

G.W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, ISBN 0 521 46539 7, xii + 106 pp.

This slender volume originated in the Wiles Lectures Bowersock delivered at the Queen's University in Belfast in 1993, and also constitutes a kind of appendix to Bowersock's Sather Lectures of 1994, just published as *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (see *Martyrdom and Rome* 25 note 4). The thesis of the appendix is no less provocative than that of the larger work. The Roman Empire generated Christian martyrdom not only by creating the political conditions which enabled it, but also by providing the ideology which made Christians eager to submit to death. Christian martyrdom was nothing other than a special manifestation of the aristocratic Roman glorification of a suicide. "Without Rome, a *martyr* would have remained what he had always been, a 'witness' and no more. But the spread of the Roman imperium brought with it the glorification of Lucretia and Scaevola in legend and the heroic suicides of Stoic philosophers in recent memory" (p. 73).

Bowersock spends the first three chapters working out the implications: if Christian martyrdom was an essentially Roman phenomenon, then it could not have been based on Jewish precedent. Indeed, martyrdom was not a Jewish ideal at all until the Jews borrowed it from the Christians during the high and later Roman Empire. Nor, less controversially, did martyrdom have a readily apparent background in Greek thought or behavior (Bowersock's dismissal of the relevance of the "pagan martyrs" of Alexandria, though, seems rather too hasty). The proper environment for the martyr was, however, the city, especially the eastern city, for martyrdom presupposed, apart from the presence of Christians, a concentration of Roman administrative activity, and the presence of crowds. The martyr was no less a phenomenon of the high imperial city than the sophist and the athlete, and their functions were, in Bowersock's account, surprisingly similar. Like sophists, martyrs, according to the martyr acts, played the role of teachers of the citizenry, had corps of zealous supporters, and held up a mirror to the municipal and imperial institutions, though unlike the sophists the martyrs did not expect their audience to like what they saw.

As may be evident from the summary of its contents, the book offers both pleasures and frustrations. The argument against the existence of a pre-Christian Jewish ideology of martyrdom is simply wrong. To make it, Bowersock arbitrarily dismisses 2 Maccabees chapters 6 and 7, which he regards as the only possibly pre-Christian evidence for such an ideology, as late insertions. He ignores the concern with martyrdom elsewhere in the book, a concern closely related to the Epitomator's advocacy of a doctrine of resurrection; he also ignores the importance of the very same themes in Josephus's accounts of the Jewish revolt against the Romans. In Josephus's later work, the notion that the Jews are willing to surrender their lives for the Law is a leitmotif, as it was also for the slightly earlier Alexandrian author of the *Hypothetica*. (Josephus himself had been a humiliating failure at martyrdom.) There is no plausible way to attribute these ideas to Christian influence.

Bowersock's dismissal of Jewish martyrdom is unnecessary for his case; he would have been entirely convincing if he had argued that Christian martyrdom was in character and function discontinuous with Jewish, both having been generated independently by the absolutist demands of more or less monotheistic religions — a likelihood which makes a search for the genesis of martyrdom unimportant. It is enough to observe that Christian writers and preachers occasionally invoked Jewish, as also Roman, precedents. After all,

Christians had, as Bowersock emphasizes, a novel language and theology of martyrdom. Many Christians in the second and third centuries were eager for death, not contemptuous of it, as the suicidal Roman heroes and philosophical senators, and even, if Josephus's stoicizing interpretation is correct, the Jewish rebels and passive resisters, had been.

One wonders also whether Bowersock's reading of the martyr acts is not credulous. How seriously should we take the set pieces in which the martyr declaims his or her final paradoxes while the crowd is reduced to rapt silence? Even if some of the early acts are based on official records, are hard kernels of fact really so easily extractable from these stories whose debt to the novel Bowersock has done so much to illuminate? Could they not be more plausibly read as artifacts of fourth-century Christian piety than as records of real second- and third-century events? And how are we to reconcile the apparent fact that martyrdom was mainly an eastern phenomenon with Bowersock's argument that its ideological underpinnings were mainly aristocratic Roman?

All that said, the pleasures of the book are considerable. Not least of these is the crisp writing; indeed, it was hard to resist reading *Martyrdom and Rome* in a single sitting. It is also obvious that Bowersock's argument is intended mainly as provocation, and as such it is successful. Historians of Christianity are challenged to rethink their theologically motivated and usually fruitless search for origins and concentrate instead on context. But the challenge to Roman historians is more serious, or at least likely to yield greater profit. For all the excesses and implausibilities of Bowersock's account, it will make it very difficult to think about the high imperial city without acknowledging the role of the burgeoning Christian movement in shaping it, and vice versa. The urban heroes of Christian self-denial must now take their place beside the sophists as typical products of the Roman Empire.

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Porphyrii Philosophi Fragmenta, ed. Andrew Smith (fragmenta Arabica David Wasserstein interpretante). Teubner, Stuttgart/Leipzig, 1993, liii + 653 pp.

This mighty enterprise is a somewhat unusual addition, perhaps, to the Teubner series. While the series includes many collections of poetical fragments, there are not many collections of prose fragments, philosophical or otherwise (Hartmut Erbse's *Theosophorum Graecorum Fragmenta* being one exception). This is also an unusually massive volume, reminding us what a large corpus of works the Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry left behind him. Porphyry in a way resembles Theophrastus (whose fragments are also currently being dealt with elsewhere), in that he exists in the shadow of a greater mind (in his case Plotinus), from whom doctrinally it is hard to distinguish him (and, of course, from whom — like Theophrastus from Aristotle — he had no great desire to be distinguished). In fact, however, Porphyry's contribution to the development of later Platonism is very considerable, if only because of his prodigious productivity (resulting in commentaries on most of the works of Plato and Aristotle, as well as treatises on most of the main topics of philosophy),¹ and the great learning with which he adorned them. It

¹ Nor should one forget his many contributions to Homeric scholarship, and treatises on rhetoric and grammar, astronomy and harmonics.