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Introduction

For centuries martyrdom has played a formative role in the Judeo-Christian world. This book investigates how martyrdom came to play this role in Jewish life and how it evolved thereafter. The book attempts to provide a linear history of martyrdom that stretches from the Hellenistic period to the dawn of the modern era, concluding with unavoidable references to the Holocaust. The latter references are preliminary and are intended to be helpful in future investigations.

This study is comparative in nature. It analyzes the conditions that produced Jewish and Christian martyrs in the pagan world and examines both the foreign ideals that the two creeds fed upon, as well as the two groups' own concepts. With an emphasis on Jewish martyrs, I hope to show how those concepts inspired the followers of each faith and how they also influenced each other. Finally, I will explore how and why the theological rivalry between the two groups continued to produce martyrs in the Christian world, until Jews concluded that this highly regarded practice must end.

My investigation, then, is multidimensional. Looking inward, I examine the function of martyrdom within the group: its use as a means to rationalize catastrophes, as a way to restructure Judaism and Jewries after destructions, as a tool for socialization and growth, as a way to legitimize emerging authorities and leaders, and as a didactical tool that instructs how to interact with members of the group and with outsiders. In short, I hope to show how martyrdom functions as one of the group's internal means of survival.

Looking outward, martyrdom is analyzed in relation to its environment. Through martyrological proclamations, symbolic acts, and the acting out of their rivals' customs and convictions, potential and would-be martyrs delivered messages to their adversaries. These polemical messages disclose the ambience that produced resistance unto death. They reveal the existing mentality not only within the Jewish circles but also with the pagan and Christian

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orbits that circumscribed them. The martyrs' blood demonstrated to all parties involved in the drama the "red lines" that could not be crossed from either side. Going on the offensive, martyrological polemics claim the religious and moral superiority of one group over others. It is not surprising, therefore, to find Jewish martyrdom and martyrologies flourishing in societies that were themselves fascinated by altruism. Thus the history of Jewish martyrdom consists of both tradition and transmutation, perpetuation and innovation. To better trace the evolution of Jewish martyrdom, I will attempt to identify and disentangle these two forces.

Methodologically, two books are of significance for this two-dimensional investigation. In *Rituals of Childhood*, I. G. Marcus has observed that since antiquity Jews "expressed elements of their Jewish religious cultural identity by internalizing and transforming" various foreign customs and rituals "in a polemical, parodic, or neutralized manner." Marcus designated this process of internalizing foreign ideas as "inward acculturation."[1] In the case of Christendom, Marcus has convincingly shown that Jews adapted Christian motifs and fused them with ancient Jewish customs and traditions. As we shall see, the evolution of Jewish martyrdom provides a good case study for Marcus's theory. Here, too, inward acculturation takes place not to assimilate but to exhibit to all, Jews and their rivals, the martyr's socioreligious commitment. Thus, among other issues, I hope to show in the first three chapters that rather than being the contribution of Hellenistic Judaism to western civilization, as the present scholarly consensus argues, the Jewish internalization of the martyrological idea commenced with the Roman occupation of the Jewish kingdom and with the rise of Christianity. It is the Roman and Christian fascination with heroic death that initiated this internalization of the concept that thereafter developed a Jewish life of its own in Judaism.

How these two forces work together is further demonstrated in D. Boyarin's study of the early relationships between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. Boyarin has shown that innovative ideas traveled between the two religions "like a wave . . . almost in a fashion of a stone thrown into a pond." In the case of martyrdom, Boyarin describes the process as a discourse "that changes and develops over time and undergoes particularly interesting transformation."[2] We shall see that Boyarin's wave theory does not stop at the banks of early rabbinic Judaism and nascent Christianity. Martyrological dialogues between Judaism and Christianity persisted throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Unlike the early intellectual dialogues, the martyrological discourses between the two creeds become violent from the Middle Ages onward (Chapters 4–9).

These martyrological dialogues appear in a variety of sources. We find them in folkloric tales, historical reports, rabbinic material, and liturgical poetry,

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to mention only a few. Despite the overall difference in the nature of these sources, their martyrological sections share several characteristics. No martyr has ever written his or her own story, at least not from beginning to end. Yet the stories of martyrdom tend to describe a very personal experience, often in the first person. At best, the narrators may have been an eyewitness to the event in question. But even then, their bias raises the question of historical accuracy. For us, this question becomes more acute when the narrators were not spectators of the scenes described. For the narrators and their audience, the question appears less troublesome, if at all. Insufficient factual information never seemed to stop an author from completing a martyrological story. Nor did the lack of facts affect the enthusiasm of the reader. Imagination and writing skills compensated for the unknown, whereas tradition and familiar literary patterns provided clear archetypes for the audience. In fact, the more remote the narrator seems to be from his heroes, the better they appear. In the end, such literary compensations result in the creation of a very distinctive genre – the martyrology.

At first glance, therefore, historians may question the value of martyrologies. Historians are trained to disjoin fact from fiction, to separate the wheat from the chaff. In the case of martyrologies, however, I believe the "chaff" to be as important as the "wheat." Despite their apparent deficiencies, martyrologies are of great value to our linear study. They may not reveal what their heroes actually said or did even during a *genuine* incident, but they do reflect what the authors and their generations thought about martyrdom and what they expected from themselves in similar situations. When the martyrologist let the martyrs speak for themselves, they are, in fact, speaking for the author and his generation. The interpretation of their flowery language, with its imagery and metaphors, provides significant information on the society that commemorated these heroes. Thus, martyrologies do not only hide a story behind a story. They are telescoping multiple narratives within a story.

These characteristics of the martyrological story are not limited to a place or period. Whether it is the Roman historian Josephus Flavius speaking about his ancestors' tradition of voluntary death, the late antique redactors of the Talmud describing the martyrdoms of first- and second-century rabbis, or twelfth-, thirteenth-, or fourteenth-century reporters, poets, liturgists, and rabbinic commentators mentioning the massacres of eleventh-century Rhineland Jews, all do so through contemporary literary styles and symbols in response to their lifetime experiences. In a flowery style embellished by metaphors and symbols, martyrologists often tend to fuse their own creativity with reality. For these reasons, this study follows the chronology of sources rather than of the events they describe. In my opinion, relying on

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the chronology of sources provides the best possibility for the study of martyrology in a linear context, even though not all the sources can always be dated accurately.

Finally, a word on who qualified as martyr for this study. Definitions of martyrdom vary from discipline to discipline and from culture to culture. Durkheim the sociologist, for instance, did not differentiate between martyrdom and suicide. Referring to all cases of self-destruction by the modern and impartial term *suicide*, Durkheim suggests the application of the term "to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or a negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result."[3] For Durkheim, the soldier dying to save his regiment, the martyr dying for his faith, or the mother sacrificing herself for her child, "can be only varieties of a single class." Durkheim identifies several categories of suicide. One of them is the "altruistic suicide," which is motivated by social codes. If this code is religious in nature, Durkheim entitles voluntary death "altruistic obligatory suicide."

Traditional theologians would disagree with Durkheim. The three monotheistic religions strongly oppose all forms of voluntary death that are dubbed suicide but praise their martyrs.[4] Ask representatives of these religions what martyrdom is and you are bound to receive different answers. What compounds the search for definition is that the originally Greek term *martyrdom* lacks a uniform meaning.[5] Narrowing down our search to a Jewish definition does not yield decisive results either. Rabbinic law (*halakhah*) would seem to be a logical starting place for the search.[6] But the Law of the voluminous Talmud can take us only so far. Expressions on voluntary death in Jewish circles had existed long before the rabbis formulated their views on the issue. Moreover, the Talmud does not speak in one voice on this matter. Nor does it provide a clear and single term to describe this act. *Qiddush ha-Shem* ("the sanctification of God's name"), the present Hebrew term for martyrdom, is a medieval fixture. Before this biblical phrase appeared in martyrological texts, rabbis had formulated various expressions to delineate and deal with voluntary death.[7] And although Talmudic rabbis considered only passive voluntary death as an alternative to forced transgression, that is, Jews must let others take their lives rather than take their own (*yehareg ve-al yaavor*), self-slaughter was not an uncommon form of *qiddush ha-Shem* in the Middle Ages, however controversial.

Christians who forced these Jews into such situations generally considered their Jewish counterparts to be irrational or satanic. Even when Jews let their rivals take their lives to prevent torture to their bodies or souls, Christians still ascribed to them such adjectives. About a millennium earlier, Romans employed similar derogatory terms to describe those dying for Christianity.

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Derogatory Roman terms, however, never prevented Christians from holding their martyrs in high regard.

It appears, then, that the evaluation of self-destruction is often a matter of self-definition.[8] But although it is true that every society defines its *causa iusta* to legitimize acts of voluntary death, one clarification is in order. Augustine claimed that "It is not the penalty that makes true martyrs, but the cause."[9] Augustine intended to exclude all non-Christians and even the Christians he deemed heretical as martyrs. In essence, the acceptance of Augustine's view would end this study before it could begin. In principle, Augustine raises a valid point. Not all cases of voluntary death belong to a single category. At least historically, the readiness to suffer unto death rather than inflict an injury unto others is the one ingredient that has made martyrdom both controversial and noble. My interest, therefore, primarily lies in the accounts that describe or discuss the voluntary death of the nonviolent believers. These believers may end their own lives or even take their families with them in a most violent way to prevent a violation of their conviction. Yet they achieve this ultimate goal without physically harming their antagonists.

We are about to see that the history of Jewish martyrdom is as complex as it is long. The frequent appearance of martyrs in the pages of history prevents us from discussing all the Jewish and Christian martyrological accounts. For practical reasons, we are bound to address only the most significant descriptions that focus on such nonviolent heroes. We begin, therefore, with the examination of the martyrologies that current scholarship places in the Hellenistic period.

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Mythic Martyrs

Religious martyrdom is considered one of the more significant contributions of Hellenistic Judaism to western civilization. Out of the conflict between King Antichos Epiphanes IV and the Jewish people, it is believed, the concept of voluntary death for God unfolded.[1] With few exceptions, this assumption has lasted from the early Christian period to this day, accepted both by Jews and Christians. To mention one example, W. H. C. Frend followed the opinion that from early times "Judaism was itself a religion of martyrdom." In his view, it was the "Jewish psychology of martyrdom" that inspired Christian martyrdom.[2]

An exception to this long-lasting scholarly consensus is G. W. Bowersock's *Martyrdom and Rome*. Focusing on non-Jewish documents, Bowersock viewed martyrdom "alien to both the Greeks and the Jews." In his opinion, "like the very word 'martyr' itself, martyrdom had nothing to do with Judaism or with Palestine. It had everything to do with the Graeco-Roman world, its traditions, its language, and its cultural tastes."[3] According to Bowersock, martyrdom is a Christian concept that developed in the Roman cultural climate. Subsequently, this Christian notion made its way into Judaism. Bowersock's view, however, still remains the exception among scholars.

My approach is compatible with Bowersock's, although with less defined borders with respect to cultural and religious separations. By focusing on the Jewish texts of the Greco-Roman period, I intend to show that voluntary death for religious purposes emerged in the Roman environment in a process that internalized the Roman "noble death" ideal and that was accelerated by the arrival of Christianity. But before turning to the Roman era, it is necessary to show why Jewish martyrdom as an ideal does not belong in the Hellenistic period.

What led early theologians and recent scholars to ascribe the origin of martyrdom to Hellenistic Judaism was their interpretation of the canonical

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Daniel and mainly the apocryphal 2 and 4 Maccabees. For Frend, thus, "Without Maccabees and without Daniel a Christian theology of martyrdom would scarcely have been thinkable."[4] The reliance on these sources often ignored the premise that about two centuries set apart 4 Maccabees from the rest. Instead, the views found in Frend's camp focused on the chronology of events alone rather than on the chronology of the narratives that depicted these events. Clumping these diverse sources together may be beneficial for an isolated study of the martyrological literature *per se*. And indeed, such studies have made significant contributions. Such methodology, however, carries trifling value for the study of martyrdom in the context of linear history. The wiggling between the 2 and 4 Maccabees, that is, between texts that are assumed to be of the pre- and post-Christian eras, in search for early Jewish roots, is bound to produce tautological conclusions.[5]

Phenomenal inceptions, conceptions, and their influences, therefore, can be adequately evaluated only in their historical frameworks. The complexity of the Maccabean narratives and the questions they raise, however, compel us first to present these narratives according to their place in scholars' surmised chronological order and their subjective scale of importance before attending to their analysis. Before putting the so-called Maccabean martyrs to the test of history, it is appropriate to turn first to Daniel.

DANIEL

A prevailing scholarly view maintains that the Book of Daniel contains the first Jewish martyrological stories, which provided the foundation and inspiration for the Jewish and Christian doctrines of martyrdom. Thus, for example, J. Rauch identifies Daniel and his three companions – Hananiah/Shadrach, Mishael/Meshack, and Azariah/Abednego – with the "Maccabean martyrs,"[6] whereas R. H. Charles crowned the four biblical heroes the "righteous martyrs of Israel."[7]

What led to this scholarly interpretation of Daniel is the behavioral descriptions of its four heroes during their Babylonian and Persian exile in the sixth century, as well as the allusions to the political condition and social instability during the time of Antiochus Epiphanes.[8] Scholars thus concede that the book, which consists of two different parts, appeared together as a unit during the time of the Maccabean revolt, if not later, as the pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy in the second half of the book suggests.[9] Although the unities of Chapters 1–6 and 7–12 belong to different periods, together they form a literary work that could help rationalize the historical and human crisis of the Jews in cosmic and mythological terms.[10] Because of its limited historical

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value, which springs from the authors' lack of interest in historiography,[11] the significance of the book lies in the moral and religious advice it echoes, not necessarily in the plain description of its protagonists' demeanor.

Within these descriptions scholars see martyrological elements, if not actual martyrdoms. The first mentioned martyrological element is believed to be the religious nature of the conflict between a powerful oppressor and an unyielding oppressed. For the first time, the Book of Daniel describes religious conflicts between the nation of Israel and foreign kings who attempted to force Jews to transgress the Mosaic law.[12] With Antiochus the book goes further. It describes an endeavor to alter the face of Judaism altogether. According to the book's mystical description, the conflicts stand in sharp contrast to former political confrontations that did not make religion a key issue. Moreover, the first half of the book depicts conflicts between mighty kings and peaceful Jews whose faith in the God of Israel constitutes their only shield.

The second element that is believed to point in the direction of martyrdom is the protagonists' absolute trust in God. In the book, the faithful hero's trust appears stronger than his instinct to life. Faithless life is meaningless. Faith played a pivotal role in protecting the faithful from harm – so pivotal, that it became worthy of dying for when challenged.

These two martyrological elements – religious conflict and trust in God unto death – are believed to appear in the first six chapters. The first story that projects these elements is set in Babylonia, in king Nebuchadnezzar's palace (Chapter 1). Daniel and his three companions, Mishael, Azariah, and Hananiah, refuse to defile themselves by eating "royal food," putting their lives at stake.[13] Ultimately, they survive their ten-day trial. God saves them from starvation in recognition of their devotion.

In Chapter 3, a direct conflict between the king and Daniel's three companions takes place. The famous ordeal by fire that the three undergo stir to the opinion that the story belongs to the martyrological genera.[14] Built on an ancient style entitled, "the Disgrace and Rehabilitation of a Minister," the chapter describes the heroes' religious loyalty and astonishing survival.[15] The king orders his Judaean captives thrown into the fiery furnace unless they agree to worship an effigy of gold. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah put their trust in God and refuse to yield.[16] Although thrown into the flames, they remain unharmed because "a man like an angel" saves them.[17]

Based on Daniel's experience in Chapter 6, A. Bentzen has considered the chapter to be a legend of martyrdom.[18] As in the previous episode, the genre of "the Disgrace and Rehabilitation of a Minister" characterizes this chapter as well. King Darius's officials decreed "that whoever shall make a request of any god or man for the next thirty days, other than of you, O king, will be

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thrown into the lions' den." Daniel continued to worship God. As ordered, the guards threw Daniel into the lions' den, but "God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths."

In contrast to the human nature of the conflict in the first half of the book, the rest revolves around a direct conflict between mighty kings and God. Against the Maccabeen background of religious enmity and unconditional faith, Chapters 11 and 12 introduce two more elements that will play a significant role in the formulation of Jewish and, especially, Christian martyrdom. This time the conflict is set in Judaea at a time of approaching final cosmic events. King Antiochus Epiphanes' ascent to power, his defilement of the Israelites' Temple, his anti-Jewish decrees, and the breaking out of violence signal the beginning of the end (Daniel 11:21, 29–35). God's final judgment will bring annihilation upon the cosmos and humanity.

This is not discouraging news, however. Catastrophic signs denote a transition to a secondary stage of existence. In this stage, God will reward and resurrect while inflicting eternal punishments on the sinful (Daniel 12:1–3).[19] Such depictions turned the darkness of death from an end into a bright new dawn; the promise of resurrection assured a new, ideal condition of existence for the righteous. For future discussions, it is important to note Collins's observation that the book speaks of resurrection in a communal context.[20]

It is these four elements in the Book of Daniel – religious conflict, trust in God unto death, death as solution and transition, and reward – that led Jewish and Christian traditions to count the heroes of the book among their martyrs, a tradition that has been accepted by modern scholarship as well. The last two chapters have especially influenced the common view that the book speaks of the "righteous martyrs of Israel," who will receive "the blessedness of a resurrection to life," which is "limited to the martyrs" in the Messianic kingdom.[21]

Based on the existence of these elements, the association of the book with martyrdom is indeed a tempting one. But this retrojected connection, influenced by religious interpretations, is without significant merit, not to mention the opinion that the Book of Daniel was designed to launch a tradition of martyrdom during the Maccabean hostility.[22] This association of the book with voluntary death denotes a continuation of religious traditions and nostalgic interpretations by succeeding Jewish and Christian martyrologists who turn to the Hebrew Bible in hope of finding justification for their martyrs' behavior.

No doubt, chapters one and three convey the heroes' readiness to give up their lives for their convictions. Chapter 6, however, misses this fundamental martyrological motif altogether; Daniel's ordeal is without a trial or a confrontation.[23] Without the individuals having the opportunity to make

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a *choice* between death and life, the basic characteristics of martyrdom are absent. Daniel's tribulation is presented here as an inevitable punishment, brought upon him post factum by conniving and envying rivals for his deeds in the past. Unfortunately for Daniel, even the sympathetic Darius could not revoke the decree once he found out it referred to Daniel's practice.

More significantly, none of the four heroes suffered or died.[24] Obviously, they are not to be blamed for being miraculously rescued by God. But their marvelous survival is precisely the book's central theme: God can marvelously save the righteous from the most precarious situation. Not only does God save the faithful from immediate hardship, He even causes him to prosper in the future. "He saves and rescues and does signs and wonders" (5.28). Even King Darius predicted: "Your God whom you serve constantly, he will save you [Daniel]," from the lions (6.17). He did.

Biblical characteristics put the Book of Daniel on a unique footing. The issue is not whether God will deliver his servant but how ostentatious this salvation will be. Daniel therefore glorifies God's omnipotence, from which only the faithful derives benefits. But the book does not celebrate martyrdom. Daniel and his three companions never declared their willingness to die. On the contrary, when Daniel informs his companions about King Nebuchadnezzar's decision to put to death all the sages of Babylon (2.12), he urges them "to seek mercy from the God of heaven . . . *so that Daniel and his companions should not be put to death* . . . " [2.18, emphasis mine]. Hardly a martyrological desire.

Each of the stories repeatedly conveys what would appear to the unbeliever as a paradoxical configuration: the more one puts himself at risk in the name of God, the better are his chances to survive the most incredible ordeal. As Collins puts it: "The story of the fiery furnace prepares its readers for such an eventuality by assuring them that their God could protect them, and that fidelity to their own exclusive cult was ultimately the best way to advancement."[25] The faithful achieves reward for his ordeal through life rather than through death. As the book demonstrates, the ordeals only advanced the heroes' position *in life*. In Daniel, life harmoniously combines religious adherence and political loyalty to foreign and often sympathetic kings. Conversely, those who are concerned only with their own safety and promotion, at the cost of their convictions, will perish.

The moral of these stories is that God does not forsake those who remain devoted. Daniel and his companions had to express their reliance on God by daily worship. Because they were not required to prove anything beyond that, and because God always saved them, actual martyrdom was unnecessary and, thus, remains out of the picture.

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