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Blood Sacrifice: The Connection Between Roman Death Rituals and Christian Martyrdom

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Blood Sacrifice:
The Connection Between Roman Death Rituals and Christian Martyrdom

by

Dawne Kennedy

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Abstract

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have done some incredible work on the subject of martyrdom, but the story is far from complete, particularly in terms of how and why it was so similar to the Roman concept of public deaths. The primary sources include the surviving Christian martyrologies, Greco-Roman philosophical treatises, and Roman, Christian, and Jewish histories. Martyrdom itself was a tool of assimilation that somehow bridged the communities of the empire together. There is a huge body of information in a variety of genres that contribute to this project. But there exists a hole in the combined scholarship that my research will fill. Although I am building on important studies that have already been completed, my research on martyrs will support the idea that there was indeed a relationship, if not a direct link, to the main query in my thesis, thus adding to the dialogue of these respected scholars. Through the use of the writings of the early Church fathers, like Tertullian and Ignatius, and Roman and Jewish historians, such as Tacitus, Livy, and Josephus, I am able to provide the history and context of what was happening to and around these martyrs and how it was connected to Roman death rituals. There is a whole socio-political angle that must be applied to the events being discussed. This project combines interdisciplinary research in history, religion, and languages, both Latin and Greek. Most of the primary sources do have an English translation, but in order to trace the etymology of specific words and phrases, it is best to compare the original document against my translations. The linguistic context is of the utmost importance in understanding the authors' intentions. My research is not only significant to my discipline, but has far reaching implications on our modern society, which is based on the governments, philosophies, and religions flourishing during this time period.

Keywords: Roman death, martyr, martyrdom, decimation, spectacles, suicide, honor, shame.

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Introduction

Martyrdom in the early Christian era represents a direct extension of Roman death and purification rituals. Dying for a specific - and usually honorable – purpose, in the honor-shame society of the Roman Empire led to a new culture, religion, and imperial dynamic. There exists a substantial body of scholarship on death in ancient Rome and Christian martyrdom. Historians, however, usually choose one topic over the other, rarely combining them, except when describing martyr accounts that happened under imperial or provincial edict. Scholars’ separation of Roman death rituals and Christian martyrdom has created a veil of misunderstanding that obfuscates a foundational element in Roman and, by extension, early Christian *ethos*, and a cultural phenomenon that, in no small part, and from the ground up, helped to define both. Seeing the two together, though, it is clear that Romans’ use of death as a purification ritual represents a significant cultural and ideological influence in the evolving understanding of martyrdom in a specifically Christian context. To fully understand the origins of my research on the connection between Roman death practices and Christian martyrdom, the ancient Mediterranean cultures, holistically and individually, of the Romans, Christians, and Jews, must be explored – their *ethos* and beliefs, societal structure and philosophies. These cultures, while separate to a certain extent, were under the dominion of the Roman Empire and part of a wider Mediterranean “culture continent” during the advent of Christianity; thus, the acts and deeds of martyrs affected the collective consciousness and reactions of each group.¹ Within these contexts the bridge between the early martyrs’ desire for sanctification through suffering and death and the Romans’ use of blood and

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 3 – 4.

death as a regenerative tool for the gods, the *patria* (homeland), and the *gens* (tribe or family) will become clear.

The Romans were a chthonic people, their lives inextricably connected to the land through the never-ending cycle of fertility, blood, and death – figuratively, literally, and spiritually. These ancient peoples placed the utmost importance on interpersonal relationships, and their responsibilities to *gens* (family) and *patria* (homeland). The connection between the relationships and duties of Roman life fully merged with their attitudes toward death. From where did these beliefs arise?

Death was a public affair, one that should bring honor to the dying and those who survived them. Death was a spectacle, a means of entertainment or a ritual to appease the gods or emperor. Death was a punishment resulting from poor performance or cowardice in battle. Death could be an order of execution. Death could be chosen or it could be forced upon you. In the spilling of blood, the gods were fed. In the spilling of blood, the dying were purified – made ready to be received by their ancestors. In the spilling of blood, honor could be restored or shame avoided.

To most modern societies, bloodletting equates with barbarism. Violent executions, blood feuds, and even the ritual sacrifice of humans and animals have been relegated to the past for most cultures, but to the ancient Romans, the spilling of blood was protective and life giving. It promised longevity and created a new beginning. The spilling of blood was the purifying aspect of death rituals. When we think of the Christian martyrs of the early church, it should be remembered that these people were occupants, and many times full citizens, of the Roman Empire. As such, the Roman ways of life and death were ingrained in their culture, even as the Christians sought to

distinguish themselves from Judaism and polytheism. As Christianity grew, so did the tensions between the Christians' doctrinal beliefs and their obligations to the empire. Most Christians chose not to continue to participate in imperial cult worship, which was a state responsibility, but rather succumbed to martyrdom. The connection between Christian martyrdom and Roman death practices may seem tenuous on the surface, but based on writings of early church figures, such as Tertullian or Ignatius, the martyrs had far more in common with the authority that condemned them than most imagine.

The Romans viewed purposeful death as a purifying, salvific, and regenerative agent. For them, a good death was an honorific charge; how one died was as important as how one lived. The honorable clean, or noble death most often employed the use of daggers, knives, and swords. Thus, bloodletting, from the Roman perspective, was believed to be a safeguard for the family or the empire. It was death to ensure life.² On the surface, Christians disagreed with the premise of voluntary deaths (whether through spectacle, decimation, or suicide), death to assuage the gods or emperor, or ritualistic deaths that promoted pagan ideals. But the early Christians took the concept of death as purification and made it their own through martyrdom. Christian martyrs embraced voluntary death at the hands of opposing authorities and viewed it as an emulation of Christ through suffering. By the blood of Jesus, Christians believed they were saved. By the spilling of their own blood, they believed they were purified and made ready for the kingdom of God, just as Ignatius believed when he was remanded to Rome for his own voluntary martyrdom. The Christians, like the Romans before them, were dying to ensure life.

² Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 3.

The Roman province of Judaea was the Jewish homeland and the birthplace of Christianity. As part of the empire, the inhabitants of any conquered lands were expected to participate in imperial cult worship as a sign of obedience to the emperor. It is mentioned here only to lay the geographical foundation of Christianity to introduce the tensions between the Romans, Jews, and Christians that led to martyrdom. In the following sections, the topics of death and religion will be explored from the views of both Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions. Under these headings, analysis of primary sources will assist in presenting a cohesive picture of the martyrs' role in the establishment of a Christian empire through the inherited – and very Roman – understanding of death with a purpose.

Literature Review

I have separated my research into a variety of categories, which will be detailed in the methodology section. For the purpose of the literature review, I will divide my sources into Roman and Christian sections. At the end of my research, I will have bridged the information into one collection that will have provided evidence to support my assertion that Christian martyrdom, up until the third century, was a direct extension of ancient Roman death rituals.

First, we need to look at the Roman *ethos* concerning the connection of blood and death rituals. In *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power*, Alison Futrell investigates the beginnings of spectacle in Rome and her outlying provinces, the role of the amphitheatre in the spiritual and political worlds, and the ideology of human sacrifice. She surmises that it was the *munus* (duty) of the heirs of the deceased to ease

the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Thus, during the gladiatorial games or spectacles where blood was spilt, it was to ensure the continuity of the community: “Death to ensure life, bloodshed to guarantee safety.”³ Futrell examines the meaning of blood in the amphitheater – what it meant for the state, the emperor, and the individual, and how the arena represented a microcosm of the empire itself. The essence of blood shed there nourished the gods and placated their anger toward humankind or was a petition to the gods. Death in the arena stood as a type of sympathetic and symbolic magic that purified the empire (and/or the individual), preparing it for regeneration.

Where Futrell examines blood sacrifice in the arena, Keith Hopkins explores death and social renewal in Rome in *Death and Renewal: Sociological Studies in Roman History (Volume 2)*. Hopkins’ treatment of the death customs and funerary rituals in ancient Rome is exhaustive. He relies on Roman historians like Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Polybius to provide accounts of the murderous games, decimation, and public executions and how they each connected to Rome’s warrior ethos. Decimation, while mentioned only a few times in the histories, best illustrates Rome’s martial preoccupations and the importance they placed on victory on the battlefield. Roman soldiers were highly trained and highly disciplined. To lose in battle or show cowardice was to invite death by decimation. In cases such as these, lots were drawn in the disgraced cohort and every tenth man was bludgeoned to death by the nine before him, hence the name “decimation.”⁴ Romans set up battlefields in the middle of their cities to

³ Alison Futrell, *Blood in the Arena: The Spectacle of Roman Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 3.

⁴ Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal: Sociological Studies in Roman History (Vol 2)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

recreate significant battles, like Ecnomus and Zama – Rome’s greatest victories during the Punic Wars with Carthage, for public entertainment. Public spectacles involved criminals and gladiators fighting to the death on these fields, and in the amphitheaters. The gladiatorial events originated as a component of funeral games in 264/3 BCE at the funerary rites of Decimus Junius Brutus Pera, and with each following *munus* the number of gladiators employed in the rites increased, their numbers only limited by the family of the deceased’s resources. These funerary games soon transitioned into the full-blown gladiatorial spectacles of the high empire. Hopkins recounts Seneca’s report of one such particular event. “In the morning men are thrown to lions and bears. At mid-day they are thrown to the spectators themselves. No sooner has a man killed, than they shout for him to kill another, or to be killed. The final victor is kept for some other slaughter. In the end, every fighter dies.”⁵

Another perspective on Roman death rituals comes from Valerie Hope’s *Death in Ancient Rome*. Hope’s book scrutinizes the personal aspect of death from grief to burial to beliefs in the afterlife. Hope understands how alien Roman death seems to the majority of the modern world given its element of spectacle and dramatic effects.⁶ Roman death customs give the impression that how one died was as sublimely important as how one lived, sometimes more. The reason for this is that ancient Mediterranean societies were honor-shame cultures. Honor was everything. To attain honor was to attain power and resources. Honor was the privilege of the wealthy. A shameful death would affect one’s afterlife in that the deceased would not be allowed to join the *Di Manes* (or ancestors). If one’s death were honorable or noble, his or her passage to the

⁵ Seneca, Letter 7.2, quoted in Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal: Sociological Studies in Roman History (Vol 2)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3.

⁶ Valerie Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 10.

afterlife would be eased. Consider then the connection of blood sacrifice in the form of funeral games to an honorable death, and how the blood was the conduit of purification that carried the soul from one world to the next, and the memory of the deceased would join the cult of the ancestors. This is evident in the near constant propitiation of the *Di Manes* for their attention and protection as we see in Roman death masks and tomb inscriptions.

In her book, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones*, Carlin Barton theorizes that honor and shame are dependent on the same emotions and engaged in a balancing act. “The socializing or integrating emotions of shame were those countervailing emotions that *could* be indulged or rectified; they could be satisfied, made right.”⁷ In an honor-shame society, it was the ultimate sin to be judged lacking – in honor, having experienced the loss of status, or having been associated with shameful acts or behaviors – and oftentimes, suicide was the only honorable method of reparation.

According to Franz Cumont, the belief in the existence of an afterlife drove the activities of man to be aimed “at less tangible realities, ensuring well-being to the family or the city or the state, and more at attaining to the fulfillment of ideal hopes in a supernatural world.”⁸ Cumont described the spiritual activity to and from the netherworld. Much of the activity (i.e., communication with the living) depended on funerary practices and burial rituals. Dying well required certain customs and considerations or at least behavior that was expected; a good death would inspire funerary art – such as death masks and intricate carvings on sarcophagi – and

⁷ Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 200.

⁸ Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 2.

remembrance in literature, as contained in extant histories. The dying had conversations with friends, relatives, or troops that sometimes lasted hours. Last words were penned. Instructions were given to the bereaved on how to go on living. Burial was an important factor for the deceased's ability to reach the desired area of the afterlife. It was the responsibility of the living to treat the dead with respect, give the dead a proper burial, and to continue to honor and remember the dead.⁹

Using these collective sources, I will paint the backdrop of Roman death customs – from spectacles and decimation to the voluntary deaths of those who committed suicide. The following sources will construct the foundation of Christian martyrdom.

In his book *Martyrdom and Rome*, G.W. Bowersock investigates the beginnings of Christian martyrdom. Martyr (*martyros*), in Greek, means “witness.” So how did the context of the word come to mean something akin to dying for one's beliefs? Bowersock contends that the shift in meaning happened during second-century Christian literature.¹⁰ In the text, the author compares martyr accounts from the early Church against the backdrop of Greco-Roman and even Judaic philosophies. By doing this, he concludes that a portion of Christian martyrs were, by definition, voluntary suicides. Many early Church fathers agree with him. The importance of his work to my project does not stem from an agreement with his methodology or conclusions, but from his comprehensive look into the world of martyrs. To undertake this project, it is essential for me to have a fundamental understanding of martyrdom. Bowersock has gathered an excellent

⁹ Dawne Kennedy, “*Mors Voluntaria* – Voluntary Death: The Role of Suicide in the Honor-Shame Society of Ancient Rome (paper presented at the University of Southern Mississippi Undergraduate Research Conference, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, April 20, 2013).

¹⁰ G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom & Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

collection of sources of which I am able to analyze and, thereafter, arrive at my own conclusions.

An author who presents a slanted view on Christian martyrdom in the Empire is Candida Moss. In her book *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, Moss suggests that sustained, targeted persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire simply did not occur. Most of the martyrs went voluntarily, and of their own accord, to death. Both she and Bowersock say this is too close to suicide to be considered an actual martyrdom. Still, that is not her main premise. She suggests that surviving martyr accounts were exaggerated or works of fiction. In addition to that claim, she posits that Christians were not targeted as a group over long extended periods of time, and certainly not in all areas of the empire.¹¹ Moss's approach to martyrdom as voluntary death lends support to my theory that Christian martyrs had a link to Roman death rituals.

In *Pagans and Christians*, Robin Lane Fox delivers an expansive history of martyrdom through his use of primary sources. As governor of Bythunia in c. 110 CE, Pliny the Younger wrote to the emperor Trajan on the problem of Christians. Trajan's response was that nothing should be done to seek Christians out, but if they were accused of sedition or refused participation in the imperial cult, then they were due a fair trial before sentencing. This account does not echo the rampant persecution of which the Romans have been accused. Christians were executed, but not to the extent we have been led to believe. Just as many pagans, Jews, and assorted others – including women – were executed in the same way that Christians were. In essence, the Romans executed anyone,

¹¹ Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013).

not just Christians, who refused to participate in rituals for the safety of the emperor and empire. By their actions, such individuals declared themselves to be enemies of the state.

To understand martyrdom in a Christian context, one must also look at its parent religion, since Christianity began as a reform movement within Judaism. Daniel Boyarin uses martyrdom to explain the convergence of early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. In *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Boyarin states that Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultural elements combine to create martyrdom that lasted until the beginning of Late Antiquity.¹² Boyarin investigates early Christianity along with nascent rabbinic Judaism. This is one of the most important works in this field since it provides a more complete understanding to the foundation of the two religions emerging in the first century. Additionally, he traces the significance of the growing trend of voluntary deaths in imperial Rome, not only of Christians, but also of the Jews. Given that Jews were a significant presence of the Roman Empire, exploring the characteristics of only Roman pagans and Christians would leave part of the story untold.

One particularly useful source on Judaism is Shaye J.D. Cohen's *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*. Cohen provides a clear history of Judaism to the rabbinic period, and by extension, early Christianity. Cohen's work will provide the foundation for Judaism in my research. A firm understanding of Jewish culture, thought, and practice from the Second Temple into the rabbinic period is necessary to my research because of Christianity's inextricable relationship to its parent religion. Cohen states that during the war of 66 – 70 CE, the Romans were responsible for the annihilation or

¹² Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 118.

weakening of a number of Jewish sects.¹³ With the zealot groups gone, or at least made inconsequential, and the Temple in ruins, the Pharisees remained. Rabbinic Judaism grew out of this group. Pauline Christianity sprang forth from rabbinic Judaism. It is from these groups that martyrs were born.

Combining these sources of Roman and Jewish histories and Christian martyr accounts, along with a large body of primary sources, will have a profound effect on this project. Each contains a piece of evidence that points to the fact that Christian martyrdom – whether deemed real or myth – stems directly from Roman death rituals through blood sacrifice.

Summary, Analysis, and Methodology

My research will entail a close reading of the primary sources and analyzing secondary sources in the scholarship surrounding my project. The primary sources include the surviving Christian martyrologies (1st – 4th centuries CE), Greco-Roman philosophical treatises, and Roman, Christian, and Jewish histories. This project falls under the banner of social history, but because my evidence is largely text-based, I will be working within the confines of intellectual history, despite the fact that I understand my project to be contributing to a greater understanding of social identity among Romans and Christians in the first four centuries of the common era.

Two distinct paths of scholarship must be followed in order to piece together this project: I must investigate Roman death rituals and Christian martyrdom, each on their own terms and then try to understand them collectively. This will necessarily entail

¹³ Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 218.

taking a close look at communities of the Jews, Greeks, Romans, and Christians within the empire. The key will be to tie them together under the overarching theme of blood sacrifices and the use of death as a purification ritual, and the early Christian martyrs. Martyrdom itself was a tool of assimilation that somehow bridged the communities of the empire together.

There is a huge body of information in a variety of genres that contribute to this project. But there is a hole in the scholarship that my research will fill. Although I am building on important studies that have already been completed, my focus on Roman death customs and martyrs will support the idea that there was indeed a relationship, if not a direct link.

SECTION 1

The Roman Concept of Public Death and the Afterlife

*“Deficit omne quod nascitur.”*¹⁴
Quintilian, *Instituto Oratoria*, V.lxxix (c. 95 CE)
“Everything that is born passes away.”

Public Deaths

Death comes for everyone. In the Roman Empire, death represented more than just the termination of human biology. Dying was as much a part of living as breathing. The Roman world was a brutal one. Blood and death were fixtures of Roman society, particularly before the advent of medicine, before people discovered the connection between good health and hygiene, nutrition, and sanitary conditions. But despite the constant specter of death that imbued Roman society, to them, the spilling of blood was protective and life-giving. It promised longevity and created new beginnings. The spilling of blood was the purifying aspect of death rituals, including both animal and human. A good death was an honorific charge. How one died was as important as how one lived.

Unlike in the modern world, where death maintains a thin wall that separates it from the daily experience of most people, some exceptions withstanding, Roman death was integrated into everyday life – most commonly that of low infant mortality, old age, murder, disease, and accidents. But the deaths we will be exploring in this paper were just as anticipated during the Republican and Imperial ages. These deaths occurred in the arena – the ones for criminal punishment and spectacular entertainment; the ones on military campaigns were meted out as a warning or, again, punishment, for poor battle

¹⁴ Quintilian, *Instituto Oratoria* V.LXXIX,
<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/quintilian/quintilian.institutio5.shtml>, accessed August 2014.

performance, desertion, or cowardice on the battlefield; and they were the ones who chose the *mors voluntaria*, the voluntary death, or were forced to commit suicide. For the purpose of this section, I will define such deaths as “public deaths.” This is an apt description, given that most of these were certainly played out in public arenas or in front of cohorts on campaign. Suicides also had public elements to them – they were overseen by a select group or effectively planned for public opinion. Most public deaths had an individual, community, or empire-wide function, and the purposive death originally most often employed the use of daggers, knives, and swords, and later added elements of drama that included wild animals and theatrical productions that ended in death. To better understand the rationale of Roman deaths in a societal and cultural context, and how they directly relate to the thesis of this project, we will survey these public deaths, bloodletting as a purifying agent for the individual and the empire, and the Roman concepts of death and the afterlife.

The Origins of the *munus* and *ludi funebres*

The Roman historian, Livy (59 BCE – 17 CE), wrote that the first gladiatorial combat began as a component of funeral games in 264 BCE.¹⁵ Decius Junius Brutus, a former Roman consul, held funerary rites for his father in which three pairs of gladiators fought for the entertainment of the mourners. Although there is some debate over the status and identity of the *gens* (tribe or clan sharing a common name) – *this gens* Junii is sometimes associated with L. Junius Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic – the historicity of the *ludi funebres* (funeral games) is attested more than once (cf. Valerius

¹⁵ Titus Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita Liber XVI Periocha*, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy/liv.per16.shtml>, accessed August 2014.

Maximus 2.4.7; Servius, *ad Aenid* 3.67).¹⁶ Nevertheless, the origins of the *munera* (duty or gift) are often debated. Some scholars tie the gladiatorial games back to the Campanians, from south-central Italy, in the third and fourth centuries BCE, citing sources (cf. Livy 9.40.17, Strabo 5.4.13, and Silius Italicus, *Pun.* 11.51-54) that mention armed combat at banquets, in which the participants competed for prizes, but only fought until first bloodshed, that is, if the host did not interfere.¹⁷ Another theory on the origins of gladiatorial combat is that it can be traced to the Etruscans, the Italic peoples from the northeastern section of Italy. Most of the evidence for the Etruscans is material: wall paintings on Etruscan tombs. In his *Deipnosophistae* (“Dinner of the Sophist”), Athenaeus of Naucratis (c. 2nd/3rd century CE) quoted Nicolaus of Damascus (b. c. 64 BCE) who claimed, “The Romans staged spectacles of fighting gladiators not merely at their festivals and in their theatres, borrowing the custom from the Etruscans, but also at their banquets.”¹⁸ Athenaeus describes the banquets and dining habits, mimicking the style of a Platonic dialogue, that twenty-four guests provide, but does not reveal the social, political, or religious components of the gladiatorial components of these events. The facts remain, though, that from wherever these games originated – Campanian or Etruscan, or even Celtic or Greek as Athenaeus also suggested – the Romans did in fact incorporate these gladiatorial games into Roman society even if they themselves did not know the origins of the practice they adopted.

¹⁶ Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal: Sociological Studies in Roman History 2* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.

¹⁷ Nic Fields, *Spartacus and the Slave War 73 – 71 BC: A Gladiator Rebels Against Rome* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2009), 22; Katherine E. Welch, *The Roman Amphitheatre: From its Origins to the Colosseum* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17.

¹⁸ Athenaeus, “*Deipnosophistae*,” 4.153, in Loeb Classical Library, Trans by Charles Burton Gulick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Athenaeus/4C*.html, accessed Sept 2014.

How did gladiatorial combat then transition from entertainment to deadly matches during funerary rites and then back to entertainment? Looking at Greco-Roman literary tradition, Homer wrote in *The Iliad* of Achilles' sponsorship of funeral games for Patroclus, which did, indeed, include combat, but not to the point of death. The sacrificial blood, however, came from animals and "twelve brave sons of the proud Trojans," who were "hacked to pieces with his bronze" and then offered on a funeral pyre.¹⁹ In Appian's *Civil Wars*, Spartacus "sacrificed 300 Roman prisoners to the shade [spirit/ghost] of Crixus," after Crixus was killed while being pursued by two Roman legions.²⁰ Human sacrifice in most every ancient society's religious and funerary rituals is supported through literary and archaeological records. Since there are references to human immolation made during religious rites, such as the Jupiter Latiaris (cf. Tatian's *Oratio ad Graecos XXIX*; Tertullian's *Apology IX*), some revisionists attempt to distance Rome from such barbaric practices, claiming foreign influence (in the ancient sense) and the brutality of later arena combat, do not quite ring true.

It remains for us to examine the "spectacle" most noted of all, and in highest favour. It is called a dutiful service (*munus*), from its being an office, for it bears the name of "*officium*" as well as "*munus*." The ancients thought that in this solemnity they rendered offices to the dead; at a later period, with a cruelty more refined, they somewhat modified its character. For formerly, in the belief that the souls of the departed were appeased by human blood, they were in the habit of buying captives or slaves of wicked disposition, and immolating them in their funeral obsequies. Afterwards they thought good to throw the veil of pleasure over their iniquity. Those, therefore, whom they had provided for the combat, and then trained in arms as best they could, only that they might learn to die, they, on the funeral day, killed at the places of sepulture. They alleviated death by murders. Such is the origin of the "*munus*."²¹

¹⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 23: 200 – 209, Trans by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1990), 565.

²⁰ Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.117, Trans by John Carter (New York: Penguin, 1996), 65; http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/Civil_Wars/1*.html, accessed August 2014.

²¹ Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, XII, http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/anf03-09.htm#P937_380057, accessed January 2014.

Bloodletting through sacrifice appeased angry gods for a community in crisis, as well as for the observation of somber funeral rituals. But, Alison Futrell cites Servius (*ad Aeneid* 10.519) as a less biased source – less biased than the Christian apologist Tertullian, that is – who claimed the Romans were developing an awareness of *crudelitas* (cruelty, severity), thereby creating a distance between the idea of human sacrifice and public bloodletting in the more acceptable guise of gladiatorial combat.²²

While Futrell’s statement has more to do with the shift of Roman perception on human sacrifice than the current trend of modern scholars (cf. Georges Ville and Paul Veyne) to create an agonistic *munera gladiatorium* rather than sacrificial, the mythological root of the *munus* should not be discounted. Consider the blood shed in the mythological making of Roma herself. Consider the blood of captives, slaves, and gladiators that was shed at the tombs to propitiate the recently deceased’s journey into the afterlife. Consider the blood that was shed in rituals to appease the gods, or petition them for safety or victory. These acts of bloodshed are the very heart of the *munera*, seeding the empire, society, *gens*, and *religio* of the Roman people. But the blood, of course, was the key. The blood shed through these rituals allowed for the continuation of the deceased’s existence in the afterlife, for the continuation of Rome, and by extension, the empire, and to show obeisance and nurture the relationships between gods and men. “The shedding of human blood must be purposive, and the strong historical identification with the needs of the state and with *pietas* fosters the identity between *munera* and sacrifice, enough to overcome a more recent distaste for ‘human sacrifice for its own sake’.”²³

²² Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 205.

²³ Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 206 – 207.

Not all scholars agree with this theory. Some, like Thomas Wiedemann, consider that for a sacrifice to be true, the victim must be willing, and since gladiators strove to win, the combat cannot be considered true sacrifice.²⁴ I disagree with Wiedemann for two reasons. The first is based on a passage of Cicero's, from the *Tusculan Disputations*:

What wounds will the gladiators bear, who are either barbarians, or the very dregs of mankind! How do they, who are trained to it, prefer being wounded to basely avoiding it! How often do they prove that they consider nothing but the giving satisfaction to their masters or to the people! For when covered with wounds, they send to their masters to learn their pleasure: if it is their will, they are ready to lie down and die. What gladiator, of even moderate reputation, ever gave a sigh? Who ever turned pale? Who ever disgraced himself either in the actual combat, or even when about to die? Who that had been defeated ever drew in his neck to avoid the stroke of death? So great is the force of practice, deliberation, and custom!²⁵

Surely, Wiedemann did not discount this and other extant sources when making the claim that gladiators did not sacrifice themselves? The second reason was that Wiedemann based his theory on Christian writers, such as Tertullian, who explained Roman notions of death against Christians, thereby presenting a bias. Looking at that supposition through a modern lens, the theory makes sense, but the ancients cannot have seen it thusly. First, Tertullian and other Christian writers lived in the empire and were ingrained in Roman society prior to accepting Christianity. They would have known their own histories and the original reasons why certain rituals were performed and events were sponsored, even after the symbolism had shifted. Second, there are extant Roman sources that corroborate that Romans did indeed participate in sacrifice, even if they did later attempt to distance themselves from sacrifice in ritual and *munus*.

²⁴ Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34.

²⁵ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 2.41, Trans by C.D. Yonge (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1877), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14988/14988-h/14988-h.htm>, accessed September 2014.

One example comes from Pliny the Younger's section on magic and ritual in his *Natural History*. "It is clear that there are early traces still existing of the introduction of magic into Italy; in the law of the Twelve Tables for instance; besides other convincing proofs, which I have already noticed in a preceding Book. At last, in the year of the City 657, Cneius Cornelius Lentulus and P. Licinius Crassus being consuls, a decree forbidding human sacrifices was passed by the Senate; from which period the celebration of these horrid rites ceased in public, and for some time, altogether."²⁶ While this does not provide conclusive proof that human sacrifice was still a major component for gladiatorial combat at the time of this writing (c. 77 CE) – and indeed, within two centuries after its first recording in Livy, gladiatorial combat via funeral games morphed into something more, something of political and entertainment value – Pliny's text does provide proof that ritual sacrifice was accepted and used before being outlawed circa 96 BCE. Given that sacrifice was indeed permitted and utilized in ritual, it stands to reason that it was also part of funerary rites, up to and including the *ludi funebres* (funeral games).

The significance of this expository section on the *munus* of gladiatorial combat is this: regardless of the contradictory theories surrounding the origins of the games, or whether or not the *ludi funebres* were steeped in human immolation, blood was the offering. Blood was offered to the land on which it was spilled for the longevity of the empire, to the shades of the deceased as a lubricant to ease their passage into the Nether World, and to the gods for their nourishment and for protection or victory. Blood gave new life to the individual, the city, and the empire. Public death and bloodletting was

²⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, 30.12, Trans by John Bostock and H.T. Riley (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1856), 426.

ingrained in Roman culture through the symbolism of regeneration and purification. And though the sacrificial element of the gladiatorial games did indeed shift to spectacular entertainment, blood was offered for the screaming masses.

The Spectacle: Entertainment in Death

From funeral games to the public spectacles so closely associated with Rome, the arena was the center of that world. The Colosseum had seating for 45,000 people and standing room for thousands more. Blood would splatter the sand, soaking into the ground as combatants fought against the backdrop of people screaming for more – more entertainment, more death. Pair after pair, group after group, gladiators fought against men, wild beasts, and in staged productions of historic battles. The modern notion has been to relegate these events to simple barbarism and then call them predecessors of the organized violent sports we might see on pay-per-view today. These deadly, mock battles did have their Roman beginnings in a religious, funerary setting, but there was also a civic component to them.

Livy wrote that the first funeral games, as mentioned in the previous section, occurred in 264 BCE. The next mention of the games comes in 216 BCE. The First Punic War began in 264, and the Battle of Cannae in 216. Were these games utilized in conjunction with the civic and religious petitionary aspect? Did the Junii clan use the gladiatorial blood spilled at the funeral rites to petition the gods for victory in battle? Was the blood only for their deceased relative, to ease his passing and allow his new ethereal existence to flourish? Or did they use it to purify the city to sustain its *aeternitas* – its continuation? It only makes sense that all these things, to a certain extent, were so,

particularly when Livy's accounts connected the funerary games to temple dedications and the hosts using these events to campaign for political office.

Quintus Fabius Maximus, a second time dictator, assembled the senate the very day he entered on his office; and commencing with what related to the gods, after he had distinctly proved to the fathers, that Caius Flaminius had erred more from neglect of the ceremonies and auspices than from temerity and want of judgment, and that the gods themselves should be consulted as to what were the expiations of their anger, he obtained a resolution that the *decemviri* [ten magistrates] should be ordered to inspect the Sibylline books, which is rarely decreed, except when some horrid prodigies were announced. Having inspected the prophetic books, they reported, that the vow which was made to Mars on account of this war, not having been regularly fulfilled, must be performed afresh and more fully; that the great games must be vowed to Jupiter, temples to Venus Erycina and Mens; that a supplication and *lectisternium* [feast of the gods] must be made, and a sacred spring vowed, if the war should proceed favourably and the state continue the condition it was in before the war. Since the management of the war would occupy Fabius, the senate orders Marcus Aemilius, the praetor, to see that all these things are done in good time, according to the directions of the college of pontiffs.²⁷

Livy also provided us with an idea of the growth of the games. From the three pairs at the Junii funeral in 264, the number of gladiators who performed increased at a steady rate.

23.30 Also, in honour of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus (216 BCE), who had been consul twice and augur, his three sons, Lucius, Marcus, and Quintus exhibited funeral games and twenty-two pairs of gladiators for three days in the forum. The curule aediles, Caius Laetorius, and Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus consul elect, who during his aedileship had been master of the horse, celebrated the Roman games, which were repeated for three days. The plebeian games of the aediles, Marcus Aurelius Cotta and Marcus Claudius Marcellus, were thrice repeated.

31.50 The curule aediles, Marcus Claudius Marcellus and Sextus Aelius Paetus, distributed among the people a vast quantity of corn, brought from Africa, at the rate of two *asses* a peck. They also celebrated the Roman games in a magnificent manner, repeating them a second day; and erected in the treasury five brazen statues out of the money paid as fines. The plebeian games were thrice repeated entire, by the aediles, Lucius Terentius Massa, and Cneius Baebius Tamphilus, who was elected praetor. There were also funeral games exhibited that year in the

²⁷ Titus Livius, *The History of Rome*, 22.9, Trans by D. Spillan and Cyrus Edmonds (1868), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/10907/10907-h/10907-h.htm#d9>, accessed July, 2014.

forum, for the space of four days, on occasion of the death of Marcus Valerius Laevinus (c. 200 BCE), by his sons Publius and Marcus, who gave also a show of gladiators, in which twenty-five pairs fought.

39.46 On occasion of the funeral of Publius Licinius Crassus (d. 183 BCE) a largess of flesh was distributed to the people, and one hundred and twenty pair of gladiators fought. The funeral games lasted three days; and, after the games, a public feast was given.²⁸

Thus, given the growing popularity of these games among the citizenry – nobility and plebian alike, the shift from a strictly religious origin, to a political and financial one, is a natural progression. The games had developed out of familial funerary rituals into spectacles of bloodletting that unified the populous of Rome and her urban provincial cities. The *munus* was a duty, certainly, but it was now being applied as an offering to the gods and citizens of the cities in which the games were held.

In Suetonius' *Twelve Caesars*, he mentioned twice Julius Caesar's use of gladiatorial games to win popular favor and political rank.²⁹ Plutarch contends that Gaius Gracchus dismantled the magistrate's seats (c. 130 - 121 BCE), built to rent out to spectators at forum games, so the poor would not have to pay to see the games. While he won popular favor for his actions, his colleagues were quite annoyed.³⁰ While it is clear that leaders and sponsors of the games carried favor of the Roman people no matter their station, and the people had begun to demand bigger and better shows. That these spectacles did grow in their exoticism and sheer size and length of days – some lasting months at a time – suggests another purpose: the games were a financial success; and as such, they accounted for a substantial economic resource in any city that hosted games.

²⁸ Titus Livius, *History of Rome*, 23.30, 31.50, and 39.46.

²⁹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars: Divus Julius* (New York: Penguin Group, 1957), 4-5, 12-13.

³⁰ Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives: Gaius Gracchus*, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Caius_Gracchus*.html, accessed Oct 2014.

Much scholarship has been directed toward the financial aspects of the arena and toward how and where these structures were built. While this facet of the arenas in which the games were held is supremely important in the overall scholarship of Roman spectacles, it would not serve the overarching theme of this project in its current incarnation to follow this thread. What is important for this line of research are the spectacles and shows themselves.

The games, as we have discovered, began in a religious and funerary setting. As the events shifted toward a more public and civic orientation, the inclusion of more than just gladiatorial combat became available. Chariot races, wild beast hunts, execution of criminals, and the dramatic reenactments of historical battles and divine rituals were incorporated into spectacles.

Futrell points to the inclusion of wild or unusual animals, some who were trained to do interesting tricks, to amuse the Roman crowds.³¹ Before too long, though, the connection between animal ritual sacrifice and the animals brought into the arena to fight began to serve the same purpose, and the shows included the *venatio*, or the hunt, such as at the annual Floralian festival. Some of these animals were not the wild beasts imagined in the arena. Some were of a more gentle variety, depending on the festival or holiday associated with the spectacle. Ovid's *Fasti* paid great attention to the reasons for the games amid religious rituals. He wrote of a fictional conversation with the goddess Flora who explained the games and the choice of certain animals. Once, Flora's worship had been ignored by the Senate, and she, in turn, ignored their harvests until they voted to enact annual games to celebrate her divinity. In the passage, the questioner asked the

³¹ Futrell, *Blood in the Arena*, 24.

goddess, “why, instead of Libyan lionesses, are peaceful deer and timorous rabbits netted for you? She replied that her province was not woods, but gardens and fields, where no fierce beast may come.”³² This would suggest a definitive sacrificial and religious slant to certain games related to particular events. Other wild beast hunts were exactly as one might expect. Bulls, lions, tigers, bears, and elephants were forced to fight each other to the death, and were pitted against gladiators, athletes in arena competitions, and eventually, the *damnatio ad bestias* (damnation to the beasts) was reserved for military traitors, conquered foes, and convicted criminals bound for execution, which included those Christians accused of sedition and treason.

A bloody death was the goal in the games. However marginalized the social status of the gladiator, he was respected for his skill in killing, as well as his willingness to die. He was trained in the *ludus* (gladiatorial schools) not only to fight, but also how to die. Although many of these gladiators were slaves, criminals, or prisoners of war, some were free men who accepted a degraded social position for the pay they would ultimately receive. Some achieved their freedom after a certain number of wins in the arena, and some were viewed as exotic and were desired as sexual partners (cf. Juvenal, *Satire* 6.103-112). Regardless of their questionable status in Roman society, gladiators, through their skills, achieved celebrity of sorts. This may be a reason why certain nobles, and even emperors, eventually performed in arena combats since celebrity was, in essence, about widespread public awareness and approval.

But what made these combats between men, or beasts, or men and beasts, so popular? Recent scholarship on the topic has increased in the past few years. Barbarism

³² Ovid, *Fasti*, Book 5.295-374, Trans by A.J. Boyle and R.D. Woodard (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 124.

or a healthy Roman bloodlust are not easy answers anymore, if they ever were. In some combats, there was high drama in the reenactments of battles. Gladiators played the part of heroes and gods, fighting against the enemies of Rome (played by other gladiators or condemned criminals), in very real, if staged, battles. For some spectators, who would never see or participate in live battle for the honor and glory of Rome, these spectacles represented military virtue. This is evident in Pliny the Younger's *Panegyricus*:

Satisfactum qua civium, qua sociorum utilitatibus. Visum est spectaculum inde non enerve, nec fluxum, nec quod animos virorum molliret et frangeret, sed quod ad pulchra vulnera contemptumque mortis accenderet: quum in servorum etiam noxiorumque corporibus amor laudis et cupido victoriae cerneretur.³³

The satisfaction of the citizens is for the advantage of the society. Public spectacles were seen next, not to weaken, nor soak in, not to shatter or make effeminate the spirits of the men, but that the spirit would be aroused toward honorable wounds and the contempt of death: while discerning the love of praise and the desire for victory even in the bodies of criminals and slaves.

For other spectators, most of whom had no real power in civic life or politics, there was the momentary thrill of being in control of a gladiator's destiny, the rush of literally owning, if only for an instant, the power of life and death. In some cases, a combatant may concede defeat and his opponent would pause, turning towards the host of the games (the *editor*) and await the decision that would mark the next few moments. Mercy or death, what would it be? The *editor* would gesture whether the gladiator would "receive the blade" (cf. Cicero, *Tusc.*) or live to fight another day. In this, the crowd's opinion could sway the host's response, particularly if the host, usually a powerful or wealthy individual, was in need of popular opinion on a current issue, or if he was in need of the reversal of opinion if the citizenry despised him.

³³ Pliny, *Panegyricus*, XXXIII, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/pliny.panegyricus.html>, accessed September 2014.

The audience brings us to the public component of the games. What were the games without the spectators? These public deaths must be witnessed, not only by humans, but by the gods, to be a proper offering, either from mankind to the gods, or from the host to the spectators. While dramatized for entertainment, these games, primal in their very nature, offered superiority over death for these spectators who knew that one day, they, too, would leave the temporal world. During that present moment, witnessing the end of those who bravely met death allowed the audience to pretend they were far from the specter of death. And, witnessing this public death shored the spectators for their own deaths, as Seneca explained, “for men will make greater demands upon themselves, if they see that death can be despised even by the most despised of men.”³⁴

Suicide, or the *mors voluntaria*

The next section was completed in May 2013, and the idea behind it was the catalyst for this entire thesis project. While reading Suetonius in a class on ancient Rome, I began to see patterns involving the *mors voluntaria* (suicide, or voluntary death) that caused me to think that suicide had a role in the Roman Empire. Indeed, it did. Even after this project was completed for the required Research and Methodology class, I continued to go deeper into Roman death practices and concepts on the afterlife. It was in yet another class discussion that something else became clear: there was a link between the deaths of the polytheistic Romans and early Christian martyrs. I must give credit to my mentor, Dr. Miles Doleac, for his helping me to recognize the initial pieces of the puzzle during our brainstorming sessions. While this next section deals completely with

³⁴ Seneca, *Epistles*, LXX.22, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/death.html, accessed November 2014.

the honor and shame components of suicide, and the philosophical and religious ideologies of such acts, it is clear that blood—that is *bloodletting*—was most often required to make the death an honorable one.³⁵

Scire mori sors prima viris, sed proxima cogi.
“Man’s first fate is to know how to die –
but the second, to be forced to die.” - Lucan, 1st century C.E.

Suicide is viewed negatively in most modern cultures. In the last few centuries, suicide has become taboo, and is often associated with mental illness. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, however, suicide was a means of maintaining, not losing, honor and status. This viewpoint emphasized the importance of the natural world to ancient Mediterranean societies. What is known about prevailing philosophies, *religio* (religion), and death practices in ancient Rome shows suicide as a conventional way of preserving individual and family honor, of representing freedom, and of repairing the stains of shame.

Ancient Rome was an honor-shame society, and it is important to look at this culture in order to understand how suicide obtained its role in it. What honor and shame mean to us in the modern world take on different meanings in the Greco-Roman world. Life was a delicate balance of maintaining honor and avoiding shame. The very word honor is the same in Latin as it is in English, but in Latin it has two uses: honor and esteem. Since honor is a word with limitations on its Latin usage, one could assume that honor, in the context of ancient Roman society, had strict limitations as well. Honor was

³⁵ See Footnote 55; Some portions of this section have been revised after new information was discovered, but most of it stands as it was written for the original project.

automatically assigned to the elite and noble class simply as a birthright. If honor was lost or damaged, so was the status of the individual. Just like the word honor, the Latin word for shame, *pudor*, had a societal assignment as well. *Pudor* entailed the lower classes and rarely was there a chance for honor to be earned, although there were exceptions – for example, if one had citizenship granted to them or were esteemed members of an upper class household. The word *pudor* itself has several uses. It can mean one has a sense of shame or shyness, disgrace or humiliation. It can also mean to blush, to be chaste, scrupulous, or decent. *Pudor*, or shame, with its variety of uses, implies emotional distress – even when the use implies “decency” because the principal definition in this set [to blush], *pudor* refers to a physiological response – blushing – that has the minor sting of pain and shame. *Pudor* also entails exclusion, a certain detachment from the community at large, the *Populus Romanus*.

Polybius (c. 200 – 118 BCE) noted that living in an honor-shame culture required knowing what was required behaviorally. For example, Polybius considered that, in battle, “defeat was not shameful *per se*; it is how one reacts to defeat that may be shameful... [and] those who engage in public affairs should not make disaster disgraceful and subject to reproach by clinging to life when duty forbids it.”³⁶ Honor and shame were not present simply in the military arena, but in every area of life. In her book, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones*, Carlin Barton, theorizes that honor and shame are dependent on the same emotions and engaged in a balancing act. “The socializing or integrating emotions of shame were those countervailing emotions that could be indulged

³⁶ Arthur M. Eckstein, *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 44.

or rectified; they could be satisfied, made right.”³⁷ In an honor-shame society, it was the ultimate sin to be judged lacking in some essential way, and oftentimes, suicide was the only honorable method of reparation.

Religion was an important part of the honor-shame society of ancient Rome. Adherents of a polytheistic pantheon of deities, who required many and variegated expressions of ritual propitiation, Romans were exceedingly devout, loyal to their local deities, and to the cult of their ancestors. They honored their gods, the emperor (after the shift from republic to empire in 31 BCE, that is), and their ancestors with worship, ritual, and libations. They were *pietas* (pious) but practical. In a society where there was no separation of church and state, all Romans were required to participate in traditional rituals to maintain a good working relationship with their gods, thus *religio* took on a social aspect. If Romans were in an honorable state of being, the gods blessed them with military conquests, good harvests, and many new births. By the same token, if Romans descended into a state of shame – evidenced by military defeats, famines and plagues, and low birth mortality – the gods must be appeased. A clear parallel can be seen in the delicate balance of religious practices and the balance that must be maintained between honor and shame.

Beyond the practical and spiritual aspects of Roman polytheism, there was a strong belief in the afterlife. Franz Cumont posits that the belief in the existence of an afterlife caused the activities of man to be aimed “at less tangible realities, ensuring well-being to the family or the city or the state, and more at attaining to the fulfillment of ideal

³⁷ Carlin A. Barton, *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 200.

hopes in a supernatural world.”³⁸ Referencing the Hebrew Sheol, the Greek Hades, and the Italian Inferi, Cumont described the spiritual activity to and from the Nether World. Much of the activity (i.e., communication with the living) depended on funerary practices and burial rituals. Dying well, even a suicide, had certain customs, or at least behavior that was expected. A good death could inspire funerary art and remembrance in literature. “To die well it was important to be surrounded by family... a relative or close friend should hear the last words, and give a final kiss to catch the last breath of the deceased.”³⁹ This will be evident in the examples of honorable suicides provided below. In each case, there were conversations with friends, relatives, or troops that sometimes lasted hours. There were last words written down. There were instructions given to the bereaved on how to go on living. Burial was an important factor for the deceased’s ability to reach the desired area of the afterlife. The living had a responsibility to treat the dead with respect, to give the dead the proper burial, and to continue to honor and remember the dead. It would be remiss not to give at least a nod to the practicality of Roman death practices. Laws were made in order to protect the city and state from the dead. It was illegal to cremate or bury a body within the city, most likely because the fires of the crematorium could spread easily to the wooden structures over narrow alleyways and destroy the city, or perhaps because of the spread of disease from the open pits that contained the corpses.

What happened after the last breath was expelled from the corpse is a matter of speculation. Romans typically believed that the soul traveled to Hades upon death, and depending on the type of life and death of the deceased, appropriate rewards awaited

³⁸ Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 2.

³⁹ Valerie Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 94.

them. Although there were a variety of ideas about the afterlife, Romans did believe in spirits – malevolent and benign, welcome and unwelcome, who wandered their old haunts. The belief also existed that, when in need, the literal souls of ancestors could be counted on to communicate with the living. If the deceased were buried or cremated, however, he or she went to the Nether World. To communicate with the living from the Nether World, there had to be libations of blood, wine, milk, or honey offered to the spirits. These souls could then advise the living so as to avoid punishment in the after life.⁴⁰ The Romans’ saw their afterlife as an extension of the natural world, thus, however death may occur – whether by suicide or otherwise – their souls would continue. On the same note, if one’s death was dishonorable, he or she might be forced to wander the earth as shades – formless apparitions who were allowed no contact with the human world or peace in the Nether World; whereas, if the deceased left this life with their honor intact, he or she would be worthy of veneration in their ancestral cult.

Additionally, the Stoic school of philosophy had strong ideas about the act of *mors voluntaria* (voluntary death). “The Stoic theory as set out by Diogenes Laertius (7.130) one might simply calculate whether the natural advantage of living are outweighed by the corresponding disadvantages.”⁴¹ Stoicism and suicide went deeper than just practical advantages, though. Marcus Porcius Cato (d. 46 BCE), a noted Stoic, chose suicide as a political statement against the expected tyranny of Julius Caesar. Plutarch’s treatment of Cato’s suicide in *The Life of Cato the Younger* shows how deeply the citizens of Utica admired Cato when they discovered his death, calling him their

⁴⁰ Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism*, 2.

⁴¹ Catharine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 99.

benefactor because he died a free man.⁴² Cato refused to live under the rule of Caesar, as many were loathe to do, and lamented the loss of republican ideals. “But Stoicism is a factor in his suicide, too; accepting life under tyranny would have compromised Cato’s self-consistency (*constantia*) as a Stoic and impaired his freedom to make the honourable moral choices.”⁴³ This suggests the transition of suicide from a morally ambiguous act to one that had a basis in maintaining one’s personal honor.

Indeed, suicide seemed to be entwined in Roman society as a tool of control. Like Cato the Younger, who would control his freedom through his death, others chose the same liberty. “Suicide was often viewed as a conscious intentional act and not one caused by mental imbalance or illness,” though suicides brought on spontaneously or by those with psychological problems did occur. The latter of these were considered bad, or dishonorable, deaths.⁴⁴

There were a variety of reasons one might choose suicide: old age or illness, despair, knowledge of guilt, loss of reputation, failure in battle, family honor, or avoidance of public shame. If one wanted an honorable, quick death, weapons would be employed for disembowelment or the cutting open of arterial veins. Swords, daggers, or poison might also be used for those facing execution orders, interrogation at a public trial, political anarchy, or for any number of reasons. In contrast, for old age or illness, one might choose to starve to death and still die honorably. Hanging oneself, though, was

⁴² Plutarch, “The Life of Cato the Younger,” *The Parallel Lives*, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Cato_Minor*.html, accessed March 2013.

⁴³ Alexei V. Zadorojnyi, “Cato’s Suicide in Plutarch,” *The Classical Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2007): 216, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4493486>, accessed April 2013.

⁴⁴ Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 32.

dishonorable. Vergil called it obscene in his *Aeneid*.⁴⁵ Jumping from a high place was also considered crude. Tacitus refers to it as undignified in the case of Sextus Papinus, who jumped to his death to avoid the shame of a series of indulgent behaviors involving his mother.⁴⁶ It is reasonable to theorize the reason for an attachment of shame to hanging and jumping to death is due to class distinction. Only the elite or those in the Roman army could afford the swords and daggers used in suicide. Only the nobility had access to pharmacists or doctors who could prepare a lethal potion. Hanging or jumping from elevated places were forms of suicide that could easily be managed by those of the lower classes. And crucifixion, though not a form of suicide, was reserved for the lowest caste of degenerate criminals and traitors or non-citizens of the empire, and was, by all proper definitions, a form of hanging. As Hope explains:

A good suicide was one that had sound motives and was bravely met. A considered decision to take one's life was esteemed whereas an impulsive decision to do so was not. Suicide could be a matter of aristocratic honor and even privilege. If death was all but inevitable, by choosing the time, place, and means of death the individual avoided further destruction of his reputation, distress to his family and possible abuse of the corpse.⁴⁷

Tacitus told the story of the suicide of the short-lived emperor, Otho (d. 69 CE). When Otho writes, "Fortune and I now know each other; you need not reckon for how long, for it is peculiarly difficult to be moderate with that prosperity which you think you will not long enjoy," he was not referring to what modernity calls "Lady Luck," but to the goddess Fortuna. Romans were devout in their religion. He was intimating that Fortuna herself had set forth his destiny, and that he accepted it. Next, he wrote: "By this let posterity judge of Otho... I need neither revenge nor consolation. Others may have held

⁴⁵ Vergil, *Aeneid* Book XII.603, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/virgil/aen/aen12.htm>, accessed April 2013.

⁴⁶ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (England: Penguin Books, 1956), 225.

⁴⁷ Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 34.

the throne for a longer time, but no one can have left it with such fortitude.” Otho was set on his suicidal course by this point, and his declaration that posterity should not judge him proves that his forthcoming suicide is one based on the salvation of his honor. The second part of this passage, the word “fortitude” is used, which translates from Latin into moral bravery or courage. The next passage suggests that Otho has a dual purpose in his suicide: “By hastening my end I earn the clemency of the conqueror. It is not in the extremity of despair, but while my army yet cries for battle, that I have sacrificed to the State my last chance. I have obtained enough reputation for myself, enough nobility for my family.” The clemency of which he speaks is not only for him, but for those troops who chose to fight for him. It was common for the conquering general to execute those who had been most loyal to the losing general. The second purpose is in the last part of the sentence when he states that his death will be for his family name. By Otho’s willingness to commit suicide, his family’s honor, safety, and status were virtually assured. The next morning, Otho fell upon his sword. Additionally, there were those from his loyal troops who committed suicide after finding Otho had done so. Tacitus reports that this became common practice in other *castra* (military encampments).⁴⁸

Honor and shame did not only belong to the world of men. The theme of reparation to avoid shame and shift the balance back to honor arises in this tale. In Livy’s *History of Rome*, Collatinus and a group of his friends were boasting about whose wife was most excellent. The men rode from their camp for Collatinus’ home and all of them agreed that his wife, Lucretia, was indeed a prize worthy of praise. Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the king, waited on Collatinus to leave and returned, having decided he would take

⁴⁸ Tacitus, *The Histories*, Book II.47-49, Trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Random House, 1942), <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/histories.2.ii.html>, accessed on March 2013.

Lucretia by force. She tried to fight his sexual advances, but to no avail. When she proved unwilling and still “not to be moved by the fear of death, he went farther and threatened her with disgrace.” After Sextus left, Lucretia waited for her husband to return from Rome. She told him what occurred. “My body only has been violated; my heart is guiltless, as death shall be my witness.” Familial honor was extremely important to Romans, and in being violated, Lucretia’s words implied that she had lost hers. Livy reported that her father and husband tried to convince her of her innocence, but Lucretia was determined not to “absolve [herself] of the punishment; not in times to come shall ever an unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia.” She then plunged a knife through her heart that she had concealed in her dress.⁴⁹ Lucretia, through her act of suicide, made an act of reparation to the damage done to her personal and family honor.

In 65 CE, the emperor Nero had many of his long-standing officials and hangers-on put to death on the grounds of conspiracy. His former mentor, Seneca, had been implicated without proof of any wrongdoing. Tacitus reports that Nero had an execution decree sent to Seneca at his home. Seneca railed at the injustice, “Surely nobody was unaware that Nero was cruel!... After murdering his mother and step-brother, it only remained for him to kill his teacher and tutor.”⁵⁰ Seneca chose to die by poison he ordered from his doctor. The poison did not do its job, nor did slitting his wrists with a dagger. Ultimately, he suffocated in a steam bath hours later. In this forced suicide, Seneca met the requirements of a noble suicide – to meet it bravely, and due to its inevitability, choose the time, manner, and place of death. Seneca wrote much on Stoic

⁴⁹ Livy, *The History of Rome*, Book I, chapter 57 – 59 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 201 – 205, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0151%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D57>, accessed April 2013.

⁵⁰ Tacitus, *The Annals*, 375-377.

philosophy and how death relates to *virtus* (virtue) and *libertas* (freedom). His “rhetorical reflections were not meant to encourage the reader to commit suicide, but to contemplate mortality, morality, virtue, and the choices an individual could make. [He] sought to live up to these ideals in his own death.”⁵¹

Not everyone in the ancient world, however, approved of suicide. Different schools of philosophy had their own beliefs regarding suicide that had little to do with honor or shame. It is, however, worthwhile to understand their points of view since their doctrines impacted Roman society and, ultimately, their behaviors. Followers of Epicurus (341 – 270 BCE) believed that true happiness was in the current life of men, and that nothing, even pain, should make a man despair of life. There was no belief in an afterlife and that death was a true end. “Death is the privation of all sentience; therefore a correct understanding that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding to life a limitless time, but by taking away the yearning after immortality.”⁵² Because of the importance placed on attaining peace in this lifetime through moderation, Epicureans rarely approved the notion of suicide. Based on Epicurus’ surviving letters and doctrines, James Warren proposed that “one will continue to live unless and until such a time when life becomes too painful even for the Epicurean wise man.”⁵³

Not even the Jews and early Christians in the Roman Empire seemed to have completely disdained suicide as long as it had the appearance of religious persecution. An example of Jewish acceptance of suicide was at the siege of Masada in Judaea (c. 67

⁵¹ Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 33.

⁵² Epicurus, “Epicurus and Epicurean Philosophy,” *Letter to Menoeceus*, <http://www.epicurus.net/en/menoceus.html>, accessed April 2013.

⁵³ James Warren, *Facing Death: Epicurus and His Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 209.

CE). Flavius Josephus was an eyewitness of the Siege of Jotapta (67 CE) and wrote an account suicide pact made in the fortress at Masada.⁵⁴ In both instances, the reason for the mass suicides was to avoid capture and indignities at the hands of the Roman soldiers who had spent nearly a year trying to take the town from the Zealot Jews. Additionally, there were many early Christians who chose to die willingly through martyrdom – by definition, a voluntary death – rather than continue to make restitution and libations to the imperial cult. Suffice to say that in the early years of the Roman Empire, the Epicureans were the only opposition to honorable and voluntary deaths based on a disbelief in an afterlife. It would not be long, however, that the Jews and Christians of the empire would make suicide taboo, and cast a sinful essence upon it.

The Romans were a visceral people, and it is their land and lives they sought to control and conquer, whether in the natural world or in the Hellenistic philosophies they so readily adopted. These ancient peoples placed the utmost importance on interpersonal relationships, family and state bonds, and truth – all building blocks of their society. For the ancient Romans, the *mors voluntaria* was often the first and only choice to repair damage done to an individual's reputation, like Lucretia; or to have the freedom to choose the method in which one would perish, as was the case for Seneca and Cato; or to preserve personal and/or family honor, as the short-lived emperor Otho did. It was the role of *mors voluntaria*, the voluntary death, that allowed the Romans a semblance of control in the honor-shame society of ancient Rome.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Flavius Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*. Book VII. Chapter VIII. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/war-7.htm>, accessed April 2013.

⁵⁵ Dawne Kennedy, *Mors Voluntaria: Voluntary Death: the Role of Suicide in the Honor-Shame Society of Ancient Rome* (HIS 300 Methodology, University of Southern Mississippi, 2013), 1- 11.

Decimatio and fustuarium

Livy wrote that, in 471 BCE, Roman consul Appius led his troops against the Volsci, an Italic tribe who settled south of Rome. After a particular disheartening battle, his soldiers deserted their posts.

When at last the soldiers had been collected from their scattered flight, the consul, who had followed his men in a vain attempt to call them back, pitched his camp on friendly soil. Then he summoned an assembly and soundly rated them, not without reason, as an army, which had been false to military discipline and had deserted its standards. Asking them all in turn where their arms and where their standards were, he caused the unarmed soldiers and the standard-bearers who had lost their standards, and in addition to these the centurions and the recipients of a double ration who had quitted their ranks, to be scourged with rods and beheaded; of the remaining number every tenth man was selected by lot for punishment.⁵⁶

Decimation (*decimatio*, from *decumo*, which is to choose every tenth man for punishment) was a tool of training and discipline. It was enacted on soldiers in a cohort if they were deemed cowardly, or had disobeyed the orders of their leader, or if they had committed the most heinous act of desertion.⁵⁷ Where guilt was placed on more than one maniple, with each maniple equalling sixty to one hundred twenty men, committing these crimes, Polybius wrote that it was nearly impossible to know each guilty party within the group, then subject those convicted to the *fustuarium* (beating to death with a cudgel). To ensure punishment was meted out, the tribunes would call the defaulters in front of their cohort or legion, harshly address their crimes, and select by lots one-tenth of the men from the guilty. The remaining men from the accused were then required to punish the selected by bludgeoning them to death; then, the survivors had to make their camp away

⁵⁶ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* II.59.9-11, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0151%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D59>, accessed January 2014.

⁵⁷ Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, 1.

from the protection of the main camp with reduced food rations.⁵⁸ Looking at decimation with just these facts, one might consider this an overly harsh punishment, but from an ancient perspective, it was not. Tacitus explained it best: “Even in a beaten army when every tenth man is felled by the club, the lot falls also on the brave. There is some injustice in every great precedent, which though injurious to individuals, has its compensation in the public advantage.”⁵⁹

The very public death by decimation was not as common as spectacles or even the *mors voluntaria* (which is explored in the next section), nor was it as revered or anticipated. What it did provide, however, was a foundational tool for the warrior state that was Rome. The discipline and training the legions were known for owe much to the practice of decimation. Imagine fresh recruits happily complying with the harsh and intense world of Roman military life, not only because compliance was the honorable thing to do and ingrained in their psyches, but also because of the whispered threat of the *fustuarium*, and the legends that surrounded it.⁶⁰

These soldiers were not afraid of death in battle, for death was inevitable to all men, but death by decimation was a dishonorable death, a bad death. Thus, the act of decimation itself was not the consequence of military crimes, but the dishonor that came with it.

While bloodletting via public executions during spectacles served to instill bravery and fear into the citizens who attended the games, decimation achieved the same goal within the military.

⁵⁸ Polybius, *Histories*, 6.38, <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus/cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekFeb2011&query=Polyb.%206.38&getid=1>, accessed June 2014.

⁵⁹ Tacitus, *Annals* 14.44.

⁶⁰ Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, 1.

SECTION 2

The Christian Concept of Purification Through Death

“It is not the punishment but the cause that makes the martyr.”⁶¹
-- St. Augustine of Hippo

Martyrdom in Early Christianity

Linking the public death rites of pagan Rome and the voluntary deaths of Christian martyrs might seem antithetical to some, but the act of spilling blood, the sacrifice of one’s life, was what purified the dying, perfecting them and making them ready for the afterlife. The Romans used some public deaths as purification rituals and the early Christians took that same concept and made it their own by pursuing and embracing martyrdom. Most interesting, though, is the irony that Romans found the Christians’ passion for martyrdom disgusting and perverse while the Christians found the Romans preoccupation with grizzly public spectacles perverse and disgusting. Yet they both fundamentally embraced the notion that bloodletting was a necessity, not only for the continuation of the life of the deceased individual but of the wider community. Bloodletting through martyrdom, whether voluntary or not, is suggestive of a dual parentage of Christianity, not arising just from Judaism, but of Greco-Roman traditions most prevalent in cities where these Christian churches grew up.

Some might wonder how Christianity can be considered a partial offshoot of imperial *mores*. Take, for example, the success of Paul of Tarsus (c. 5 – c. 67 CE) in spreading his view of Christianity, which was more liberal and inclusive than other

⁶¹ Augustine of Hippo, Dictionary.com. Columbia World of Quotations. Columbia University Press, 1996. http://quotes.dictionary.com/It_is_not_the_punishment_but_the_cause, accessed November 2014.

longstanding apostles of the Jesus Movement.⁶² Paul clearly went against the mandates of the Council of Jerusalem (c. 50 CE) and had an open, and divisive, dispute with Peter over the matter; later on, he also split with compatriots Barnabas and John Mark over other issues.

Paul accused Peter and other apostles of being afraid of the circumcision faction after Peter backed away from sharing meals with Gentile Christians in Antioch. Fear, in the ancient world, destroyed honor, and to be accused of such, especially openly and in front of witnesses, was shame inducing and hardly the type of distinction Peter, who Paul refers to as a “supposed” leader of the church (in Gal. 2), should have.⁶³

Paul’s view diverged from Christianity against Jewish parentage and inclined in important ways toward Greco-Roman ideals, exemplified in the growing numbers of martyrs, the more Pauline the movement became. This section will explore the origins of martyrdom from the philological and practical standpoints of the Judeo-Christian ethos.

Martyr: What Does it Mean?

The English “martyr” originates from the Greek word μάρτυς (martyros), which simply means “witness.” It was a legal term used in the courts of Athens, and eventually the Greco-Roman world, and “could be used metaphorically for all kinds of observation and attestation.”⁶⁴ This should not be too difficult for anyone who has observed a modern courtroom drama to understand. A witness is called upon to testify to the truth of a matter. In today’s courts, the witness is sworn in, giving an oath to speak only the truth to the judge while laying hands on a holy book, usually a Bible. A μάρτυς (martyros) in the Roman Empire was brought before the *ekklesia*, Sanhedrin, or proconsul and asked

⁶² Compare Acts 15:29 to 1 Cor 8, NRSV.

⁶³ Dawne Kennedy, “The Circumcision Faction: Jewish and Christian Identity in Antioch, c. 30 – 55 CE,” (History Capstone, University of Southern Mississippi, 2014), 13.

⁶⁴ G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

pertinent questions about the matter at hand. It was only after adherents to the Jesus movement were called as witnesses before their local magistrates and judges that the context of the word “martyr” began to mutate, becoming a foundational aspect of Christianity itself.

By its current definition, a martyr is a willing and/or sacrificial victim, a sufferer for a cause, an idealist. Some scholars suggest that martyrdom was the product of Greek literary devices or perhaps even invented or exaggerated to advocate the spread of Christianity. Some have suggested that martyrdom in the Jewish context emerged because of the Maccabean rebellion (c. 167 – 104 BCE). The author of the Hebrew text in 1 Maccabees gives the rationale for these people willingly and innocently dying at the hands of the enemy as “heaven and earth testify for us that you are killing us unjustly;” and others make the claim that martyrdom began with the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.⁶⁵ Martyrdom is a fluid concept that most modern people cannot observe in its entirety because of the capriciousness of the definition. Each scholar seems to have a slightly divergent valuation, however erudite and well researched it is, on what they perceive martyrdom to be, when they perceive it to have happened, and to what group it should be ascribed. As such, this can only mean that martyrdom, in its complexity, cannot be owned by any one culture, or defined by a rigid set of rules. Perception plays a huge role in the making of martyrdom. Martyrdom can be explained in such a way from the combined viewpoints of a variety of accepted scholarly theories that will simplify the concepts, if not the actual events. Moreover, we will begin to see martyrdom in the specific Christian context as a purification ritual, the act of making perfect the martyrs for the kingdom of God.

⁶⁵ 1Maccabees 2.31 - 38, NRSV.

First, the modern connotation of the word “martyr” is employed for those who lose their lives or freedom in defense of their religious, social, or political beliefs, or for those who put on the mantle of public self-sacrifice to gain attention for a cause. This is far removed from what it became in the second century of the Common Era, and, of course, the original meaning of the word. *Martyros* and its equivalents appear in the New Testament many times, but most often in the sense of the word “witness;” however, the context of the original Greek word had begun to shift.⁶⁶ These were not witnesses in the Athenian legal sense, even though, chances are it was still used as such. These were witnesses of suffering, of another’s death, or of the glory of God. Take, for example, the stoning of Stephen in *The Acts of the Apostles* (written c. 85 CE). The Church recognizes him as the first martyr under the current definition of the word, but there are scholars who question what the author of Luke-Acts meant by the usage of *μάρτυς* (*martyros*), where the Apostle Paul said, “and while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.” (Acts 22:20)

Glen Bowersock asserts that the author also recorded Paul as having referred to himself as “God’s choice... ‘as a witness to all men of what he had seen and heard’.”⁶⁷ Here, one could almost imagine the author of *Acts* to have used the second century definition of martyrdom for both instances since, at the time of the writing of these documents, both Stephen and the Apostle Paul were long since dead. Thus, the author would have had cause to describe them both as *μάρτυς* – in the transitional sense – since he was already aware of both their fates.

⁶⁶ The canonical books of the NT were written between 49/50 and 120 CE, thus the transition of the etymology of “*μάρτυς*” must have happened prior to this duration of time.

⁶⁷ Bowersock, 15.

Stephen, as it was written, died at the hands of fellow Jews for the crime of blasphemy. Paul's death is not recorded in canonical scripture, although we do know he was remanded to Rome to defend himself for crimes against Jewish Law, the Temple, and the emperor.⁶⁸ The last we know of him is that he was held in Rome for two years at his own expense, late in the reign of Nero – probably in the wake of the Great Fire in 64 (54 – 68 CE). There were rumors that he was released after his trial and traveled on to Spain and Britain to further preach the gospel, but there is no proof of this. It is widely accepted, however, that Paul was martyred during Nero's persecution in the mid-sixties, probably as part of Nero's sweeping retaliation of Christians' perceived part in the Great Fire of 64 CE (cf. Tacitus, *Annales*). An early mention of Paul's death by martyrdom is located in a letter to the Ephesians from Ignatius (written c. 110 CE). "You are initiated into the mysteries of the Gospel with Paul, the holy, the martyred, the deservedly most happy, at whose feet may I be found, when I shall attain to God."⁶⁹ Historians can usually posit a theory on the usage of words through context and grammatical constructions, as discussed above, but clearly Ignatius' grammatical use of "martyred" meant Paul was subjected to persecution, and contextually, in that Ignatius himself was in transit to Rome as an eager and voluntary martyr. The evolution in the word usage had shifted even more in the span of twenty-five years (from 85 CE to 110 CE).⁷⁰ Ignatius was rabid to become a martyr, and to stand in the great tradition of Paul of Tarsus, the apostle to the apostles.

⁶⁸ Acts 25:8, NRSV.

⁶⁹ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, Chapter XII.

⁷⁰ Acts is believed to have been written c. 85 CE, and Ignatius' letter was written in 110 CE.

From Witness to Persecuted

Although many Christians were executed during the first three hundred years of the existence of the Church, most scholars agree that it was not until the middle of the third century that Christians, as a group, were legally persecuted. The key words here are “legal persecution.” Persecution as described by the authors of the New Testament happened simply because the victims were followers of Jesus. In the *Gospel of Luke*, Jesus is reported to have predicted widespread persecution of these followers:

They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you the words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a head of your hair will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls. (Luke 21.12-19)

Historians accept that this gospel was written before the end of the first century, circa 85 CE. Luke’s style of writing owes a debt to Greek historian, Thucydides (c. 460 – 395 BCE). The author fully admits that he used oral tradition, written sources and eyewitness accounts in compiling the *Gospel of Luke* and the sequel to this book, *The Acts of the Apostles*.⁷¹ His use of Greek was more proficient than the other authors of the synoptic gospels, especially compared to Mark’s gospel, whose usage of Greek is elementary at best. Luke’s writing style and his knowledge of the Septuagint means that he was most likely educated in Greek thought. Considering these points, Luke would have been well aware of the literary devices used by Thucydides, such as paraphrasing speeches to fit the mood of the moment.

⁷¹ Luke 1.1-4, NRSV.

This indicates that, even before the imperial edicts of Decius (250 CE) and Diocletian (303-304 CE) against Christians, apostolic communities as early as 85 CE were aware of and writing in response to tensions between themselves and the Empire. Some, like the author of Luke-Acts, strove to eliminate any possibilities of further negative actions towards them. We must keep in mind that just a mere twenty years earlier the emperor Nero had placed the blame for Rome burning on Christians, which resulted in some executions. The emperor Claudius had ordered an exile of Jews from Rome during his reign (r. 41 – 54 CE), and in 70 CE, Titus destroyed and looted the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, Luke's intention in this gospel was more than just educating his patron, Theophilus, on the teachings of Jesus within a narrative of his life. Luke wrote for a political reason as well.

In the beginning of the gospel, Luke portrayed Christians as descendants of the Jews and Jesus as a practicing Jew who obeyed the Law. But by the end of the first half of the book, in chapter eleven, he begins demonizing Pharisaical Jews as the persecutors of Jesus, while exonerating Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate, and by extension, Rome, of the guilt of Jesus's execution. The author then, in *Acts of the Apostles*, reports a Pauline speech that, for the first time, makes a connection between the Jews' rejection of Jesus' messiahship and Paul's subsequent mission to the Gentiles.⁷² Paul's own writings in *Romans* (3.19-20) and *Galatians* (3.24-28) blur the lines between Jewish and non-Jewish people, condemning separatist rhetoric and the notions of the Jews' unique and singular chosen-ness and arguing that the Jesus Movement should rightly include Gentiles.

⁷² Acts 13.44-52, NRSV.

The Semantics of Persecution Versus Prosecution

In her book, *The Myth of Persecution*, Candida Moss asks us to distinguish between “persecution” and “prosecution.”⁷³ Jesus’ trial and crucifixion are perfect examples of this distinction. The author of Luke-Acts states that members of the Sanhedrin took Jesus to the Roman governor, Pilate. There, they accused him of “perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.” (Luke 23:3) These charges, which amounted to treason and sedition, would bring the death penalty in the Roman Empire, and were not, in essence, religiously motivated, but political. Thus, Jesus’ execution was the result of prosecution, but not Roman persecution. While the overarching theme of persecution versus prosecution has definite merit, Moss contends that Christians invented the “myth of persecution” to prove their superiority over their enemies, whom they likened to demonic entities, and who, in turn, provided the necessary foil to substantiate Christian persecution.⁷⁴

Moss’ statement that Christians were not *consistently* persecuted by the Romans is astute, but it has already been established by some of the foremost historical and religious scholars; thus, for her to denounce the majority of martyr events as “pious frauds” when there are multiple attestations of certain accounts – both Christian and secular – promotes somewhat narrow scholarship on the matter. She maintains that interpolation and dramatic license have so bastardized the martyr accounts – even the six most known accounts: Polycarp, Ptolemy and Lucius, Justin and companions, the martyrs of Lyons and Scillium, and Perpetua and Felicitas – that they cannot possibly be reliable

⁷³ Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 159-160.

⁷⁴ Moss, 260.

or given credence to. What Moss allows is that Christians who venerate the sainted martyrs cannot truly know or understand who the martyrs were, or what they said since the accounts are, in her opinion, fraudulent. On that assumption, those who revere the saints are allowed to know only what their biographers have set down in writing.⁷⁵ This assertion seems to be seen through a modern lens. By her reasoning on this specific topic, the use of historical bias is the basis for non-belief in ancient sources, which is ludicrous at best. There is historical bias in every source. It is the responsibility of the reader to know the context and compare contemporary sources in order to glean as much of the truth as can be known. We cannot discount sources simply because of bias. We use it to understand the mindset of the author's community during the time of the original writing, and if possible, discover when, how, and why any additions or edits were made to the document. Understanding an author's bias allows the reader to understand how to read a source and place it in its proper context. Historians, especially scholars of early Christianity, are largely dependent upon contextual and linguistic clues and select criteria (of embarrassment, multiple attestation, subversion, and the like) to know what happened. As in the case of the author of Luke-Acts, many biographers take liberties in paraphrasing speeches and slanting the bias for agenda-driven reasons. The actual words and deeds of the martyrs prior to their deaths are important, yes, but less so than that they were, in fact, executed, presumably for being Christian.

The point is simple. Whether victims were persecuted or prosecuted, or by whom, the result was the same – somebody was going to die. It is the perception of *why* these people were dying that scholars are at odds on certain positions; but frankly, to the masses, perception is reality. Moss was correct in her assertion that there is a definitive

⁷⁵ Moss, 124-125.

difference between persecution and prosecution. Her problem seems to be with the terminology of “persecution,” and what it means to the modern Church, not so much with whether or not Christians were executed. They were. And the exploration of the difference could possibly redefine the perception of these early Christians, particularly in the context of time and location, and expose current misconceptions while no longer excusing certain behaviors. Still, early Christian literature, and even some secular sources, quite plainly deliver a history of martyrdom, a history of persecution, and whether every single martyr account is completely factual, whether it was interpolated and biased, persecution and martyrdom were interwoven into the fabric of the history of the Church, and that, for good or ill, is what is promoted. Christians believed, based on New Testament scriptures, that if one suffered for the name of Jesus, that suffering led to the glorification of God and proved that the victim was a genuine believer; thus, persecution and martyrdom were intrinsic to the very framework of the early Church.

Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians is believed to be the oldest document in the New Testament, written circa 49/50 CE. In it, Paul writes, “For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judaea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out... indeed, you yourselves know that this [persecution] is what we are destined for.” (1 Thessalonians 2.14-15; 3.3) In *The First Letter of Peter*, the author makes clear the attitude on suffering.⁷⁶ *1 Peter* is believed to have been written after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, but sometime before 120 CE.

⁷⁶ 1 Peter 1.6; 1 Peter 4.12-19, NRSV.

In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1.6-7)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or a mischief-maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name. For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinners? Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God's will entrust themselves to a faithful creator, while continuing to do good. (1 Peter 4.12-19)

There are many similar references to such persecution located in the New Testament, but what these two passages tell us is that persecution began to happen very soon after the death of Jesus (c. 30 - 35 CE). Beginning with *Acts*' Stephen (c. 35 – 40 CE) and continuing intermittently through the reign of Constantine (r. 306 – 337 CE) and beyond, the early Church promoted their reputation of being persecuted, which, no matter what terminology is used, ultimately equates to martyrdom. Martyrs began to transition from being mere legal witnesses to something more, something akin to dying for God (cf. Tertullian, *Ad Martyras*). But why did persecution begin in the first place?

The Role of the Jews

Looking at the above passages from *Luke* and *1 Thessalonians*, it is clear that the authors referred to the Jews as Christian persecutors. Paul himself corroborated this claim when he wrote, “you have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.” (Galatians 1.13)

As a Pharisaic Jew, Paul undoubtedly saw himself as a defender of the purity of Judaism, upholding the strict interpretation of the law on which his faith was based. By this point in Jewish history, it was common belief that to perform idolatry, intermingle with foreigners, and ignore the tiniest facet of the Law would invite the wrath and punishment of Yahweh. This punishment usually involved the subjugation of the Jews by their enemies.

Even though the Roman general Pompey had conquered Syria-Palestine, annexing the Jewish homeland to the Roman Empire in 63 BCE, the Romans were familiar with Judaism since Jewish immigrants already had a community in Rome, as well as most large imperial cities. Tradition was the basis for Roman culture in most things, but especially in law and in religion. They looked upon their Jewish constituents' religion as archaic and ancestral, as *mos maiorum* (the custom of the ancestors). For the Romans, there was a kinship with the Jews in revering the traditions of one's ancestors and that was a key component in the initial tolerance, if not the notion of acceptance, of Jewish culture and practice.

Jewish communities in the empire were given special dispensation to send monetary assistance to the Temple in Jerusalem. Jews were not required to participate in imperial cult worship as it went against their mandate to worship only Yahweh. Jews were exempted, according to Josephus, "from going into the army" – although they were later conscripted into the military – and were permitted to "use the customs of their forefathers in assembling together for sacred and religious purposes, as their law requires and for collecting oblations necessary for sacrifices."⁷⁷ This suggests that the Jews had a certain amount of autonomy in their communities, at least when it came to their religious responsibilities. According to Wayne Meeks, even when Jews in various imperial cities, like Antioch, retained the rights of full citizenship, their status remained ambiguous among their neighbors. "Their strict monotheism, their 'imageless' worship, the strong cohesion of their communities won admiration among many of their pagan neighbors, leading some to become outright proselytes, others to

⁷⁷ Flavius Josephus, "Antiquities of the Jews," Book 14.10.12 in *The New Complete Works of Josephus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 226.

become sympathizers or even formal adherents to the synagogue,”⁷⁸ but these same qualities also caused resentment. If the Jews were to be *politai* (citizens) rather than *katoikountes* (alien residents), they should worship the local gods and keep all monies within the city rather than send it to other provincial towns.⁷⁹

Despite the resentments that rose against them from their neighbors throughout the empire, the Jewish elite in Judaea had close ties with imperial Rome. Judas Maccabeus (c. 161 BCE) initiated a political alliance with Rome in order to gain leverage against the Seleucids.⁸⁰ Hasmonean priests gave their support to Julius Caesar. That support was returned when Caesar proclaimed certain Syrian and Judean cities as “free” cities, with Roman citizenship bestowed upon their inhabitants. The Herodian dynasty was established through friendship with the Julio-Claudian emperors. Herod the Great’s own sons were fostered at the imperial court in Rome, sent there to “enjoy the company of Caesar”⁸¹ and Herod also named the port city of Caesarea Maritima – where Roman procurators had their residence – after Caesar Augustus.

The Jewish-Roman relationship was not completely peaceful, regardless of the aforementioned connections. After the death of Herod the Great, his successors seemed incapable of satisfying both the Roman government and the Jewish population. As such, there was a restoration of Roman power in Judaea and Rome appointed governors and procurators as direct rulers. The Zealot faction of the Judean Jewry rebelled against perceived, and some very real, slights local governors and pagan neighbors committed against the Jewish population. These skirmishes ultimately led to the Great Revolt (66 –

⁷⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 36.

⁷⁹ Flavius Josephus, “Against Apion,” Book 2.4-6 in *The New Complete Works of Josephus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 962-965; Dawne Kennedy, “The Circumcision Faction: Jewish and Christian Identity in Antioch, c. 30 – 55 CE,” (History Capstone, University of Southern Mississippi, 2014), 4.

⁸⁰ 1 Maccabees 8, NRSV.

⁸¹ Flavius Josephus, *The New Complete Works of Josephus: Jewish Antiquities, Book 15.10.1*, Trans by William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 519.

73 CE) against the Romans.⁸² Roman legions, led by future Flavian emperors Vespasian (r. 69 – 79 CE) and Titus (c. 79 – 81 CE), put down the rebellion. In 70 CE, under the leadership of Titus, the Romans sacked and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. It is important to note that in spite of the Jewish-Roman wars, the Jewish communities spread throughout the empire did not suffer a loss of rights as Roman citizens, nor were their religious privileges rescinded, such as the right to assemble and to decline participation in imperial sacrifices. The Jews, as a whole, still received the same special dispensations as before, save one. After the Temple's destruction, Vespasian created a tax, the *fiscus iudaicus*, on all Jews throughout the empire. The new tax took Jewish financial support previously earmarked for the Temple at Jerusalem, transferring the funds to Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome.⁸³ This minor reparation cannot be truly considered a punishment since Rome already had taxes placed on the provinces, essentially removing one of the complaints other communities had against the Jews. But this speaks to several things. One, the Jewish communities were large, had wealth, and political clout (cf. Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 28).⁸⁴ And two, there were still strong ties between Rome and certain sects, like the Pharisees, of Second Temple Judaism.

With the Temple eradicated from Jerusalem's landscape, the Sadducean Jews (Temple elites and powerful members of the Sanhedrin) found themselves without a power base. Judaism was a topocosmic religion. The Temple in Jerusalem was its physical center with the Sadducees as its moral center. Pharisaic Jews were rising in power because they were less Temple-centric, believing as they did that Jews could stay

⁸² The Great Revolt is also called The Jewish Wars, of which there were three separate rebellions.

⁸³ Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 97.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 94.

true to Judaism anywhere, as long as the 632 admonitions of Mosaic Law were kept. As such, the Pharisees had much to gain in cooperating with imperial edicts, whether in Judaea or in their large communities all throughout the empire.

Understanding the relationship between the Jews and Romans sets the foundation for understanding why the Jews are considered to be the Christians' first persecutors. The Jewish communities were the first to hear the messianic message. And while some of them accepted that Jesus was the messiah, "most Jews found the Christian claims about [Jesus' messiahship] unbelievable and ludicrous, or even blasphemous."⁸⁵ The Jesus movement was viewed with suspicion, as a wicked new superstition at best, and their beliefs and blatantly radical actions created enmity between themselves and their communities. Because of the Jewish communities' connection with these Christian-Jews, the current climate was dangerous for Jewish leaders, whose relationship with the imperial house was still rather strained due to the ongoing tensions between the privileged and populous Jewish communities and their Greek neighbors throughout the Empire, and other zealot factions that still held hostilities toward Rome.⁸⁶

The Romans and the *Christiani*

As Christianity began to spread, the Greco-Roman world began to take notice of them, and what they heard and witnessed was not to their liking. Christians reportedly met in large groups for teaching, promoting strange new customs at odds with Roman and Jewish traditionalism. Although Tacitus does not list the specific activities that

⁸⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25.

⁸⁶ W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatists* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), 143.

caused the Romans' distaste of Christian communities, he does make reference to them while recounting the events surrounding the Great Fire of 64 in Rome. The emperor Nero was suspected of starting the fire that destroyed all but four of the city's districts.

*Ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit, quos per flagitia invisos vulgus **Chrestianos** appellabat. auctor nominis eius **Christus** Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat; repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursus erumpebat, non modo per Iudaeam, originem eius mali, sed per urbem etiam, quo cuncta undique atrocita aut pudenda confluunt celebranturque. igitur primum correpti qui fatebantur, deinde indicio eorum multitudo ingens haud proinde in crimine incendii quam odio humani generis convicti sunt.*⁸⁷

Consequently, to get rid of this report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of the hatred against mankind.⁸⁸

Latinists have long regarded the misspelling of *Chrestianos* as a mistake on the part of Tacitus. In the past few years, however, some scholars have argued that Tacitus either did not misspell *Chrestianos*, as it could have been a vulgar spelling at the time. For whatever reason Tacitus used the alternate spelling, it is clear that he is referring to followers of Jesus, known by this time as Christians.

This passage from the *Annals* is telling. Tacitus claims innocence for the victims in the charges levied against the Christians. This does not mean he, or others in the Roman world, had positive feelings towards them, possibly because Christians were

⁸⁷ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, Book 15.44, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/tacitus/tac.ann15.shtml#44>, accessed December 2013.

⁸⁸ Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, Book 15.44, Trans by Michael Grant (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1956), 365.

thought to despise the temporal world, thus having an *odium humani generis*, or hatred of the human race. Tacitus mentions that only Christians in the city of Rome were sought out and arrested, so this persecution was not empire-wide. The adjectives used for them – “evil,” “superstitious and mischievous,” and having “hideous and shameful” practices – let us know that any sympathy that might have been felt for the excessive punishments came only after the executions had become gruesome and ruthless to the extent that the deaths were viewed as being for “one man’s brutality rather than the national interest.”⁸⁹ Being burned as human torches in Nero’s garden was expected because the punishments fit the crime, but being torn apart by wild dogs and dressed as Danaids and Dirce to perform in deadly circus games was perceived to be unwarranted for arson, and crucifixion was reserved for non-citizens. One more salient point from this passage is that Tacitus specifically calls this group “Christians,” which points to a marked distinction between the Christians within and outside of the Jewish communities in Rome by 64 CE.⁹⁰

Additionally, Suetonius (70 – 130 CE) wrote in his biography of Nero, “*afflicti supplicii Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis novae ac maleficae.*”⁹¹ The translation reads: *Christians, a class of men of a new and wicked superstition, were afflicted by punishments.* This mention of Christians was inserted in a passage detailing Nero’s new laws against a variety of things, including public banquets, pantomime actors, and dishonest business practices among charioteers. Suetonius does not provide

⁸⁹ Tacitus, *Annals*, 366.

⁹⁰ Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 126.

⁹¹ Suetonius, “*Vitae Neronis*,” in *De Vita Caesarum*, 16.2, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Nero*.html#16, accessed September 2014.

as much detail as Tacitus did, but there is a dual attestation here: the new and wicked, or mischievous, superstition.

The emperor Nero was responsible for the first recorded Roman persecution of Christians in 64 CE. As Tacitus wrote, the Christians in Rome were singled out for their anti-social behavior and the unsubstantiated rumors surrounding their activities, not for their actual guilt in starting the fire that destroyed the majority of Rome. Their punishment was for their suspicious and separatist behavior that stemmed from their religious beliefs, but not from those beliefs themselves. Because they were unpopular and despised for keeping themselves apart from their communities, Nero could choose them as the guilty party and, whether it was true or not, the citizenry would not care enough to seek out the truth.

This persecution must have begun the establishment of the Christians as true, if occasional, enemies of the Empire because a little over fifty years later (c. 109 – 112 CE), the governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, wrote to the emperor Trajan on the problem of confessed Christians in his territory. Pliny received a list of people who were accused of being Christians – no other charges except Christianity were stated – and he was unfamiliar with the proper protocol in dealing with them. He informed the emperor that he himself interrogated the Christians, not once, but three times, giving them opportunities to either recant their testimonies or face torture. If they still persisted in claiming Christianity, Pliny had them executed since, “stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy certainly ought to be punished.”⁹² From the torture of two female members of the Christian community (ministers, slaves or deaconesses), Pliny discovered quite

⁹² Pliny the Younger’s Letter to the Emperor Trajan, c. 109 – 112, *Wheelock’s Latin Reader: Selections from Latin Literature*, 2nd ed, ed Frederick M. Wheelock (New York: Harper Collins Reference, 2001), 269 – 273.

innocuous details about Christianity: the singing of hymns at their gatherings, the binding of oaths not to partake in thievery, adultery, or fraud, and to strive to help other Christians in need. The Christians' crimes were in their actual assembling together since secret societies were forbidden. Only approved clubs, guilds, and religions were allowed to meet openly. Pliny thought them harmless, if having "depraved, excessive superstition."⁹³ The main problem, it seems, from Pliny's perspective was their growing number, which he deemed dangerous. Trajan's response confirmed Pliny's actions. If the Christians recanted and performed sacrifice, cursing the name of Christ, all was forgiven them and no further punishment would be meted out. Furthermore, Trajan instructed Pliny not to actively seek them out for their "Christianity" and that he should deny anonymous accusations. "In truth, pamphlets without authors ought to have no place in accusations. For this is the worst of example and not appropriate to our age."⁹⁴ This particular directive tells us with certainty that Christians were being pointed out to the authorities, some anonymously. Reason dictates that anonymous accusations would come from those with something to gain – property and fortunes, most likely – if the accused were found guilty and stripped of their belongings. The emperor's statement of the acceptance of anonymous accusations as inappropriate has its basis in *pietas* and *philosophia*. Justice and honor went hand-in-hand with piety and philosophy. The Christians may be persecuted and executed for breaking the law of assembling together, and for their refusal to submit to the expected imperial sacrifices, but not for their religious beliefs.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ The Emperor Trajan's Response Letter to Pliny the Younger, c. 109 – 112, *Wheelock's Latin Reader: Selections from Latin Literature*, 2nd ed, ed Frederick M. Wheelock (New York: Harper Collins Reference, 2001), 273 – 275.

But the pendulum always swings back to the beliefs. Were the Christians martyred for what they believed or for their crimes against the Roman state? Jesus and Paul both were reported as having said that believers would be persecuted for the “name.”⁹⁵ Once again, this is where perception comes into play and we ponder the concept of martyrdom. There is no doubt, based on Christian literature and secular sources alike, that Christians were arrested, tried, tortured, and executed. Historical sources make clear it was for their behavior as separatists – anti-social, anti-imperial, and for cleaving to their illogical *superstitio* (as opposed to *religio*), but we cannot ignore the reason behind this behavior: their beliefs and doctrines. So, in a very real sense, Christians were being persecuted for their beliefs. On what were these pernicious descriptions based?

Romans saw this newly invented group, the Christians, as *atheoi*, literally “without the gods.” Their refusal to sacrifice to the imperial and local cults, or even to pray for the safety of the emperor, was viewed as dangerous to the provinces and ultimately, the Empire.⁹⁶ Petition and obeisance to the local gods were the responsibility of each citizen. The Romans’ gods insured the continued prosperity and safety of the towns and cities with which they were associated. To deny the gods their due was tantamount to turning one’s back on their deities, their city, empire, and tradition itself.⁹⁷ More than this, the depravation and degradation alluded to rumors of sexual deviance between members of sect, as well as cannibalism (in reference to a misunderstanding about the Eucharist). Romans were suspicious of any religion’s potential to introduce immorality into the city. With the mysteries of initiation into Christianity, secretive meetings in houses, and talk of a new king – whose body they consumed during meals – and a coming kingdom that would supplant the current one, it was no small wonder that the Romans distrusted and kept watch on the Christians. The Romans were adept at keeping order in the Empire through their military and well-placed governors in the provinces. Their systemization was based on a balance of *lex* and *religio* (law and religion), with *pietas* (piety), *gens* (family), and *patria* (state) at the foundation of this honor-shame society. There was no separation of church and state. They considered the reverence they had for their gods to be far superior to non-Romans’ *externo religionibus* (foreign religions), and “if we [Romans] reject

⁹⁵ Luke 21.12-19; 1 Thessalonians 2.14-15; 3.3, NRSV.

⁹⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 426.

⁹⁷ W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 105.

devotion towards the gods, good faith and all associations of human life and the best of virtues, justice, may also disappear.”⁹⁸ Frend states it best: “Religion and the preservation of the Roman state were intimately connected.”⁹⁹ Any individual or group who threatened the peace and stability of the state was met with severity, for any behavior contrary to the Roman way of life was considered an action against the state and emperor, and therefore, treasonous.¹⁰⁰

Whether Christians, Jews, or any number of religious cults – namely, the Bacchanals and Druids – were at fault for disturbing the peace or instigating riotous or immoral behavior, the Romans were sure to take issue with it and attempt to eradicate it. Christianity, therefore, cannot claim exclusivity to the concept of martyrdom or even persecution/prosecution; nevertheless, it is so much a part of the Christian *ethos* that it cannot be thought of in the same terms as Jewish or pagan “persecution” under Roman rule.

⁹⁸ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De Natura Deorum Ad M. Brutum Liber Primus, 1.2.4* (45 BCE). <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/nd1.shtml>, accessed December 2013.

⁹⁹ W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 106.

¹⁰⁰ Dawne Kennedy, “The Circumcision Faction: Jewish and Christian Identity in Antioch, c. 30 – 55 CE,” (History Capstone, University of Southern Mississippi, 2014), 9 - 10.

Conclusion

Christian Acts on a Roman Stage

By the end of the second century, persecution and martyrdom was indeed different than when the Jews experienced it in the first Jewish war and the mass suicide at Masada, than when the followers of Jesus – still Jews, mind you – experienced it in the first century, and when the priests and priestesses of *externorum religionum* – pagan cults in the Roman provinces – experienced it, to when the Christians were specifically targeted in the second to fourth centuries. In his book, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Daniel Boyarin maintains that martyrdom, as a discourse, changed and developed over the course of these centuries from Judaic traditions. “This element [posthumous recognition and an anticipated reward] is already well-attested in 2 Maccabees: the notion that the martyr is immediately ‘saved’ ... and for Christians, beginning with Ignatius, it was a central aspect of the experience of Imitation of Christ.”¹⁰¹

Around the same time Pliny wrote to Trajan, the concept of martyrdom shifted even further. Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch in Syria, was arrested (c. 110 CE) and subsequently sent to Rome for trial.¹⁰² In letters he wrote to the various churches, in the style of the Apostle Paul, he claims only that he was arrested for the “name” of being a Christian.¹⁰³ We do not know how he came to be arrested, but in his letter to the Roman

¹⁰¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 95.

¹⁰² Because he was not tried and executed locally, it could be that he was a Roman citizen, remanded to Rome to stand trial as a citizen.

¹⁰³ Ignatius, “Letter to the Ephesians 3.1” and “Letter to the Romans 1.1,” in Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 326, 28.

Christians possibly in positions of influence, he beseeched them to keep silent on his behalf because he desired, more than anything, to die a martyr's death.

I am corresponding with all the churches and bidding them all to realize that I am voluntarily dying for God – if, that is, you do not interfere. I plead with you, do not do me an unseasonable kindness. Let me be the fodder for wild beasts – that is how I can get to God. I am God's wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ. I would rather that you fawn on the beasts so that they may be my tomb and no scrap of my body be left. Thus, when I have fallen asleep, I shall be a burden to no one. Then I shall be a real disciple of Jesus Christ when the world sees my body no more. Pray Christ for me that by these means I may become God's sacrifice.¹⁰⁴

Ignatius was eager to die as a Christian martyr, but was it for belief alone, or was it something more? Ignatius purports that by his death, his martyrdom, he will then be a true disciple of Jesus, and that this [death] was a direct path to God. He knew by dying in a sacrificial manner it would bear witness to the truth of the religion and, therefore, be instrumental in spreading the gospel. After all, who would choose this type of violent and bloody end if not for a worthy or true cause? This passage may be one reason why Tertullian wrote (c. 197 CE), “your tortures accomplish nothing, though each is more refined than the last; rather, they are an enticement to our religion. We become more numerous every time we are hewn down by you: the blood of Christians is seed.”¹⁰⁵

For a hundred years before Tertullian made this claim and after Ignatius had written his letters, there were fantastic accounts of Christians in Rome and the urban cities of Gaul, North Africa, and Asia Minor and their executions, committed presumably only because they were Christians. In 155, Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor, was burned at the stake. In 177, a group of Christians in Gaul – Lyons and Vienne

¹⁰⁴ Ignatius, “Letter to the Romans 4.1-2,” in Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

¹⁰⁵ Tertullian, “Apology 50.13,” in Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 82.

– were subjected to various tortures, finally being thrown to the beasts in the amphitheater. In 180, Christians in Scillium were beheaded.¹⁰⁶ In 202, another group of Christians, who included Perpetua and Felicitas, were placed in the arena with wild beasts where they met their end. The common thread between all these accounts, besides similar literary devices (*chiasmus*) and miraculous and supernatural events employed within, is that none of these martyrs were reported to have actively sought their fates. It is conveyed that each of them went joyfully to their deaths, believing that dying a martyr's death would purify them from their sins and deliver them immediately to God in heaven. They did not try to extricate themselves from the situation. In fact, in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the author speaks against doing so “since the gospel does not so teach” adherents to come forward voluntarily.¹⁰⁷ There were, however, instances in these accounts where the behavior of the imprisoned Christians could be viewed as provocative, and there were certainly accounts of solicited martyrdom that occurred in other parts of the Empire.

While the Scillitan martyrs were being tried in Carthage (c. 180), a Roman proconsul, Arrius Antoninus was tending to judicial business in Asia. A horde of Christians came forward to demand martyrdom at the hands of the Romans, reportedly with nooses already tied around their necks.¹⁰⁸ These Christians had not been arrested. They were not on trial. They had not been accused. They simply wanted to die a martyr's death. Antoninus took some of the mob into custody to be tried, but the majority remained free to their dismay. They pressed him until, according to Tertullian,

¹⁰⁶ These martyrs must have been Roman citizens (because of the beheading), even though they were not brought to trial in Rome.

¹⁰⁷ “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” in Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.

¹⁰⁸ Frend, 293.

the exasperated Antoninus responded, “Wretches, if you simply must die do you not have cliffs and ropes?”¹⁰⁹ Eusebius (263 – 339 CE), bishop of Caesarea and biographer of Constantine, reported that he himself witnessed the condemnation of numerous Christians in Egypt with just as many coming forward to confess their status as Christians in the hopes of being martyred.¹¹⁰ While these are just two examples of Christians showing an unambiguous desire for *mors voluntaria* (voluntary death), other accounts are less clear. Some martyred Christians did not volunteer their position, but gave themselves away knowing the consequences of their actions. They could be seen teaching doctrine in the *agora* (marketplace), assembling with other known Christians with impunity, or visiting condemned Christians being held in prison. Even if they were arrested without having done anything to provoke the indictment, some Christians’ obstinate behavior towards their captors soon caused rancor, and would quicken their sentence and execution.

One other key factor in understanding these martyr accounts, and other reports of martyrdom throughout the empire, is location. None of these accounts were reported in rural areas or small towns. All of them were in major urban centers, most commonly in Asia Minor and North Africa, and also scattered throughout the provincial cities in Europe and Greece. And as Bowersock describes this phenomenon, it was “an urban manifestation of Christian zeal.”¹¹¹ We can see this is so not only in the previous accounts’ locations, but also in the account of Cyprian (d. 258), the bishop of Carthage.

In 250, the emperor Decius (r. 249 – 251) issued an edict in which all inhabitants of the Roman Empire were to participate in sacrifice on behalf of the emperor’s safety.

¹⁰⁹ Tertullian, *The Address of Q. Sept. Tertullian to Scapula Tertullus, proconsul of Africa*, http://www.tertullian.org/articles/dalrymple_scapula.htm, accessed December 2013.

¹¹⁰ Eusebius, *The Church History* 8.9.5, Trans by Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2007), 267.

¹¹¹ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 42.

Each person, in his or her own community, had to make an offering for the emperor and partake of the sacrificial food and drink by a certain date or risk imprisonment and death. Those who performed the sacrifice were issued a certificate of compliance (*libellus*). A few years later, the emperor Valerian reinstated Decius' persecution edict under which Cyprian was exiled, recalled, and then beheaded for his refusal to participate in the imperial cult sacrifice. But, and this speaks to my point about location being significant, Cyprian refused to confess his Christian status in the town of Utica.

The honor belonging to our illustrious church will be vitiated if it is in Utica that I should receive sentence upon making my confession (whereas I have been appointed as bishop over another church [Carthage]), if it is from Utica that I should go forth as a martyred lord. For it is in your midst that I ought to be making my confession, and it is there I ought to suffer.¹¹²

Cyprian chose to withhold his confession, even an urban port city like Utica, in order to make his death more effective in Carthage, where he was bishop and had many students and followers. Carthage was also an urban town, and Cyprian's decision to confess there was even more effective because of his position.

And as Bowersock points out, "no early martyr was taken aside discreetly and executed out of sight, just as no interrogations were conducted in small towns."¹¹³ There was a simple and obvious reason for this. No interrogations were conducted because no courts or trials were held in small territories. Accusations would be made and brought before the magistrates or proconsuls in which the province the smaller regions belonged. Those convicted – Christian or not – would be sentenced accordingly. Some were sentenced with non-lethal punishment, but if your crime was seen as detrimental to the empire, if it was seditious or treasonous, then execution, most often in the arena, was the

¹¹² Cyprian, "Epistles, 8.1.4" in G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 62.

¹¹³ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 50.

result. While this is a major factor in the initial cause of martyrdoms being an urban phenomenon, martyrs and church leaders, like Cyprian and Tertullian, did not hesitate to use it to their own purpose.

Clearly, Christianity survived, becoming a major world religion in the first three centuries after its inception, but what did the infamy of martyrdom do for the spread of Christianity and the reputation of Christians in those early decades? In his *Apology*, Tertullian argued that the sight of the executions of persecuted Christians aroused questions concerning the faith the martyrs championed as more precious than mortality, rather than continued malice. “And who, when he has inquired, does not approach us? Who, when he has approached, does not desire to suffer so that he may procure the full grace of God, that he may purchase from him full pardon by paying with his own blood?”¹¹⁴ The Christian *ethos* reflected a growing desire to stand against pagan idolaters of the Empire very openly through martyrdom, just as in the case of Perpetua, a kind of blood baptism, where the crowds cried “Well washed! Well washed!” as onlookers were splashed with her blood and the blood of others sacrificed in the arena.¹¹⁵ By her death, and the deaths of all martyrs, a remission of sins was granted, purifying them for immediate entry into the kingdom of God.¹¹⁶

Martyrs promoted the glorious deaths, fully sanctioned by those Christians who viewed their lot was to suffer for their beliefs, and attracted more and more believers and non-believers alike. Tertullian believed that martyrdom was the will of God, and the blood shed during the executions was the catalyst for two things: purification of the

¹¹⁴ Tertullian, *Apol.* 50.15, 82.

¹¹⁵ “The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas,” in Bart D. Ehrman, *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 49.

¹¹⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 435.

victim and an attraction to the religion.¹¹⁷ Tertullian was right, but perhaps not for the reasons he thought he was. Because martyrs were executed in cities with large populations, in the most public of ways – in the arena for civic celebrations or as exotic entertainment – they were a core element of Roman culture. The spectators associated them with their love of the games, as a component – a deserving one, no less – of those who did not have the interests of the emperor or the city at heart. Christians were already deemed as *other*, and their role in the games only served to unite the already hostile Jews and polytheists against them.¹¹⁸ The hostility of some turned to curiosity, and then admiration. The acts of the martyrs did indeed lead some to embrace Christianity, and the “sight of condemned Christians provoked some volunteers [to martyr themselves].”¹¹⁹

But did all Christians view martyrdom as a necessary and absolute component of their faith – particularly *voluntary* martyrdom? No. The topic of voluntary martyrdom caused much debate between pre-Augustinian Christian theologians, most notably Clement of Alexandria (d. 215 CE) and Origen (d. 254 CE) who were both against voluntary martyrdom and Tertullian, who believed it was the duty of Christians to suffer and die in emulation of Jesus’ suffering and death.¹²⁰ Both Clement and Origen accepted certain schools of philosophy, Platonism, for one, as parallel to Christian doctrine in that “both [Christians and Platonists] were radically other-worldly: Christ had said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world;’ Plato had said the same of his realm of ideas.”¹²¹

Platonists were uniformly against the idea of self-destruction, while many Stoics and

¹¹⁷ Tertullian, *Scorpiace*, 4, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0318.htm>, accessed November 2014.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 43.

¹¹⁹ Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 443.

¹²⁰ Tertullian, *Apol.* 50.15, 82.

¹²¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1969), 42; and ; and C. *Acad.* III, xix, 42, in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1969),93.

Epicureans saw the morality and nobility of the *mors voluntaria*. With the belief that purposefully seeking a martyr's death was tantamount to suicide, Clement went as far as to claim that martyr-suicides were not truly Christians.

We, too, say that those who have rushed on death (for there are some, not belonging to us, but sharing the name merely, who are in haste to give themselves up, the poor wretches dying through hatred to the Creator) – these, we say, banish themselves without being martyrs, even though they are punished publicly. For they do not preserve the characteristic mark of believing martyrdom, inasmuch as they have not known the only true God, but give themselves up to a vain death.¹²²

Ironically, Tertullian, who was violently opposed to the notion that any Greco-Roman ideals or philosophies could truly influence Christianity, employed noble pagan deaths of the past as justification that “if these courageous people destroyed themselves for a false way of life, should Christians not do the same for the true way?”¹²³

Even in the debate on voluntary martyrdom between Christian sophists and theologians, there was strong a connection to the Greco-Roman *ethos*. But at the core of both cultures, a complex system of beliefs and rituals were associated with every type of death. For the Romans, perhaps their preoccupation with dying stemmed from their relatively short life spans, or that they were so closely tied to the cycles of nature. Roman life was inextricably tied to the land through the never-ending cycle of fertility, blood, and death. Blood ushered a baby from the womb, blood would be spilled over and over throughout a lifetime – from hunting or preparing food, to religious rites and, of course, in one of the Roman's favorite pastimes: war. More importantly, at the end of a life, Romans saw blood as the lubricant to take the deceased from this world and into the

¹²² Clement, *Stromata* IV, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-stromata-book4.html>, accessed October 2014.

¹²³ Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, VII, http://www.tertullian.org/works/de_praescriptione_haereticorum.htm, accessed October 2014; Tertullian, *Apology* L; and Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 63.

afterlife. For the Christians, their preoccupation with death stemmed from the exchange of their earthly life – through persecution and the shedding of their blood as a sacrifice – for the expectation of a better, more peaceful afterlife.

Tying Roman death and Christian martyrdom together, symbolically and tangibly, is the notion that the spilling of blood entailed a ritual of purification. This blood – this death – was a means of achieving an individual's desired place in the afterlife, whether he or she was a polytheist or a Christian. The Romans' use of public death as a purification ritual represented a significant cultural and ideological pattern that influenced the understanding of martyrdom in a specifically Christian context. The bloodletting of Christian martyrs and the symbolism of purification by blood that swirled around it, finds a very close antecedent, indeed, if not a direct ancestor in Roman death rituals.

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