disciple must be ready to face the same destiny as Jesus because of his likeness to his teacher.

Matthew does not only provide instructions for itinerant disciples, but also for those who might be visited by them. In verse 42 these visitors are called «prophets» and «righteous». As we will see, this is a clue that the role of the Christian missionary is read in the light of two particular traditions.

²¹ See Bovon, *Évangile...*, 324 and 326-327. Scholars disagree as to the original place of Luke 6:40/Matt 10:24a.25a in Q: see F. Neyrinck, *John and the Synoptics: 1975-1990*, in *John and the Synoptics* (BETHL, 101), ed. by A. Denaux, Leuven 1992, 3-62, 22.

²² On Matthew's redactional changes, see Gundry, *Matthew...*, 186-188.

5.2 Matthew 23

Chapter 23 is connected to chapter 10 in many ways. Two passages are of interest to us: the verses on leadership (8-12), and those on the righteous and the prophets (29-35). Matthew 23:8-12 reads:

- 8a But you are not to be called rabbi,
- 8b for you have one teacher (διδάσκαλος),
- 8c and you are all siblings.
- 9. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.
- 10. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.
- 11. The greatest among you will be your servant.
- 12. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

It is clear that Matt 23:8-12 forms a self-standing pericope. On the one hand, these verses are a set of instructions with explanations for the disciples,²³ whereas this is not the case for what precedes, which is a description of the habits of scribes and Pharisees, and for what follows, which is a list of woes. On the other, the content concerns a precise topic, the use of titles and social standing. This pericope can be divided into two parts. The first one is made of verses 8, 9 and 10, each of which is introduced by the same verb in negative form and imperative mood and deals with a different title: «rabbi/teacher», «father» and «instructor». Each verse contains a theological explanation as to why the title cannot be used. The second part, verses 11-12, is a gloss on 8-10.²⁴ The redaction of Matt 23:8-12 is a complex problem, but only a few remarks are relevant for this study. The pattern of verses 8-10 is broken in several points: for instance in verse 8 we find

²³ By addressing the disciples, Matthew makes it clear that what follows must especially apply to the community (*Ibid.*, 457).

²⁴ On the possible partition of Matt 23:8-12 see R. Hoet, «*Omnes autem vos fratres estis*»: Étude du concept ecclésiologique des «frères» selon Mt 23,8-12 (AnGr, 232), Rome 1982, 95-98.

an emphatic «you» and «teacher» replaces «rabbi».²⁵ The breaks in the pattern betray the composite nature of the verses. The use of an Aramaic word is a strong clue that 8a as well as its companion, verse 8b, originally circulated in Aramaic. It is unlikely that 8b was added later since verse 8a would lose much of its impact without the theological point made by 8b. If this is so, it is intriguing to see that in verse 8b «rabbi» has been translated.²⁶ It is difficult to ascertain whether Matthew was the author of the translation, but it is proper to observe that the use of διδάσκαλος, rather than the expected κύριος (cf. Mark 9:5 with Matt 17:4 and Mark 10:51 with Matt 20:33) recalls the previous chapter (Matt 22:16; 22:24; 22:33; 22:36) and shows that the evangelist is interested in Jesus the teacher. Verse 23:8c is the odd man out, because Matt 23:8ab is a self-standing logion and because ἀδελφοί is not the word we would expect. Rather, «disciples» is the term that would have fitted the context. It is possible that Matt 23:8c was actually penned by Matthew and that the inconsistency is due to his views. Matthew was concerned about people who exploited their teaching for prestige and honour.²⁷ The invitation to be «siblings» targets this people. In the previous section on Matt 10:24-25 I have observed that Matthew was worried that missionaries might be driven by selfish interests and that for this reason he stressed the importance of humbleness and of full trust in God. Therefore, the addition of 23:8c is consequent with Matthew's thought. Verses 9-10 extend the ban to «father» and to Greek titles of leadership.

Matt 23:8-10 must be read in the light of verses 11-12. Each of these two verses presents many parallels in the rest of the New Testa-

²⁵ B.T. Viviano, *Social World and Community Leadership: The Case of Matthew 23.1-12,34*, in *JSNT* 39 (1990) 3-21, 8.

²⁶ The correct interpretation of «rabbi» is a matter hotly debated: see S. Légasse, *Scribes et disciples de Jésus*, in *RB* 68 (1961) 321-345 and 481-506, 334-336; Zimmermann, *Lehrer...*, 86-91; B.T. Viviano, *Rabbouni and Mark 9:5*, in *RB* 97 (1990) 207-218, reprinted in *Id.*, *Trinity – Kingdom – Church: Essays in Biblical Theology* (NTOA 48), Freiburg-Göttingen 2001, 64-74 (see the bibliographical list at p. 64 n. 2).

²⁷ See P. Hoffmann and V. Eid, *Jesus von Nazareth und eine christliche Moral: Sittliche Perspektiven der Verkündigung Jesu* (QD, 66), Freiburg im Breisgau, 1975, 223-225.

ment.²⁸ Since they are never cited together, we conclude that Matthew was probably responsible for joining them.²⁹ Matthew has changed the clause $\delta\varsigma \alpha\tilde{\nu} \theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\eta \mu\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\alpha\varsigma \gamma\epsilon\nu\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\theta\alpha\iota \acute{\epsilon}\nu \upsilon\mu\acute{\iota}\nu$ (Mark 10:43; cf. 9:35) into $\acute{\omicron} \mu\acute{\epsilon}\iota\zeta\omega\nu$, which might be his own translation of $\rho\alpha\beta\beta\acute{\iota}$, «my great one». The following verse insists on the inverse proportion between $\upsilon\psi\acute{\iota}\omega$ and $\tau\alpha\pi\epsilon\iota\nu\acute{\omicron}\omega$. Both verses invert the value attached to normal social relationships, first through a precise statement, second through a generic one. This pair explains how the three preceding verses should be interpreted and thus gives a consistent meaning to the whole pericope: titles should be avoided and the relationship between the members of the community should be that of siblings and of mutual service.³⁰

In the second passage (Matt 23:29-35), we read of the prophets and the righteous. The last woe (23:29-33) recalls the violent destiny of these two figures in the history of Israel and attributes to the ancestors of scribes and Pharisees the responsibility for the murder of the prophets. In verses 34-35 we read that Jesus sends prophets, wise men and scribes and that scribes and Pharisees will be responsible for their death. This passage refers to itinerant missionaries ($\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omega \alpha\pi\omicron\sigma\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\lambda\omega$: cf. Matt 10:16). It reminds them that they will suffer persecution, which is already forecast in Matt 10:17 and in Matt 5:11-12. The present tense $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\chi\upsilon\nu\acute{\omicron}\mu\epsilon\nu\omicron\nu$ (23:35), rather than Lukan perfect $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\kappa\epsilon\chi\upsilon\mu\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\nu$ (11:50), makes it clear that persecutions are not over. The situation is so dramatic that Matthew replaces Luke's $\delta\iota\acute{\omega}\zeta\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\nu$ (11:49) with $\sigma\tau\alpha\upsilon\rho\acute{\omega}\sigma\epsilon\tau\epsilon \kappa\alpha\iota \acute{\epsilon}\xi \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{\omega}\nu \mu\alpha\sigma\tau\iota\gamma\acute{\omega}\sigma\epsilon\tau\epsilon \acute{\epsilon}\nu \tau\alpha\iota\varsigma \sigma\upsilon\nu\alpha\gamma\omega\gamma\alpha\iota\varsigma \upsilon\mu\acute{\omega}\nu \kappa\alpha\iota \delta\iota\acute{\omega}\zeta\epsilon\tau\epsilon \alpha\pi\omicron \pi\acute{\omicron}\lambda\epsilon\omega\varsigma \epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma \pi\acute{\omicron}\lambda\iota\nu$ (23:34). Dreary persecution is pictured as the context of the activities of itinerant missionaries.³¹

²⁸ For verse 11 we have: Mark 9:34-35; 10:43-45; Matt 5:19; 18:4; 20:26-8; Luke 9:48; 22:26-27. For verse 12 we have: Luke 14:11; 18:14; 2 Cor 11:7; Phil 4:12; Jas 4:10; 1 Pet 5:5-6.

²⁹ Cf. C. Niemand, *Die Fusswaschungserzählung des Johannesevangeliums: Untersuchungen zu ihrer Entstehung und Überlieferung im Urchristentum* (StAns, 114), Rome 1993, 95-96.

³⁰ K.G.C. Newport, *Sources and Sitz im Leben of Matthew 23* (JSNT.S, 117), Sheffield 1995, 130-133.

³¹ D.E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23* (NT.S, 52), Leiden 1979, 176-178.

5.3 Discipleship and Persecution

It is now possible to draw some conclusions on the relationship between discipleship and persecution in the two Matthean texts which entered in a long tradition via Ignatius. Matthew develops a pre-existent tradition, which emphasized that there is only one teacher, Jesus. He employs this tradition within the context of persecution. If Jesus suffered violent death, his disciples should not expect a better treatment. Jesus' life, including his uncompromising attitude about death, is the model to follow because he is the only teacher. Readiness to face persecution goes together with readiness to service towards the rest of the community, because its members are all siblings who imitate the only master. On the contrary, if the Christian community had many teachers, it would reproduce the power structure of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 23:2 and 23:6-7). Equality would disappear from the community, hypocrisy would creep in, and possible persecutions would be shunned in the name of self-interest.

One of the ways Matthew develops these themes is through the topic of the persecutions of the prophets and the righteous in the past. This provides him with the possibility of interpreting the rejection and suffering of Jesus and of Christian missionaries. We must now turn to this topic and see what light it can shed on how Jesus and his followers understood violent death.

6. The Suffering of the Righteous and the Violent Fate of the Prophet

The suffering of the righteous, or *passio iusti*, is an Old Testament motif, in which suffering is accompanied by a request and/or the bestowing of salvation by God.³² Its roots cannot be clearly identified, but the earliest evidence is to be found in pre-exilic Psalms (e.g. 3:5;

³² See L. Ruppert, *Der leidende Gerechte: Eine motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Alten Testament und zwischentestamentlichen Judentum* (FzB, 5), Würzburg 1972; K.T. Kleinknecht, *Der leidende Gerechtfertigte: Die alttestamentlich-jüdische Tradition vom 'leidenden Gerechten' und ihre Rezeption bei Paulus* (WUNT², 13), Tübingen 1984.

6:10; 7:1). From there it extends down to rabbinic literature.³³ An important development took place as a consequence of the policy of compulsory Hellenisation carried out by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the middle of the second century B.C.E. The persecution and death of those who did not comply with Antiochus' demands were the object of theological reflection, which influenced numerous books, such as Daniel, 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees. Perhaps, under the influence of the fourth song of the Suffering Servant (Isa 52:13-53:12), Daniel developed the idea that death was not the end, but that it was followed by the resurrection of the righteous faithful to God.³⁴ In Dan 3 the three men who do not bend their will before Nebuchadnezzar are eventually delivered. The death of the persecuted is tackled in Dan 12:1-3, which envisages a judgement at the end of time when those who have been murdered will be vindicated.³⁵ According to 2 Maccabees, a work written in the late second century B.C.E., Antiochus' persecution is God's punishment for the sins of the people, and the death of the persecuted is a means of purification. Moreover, those who die will be rewarded. In chapter 7 we read of the story of seven brothers and their mother who preferred torture and death to eating defiling meat. Their resistance is supported by belief in resurrection.³⁶ Reflection on persecution is taken a step further in 4 Maccabees, a book written in the first century C.E. The death of Eleazar in chapter 6 works as purification for the sins of the whole nation, that is, it carries a vicarious effect. In chapter 18, the story of the seven brothers is retold with various expansions, including a list of biblical exempla of steadfastness with which the mother intends to strengthen her children before the threat of death (18:11-19).

³³ See Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 23-166.

³⁴ Droge, *Death...*, 69-71; L. Ruppert, *Der leidende (bedrängte, getötete) Gerechte nach den Spätschriften des Alten Testaments (inclusive Septuaginta) und der (nichttrabbinischen) Literatur des Frühjudentums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Gottesbild*, in *Die Entstehung der jüdischen Martyrologie* (StPB, 38), hg. v. J.W. van Henten, Leiden 1989, 76-87, 78-82 and 85; Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 91-92.

³⁵ See Baumeister, *Anfänge...*, 13-23; Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 88-92.

³⁶ On 2 Maccabees and the «suffering righteous» motif, see Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 123-126.

Besides the motif of the suffering righteous, there is another tradition to be taken into account: the violent destiny of the prophets. Early Christian writers make many references to prophets unjustly persecuted and murdered, though the Old Testament seem to lack the necessary historical evidence.³⁷ This tradition derives from the need to interpret Israel's fall to the Assyrians in 733/722 b.c.e. and later Judah's fall to the Babylonians in 589/587 b.c.e. It is based on the deuteronomistic interpretation of history, which considered these defeats a divine punishment because the people did not pay heed to God, nor to God's messengers. The oldest pieces of evidence are Neh 9:26; 2 Kgs 17:13-14; 2 Chr 36:14-16; Jer 44:4-6; Ezr 9:11.³⁸ This tradition is to be found in many later works, such as Josephus, *A.J.* 9.265-267 and 9.281.³⁹

Though the «suffering righteous» and the «violent destiny of the prophet» are to be kept separated, these influenced each other⁴⁰ and are to be found tied up together in Luke 6:22-23 par Matt 10:22.⁴¹ At the time of Jesus and of the composition of the books of the New Testament these motifs were well established. They included several features which varied and were differently expressed according to social and religious contexts: the ideas of the immortality of the soul of the righteous and of the righteous' resurrection from the dead, which are typical of apocalyptic writings; the case in which the innocent is tested by God and rewarded at the end of time or in which he suffers for his sins in order to be purified for the final judgement; the related humiliation-vindication pattern; the readiness of the righteous to die

³⁷ Matt 5:12 par. Luke 6:23; Matt 23:30-31; Matt 23:34-39 par. Luke 11:49-51 and 13:34-35; cf. Mark 12:1-12 par. Matt 21:33-46 and Luke 20:9-19; Acts 7:52; Rom 11:3; 1 Thess 2:15; *Magn.* 8.2; Barn 5:11.

³⁸ O.H. Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferung des deuteronomistischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Spätjudentum und Urchristentum* (WMANT, 23), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1967, 60-80.

³⁹ Steck, *Israel...*, 81-86.

⁴⁰ There is an important difference. The violent rejection of the prophets is part of Israel's failing and the focus is on Israel, whereas in the second theme the focus is the suffering of the righteous. On connections and differences, see Steck, *Israel...*, 254-257, and the critique by Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 81-82.

⁴¹ Steck, *Israel...*, 257-260.

for loyalty to the Mosaic law; hints or explicit references to the vicarious value of suffering; messianic expectations.⁴²

7. *Suffering and Persecution in Matthew*

This is the background against which Matt 10 and 23 must be understood.⁴³ We have seen that both chapters deal with persecution and make reference to prophets and righteous. In Matt 10 the Christian missionaries are warned that they will be persecuted like their master and called «prophet» and «righteous» (verse 41). They are informed that they will be hated by all, but that endurance will be rewarded with salvation (10:22).⁴⁴ In Matt 23:8-12 the evangelist employs the humiliation-vindication pattern.⁴⁵ Matthew 23:29-33 mentions the death of the prophets and of the righteous of old and their vindication through divine judgement against the descendants of the persecutors. Matthew 23:34 ties these past events with the fate of those sent by Jesus. Matthew 23:35 recalls the pouring of the blood of the righteous. It includes among them Abel, who also features as one of the exempla in 4 Macc 18:11. In Matt 23:37 Jerusalem is accused of persecuting prophets and God's envoys.

The resistance which the disciples' mission was met with is explained in the light of the traditions of the suffering righteous and of the violent destiny of the prophets. The death of Jesus is seen within the same frame. Moreover, it is used to warn against compromise. The radicalism of the gospel may easily provoke persecution, which is not to be avoided at the expense of the gospel itself. This is why Jesus is the only teacher. In the ancient world and especially in contemporary Jewish society a teacher provided a model of behaviour to the

⁴² Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 163-166. With regard to the humiliation-vindication pattern, see E. Schweizer, *Erniedrigung und Erhöhung bei Jesus und seinen Nachfolgern* (ATHANT, 28), Zürich 1955. More recent scholarship, though correcting Schweizer's views, has lent support to his thesis: see Ruppert, *Jesus...*

⁴³ On Matt 23:29-37, see Steck, *Israel...*, 26-50, 290-297.

⁴⁴ See Steck, *Israel...*, 257-260.

⁴⁵ See Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 175-177, who considers two texts related to Matt 23:11-12: Mark 9:35 and 10:42-44.

disciples.⁴⁶ A Christian community which had many teachers might be torn apart by diverging options of how believers should conduct themselves. There would be the serious risk of tampering with the gospel in order to make it less dangerous for its followers and even of turning it into an instrument to promote one's own interests. According to Matt 23, scribes and Pharisees provided a patent specimen of this risk and verses 8-12 may well be directed against Jewish converts claiming the role of rabbis in the community.⁴⁷ The radicalisation of the requirements for missionaries and the emphasis on persecution in Matt 10 intend to discourage Christian preachers from the temptation of behaving as hypocrites by promoting themselves through the gospel. The discrepancy between words and deeds in early Christian preaching was a serious problem. There are several texts dealing with the provisions for the missionary and showing concern that the missionary might exploit his work for selfish reasons: Acts 20:33-35; 1 Cor 9:14-18; 2 Cor 11:7-21; 12:13-16; 1 Thess 2:9; 1 Tim 5:17-18; *Did.* 11-13 *passim*; Herm. *Mand.* 11.12. These Christian missionaries joined the ranks of the many wanderers, such as philosophers and fortune-tellers, who asked for money,⁴⁸ and drew pagan scorn.⁴⁹ In such a context, it was imperative that deeds match words,⁵⁰ as it was in the case of Jesus. In Matthew's view, aberrations could be avoided by pointing to only one teacher, Jesus. If there is only one teacher, disciples do not have a choice: Jesus presents the only life-model to be

⁴⁶ M.J. Wilkins, *The Interplay of Ministry, Martyrdom and Discipleship in Ignatius of Antioch*, in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (JSNT.S, 87), ed. by M.J. Wilkins and T. Paige, Sheffield 1992, 294-315, 302; Bommes, *Weizen...*, 47; F. Normann, *Christos Didaskalos: Die Vorstellung von Christus als Lehrer in der christlichen Literatur des ersten und zweiten Jahrhunderts* (MBTh, 32), Münster (Westfalen) 1967, 84.

⁴⁷ Zimmermann, *Lehrer...*, 158-189. On teachers in the Matthean community see also T.A. Wayment, *Christian Teachers in Matthew and Thomas: The Possibility of Becoming a «Master»*, in *JECS* 12 (2004) 289-311.

⁴⁸ See the list of ancient sources in Luz, *Evangelium...*, 97 footnotes 58 and 59.

⁴⁹ In *Peregrinus*, Lucian of Samosata depicts the character of Peregrinus Proteus and makes fun of itinerant Christians, who made money from their visits to Christian communities. See U. Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer im zweiten Jahrhundert: Ihre Lehrtätigkeit, ihr Selbstverständnis und ihre Geschichte* (SVigChr, 4), Leiden 1989, 144-145.

⁵⁰ Cf. the importance of deeds in Jas 1:22-27 and 3:17-18.

followed, which included truthfulness, poverty, and readiness to die for the gospel.

8. *Suffering and Persecution before Matthew*

The traditions of the suffering righteous and of the violent death of the prophet play an important role in Matthew's understanding of persecution, but what about pre-Matthean Christians? These traditions were surely present in Q (Matt 5:11-12 par. Luke 6:22-23; Matt 10:22; 23:34-39 par. Luke 11:49-51 and 13:34-35).⁵¹ The «suffering righteous» was known to Paul to the point that it may have been the main background of his writings.⁵² The apostle employs it not only to make sense of Jesus' fate (cf. Rom 15:1-6; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Cor 1:3-11; 2 Cor 4:10-11),⁵³ but also of his own life.⁵⁴ We must also recall four texts in which the destiny of the protagonist is viewed as scriptural, though no reference to a particular passage is made: Mark 9:11-13; 14:21; 14:48-49; 1 Cor 15:3-4. Liebers has demonstrated that Mark and Paul do not have in mind a precise text, but the scriptural traditions of the suffering righteous and the violent death of the prophet. These two traditions served early Christians to make sense of Jesus' death.⁵⁵

What about Jesus himself? There are at least three ways of inquiring whether Jesus might have been acquainted with these traditions. First of all, we must consider historical likelihood. It is difficult to imagine that Jesus did not envisage his death in view of the opposition he met and of the execution of John the Baptist. There is no need to assume that he sought his death: the hostility his preaching aroused was enough reason for his opponents to get rid of him.⁵⁶ It is also

⁵¹ Steck, *Israel...*, 20-26 and 257-260 about Matt 5:11-12 and 10:22; pp. 26-33, 40-58, 222-239 about Matt 23:34-39; see also pp. 265-269 about Acts 7:52 and pp. 269-273 about Mark 12:1b-9.

⁵² Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 193-376.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 367-368.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 369-374.

⁵⁵ R. Liebers, «Wie geschrieben steht»: Studien zu einer besonderen Art frühchristlichen Schriftbezuges, Berlin 1993.

⁵⁶ Baumeister, *Anfänge...*, 66-72.

likely that he warned his disciples that they might meet the same fate.⁵⁷ If these assumptions are true, we might imagine that Jesus saw some meaning in his death, or else he would have fled Jerusalem before it was too late. He might have seen himself as the rejected prophet and, in addition, he might have expected personal vindication and some sorts of God's intervention as a consequence of it.⁵⁸

Secondly, the criterion of multiple attestation suggests that Jesus uttered logia that followed the humiliation-vindication pattern, which characterises the *passio iusti* motif. We find this pattern in the opposition πρῶτος/διδάκωνος (Mark 9:35; 10:43-44; cf. Matt 5:19; 20:26; cf. 23:11; cf. Luke 9:48 and 22:26-27), and in the opposition ταπεινώω/ὑψώω (cf. Matt 18:4; Matt 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14; 2 Cor 11:7; cf. Phil 4:12; Jas 4:10; 1 Pet 5:5-6; cf. *Did.* 3.9).⁵⁹ The presence of different forms, the range of authors, some of whom independent from the others, and the range of genres in which the sayings are placed are strong indications that Jesus was the one who transmitted this pattern to the disciples.

Thirdly, it is necessary to consider whether not only a specific pattern, but also individual logia based on the tradition of the suffering righteous may go back to Jesus. A passage such as Jesus' citation from Ps 22:1 (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46) may provide the required evidence, but its authenticity is debated and it would be safer to say that it is a strong clue that the earliest Christians interpreted Jesus' ministry in such a way.⁶⁰ Another candidate is Mark 10:45, which, in Kleinknecht's opinion, offers the best presentation of Jesus' understanding of approaching death,⁶¹ but its authenticity is disputed as well.⁶²

⁵⁷ Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 174-176.

⁵⁸ L. Ruppert, *Jesus als der leidende Gerechte? Der Weg Jesu im Lichte eines alt- und zwischentestamentlichen Motivs* (SBS, 59), Stuttgart 1972.

⁵⁹ See Hoffmann, *Jesus...*, 188-194.

⁶⁰ J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (ABRL), I New York 1991, 170-171.

⁶¹ Kleinknecht, *Gerechtfertigte...*, 171-173.

⁶² J. Gnllka, *Das Evangelium nach Markus* (EKK 2/2), Zürich-Neukirchen-Vluyn 1979, 100.

In sum, we cannot establish with certainty whether Jesus thought of his looming death in terms of the suffering righteous motif. However, there are good reasons to believe that he did so.

9. From Jesus to Matthew

Before moving forward, it will be helpful to draw some provisional conclusions. The disciples, probably in the wake of their master's teaching, interpreted his death and their persecution in terms of the suffering righteous and of the violent destiny of the prophet. Eventually, this interpretation reached Matthew. In Matthew's view, it should solve a number of problems, which he faced in his community. Christian preachers exploited their mission to serve personal goals. Some Christians enjoyed being called with prestigious titles, which enhanced their position. These people could not stand a chance before persecution and were likely to alter the gospel and accommodate it to suit their own interests. However, if Jesus is the only teacher, his teaching and his life are the master-models for all believers. Since his life and death were interpreted in the light of the destiny of the suffering righteous and of the persecuted prophet, this was also the destiny that Christian preachers and leaders should expect. God's salvific action would work through their deaths.

It is noteworthy that at this stage Jesus' life is only a further example of the persecution endured by the righteous and the prophet. However, we are going to see that his appointment in Matthew as the only teacher is an important part of the process whereby Jesus' life will no longer be considered as that of yet another sufferer for God's sake, but as that of the sufferer. This is the basis of Christian discourse on martyrdom.

10. Ignatius of Antioch

The bishop of Antioch is the first author who presents a developed concept of martyrdom: this is a particular understanding of persecution, which is no longer a risk Christians should reckon with, but a

way to attain God and proclaim one's faith. This concept is rooted both in personal experience and in traditions current in his Antiochene environment. One of these traditions was the Gospel of Matthew, which he probably knew first hand. If he did not, he was at least acquainted with material related to it.

Ignatius wrote a number of letters during his journey as a captive from Antioch to Rome, which took place sometime between 105 and 135 C.E.⁶³ These letters were mostly addressed to communities in Asia Minor, where he had stopped during the journey or about which he had been informed.⁶⁴ In his writings Ignatius tackles a number of matters, including the threat which he believed certain people posed to the unity of the churches. Who these people were and the exact nature of what they believed is a much-debated question.⁶⁵ They are often gathered in two groups, Judaizers and docetists, though alternative solutions are possible.⁶⁶ The location of the dissidents is another mat-

⁶³ See C. Mounier, *Où en est la question d'Ignace d'Antioche? Bilan d'un siècle de recherches 1870-1988*, in ANRW 27.1: 359-484, 480-484; W.R. Schoedel, *Polycarp of Smyrna and Ignatius of Antioch*, in ANRW 27.1:272-358, 345-346, 347-349. English quotations of the letters are taken from W.R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Hermenia), Philadelphia 1985.

⁶⁴ I follow the majority of Ignatian scholars who rely on the middle recension (Schoedel, *Polycarp...*, 345-346).

⁶⁵ See Schoedel, *Polycarp...*, 301-304; Mounier, *Question...*, 398-413; C.K. Barrett, *Jews and Judaizers in the Epistles of Ignatius*, in *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity* (SJLA, 21), ed. by R. Hammerton-Kelly and R. Scroggs, Leiden 1976, 220-244, 221-230.

⁶⁶ According to Schoedel, Ignatius confronted Judaizers and docetists, but he polarized the two groups (*Ignatius*, 12-13). Other proposals include the following: Ignatius fought docetists only (E. Molland, *The Heretics Combated by Ignatius of Antioch*, in *JEH* 5 [1954] 1-6; E. Norelli, *Ignazio di Antiochia combatte veramente dei cristiani giudaizzanti?*, in *Verus Israel: Nuove Prospettive sul giudeocristianesimo. Atti del Colloquio di Torino (4-5 novembre 1999)*, ed. by G. Filoramo and G. Gianotto, Brescia 2001, 220-264; he opposed Gnostics and Jewish-Christians (P.J. Donahue, *Jewish Christianity in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch*, in *VigChr* 32 [1978] 81-93, 82-88; V. Corwin, *St. Ignatius and Christianity in Antioch*, New Haven 1960, 52-65); Ignatius tackled the opposition of several groups, which agreed in rejecting the rule of the bishop (P. Meinhold, *Schweigende Bischöfe: Die Gegensätze in den kleinasiatischen Gemeinden nach den Ignatianen*, in *Festgabe Joseph Lortz*, ed. by E. Iserloh and P. Manns, II Baden Baden 1958, 467-490, repr. in P. Meinhold, *Studien zu Ignatius von Antioch* [VIEG 97], Wiesbaden 1979, 19-36).

ter of debate. I think that he envisaged opponents in the communities he wrote to, rather than the opponents he had faced at Antioch.⁶⁷

10.1 *Jesus' Passion, Death and Resurrection*

One of the points at issue with the opponents was the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. The views of the Judaizers on this topic are especially tackled in *Magnesians* and in *Philadelphians*. In *Magnesians* we are told of people who do not read the Scriptures in the light of Christ and miss their true meaning, because the prophets spoke of him so that «the disobedient might be persuaded» (8.2). If the prophets lived according to Jesus and prophesied about him, how can Christians, who have the advantage point of seeing the prophecies fulfilled, live according to Judaism? Ignatius also writes that the prophets lived «in accordance with the Lord's day» (*Magn.* 9.1). This means for the bishop that they knew in advance of Jesus' death and resurrection. Thus, the prophets were disciples in spirit of Jesus, the «only teacher» (9.1-2). It seems that in Ignatius' opinion those who do not read the Scriptures in the light of Jesus do not appreciate Jesus' death and resurrection and their salvific power.

In *Phld.* 6.1 we read: «But if anyone expounds Judaism to you, do not listen to him». The nature of this «Judaism» is suggested by this very passage, in which the verb «to expound» (ἐρμηνεύειν) points to the question of Scriptural interpretation. In *Phld.* 5.2 Ignatius writes: «we also love the prophets because they also made their proclamation with the gospel in view and set their hope on him [Jesus] and waited for him» (cf. 9.2). It is clear that those opposed by Ignatius love the prophets, but that they, contrary to Ignatius, question that the prophets had Christ in view. This problem is brought to the fore in *Phld.* 8.2:

⁶⁷ Ignatius may write about people and ideas he knew from Antioch: see for example W. Uebele, «Viele Verführer sind in die Welt ausgegangen»: Die Gegner in den Briefen des Ignatius von Antiochien und in den Johannesbriefen (BWANT 151), Stuttgart 2001; Donahue, *Jewish Christianity*, 81-82. Alternatively, as I believe, he refers to opponents actually at work in the communities he addressed. See Barrett, *Jews*, 240; C. Trevett, *Apocalypse, Ignatius, Montanism: Seeking the Seeds*, in *VigChr* 43 (1989) 313-338; P. Prigent, *L'hérésie asiatic et l'église confessante de l'Apocalypse à Ignace*, in *VigChr* 31 (1977) 1-22.

«I heard some say, "If I do not find (it) in the archives, I do not believe (it to be) in the gospel". And when I said, "It is written", they answered me, "That is just the question"». The interpretation of this passage depends on the meaning of the word «archives» (ἀρχεῖοι). Schoedel has argued convincingly that it is an alternative designation for the Scriptures.⁶⁸ Our passage shows that the dissidents challenged Ignatius to prove his point from the Old Testament and that what he said did not convince them. The point under discussion can be easily inferred from what follows: «But for me the archives are Jesus Christ, the inviolable archives are his cross and death and his resurrection and faith through him—in which, through your prayers, I want to be justified» (8.2). According to Ignatius the Scriptures prophesied about Jesus, towards whom the prophets looked (5.2; 9.2). For the opponents, however, this was an open question. We understand that their interest in Judaism was especially an interest in the Jewish Scriptures.⁶⁹ Did they really speak about Christ? The answer of the dissidents, who considered the Scriptures as the ultimate test of truth, was either uncertain or negative.⁷⁰ This was not so for Ignatius, for whom the ultimate test of truth is Jesus Christ's passion and resurrection. If the Scriptures are read separately from the Christ event, they are useless old fables (*Magn.* 8.1).⁷¹

The views of the docetists are of a different sort. In *Ephesians*, after warning against the teachers who are «rabid dogs» (7.1), Ignatius lists semi-creedal paradoxes, which highlight both the spiritual and the human nature of Jesus (7.2). These paradoxes are developed in a subsequent text, which focuses on the human nature of Jesus: «For our God, Jesus the Christ [...] was born and baptised that by his suffering he might purify the water» (18.2). The same theme is developed towards the end of the letter (19.1). In *Trallians* Ignatius opposes the views of those who say that Jesus suffered in appearance (10). In the preceding quasi-creedal text (9.1-2) he stated the reality

⁶⁸ Ignatius, 208; see also W.R. Schoedel, *Ignatius and the Archives*, in *HTHR* 71 (1978) 97-106; Barrett, *Jews...*, 233; Molland, *Heretics...*, 4-5.

⁶⁹ Schoedel, *Archives...*, 104-106; Id., *Polycarp...*, 343.

⁷⁰ Cf. S.J.D. Cohen, *Judaism without Circumcision and «Judaism» without «Circumcision» in Ignatius*, in *HTHR* 95 (2002) 395-415, 399-402.

⁷¹ Cf. Barrett, *Jews...*, 237.

of Jesus' birth, earthly life, death, and resurrection through the fourfold repetition of the adverb «truly» (ἀληθῶς). The only piece of evidence he brings forth is that, if Jesus suffered only in appearance, Ignatius' bonds are in vain (10). Of particular interest is *Smyrnaeans*. The life in Smyrna was upset by the teaching of people who claimed that Jesus suffered only in appearance (2; 4.1-5.2; cf. *Trall.* 10). Ignatius' response takes different forms. The first is that of an elaborated semi-creedal text (1.1-2) similar to *Trall.* 9.1-2. The second consists in emphasizing Jesus' bodily resurrection by saying that the disciples touched his body and that Jesus ate and drank (3.1-2). The third is an appeal to the Scriptures and the gospel (5.1; cf. 7.2). The law of Moses and the prophets foretold the events of Jesus' life, the gospel transmitted them.⁷² The fourth response is grounded in Ignatius' own suffering: «For if those things [the events in Jesus' life and his bodily resurrection] were done by our Lord (only) in appearance, I too am in bounds (only) in appearance. And why indeed have I given myself up to death, to fire, to sword, to wild beasts?» (4.2).⁷³

10.2 Discipleship and Martyrdom

The term «disciple» (μαθητής) and related forms occur fifteen times in the letters.⁷⁴ The concept of discipleship plays a major role for the Antiochene bishop.⁷⁵ Ignatius believes that there are two ways of being a disciple.⁷⁶ The first consists in being part of the community and living according to the tenets of Christianity (*Eph.* 10.1; *Magn.* 9.1; 10.1). The second is the way of the martyr and refers to Ignatius himself (*Eph.* 1.2; 3.1; *Rom.* 4.2; 5.1; 5.3; *Pol.* 7.1). At the time of Ig-

⁷² «Gospel» here is to be intended not as a written book, but as oral message of salvation. See C.T. Brown, *The Gospel and Ignatius of Antioch* (Studies in Biblical Literature, 12), New York 2000.

⁷³ N. Brox, *Zeuge und Märtyrer: Untersuchungen zur frühchristlichen Zeugnis-Terminologie* (StANT, 5), München 1961, 213-214.

⁷⁴ The term μαθητής in *Eph.* 1.2; *Magn.* 9.1; 9.2; 10.1; *Trall.* 5.2; *Rom.* 4.2; 5.3; *Pol.* 2.1; 7.1; the verb μαθητεύω in *Eph.* 3.1; 10.1; *Rom.* 3.1; 5.1; the noun μαθητεία in *Trall.* 3.2. See Wilkins, *Interplay...*, 299.

⁷⁵ On the theme of martyrdom in Ignatius see *ibid.*; Bommes, *Weizen...*; Brox, *Zeuge...*, 203-222.

⁷⁶ Wilkins, *Interplay...*, 299; Bommes, *Weizen...*, 44-46.

natus μάρτυς was not yet a technical term for «martyr».⁷⁷ «Disciple» is the word he employs for it.

The discipleship of the martyr is a process, which culminates with the achievement of perfection at the end of the suffering:⁷⁸ «entice the wild beasts that they may become my tomb and leave behind no part of my body that when I fall asleep, I may burden no one. Then I shall truly be a disciple of Jesus Christ when the world will not even see my body» (*Rom.* 4.2). The model is the passion. Through martyrdom the life of the disciple comes as close as possible to that of Jesus.⁷⁹

We have seen that the passion was at the centre of Ignatius' polemic with the opponents. He believed it to be the key to unlock the Scriptures and the stumbling block for those who held docetic views. He also viewed his own martyrdom as a testimony to the passion. We may assume that in his opinion martyrdom belongs to the realm of deeds that speak more than many words.⁸⁰ Ignatius believes that, while the opponents waste their time with false teachings, he goes straight to the chore of Christian faith. In his view the touchstone of the truth of one's teaching lies in following in Jesus' footsteps even if these lead to death. True teaching is the one in agreement with the suffering of Christ.⁸¹ People who accept dissenting teachings do not conform to the passion (*Phld.* 3.3). Those who deny the reality of it are false teachers. Ignatius understood that, if one preaches that Jesus actually did not suffer, Christians are permitted to eschew martyrdom and to follow life paths other than that of Jesus (cf. *Magn.* 9-10.1).⁸² Moreover, plurality of views and behaviours among Christians was a challenge to the unity and ultimately to the very existence of Christian faith.⁸³

⁷⁷ Brox, *Zeuge...*, 204; Bommes, *Weizen...*, 29.

⁷⁸ Brox, *Zeuge...*, 208-209.

⁷⁹ Bommes, *Weizen...*, 119.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Eph.* 15.1-2, which is dealt with below.

⁸¹ Normann, *Christos...*, 86-87; cf. Wilkins, *Interplay...*, 304-306.

⁸² Cf. Wilkins, *Interplay...*, 304.

⁸³ Cf. Brown, *Gospel...*, 180-197.

10.3 *Jesus the Only Teacher*

In two passages Ignatius calls Jesus «teacher». *Ephesians* 15.1 tackles the opposition to the silent bishop Onesimus (6.1): «It is better to be silent and to be than while speaking not to be. To teach [διδάσκειν] is good if the one who speaks acts. One, then, is the teacher [εἷς οὖν διδάσκαλος] who ‘spoke and it was so,’ and also what he has effected in silence is worthy of the Father». Ignatius defends the bishop with a three-step argument, which is based on the Greco-Roman commonplace that words must match deeds.⁸⁴ First, deeds, taken in isolation, are better than words. Secondly, the preferable case is that of deeds matching words. Third, the perfect case is that of deeds matching words and, paradoxically, even silence. This is the case of Jesus, whose deeds match both his silence, probably a reference to the passion,⁸⁵ and his words. The word «teacher» occurs also in *Magn.* 9.1-2:

«1. If, then, those who lived in old ways came to newness of hope, no longer keeping Sabbath, but living in accordance with the Lord’s day, on which also our life arose through him and his death (which some deny), through which mystery we received faith, and therefore we endure that we may be found disciples of Jesus Christ, our only teacher [τοῦ μονοῦ διδασκάλου ἡμῶν]; 2. how shall we be able to live without him of whom the prophets also were disciples in spirit, him to whom they looked forward as their teacher [ὡς διδάσκαλον]? And therefore he for whom they rightly waited came and raised them from the dead».

According to Ignatius, by keeping the Sabbath rather than the Lord’s day the Judaizers of Magnesia reject faith in Jesus, the core of which is his death and resurrection. Following Jesus to the point of death is the condition to become a true disciple of the only teacher. Doing thus, the disciple undergoes the same experience as the prophets of old, who suffered persecution because they lived according to Christ (*Magn.* 8.2), who was their teacher (*Magn.* 9.2). This last point should be marked. For the earliest Christians Jesus experienced the

⁸⁴ Schoedel, *Ignatius...*, 76-77.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

same violent fate as the prophets. For Ignatius the prophets experienced in advance the same violent fate as Jesus.

These two texts must be compared with Matt 10 and 23. Firstly, they share the theme of Jesus the only teacher. Secondly, both Matthew and Ignatius believe that the goal of discipleship is to be like the teacher, although there is no chance of becoming one. Thirdly, the two Gospel texts and *Magn.* 9.1-2 join discipleship and persecution. Fourthly, both *Ephesians* 15.1 and Matt 23:3 are polemic with those whose words do not match their deeds.

Ephesians 15.1 and *Magn.* 9.1-2 are considered among the clues indicating that either Ignatius knew Matthew’s Gospel or that both authors drew on common (Antiochene) tradition.⁸⁶ The connection between Matthew and Ignatius enables us to detect some of the changes in Christian understanding of death. In Ignatius it is clear that Jesus does not belong any longer to the series of the suffering prophets, but his death is the type of all deaths faced for God’s sake, past and future. If the traditions of the suffering righteous and of the violent destiny of the prophet were used by early Christians to make sense of Jesus’ death, Jesus’ death is employed by subsequent generations to make sense of the persecution they endured. Even more than this, it is the model to follow. Therefore, in certain circles Jesus came to be held as the only teacher. His life and especially his death became paradigmatic to the point that not only they were exemplary for Christians, but they had also been for the prophets of old.

The concept of discipleship changed and emphasis was laid on the imitation of the passion. Ignatius is persuaded that through his execution he will become a perfect disciple of his crucified teacher. However, the reality of the passion was denied by some Christians. Ignatius replied that his very bonds were a testimony against them. The bishop claimed that his suffering proved that his deeds matched his words, whereas dissenters were hypocritical. In sum, they failed to be faithful disciples of the only teacher.

⁸⁶ W.R. Schoedel, *Ignatius and the Reception of the Gospel of Matthew in Antioch*, in *Social History of the Matthean Community: Cross-Disciplinary Approaches*, ed. by D.L. Balch, Minneapolis 1991, 129-177, 171-172; Brown, *Gospel...*, 153-154.

11. Martyrdom of Polycarp

Shortly after the death of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, the church in Philomelium asked the church in Smyrna an account of what happened (Inscription). This account was written down by Evaristus on the basis of Marcion's testimony (20.1-2). Chapter 21 provides detailed information as to the date of the martyrdom, though the interpretation of this text is unsettled. The dates usually suggested range from 155 to 177. Recent scholarship favours an early date.⁸⁷

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is not only a historical report, but also a theological interpretation of the death of Polycarp. History and theology are hardly distinguishable. The purpose of this writing is to show that the blood testimony of the bishop took place κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον. This phrase occurs in the first (1.1) and the last chapter (19.1), before the appendices. A similar phrase occurs in *Mart. Pol.* 2.1, where the author praises those martyrdoms which are κατὰ τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ. The «gospel» and the «will of God» point to the death of Jesus. His passion is the only model to which a persecuted Christian should conform (1.2; cf. 17.3). Polycarp is glad that he partakes of Christ's chalice (14.2).⁸⁸ His flight, arrest, questioning and death are told in such a way as to recall Jesus' passion. Evaristus lays stress on the importance of conforming to it by introducing two further cases. Chapter 3 features a young Christian, Germanicos, who

⁸⁷ See the discussion on the *Martyrdom's* date in C. Burini, *Polycarpo di Smirne: Lettera ai Filippesi, Martirio* (SOCr, 26), Bologna 1998, 98-106; Schoedel, *Polycarp...*, 354-355; B. Dehandschutter, *The Martyrium Polycarpi: A Century of Research*, in ANRW 27.1: 485-522, 497-502; survey of scholarship in R. Cacitti, *Grande sabato: Il contesto pasquale quartodecimano nella formazione della teologia del martirio*, Milan 1994, 11-38. The authenticity of parts of the writing has been questioned especially because of the shorter text quoted by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 4.15.3-45). However, there is growing consensus that the whole of the *Martyrdom* is authentic with the exception of chapters 21 and 22, which should be considered later interpolations, though chapter 21 is believed to contain valuable information. See Burini, *Polycarpo...*, 108-110; G. Buschmann, *Martyrium Polycarpi. Eine formkritische Studie: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Entstehung der Gattung Märtyrerakte* (BZNW 70), Berlin 1994, 16-19, 39-70; Id., *Das Martyrium des Polycarp* (KAV, 6), Göttingen 1998, 37-38; Dehandschutter, *Martyrium...*, 492-497.

⁸⁸ Buschmann, *Martyrium...*, 49-52.

stands by his faith and is condemned to be killed by a wild beast. The protagonist of the following chapter is Quintus. He and other people delivered themselves to the authorities, but the sight of the beasts persuaded Quintus to sacrifice to the emperor. For the author of the *Martyrdom*, self-denunciation is not admissible, because οὐχ οὗτος διδάσκει τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (4). Quintus' episode makes it clear that only one type of martyrdom is viable, that which is in agreement with the gospel. It is possible that this episode was introduced to oppose Montanist enthusiasm for martyrdom, to which the phrase κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον would refer.⁸⁹ However, eagerness for martyrdom is not necessarily to be tied up with Montanus or pre-Montanist tendencies.⁹⁰ We have seen such willingness in Ignatius too and to some extent it is also in Polycarp. It is no question of orthodox and heretics, but of an approach to voluntary death common to a number of early Christians.⁹¹

Quintus' story can also be seen as a case in which words do not match deeds. Polycarp does not only confess to be a Christian, but, contrary to Quintus, also accepts the consequences of his confession. In the life of the martyrs, words and deeds are joined together because martyrs are imitators and disciples of Jesus (17.3).

The relationship between words and deeds play an important role in Ignatius' thought. We have seen that in *Eph.* 15.1 he wrote that deeds should match words and even silence, and added that Jesus was the only teacher «who spoke and it was so». We can compare this text with *Mart. Pol.* 16.2, according to which «every word that came forth from his [Polycarp's] mouth was fulfilled and will be fulfilled». ⁹² It is noteworthy that in the same verse Polycarp is called «teacher». *Mart. Pol.* 16.2 and *Eph.* 15.1, the former of which may be influenced by

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 52-58.

⁹⁰ Schoedel, *Polycarp...*, 358.

⁹¹ Droge, *Death...*, 132-138. Evaristus' book may address the excesses of an enthusiastic longing for martyrdom. See T. Baumeister, *Die Norm des evangeliumgemässen Blutezeugnisses: Das Martyrium Polycarpi als vorsichtige Exhortatio ad Martyrium*, in *Stimuli: Exegese und ihre Hermeneutik in Antike und Christentum* (JAC 23), ed. by G. Schöllgen and C. Scholten, Münster 1996, 122-128.

⁹² Buschmann, *Martyrium...*, 139-141 and *Polykarp*, 101-103, both with reference to the origin of the technical use of «martyr».

the latter, share the idea that the teacher is one whose words and deeds match.

In two texts the role of teacher and the theme of martyrdom are dealt with together. These texts call for attention because they develop the line of thought which we saw in Matthew and Ignatius.

11.1 Martyrdom 17

After Polycarp's death, his body became object of contention. Nicetas, father of police chief Herod, asked the magistrate not to hand the body over to Christians, for fear that «they desert the one who was crucified and begin to worship this one» (17.2). We do not know whether this is a historical petition, but behind this episode there lies an important issue: the wondrous life and death of Polycarp may persuade some Christians to place the martyred bishop on the same standing as Jesus. The narrator dismisses this possibility and draws a clear distinction between martyrs and Jesus.⁹³ The Jews who instigated the petition ignore that

«2. we are never able to abandon Christ, who suffered for the salvation of the entire world of those who are being saved, the one who was blameless for sinners; nor are we able to worship any other. 3. For we worship this one who is the Son of God, but we love the martyrs (μάρτυρας) as disciples (μαθητάς) and imitators (μιμητάς) of the Lord. And they are worthy, because of their unsurpassable affection for their own king and teacher (διδάσκαλον). May we also become partners and fellow disciples (συνμαθητάς) with them! (17.2-3)»

This sentence outlines the hierarchical structure of Christianity: first, Jesus, teacher and king; second the martyrs, imitators and disciples of Jesus; third, common believers. It is clear that *Mart. Pol.* 17.2-3 intentionally avoids calling anybody «teacher» but Jesus. This may seem odd in view of the fact that Polycarp is called «teacher» in *Mart. Pol.* 12.2; 16.2; 19.1. However, Polycarp's role is clearly subordinated to that of Jesus, because, in the end, all Christians are dis-

⁹³ Cf. Buschmann, *Martyrium*..., 333-335.

ciples. This view fits in with Ignatius' letters. It also suits the theology of Matt 23:8-12. There is only one teacher, that is, only one life-model: Jesus. Christians are all disciples and imitators of Jesus. This means that no alternative models can be offered, but the gospel (cf. 4.1). Conformity to the gospel implies the agreement between words and deeds. As Ignatius writes, «to teach is good if the one who speaks acts» (*Eph.* 15.1). Violent death is the final test case which proves whether words match deeds.

11.2 Martyrdom 19

The relationship between teaching, martyrdom, words and deeds is also dealt with in *Mart. Pol.* 19.⁹⁴ Polycarp is the only one among twelve martyrs that is remembered by everybody, «For he was not only an exceptional teacher (διδάσκαλος) but also a superb martyr (μάρτυς). Everyone longs to imitate his martyrdom (μαρτύριον), since it occurred in conformity with the gospel of Christ» (19.1). Because of his endurance, Polycarp has received the crown of immortality. He glorifies God and blesses Jesus together with the apostles and all upright people (19.2).

It must be noted that Polycarp is called «teacher» and «martyr». We have seen the reason for this connection in chapter 17: Polycarp is not only a teacher, but also a doer of his teaching. The most difficult deed is that of accepting martyrdom. This is what Polycarp does.⁹⁵ It must be observed that Polycarp's martyrdom is considered a model for other Christians, because it took place according to the gos-

⁹⁴ The section beginning with Polycarp as teacher is one of those suspected of being an interpolation (see H. von Campenhausen, *Bearbeitungen und Interpolationen des Polykarp Martyriums*, in *Aus der Frühzeit des Christentums: Studien zur Kirchengeschichte des ersten und zweiten Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen 1963, 253-301, 344-347), but we have seen that, according to more recent research, the whole writing is authentic with the exception of chapters 21 and 22.

⁹⁵ In this passage, «Das Lehrersein wird durch das Martyrssein überboten. Der Martyr ist jemand, der das, was er lehrt, im Märtyrertod auch selbst verwirklicht. Diese Tat hat aber wiederum eine Beziehung zum Wort. Der Lehrer lehrt während seines Lebens und legt Zeugnis ab in der Tat seines Todes um des Glaubens willen. Der Inhalt der Lehre und des Zeugnisses ist gleich, nämlich der christliche Glaube als Kenntnis von Gott und als Erlösungswirklichkeit» (Baumeister, *Anfänge*..., 266).

pel. This is another way of saying what we have already detected in chapter 17: «Jesus the teacher» provides the life model for Christians.

12. The Technical Use of «Martyr»

We have seen that Ignatius does not employ the term μάρτυς and cognate forms in the technical sense of martyr. Instead, he employs μαθητής, but a few decades later the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* employs μάρτυς. The new technical meaning of this word is not explained: therefore, it is considered to be known to the addressees. In Asia Minor during the lapse of time between Ignatius and the *Martyrdom* something must have happened which brought about this change. The scholarly debate on this issue is still open, but there is one proposal that has received large support.⁹⁶ Ignatius saw his death as a convincing proof of the reality of Jesus' suffering against his docetic opponents. In this sense, his death was a testimony. The increasing distance from Jesus' death explains this new sense of μάρτυς. The first Christians could rely on the testimony of those who actually saw Jesus and knew he was a flesh and bone person capable of suffering. The following generations could not benefit any longer from this testimony. A new form of testimony was needed. Persecutions brought this about: the martyr's own suffering bears witness to the reality of Jesus' suffering. Strictly speaking, this testimony is based on a *petitio principis*, since it assumes what it intends to prove. Ignatius' opponents failed to be impressed, but writers belonging to the great church saw in it a persuasive argument.

These are the foundations which one can detect beneath the proposal of the anti-docetic testimony. Such detection can be maintained even if more recent research has shifted the object of testimony from Jesus' suffering to the relationship between deeds and words.⁹⁷ A

⁹⁶ It is clearly outlined in Brox, *Zeuge...*, 203-225. See also E. Günther, *Zeuge und Märtyrer*, in *ZNW* 47 (1956) 145-161, 155-157.

⁹⁷ Baumeister, *Anfänge...*, 257-270; A.M. Schwermer, *Prophet, Zeuge und Märtyrer: Zur Entstehung des Märtyrerbegriffs im frühesten Christentum*, in *ZThK* 96 (1999) 320-350.

martyr is one who acts consistently with what he or she preaches and dies for it.

The origins of the technical use of μάρτυς are already to be found in Matthew. Matthew 10 and 23 join persecution and discipleship and criticize hypocrisy. The theological reflection which produced these two chapters is also the same on which Ignatius based his idea of martyrdom as a form of discipleship. Ignatius laid emphasis on the necessity that words match deeds. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* the matching of words and deeds on the part of those professing Jesus' passion is expressed as testimony with the word group attached to μάρτυς (cf. *Phil.* 7.1).

13. Conclusions

The birth of the Christian concept of martyrdom can be followed through the traces which have been left in three texts.

The first stage is witnessed by Matthew. According to Matt 10:24-25, Jesus' disciples must not expect a better treatment than their teacher. These two verses are placed after a section on persecution (10:17-23) and before another section on persecution (10:28). The persecution of God's envoys is also one of the themes of chapter 23, and it is bound to the command implying that there is only one teacher, Jesus himself (23:8). It is likely that Matthew draws on older materials going back to Jesus, who must have foreseen that he and his followers would have to face violent death. The traditions of the suffering righteous and of the violent death of the prophet may have helped Jesus to make sense of this opposition.

The Matthean understanding of discipleship and persecution is probably the background of Ignatius' interpretation of disciple as a voluntary «openness» to martyr. The Antiochene bishop develops what is to be found in Matthew. Jesus is the only teacher. All Christians are disciples of Jesus. One form of this discipleship is to follow Jesus' destiny to death. Ignatius claims that discipleship does not only include readiness to violent death, but that it may actually consist in violent death. Persecution becomes martyrdom. It should be noted that it is not necessary to suppose that Ignatius read Matthew. Com-

mon tradition is enough to account for the relationship between them, all the more since Matthew's Gospel is likely to stem from Antioch.

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* marks the third stage. This book is well acquainted with the views of Ignatius and, in comparison to him, stands on the vantage point of possessing a technical term for «martyr». This term expresses the idea that the martyr is a «witness» to Jesus' death. The death of the martyr is supposed to prove that Jesus truly suffered and died. The martyr is considered the perfect disciple, whose destiny matches that of his or her master to the point of becoming a testimony of what the master endured. This is a natural development of the views embodied in Ignatius' letter. However, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is not as consistent, since it posits two teachers, Jesus and Polycarp, the latter being at the same time disciple and martyr. Evaristus was not a theological mind of the first water and inconsistencies might be expected. Moreover, he may have been influenced by the possession of a full-fledged conception of martyrdom embodied in a technical term. At the time of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the word «disciple» was being unburdened of the connotation of violent death for God's sake, because another term was at disposal. This meant that through the discourse on martyrdom the unique path of Jesus' passion was secured as the only one Christians can follow when facing comparable circumstances of opposition. Then, it was possible to use the counterpart of «disciple», namely «teacher», as applied to people other than Jesus.

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Summary: *The motifs of the suffering righteous and of the violent death of the prophets were used by Jesus' disciples to interpret the death of their master. Matthew employed these themes in order to criticise Christian preachers seeking prestigious titles (Matt 23:8-10). By appointing Jesus as the only teacher (Matt 23:8), he tells them that they should not expect a better fate than persecution and death. This line of thought was developed by Ignatius of Antioch, the first Christian writer who elaborated the idea of martyrdom by claiming that persecution and death are not a risk to be taken into account, but a privileged form of being disciples of the only teacher. He also claims martyrdom to be an anti-docetic proof. The author of the Martyrdom of Polycarp continues the reflection in Ignatius by maintaining that a «martyr» is an anti-docetic witness to the reality of Jesus' death, but he also stresses that martyrdom is legitimate only if follows Jesus' model.*

Voluntary Martyrs in the Early Church: Heroes or Heretics?

«Voluntary martyrs» are often referred to in studies on early Christianity. Of course, by definition, all martyrs, even those who initially fled persecution and were later arrested, suffered death of their own free will. Many martyrs are known to have been offered a reprieve, if they would sacrifice to the gods, and of course rejected the offer.¹ It has been urged that «“voluntary martyrdom” is not the best term as almost every Christian martyrdom in the Roman empire was voluntary».² But there is no convenient equivalent in English to the German *Selbst-Auslieferer*. So in this paper «voluntary martyrs» is applied to those who actively sought a martyr's death, and, in some cases, even provoked the authorities to arrest and try them. It has also been suggested that

«[a]lmost all [voluntary martyrdoms] were secondary martyrdoms, sparked off by the sight or news of fellow Christians who were being tried,

¹ All the evidence suggests that it was customary for magistrates to urge professing Christians to recant by sacrificing to the gods, not to the emperor, as often supposed. The imperial cult is seldom mentioned in the martyr-acts. See G.E.M. de Ste Croix, *Why were the early Christians persecuted?*, in *Past and Present* 26 (1963) 6-38, at 10: «emperor-worship is a factor of almost no independent importance in the persecution of the Christians». F. Millar, *The imperial cult and the persecutions*, in W. den Boer, ed., *Le culte des souverains dans l'Empire romain* (Entretiens Hardt XIX), Geneva 1972, 145-175, comes to the same conclusion in a detailed study.

² A. Wypustek, *Magic, Montanism, Perpetua, and the Severan persecution*, in *VChr* 51 (1997) 276-297, at 281.