

## SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE:

# MARTYRDOM IN SECOND TEMPLE JUDAISM AND IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

by

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In this lecture, Professor Flusser discusses various aspects of martyrdom (Hebrew: *kiddush ha-shem*; lit. sanctification of the Name) in Second Temple Judaism, and their influence on and adaptation by early Christianity, by tracing several common themes in Jewish sources and their New Testament parallels. In the wake of the religious persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes, ideas of martyrdom became a central feature of Jewish existence and found expression in many Jewish compositions. II Maccabees, early sayings of the Sages, and the apocalyptic *Assumption of Moses*, emphasise the power of the death of a martyr at the hands of hostile Gentiles – so glorious that it can put an end to evil on earth and/or atone for it. Indeed, the latter work views the martyrdom of the Messiah Taxo and his sons as precipitating the final redemption and the messianic era.

In line with their belief in predestination, the Essenes felt that the pre-ordained suffering and death of God's elect had to be met with great joy, as expressed in the *Assumption of Isaiah* and manifested during the Roman persecutions. Indeed, a "crown of glory" surrounds the suffering martyr. In later Talmudic literature, this crown is worn by the righteous at their death. Professor Flusser traces the depiction of the halo surrounding the heads of Christian saints and martyrs to this Jewish idea, and supports his point with several pertinent citations from the New Testament where it takes on even greater significance. Similarly, the early Christian belief in the purification and sacrifice of the righteous by the ordeals of martyrdom can be traced to the Essene "sons of light". Both rabbinic and Essene interpretations of Leviticus treat the death of the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abijeh, who perished during a sacrifice in the tabernacle, as a sacrificial martyrdom of righteous priests. This Biblical prototype of a sacrifice to God hints at the desired holiness of human sacrifice and expiation which forms a basis of Christianity.

Another common motif is the death of prophets at the hands of the people of Israel, not of the Gentiles. The source of this recurring theme is

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not known, although its prevalence is attested by the erection of monuments to ancient prophets and martyrs in the first century C.E. in the Hellenistic Diaspora (e.g. the graves of the Maccabean martyrs venerated in Antioch by both Jews and Christians). The Gospels of Matthew 23:34-37 and Luke 11:49-51, which cite the persecution and martyrdom of prophets in Jerusalem as part of their apostolicity, resemble statements in the Apocrypha in Enoch and Jubilees. Zechariah receives particular attention. Similarly, New Testament interpretations of Isaiah 53:7-8, describing Jesus's end in terms of the prophet's death, which is seen as foreshadowing Jesus's fate, constitute the ultimate working out of this theme so prominent in the contemporary Jewish literature.

The martyrdom of Jesus contains several of the aforementioned features and adds some new dimensions. His death as atonement for man's sin is described in I Peter 3:18 as that of a righteous individual who dies in order to bring the wicked closer to God, thereby recalling the Jewish sources. The theme of the murder of a prophet in Jerusalem is also connected with Jesus's death. The motif of martyrdom by the Gentiles, however, is, in Jesus's case conspicuously absent from the New Testament (except for one reference, Luke 18:32 and parallels), although in fact Jesus was executed by the Romans. The reason for this was apparently to avoid estranging Gentile Christians from their new faith.

In addition, Christianity stresses the resurrection as proof of Jesus's death being that of a righteous man, and of his victory over the sins of the believers for whom he died. From the beginning, Jesus's Messiahship became intertwined with the idea of atonement through the martyrdom of a righteous man. The belief in the Messiah's expiatory death developed into the cornerstone of Christian faith. Subsequent Christian martyrs, unlike their Jewish counterparts, do not, therefore, expiate the sins of their people. This task has been carried out completely by Jesus. They only follow in his footsteps.

Professor Flusser has demonstrated that ideas vital to early Christianity have their origins in Second Temple Judaism's varied branches. He has drawn the Jewish sources and the New Testament passages into a common and shared world of thought, concepts and references, transcending the barriers created over the centuries.

Summary by Rivkah Duker