

The Fate of the Apostles

Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest
Followers of Jesus

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Chapter 1

Introduction

How can we trust in the historical resurrection of Jesus? A commonly used argument points to the apostles' willingness to become martyrs. Popular apologists frequently cite their deaths as good reason to trust the sincerity of their testimony, since it is difficult to believe they would go willingly to such gruesome deaths for the sake of empty deceit.

Credentialed scholars also make a similar argument. E.P. Sanders, for instance, in his *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, argues that “many of the people in these lists [of eyewitnesses] were to spend the rest of their lives proclaiming that they had seen the risen Lord, and several of them would die for their cause.”¹

And Michael R. Licona notes:

After Jesus' death, the disciples endured persecution, and a number of them experienced martyrdom. The strength of their conviction indicates that they were not just claiming Jesus had appeared to them after rising from the dead. They really believed it. They willingly endangered themselves by publicly proclaiming the risen Christ.²

Further, in *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, Craig S. Keener argues:

The disciples' testimony was not fabricated. Ancients also recognized that the willingness of people to die for their convictions verified at least the sincerity of their motives, arguing against fabrication. People of course die regularly for values that are false; they do not, however, ordinarily die voluntarily for what they believe is false. Intentional deception by the disciples is thus implausible.³

Still, despite the popularity and importance of this argument to historical Jesus studies, little scholarly work focuses primarily on *evaluating the evidence for their martyrdoms*.⁴ Questions naturally remain, then, which strike to the heart of the

¹ E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 279–80.

² Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 366.

³ Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 342.

⁴ For various books that explore the lives of the apostles, see William Barclay, *The Master's Men* (London: SCM Press, 1960); Pope Benedict XVI, *The Apostles* (Huntington,

apostolic message: Were the apostles hopelessly biased? Did they really believe Jesus had appeared to them after his death, or did they fabricate the entire story? Do the deaths of the apostles provide positive evidence for the resurrection accounts? And perhaps most importantly, most fundamentally: How strong is the actual historical evidence that the apostles of Jesus died as martyrs? In offering this study, I hope to answer these questions.

In fact, we do have reliable historical evidence to trust the ancient and uniform testimony that (1) all the apostles were willing to die for their faith, and (2) a number of them actually did experience martyrdom.

The argument itself is quite simple: The apostles spent between one and a half and three years with Jesus during his public ministry, expecting him to proclaim his kingdom on earth. Although disillusioned at his untimely death, they became the first witnesses of the risen Jesus and they endured persecution; many subsequently experienced martyrdom, signing their testimony, so to speak, in their own blood. The strength of their conviction, marked by their willingness to die, indicates that they did not fabricate these claims; rather, without exception, they actually believed Jesus to have risen from the dead. While in and of themselves these facts prove neither the truth of the resurrection in particular nor Christianity as a whole, they do demonstrate the apostles' sincerity of belief, lending credibility to their claims about the veracity of resurrection, which is fundamental to the case for Christianity.

In other words, *their willingness to face persecution and martyrdom indicates more than any other conceivable course their sincere conviction that, after rising from the dead, Jesus indeed appeared to them.*

IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2007); Ronald Brownrigg, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Macmillan, 1974); John R. Claypool, *The First to Follow: The Apostles of Jesus* (Harrisburg, NY: Morehouse, 2008); E. Dale Click, *The Inner Circle* (Lima, OH: CSS, 2000); Edgar Goodspeed, *The Twelve: The Story of Christ's Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston, 1957); J.G. Greenhough, *The Apostles of Our Lord* (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1904); Morris Inch, *12 Who Changed the World: The Lives and Legends of the Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003); George F. Jowett, *The Drama of the Lost Disciples* (Bishop Auckland, England: Covenant, 2004); Emil G. Kraeling, *The Disciples* (Skokie, IL: Rand McNally, 1966); Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972); F. Townley Lord, *The Master and His Men: Studies in Christian Enterprise* (London: Carey, 1927); Marianna Mayer, *The Twelve Apostles* (New York: Phyllis Fogelman, 2000); William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, rev. ed. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1973); C. Bernard Ruffin, *The Twelve: The Lives of the Apostles After Calvary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997); Thomas E. Schmidt, *The Apostles After Acts: A Sequel* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013); Asbury Smith, *The Twelve Christ Chose* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958); H.S. Vigeveno, *Thirteen Men Who Changed the World* (Glendale, CA: G/L Publications, 1967).

Of course, however, many often misstate or misunderstand the argument from the deaths of the apostles to the truth of Christianity. Candida Moss, for example, claims that Christians “like to think of their martyrs as unique. The fact that early Christians were willing to die for their beliefs has been seen as a sign of the inherent truth of the Christian message Christianity is true, it is said, because only Christians have martyrs.”⁵ Two points are important to make in response. First, as I demonstrate, there *are* many martyrs outside Christianity; I don’t claim that *only* Christians have martyrs, but that *the apostles died uniquely for the belief that they had actually seen the risen Christ*, which demonstrates the sincerity of their convictions. The deaths of others for their religious causes in no way undermine the evidential significance of the fate of the apostles. Second, the apostles’ willingness to die for their beliefs does not demonstrate “the inherent truth of the Christian message,” but that the apostles *really believed* that Jesus had risen from the grave. The apostles could have been mistaken, but their willingness to die as martyrs establishes their unmistakable sincerity. The apostles were not liars; rather, they believed they had seen the risen Jesus, they were willing to die for this claim, and many actually did die for it.

Methodology

I am primarily concerned with the historical evidence for the martyrdom of the apostles, which involves studying the earliest available sources, including New Testament documents, with particular focus on the book of Acts, the writings of the early church fathers, pseudepigraphical writings such as the *Acts of the Apostles*, Gnostic sources, and other extra-biblical accounts.

While there are some valuable later sources for the fate of some of the apostles, this investigation focuses primarily on what Markus Bockmuehl has dubbed “living” memory. First- and second-century writers emphasized that they were passing on a shared “living” memory of the apostles, which is to make a stronger claim than saying they were simply passing on a shared tradition or cultural memory. Instead, they believed they were transmitting personal memory of events that trace back to the apostles themselves.⁶ This living memory extended until the end of the second century, after which it could no longer

⁵ Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 17, 81.

⁶ Markus Bockmuehl, “Peter’s Death in Rome? Back to Front and Upside Down,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 7–13. The belief in living memory can be seen in church fathers including Ignatius, Papias, Polycarp, Justin, Irenaeus, and possibly even Tertullian.

be accurately appealed to as a means of understanding the apostolic Gospel.⁷ This prevents neither the development of legendary material about the apostles nor theological disagreements. According to Bockmuehl, living memory simply means that “until the end of the second century there were living individuals who personally, and sometimes vividly, remembered the disciples of the apostles—and that such memory was still thought to carry weight in debates about how to interpret the bearers of apostolic faith.”⁸

According to Bockmuehl, living memory involves three generations: (1) Peter and his contemporary associates, assumedly dead by roughly AD 70, (2) the direct followers of the apostles, the last of which died by about AD 135, and (3) the second-generation followers of the apostles, who would have died by about AD 200.⁹ Of course, by focusing on living memory I do not mean to imply that later history necessarily becomes suspect and unreliable. On the contrary, one can know many things independently of living memory. Indeed, for some apostles no chain of living memory exists, and for these cases one will need to rely upon the merits of later tradition.

Historians have recognized a spectrum of epistemological confidence for the examination of historical events. For the purposes of this inquiry, I adopt the following scale for evaluating the historical evidence for the martyrdom of individual apostles:

- *not possibly true*—certainly not historical;
- *very probably not true*—doubtfully historical;
- *improbable*—unlikely;
- *less plausible than not*—slightly less possible than not;
- *as plausible as not*—plausible;
- *more plausible than not*—slightly more possible than not;
- *more probable than not*—likely;
- *very probably true*—somewhat certain;
- *the highest possible probability*—nearly historically certain.

⁷ Bockmuehl provides an example from Irenaeus, who as a boy had personal contact with Polycarp, an eyewitness and companion of the apostles. Irenaeus insists that Polycarp would have soundly rejected Florinus’s Valentinian understanding of Christian origins: “I can attest before God that if that blessed and apostolic presbyter had heard anything of this kind he would have cried out and covered his ears, and said according to his custom, ‘O good God, for what a time have you preserved me that I must endure this?’ He would have fled the very place where he was sitting or standing, when he heard such words” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20.7). Irenaeus believed there was a short chain of personal contacts tracing back to the apostles that revealed a personal recollection in his own day. See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.20.9.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 5.20.7, 12–13.

The reliability of the historical evidence for each apostle will be analyzed individually and assessed based upon the quantity and quality of the available historical data.

If the terms were put into a numeric scale, the probabilities look like this:

1. *not possibly true*—0–1;
2. *very probably not true*—2;
3. *improbable*—3;
4. *less plausible than not*—4;
5. *as plausible as not*—5;
6. *more plausible than not*—6;
7. *more probable than not*—7;
8. *very probably true*—8;
9. *the highest possible probability*—9–10.

To help determine where each apostle falls on the numeric scale, a few specific questions will be asked. First, how many sources are there? Multiple sources, when they are independent, provide greater confidence the claim is true. Second, how early are the sources? Generally speaking, earlier sources are considered more reliable than later sources. Third, are there sources from varying perspectives? For instance, a martyrdom account has greater credibility if it is supported by Christian, Gnostic, and secular sources. And a written account may also find support from oral tradition. Fourth, is there a historical nucleus even if secondary details disagree? Various accounts often fail to match up on some particulars, yet historians confidently believe they can ascertain a historical core. This claim is true even if an account has legendary and miraculous details.¹⁰

Defining Martyrdom

What, precisely, is a martyr? In its original Greek setting, “martyr” simply means one who testifies in a legal manner, a “witness.”¹¹ Later, it came to refer to one whose testimony for Jesus results in death, which is now the standard Christian understanding of “martyr.”¹²

¹⁰ A popular example is the crossing of the Rubicon by Julius Caesar, which led to his taking control of the Roman Empire. There is considerable debate about when and where he crossed the river. Some of the various accounts seem to contradict, and one even has a miraculous story. Yet classicists are confident the account is historical. See Craig Blomberg, *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 138.

¹¹ Mark Allan Powell, “Martyr,” in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed., ed. Mark Allan Powell (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 608.

¹² David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), s.v. “Martyr,” by Edward P. Myers.

But does martyrdom require death, or can one's suffering qualify one as a martyr? Are martyrs only those who confess certain beliefs, or might they be persons singled out, say, for moral acts? While these are worthwhile questions, I limit this discussion to the traditional understanding of Christian martyrdom, perhaps the strictest possible definition, as *involving death for confession of the Christian faith*.¹³

I should note that this understanding of martyrdom includes the idea that death is voluntary. Even though martyrdom can be avoided through one's renunciation of belief, the martyr *chooses* death. This applies even if the confessor is not given an official opportunity to recant, for he or she continues in the faith with knowledge of the outcome that may result from such belief. Thomas Wespetal concludes: "Thus individuals like John the Baptist, Zechariah (2 Chr 24:20–22) and Uriah (Jer 26:20–23), although they were given no formal opportunity to recant, could have forestalled their deaths had they taken the initiative to retract their accusations against their king."¹⁴

There are no early and reliable historical accounts to indicate the apostles were given the opportunity of recanting their faith at the moment of their deaths. The earliest record of executions for merely bearing the name "Christian" comes from a letter the governor Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan (AD 112), long after the death of the last apostle:

I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the

¹³ Thomas Wespetal defends this traditional conception of martyrdom with a few clarifications. First, at times the church has recognized non-fatal martyrdoms, such as monasticism or being sent to work at mines. However, the church continued to distinguish between those who died and those who did not. Fatal and non-fatal cases were not designated with a single term, which would have abolished the difference. There is substantial historical evidence for reserving "martyr" for those who have died (1 Clement 5:3–7, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.1, 2.1–2, 13.2, 14.2, 15.2, 17.3, 18.3, 19.1, 21.1, and Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.28). Second, some have applied "martyr" to those who have died defending the poor and oppressed of the world. But as Wespetal observes, this runs contrary to what seems to be the majority Christian view since the early church through the time of the Reformation. Third, while one must die for the faith to be considered a martyr, this death need not occur immediately, but can occur soon afterward because of the harm caused by the persecution. Fourth, martyrdom must end in death. Daniel, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego demonstrated a willingness and readiness to face death for their convictions until God saved them. Nevertheless, they cannot technically be considered martyrs, as some have tried to do. Thomas J. Wespetal, "Martyrdom and the Furtherance of God's Plan: The Value of Dying for the Christian Faith" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2005), 19–33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image ... and moreover cursed Christ ... these I thought should be discharged.¹⁵

Although Pliny's represents the first *explicit* reference to the mere bearing of the name "Christian" as being sufficient to warrant death, there is good reason to believe the practice existed much earlier, even into the mid-to-late first century, when the apostles engaged in missionary activity.¹⁶ Peter urges Christians to expect and accept persecution for the *name* of Christ: "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name" (1 Pet 4:16).¹⁷ In his classic study on persecution in the early church, Geoffrey de Ste. Croix argues that persecution "for the Name" likely began during the time of Emperor Nero (AD 54–68):

The onus is on those who deny the early importance of this long-lasting element to produce reasons why it should have arisen only after Pliny's day, when all that we know of Roman religion would lead us to expect its appearance very soon after Christianity first attracted the attention of the government.¹⁸

¹⁵ Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96–97, as cited in *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed., ed. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 551–53.

¹⁶ Candida Moss disagrees: "The fact that Pliny has to make inquiries about this indicates that, before this point, there were no measures in place for the treatment of Christians" (*Myth of Persecution*, 140). As a result, she concludes that Christians were not the ancient Roman equivalent of "enemies of the state." But the fact that Pliny makes inquiries of Trajan could be for a host of other equally compelling reasons than the lack of measures for the treatment of Christians. Consider an alternative view: maybe the laws exist, but Pliny is unsure of how he is to apply them in his particular circumstances. Even in contemporary America there are state and federal laws that are regularly ignored and not enforced for political reasons. Immigration is a case in point. There are fierce debates about whether federal border laws should be enforced. The problem is not a lack of laws, but the political climate that makes it difficult to enforce them. Thus, even though there are federal and state laws on immigration, it would be completely feasible for a modern-day version of the Pliny–Trajan discussion to take place between a state governor and the President of the United States regarding how to treat illegal immigrants.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

¹⁸ G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, ed. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 150.

Oscar Cullman believes Christians came into conflict with the state *before* Nero: “The whole Neronic persecution would be incomprehensible, unless the Roman State had come to know the Christians earlier. It was on the basis of previous experiences of them that they were declared state enemies.”¹⁹

Candida Moss, on the other hand, believes the lack of official records of the apostles being given the opportunity to recant and live undermines the validity of their testimony. This is the missing element, she claims, required to make the argument they died *for* Christ.²⁰ She is right that there is not a record of the apostles being offered the opportunity to recant, but they ministered in potentially caustic environments with full awareness of the possible consequences for their actions.²¹ The fact that their founding leader was a crucified criminal of the Roman Empire also certainly plays a part of their collective consciousness. Jesus even warned his disciples that the world would hate and even persecute them, as they did him (John 15:18–25).²² Every time the apostles proclaimed the name of Christ, then, they knowingly risked suffering and death. Even so, they continued to teach and preach the risen Jesus. Given their active proclamation of Christ, and their full awareness of the cost of such proclamation, if some of the apostles died for their faith, they qualify under the traditional definition of “martyr.”²³

¹⁹ Oscar Cullman, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 30. Cullman points to passages in 2 Cor and Acts 17:7, which indicate that those brought to the faith by Paul were accused by the Jews before civic authorities.

²⁰ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 137.

²¹ See Acts 4, 5, 6:8–8:3, and 12:1–5.

²² This is not to presume the truth of Jesus’s martyrdom predictions as recorded by John. While I do not hold that the NT authors simply fabricated sayings for Jesus based on subsequent events, those who do believe this will find that they are unable to avoid the conclusion that the statements (which they will tend to think are late fabrications) nevertheless describe the real state of affairs—to wit, the persecution of the apostles. William Paley aptly observed: “One side or other of the following disjunction is true; either that the evangelists have delivered what Christ really spoke, and that the event corresponded with the prediction; or that they put the prediction into Christ’s mouth, because, at the time of writing the history, the event had turned out to be so.” Either way, the apostles were likely persecuted for their faith. William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1859), 59.

²³ There is considerable debate as to whether Christians were the first martyrs. G.W. Bowersock argues that martyrdom was entirely new to the second, third, and fourth centuries of the Christian faith. He says, “There is no reason to think that anyone displayed anything comparable to martyrdom before the Christians ... martyrdom was alien to both the Greeks and the Jews” (G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 7–8). Candida Moss agrees with Bowersock that *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, traditionally dated AD 157, was the first time the term “martyrs” was indicative of the concept of martyrdom. The problem with this approach, says Moss, is that it makes

Challenges for the Historical Investigation

Critics frequently challenge the claim that the death of the apostles provides significant evidence for the veracity of their testimony, usually along two lines. First, the lack of early historical data undermines the trustworthiness of the accounts.²⁴ Second, the *Apocryphal Acts*, which record the lives and deaths of many of the apostles after the *Acts of the Apostles*, are filled with legendary accounts, and thus undermine the credibility of the tradition.²⁵ Candida Moss concludes: “The result is that the fact of the apostles’ deaths cannot be used as evidence for the truth of Christianity, the resurrection, or any other detail of Jesus’s ministry.”²⁶

Lack of Information

These two challenges raise important issues. As for the first challenge, it is true that there is little information on the lives and deaths of *some* of the apostles shortly after the inception of the church. But the lack of information does not undermine the significance of what does exist. As I will show, the evidence for individual apostles varies considerably. And it is certainly possible that future evidence will arise that sheds further light on the fate of the apostles.

the *idea* of martyrdom synonymous with the particular term. A group may value death for a specific reason without having a corresponding word for the person who dies. She says: “If terminology is divorced from theme, the search for the beginning of martyrdom takes us into the expanses of the Greco-Roman and ancient Jewish literature, to the tales of the Maccabees, the epic poems of Homer, and the paradigmatic death of Socrates” (Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012], 5). As Moss observes, early Christians did not necessarily see dying for their faith in Christ as new and unique (see Heb 11:32–38). The key issue for this book is not whether the term *martyrs* was in use during the time of the deaths of the apostles. This book will utilize a functional definition of martyr that incorporates examples of martyrdom even if the corresponding technical term was not yet in use.

²⁴ In a debate with William Lane Craig, Bart Ehrman questioned the quality of the historical evidence for the martyrdom of the apostles: “And an earlier point that Bill made was that the disciples were all willing to die for their faith. I didn’t hear one piece of evidence for that. I hear that claim a lot, but having read every Christian source from the first five hundred years of Christianity, I’d like him to tell us what the piece of evidence is that the disciples died for their belief in the resurrection” (“Bart D. Ehrman—Opening Statement,” in William Lane Craig and Bart D. Ehrman, “Is There Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus?,” debate at Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, March 28, 2006, accessed November 5, 2013, http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-there-historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection-of-jesus-the-craig-ehрман#section_2).

²⁵ Robert M. Price, “Would the Apostles Die for a Lie?” *Free Inquiry* 21 (Fall 2001): 20.

²⁶ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 137.

Two reasons may help explain why there is so little detailed early explication of the lives and deaths of the apostles. First, during the inception of the church, Christians did not write primarily to chronicle their own history, but to address specific issues and problems in the church. Paul does not aim to write a history of the church or develop a systematic theology. Rather, he addresses particular issues within individual churches. The same is true for a period in the post-apostolic age. On his way to martyrdom, for instance, Ignatius wrote his letters to individual churches to address issues they were currently facing, such as unity, suffering, and the danger of false teachers. The *Didache*, also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, is a handbook with instructions for Christian behavior. And the *Shepherd of Hermas* deals with real issues people confronted, including the problem of sin after baptism. There is no systematic history of the church until Eusebius in the fourth century. The one exception to this point is the book of Acts, which records important church history. But even the focus of Acts is more on chronicling the spread of the Gospel (cf. Acts 1:8) than on recording the history of the church for its own sake.

Second, we should remember the purpose for which Jesus called 12 apostles. James Dunn notes: “The only obvious way to interpret the significance of Jesus’ choice of twelve disciples was that he saw them as representing (the twelve tribes of) Israel, at least in God’s eschatological intent.”²⁷ This same reasoning lies behind the emphasis in early Christianity upon “the Twelve,” as seen in passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:5 and Revelation 21:14. The calling of the 12 disciples was a prophetic sign that God was sovereignly initiating a new era for Israel. Craig Keener writes:

Although these witnesses were foundational (cf. similarly Eph 2:20), from the standpoint of Luke’s theology, such choices did not exalt the individuals chosen *as* individuals (hence the emphasis on their backgrounds, e.g., Luke 5:8; 22:34; Acts 8:3); rather, these choices highlighted God’s sovereign plan to fulfill the mission effectively ... apart from Jesus, all the protagonists would be like David, who passed from the scene after fulfilling God’s purpose in his generation (Acts 13:36).²⁸

This may help explain why the Gospels pay so little attention to some of the apostles. The importance of the Twelve is found less in the individuals who composed the group than in the theological transformation their existence signified. For these two reasons, one may expect little historical explication of their lives in the writings of the early church.

²⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem: Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:206.

²⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 1:662.

Legendary versus History

As for the second challenge, Candida Moss completely dismisses the evidence for the deaths of the apostles because “our sources for these events are the stuff of legend, not history.”²⁹ There are two problems with this sweeping dismissal. First, evidence for some of the apostles is not contained in legendary documents, such as Clement of Rome’s accounts of the deaths of Peter and Paul, and Josephus’s account of the death of James. Second, while many legendary accounts of the lives and deaths of various apostles occur in the early writings of the church, including some seemingly unbelievable³⁰ legends contained in *Apocryphal Acts*,³¹ the key question is not whether they contain some legends, but whether they contain a historical core. Hans-Josef Klauck observes: “From the fourth and fifth centuries onward, in the West and especially in the East, the relevant material becomes more and more copious and crosses the always fluid border into pure legend and hagiography.”³² Moss agrees: “It was ... during the fourth century that Christians became more interested in telling romantic fictions than preserving historical facts.”³³ If Christians started telling romantic fictions around the fourth century, without any ties to historical truth, then it seems to imply that before that time they *were* concerned with preserving at least a remnant of historical truth. And sometimes it may be reasonable to conclude that a kernel of historical truth has been preserved even *after* this time as well. We must examine each account individually, not, as Moss does, merely sweep them aside collectively.

The *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, then, written before the fourth century, may contain some remnants of a reliable historical tradition. Most scholars seem to assume the *Apocryphal Acts* are entirely fictional and incapable of providing veridical historical data on the lives and martyrdoms of the apostles. However, two points raise questions about the dogmatism with which this position is often

²⁹ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 136.

³⁰ Even in court cases, jurors are instructed that they may not believe a particular portion of an eyewitness account, but can still accept some other isolated piece. The juror simply has to try to determine why the witness might speak truthfully in one area of testimony, while lying or being incorrect in another.

³¹ For example, in *The Acts of John* a group of bedbugs pester the apostle John. They annoy him so much that he commands them to stay far away from “the servants of God.” They wake in the morning and find the bugs patiently waiting at the door of the room. The bugs continue to obey the voice of John. In the *Acts of Philip*, a huge leopard prostrates itself at the feet of three apostles and speaks to them with a human voice. And in *The Acts of Paul*, milk splashes on the tunics of the executioners at the beheading of Paul.

³² Hans Josef Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 231.

³³ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, 234.

held. First, archaeological finds have provided support for at least one significant *Act*.³⁴ Second, there may be a living memory of an earlier reliable tradition that some of the *Acts* contain.³⁵ Of course, then, while they would not be treated with the same credulity as other ancient writings, such as those of Tacitus or Josephus, still these accounts should not, without careful analysis, be dismissed as entirely fictitious. Instead of simply dismissing apocryphal accounts that contain legend, I intended carefully and cautiously to use them in historical analysis.

Additional Historical Challenges

Two final challenges hinder an ability to discern the lives and fates of individual apostles. First, beginning late in the second century, various major cities began claiming apostolic origins. Justo Gonzalez observes:

In its rivalry with Rome and Antioch, the church in Alexandria felt the need to have a founder with apostolic connections, and thus the tradition appeared that Saint Mark had founded the church there. Likewise, when Constantinople became a capital city in the empire, its church too needed apostolic roots, and thus it was claimed that Philip had preached in Byzantium, the ancient site on which Constantinople was later built.³⁶

There are multiple traditions surrounding the apostle Andrew, involving Scythia (southern Russia), Greece, as well as Ephesus and Asia Minor. These traditions may appear contradictory, and attempts have been made to reconcile them.³⁷ Perhaps an overly zealous church invented one or more of the traditions to give itself apostolic authority. It may be difficult to know for sure. The mere fact that multiple traditions exist does not, however, mean there is no knowable truth about Andrew's mission. And it does not follow that a reasonable conclusion cannot be drawn by analyzing the quality and quantity of evidence. At worst, the various traditions simply raise the difficulty of investigation and the care with which the evidence must be handled.

The second challenge for the investigation into the deaths of the apostles relates to the fact that in the Greco-Roman world, dying a courageous death was both a sign of virtue as well as a mark of manliness. A good death could transform one into a model of patriotism or heroism.³⁸ This was doubly true for

³⁴ See Chapter 9 for a significant archaeological finding that supports *The Acts of Thomas*.

³⁵ See the analysis of *The Acts of Peter* in Chapter 5.

³⁶ Justo Gonzalez, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, The Story of Christianity, revised and updated ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 1:37.

³⁷ McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, 52.

³⁸ Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 28–29.

Christians since Jesus, who died as a martyr, founded Christianity.³⁹ Clement of Alexandria said: “We call martyrdom perfection, not because the man comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love.”⁴⁰ According to Tertullian: “The death of martyrs also is praised in song.”⁴¹ Thus, martyrdom stories served both edifying and apologetic purposes in the early church, especially in the West.⁴²

Does this mean the martyrdom stories were fabricated? Some may have been. Multiple stories for certain apostles include their dying in different places, at different times, and in different ways. Clearly they cannot all be true. But it hardly follows that *all* stories were invented simply because they elevate the status of the martyr and served an apologetic function in the early church. Just because a fact may have an apologetic function does not mean it was invented. The writer could be equally motivated by concern for truth. The onus, then, is on those who claim the stories were *all* invented; what evidence exists to warrant the claim? In fact, if the church felt free to invent martyrdom stories, then one wonders why more stories of the martyrdoms of the apostles were not invented in the first two centuries of the church. The silence of history is telling.

I uphold, then, that the disciples fully understood the cost of following Jesus. In his farewell address to his disciples, Jesus spoke both of the world’s hatred for them and of the witness that the Holy Spirit and the disciples will provide for him. The result of this witness, Jesus warned his disciples, would be their suffering and death (John 15:18–16:4). Thus, they expected and anticipated their own deaths for the sake of the Gospel. In doing so, they were following the example of Jesus, and providing the greatest possible witness for their belief in the risen Jesus. William Weinrich concludes:

Jesus’ love, shown in his death, leads to the disciples’ giving their life for the brethren. The suffering and death of the disciples, occasioned by the hate of the world, is “witness” to Jesus and therefore gives sustenance to the community of believers. This element was fundamental in the early Christian view of martyrdom

³⁹ G.W.H. Lampe, “Martyrdom and Inspiration,” in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 118.

⁴⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata, Miscellanies* 4.4, as cited in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev and chronologically arranged by A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Co., 1885), 2:412.

⁴¹ Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 7, as cited in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, rev. A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Co., 1885), 3:639.

⁴² Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), liv.

and lies at the bottom of the Acts of the Martyrs whose principal function was to exhort and encourage those who read them.⁴³

Jesus was the great exemplar for his disciples. He called his disciples not merely to follow his doctrines or teachings, but to follow *him*. He willingly laid down his life for those he loved (John 10:14–18). Christians are urged to follow his example (Mark 8:31–38; Heb 12:1–3; 1 Pet 2:18–25; 1 John 2:6). Paul called believers to him as he imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7). Paul suffered greatly for his faith (2 Cor 23–33). He saw this suffering as honoring Christ, but also testifying to His name. Ignatius saw martyrdom as an imitation of the example of Jesus: “Permit me to be an imitator of the passion of my God.”⁴⁴ While the ancient world revered as heroes those who died a good death, the church did not need to invent all the martyrdom stories, for the apostles willingly faced death as an act of imitating Christ, so their message would have the greatest impact.

Research Outline

Even though there are undeniable impediments to the investigation, careful historical analysis revealed that the apostles were willing to die for their faith, and that in fact many did. The strength of their convictions demonstrates that they were not fabricating their claims about Jesus, but that they actually believed their claims that Jesus had risen from the grave.

Before examining the historical evidence for individual apostles, a few steps need to be established. The subsequent chapters address the following issues:

1. What was the apostolic kerygma? Chapter 2 makes the case that the Christian faith was a “resurrection movement” since its inception. People joined the church because they believed in the resurrection, and the apostles, as well as other early Christians, willingly suffered for their conviction that Jesus rose from the grave. There is no record of an early Christianity in which belief in the resurrection was missing.
2. Who were the Twelve? Were they really eyewitnesses to the resurrection? Chapter 3 explains what is known about the apostles and provides evidence they were genuinely eyewitnesses. Focus is placed on the original 12 disciples—with Matthias replacing Judas—as well as Paul and James

⁴³ William C. Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom: A Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Contexts of Persecution and Martyrdom in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 30–31.

⁴⁴ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans*, 6.13.

the brother of Jesus, since they were also witnesses of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:3–8). It is important to demonstrate that they were actually eyewitnesses because this separates them from others who suffered and died for their beliefs, including modern day martyrs.

3. Did Christians really suffer and die for their faith in the early decades of the church? How extensive was the persecution? In order to establish that the apostles died as martyrs it was demonstrated that Christians were in fact tortured and killed in significant numbers during the early church. Chapter 4 demonstrates the historical evidence for the persecution of Christians in the first century. Among the sources for this evidence are the New Testament, early Christian writers, and Roman and Jewish historians.
4. Is there evidence the apostles died as martyrs for their faith? Chapters 5–18 are the core of the book and the linchpin of the argument. The chapters begin with the most attested apostles, such as Peter and Paul, move to the moderately attested apostles, such as Andrew and Thomas, and conclude with the least attested apostles, such as Simon the Zealot and Matthias. After the historical evidence is presented, each apostle is analyzed with a historical rating from *not possibly true* (certainly not historical) to *the highest possible probability* (nearly historically certain).
5. The concluding chapter summarizes the evidence from the investigation and draws broad conclusions concerning the fate of the apostles regarding the evidence it provides for the resurrection. Three pressing objections are considered and rebutted. Once all the evidence is considered, it is clear the apostles were willing to die for reporting what they believed to be true, and that many in fact did.