

## MARTYRS AND MARTYRDOM<sup>1</sup>

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THERE are two reasons why this subject should be interesting. One is philological and has to do with the meaning of the word. The other is eminently practical and has to do with the fact that this twentieth century of ours may turn out, when the church history of the period is written, to be one of the great ages of Christian martyrs. We do not yet know, and it is likely that we cannot know, the full extent of the sufferings of God's people; but we do know that they have been great. I believe that this century will show records of heroism and loyalty and endurance that can stand comparison with anything that was produced in the dark ages of Decius and Diocletian. I propose to begin with the philological side because I think it is not only intellectually interesting but also capable, if we study it carefully, of illuminating the great moral and religious issues. The primary connotation of the word 'martyr' nowadays is that of suffering. You may be a martyr *for* some cause. You may be a martyr for Christianity or Democracy or Fascism or Nazism. One of the most distinguished martyrs of Nazism was a particularly objectionable character called Horst Wessel, who had his place in the Nazi martyrology and his own particular hymn which was chanted with great fervour by his devotees. Or you may be a martyr for Communism or Nationalism or any other -ism. You may be a martyr *for* any of these things. On the other hand you may be a martyr *to* rheumatism or neuralgia. That is the odd thing because the Greek word *μάρτυς*, from which martyr is derived, contains no suggestion whatsoever of suffering. The Greek word *μάρτυς* means a 'witness', and the cognate noun *μαρτυρία* means 'testimony'; and there is no thought that pain may be involved. If I sit down and write a

<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 14th of November, 1956.

testimonial to my secretary saying that she has given complete satisfaction in all her work up to date and that I can recommend her for any position of trust and responsibility, that is a *μαρτυρία* and when I write that I am in the old sense of the word a *μάρτυς*. There is no suffering involved. Now what we have to find out, if we can, is what is the bridge between that painless testimony and the confessional and eventually non-confessional pains and discomforts ; and where and when it was built. It needs only a quick look to see that this drastic change of meaning is a specifically Christian phenomenon ; that it is in the early church that the name *μάρτυς*, 'witness', is given as a title to those who suffer for their religion. That change of meaning was already completed by the time of Origen in the first half of the third century. He used the word *μάρτυς*, as a religious term, in exactly the same way that we use the word 'martyr', meaning by it 'one who of his own free choice chooses to die for the sake of religion'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, martyrdom takes place when people, and again I quote, 'die for religion and prefer to die rather than deny their religion and live'.<sup>2</sup> Suffering and dying for one's religion is not peculiar to early Christianity. It was already present in the Old Testament and in early Judaism. The thing was there but the name was not used of it. Loyal Jews who laid down their lives in Old Testament times or in the period between the Testaments certainly died for their religion, but they were not at that time called martyrs nor was their death called martyrdom. By the time of Origen it had become perfectly possible and quite natural to use the words in this way and Origen does, in fact, call those who died in the Maccabean days martyrs and ranks them along with Christian martyrs. It is quite clear then that we have to do with a Christian use of the terms. It is also clear that by Origen's time that use had been so long established that *μάρτυς* meant simply one who openly stands up for the true religion at the cost of suffering or death to himself ; and there is apparently no urge to reflect on why the word should have been chosen or what it is of which the martyr is a witness. The change of meaning took place in the early Church but the preparation for it had begun much earlier and it can be traced in the

<sup>1</sup> *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, ch. 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, ch. 5.

Old Testament and in the extra-canonical Jewish writings ; and I think it is to these sources that we must look in the first instance for answers, even if they are only tentative answers, to three questions. I think that these are the key questions and I shall continue to ask them at successive stages in the survey which follows.

- (1) Who are the witnesses ?
- (2) To what do they bear witness ? and
- (3) Are they persecuted for witnessing, and if so, why ?

They are simple enough questions and I hope we may be able to find reasonable answers to them.

First, who are the witnesses ? The answer may be found by considering the passages in the Old Testament where words meaning 'witness' or 'testimony' or 'testify' are used in contexts in which the testimony given is religious testimony and the person giving the testimony is therefore involved in unmerited suffering inflicted by his fellows. In this connection we have a most instructive text in the book of Nehemiah.<sup>1</sup> To see the full force of it we must read the immediate context as well. In chapter eight there is a description of how the Law of Moses had been promulgated by Ezra the Scribe and of the joyful celebrations which followed this event. These celebrations included the holding of the Feast of Tabernacles. Later on, in the same seventh month of the year, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, a solemn fast was observed, in the course of which Ezra uttered a prayer of confession. In that prayer he detailed all that God had done for Israel from the earliest times down to the settlement in the Promised Land. That occupies chapter nine verses 7 to 25. The text continues in verse 26, 'Nevertheless they', that is the Israelites, 'were disobedient and rebelled against thee and cast thy law behind their back and killed thy prophets, who had testified against them<sup>2</sup> in order to turn them back to thee, and they committed great blasphemies'. I think this is a particularly instructive passage because the prophets are here clearly regarded as God's witnesses, and they give their testimony to Israel at the cost of their lives. That is to say the true and faithful witnesses for God are a small and persecuted minority

<sup>1</sup> ix. 26.

<sup>2</sup> הַעֲדוּ בָּם ; διεμαρτύρατο ἐν αὐτοῖς.

within Israel. But there is another picture, and a rosier one, which is presented in Deutero-Isaiah. Here Israel as a whole, God's servant and chosen people, are regarded as witnesses. Thus in Isaiah xliii. 8-12 as given in the R.S.V. :

'Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears !  
Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble.

Who among them can declare this, and show us the former things ?

Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say,  
It is true.

You are my witnesses ', says the Lord, 'and my servant whom I have chosen,  
that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He.

Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.

I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no saviour.

I declared and saved and proclaimed, when there was no strange god among you ;  
and you are my witnesses ', says the Lord.

And again in xliv. 6-8 :

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts :

'I am the first and I am the last ; besides me there is no god.

Who is like me ? Let him proclaim it, let him declare and set it forth before me.

Who has announced from of old the things to come ?

Let them tell us what is yet to be.

Fear not, nor be afraid ; have I not told you from of old and declared it ?

And you are my witnesses !

Is there a God besides me ?

There is no Rock ; I know not any.'

Here it is God's people as a whole who are his witnesses. In the prophet's vision they have become the fulfilment of the longing of Moses himself when he cried 'Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets'.

The answer to our first question is that those who bear witness are in the first instance the prophets of Israel, and secondarily those in Israel who through hard experience learn the truth of the prophetic message and accept it as from God. 'Have I not told you from of old and declared it ? And you are my witnesses !'

That brings us to the second question. 'Have I not told you from of old and declared *it* ?' What is 'it' ? To what do the prophets and their disciples bear witness ? What is the content of their testimony ? There are in the first instance two possibilities : first, the testimony might be a report to God about

Israel: and particularly about the misdeeds of Israel; for example, Elijah's report to God at Horeb,

The people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.<sup>1</sup>

But it quickly appears that God has no need of this kind of testimony; he is already better informed than Elijah about the state of religion and public morals in Israel. So we turn to the second possibility: that the prophetic testimony is a report to Israel about God's actions and intentions; and this seems to me the most likely interpretation and the one that corresponds most nearly to the normal practice of the true prophets. The witness which the prophet bears is a giving notice to Israel of what they may expect from God in view of what they are and the way they behave. In Nehemiah ix. 26 the Hebrew **הִעֲיִדוּם** could fairly be rendered, I think, by 'testified at them'. The R.S.V. says 'warned them'. The prophets gave them notice of God's intentions. This involves a further point—and I think an essential one—namely, the conviction on the part of the prophet that he has special sources of information. If I may digress for a moment, we are too apt to think of the Old Testament prophets as if they were the pre-Christian equivalent of our more enlightened commentators on public affairs: persons extremely well informed on all matters of fact, with a sound judgement and a sensitive conscience; able to make a clear picture of the whole situation and then give a considered opinion about it. I do not want to belittle the work that is done by such men in our own day; but I must point out that the Hebrew prophets went about their business in a different fashion. Their deliverances came out at irregular intervals; and they never thought of them as their own work. Rightly or wrongly they believed that they had been admitted to the Council Chamber of God himself. They had found themselves listening to the discussions in Heaven between God and his immediate entourage on what was to be done with his people Israel. Consequently the prophet never regarded himself as merely making acute guesses about what the future might hold, or intelligent forecasts of the probable

<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings xix. 14.

behaviour of his human contemporaries. He always thought of himself as simply reporting decisions that had been taken at the top level, decisions about which he had first-hand information. The importance of this way of looking at the prophetic task was clearly seen and convincingly stated by my friend and colleague H. Wheeler Robinson in an article published in the *Journal of Theological Studies* for 1944 (pp. 151-7) entitled "The Council of Yahweh".<sup>1</sup> In support of his thesis he quotes a large number of relevant Old Testament texts. For example, Jeremiah xxiii. 18, 21, 22 where the question is asked, 'Who hath stood in the Council of Yahweh that he should perceive and know his work?' Again Jeremiah reports a declaration of God regarding false prophets in which God says: 'I sent not these prophets, yet they ran; I spake not unto them, but they prophesied. But if they had stood in my Council,<sup>2</sup> then had they caused my people to hear my words.' These unauthorized prophets with a message which does not come from the Council of Yahweh might fairly be called 'false witnesses of God'. For a picture of the transactions in the Heavenly Council, the *Sōdh*, Wheeler Robinson naturally turns to the famous story in 1 Kings xxii, the vision of the prophet Micaiah the son of Imlah with its vivid portrayal of the deliberations in Heaven on how to deal with king Ahab. Perhaps there is another glimpse of the Council, as Robinson suggests, in the prophet's inaugural vision in Isaiah vi, and again quite clearly in the prologue to the book of Job. There are certainly allusions to it in Psalm lxxxix. 7 and in Job xv. 8; and according to Amos iii. 7 the decisions of the Council are regularly reported to the prophets as God's servants: 'The Lord God does nothing without making his secret purpose known to his servants the prophets.'<sup>3</sup> To that material I should be inclined to add Daniel iv. 17: the sentence upon Nebuchadnezzar which is 'by the decree of the Watchers and the demand by the word of the Holy Ones to the intent that the living may know that the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will'. In this case

<sup>1</sup> See also his *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (1946), pp. 166-70.

<sup>2</sup> 710

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps also Amos iv. 13.

Nebuchadnezzar has the vision but it is Daniel who has the interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

We can now formulate the answer to our second question. The prophets who are the witnesses *par excellence* in the Old Testament bear witness to what they have been admitted to see and hear in the Council of Yahweh. They are in a real sense eye-witnesses and ministers of the word. Their task is to declare without fear or favour the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, as it has been made known to them in God's Council Chamber; and very often they have to give their testimony before earthly rulers in Jerusalem or Samaria. That testimony concerns the decisions of the Almighty regarding the behaviour of Israel and her rulers; and only too often it must be a judgement of condemnation and a sentence of exemplary punishment.

With that we come to our third question, which now takes the form, Were the Old Testament prophets persecuted? And if so, why? Some of them certainly suffered, and even died, in carrying out their task. How many of the canonical prophets in fact came to a violent end may be a very open question and there may be more legend than history in some of the accounts. Nevertheless, it was widely and firmly believed in New Testament times that the prophets, or a considerable number of them, had sealed their testimony with their blood. The fullest recent discussion that I know of on this topic is an essay by H. J. Schoeps entitled, 'Die jüdischen Prophetenmorde'.<sup>2</sup> Schoeps begins from a number of New Testament texts in which the

<sup>1</sup> To the Old Testament material we may add *Sifra* on Lev. i. 1 (ed. Weiss 3<sup>a</sup> 4<sup>a</sup>), where the question is discussed whether anyone but Moses heard what was said by God in the Tent of Meeting. It is conceded that the words of the Almighty were not heard by Israel as a whole, or by the Elders, or by the sons of Aaron, or by Aaron himself. The commentary continues: 'Though I exclude all these I do not exclude the ministering angels since Moses could not enter their company until he was invited. But Scripture says it was a voice "for him" and a voice "to him"'. [It follows that] Moses heard the voice and all these did not hear the voice.'

The text is taken to mean that Moses, and he alone, was given audience by God enthroned on the Ark in the Tent of Meeting. He is taken more completely into God's confidence than even the ministering angels.

<sup>2</sup> *Aus frühchristlicher Zeit* (1950), pp. 126-43; cf. M. Simon in *RHPR* (1954), 102.

persecution and martyrdom of the prophets is asserted : Matthew xxiii. 31-9; Luke xi. 47-51 ; xiii. 34 f. ; Acts vii. 52 ; Hebrews xi. 36 ff. ; and 1 Thessalonians ii. 15. When you put those texts together you find that the charge that the Jews were guilty of murdering prophets was made by Jesus, by Stephen, by Paul, and by the author of Hebrews. What grounds are there for it ? In the Old Testament we have positive evidence in the case of a minor prophet called Uriah the son of Shemaiah, a contemporary of Jeremiah, referred to in Jeremiah xxvi. 20-4. He was slain with the sword by king Jehoiakim. Jeremiah narrowly escaped a similar fate. The divine comment is given in Jeremiah ii. 30, where the prophet says in God's name, ' In vain have I smitten your children, they took no correction ; your own sword devoured your prophets like a ravening lion '. Then we have the case of Zechariah son of Jehoiada in 2 Chronicles xxiv. 20-22 who was stoned to death by command of king Joash ' in the court of the house of the Lord '. Thirdly, we have in 1 Kings xix. 10, 14, Elijah's complaint that his contemporaries in Israel had slain the prophets and that they were bent on destroying him. That is quoted in Romans xi. 3 by Paul and is reflected in Nehemiah ix. 26. Thus there is some justification for the statements in the New Testament, even if we confine ourselves to the Old Testament evidence. But it is not a very long list and it says little or nothing about the ultimate fate of the major prophets. The Church Fathers were aware of this difficulty. Origen, in his *Commentary on Matthew* dealing with Matthew xxiii. 31 ff., calls in the Jewish apocryphal books to supplement the Old Testament. He says : ' Perhaps we ought to look and see if it would not be right to prove what Christ says from the more secret books which are in circulation among the Jews '. There it is quite clear that he is thinking of such apocryphal books as the *Martyrdom of Isaiah*, to which he refers elsewhere. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews was acquainted with the tradition that Isaiah was sawn asunder. The story is told in the *Ascension of Isaiah* and is to the effect that when Isaiah was being pursued a tree that stood in his way miraculously opened up for him. He stepped inside and the tree then closed in on him again so that he was safely inside the trunk. Unfortunately a bit of his gown stuck



out and acted as a tell-tale. The wicked king immediately ordered that the tree should be sawn through about three feet above the ground ; and it was done accordingly. The death of Isaiah is referred to in the Epistle to the Hebrews in the list of heroes of faith, where it is said, ' They were sawn asunder in the midst '. That story is told over and over again by the early Fathers : it is also told over and over again by the Jewish rabbis. Whatever its value may be, it was evidently part of a settled tradition in Judaism and early Christianity.

Another source of information is the so-called *Lives of the Prophets*. Schoeps thinks it is possible that in its original form this book was known in the first century A.D. Again it is a work that does not appear to have any historical value ; but it seems to reflect popular beliefs. We have the lives of twenty-three prophets in this work, and six of them came to violent ends. The prophets concerned are Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah the son of Jehoiada. Other authorities add Joel and Habakkuk. Amos was, according to this story, beaten to death with a club ; Micah was thrown over a precipice ; Isaiah was sawn in two ; Jeremiah was stoned ; Ezekiel was murdered by members of the tribes of Dan and Gad, who dragged him by the feet until they had completely smashed his skull ; Zechariah was slain by king Joash beside the altar. All this goes to show that there was a strong belief in the early days that a number of prophets had died in the execution of their duty. In Stephen's speech in Acts it is laid down, first, that the prophets were persecuted in Israel, and second, that they foretold the advent of the Righteous One, but Stephen does not make their foretelling of the advent of the Righteous One the cause of the persecution. He asks : ' which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute ? ' And there is an important distinction here ; because I think more persecutions than martyrdoms can be found in the Old Testament. We have the case of Elijah's flight from Jezebel (1 Kings xix. 8), the case of the hundred prophets under Obadiah's care in the cave (1 Kings xviii. 3 f.), Micaiah the son of Imlah imprisoned by Ahab, Hanani the seer imprisoned by Asa, Jeremiah twice in custody in the stocks and in prison and once deposited in an empty cistern ; and further examples may

be found in the apocryphal books. There are many details about the troubles of Jeremiah and his death by stoning at the hands of his countrymen in Egypt, and they are repeated over and over again by the early Fathers and by the rabbis. Ezekiel's martyrdom is reported in some early Christian writings. Zechariah the son of Jehoiada appears in the Old Testament and I think it is he who is meant in the saying of our Lord.<sup>1</sup>

From all this we may draw the following conclusions. (1) There is a certain amount of concrete evidence in the Old Testament that some prophets at any rate did die in the execution of their duty. (2) We have further evidence that others were persecuted in the execution of their duty, even if they were not put to death. (3) And going beyond what is established in that way in Old Testament history we have a widespread popular belief that the persecutions reported in the Old Testament were not the only ones, and that prophets of whose fate we have no record in the Old Testament were in fact put to death.

The persecutions and martyrdoms of the prophets are also implied in the parable of the vineyard and the wicked husbandmen in Mark xii. 1-12 with its parallels in Matthew xxi. 33-46 and Luke xx. 9-19. This parable forms part of the group of conflict stories which runs from Mark xi. 27 to xii. 37. It is regarded with grave suspicion by many scholars; and it is often held that as it stands it does not belong to the conditions of the lifetime of Jesus, but to the situation after his death in the early days of the primitive Church, with its acknowledgement of the exalted son of God.<sup>2</sup> Concerning this objection I would only say that if it is valid, which I do not believe, it would be valid also against the accounts of the Baptism, Temptations, Transfiguration, and the examination before Caiaphas. If the first three of these are accepted as reflecting experiences of Jesus himself, as I think they must be if they are to be accepted at all, then they provide an entirely adequate ground for Jesus' description of himself as the son in the parable and our real task is to determine the meaning of the word 'son' in this connection. But it is also

<sup>1</sup> 2 Chron. xxiv. 20 ff. ; Matt. xxiii. 35. For a discussion of this saying see my book, *The Sayings of Jesus*, pp. 95 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See for example W. G. Kümmel in the *Festschrift for Coguel*, p. 131.

objected that the story of the vineyard is not a parable but an allegory. I venture to think that the pressing of the distinction between parables and allegories has been somewhat overdone. Elsewhere I have discussed the difference in purpose and construction between parables and allegories.<sup>1</sup> I do not propose to go over that ground again but I venture to say two things. The first is, that no voice from Heaven has yet declared that Jesus could not have used allegories as well as parables if it suited his purpose to do so. The second is that if the vineyard story is an allegory, it is an allegory of a sort for which there were plenty of precedents in pre-Christian Judaism, and farther back still in Hebrew prophecy. This particular kind of composition might better be called 'veiled history', for the essential thing about it is that it describes real people, real events, and real relations in a manner which is intelligible to those who know how to interpret the details. It is the method that is still used in our own day by satirists and cartoonists no less than by prophets and apocalyp-  
tists. Every time an American cartoonist draws a picture of Uncle Sam or an English cartoonist draws John Bull doing this or that, he is employing this method of conveying his meaning, and there is a whole host of conventional figures of this kind, as well as doves bearing olive branches, and so on. We are familiar with the signs and most of us know how to interpret them. Much work of this kind was done both in the prophetic and the later Jewish writings and the people of that time knew how to interpret what they found there. For example, whether the domestic story told by Hosea is fact or fiction does not in the last resort matter very much : what does matter a great deal is that that story, whether it is fact or fiction, is meant to portray the history of Israel and, as the key to that history, the relation between God and his people. The visions recorded in the Book of Daniel are generally acknowledged to be 'veiled history', the history of Israel and the neighbouring empires. Examples of this kind could, I think, be multiplied ; and I cannot see any reason why Jesus should not have used this well-established method of teaching, if he thought it useful. Accordingly I think we are justified in citing the parable of the wicked

<sup>1</sup> *The Sayings of Jesus*, pp. 24-7.

husbandmen as evidence that Jesus regarded persecution, and even killing of prophets, as part and parcel of the history of Israel. In later Judaism and early Christianity it is common ground that prophets are rejected, persecuted, and slain by those to whom they are sent.

• One conspicuous feature of the treatment of prophets in the Old Testament is that the opposition is much more concerned to intimidate the prophet than to destroy him ; and in practice the main object is usually to prevent the promulgation of the heavenly decrees. So it is in the case of Amos, who is officially warned off Israelite territory. Similarly at the other end of the story John the Baptist is held in custody and Antipas is really afraid of him. The liquidation of the prophet in that case is brought about by very strange means indeed, and much to the embarrassment of Antipas himself. Now when one compares Ahab's treatment of Micaiah with Jezebel's message to Elijah one wonders whether the born Israelite was not just a little afraid of going to extremities with a prophet. Micaiah had made the most devastating threats in the name of God against Ahab, and all Ahab had to say was ' take him away ; keep him on bread and water till I come back victorious ', to which Micaiah retorted, ' if you come back victorious the Lord has not spoken by me '. But there is no suggestion of ' take him away and throw him over the nearest cliff '. All that is very different from the message that Jezebel sends to Elijah : ' May the gods do so unto me and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to-morrow about this time.' It was better, if the prophet should later turn out to be genuine, not to have done anything irremediable. Ahab's heathen consort was not troubled by these inhibitions and she was ready for direct action on the spot : and so was Antipas's consort Herodias. The prophetic reaction in these cases is to make sure that the decrees are not nullified. The roll of Jeremiah that is cut up and burnt by the king is immediately re-written ; and one of the executive orders of Isaiah is ' bind thou up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples '<sup>1</sup>.

I think we are now in a position to answer our three questions so far as they concern the Old Testament and early Judaism.

<sup>1</sup> Isa. viii. 16.

Who are the witnesses? They are primarily the prophets. To what do they witness? They witness to the immediate purpose of God, reporting the decisions that have been taken in God's Privy Council regarding Israel. And are they persecuted? They are, in some cases at any rate. And why? Because the message that they bring is not the message that the audience wishes to hear. They bring news of disaster and punishment when people want to hear something optimistic, cheering and promising.

The fall of the Hebrew kingdoms and the Babylonian captivity of Judah made some very drastic changes in Israel. Jerusalem changed from the political capital of Judah to become the cult centre and holy city of Judaism. The high priest became the real head of the Jewish community at home and abroad. The canonization of the Mosaic Law was an accomplished fact and that of the prophetic books was on its way. Those were epoch-making changes; but to a certain extent they had already been prepared for before the Babylonian Empire finally made an end of the kingdom of Judah. In one respect a great change had been wrought by internal movements in the kingdom itself. When Josiah put down the local sanctuaries and made it the law that no worship of the one kind that was really recognized as proper worship in those days, that is, sacrifice, could be offered except in the one place, Jerusalem, he took a first step towards making it unnecessary in any place: the first step towards teaching people to do without it. We may try to imagine what would happen if it became the law of the land that there could be no celebration of the Eucharist in England except in Westminster Abbey. Josiah did something like that for the kingdom of Judah. He made it impossible for the ordinary man up and down the country to take part in the recognized services of worship unless he came to Jerusalem—and people could not come up to Jerusalem every day of the week or even once a week. He took the first step which was eventually to enable the Jewish people to manage without Temple or sacrifices. That is the beginning. The next stage was reached after the return from the Exile when the handful of people that gathered in the small piece of territory around the Holy City found that they had become the centre not

of any political régime but of a world-wide religion ; because there were Jews scattered about all over the inhabited world at that time and they were linked with one another by the fact that they looked to this one common centre. The thing that united them was the knowledge that the spiritual head of the community was in Jerusalem, and that there the Temple of Yahweh was rebuilt. The sacrifices were again being offered, though they could not partake in them except by contributing money towards their upkeep.

More than that, they had the Scriptures. Now the Scriptures were not confined to Jerusalem. The Bible could be read anywhere, and the Bible now became the real spiritual food and drink of the devout, observant Jew. Those Scriptures were not regarded primarily as books that would stir up pleasant religious emotions in the people who read them. They were a far more serious matter than that. Those who read the Bible in the post-exilic period were reading what might almost be called the Minute Books of the Council of God ; the records of the proceedings in the heavenly assembly ; the decrees of God which had been passed from time to time, some of them carried into effect there and then, others still waiting to be put into effect. Now every Jew who took his religion seriously had those documents in his mind. He had the divine oracles that had been given to the prophets ; he had the Law of Moses ; and over and above that book-knowledge he had the memory of what his people had been through. What was thus remembered was understood in terms of obedience or disobedience to the divine commands, with consequent prosperity or disaster. For the Jews their own history became the confirmation that what they had in their sacred books was divine truth ; it had been made known in advance by God and it had been verified in the experience of the people. Here was what seemed to be a very solid anchorage for religious faith.

But that faith was to be subjected to a still more severe testing, which came in the period after the death of Alexander the Great, when the clash that his conquests had made inevitable between the culture and civilization of the West and the old-established faiths and customs of the East came to an acute crisis. It was

part of the policy of Alexander and his successors to establish Greek cities at the strategic points in the countries that had been conquered.<sup>1</sup> They established living centres of Greek culture and the ruins of them are still there to astonish the traveller. The pressure of the Hellenizing forces varied from time to time. In the third century B.C. Palestine was under the rule of those successors of Alexander who had established themselves in Egypt, the Ptolemies. So far as we know they were not fanatical in pushing Hellenism on their subjects ; but there was a good deal of peaceful penetration by Greek ideas, particularly amongst the upper classes in Jerusalem. In the second century Palestine came into the possession of the Seleucid kingdom ruling from Antioch, and there was from that time onwards a much stronger pressure of Hellenism upon Jewish faith and customs. Once again the progress of Hellenism was most marked amongst the upper classes. The kind of thing that was taking place, I imagine, has one of its nearest parallels in Czarist Russia before the 1917 revolution, when ordinary Russians spoke Russian thought Russian, and lived Russian, but the aristocracy thought French, talked French, and followed French fashions. There seems to have been a period in Jewish history in the second century B.C. when, if you wanted to be anything in Jerusalem society you had to have a certain amount of Greek polish. Mortal combat between Judaism and Hellenism broke out towards the middle of that century in the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes ; and it is in that conflict that we have undoubted Jewish martyrdoms. At this time people did die for their religion. Only they were not yet called martyrs nor was their death called martyrdom. The name had not yet been appropriated to this kind of suffering and death. The Maccabean martyrs are men and women who reassert the truth of what is given in their Scriptures, in the Law and the Prophets, and are prepared to endure torture and death rather than abandon their position. Those Maccabean martyrs are doubtless the most significant of the spiritual heroes of pre-Christian days ; but we cannot conceal from ourselves the fact

<sup>1</sup> That policy was repeated in reverse by St. Paul. He did not establish new cities ; he was content to attack the cities that were already established at strategic points and capture and hold them for the Christian Gospel.

that there were other sufferers for good causes in the centuries before Christ. In the pagan world, for example, there were those who laid down their lives for truth or virtue, and the most distinguished of them all, the one that springs first to memory is, of course, Socrates, dying in Athens for the sake of what he regarded as the right of free enquiry. In that connection it is interesting to compare the records of the end of Socrates written by his disciple Plato with some of the records of the early Christian martyrs. The *Apology* of Socrates in many respects resembles what we call the *Acta* of a Christian martyr; the *Crito* and the *Phaedo* correspond to what is known as a *Passio*.<sup>1</sup> There are other cases from outside Judaism and Christianity. One I only mention to dismiss it; and that is the so-called *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs of Alexandria*. They have been recently studied by Father Musurillo and I think he has established beyond any doubt (a) that they have no religious significance whatever; (b) that there were trials and executions in Alexandria at the relevant time but they had no significance except a political one; (c) that the so-called martyrs of Alexandria were really ardent Egyptian nationalists who fell foul of the Roman Empire.

But looking back over the whole period we have to ask how many of the people who died for one good cause or another are to be reckoned as genuine recruits to the 'noble army of martyrs',

<sup>1</sup> I refer here to the distinction made between two types of record: one of which is called *Acta*—the Acts of martyrdom—and the other is called *Passio*—the Passion of a particular martyr or group of martyrs. The distinction goes back to one of the greatest of modern Hagiologists, Father Delehaye. It is that in *Acta* we have what amounts to a shorthand transcript of the proceedings before the official authority; and it is usually quite brief. It will usually go on to two or three pages at the outside; and it consists of questions and answers. The Proconsul said, 'You are so-and-so?' 'Yes.' 'I understand you are a Christian?' 'Yes.' 'You must stop being a Christian.' 'No.' 'I give you ten minutes to think it over.' 'No.' 'Very well, take him away.' It is not quite as short as that but that is the substance of it. The other thing, the *Passio*, is the same situation written up by some godly witness or reporter of what took place and in the *Passio* you learn far more about the feelings of the martyr and the things the martyr said to friends and sympathisers and the things the martyr suffered and so on. It is all much more graphic: much less plain and businesslike and in the case of the passions of martyrs we have always to be on the look-out for what is pious embroidery of the original story, because such stories tend to attract such embellishments as time goes on.



and what is the test for inclusion in that roll of honour? There are a number of voices that speak to us from the early Church. One of the earliest is Ignatius.<sup>1</sup> He says: 'The divine prophets lived according to Jesus Christ; and for this reason they were persecuted, being inspired by his grace to convince the unbelievers that there is one God who revealed himself through Jesus Christ his Son, who is his Word that proceeded from silence, who was well pleasing in every respect to him who sent him.' According to Ignatius there is no doubt that the prophets belong to the 'noble army of martyrs'. Again Irenaeus<sup>2</sup> says, 'As they', that is the prophets, 'were members of Christ it was as such that each of them prophesied. One was pre-figured by all of them and their message had reference to One.' The justification of these Old Testament heroes is that they were witnesses to Christ before his coming. Cyprian, in chapter xi of his pamphlet on Martyrdom addressed to Fortunatus, brings forward both the prophets and the Maccabean heroes as exemplars for Christians; and he finds that the only difference between the period before Christ and the Christian era is that, whereas in the pre-Christian centuries the number of martyrs was limited, in the new age since the coming of Christ the total is already beyond computation. In support of this he appeals to the seventh chapter of the Book of Revelation with its description of the great multitude which no man could number. In his tract on *The Unity of the Church*<sup>3</sup> he claims that schismatics cannot be martyrs: if you leave the Church you cannot be a martyr. But that, of course, does not touch the lives of pre-Christian martyrs. They were not schismatics because at that time there was not yet any Church from which they could separate, as schismatics later did.

In the same period Origen in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*<sup>4</sup> deals with the question of the martyrs; and evidently he has some difficulty in making up his mind. He draws a careful distinction. First of all he says, 'many who did not belong to the portion of God appear to have fought to obtain self-control and some have died a heroic death because of their loyalty to the common Master of all men'. He has in mind people like

<sup>1</sup> *ad Magn.* viii. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. xiv.

<sup>2</sup> *adv. Haer.* i. 23. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. v and xxii ff.

Socrates. 'Men eminent in philosophical enquiry have been anxious to be prudent. Men who have made it their purpose to live rightly have devoted themselves to righteousness. Indeed each virtue is opposed either by the carnal mind or by many attacks from external sources.' That is excellent. These were good people and they certainly had high purposes ; and of course they were liable to opposition, both by inward temptation to forsake their ideals, and by pressure from without. But the only people to fight for religion are the 'Elect Race, the Royal Priesthood, the Holy Nation, the people for God's possession'.<sup>1</sup> The rest of mankind do not even try to make it appear that if there is persecution of the religious people they intend to die for religion and to prefer death rather than deny their religion and live. Origen goes on to argue that we must not only believe in the heart but also confess with the mouth and continues : 'They deceive themselves who suppose that it is sufficient for the attainment of the end in Christ, if with the heart they believe unto righteousness omitting the words "but with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"'. Indeed I would go so far as to say', he adds, 'that it is better to honour God with the lips when one's heart is far from God<sup>2</sup> than to honour him with the heart and not make confession with the mouth unto salvation.' Evidently Origen was not in favour of any cloistered and anonymous faith. If you believed you had to come out into the open with it ; and he was prepared to argue that it was better to make an open profession, even if you did not always live up to it, than to have the most exalted religious sentiments and to keep them strictly to yourself. In another part of the same treatise he says : 'In Ecclesiastes Solomon says, "I praised all the dead more than the living, as many as are alive until now".<sup>3</sup> What does that mean? Well, who could more justifiably be praised for his death than he who of his own free choice chooses to die for the sake of religion?' And that is the introduction to the story of the Maccabean martyrs. Who could more justifiably be praised for his death than he who of his own free choice chooses to die for the sake of religion? Such a man was Eleazar, whose

<sup>1</sup> See Exod. xix. 6, 1 Pet. ii. 9, Origen, *Exh.* v.

<sup>2</sup> Is. xxix. 13. Cf. Mark vii. 6 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Eccl. iv. 2.

end is described in 2 Maccabees vi. Origen himself describes the martyrdom of Eleazar in great detail and afterwards goes on to an account of the martyrdom of the seven brothers and their mother, who were put to death with all kinds of torments by Antiochus Epiphanes. Origen evidently regards those people as authentic martyrs but it does not seem that he would have added Socrates to the list. The only persons entitled to a place on the roll of martyrs are those who belong to the people of God. That means Israelites in the pre-Christian times and Christians in the period since the Christian revelation was given. That was Origen's solution and on that finding the Maccabean martyrs were genuine martyrs. But this did not entirely close the question. On Origen's view the prophets and the Jewish martyrs were witnesses to Christ before his Incarnation ; but there was a contrary opinion in the early Church which refused to regard anyone who died before Christ as really martyred for Christ's sake. Only the Church's martyrs are Christ's martyrs and the statement of the case has been so well put by Marcel Simon in a recent article that I cannot do better than state it in his words.

There was 'established a fundamental distinction between the martyrs of Israel and the martyrs of the Church. Only the latter truly died for Christ ; the others perished for the Law or for righteousness or for truth or for a faith which, if it prepares for and in some ways contains the Christian faith implicitly, can nevertheless not be identified without further qualification with Christianity. St. Augustine was aware of this problem and he underlines it very forcibly. He says, " For Christ's sake, that is for the sake of the confession of the name of Christ by which we are Christians, no one died before Christ. . . . Many died and are martyrs. Many prophets have suffered such things. However, they did not die thus because they announced Christ beforehand but because they spoke of the sins of men to men and resisted their iniquities ; and they are counted amongst the martyrs. And rightly so : if it was not for the confession of the name of Christ, yet it was for truth that they gave up their lives." But St. Augustine could not rest content with that solution and he found another. He came to the conclusion that the name of Christ, which is what makes the Christian martyr, was somehow

given in a veiled form in the Law so that those who died for their loyalty to the Law could be regarded as having died for Christ, who was hidden in the Law. "If Moses did write about Christ, he who truly died for the law of Moses laid down his life for Christ and therefore the Maccabeans are martyrs of Christ: Machabaei ergo martyres Christi sunt."'

Once it was settled that the Old Testament and Jewish martyrs down to John the Baptist were in some way martyrs for Christ a very interesting thing happened: the Church at once took steps to appropriate them. If they were martyrs for Christ then obviously they were, so to speak, Christian martyrs and they should be detached from their Jewish environment and taken into the Church; and as this movement took place when the christianized Roman Empire had possession of Palestine it was a simple enough matter to set about doing it. It is one of the fascinating little corners of ecclesiastical history in the early centuries to see what the Church did in this matter. That also is contained in this extremely interesting article by Marcel Simon. There were three principal steps and the course of action to be taken depended on the fact that the Jewish community had discovered that they themselves had something to be proud of in the record of their own martyrs. After all, these men were Jews by birth; and, whatever the Christian Church might say, they had died for the Jewish faith. They were Jewish heroes; and in Judaism there began to be a certain veneration of the Jewish saints. People made pilgrimages to the places where they had been martyred and to their tombs; and so there grew up a veneration for these heroes which is not dissimilar to the cult of the saints in the Christian Church. Somehow it was carried through without any qualification of the exclusive religious loyalty due to God himself.<sup>1</sup> Where such cult-places and cult-practices existed, the Church began by appropriating the holy places of the Jewish saints, with any relics there might be, and claiming them as Christian property.

The next step was to associate any Jewish saint with a Christian companion so that he came, as it were, under the tutelage of his

<sup>1</sup> For a Muslim parallel see Austin Kennett, *Bedouin Justice*, ch. v, especially pp. 40 ff.

Christian comrade. This produced some strange partnerships, for example, St. Lot and a Christian saint called Procopius. David was put in company with James the Just, Zechariah with Simeon, and so on.

And the third method, if other ways proved ineffective, was to set up a rival sanctuary and gradually draw away the clientele from the original place. All that just went to show that the Church had come to the firm conclusion that these martyrs of Old Testament times and of later Judaism were genuine martyrs, that somehow or other they had died for Christ, and therefore that the Church of Christ had a right to claim them as her own.

So then we come back to our three original questions. In dealing with the Old Testament we came to the conclusion that the primary witnesses are the prophets, and this because they claim to be eye-witnesses and ear-witnesses of the actual proceedings in the heavenly Council. Then as secondary witnesses we have God's faithful people, who have heard and received the testimony of the primary witnesses, the prophets, and have not only heard and received it but also have seen it verified in the event in their own experience, and in that historical verification have come to know that it is true. That is what is implied in the statement in the passages from Isaiah quoted above. 'You are my witnesses' says God to Israel. 'You have heard the decisions of the heavenly court through the prophets and you have seen them carried out and therefore you know what kind of God I am. You are my witnesses both of the prophetic judgement or the prophetic promise and of the mighty acts of God in which these things have been fulfilled.' Thus the witnesses are now the whole people, the post-exilic Jewish community who really accept what is given in the Law and the prophets. And what is the thing to which they bear witness? It is the purpose of God: a purpose which has been declared by God in his word to the prophets, and by the same God carried out in deed in the experience of the nation. The thing to which post-exilic Judaism bears witness is not a theological theory or an ethical system, it is a profound, tragic religious experience, an experience which had involved the death and resurrection of Israel: that was the thing of which they were witnesses. And

were they persecuted? They surely were. The Maccabean age had a long roll of martyrs. An interesting point here is that the Church set the greatest store by a few of them: Eleazar and the Maccabean brothers, the seven brothers and their mother are favourite figures for Christian hagiologists; but little is said about the other band of unknown people, told of in the first book of Maccabees,<sup>1</sup> who allowed themselves to be massacred in cold blood rather than fight and break the commandment about keeping the Sabbath. We can only guess the reasons for this unmerited hagiological neglect: I should be inclined to suggest that Eleazar and the seven brothers and their mother got the place that they did in Christian esteem because they not only died but also they made a public profession of their faith in the presence of the pagan ruler before they died. That is, they testified with their lips before they sealed their testimony with their lives. The others who are, in our view I think, just as truly martyrs did not have an opportunity to testify with their lips but they testified very adequately by their actions. There it is. Some of them did suffer for their religion; and if we ask why, it was because their religion stood in the way of the policies of pagan powers. There have been martyrs in our own day for the same good reason.

<sup>1</sup> ii. 31-8.