

# 5 The Martyrdom of Polycarp

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## 1.1 Introduction to Polycarp's Martyrdom

### **1.1.1 Background of Polycarp's Martyrdom**

> **Together read** Martyrdom Salutation-1:1; 4:1; 19:1; 20:1-2. Take note Marcion and Evarestus.

### **1.1.2 History of documents of the letter**

The text of Martyrdom is preserved in eight Greek manuscripts.

- The oldest of those eight is named *Atheniensis* (10<sup>th</sup> century).
- One of those eight Greek manuscripts is the *Codex Hierosolymitanus*.
- Eusebius (*History of the Church* 4.15) quotes the Salutation, 1:1a, and 8:1-19:1a. He paraphrases 2:2-7:3.
- There is a Latin version of the letter.
- There are Slavonic, Armenian, Syriac and Coptic translations, but all these are translated from Eusebius, so they do not add to our knowledge of the original text.

### **1.1.3 Importance of the Martyrdom in the early Church**

This is the oldest written account of a Christian martyrdom after the New Testament; it was a model for what would become a popular *genre* of literature, the martyrdom stories. The document must therefore have been important in the early Church. Eusebius says: 'I consider it most important that his death, a written account of which is still extant, should be recorded in this history.' (*History of the Church* 4.15.1)

### **1.1.4 The first original copies of Martyrdom**

> **Together read and discuss** Martyrdom 22:1-3. Note that the end of the original letter was 22:1. The people who made copies added 22:2-3. These additions give credibility to the document; it is traced back to the papers of Irenaeus, who had known Polycarp personally. This proves how old the document must be.



### **1.1.5 Date of the document**

The Martyrdom mentions the date of Polycarp's death as 22 or 23 February (see Martyrdom 21), but not the year. Did it happen under Statius Quadratus as we read in chapter 21? Then we must think of ca. 155-160. This also fits with the trip that Polycarp had made to Rome for meeting with pope Anicetus. Anicetus became pope in 154.

If we accept that chapter 21 is a late addition, we could accept the later date that is given by Eusebius, namely the year 167. But even if chapter 21 is a late addition, the earlier dates of 155-160 may still be true.

## 1.2 Content of Polycarp's Martyrdom

### **1.2.1 What was Polycarp accused of?**

> **Read in groups and discuss:**

- a) Martyrdom 3:2; 4
- b) 8:2; 9:1-10:1
- c) 12:1-3

> **Discuss together**

### **1.2.2 How did Polycarp die?**

> Read together 13:1-14:1; 15:1-16:2

### **1.2.3 The Martyrdom's theology of suffering**

> Read in groups and discuss

- a) 1:2; 2:2c-3
- b) 6:2; 9:3; 11:2
- c) 14:1-2; 15:2
- d) 17:1; 18:2; 19:1-2

> Discuss in class

### **1.2.4 What does 'Martyrdom according to the Gospel' mean?**

We come across this term 'Martyrdom according to the Gospel' (or: 'in accordance with the will of God') in 1:1; 2:1. The martyrdom of Polycarp showed the believers what 'martyrdom according to the Gospel' means.

- He waited to be betrayed –just as the Lord did. 2:1. Cf. 4:1.
- He looked not only for his own interest but to the interest of others as well. 2:1
- Nobility, patient endurance, bravery, loyalty to Christ. 2:2; 3:1-2. Cf. 4:1
- Absent from the flesh during martyrdom. 2:2-3

It seems clear that the document is not just an eyewitness account, but that it is a theologically edited version of that account. Especially interesting in this regard is how the editor made the martyrdom of Polycarp resemble the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe that is also meant with 'martyrdom according to the Gospel'. Some examples:

> Read together and discuss: 2:2; 5:1; 6:2; 7:1; 8:1; 12:2; 14:1.

### **1.2.5 Polycarp's prayer on the stake**

> Read together and discuss: 14:1-3

Note the carefully chosen theological language; this is also liturgical language. Also note the Eucharistic language regarding Jesus Christ and his martyr Polycarp. In this context, consider how the death of Polycarp is described: he was baked as bread. (cup: 14:2; bread: 15:2)

### **1.2.6 Beginning of veneration of saints**

> Read together and discuss:

- 13:2: even during his life, because of his holiness, people wanted to touch his blessed flesh.
- 17:2-3: enemies were worried that they would worship his corpse. Look at theological response
- 18:1-3: what did the early Church do around the place where the martyr was buried? Why?

## **1.3 Lessons of Polycarp's Martyrdom**

### **1.3.1 How does this Martyrdom help shape our knowledge of Church history?**

> Discuss

### **1.3.2 How does Polycarp's Martyrdom shape our view of Bible and tradition?**

> Discuss

### **1.3.3 How does the Martyrdom help us today in Egypt?**

> Discuss