

ANCIENT CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM: DIVERSE PRACTICES, THEOLOGIES, AND TRADITIONS. By Candida R. Moss. Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2012. Pp. xiv + 256. \$40.

Tolstoy began *Anna Karenina* with the memorable words, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Moss sets out to prove that each early Christian community is unlike others by delving into the particular motivations by which the communities recorded the stories of their local martyrs. Taking some of the themes she explored in her previous book, *The Other Christs* (2010), she posits a real diversity of martyrdom accounts from region to region showing how specific themes illustrate the prevailing theologies of areas with large Christian populations in the first few centuries.

After exploring various concepts of martyrdom and possible models for martyr accounts, from the Maccabees and Jesus to Socrates and Lucretia, M. moves to the body of her book, where she chooses paradigmatic martyr stories to illustrate her thesis. For Asia Minor, accounts of martyrdom, specifically extracts from the letters of Ignatius and the martyrdom of Polycarp, show how martyrs there sought to imitate Christ. At Rome, the apologies and acts of Justin Martyr and the *Acts of Paul* demonstrate how Christians shaped stories to demonstrate Christianity as the true philosophy, primarily against Stoics. The *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons* and Irenaeus’s account of the martyrdom of Stephen in *Against the Heresies* harnessed the charisma of the martyrs of Gaul to promote church unity. In North Africa the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* illustrate the apocalyptic character of Carthaginian Christianity. Finally, for Alexandria M. chooses Clement’s comments on martyrdom and *The Apocalypse of James* and the *Gospel of Judas* to exemplify the attempt to identify an orthodox theology of martyrdom against gnostic versions.

M. limits her investigation to the period of the second to the turn of the third centuries, well before the plethora of martyr stories generated by the Decian persecution. For nearly every one of her texts she discusses various theories of their dating, though not always adjudicating among them. A surprising example of her redating is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which M. places at the turn of the third century against the traditional date of ca. 156, because its first clear influence is on the martyrdom of Pionius, which M. dates to no earlier than 250. She is also suspicious of an earlier date for Polycarp because of its inclusion of beliefs and practices, which M. believes arose much later than the mid-second century: “the cult of saints, collection of relics, catechesis for martyrdom, the Catholic Church as a distinctive entity, the practice of voluntary martyrdom and the high estimation of martyrs” (73).

There is much to commend this work, especially for its taking on the attempt to situate different theologies of martyrdom in different historical and geographical contexts and to correlate the martyr accounts with theologies of the communities. However, the project needs more clear and careful contextualization and argumentation. First, one needs to be very clear about the themes M. finds in this or that area of the Mediterranean. They are by no means characteristic of only one area. Apocalyptic themes, for example, were not limited to Carthage. Second, the comments on martyrdom that illustrate specific themes need to be set in the context of the distinctive civic life of the communities and the other Christian writings from the area in order to characterize more adequately the attitude of the communities toward their martyrs. If it happened, as M. opines, that in Rome “those not formally educated by tutors may have had some familiarity with philosophical concepts, values, and maxims even if they were not well versed in the metaphysical theories on which they were based,” why might it not have happened in Alexandria or elsewhere? Some parts of the book seem not well integrated into the argument, for example, the excursus on the short, middle, and long recensions of Ignatius’s letters. Also the arguments on the intertextuality of martyr accounts might have been more sophisticated. M. asserts, for example, that when it comes to the martyrdom of Polycarp, “numerous allusions to scriptural narratives of Jesus’s death certainly cast doubt on the texts’ status as an eyewitness report” (63) If this were so, M. would need to discount the photographic record and the eyewitness testimony of opponents of the Mexican martyr Padre Miguel Pro, S.J. (d. 1927), whose execution exhibits many parallels with the passion of Jesus and the martyrdom of Polycarp.

These caveats aside, M.’s book provides an incentive for scholars to look more carefully at the connections between hagiography and theology.

Fordham University, New York

MAUREEN A. TILLEY

NO RELIGION WITHOUT IDOLATRY: MENDELSSOHN’S JEWISH ENLIGHTENMENT.
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The critique of idolatry is an overarching hallmark of Judaism. Aniconism is a function of biblical monotheism’s uncompromising opposition to idolatry, to wit, what in Hebrew is called *avodah zarah*, “alien worship.” Whereas in the Torah idolatry is primarily a problem that has ethical implications, the medieval philosopher Maimonides regarded it as indicative of a profound cognitive flaw. The inner linkage between false practices and thought gained new urgency in the modern period when Jews were challenged to demonstrate that Judaism is a rational religion that