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JEWISH MARTYRS IN THE PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN WORLDS

This book presents a linear history of Jewish martyrdom, from the Hellenistic period to the high Middle Ages. Following the chronology of sources, the study challenges the general consensus that martyrdom was an original Hellenistic Jewish idea. Instead, Jews such as Philo and Josephus internalized the idealized Roman concept of voluntary death and presented it as an old Jewish practice. The centrality of self-sacrifice in Christianity further stimulated the development of rabbinic martyrology and the Talmudic guidelines for passive martyrdom. However, when forced to choose between death and conversion in medieval Christendom, European Jews went beyond these guidelines, sacrificing themselves and loved ones. Through death they attempted not only to prove their religiosity but also to disprove the religious legitimacy of their Christian persecutors. Although martyrs and martyrologies intended to show how Judaism differed from Christianity, they, in fact, reveal a common mind-set. Although the medieval martyrological option was played down during the Holocaust, medieval martyrologies still feature in Ashkenazic prayers of today.

Shmuel Shepkaru is Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies and history at The University of Oklahoma.

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SHMUEL SHEPKARU
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521842815

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First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Shepkaru, Shmuel.
 Jewish martyrs in the pagan and Christian worlds / Shmuel Shepkaru.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-84281-6 (hardback)

1. Martyrdom – Judaism – History – To 1500. I. Title.

BM157.S43 2005

296.3'3 – dc22 2005010535

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84281-5 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-84281-6 hardback

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For Shizuka and Leon



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“The tyrant dies and his rule is over, the martyr dies and his rule begins.”
Søren Kierkegaard



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Preface

This book is the product of many years of labor. A stimulating graduate seminar on medieval European Jewry with Professor Robert Chazan at New York University animated my interest in the, then, insufficiently explored and, still, hotly debated topic of Jewish martyrdom. My seminar paper on the phenomenon of medieval martyrdom evolved and grew into a master's thesis and doctoral dissertation on the history of Jewish martyrdom. Additional teaching, research, publishing of articles, valuable correspondence, and public and academic presentations, further prepared me for the writing of this book.

Until recently, a comprehensive study on this subject was still missing. I hope this book will contribute toward answering that scholarly lacuna, although I have no illusion that such a vast topic can be confined to a single book. Several significant studies focusing mainly on Jewish martyrdom in the Middle Ages appeared after I had finished my dissertation. I was happy to discover that some of these studies were in agreement with several of my early findings. Regrettably, I could not take advantage of Professor Jeremy Cohen's valuable study, *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade*, because it came out while this book was already in production.

Abundant thanks are in order to known and unknown people. I owe a great deal of gratitude to my adviser, Professor Robert Chazan, who provided perpetual support and guidance. More than just inspiring this study, he himself has become an inspirational model for me. What I have gained personally and professionally from my experience with him goes far beyond the scope of this book. Thanks also are due to another teacher, Professor Lawrence Schiffman, for all I have learned from him while in graduate school. I am deeply grateful to Professor Ivan Marcus of Yale University for his advice and support. After offering to read my dissertation, he made numerous valuable suggestions. He also graciously offered his constructive reactions to my articles. This study benefited enormously from our correspondence. Many thanks to Professor

Joseph Shatzmiller of Duke University for his anonymous (at the time) comments on a different project that proved to be useful in this one as well and for the warm words of encouragement that followed. I am indebted also to the anonymous reviewers of my manuscript for their beneficial comments and critiques. Dr. Beatrice Rehl discussed with me the possibility of submitting this study to Cambridge University Press. Beatrice, Andy Beck, Nicole McClenic, and the rest of the Cambridge editorial team deserve my gratitude for making the production of this book such a pleasant experience.

My research and the resulting publications in recent years were made possible due to the generous support of the Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences of the University of Oklahoma under Dean Paul Bell. This book could not have appeared in its present length without the support of the University of Oklahoma's College of Arts and Sciences, the Office of the Vice President for Research/Graduate College, the History Department, and the Judaic Studies Program, all of which contributed toward subventing it. Many thanks to the chair of the History Department, Professor Robert Griswold, for doing the "begging" on my behalf. I am especially grateful to the chair of the Judaic Studies Program, Professor Noam Stillman, for first discussing with me the possibility of teaching at the University of Oklahoma, and not least for the true amity that has grown between us. As a true teacher, he has always made himself available to patiently answer numerous questions and provide valuable personal and professional advice.

Words cannot sufficiently express my thanks to and appreciation of my family. My father Leon, of blessed memory, instilled in me the importance of education, the love for history, and Jewish history in particular. My mother Leah has made countless sacrifices for our family. She with my sister Rivka and her family have also made heroic efforts to provide me with the peace of mind that is so necessary in such projects. They have been a source of strength and encouragement. Despite the geographical distance, they all are always so very close.

Aheron, Aheron, Haviv, to my wife Shizuka, I am grateful beyond words for sharing her life with me. Not a single day goes by without me feeling so fortunate to have her as a partner in everything I do. I would not be where I am today without her at my side. As I was submitting this manuscript for publication, came the wonderful news that our son Leon was due to arrive into the world. They both make my life whole, and it is to them that I offer this book.