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MARTYRDOM, VIOLENCE, AND DIGNITY¹

Martírio, violência e dignidade

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Abstract: This article reconsiders historically based arguments for Christian martyrdom, subjecting the tradition to an analysis suited to liberation of the marginalized. It begins with a description of the historical development of scholarship on martyrdom. From there, the essay analyzes Moss's arguments regarding the discursive use of the image of the martyr, alongside Recla's arguments regarding the Christian martyr as *autothanatos*, one who enacts self-death. Moss and Recla demonstrate the simultaneous fabrication and erasure of violence from the narratives of martyrdom. The article reconciles these opposing conclusions by applying the contextual lens of honor/shame to the analysis of martyrdom. Doing so reveals that, more than attempts to emphasize violence and/or suffering, martyrs, as culturally marginalized persons, represent for early Christians, the ideal Christian life-attitude of the marginalized, which is that of making radical claims of and to human dignity.

Keywords: Martyrdom. Violence. Existentialism. Honor/shame. Candida Moss.

Resumo: Este artigo reconsidera argumentos baseados historicamente para o martírio cristão, submetendo a tradição a uma análise adequada à libertação dos marginalizados. Começa com uma descrição do desenvolvimento histórico da pesquisa sobre o martírio. A partir daí, o ensaio analisa os argumentos de Moss sobre o uso discursivo da imagem do mártir, ao lado dos argumentos de Recla sobre o mártir cristão como *autothanatos*, aquele que encena a automorte. Moss e Recla demonstram a produção simultânea e o apagamento da violência a partir das narrativas do martírio. O artigo reconcilia essas conclusões opostas aplicando a lente contextual da honra/vergonha à análise do martírio. Ao fazê-lo, revela que, mais do que tentativas de enfatizar a violência e/ou sofrimento, os mártires, como pessoas culturalmente marginalizadas, representam para os primeiros

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■ cristãos a atitude de vida cristã ideal dos marginalizados, que é a reivindicação radical à dignidade humana.

■ **Palavras-chave:** Martírio. Violência. Existencialismo. Honra/vergonha. Candida Moss.

Introduction

In addition to seeking support for Christian non-violence in New Testament scripture, support for the non-violence and/or non-resistance of Christians is also sought by referencing the phenomenon of martyrdom in the early church. Martyrs are portrayed as individuals who willingly sacrificed their lives rather than recant or compromise their religious confession or witness. They are upheld as non-violent and nonresistant imitators of Christ, who are themselves worthy of imitation. Such narratives of martyrdom have performed historically, and continue to perform, the task of shaping Christian conduct. The impact of the martyrdom narrative, however, has changed from the times of the early church. While in the early church the phenomenon of martyrdom served liturgical and ecclesiastical formative purposes, the modern function of martyrdom often serves to create a “Christian persecution complex.” The narrative of martyrdom allows Christians in the West (particularly nationalistic dispensationalists),³ who are cultural hegemons and who maintain economic and political dominance globally, to claim the position of marginalization, disadvantage, and literal persecution in “the world,” because of their faith.⁴ In addition dominant groups within Western Christianity have relied upon martyrdom narratives to assert their dominance over those not in the dominant group, by compelling the non-dominant to accept their domination; to adhere the example of suffering, best exemplified by the martyrs.⁵ If the tradition of martyrdom is to remain relevant to the two-thirds world

³ See, e.g., OLDFIELD, Duane. The Evangelical roots of American unilateralism: The Christian Right’s influence and how to counter it. *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 2004, p. 1-6; SAIYA, Nilay. Onward Christian Soldiers: American Dispensationalists, George W. Bush and the Middle East. *Holy Land Studies*, v. 11, n. 2, p. 175-204, 2012; TURNER, Bryan S. Multiple Modernities and Political Millenarianism: Dispensational Theology, Nationalism, and American Politics. In: MICHEL, Patrick; POSSAMAI, Adam; TURNER, Bryan S. (Orgs.). *Religions, Nations, and Transnationalism in Multiple Modernities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. p. 135-151.

⁴ However, for an account of the ways that Christians are, in fact, facing increasing persecution and death outside of the West, see, e.g., ALLEN, John L. *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution*. 2. ed. New York: Crown, 2016; MARSHALL, Paul; GILBERT, Lela; SHEA, Nina. *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013.

⁵ This is suffering that is in line with the subordination that is deemed ideal for the subordinated, who might rightfully recognize that their subordination and submission to the dominant is the will of God, since they understand that, cosmically, in the New Order of the Kingdom of God, the subordinated stand as equals with the dominant. See, YODER, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*. 2. ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994. p. 162-187. Contra Yoder’s view, see, FIORENZA, Elisabeth Schüssler. *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Anniversary edition. Boston: Beacon, 1995, for refutation of Yoder’s argument for accepting “things as they are.”

that is often subject to (neo)colonial domination, the narrative of martyrdom warrants liberative scrutiny.

This essay begins with a description of the historical development of scholarship on martyrdom. From there, the essay analyzes Moss's arguments regarding the discursive use of the image of the martyr, alongside Recla's arguments regarding the Christian martyr as *autothanatos*, one who enacts self-death. Moss and Recla demonstrate the simultaneous fabrication and erasure of violence from the narratives of martyrdom. The article reconciles these opposing conclusions by applying the contextual lens of honor/shame to the analysis of martyrdom. Doing so reveals that, more than attempts to emphasize violence and/or suffering, martyrs, as culturally marginalized persons, represent for early Christians, the ideal Christian life-attitude of the marginalized, which is that of making radical claims of and to human dignity.

Martyrdom Origins

The term *martyrs* has been identified as beginning to be used in the mid-second century to describe acts of Christian death.⁶ It has been documented that the construction of the linguistic category "martyr" took place dialogically with the construction of the categorization of "Christian," so that the martyr's assertion, "I am Christian" is a component of the process of becoming a martyr, as being a martyr necessarily meant to be Christian.⁷

From making linguistic findings, the scholarship moved to making conceptual connections in the study of martyrdom. Scholars have demonstrated a tradition of "martyr-likeness" that precedes the second century linguistic appearance of the "martyr." Frend, van Henten, and Seeley posit Jewish roots of the concept of martyrdom based on Jewish history, which includes narratives of righteous suffering such as the three young men, the king and the furnace; Daniel in the lion's den; and more directly parallel, Elieazer and the seven sons in the Maccabees writings.⁸ Lohse, as well, argues for the importance of Jewish martyrdom as an influence upon early Christian thought, particularly Pauline interpretations of Jesus's death.⁹ Seeley later shows that Lohse's interpretation points to Hellenistic Judaic influence on the construction of the Maccabees writings.¹⁰ Lohse's study, then, demonstrates the Greco-Roman culture as an additional significant source for the concept of Christian martyrdom. The Helle-

⁶ BROX, Norbert. *Zeuge und Märtyrer. Untersuchungen zur frühchristlichen Zeugnis-Terminologie*. München: Kösel, 1961; CAMPENHAUSEN, Freiherr von. *Die Idee des Martyriums in der alten Kirche*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1936.

⁷ MUSURILLO, H. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1972. p. xi to lxiii.

⁸ FREND, W. H. C. *Martyrdom & Persecution in the Early Church*. Anchor Books edition. New York: Doubleday, 1967; VAN HENTEN, Jan Willem. *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees*. First edition. Leiden; New York: Brill, 1997; SEELEY, David. *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul's Concept of Salvation*. New York: Bloomsbury, 1990.

⁹ LOHSE, Eduard. *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955.

¹⁰ SEELEY, 1990, p. 84-85.

nistic conception of a martyr-like person was one who exemplified the “noble death.” This tradition is evident in the examples of Achilles, Euripides, Athenian funeral orations, and most notably, the paradigmatic death of Socrates.¹¹ Further, those identified in the Greco-Roman tradition as embodying the noble death were deemed exemplars whose lives and deaths should be imitated by those who followed or admired them.

In light of this, the “startling literary and thematic similarity”¹² between Judeo-Christian martyrdom and Greco-Roman noble death, and the “very strong family resemblance between... Maccabees, Paul, and Greco-Roman philosophers,”¹³ has been noted. Thus, the idea of martyrdom was not a Christian innovation. It developed out of the Christians’ cultural context as Jews in territories controlled by a Hellenistic Roman Empire.

Ideologies of Martyrdom

Deconstructing the Idea of Martyrdom as Persecution

Candida Moss’s reinterpretation of early Christian martyrdom has done much to dispel the previously ubiquitous understanding of the martyrs as historical persons, and of martyrdom as acts of heroic persons who die in loyalty to their faith and to the church. The body of Moss’ work explores questions of how martyrs are created and for what purposes. Moss argues that there is no singular account of martyrdom. The martyr narratives vary across time and geography.¹⁴ Nonetheless, she identifies broad trends present in early accounts. One such trend is imitation.

In mid-first century Asia Minor, martyrdom entailed memorialization of those who died in imitation of the death of Jesus. The Luke/Acts portrayal of Stephen exemplifies this pattern of mimesis. The attack on Stephen is precipitated by the same accusation made of Jesus, relating to claiming the temple would be destroyed. Stephen, like Jesus, appears before the high priest. Both Jesus and Stephen refer to the Son of Man at the right hand of God and cry out at the moment of their deaths. Also, both Jesus and Stephen ask for forgiveness of their persecutors, and both commend their spirit before they die.

What the Stephen/Christ parallel demonstrates is the literary shaping of martyr narratives to imitate the narratives of Jesus’s death. This method of *imitatio Christi*,¹⁵

¹¹ MOSS, Candida R. *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. p. 10.

¹² MOSS, 2010, p. 10.

¹³ SEELEY, 1990, p. 16.

¹⁴ MOSS, Candida R. *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.

¹⁵ Moss uses *imitatio Christi* to refer “actions or words that imitate those of Christ, not complicated ethical and spiritual systems of thought,” such as is the technical use of the term in medieval Roman Catholicism. MOSS, 2010, p. 21-23.

reflects Greco-Roman ideology, well established among Greco-Roman moralists¹⁶, which recognized the importance of imitation. The ancients taught that through “the imitation of the words and deeds of great figures, it was possible to become like them.”¹⁷ Thus, early Christian martyr memorialization applied the accepted Greco-Roman technique of constructing narratives to reflect an imitation of Jesus. This was a way of reinscribing Jesus’s greatness, and at the same time, of denoting the martyr-imitator as great, and as an example to be imitated.

Further, Moss argues that Christian authors of martyr narratives borrowed more than the technique of mimesis.

Christians adapted their ideas about martyrdom and sometimes even the stories about the martyrs themselves from both ancient Jewish and pagan writers...[W]hen early Christians sat down to write the stories of their own heroes and heroines, they did not start afresh. They drank deeply from the well of the noble death tradition.¹⁸

Moss goes on to show that the influence of the culture encompassed more than the noble death tradition. Early Christian writers borrowed from court trial transcripts of heroically condemned pagans, as well as from the Greek romantic novel genre—from which the martyr narratives created fantastic themes of travel, adventure and romance. Apocryphal legends of the apostles’ acts emerged that included “miracles, shipwrecks, talking animals, prodigious infants, Harry Potter-like battles of wits with powerful magicians, and flying, talking, and walking crosses.”¹⁹ Ultimately, what the Christians wrote about Christian martyrs, which is traditionally regarded as unique and as evidence of Christian authoritative truth, is not unique to Christianity. The narratives are a re-working of literary forms common to the ancient world.

Finally, Moss discredits the conception of consistent persecution of Christians in the first century. Though she does acknowledge that there were periods of persecution, (“1)...following the Great Fire of Rome in 64, 2) around 250, during the reign of Decius, 3)...during the reign of Valerian in 257–58, and 4) during the ‘Great Persecution’ under...Diocletian, which lasted from 303 to 305 and was renewed by Maximinus Daia between 311 and 313”²⁰), Moss highlights the scholarly consensus that there were no known persecutions by the Roman government before 64 CE, and that between 64 and 250 CE there were only isolated, local persecutions.²¹ Contesting the perception that Jews were the early primary persecutors of Christians, Moss argues that the Jews-following-Jesus were but one branch among many other branches

¹⁶ MOSS, 2010, p. 20, citing: MALHERBE, Abraham J. *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*. Philadelphia, Pa: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989. p. 135-136.

¹⁷ MOSS, 2010, p. 21.

¹⁸ MOSS, Candida. *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*. Reprint edition. New York: HarperOne, 2014. p. 80.

¹⁹ MOSS, 2014, p. 77.

²⁰ MOSS, 2014, p. 129.

²¹ MOSS, 2014, p. 127-162; DE STE. CROIX, Geoffrey. *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. p. 106.

of Jews, and that there was no persecution of Jews-following-Jesus, strictly related to their beliefs. Questioning the historicity of what has been transmitted about the persecutions and deaths of the apostles, Moss argues that to accept the apostle's martyrdoms as historical fact requires accepting about the apostles, most significantly, that:

(1) that they thought of themselves as Christians [not Jews], (2) that the motivation for their arrests and executions was that they were Christians rather than troublemakers, and (3) that they actually were arrested and executed. Of these three assumptions, the third is the most important...[However,] the documents that contain the stories of the deaths of the apostles...were written many, perhaps hundreds, of years after the events they purport to describe. Even the five earliest apocryphal acts of the apostles...[Peter, Paul, Thomas, Andrew, and John] were composed in the second century under the influence of the Greek romance novel. This is to say nothing about the unreliability of the stories pertaining to the other apostles. The fact of the matter is that we simply don't know how any of the apostles died, much less whether they were martyred.²²

Thus, though acknowledging that Christians did undergo persecution, Moss concludes that the fact that there were deaths, even horrific deaths, is not the same as promoting the belief that Christians endured unrelenting imperial violence from the time of Jesus's death until the time of Constantine. Such an idea is fallacious.

Constructing the Idea of the Martyr as Autothanatos

Matthew Recla moves the discussion of martyrdom from a linguistic, contextual, or deconstructive perspective, towards recognition of the existential nature of the claims asserted through martyrdom. Recla's thesis is that by accepting death, the martyr acts violently and autonomously as an expression of agency and authentic-self-making.

Martyrdom as violent and autonomous

Recla asserts that the martyr's act of dying is an act of violence and an autonomous act. While we are loathe to color martyrdom with the negative moral assessment that the appellation of violence carries, Recla argues that "violence" need not, and indeed does not, constitute a morally negative occurrence.²³ Attaching a negative assessment to violence is to impose a moral color on a morally neutral occurrence. Following Agamben and Foucault, Recla states that the moral color of violence "is

²² MOSS, 2014, p. 136.

²³ For more on the ideological underpinnings of "violence," see, STAUDIGL, Michael. Introduction: Topics, Problems, and Potentials of a Phenomenological Analysis of Violence. *Phenomenologies of Violence*, p. 1-32, 2014; TITE, Philip L. *Conceiving Peace and Violence: A New Testament Legacy*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004.

constituted only in the *prohibition* of that [‘violent’] act by sovereign authority.”²⁴ In other words, it is only *because an act transgresses* sovereignty or institutional authority that it is deemed to constitute “violence” and is deemed morally bad.²⁵ Further, the acts of those with authority that do harm, that function with a latent violence, become invisible and misrecognized. Violence is not attributed to the Authority. When violence is deemed to be a phenomenon in some cases, but not in others, “its appearance becomes synonymous with moral culpability.”²⁶

The newly ascended Christianized Roman Empire took control of the developing ideology of martyrdom. Imperial authority asserted who and what constituted true martyrdom. Instead of martyrdom being regarded as a transgression against power, imperial Christianity named as fanatics and heretics those transgressors of authority who died for their beliefs.²⁷ The *martyr*, in contrast, was one of whom authority approved, who exemplified the proper faith, not one who was a transgressor. The sanction of the sovereign, thus, gave martyrdom a favorable moral color.²⁸ It becomes difficult now to regard as “violent” (i.e., bad and transgressive), that which has been pre-colored as morally good.

The martyrdoms of the first century church, however, were not undertaken with the sanction of institutional authority. The deaths may be understood as violent since in narratives the martyr “refuses sovereign control over life and death by taking her life into her own hands, reclaiming it for her own purpose.”²⁹ She acts transgressively. Her transgressive act makes use of the punishment of the institutional authority to defy the institutional authority. Further, where *violence is the transgression* of authority, the martyr’s act of violence, which warrants a punitive response, makes impossible any punishment of the transgressor. Recla, thus, regards the act of the martyr as an autonomous act, in that “the martyr’s conscious usurpation of control over life and death from sovereignty is a violent act that constitutes—and finalizes—a law unto itself.”³⁰

²⁴ RECLA, Matthew. Homo profanus: The Christian martyr and the violence of meaning-making. *Critical Research on Religion*, v. 2, n. 2, p. 147-164, 2014b. p. 149.

²⁵ RECLA, 2014b, p. 149-151.

²⁶ RECLA, Matthew. Autothanatos: The Martyr’s Self-Formation. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, v. 82, n. 2, p. 472-494, 2014a. p. 485.

²⁷ This was especially deemed necessary to resist the rise of the Donatist branch of the church, which regarded itself as the true church, and as “the church of the Martyrs.” For more on Donatist sectarianism, and the violence surrounding Donatist practice, see, FRIEND, W. H. C. *The Donatist Church: a movement of protest in Roman North Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971; GADDIS, Michael. *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. p. 103-130.

²⁸ RECLA, 2014a, p. 473.

²⁹ RECLA, 2014b, p. 149.

³⁰ RECLA, 2014b, p. 148.

Martyrdom as authentic-self-making

The death of the martyr as violent and autonomous informs Recla's reframing of martyrdom. He rejects the conception of "Christian martyrdom as an instantiation of nonviolent self-sacrifice," and instead "read[s] the martyr as the *autothanatos* [one who enacts self-death], and the violent, intentional self-death as a radical act of identity assertion, of autonomy."³¹ Recla relies upon Heidegger's conception of *Dasein*, "being there"-ness, to support his claim. *Dasein* is a unique ontology. Its Being is essentially an issue for it.³² *Dasein* attempts self-understanding through the world, institutions and tradition, but can find its authentic truth not in these other entities, nor in other *Dasein*, nor in the mundane routines of life, but only in the potentiality of the self. The self is born, and is then "there being." The phenomenon of death is an end. Death represents the final limit *and possibility* for the completeness of Being. The everyday evasion of death is the evasion of the ground of Being. To evade death is to be inauthentic. *Autothanatos*, however, "actively manages the possibility and liminality of death."³³ *Autothanatos* moves the description of martyrdom from a social description³⁴ to an individual and existential description.³⁵ *Autothanatos*' Being-toward-death calls the *autothanatos*' Being from the "certainty of tradition," towards "its most central potentiality"³⁶; it is called into mystery and openness to Being. "It is only through a resolute anticipation of death that an authentic Being can be sustained."³⁷

Recla's analysis of the *autothanatos*-martyr provides an existential meaning for martyrdom that is lacking in previous accounts in the Christian tradition. However, he acknowledges that a central question is unanswered. This is "whether the death of the martyr was an end in itself, independent of social function?"³⁸ He determines that as those looking back, we like *autothanatos*, must remain open; we cannot make a judgment from an ontological perspective "because of the elusiveness of volition."³⁹

Reading Moss and Recla together makes disclose discontinuities in their accounts of violence in martyr narratives. For Moss, violence is accounted for in culture,

³¹ RECLA, 2014a, p. 483.

³² HEIDEGGER, Martin. *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*. Albany: SUNY, 1996. p. 117.

³³ RECLA, 2014a, p. 480.

³⁴ Recla's description of the Christian martyr's movement away from the social description, which entails the everyday aversion of death, is helpful here: "Death [typically] is viewed in opposition to life. The intentional death of the other is thus aberrant and abhorrent. A substitutionary theory that harnesses the power of the death of the other for the living allows for stasis with the dead and an explanation for their alienation. The death of the other becomes functional. This attempt to artificially appropriate the death of the autothanatos is also an unwillingness to face the persistence of one's own death. The second way to read the death of the autothanatos is as a model to be literally imitated, duplicated [...] the death of the other becomes a value for my own existence [...] death as food for life, as sacrifice for me and for Christianity." RECLA, 2014a, p. 482.

³⁵ RECLA, 2014a, p. 481.

³⁶ RECLA, 2014a, p. 482.

³⁷ RECLA, 2014a, p. 482.

³⁸ RECLA, 2014a, p. 490.

³⁹ RECLA, 2014a, p. 490.

and the conception of the culture as inherently violent towards first-century Christians is divulged as largely false. For Recla, violence is accounted for as transgression, and the acts of the martyrs themselves reflect inherent violence, yet that violence has been neutralized in martyrdom narrations. It is here that a reading incorporating the heuristic of honor/shame might serve as a bridging concept between the false violence of the empire and the neutralized violence of the martyr. In other words, there was not consistent violence surrounding martyrdom for Moss, and there was inherent violence implied in martyrdom for Recla.

Here the honor/shame lens becomes useful to show that the martyr narratives both create and uncreate violence in their telling as a means of communicating an overarching message that is not about violence, but rather about the honor and dignity of Jesus, Christian martyrs, and Christians generally. Such a reading presents a possible answer to Recla's question of the independent vs. social operation of martyrdom.

Early Church Honor-Shame Context

The concept of honor/shame is fundamental to the Greco-Roman context of the Gospels. In the context of Roman antiquity, “[c]oncern for honor permeate[d] every aspect of public life...Honor [w]as the fundamental value.”⁴⁰ Honor was one's public reputation.⁴¹ It was not only one's status in the community but the community's *recognition* of that status.⁴² Such recognition was inconsistent, and was determined within a culture of perpetual community evaluation, which performed a kind of social control.⁴³ Honor became, then, “public acknowledgement of one's worth or social value.”⁴⁴

Honor determine[d] dress, mannerisms, gestures, vocation, posture, who [could] eat with whom, who [sat] at what places at a meal, who [could] open a conversation, who ha[d] the right to speak, and who [was] accorded an audience. It serve[d] as the prime indicator of social place (precedence) and provide[d] the essential map for persons to interact with superiors, inferiors, and equals in socially prescribed or appropriate ways.⁴⁵

Thus, honor, which was determined by communal assessment, assigned and proscribed nearly all facets of the ways in which one experienced life on a daily basis.

⁴⁰ MALINA, Bruce J.; ROHRBAUGH, Richard L. *Social-science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. 2. ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003. p. 369.

⁴¹ MALINA; ROHRBAUGH, 2003, p. 370.

⁴² MALINA; ROHRBAUGH, 2003, p. 370.

⁴³ MALINA; ROHRBAUGH, 2003, p. 370.

⁴⁴ MALINA; ROHRBAUGH, 2003, p. 371.

⁴⁵ MALINA; ROHRBAUGH, 2003, p. 370.

Honor/Shame in Operation

Honor was *ascribed* by one being born to an honorable social position. However, for the majority of persons in Palestine, who were non-elites, honor was *achieved*, or acquired. The achievement of honor was possible by its gain (or loss) through public success (or failure). The necessary negotiation of honor was typically conducted through community enactments of the “challenge-riposte.” Challenge-Riposte competitions consisted of one person issuing a challenge to the honor of another person, and the other person answering in a way that preserved his or her own honor and/or issuing a greater challenge to the first person. Challenge-riposte was pervasive and ruled many aspects of life.⁴⁶

In addition to conceiving of honor/shame in terms of ascription and achievement, the culture of honor was also mediated through symbolization of the physical body, and the “name” or reputation of the person. Placing a crown on the head of the king, and slapping the face of the prisoner;⁴⁷ or, placing a king on a raised throne, and throwing enemies at the feet of the victor are all ways that honor/shame are symbolically communicated.⁴⁸ Garments, such as white robes, are also used to communicate the honor of the one wearing the garment.⁴⁹ The “name” is also a site of symbolic honor. Thus, “[p]raising or “sanctifying” God’s name or making God’s name “known” are expressions for giving God honor or spreading God’s honor.”⁵⁰ Speaking ill of God’s name, blaspheming, on the other hand, is to dishonor God. Another example of ultimate dishonor was crucifixion. Crucifixion was reserved for punishment of those inherently without honor, such as criminals and slaves.⁵¹ Crucifixion’s shame and dishonor rested in the “progressive public humiliation” involved in the process of crucifixion, including powerlessness, the removal of clothing, thus, nakedness, and the abuse of the body.⁵²

Early Christian Community and Honor/Shame

The culture of honor/shame was pervasive for first century Jesus-followers. It affected the way that early Christians were received or rejected in the social order, and among their kinship groups. As Jews there was already tension between loyalty to traditions that resulted in dishonor in larger Roman society.⁵³ This tension was even

⁴⁶ MOXNES, Halvor. Honor and Shame. In: ROHRBAUGH, Richard L. (Org.). *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation*. First ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003. p. 21.

⁴⁷ DASILVA, David A. *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2000. p. 31.

⁴⁸ DASILVA, 2000, p. 31.

⁴⁹ DASILVA, 2000, p. 32.

⁵⁰ DASILVA, 2000, p. 32.

⁵¹ NEYREY, Jerome H. (Org.). *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson, 1991. p. 139.

⁵² MALINA; ROHRBAUGH, 2003, p. 346; NEYREY, 1991, p. 139.

⁵³ DASILVA, 2000, p. 38-40.

greater for those who embraced the testimony of Jesus. Minority groups, such as Jews and Christians, utilized a strategy for achieving honor despite the loss of honor that one sustained in the broader culture.

DaSilva explains that the strategy for minority groups involved three components. First, there was the fencing of the minority group's "court of reputation." The minority in-group focused their attention "toward one another, toward their leaders, and very frequently, toward beings beyond the visible sphere ([e.g.,] God or the honored members the group who have moved to another realm after death.)"⁵⁴ The goal was to frame the larger out-group as the "deviant body" that is out of line with the cosmic order. In the fledgling Christian community this was accomplished by the writers of the New Testament being "careful continually to point the members of the Christian group away from the opinion that non-Christians might form of them, toward the opinion of those who would reflect the values of the group"⁵⁵—the sole proper court of reputation for the Christians.

Second, in addition to controlling the conception of the public court of reputation for determinations of honor, the minority in-group also sought to control the *in-group* conception of honor. Thus, there was regular articulation for the in-group of reasons "why the approval or disapproval of outsiders does not matter to the members of the group and why it is no reflection of the group members' true honor and worth."⁵⁶ The hostility and scorn of the out-group was re-interpreted in a positive light for the in-group. "Rather than being felt as a demeaning, degrading experience, society's assaults on the group can become an opportunity to show courage or to demonstrate a person's loyalty to God, or to have his or her moral faculty exercised and strengthened."⁵⁷ The goal was to minimize the in-group's self-perception of dishonor. Church leaders and New Testament authors focused the Jesus-followers on God's opinion of what is honorable or shameful. It was God who had the ultimate "stamp of approval" or disapproval, and God's determination would be made on the Day of Judgment.⁵⁸ The New Testament stressed the special place of honor in God's eyes that Jesus-followers enjoyed. They were assured that they are invited to become God's own people, adopted into God's own family, made a part of God's own household, sharing in Christ's honor.⁵⁹ In addition to prayer, direct Spiritual communication, and the Hebrew scriptures, the means of knowing God's opinion of what was honorable was the affirmation of the community of believers. There was in-group reinforcement and "kinship-like" in-group commitments (including the sharing of resources) to make the in-group, rather than the broader society, the source of determinations of what was honorable and of how to attain honor. In addition, church leaders also emphasized the dishonor and shamelessness of outsiders. Their dishonor is found in their

⁵⁴ DASILVA, 2000, p. 40.

⁵⁵ DASILVA, 2000, p. 55.

⁵⁶ DASILVA, 2000, p. 40.

⁵⁷ DASILVA, 2000, p. 41.

⁵⁸ DASILVA, 2000, p. 56.

⁵⁹ See 1 Peter 2:5, 9-10; John 1:12-13; Rom 8:14-17; Heb 2:10, 3:1-6, 14; 1 Peter 1:23; Rev. 1:5-6; 5:9.

ignorance and inability to understand what is valuable and worthy, as well as in their dishonorable conduct, including idolatry, and vice.⁶⁰

The third strategy employed, was for the in-group to use honor/shame to enforce proper in-group behavior.⁶¹ The group was encouraged to do one set of things, and to refrain from another set of things, so that they could either receive or avoid the respective honor or disgrace resulting from their actions. Models of behavior were established. “Some figures are held up as worthy of praise and emulation, while others were held up to serve as bad examples who should not be emulated.”⁶² In the first-century church, leaders “held up certain believers to be honored, shamed others, and encouraged the churches themselves to create a dynamic social environment in which honoring and shaming actively supported the group’s values and reinforced individual commitment to honor those values.”⁶³ An ethos of self-regulated accountability within the in-group was meant to maintain the community.⁶⁴

Honor/Shame and Martyrdom

It is not difficult to make a connection between the early church’s negotiation of honor/shame and the phenomenon of martyrdom. With respect to fencing or limiting the influence of the opinions of outsiders, the narratives of martyrdom serve to make a distinction between those outside the community and those inside. The outsiders are narratively framed as being against the community of insiders; *they* are the persecutors, *we* are the persecuted. The persecutors are painted as being without honor and the Jesus-followers as honorable. The same is true with regard to shaping the honor/shame consciousness regarding those inside the group of Jesus-followers. The honor and dignity of the Jesus-followers, their approval by God, is emphasized. They are imitators of Jesus the Christ. As He has been raised to God’s highest honors, and crowned with the highest honor, so too are Christian martyrs, and Christians generally, privy to such honor. Finally, the martyr’s image was used to define and enforce the proper behavior of Jesus-followers. Martyrs were held up as exemplars whose lives and deaths were worthy of honor. The deeds of the martyrs in the narratives contributed to the formation of the community’s identity. At the same time the actions of the outsiders, those who persecute the Jesus-followers, are portrayed as dishonorable.

The warrant for an honor/shame analysis

Moss has argued that the Jesus-sect was not subject to persistent persecution in the first century. While the historical record lacks evidence of persistent imperial

⁶⁰ DASILVA, 2000, p. 61-65.

⁶¹ DASILVA, 2000, p. 40-41.

⁶² DASILVA, 2000, p. 41.

⁶³ DASILVA, 2000, p. 79-80.

⁶⁴ DASILVA, 2000, p. 82-83.

persecution, there is nonetheless ample evidence of marginalization of non-elites in Palestine, a group which encompassed many within the first century church.

Politically, because of insurrections by Jewish insurgents, Rome exercised brutal force in crushing the Jewish community during the first century. This resulted in generalized dishonor and demoralization of the vanquished. Further, the colonization of the Palestinian region, resulted in the segregation and domination of the vast majority of the people, politically, socially, and religiously, by the class of Jewish priestly elites, who served as patrons of imperial Rome.⁶⁵ Economically, the majority peasant class consisted of subsistence farmers,⁶⁶ who were dependent upon the vagaries of the weather and nature for yields that would sufficiently allow for the sustenance of the family and also payment of Roman tribute, local taxes, and religious tithes.⁶⁷ Often the yield was insufficient and peasant families fell into sinkholes of debt. Elites controlled two-thirds of the economic wealth of the country while 90% of the people survived off of one-third of the land's production.⁶⁸

Significantly, in this cultural context, wealth was not the most important value. The more important and fundamental value was honor and the community's estimation of the family. Thus, poverty was not merely a matter of economic survival, poverty entailed lost honor; it meant to become publicly disgraced.⁶⁹

Honor/Shame in Luke's crucifixion scene:

The example of Jesus's crucifixion scene in the Gospel of Luke provides an example.³³ *When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [34] Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.* (Luke 23:33-34)

Background

The books of Luke and Acts are a joint composition, with a dating generally agreed to be in the mid-first century.⁷⁰ Our example text appears in Luke's Gospel, and no other Gospel account. Significantly, v. 34 is missing from important early

⁶⁵ HÄKKINEN, Sakari. Poverty in the first-century Galilee. *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, v. 72, n. 4, 2016. p. 4; HORSLEY, Richard A. *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and The New World Disorder*. Paperback. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. p. 11.

⁶⁶ But not only farmers, also fishers, laborers, artisans, as well as beggars, outcasts, and other "expendables." BORG, Marcus J. *Conflict, holiness, and politics in the teachings of Jesus*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1998. p. 10.

⁶⁷ BORG, 1998, p. 47-48.

⁶⁸ BORG, 1998, p. 11-12.

⁶⁹ HÄKKINEN, 2016, p. 4.

⁷⁰ FITZMEYER, Joseph A. *The Gospel According to Luke (X - XXIV): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. New York: Doubleday, 1985; HAGNER, Donald A. *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction*. Ada, MI: Baker, 2012; ROBINSON, John A. T. *Redating the New Testament*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000.

manuscripts of Luke's Gospel.⁷¹ This raises the question as to whether this verse was originally included and later omitted, or whether it was a later addition.⁷² Despite the uncertainty of its original inclusion, the prayer has been included since it matches Luke's version of the Lord's prayer (11:4 "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."); it fits Luke's narrative preference, of featuring the prophet being rejected out of ignorance;⁷³ ⁷⁴ and it fits Luke's pattern of showing Jesus at prayer regularly, particularly at pivotal moments of the narrative,⁷⁵ thus, modelling the life of prayer that the disciples should follow.⁷⁶

Themes

First, the passage is meant to leave no doubt that Jesus underwent the ultimate degradation of crucifixion. Scholars have noted that this passage is "portrayal of the extreme humiliation of Jesus,"⁷⁷ and that it depicts "Rome's terror apparatus, designed especially to punish criminals and quash slave rebellions in the most painful, protracted, and public manner possible as a warning against rebellion."⁷⁸

Luke, however, quickly passes over the physical pain and torture of Jesus.⁷⁹ Rather, he focuses on the various attempts made to humiliate and dishonour Jesus. Luke divides the scene on the cross into two units. The first unit, vv.33-38, which will be considered here, records the continued mocking of Jesus.⁸⁰ It parallels the accounts in Matthew and Mark. The second unit (vv. 39-43) relates to Jesus's exchange with the thief and is only found in Luke.

Throughout the first unit, Luke highlights the dishonor of Jesus by featuring language that implicitly references Hebrew Bible passages related to dishonor.⁸¹ The-

⁷¹ For details regarding the manuscripts that contain the verse and those that do not, see, FITZMEYER, 1985, p. 1.503.

⁷² For a listing of proponents and opponents of the inclusion of the verse, see, EUBANK, Nathan. A Disconcerting Prayer: On the Originality of Luke 23:34a. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, v. 129, n. 3, p. 521-536, 2010. p. 521.

⁷³ See, e.g., Acts 3:17, 7:25, 13:27

⁷⁴ DANKER, Frederick W. *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988. p. 373; JOHNSON, Luke Timothy. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991. p. 376.

⁷⁵ E.g., baptism (3:12), choosing the twelve (6:12), before Peter's confession and the first announcement of the passion (9:18), at his transfiguration (9:28), before he teaches the "Our Father" prayer (11:2), at the Last Supper (to strengthen Peter's faith) (22:32), during his agony on the Mount of Olives (22:41), and on the cross itself (23:46).

⁷⁶ FITZMEYER, Joseph A. *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981. p. 244-245.

⁷⁷ PARSONS, Mikeal C. *Luke (Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015. p. 337, sidebar.

⁷⁸ EDWARDS, James R. *The Gospel According to Luke*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015. p. 275.

⁷⁹ The emphasis on Jesus's suffering and torture became prominent during the middle ages with the rise of "affective piety." See, FULTON, Rachel. *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

⁸⁰ PARSONS, 2015, p. 336.

⁸¹ PARSONS, 2015, p. 336-337.

se include Isaiah 53:12 (“Therefore, I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”), Psalm 22:18 (“They divide up my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots”), Psalm 22:7 (“All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads”), and Psalm 69:21 (“They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.”). All the Hebrew Bible passages alluded to in the first unit emphasize the experience of humiliation, mocking, and shame.

Within both units, three groups of mockers and three groups of non-mockers are noted in juxtaposition. The leaders of the Jews mock Jesus, and refer to him as God’s Messiah, but the crowd remains silent and not mocking. The soldiers mock Jesus, and refer to him as King of the Jews, but one soldier does not mock and realizes Jesus was righteous. One bandit mocks Jesus, disparagingly referring to him as the Messiah, and one bandit responds to Jesus acknowledging his messianic reign.⁸² It is clear that Jesus’s humiliation is important to Luke’s depiction. It is also clear that Luke is creating exemplars. Jesus suffers dishonour, but is, in fact, behaves with courage, dignity and honor; he is, in fact, the rightful bearer of the titles of honor assigned him. The others in the scene are those who appear to possess honor, but who behave with dishonor, since they fail to recognize that Jesus is God’s honoured King and the Messiah. Jesus will be honoured by God, and the various unbelieving others will be dishonoured by God.

This passage points to the “ignorance motif” that forms part of Luke’s theological emphasis.⁸³ Luke makes clear that Jesus endures humiliation and dishonor at the hands of elites, but also makes clear that these persecutors had political awareness, but not cosmic awareness of the significance of their deeds.⁸⁴ Ellis concludes that, for early Christians, prior to being exposed to the reality of who Jesus is, one’s unbelief was excused. However, “persistent, or ‘fixed’ ignorance is a particularly damnable quality.”⁸⁵

Links to Jesus’s Martyrdom

Though Luke 23:34 is unlikely to have been part of the original manuscript, it is a martyr narrative that shapes and is shaped by the meta-narrative of the first century experience of oppression. It is not inappropriate, therefore, to consider it as true to the Lukan narrative.

As has been shown, the text itself emphasizes, through intertextual allusion and various parties disparagement of Jesus, not death or physical torture, but humiliation and dishonor. Exegesis which emphasizes the suffering and torture of the cross,

⁸² JOHNSON, 1991, p. 380.

⁸³ DANKER, 1988, p. 374; ELLIS, E. Earl. *The Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wipf and Stock, 1983. p. 267; FITZMEYER, 1985, p. 1.503.

⁸⁴ EDWARDS, 2015, p. 688.

⁸⁵ ELLIS, 1983, p. 268, also see, p. 16-18.

does so despite the lack of such a depiction within the Gospel of Luke. Luke could easily be read as deemphasizing the physicality of the crucifixion in favour of an emphasis on dishonor and humiliation.

After Jesus is arrested, the men holding Jesus are depicted as “mocking and beating” him (22:63). When Jesus is taken before the authorities, he is not physically assaulted. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod. Herod and his soldiers, “treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him” (23:11) and returned Jesus to Pilate. Pilate, reluctant to crucify Jesus, suggests that Jesus simply be whipped (23:16), but his suggestion is rebuffed. Pilate reasons further with the accusers, suggesting again that Jesus be whipped (23:22), and is again rebuffed. Pilate then gives in to the demands of the people to have Jesus crucified. Jesus is never whipped in Luke’s account. As Jesus was led away to be crucified, Simon the Cyrenian is impressed, “and they laid the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.” (23:26) Thus, Jesus did not endure the physical burden of actually bearing the cross to the site of crucifixion.⁸⁶ About the act of crucifixion Luke tells us only, “[w]hen they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals.” (23:33) He adds *no details* of the physical or procedural elements of the act of crucifixion. What Luke does provide, however, are the details of the degradation that Jesus endured. Luke tells us that “the leaders scoffed at him,” (23:35) and describes how; that the “soldiers also mocked him,” (23:36) and describes how; that one of the criminals “kept deriding him,” (23:39) and then describes how.

Throughout the crucifixion process, Luke presents a composed and in control Jesus. As he walks to the site of the hanging, unencumbered by the cross, Jesus makes a long statement advising those mourning him to instead mourn for themselves.⁸⁷ While he is on the cross, Luke’s Jesus makes three statements. First, there is his prayer of forgiveness for his accusers (23:34), second, Jesus gives assurance to the thief hanging beside him of entry to paradise (23:43), and third, Jesus commits his spirit to the Father (23:46). After yelling this last utterance, “he breathed his last.” (23:46) Luke does not even tell us that Jesus “died.”

What we glean from Luke’s description is that Jesus’s humiliation and dishonor was key to Jesus’s story and identity. Further, that during this entire ordeal, Jesus retained his dignity and composure. He was in control of himself, even when his body was in the control of others. Jesus could retain control because of his confidence in God.

The most telling cue that we have of Luke’s intent to move the focus of the crucifixion narrative from dishonor to that of valor, is in the framing of the last words

⁸⁶ This is quite remarkable considering that Luke’s Jesus twice comments during his ministry that anyone unwilling to bear their own cross and follow him cannot be his disciple (Luke 9:23-24, 14:27).

⁸⁷ See, Luke 23. 27-31: ²⁷ A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. ²⁸ But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ ³⁰ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ ³¹ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

of Jesus as not within the experience of suffering or dishonor. By silently deleting⁸⁸ from Mark's account Jesus's cry of dereliction ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"),⁸⁹ Luke portrays Jesus's last words as those of commitment of his spirit to God. This is, on its face, a less gloomy presentation of Jesus's state of mind. Yet it also speaks to Luke's shift away from the Hebrew Bible's reference alluded to by the utterance of forsakenness. The cry of forsakenness alludes to Psalm 22:1,⁹⁰ which details the psalmist's disgrace at great length, before turning to the psalmist's trust that Lord will deliver the psalmist. Instead of making an allusion to profound humiliation, Luke's Jesus commits his spirit, which alludes to Psalm 31:5 (30:6 LXX)⁹¹. This psalm emphasizes deep trust in *God's redemption from shame and disgrace*, rather than the humiliation itself, as in Psalm 22. Luke's Jesus even at the end, as he has been throughout his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, is confident and in command.

When Jesus prays that his persecutors will be forgiven, therefore, his statement is not framed here as being rooted in love for his enemies. The statement is not about Jesus's enemies. Rather, the prayer reveals Jesus to the reader. What is revealed is not merely that Jesus had a concern for others in his darkest hour of pain and torture. The text is not concerned with the pain and torture of the cross. What the prayer reveals of Jesus, instead, is Jesus's sense of self, his sense of personal empowerment. Jesus prays for his persecutors, as an indication that he remains in control and is not personally diminished by the persecutors' attempts to diminish him.

Closing Remarks

Jesus is the idealized martyr prototype. As Moss demonstrated, Luke's portrayal of Stephen, the first martyr of the church, is mimetic of the Jesus prototype. The reciprocal narrative shaping is clear. What is also clear is that the narrative shaping of the first century is not intended to emphasize the suffering and persecution of Jesus and Jesus-followers for the sake of suffering. The violence and persecution that Moss decries as not normative is included in the first century narratives to highlight the narrative emphasis on Jesus and the martyrs' assertion of dignity and honor in the face of material conditions and a culture that sought to thoroughly dishonor them. The violence of the acts of the martyrs that Recla deems neutralized by the tradition, is in fact intended to express the violence of authentic-self-making that he identifies. The martyrs act violently in transgression of authority in pursuit of their authentic, honored, dignified, selves. An answer is suggested to Recla's unanswered question, of whether the death of the martyr was an end in itself, independent of social function. The death was an end in itself, but it also served a social function. The death extracted honor for the martyr and the Christian community, from the culture. They claimed for

⁸⁸ HAYS, Richard B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016. p. 235.

⁸⁹ See, Matthew 26:46 and Mark 15:34.

⁹⁰ HAYS, 2016, p. 235; PARSONS, 2015, p. 335-336.

⁹¹ HAYS, 2016, p. 235.

Jesus-followers that which the culture had adamantly denied them as Christian while they were alive.

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