1 Martyrs in religions

> *Samson said: "Let me die with the Philistines!" Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple . . . Thus he killed many more people when he died than when he lived.* *Judges 16:30*

> *When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained . . . each of them was given a white robe, and told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed was completed.* *Revelation 6:9, 11*

Martyrdom means witness. Witness is the most powerful form of advertisement, because it communicates personal credibility and experience to an audience. Therefore, it is not surprising that the world's missionary religions have developed the art of the promotional martyrdom into a process that is identifiable and fairly constant through different faiths. Before dealing with the specific commonalities of Islamic martyrdom (Chapter 2) we will first examine the narrative progression that historically attested martyrs and stories of their martyrdoms have laid down for us: the portrayals of the enemy, the nature of the audience participation and subsequent commitment expected from it, and the form of the martyrdom narrative, which is the method of eternalizing the act and its pathos.

For martyrdom to succeed there must be a martyr.[1] This is an absolute necessity, and all martyrdoms and their narratives can be boiled down to the fact that we are talking about a person (sometimes as part of a larger group, but even so with individuality) who will choose suffering or death in order to demonstrate an absolute commitment to a cause. Usually, the martyr is given some reality through the hagiographical accounts of his or her suffering that allow the audience to relate to this suffering. In other words, the martyrdom must have communicative force within the context of the society in which the martyrdom is taking place. The martyr must have belief in one belief system and possess

[1] Eugene and Anita Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, p. 9 includes three basic types of martyrs: 1. choosing to suffer or die rather than give up one's faith or principles; 2. being tortured or killed because of one's convictions; 3. suffering great pain or misery for a long time.

a willingness to defy another belief system. He or she will stand at the defining point where belief and unbelief meet – however these two categories are constructed in the minds of the martyr, the enemy, the audience and the writer of the historical-hagiographical narrative – and define the relationship between the two. In this sense the martyr creates a boundary with his or her life that may or may not have previously been apparent.

Therefore the martyr himself/herself becomes a living definition of the intrinsic nature of the belief system for which he or she was willing to die. The martyr's defining role is most helpful when that particular belief system is under attack, is in a minority position or is not in a politically or culturally dominant position within a given geographical location. At those times there may be outconversion or dilution of the core values of the belief system (however those are assessed, from the outside or the inside) such that many believers may not see worth in it at all. Attacks on the martyr's belief system can be coordinated and systematic or sustained by the all-encompassing nature of what is commonly perceived to be a superior belief system. (Occasionally it is possible that this dominant belief system does not even perceive itself to be leveling such an attack; merely its omnipresence creates the situation of a siege for other, subordinate belief systems, who then can be in need of a martyr-figure in order to preserve their independence or self-image.)

The martyr changes that equation (whether he or she is willing or unwilling). First of all, by making a statement, he or she creates a boundary between two belief systems. Second, he or she creates an example, a standard of conduct by which to judge other fellow believers. By demonstrating publicly that there is something in the subordinated or persecuted belief system worth dying for, the value other believers place upon it is augmented, and that belief system is highlighted. And third, by creating boundaries and examples, the martyr also creates cohesion and substance where previously there had been drift and lack of definition (at least according to the perception of the martyr and his or her hagiographer). However, in order to accomplish all of these things, the martyr must see the process through to the end (usually death). This includes a series of events which have come to be identified with martyrdom: suffering on the part of the martyr, the obvious and apparent injustice of the enemy, some type of communication of defiance on the part of the martyr and ultimately his or her death. While in some martyrdom paradigms these events do not have to be specifically directed at the martyr – for example, the suffering of the martyr or the injustice inflicted by the enemy may be indirect or even impersonal in nature – ideally all of these components would be present.

There must also be an audience. The audience need not be physically present at either the pre-martyrdom suffering or the act of martyrdom, but must have access to information concerning them. If the audience is personally a witness to the martyrdom, then it needs to coalesce around a collective memory of

this emotional and traumatic event. But if the audience is not an immediate witness to the martyrdom event, then there has to be a communicative agent, who will either shape the narrative or narrate the events to one who will transmit them to the outer, secondary audience. This stage of the martyrdom is of crucial importance, perhaps even more crucial than the actual suffering and martyrdom itself. The reason for this importance lies in the shaping of the historical memory that takes place at this stage, during the course of which the traumatic events are molded into the most emotionally powerful narrative that the transmitter is capable of composing. In a way the writer or hagiographer-figure is also part of the audience, but one that has a greater interpretive role in portraying the events. After this time, the audience will rely upon this initial interpretation of the martyrdom event in order to continue to build a tradition, often vastly expanding upon the initial narrative and perhaps even creating a whole cycle or series of cycles of stories that sometimes bear little relation to the initial event.

Ideally, for the martyrdom to succeed there must be an absolute evil upon which the audience can focus their revulsion.[2] This defining aspect of martyrdom is not always physically present at the moment of martyrdom, but it must be looming in the background or have some corporeal presence against which the martyr, his or her cause, and the eventual audience make their stand. This evil can be a ruling power, the representative of a ruling power, or a system that is alien and oppressive by nature (at least according to the perception of the other participants in the martyrdom narrative). It is frequently important that the enemy be made, during the course of the martyrdom narrative, to recognize, at least tacitly, its own essential illegitimacy or perhaps evil, and the essential good of the martyr. In this way the martyr is granted stature and nobility out of the mouths of his or her own persecutors and enemies.

There are also those who acquiesce to the martyrdom. These people attempt to stand on the side, to remain spectators or emotionally uninvolved. It is not unusual in the more carefully shaped martyrdom narratives to find this group especially singled out for emotional and polemical abuse by all sides. The reason for this abuse is clear: this is the group that can be mobilized to join one side or the other. In a martyrdom narrative, this group ideally should suffer guilt for their lack of involvement, for their unwillingness to stand up for the wronged martyr, or for their fear of the consequences of confrontation with evil. In the end, the guilt that is produced among this spectator audience is capable of generating a large-scale movement that can use the martyrdom as its standard, its rallying point and its magnet for converts.

Conversion is ultimately the goal of the martyrdom narrative (though not all martyrs die in order to convert other people). Its ability to advertise the cause of the martyr is the crucible upon which the effective martyrdom narrative

[2] This is what Weiner and Weiner (ibid.) define as the "martyrological confrontation."

is to be judged. In reading over history's rejected narratives, the reasons for their failure become clear. These reasons include insufficient pathos, inability to communicate or connect with an audience, an unreceptive audience or an inappropriate time for a given theme of martyrdom. Sometimes martyrdom narratives fail to be effective because the market is saturated with blood and gore, too jaded to be shocked, or unable to identify with the situation portrayed in the narrative. Thus, while there are many martyrs to be found in history, few are chosen to be representative of a given movement, belief system or people. Of those few, even fewer speak across cultural boundaries and become global in their reach. But those stories that have become global are among the most moving and dramatic that humanity has produced and continue to inspire people, generation after generation.

In the end martyrdom is about blood and suffering. There is no question that the stories of martyrs are horrifying, and they focus upon the pain that so many humans have inflicted upon each other. More than occasionally a martyrdom narrative can be so elongated, so focused upon the blood and suffering, that the audience can simply be overcome by exhaustion or, as previously stated, become jaded. For this reason some martyrdom narratives focus upon brevity, make every word count, and try to achieve the level of horror through the imagination. Since the words of the narrative are few, the audience demonstrates its participation by imagining the entire scene, by filling out the missing details through the process of continual recreation of the events as they are retold to audience after audience. However, it is more common for the bloody details to be spelt out in detail, and for the audience to be brought up to the moment of collective guilt and repentance through the ritual of recitation of the endless torments of the martyr. This process of recitation in itself constitutes a collective expiation of the sin of indifference, especially in those rituals like the Good Friday–Easter sequence in Christianity or the 'Ashura' (10^{th} of Muharram) commemoration of the martyrdom of al-Husayn in Shi'ite Islam that are repeated each year. Details of these martyrdom narratives are often known by the audience, and in many cases are expanded through the retelling of the events and the emotional need of the audience to participate in them.

While the above lists some of the cardinal binding narratives of martyrdom as they can be seen from a broad historical perspective, not all narratives have every single one of these themes, nor are all carefully crafted with all of these necessities in mind. Audiences and circumstances among religious and political groups vary widely, and the development of the theme of martyrdom is an ongoing process that continues today. Since the variables around the basic theme are practically infinite – in accord with the number of possible martyrs and audiences – it is not surprising that the theme of martyrdom is one of great intricacy and historical depth. So as to understand this historical depth, let us begin with the earliest martyrdom narratives that continue to influence our world.

Jewish martyrdom

From a historical point of view, the earliest defining moments of martyrdom have been those of the Jewish people, especially those which occurred during the period of the Hellenization of the Middle East (330s BCE onwards) after the conquest by Alexander the Great. Alexander's successors, especially the Selucid Empire (305–*ca.* 70 BCE), emphasized the Greek pantheon over and above the local Near Eastern cults (such as the Judaism of that time). This religious policy had strong political and cultural ramifications as well, since the Selucid Empire, like most of the successor states to the empire of Alexander the Great, was a heterogeneous mixture of peoples and religions ruled by a Greek aristocracy. This ruling group sought to create some type of unity within the empire, especially after the Battle of Magnesia (190 BCE), when it became clear to the Selucids that they would need to confront the growing power of Rome in the eastern Mediterranean basin.

It is by no means obvious that the Jews would be the ones to resist. As a group they did not fit into the paradigms presented above. During the Selucid period, Judaism was not a missionary religion (although during the Maccabean period that followed it, peoples surrounding the Jews in the area of Palestine, such as the Idumeans and others, were forcibly converted). However, in other ways, the paradigm holds true. The leadership of the Jewish people at the time, especially the priesthood, was highly Hellenized and thus alien to the common folk. Jews had a highly literate culture, centered around the holy books (later to become the Hebrew Bible). These books detail a long struggle between royal and priestly/prophetic elites for the right to interpret the will of God that were frequently written from the point of view of the latter elites. This demonstrates a willingness to stand up against royal prerogatives and in some cases to die for them (e.g., Elijah in I Kings 18; and Jeremiah in Jeremiah 20–21, 26, 28). Other popular heroes, such as Samson (cited at the beginning of this chapter), were also said to have been willing to die for their beliefs in order to kill their enemies.

The later books of the Hebrew Bible are filled with these types of stories. Thus, the Jews had a highly developed culture ready for martyrdom. However, even the most willing martyr needs a cause for which he or she can die. This cause was unwittingly supplied by the Selucid monarch, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–163 BCE), whose desire to unify the various cults of his divided realm was an understandable one. Antiochus was facing Rome, which had a highly unified belief system and the capability to project force into distant lands, and he needed to unify his realm. The obvious choice for this unity was the Greek pantheon, since he was Greek by culture and it had enough variety to supply all of the putative needs of his subjects. Politically, this process of unification made sense, but the Jews and other cults and peoples chose to resist it, ultimately causing the downfall of the Selucid Empire about fifty years later.

Despite their Hellenized and compromised leadership, some of the Jews were unwilling to accept Antiochus' religious reforms. The reasons for this revolt are described in the book of Daniel 11:31–35:

> His[3] armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him. Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered. When they fall, they will receive a little help, and many who are not sincere will join them. Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.[4]

From this biblical selection it is easy to see what the stakes are in the earliest martyrdom accounts. Because the Temple cult in Jerusalem had been defiled there was a necessity to resist Antiochus. This defilement was coupled with a betrayal by the Jewish political and religious elite, who had been corrupted by Hellenization according to the understanding of the biblical writer. Therefore, it was necessary to create examples – those who would die by the sword or be burned, etc. – who could resist and galvanize the population. The end result of this process is the refinement, the purification of the Jewish people, that the apocalyptic writer describes in the final verse.

Not surprisingly the Maccabean revolt (167–40 BCE) started in a conservative area to the northeast of Jerusalem, when agents of the king came to this region to compel the Jews of the area to offer sacrifices under the new religious system. When one Jew came forward to offer this sacrifice, the ancestor of the Maccabeans killed him. This revolutionary action was preceded and followed by numerous martyrdoms, the most famous and paradigmatic of which was that of Eleazar. This man was said to be a sage, and of advanced age, and was repeatedly forced to eat pork. "He, however, preferred death with glory to life with defilement," as the writer of II Maccabees puts it.[5] Different inducements were offered to him: tortures, deception, kindly advice to acquiesce from those who had already succumbed to temptation, and appeals on the basis of his age. All of these temptations were refused; on the contrary, Eleazar told his tormenters to

> send him off to the netherworld without delay. "Such pretense is unworthy of my advanced age. My pretense for the sake of a brief transitory span of life would cause many of the younger generation to think that Eleazar at the age of ninety had gone over to the gentile way of life, and so they, too, would go astray because of me, and I would earn the defilement and besmirching of my old age. Indeed, even if I should be released

[3] Either Antiochus or in a broader sense the Selucids as a whole.
[4] Translation from the *New International Version*.
[5] Jonathan Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, p. 281 (II Maccabees 6:19).

for the present from punishment at the hands of men, alive or dead I would not escape the hands of the Almighty. Therefore, if I now bravely give up my life, I shall show myself worthy of my old age, as I leave to the young a noble example of how to go eagerly and nobly to die a beautiful death in the defense of our revered and sacred laws."[6]

He was then whipped to death. This is probably one of the earliest examples of martyrdom as it came to be understood in the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The martyr was willing to die for something that for others was inexplicable. Consumption of pork, for Eleazar's tormenters, was far from being something for which one should die. Even in orthodox Judaism consumption of pork is allowed in order to save one's life (the principle of *pikkuah nefesh*). But for Eleazar it was more important to set a complete example of his faith for others than it was to prolong his life or to give up any part of the Law. (Indeed, later Jewish martyrologies usually focus upon much more crucial elements of the Law, such as the breaking of the Sabbath or the rite of circumcision.) Although we have no way of knowing whether the speech put into his mouth by the writer of II Maccabees is authentic (and it probably is not, a fact that is common to almost all of the martyrdom narratives to be discussed in this book) it expresses perfectly the manner in which the idealized martyr should proceed to his or her death. For Eleazar, the priorities are clear: his life as an example to others, his responsibility before God and most especially his need to place himself physically between orthodoxy and the process of easy assimilation to the dominant culture.

For classical martyrdoms Eleazar is paradigmatic. He died for a cause that sets his faith apart from all others (at least at that time). Eleazar embraced death with the specific purpose of exalting his faith and keeping himself pure. He confronts his tormenters squarely and states clearly what the stakes are – that he does not care about life, that it is more important to think about his future judgment at the hands of God, and the example he will set for others – and goes willingly to die a horrible death. The tortures that bring about his death – the whip – are graphically described so that the reader feels that he or she is personally present and receives the full emotional impact of the scene. At the end we are left with a deep respect for Eleazar. Because he was willing to die for the Law, his death is a dignified one, and his tormenters are reduced to insignificance.

Martyrdom in Judaism during the millennia after Eleazar became increasingly important as many Jews, both willingly and unwillingly, followed in his footsteps. Since the majority of these martyrdoms were inflicted upon the Jewish people by Christians (or at least Europeans such as Adolf Hitler coming from a Christian or post-Christian environment) and not Muslims, for the most part later Jewish martyrdom is irrelevant for the purposes of this book.

[6] Ibid. (II Maccabees 6:24–28).

Christian martyrdom

Undoubtedly the most famous Jewish martyr was Jesus Christ. With the story of his martyrdom, immortalized as one of the foundational stories of Christianity, the art of the martyrdom narrative comes to maturity. Taking the account in the Gospel of Luke[7] as a basis for the analysis, and focusing upon Chapter 23, we see that Jesus is passive throughout the entire story. He is taken prisoner at the Garden of Gethsemane in the previous Chapter (22), betrayed by his closest disciples and friends and mocked by the soldiers and guards, all of which serves as the backdrop for the actual story of the crucifixion. At the beginning of Chapter 23, Jesus is led into the presence of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, after it is made clear to the reader that the Jewish leaders who have arrested him have no valid basis for accusing him.

Pilate's position is an unenviable one: in verse 4 he says, "I find no basis for a charge against this man," but it is clear this statement is very unpopular with the crowds. When Pilate finds out that Jesus is not a citizen of Judea, but a Galilean, he sends Jesus to the local ruler, Herod, to be questioned. Herod is unable to provoke Jesus into giving any answers and obviously thinks that he is harmless or at least not worthy of death. Throughout the entire martyrdom story Jesus either does not answer his accusers or gives passive, ambiguous answers. This silence gives Jesus stature and nobility that his accusers do not share. The calls on the part of the Jewish leaders and crowd, however, are unambiguous in their message that Jesus must die.[8] Pilate, therefore, is in a quandary expressed in verses 13–16:

> Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him."

However, the pressure of the crowds was clearly wearing Pilate down, and in the end he acceded to their demands to have Jesus crucified.

The crucifixion itself is also drawn out, and emphasis is placed upon the suffering and humiliation that Jesus endured at the hands of the soldiers, the crowds and even one of the two criminals crucified alongside him. However, Jesus maintains his stature by forgiving his enemies and continuing his silence towards the specific insults hurled at him. Probably the most heart-wrenching sequence in the entire crucifixion narrative is the conversation between the two

[7] The Gospel of Luke is usually seen as the most historical of the four Gospels, but of course, like the others, contains the full range of the martyrdom of Jesus.

[8] This portrayal of the Jewish responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion has had wide-ranging consequences for the history of the Jewish people under Christian rule, including numerous pogroms, accusations and ultimately the Holocaust.

criminals, one of whom attacks Jesus, while the other one affirms his innocence and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," to which Jesus replies, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (verses 42–43). The actual death of Jesus is dramatic and given cosmic significance as darkness shadows the land and the curtain of the Temple is torn (verses 44–45). The centurion witnessing this entire sequence of events testifies to the innocence of Jesus, and finally even his detractors are reduced to silence in the face of such events.

The Jesus martyrdom narrative has all of the classical elements necessary for pathos: the obviously unjust sentence, the patently evil persecutors, the indifferent governor, the drawn-out vignettes of suffering and the affirmations from various unlikely sources (Pilate, the second criminal, the centurion) of Jesus' innocence and even superiority. It is a story very carefully woven together, and given in four (slightly) different accounts, all of which focus upon differing elements of this martyrdom.

Most of the immediate followers of Jesus, as documented in the book of Acts and other martyrological histories preserved from early Christianity, died martyrs' deaths. Most of the church traditions have massive collections of martyrs and martyrs' days upon which calendars are built.[9] These martyrdoms have almost the same format as that of Eleazar above and are extremely repetitious. Of all these martyrs perhaps two can be chosen to represent the Christian tradition: Stephen and Polycarp. Stephen's martyrdom is described in the book of Acts 6:8–15, 7:1–60, and is extremely dramatic. Being a charismatic preacher of the gospel during the period immediately following Jesus' departure, Stephen was the focus of determined opposition. At every point in the martyrdom we are given evidence of Stephen's special relationship with God. He is said to have looked like an angel (6:15), and spoke boldly before the Sanhedrin, demonstrating to them his belief that Jesus was the messiah. At the end of his sermon,

> Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55–56)

At this point, having roused the fury of the Sanhedrin, Stephen has crossed over the boundary into certain death. As a token of that fact, he is granted a vision of heaven not given to others, since he is about to depart from the world. However, Stephen's death, by stoning, is not given the usual graphic detail that martyrologies favor and is merely used as a transition into the upcoming career of Paul of Tarsus.

[9] Some of the collections are Paul Bedjan (ed.), *Acta martyrum et sanctorum Syriace*; Irfan Shahid (ed. and trans.), *The Martyrs of Najran*; *Martyrologium romanum: ex decreto sacrosancti oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Ioanis Pauli PP II promulgatum*; and John Foxe (d. 1587), *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*.

Polycarp, who was Bishop of Smyrna (*ca.* 155 CE), was famous as a figure who claimed to have personally known the apostle John, and as such had great authority in the church in Asia Minor. The epistle dedicated to his martyrdom (in the form that has come down to us probably written by the historian Eusebius) sets the tone for later martyrologies. It praises the constancy of the martyrs and states,

> and truly, who can fail to admire their nobleness of mind, and their patience, with that love towards their Lord which they displayed? Who, when they were so torn with scourges, that the frame of their bodies, even to the very inward veins and arteries, was laid open, still patiently endured, while even those that stood by pitied and bewailed them.[10]

Polycarp was betrayed by an apostate – contrasting his constancy with the faithlessness of the traitor – and while hiding from the authorities was granted a vision of his future end: he was to be burned alive. When he was found hiding, he had the chance to flee, but like Jesus refused to take it, saying: "Let the will of God be done." The authorities tried to persuade him to sacrifice to Caesar, but Polycarp resisted and went forward, eagerly to the stadium where he was to face his death. Like Eleazar, Polycarp took refuge in his age when called to revile Christ, and stated: "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my king and my Savior?"[11] Threats and torments did not sway Polycarp, and he was then sentenced by the Romans to be burned alive. After a last prayer, Polycarp entered the fire, but like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3, the flames did not touch his body. "Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odor [coming from the pile], as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there." Since his body could not be burned, Polycarp was then dispatched by a dagger. All of these elements (the pre-martyrdom speech, the incorruptibility of the body, etc.) will become important, if not essential, in the classical Christian (and later Muslim) martyrdom narrative. Martyrdoms continued throughout the Roman Empire until the Emperor Constantine legalized the Christian faith. Many other martyrologies focused upon the sufferings of Christians outside the Roman Empire, in the Persian Empire, orthodox Christians persecuted by the Arian Christians, and many stories of missionaries who were martyred during the course of their ministry. This long history of martyrdom remains an integral part of Christianity, even to the present day.

These martyrs laid down the essential characteristics of the Christian martyrdom: the passivity towards the process, the role of the exhortation, the demonization and ultimately the irrelevance of the persecutors, the fact that the

[10] "The Encyclical Epistle of the Church at Smyrna concerning the Martyrdom of the Holy Polycarp," trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donalson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, i, p. 39.
[11] Ibid., p. 41.