

Candida R. Moss. *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012. 256 pages. \$40.

The book, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, offers readers a unique view into the complex experience of martyrdom. Biblical scholars, church, and social cultural historians will find this work appealing and engaging. In chapter one the author focuses on cultural aspects associated with the Christian era of martyrdom. She highlights the oftentimes assumed “notion that Christianity invented martyrdom” (23), but posits historical evidence that reveals pre-Christian origins of martyrdom. In reality, the Maccabees practiced martyrdom, and some Roman pagans did too; all of which, she makes clear, predated Christianity.

Still, differing opinions persist relative to the exact dating of this phenomenon. The uniqueness of the arguments for Christian martyrdom appears to be linked to the cultural codification of the practice itself. The multi-layered practices and traditions provide a thorough look into the complex world of sacrificial dying for a noble cause. Also, in chapter one, the author invites readers to consider the questions: What is it about the concept of “the good death and the self-conscious sufferer”? Are there other ways of dying that are analogous in value and meaning? Linguistically, these questions identify death (martyrdom) in a religious context. Another question raised: Is this a distinctively Christian cultural event? The author suggests that the cultural intricacies of martyrdom are woven into the social and political fabric of society where these ideas were born; and simply, or profoundly stated, the author shows that the practice of ancient Christian martyrdom did not occur in a vacuum devoid of the theological, but in the social and cultural traditions of its time.

In chapter 2, *Asia Minor: Imitating Christ* shows the significance the author places on geographical location and the culture of early Christian martyrdom. Moss splendidly provides a chronological link between the early Apostles and early Church writers when she cites biblical text, and letters from Ignatius, Eusebius, and Polycarp. She gives an interesting perspective to the caricature of persecution, when she states “only the imperially organized active discrimination that ends in death can be properly termed persecution” (50), clarifying the fact that the followers of Christ viewed suffering as a meritorious event.

Through the letters of Paul, Peter, and early Church martyrs such as Polycarp and Ignatius among others, Moss says that suffering was to be positively identified with Christ and his sacrificial death. This kind of “imitation” was, according to Moss, an attempt to theologize violence, from the “beginnings of the Christian mission in Asia Minor” (52). Her argument is credible, but will encounter detractions by those who are troubled with the concept of theologized violence associated with sacrificial dying—martyrdom.

Chapter 3, the *Philosophical Martyr*, continues to engage with the larger narrative of Christianity’s political and cultural connection to the Greco Roman idea of Socratic philosophical pedagogy: “When we turn to Rome and to the writings and martyrdom traditions associated with Justin Martyr, it becomes clear that many in Rome framed their understanding of Christian martyrdom with the tradition of the philosophical noble death and doused their heroic subjects with an air of self-possessed clarity” (79). Moss’ effectiveness here lies in the idea that the shift from the early apostolic events in Acts was primarily a philosophical shift in the way Christianity was articulated in the Greco Roman Hellenistic world.

Everyone who reads Moss’ analyses and parallels between Gallic Christianity in chapters 5 and 6 should find it insightful and thoughtful. Her connection between Gallic Christianity and the history of Christianity in North Africa to apostolic origins is enlightening. She describes in

Histories of Christianity how “Gaul has been cast as the impoverished offspring of Asiatic Christianity” (102). The link to be made is the role of persecution and the spread of the likeminded practice of martyrdom “when we read the sources carefully however, we see that the literature contains distinctive thematic elements” (102). Moss’ insertion of letters from the Churches of Vienne and Lyons reveal a distinctive pattern of persecution in these regions. Moss is careful, however, not to pinpoint a date for the arrival of Christianity in Africa, though there is little doubt regarding Roman influence on North Africa due to “logical deduction from trade activity in the region.” Moss’ work will contribute greatly to the ongoing study of cultural customs related to social and religious practices of martyrdom.

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