

POLYCARP MEETING, IZMIR (SMYRNA)

**Meeting suffering and
persecution: A conversation
between the *Martyrdom of
Polycarp* and 1 Peter**

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The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and I Peter

- Why I Peter?
 - addressing believers suffering as followers of Jesus
 - addressed to an area including Smyrna
- What I'm not arguing
 - *Mart. Pol.* is literarily dependent on I Peter
 - on the basis of authorship, date, etc.
- Seeking to learn about kinds of suffering and persecution
 - and approaches to those by the two writers

Where we're going

- Introducing the two letters
- Suffering as a Christian
 - How to meet suffering as a Christian
- Christian testimony
- Defending the faith
- Conclusion

Introducing 1 Peter

- address 1:1
 - ‘exiles of the dispersion’ 1:1, 17
 - ‘aliens and exiles’ 2:11 cf. Gen 23:4 LXX
 - predominantly gentile

Introducing 1 Peter

- address 1:1
- facing suffering and persecution for their faith
- withdrawn from former way of life: 'lawless idolatries'
4:3-4

If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the field, if the sky doesn't more of the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: "The Christians to the lion!"

Tertullian, *Apology* 40.1-2

Introducing 1 Peter

- address 1:1
- facing suffering and persecution for their faith
- withdrawn from former way of life: 'lawless idolatries'
4:3-4
 - not attending Roman spectacles
 - declining to hold municipal office
 - avoiding Roman baths
 - avoiding meals and associations including sacrifice to the gods or meat offered in such sacrifices

Introducing 1 Peter

- address 1:1
- facing suffering and persecution for their faith
 - withdrawn from former way of life: 'lawless idolatries' 4:3-4
 - 'good works' as cause of persecution 3:14a, 16, 17
 - exclusive devotion to Christ 2:17
 - living as free people 2:16

Introducing 1 Peter

- address 1:1
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4:3-4

...the Petrine author probably does not have any specific conduct in mind when he describes the negative response toward the good works of Christians. This is a general comment about hostility shown toward Jesus followers based on their newly adopted lifestyle.

Travis Williams & David Horrell, / *Peter*, 1:25 |

Introducing 1 Peter

- address 1:1
- facing suffering and persecution for their faith
 - withdrawn from former way of life: 'lawless idolatries' 4:3-4
 - recall new identity in Christ as God's holy people 2:9-10
 - recognise sufferings as trials for a limited time 1:6-7
 - God is in control 3:17; 4:19
 - be conscious of God with them 2:9-10
 - example of Christ 2:21-24

The strategy of the letter may therefore be summarised as an attempt to give comfort and hope to those suffering alienation, victimisation, and both formal and informal hostility, by assuring them of the honourable identity as God's elect people, and by calling them to endure their suffering, to resolute commitment and to doing what is good, whether or not suffering results...it may represent a survival strategy for the relatively powerless, along with a call for resistance that was polite but nonetheless firm (and potentially fatal).

Travis Williams & David Horrell, / *Peter*, 1:281

Introducing the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

- Polycarp born c.AD 70
 - 86 when martyred, c.AD 156
 - associated with John and other eyewitnesses (Eusebius)
 - installed as bishop of Smyrna by John (Tertullian, Irenaeus)
 - *Philippians* shows familiarity with NT, especially Paul

Introducing the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

- *Mart. Pol.* as eyewitness account of Polycarp's arrest, trial and death
 - formally a letter to the church in Philomelium and others 1.0
 - written by Marcion 20.1—contrast 23.1
- Polycarp as example of 'martyrdom that is in accord with the gospel' 1.1
 - 'nobility' 2.1, 2; 3.1, 2
 - 'patient endurance and loyalty to the Master' 2.2

Introducing the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

- *Mart. Pol.* as eyewitness account of Polycarp's arrest, trial and death
- Polycarp as example of 'martyrdom that is in accord with the gospel' 1.1
 - contrast Quintus 4
 - Polycarp stays away from the city 5.1
 - vision of fire 5.2
 - betrayed by a young slave under torture 6.1–7.1
 - provides food and drink for arresting party 7.2
 - receives permission to pray 7.2-3

Introducing the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

- *Mart. Pol.* as eyewitness account of Polycarp's arrest, trial and death
- Polycarp as example of 'martyrdom that is in accord with the gospel' 1.1
- pressure from Herod to say 'Caesar is Lord' and offer incense 8.2
 - threats 8.3
 - the voice: 'Be strong, Polycarp, and courageous' 9.1
 - proconsul's arguments and Polycarp's response 9.2

Ὀγδοήκοντα καὶ ἕξ ἔτη ἔχω δουλεύων αὐτῷ, καὶ
οὐδέν με ἠδίκησεν· καὶ πῶς δύναμαι
βλασφημῆσαι τὸν βασιλέα μου τὸν σώσαντά με;

Eighty and six years have I served him, and he has
done me no wrong; how, then, is it possible to
blaspheme my king who has saved me?

Mart. Pol. 9.3

Introducing the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

- 'I am a Christian' 10.1
 - offer to explain the Christian faith to the proconsul 10.1
 - threat of wild beasts or burning alive 11.1-2

Πῦρ ἀπειλεῖς τὸ πρὸς ὥραν καιόμενον καὶ μετ' ὀλίγον σβεννύμενον, ἀγνοεῖς γὰρ τὸ τῆς μελλούσης κρίσεως καὶ αἰωνίου κολάσεως τοῖς ἀσεβέσι τηρούμενον πῦρ. ἀλλὰ τί βραδύνεις; φέρε ὃ βούλει.

You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish.

Mart. Pol. 11.2

Introducing the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

- 'I am a Christian' 10.1
 - offer to explain the Christian faith to the proconsul 10.1
 - threat of wild beasts or burning alive 11.1-2
 - crowd cries out for his burning alive as 'destroyer of our gods' 12.1
 - Polycarp sees this as necessary because of his vision 12.3; 5.2
 - undresses and asks not to be nailed to the stake before praying 13.1–14.3

Introducing the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*

- fire does not burn his flesh, so stabbed with dagger
15.1–16.1
- Herod's faith Nicetes appeals to the proconsul not to hand Polycarp's body to the Christians 17.1-2
 - believers *worship* Jesus as son of God, but *love* the martyrs 17.2
 - cremation of body and believers gather up bones 18.1-2
 - look forward to celebrating anniversary 18.3

Suffering as a Christian

- nature of the suffering
 - verbal abuse I Pet 2:12, 15; 3:9; 4:14
 - threats *Mart. Pol.* 8.3
 - physical maltreatment I Pet 2:19; *Mart. Pol.* 8.3
- causes of suffering
 - pressure to bow to Caesar as Lord and offer incense *Mart. Pol.* 8.2; 9.2
 - change of lifestyle and social withdrawal I Pet 4:3-4
 - ‘good works’: better to suffer than to sin (Jobes)

Suffering as a Christian

- imitating Christ
 - *Mart. Pol.* 1.2; 19.1—introduction and conclusion
 - martyrs as ‘disciples and imitators of the Lord’ 17.3
 - parallels with passion of Christ, e.g. ‘as the Lord did’ 1.2
 - not ‘mechanical’ copying—Polycarp as ‘**sharer** with Christ’
Χριστοῦ **κοινωνός** 6.2
 - ‘**you share** in Christ’s sufferings’ **κοινωνεῖτε** τοῖς τοῦ Χριστοῦ παθήμασιν 1 Pet 4:13
 - ‘Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an **example**, (ὑπογραμμόν) so that you should follow in his steps’
1 Pet 2:21 with 22-24; also 3:17-18

How to meet suffering as a Christian

- prayer in suffering
 - *Mart. Pol. 7* when arrested, for two hours
 - when about to die 14.1-3
 - like Jesus and Stephen praying
 - summarises his faith in the form of testimony

O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your presence, I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour, so that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you have prepared and revealed beforehand, and have now accomplished, you who are the undeceiving and true God. For this reason, indeed for all things, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom be glory to you, with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come. Amen.

Mart. Pol. 14.1-3

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 - expresses confidence in victory of Father, Son and Spirit

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How to meet suffering as a Christian

- prayer in suffering
 - *Mart. Pol. 7* when arrested, for two hours
 - when about to die 14.1-3
 - like Jesus and Stephen praying
 - summarises his faith as testimony
 - expresses confidence in victory of Father, Son and Spirit
 - his prayer portrays martyrdom as worship

O Lord God Almighty, Father of your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of you, the God of angels and powers and of all creation, and of the whole race of the righteous who live in your presence, **I bless you because you have considered me worthy of this day and hour**, so that I might receive a place among the number of the martyrs in the cup of your Christ, to the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and of body, in the incorruptibility of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among them in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as you have prepared and revealed beforehand, and have now accomplished, you who are the undeceiving and true God. For this reason, indeed for all things, **I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you, through the eternal and heavenly high priest, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, through whom be glory to you, with him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come. Amen.**

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How to meet suffering as a Christian

- prayer in suffering
 - *Mart. Pol. 7* when arrested, for two hours
 - when about to die 14.1-3
- blessings not curses 1 Pet 3:9
 - calling on (ἐπικαλεῖσθε) God as Father 1:17
 - be self-controlled for prayers 4:7
 - give glory to God 4:16
 - cast all anxiety on God 5:7

How to meet suffering as a Christian

- blessings toward those who abuse
 - Polycarp gives hospitality to his arrest party
Mart. Pol. 7.2
 - blessings not curses 1 Pet 3:9
- enduring suffering
 - power of the Holy Spirit 1 Pet 4:14
 - the voice in the arena *Mart. Pol. 9.1*
 - remembering the Lord Jesus' generosity *Mart. Pol. 9.3*;
1 Pet 2:21-24; 3:17-18

How to meet suffering as a Christian

- martyrdom in *Mart. Pol.*—a distinctive
 - ushers victim into eternal life 2.3
 - no comparison with eternal suffering 2.3
 - cosmic conflict of Satan and God 2.4; 3.1—God will be victorious (cf. 1 Pet 5:8-9)
 - martyrs as μηκέτι ἄνθρωποι ἀλλ' ἤδη ἄγγελοι 'no longer humans but already angels' 2.3

Christian testimony

- Christianity *de facto* illegal in first century (Williams & Horrell)
- verbal testimony when called for 1 Pet 3:15
 - ‘I am a Christian’ *Mart. Pol.* 10.1
 - offer to teach the proconsul the Christian faith
 - refusal to compromise over who you worship *Mart. Pol.* 8-9
 - against enticement: it doesn’t matter 8.2
 - against threats 8.3
 - humour: ‘away with the atheists’ 9.2

Christian testimony

- Christianity *de facto* illegal in first century (Williams & Horrell)
- verbal testimony when called for 1 Pet 3:15
 - courtesy and honour in resisting the proconsul
Mart.Pol. 10.2
 - ‘be subject’ 1 Pet 2:13-15
 - honour the emperor, but fear God 2:17

Christian testimony

- Christianity *de facto* illegal in first century (Williams & Horrell)
- verbal testimony when called for 1 Pet 3:15
- testimony by actions
 - ‘doing good’ 1 Pet 2:12, 14-15, 20; 3:6, 10-11, 13, 16-17; 4:19
 - hope for relief from hostility—suffering for ‘a little while’ ὀλίγος 1:6; 5:10
 - hospitality *Mart. Pol.* 7.2

Christian testimony

- social stance
 - nuanced stance between conformity and resistance (Williams & Horrell)
 - disciplined resistance and non-conformity
1 Pet 1:13-14; 5:8-9
 - maintain devotion to Christ 3:15
 - aware that some actions may generate hostility even if done politely and respectfully
 - 2:13 emperor human, not divine
 - 2:17 honour the emperor, but fear God

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 - maintain devotion to Christ 3:15; *Mart. Pol. 10.1-2*
 - aware that some actions may generate hostility even if done politely and respectfully
 - 2:13 emperor human, not divine
 - 2:17 honour the emperor, but fear God; *Mart. Pol. 8.2*

Defending the faith

- verbal testimony
 - ‘Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect.’
1 Pet 3:15-16a
 - *only* when asked? (Williams & Horrell)

Defending the faith

- verbal testimony
 - ‘Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect.’ 1 Pet 3:15-16a
- Polycarp
 - asks for time to pray 7.2-3; cf. 14.1-3
 - refuses to take part in idolatry 8.2; 9.2-3
 - Christ has done him no wrong 9.3
 - offer to teach the proconsul 10.1

Conclusion: what have we seen?

- A consistent, explicitly Christian understanding of suffering and persecution as Christians (in both letters)
 - understanding suffering and how to meet it
 - recognising the importance of testimony
 - realising the need to be ready to defend the faith
- Development of that into a theological narrative account of martyrdom in *Mart. Pol.*

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