

MARTYRDOM AND RESURRECTION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT¹

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FROM a very early stage in the development of the Christian faith there is clear evidence of the belief that the martyrs, that is those who die because of their witness to Christ, are granted special privileges. This is expressed clearly in one form in Revelation xx. 4 ff., in the vision of "the souls of those who had been beheaded for the sake of God's word and their testimony (*μαρτυρίαν*) to Jesus", to whom is granted the reward of participating in "the first resurrection" at the parousia of Christ and in his thousand-year reign and of freedom from the claims of "the second death". In another form, which was to become the dominant one, this belief asserted that the martyr does not have to wait until the general resurrection at the parousia, but is granted immediate admission to the presence of Christ; in this form this may be called belief in "the instant resurrection of the martyrs". It is with this second and dominant form of belief about the destiny of martyrs that this article will be concerned.

Nowhere in the New Testament is this belief explicitly stated, although, it will be argued later, it is implicit in a number of important passages. For explicit statement of it we have to look to sub-apostolic and second-century writings. It is explicit in the earliest extracanonical Christian writing, *The First Letter of Clement of Rome* which speaks of "Peter who . . . bearing his witness (*μαρτυρήσας*) went to the glorious place which he merited" (1 Clem. v. 4), and of Paul who, "released from this world, was taken up into the holy place" (v. 7). A couple of decades later, Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to martyrdom, says, "It is a grand thing for my life to set on the world, and for me to be on my way to God, so that I may rise in his presence" (*Rom.* ii. 2), and, "If I suffer, I shall be emanci-

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pated by Jesus Christ; and united with him, I shall rise to freedom" (ibid. iv. 3; cf. also v. 3). In *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the aged bishop prays that he "may be received this day in thy presence as a rich and acceptable sacrifice" (xiv. 2), and it is asserted that "he received the crown of immortality; and he rejoices with the apostles and all the righteous to glorify God the Father Almighty, and to bless our Lord Jesus Christ" (xix. 2). It is said of the martyrs of Vienne and Lyons that they "hastened to Christ",¹ that "they humbled themselves under the mighty hand, by which they are now greatly exalted",² and "went in peace to God".³ Tertullian says that "no one, on becoming absent from the body, is at once a dweller in the presence of the Lord, except by the prerogative of martyrdom, whereby (the saint) gets at once a lodging in Paradise, not in Hades".⁴ Finally, we may refer to the apocryphal *Acta* of the various apostles. Andrew says, "There has been allotted to me this destiny, to depart out of the body and to live with the Lord, with whom I am even being crucified".⁵ Paul tells Nero, "If thou behead me, this will I do: I will arise and appear to thee in proof that I am not dead, but alive to my Lord Jesus Christ".⁶ Further it is reported that after his martyrdom Paul appeared to the prefect Longinus and the centurion Cestus,⁷ and that Peter appeared after his death to Marcellus.⁸

This developing Christian theology of martyrdom appears to have had a parallel development in post-New Testament Judaism, although the evidence for the latter is rather more meagre.⁹ This fact of parallel development of belief in instant resurrection raises the question whether it has a common root in the Judaism of the intertestamental period.

¹ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 5, 1, 6.

² Ibid. 5, 2, 3.

³ Ibid. 5, 2, 17.

⁴ *de Resurrectione Carnis*, 43; cf. also *de Anima*, 55, where Tertullian records that on the day of her martyrdom "Perpetua . . . saw only her fellow-martyrs there, in the revelation which she received of Paradise". Further, cf. *Didascalia Apostolorum* (trs. R. H. Connolly, Oxford, 1969; reprint of 1929 edn.), p. 174, lines 23-32.

⁵ E. Hennecke, *N. T. Apocrypha* (E.T. edited by R. McL. Wilson, London, 1965), ii. 421.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 385 ff.

⁷ Ibid. p. 386 f.

⁸ Ibid. p. 321.

⁹ Strack-Billerbeck cite the Midrash on Eccl. iv. 2 and ix. 10.

E. Stauffer¹ and W. H. C. Frend² among others trace the roots of the Jewish and Christian theologies of martyrdom back to the Maccabean revolt, which brought about a singular change in Jewish eschatology which had, until then, been a corporate eschatology, that is an eschatology of the nation. Thereafter, in some Jewish circles at least, notably that of the Pharisees, there developed an eschatology of the individual, marked in particular by the hope of individual resurrection (cf. Dan. xii. 2).³ While there was wide diversity of opinion concerning who would participate in this resurrection,⁴ there was unanimity that "the righteous" would participate, and in much of the intertestamental literature the "righteous" man *par excellence* is one who is persecuted even to death for his faith. In 2 Maccabees there are a number of references to the act of martyrdom as the means of the martyr's entry into eternal life. Eleazar says to his Syrian persecutors, "Alive or dead, I shall never escape from the hand of the Almighty" (vi. 26). In the account of the martyrdom of the seven brothers, the second brother says, "You are setting us free from this present life, and, since we die for his laws, the King of the universe will raise us up (*ἀναστήσει*) to a life everlastingly made new" (vii. 9). The fourth declares, "Better to be killed by men and cherish God's promise to raise us again (*ἀναστήσεσθαι*). There will be no resurrection (*ἀνάστασις*) to life for you" (vii. 14). The mother encourages the seventh brother, "He (God), in his mercy, will give you back life and breath again, since now you put his laws above all thought of self" (vii. 23), and tells him to "accept death and prove yourself worthy of your brothers, so that by God's mercy I may receive you back again along with them" (vii. 29). To give a final example of the resurrection hope in 2 Maccabees, there is the story of the horrible death of Razis who, rather than be arrested, attempted to commit suicide, first by stabbing himself, then by throwing himself from the wall, and "Finally,

¹ *New Testament Theology*, ch. 21 and App. I.

² *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, Oxford, 1965.

³ Cf. *ibid.* pp. 46 ff.

⁴ Cf. C. V. Pilcher, *The Hereafter in Jewish and Christian Thought* (London, 1940), p. 152.

standing on a sheer rock, and now completely drained of blood, he took his entrails in both hands and flung them at the crowd. And thus, invoking the Lord of life and breath to give these entrails back to him again, he died " (xiv. 46).

From the time of the New Testament, in *The Assumption of Moses* we have further evidence of this belief in the resurrection or exaltation of the persecuted righteous :

God will exalt thee, and he will cause thee to approach the heaven of the stars, and he will establish thy habitation among them, and thou wilt behold from on high, and wilt see thy enemies in Ge(henna). (ch. 10).¹

In Hellenistic Jewish writings there is a similar development, but here it is expressed in terms of the immortality of the soul, as, for example, in *IV Maccabees* and *The Wisdom of Solomon*. As far as the latter writing is concerned, as Charles Larcher has shown,² the idea of the immortality of the soul differs considerably from the classical Greek concept, although no doubt influenced by it. Indeed, the term "soul" (*ψυχή*) may be interpreted in its Hebraic sense of "life" without doing any violence to the author's meaning. Pseudo-Solomon seems to be clearly aware of the idea of resurrection:

Thou hast the power of life and death,
thou bringest a man down to the gates of death and up again.
Man in his wickedness may kill,
but he cannot bring back the breath of life that has gone forth,
nor release a soul that death has arrested (xvi. 13 f.).

In the crucial passage, chapters 2-5, which may well go back to a Palestinian Jewish original, he emphasizes the theme of God's vindication and exaltation of the persecuted righteous:

The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God
There no torment shall touch them.
In the eyes of foolish men they seem to be dead;
their departure was reckoned as defeat,
and their going from us as disaster.
But they are at peace
for though in the sight of men they may be punished,
they have a sure hope of immortality. (iii. 1 ff.)

¹ The idea of the "exaltation" of the humiliated and persecuted is a dominant theme in the prophetic writings, in the Psalms, and in intertestamental apocalyptic literature. We shall return to this theme later.

² *Études sur le livre de la Sagesse* (Études Bibliques), Paris, 1969.

The fluctuation between past, present and future tenses (which may reflect the tenselessness of a Hebrew original) makes it difficult to decide whether the author considers that "the souls of the righteous" are in Hades (Sheol) awaiting the last judgement and general resurrection, or that they have already been exalted or resurrected to be "with God". However, the latter seems more likely because of his later assertion, "But the righteous live for ever; their reward is in the Lord's keeping, and the Most High has them in his care" (v. 15). Somewhat similar is Josephus' statement that the young Jewish patriots cut down Herod's golden eagle over the gate of the Temple, believing "that they would enjoy greater happiness after they were dead".¹

There appears, then, to be sufficient evidence for the existence in intertestamental Judaism of belief in "instant" resurrection or exaltation of the martyrs to be with God, and this belief is the basis for the developing theology of martyrdom in the early church and in post-biblical Judaism. The question now arises whether there is evidence of this belief in the New Testament itself.

Ernst Lohmeyer, who himself endured persecution at the hands of the Nazis and appears to have suffered a martyr's death in 1945,² interpreted Paul's Letter to the Philippians as a treatise on martyrdom, in a work first published in 1930.³ Although no commentator since has been prepared to accept Lohmeyer's thesis in its entirety, there is widespread agreement that Paul wrote the letter in circumstances in which his own martyrdom for the sake of the gospel was an imminent possibility and that this fact throws light on some passages in the letter which appear to conflict with the eschatology which he expresses elsewhere. Generally speaking, elsewhere Paul thinks in terms of the general resurrection at the last day, a belief inherited from Pharisaic Judaism, but modified by identifying "the last day" with the parousia of Christ, when Christians

¹ *Wars*, 1, 33, 3.

² Cf. R. Gregor Smith's foreword to Lohmeyer's *The Lord's Prayer* (trs. John Bowden), London, 1963.

³ *Die Briefe an der Philipper, Kolosser und Philemon*, Göttingen, 1930.

who have already died will be raised from the dead, those still living will be changed, and together resurrected dead and transformed living will be united to form the retinue of the triumphant Lord when he comes (1 Thess. iv. 13 ff. ; 1 Cor. xv. 51 ff.). That is, Paul has modified his former belief in the general resurrection in the light of his faith in Jesus the Risen Lord who is "the first-born from the dead" (Col. i. 18), "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. xv. 20). O. Cullmann has argued that this Pauline eschatology implies as a corollary the idea that believers who die before the parousia occupy an intermediate state which Paul apparently thinks of in terms of "sleeping", or perhaps simply in terms of the Jewish concept of Sheol.¹

If this is a generally correct picture of Paul's eschatology, then one passage in Philippians seems to be in conflict with it, and the difficulty is usually resolved by asserting that Paul has developed or changed his earlier eschatological position as expressed so explicitly in 1 Thessalonians iv and 1 Corinthians xv. In Philippians i. 23 f. Paul writes :

My desire is to depart and be with Christ,² for that is far better.
But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

With this also may be linked the somewhat similar but less explicit passage, iii. 10 f. :

That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I might attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Another explanation is possible, however. If Paul is facing the possibility of imminent martyrdom, which he certainly was

¹ *The Immortality of the Soul and the Resurrection of the Dead*, Eng. tr., London, 1958.

² Cf. A. Wikenhauser, *Pauline Mysticism: Christ in the Mystical Teaching of St. Paul* (Freiburg-Edinburgh-London, 1960), pp. 62 f., for a brief study of the distinction between the Pauline phrases "in Christ" (ἐν χριστῷ) and "with Christ" (σὺν χριστῷ): "It is only at the resurrection . . . that we shall begin to be 'with Christ'. To be with Christ is the final goal and the supreme aim of the Christian. . . . 'Being in Christ' comes to an end when it attains its purpose and we are 'with Christ'." I have not had access to the definitive study of J. Dupont, *Syn Christoi : L'union avec le Christ suivant S. Paul*, Louvain, 1952, referred to by Wikenhauser and others.

not facing when he wrote 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, this new factor does not necessarily alter his view of the "sleeping" of the believer until the general resurrection. Rather, now that he faces the threat of martyrdom he expresses his faith in terms of another aspect of Jewish eschatological hope, namely the belief that those who die in witness to their faith have the privilege of immediate admission into the presence of their Lord through instant resurrection. In the face of martyrdom Paul hopes that, like the Jewish martyrs, he will not have to wait for resurrection at the last day, but will "pass at death directly to heaven".¹ The interpretation of Philippians i. 23 f. in the light of this current Jewish belief makes more sense than to see in it a dramatic change in Paul's eschatology, a change for which there is no other evidence at all. The new factor of approaching martyrdom calls forth a hitherto unexpressed aspect of his eschatology.

If Paul's eschatology contained this element of what Stauffer calls "The Old Biblical Theology of Martyrdom",² it is appropriate to ask whether Jesus himself could have shared in this belief in instant resurrection of the martyrs. John Downing³ has shown that "at the time of Jesus, people thought in terms of human beings making atonement for others by means of their suffering and death",⁴ and has noted the existence of "popular Jewish devotion to martyrs at their burial places".⁵ He devotes the major part of his article to a study of "the experience of rejection" from which "Jesus came to believe it was God's will that he should die at the hands of his people, as he believed so many of his prophetic predecessors to have done before him".⁶

¹ E. Stauffer, *op. cit.* p. 334; cf. E. Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an der Philipper*, pp. 62 f.; A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (E.T., London, 1931), pp. 135 f.; H. Rex, "Immortality of the Soul, or Resurrection of the Dead, or What?", *Reformed Theological Review*, xvii (1958), 73 ff.

² *Op. cit.* App. I and ch. 21, "The Passion of Christ's Forerunners".

³ "Jesus and Martyrdom", *J.T.S.*, N.S. xiv (1963), 279 ff.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 284. This is also one of the elements of Stauffer's "Old Biblical Theology of Martyrdom".

⁵ *Art. cit.* p. 294. Cf. also J. Jeremias, *Heiligengräber in Jesu Umwelt* (Göttingen, 1958), pp. 11-23, 49 f., 129 ff., and E. Bammel, "Zum jüdischen Märtyrerkult", *TLZ*, 1953. pp. 119-26.

⁶ *Art. cit.* p. 292.

On the basis of this he goes on to argue convincingly for the authenticity of sayings attributed to Jesus which either imply or explicitly claim expiatory or redemptive significance for his approaching martyr-death.¹

Neither Stauffer nor Downing goes on to apply this expectation of Jesus that he would be rejected, persecuted and martyred by his own people to an important group of sayings in the Marcan strand of the synoptic tradition, namely the predictions of the suffering, martyrdom *and* resurrection of "the Son of Man". Usually discussion of these sayings takes place in the context of discussion of the meaning of this perplexing title and of the authenticity of the sayings in which it occurs. The decision as to the authenticity of the sayings, and of any of the three groups into which they naturally fall, depends to a large degree on the prior decision concerning what the title may or may not have meant on the lips of Jesus, if he in fact used it. Denial of the authenticity of the sayings predicting the death and resurrection of the Son of Man usually depends on the prior assumption that Jesus used the title, not in reference to himself, but to another, the transcendent figure who would come to vindicate him, or that because there is no evidence that pre-Christian Judaism linked suffering and martyrdom (and resurrection) with the title, Jesus himself could not have made the connection; therefore it must have been made after Jesus' death and resurrection, when the church identified Jesus with "the Son of Man".

It is not my concern here to enter the current "Son-of-Man debate" by arguing that the predictions of the death and resurrection of the Son of Man are authentic sayings of Jesus *qua* "Son-of-Man sayings". My concern, rather, is to argue for the possibility that Jesus did foresee and predict suffering, death and resurrection for himself. If Jesus shared "the old biblical theology of martyrdom", then there is no reason to doubt that he would have forewarned his followers that his way was leading to martyrdom, and through martyrdom to instant resurrection. If this is the case, then, whether or not Jesus used

¹ Stauffer, *op. cit.* p. 334, lists considerable evidence for the currency of the belief that the blood of the martyr atones for the sin of his people.

the title "Son of Man" in these predictions, there is no justification for declaring them to be *vaticinia ex eventu*. This does not necessarily mean, however, a denial that in the course of oral transmission the sayings have undergone some elaboration in the light of the actual events which had taken place.

Stauffer commences his chapter, "The Passion of Christ's Forerunners", thus :

The OT itself says of the children of Israel : "They mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and scoffed at his prophets" (2 Chron. xxxvi. 16). For later writers it was axiomatic that the people of God were basically opposed to whatever really emanates from God, and that therefore they had always persecuted God's true servants and ambassadors, and always would.¹

Whether all the prophets actually suffered a martyr's death or not,² the Old Testament is certainly the story of the rejection by God's people of his messengers who came as witnesses to his will for them. For example, Jeremiah testifies to Israel's rejection of the prophets, when he records God's message : "I took pains to send all my servants the prophets to you with this warning : 'Do not do this abominable thing which I hate'. But your fathers would not listen ; they paid no heed" (Jer. xlv. 4 NEB). Further, by New Testament times it had become part of popular tradition that "the prophets" as a class had been persecuted and even martyred. This is to be found clearly expressed in Stephen's speech in Acts (vii. 35, 39, 51-53), in 1 Thessalonians ii. 15 and Hebrews xi. 36 ff. as well as in three strands of the synoptic tradition of the teaching of Jesus, Mark, Q and L.

Mark : Mark ix. 12 f.

Q : Math. v. 12 (Luke vi. 23) ; Math. xxiii. 37 (Luke xiii. 37) ; Math. xxiii. 29 ff. (Luke xi. 47-51) ; Math. xxiii. 37-39 (Luke xi. 34).

L : Luke xiii. 33.

The idea is also implicit in the Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (Mark xii. 1 ff. and parallels), whatever its original form may have been.

Whatever Jesus' original expectation may have been as to the

¹ Ibid. p. 98.

² Cf. T. W. Manson, "Martyrs and Martyrdom", *BJRL*, xxxix (1956-57), 469 ff.

success of his mission and the response to his preaching and teaching, the opposition he encountered from the Jewish leaders, at whatever stage it began to manifest itself as a real threat, must have led him to expect from the people of his time the same treatment as their fathers had meted out to God's messengers who had preceded him. Further, the fate that had befallen John the Baptist either just before or shortly after Jesus began his ministry must have made him aware of the dangers which awaited anyone who sought to revive the old prophetic tradition. Expecting martyrdom, Jesus would certainly have thought of it in terms of current Jewish belief about the destiny of the martyrs, part of which, as we have seen, was the belief in the instant resurrection of those who die in testimony to their faith. In the light of the expectation of martyrdom, Jesus' discussion with his disciples in the district of Caesarea Philippi, which leads up to Peter's confession and Jesus' first prediction of his passion and resurrection, makes good sense as an episode in the ministry of Jesus, and there is no good reason to treat it as a post-resurrection narrative read back into the ministry. First, the reply given to Jesus' question, "Who do men say I am?", namely "John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets" (Mark viii. 28 and parallels), implies a popular belief in the return or resurrection of the martyred prophets, a belief which is already implied in Mark vi. 14 ff. and parallels: "Some said, 'John the Baptist has been raised from the dead . . .'. But others said, 'It is Elijah'. And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old'. But when Herod heard of it he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised'." Peter's reply to Jesus' more specific question, whatever form the reply may originally have taken, was either rejected outright or evaded by Jesus, who goes on immediately to predict, not the glorious triumphant future of popular messianic expectation, but rejection, humiliation, suffering and death, followed, after a very short time, by resurrection from the dead for "the Son of Man". This same theme is repeated in Mark ix. 9 ff., ix. 31, x. 33 ff., xiv. 8 (and parallels) as well as in the narrative of the Last Supper (Mark xiv. 12 ff. and parallels). If Jesus shared the current belief in the resurrection or exaltation of the martyrs and had come to expect martyrdom for himself,

there is nothing improbable about his prediction of his own martyrdom and subsequent resurrection.

It may be objected, of course, that the disciples' unpreparedness for Jesus' arrest, trial and death, and their initial fear and dismay at the appearances of their risen Lord tell against the likelihood that Jesus had forewarned them by predicting his death and resurrection. To this the answer may be given that they had failed to grasp the significance of what Jesus was saying, that they simply could not take in the idea that their Master would be martyred. A mental block in the face of possible disappointment and tragedy is not an uncommon phenomenon in human experience. Peter's outburst in reaction to Jesus' first prediction of the passion and resurrection at Caesarea Philippi is a perfectly natural human reaction, as Jesus himself recognized: "You think as men think, not as God thinks" (Mark viii. 33 NEB).

The possibility that Jesus shared the belief in the instant resurrection of the martyrs sheds light also on the word of Jesus to the dying "thief": "Today you shall be with me in Paradise" (Luke xxiii. 43). C. H. Dodd has pointed out¹ that Matthew and Mark (Math. xxvii. 38; Mark xv. 27) describe the two men crucified with Jesus as *λησται*, that is "rebels" or "freedom-fighters", whereas Luke (xxiii. 32, 39) uses the word *κακοῦργοι*, that is "criminals". The word *λησται* in Mark xv. 27 echoes the *στασιασταί* ("rebels") of Mark xv. 7; the two *λησται* crucified with Jesus were "among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection". If these men were rebels or freedom-fighters, in the eyes of the Romans they would be "criminals" (*κακοῦργοι*), but in the eyes of patriotic Jews they would be patriots dying as martyrs in the cause of Jewish freedom. The statement of the "penitent thief" to his comrade, "You are under the same sentence as he is. For us it is plain justice; we are paying the price for our misdeeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke xxiii. 41), is a recognition on his part that at least according to the law of the Roman occupying power their death is merited, while Jesus,

¹ *The Founder of Christianity* (London, 1971), p. 160.

who has done nothing contrary to that law, is suffering unjustly. Jesus' reply, "Today you shall be with me in Paradise" (Luke xxiii. 43), implies the recognition that the "penitent thief", like Jesus himself, is suffering for the cause of the freedom of God's people, however differently he and Jesus may have interpreted the nature of that freedom and the methods by which it might be achieved. That is, the "thief", like Jesus, is suffering martyrdom, and will therefore receive the martyr's reward of instant resurrection with Jesus.

It has already been noted that in pre-Christian Jewish literature the idea of "exaltation" of the righteous sufferer is much more frequent than that of "resurrection". This more frequent and more ancient theme lies behind the idea of the exaltation of Jesus expressed, for example, in the christological hymn in Philippians ii. 6 ff. which refers only to exaltation, and at much greater length in the Letter to the Hebrews which mentions his resurrection only in xiii. 20, and there with the idea of "bringing again" (*ἀνάγειν*), rather than the idea of "raising up" (*ἀνιστάναι*). The same theme of instant "exaltation" or "resurrection" of the martyr may lie behind John's identification of the raising of Jesus on the cross with his "exaltation", an identification which has led C. F. Evans¹ to suggest that the Johannine resurrection narratives are superfluous. Be that as it may, it appears that the old belief in the instant resurrection or exaltation of the martyrs offers a clue which helps to solve a number of important problems of New Testament exegesis.

¹ *Resurrection in the N.T.* (London, 1970), p. 116: "Strictly speaking, there is no place in the Fourth Gospel for resurrection stories, since the ascent or exaltation has already taken place."