



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2015.12.17

Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780300154658. Pp. xiv + 256. \$50.00. Cloth.

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A methodological approach could determine how the martyr's persona and purpose emerge from a martyrological account. Are martyrological narratives reliable historical reports, literary productions, philosophical discourses, didactical tools, polemical devices, ideological treatises, or perhaps all of the above? Since Moss believes that martyrdom is not a single notion, she treats "martyrdom as a set of discursive practices that shaped early Christian identities" (p. 17). Her goal is not to discover what the historical martyrs said and did, but rather what the literary accounts divulge about the development of early Christian ideologies. Roman persecutions did not ignite the production of these ideologies. According to Moss, Christian literature constructed both the ideas of persecution and the image of the martyr to achieve diverse ideological goals. Moss, therefore, finds it crucial to explore first the history of the literary evidence before examining the story it tells. She locates the provenance of this literary tradition in the Pre-Christian Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures (chapter 1) because the idea of "martyrdom" predates the term *martyrs*. Diverse intellectual and cultural environments continued to impact the Christian development of martyrological ideologies. Moss therefore examines the developments of Christian martyrdom regionally.

The Asiatic Community is discussed in chapter two. Moss questions the linguistic-based scholarly view that identifies Asia Minor as the cradle of Christian martyrdom (p. 50). Moss argues that the description of death as divinely preordained had been a self-serving Christian bias, "[e]ven before historical Christians started to die" (p. 51). This is only one of the reasons why she questions the integrity and the dating of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* to the second century. Along with the historical inaccuracies, unrealistic depictions, parallels between Polycarp's and Jesus's trial, Irenaeus's unfamiliarity with the details of Polycarp's execution, the possibility that Quintus was a Montanist, and references to relics lead Moss to regard the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* as a mid-third-century literary account. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, therefore, "is not the fountainhead of early Christian martyrdom writ large—and we may question whether in fact such a fountainhead exists at all" (p. 76). Even if the *Martyrdom of*

Polycarp were a second-century account, Moss points out, it does not appear to influence early Christian thinkers until the composition of the third-century *Martyrdom of Pionius*.

Chapter Three addresses the Christian community in Rome. What the Roman Christian literature has in common with that of the Asiatic Church is merely the creation of the persecution narrative. Moss finds the “dissimilarity to the evidence from Asian Minor” (p. 98) striking. In the Roman Christian literature of martyrdom and apologetics, martyrs follow the philosophical model of Socrates—symbolizing virtue vs. vice—while the Asiatic literature presented the suffering martyr in terms of sacrifice and Christly imitation. Roman Christian literature “does not appear to owe much to the rich symbolism of Revelation or to the mimesis of the life of Jesus.” Polycarp as well “had no influence on the ideas of martyrdom” that Justin Martyr’s Roman students accredited him with after his death (p. 99).

Chapter Four argues that second-century Gaul exhibits a distinctive ideology, which received “most limited attention” because Gaul has been “cast as the impoverished offspring of Asiatic Christianity” (p. 102). Moss rejects Irenaeus’s authorship of the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*, dates at least some sections to the mid-third century, and regards Eusebius a “heavy-handed editor” of the *Letter*. Moss does find references to Asiatic stories of martyrdom in Irenaeus’s work, but not necessarily to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (another reason for Moss to place the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in the third-century). Yet, “even if” Justin Martyr, Polycarp, and Ignatius “left an imprint” on Irenaeus’s thinking, he advanced his own opinion (p. 117).

North African martyrdom is discussed in Chapter Five. Here, too, Moss doubts the authenticity of the available North African accounts. In the case of the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, Moss questions the delineations of Roman legal procedures and demands to hand over religious books. Moss finds such overt demands in a pre-Diocletian account “highly unusual” (p. 127). The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is deemed a “theological reformulation” inadequate for the reconstruction of historical events “with absolute certainty” (p. 131). If not a forgery, then, the *Passio* is a “composite document” at best. Parallels are also drawn between Perpetua and Thecla of the second-century Asiatic *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Yet, despite these parallels and the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*’ “indebtedness to Paul” (p. 129), Moss does not believe that North African Christians imported martyrdom from Asia Minor. Different from the Asiatic martyrological goals, the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* “was a self-conscious device intended to support particular baptismal practice [by women], not merely to promulgate martyrdom.” “Hints of opposition” to martyrdom in Tertullian’s *Fug. 5.1*, as well as the possibility that Perpetua’s father was a Christian—and was opposed to her martyrdom—may suggest that not all members of the North-African community were pro-martyrdom (p. 143).

Chapter Six aims to deconstruct pro- and anti-martyrdom ideologies. According to Moss, not all the so-called pro-martyrdom accounts viewed martyrdom as an ideal that should never be avoided, and not all the alleged anti-martyrdom narratives rejected the idea all together. Though supportive of martyrdom, Clement of Alexandria is also critical of voluntary martyrdom. He employs Gnostic terminology and values to construct the true martyr, despite being anti-Gnostic. Clement’s true martyr takes the middle ground, between enthusiastic martyrdom and apostasy. Clement (as well as Cyprian of Carthage) marks the beginning of exegetical and rational foundation for the option of self-exile. On the other hand, Gnostics were not fundamentally opposed to martyrdom nor detached from mainstream martyrdom literature. Moss considers both

the *First Apocalypse of James* and the *Gospel of Judas* Gnostic works that contain pro-martyrdom nuances. Moss disapproves of the traditional “three points of sliding scale: the hot enthusiasm of the New Prophecy, the frigid apostasy of the Gnostic, and, in between, the measured position of the orthodox, who is just right” (p. 162).

Two main themes characterize Moss’s book. First, the reader will notice Moss’s pronounced distrust of the early Christian accounts that a number of scholars regard as evidence for second-century martyrdom. Questioning the integrity and historicity of these accounts, Moss reads these martyrologies as third-century literary works (“Few, if any, of the texts examined in this book can be firmly nailed down in the second century . . .” p. 166). Moss aptly exposes the difficulties with the dating of the early accounts. Moss is correct that the prevailing second-century dating is not unequivocally certain. Her skepticism of the legal description of Polycarp’s trial is justified, as well as her suspicion that several hands affected the *Martyrdom of Perpetua*. At the same time, however, her arguments for a third-century provenance are equally uncertain. Finding literary parallels between Polycarp and Jesus in the second century is not unexpected; detecting references to relics does not necessarily push back the entire account to the third century. Premature forms of relic worshiping may have existed in the Roman world already during or before the second century. The story of Pudens’s ring in the *Martyrdom of Perpetua* may provide such clue, which Moss interprets differently. Essentially, Moss’s argument about relics would push the date of the account to the fourth or fifth century. It is also uncertain whether Quintus from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was a third-century Montanist of the New Prophecy, or that his story is about the conflict with the heretical sect.

Moreover, Moss’s refusal to place Quintus’s story in the second century because it reflects the third-century Montanist controversy appears to contradict the reasonable core of her thesis that there “was no homogenous, moderate, orthodox position on the performance and significance of martyrdom. Views of martyrdom were constantly re-shaped and reproduced. In the study of the first and second centuries, it is ill-advised, indeed impossible, to line up doctrinal categories with martyrological praxis” (p.162).

In the case of Perpetua’s diary, Moss suggests that we “remain skeptical about the extent to which we have access to Perpetua herself” (p. 131), but then raises the possibility that her father was not a pagan, but a Christian. This suggestion is brusquely inserted at the conclusion of the chapter almost as an afterthought, without providing proof or a discussion.

Similarly, it is uncertain that the *First Apocalypse of James* is a Gnostic account. Designating the account Gnostic serves Moss to “deconstruct the notions that Gnostics were fundamentally opposed to martyrdom and untied in their characterization of martyrdom and that they developed their arguments in splendid isolation from more mainstream martyrdom literature” (p.159). This is a significant conclusion, but it relies solely on the debatable Gnostic designation of the *First Apocalypse of James*. Alternatively, the lack of opposition to martyrdom would support the argument against a Gnostic designation of the *First Apocalypse of James* more effortlessly.

Related to her skepticism of the sources is Moss’s reluctance to read the martyrological texts in the context of persecution. Moss seems to have rejected the view that Roman persecution was sporadic and local. Her skepticism of persecutions is applied to both pagan and Christian reports.

Her argument that Pliny recorded his correspondence with Trajan to “preserve his literary prowess for prosperity” may be true, but in itself does not negate the authentication of his actions against Christians, even if such actions do not reflect an active and comprehensive anti-Christian imperial policy. The agreement between Pliny-Trajan correspondence and Christian reports of trials and persecution “for the name” (for example, Justin Martin, *I Apol.* 4.1-4) deserve attention. Such corroboration can hardly be coincidental. Moss may also be right that Decius’s decree “may have stemmed from a desire to unify the Roman empire [sic] rather than from a decision to root out Christians” (p. 12). Undoubtedly, Decius’s reason made no difference to the Christians, assuming they were even aware of his purported goal. To be clear, Moss is right to point out the multipurpose functions of the persecution narrative in early Christian text. But the existence of persecutions (however sporadic and local) and their function as a literary *topos* do not have to be mutually exclusive.

Moss’s second theme consists of two components: 1) early Christian ideologies of martyrdom were independent regional products, and 2) these local ideologies show no signs of borrowing or cross-fertilization among the different Christian communities. Moss finds no unifying feature to the early texts. “Language, imagery, and values differ from region to region, group to group, and text to text” (p. 164). Local goals and needs shaped these ideologies. This is Moss’s strongest and most significant contribution. She identifies the special ideological characteristics of each Christian community. Moss rightly observes that there “is no historical reason to suppose that martyrdom is more singular and monolithic than other contested values and ideas” (p. 164). This advice, however, is unheeded when discussing pre-Christian “martyrdom.” The pre-Christian martyrdom discussion suggests that Jewish, Greek, and Roman societies simultaneously borrow from each other while still developing their own ideologies. It is puzzling, therefore, that Moss accepts the idea of a collective “martyrological” thinking among societies that were apart both religiously and geographically, while rejecting the same possibility of ideological partaking in the case of the Christian communities, which notwithstanding their undeniable individual characteristics, had much more in common religiously, scholarly, politically, and socially. Moss is aware that Irenaeus mentions Polycarp, that he and the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* mention Stephen, that the Perpetua’s diary echoes Revelation’s apocalypse, and that the similarities between the stories of Perpetua and Thecla in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* are “startling” (p. 141), for example. Yet, she sees such accounts as independent compositions reflecting distinct local ideologies because the texts show also dissimilarities. Can it not be that the textual parallels provide examples of ideological transmissions among the communities of Asia Minor, Europe, and North Africa, while the differences exemplify the tailoring of imported ideas to local needs? Moss seems to accept such a mechanism in her pre-Christian discussion. Similarly, Moss holds that the memory of the Christian “experience” under Nero “fostered the creation of a narrative in which Christians portrayed themselves as persecuted community”(p. 78). Why, then, would Christian authors share and develop a conjured persecution narrative throughout the empire but ignore the narrative’s descriptions of the martyrs’ reactions to persecution?

On the flip side, Moss argues that the orthodox *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons* and the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas* “intersect and overlap” (p. 161) in their denunciation of the sacrificial theology such as the one found in Ignatius or the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. According to Moss, the story of Alexander and Attalus reflects anti-sacrificial interpretations in the *Letter*.

But the image of Attalus burning on an iron chair while “the fumes from his body were borne aloft” may be seen as echoing a sacrificial motif. The dichotomy between the peaceful martyrs and the violent pagans—whose craving for executions is compared to barbaric cannibalism—as well as the *Letter’s* statement that the martyrs “at last were themselves sacrificed,” make Moss’s reading of this single example as a rejection of the sacrificial motif highly debatable. Moss’s questionable anti-sacrificial interpretation casts doubts on her argument that the orthodox and the Gnostic accounts intersect and overlap.

Given the complexity of the primary sources and the quantity of studies, alternate interpretations and conclusions are hardly surprising. These differences do not hinder Moss’s service of familiarizing the readers with the complexity of the primary source and incorporating the available literature on the subject. Especially readers unfamiliar with these accounts and their history would find her source-introductory discussions useful, however complicated. Moss deserves credit for raising and revisiting difficult questions about the nature of the primary sources and what their interpretations could mean to our understanding of early Christian martyrdom. Her questions as well as her proposed answers are thought provoking. Moss’s book will continue to stimulate the intellectual discussion on this sensitive topic.