Witness and martyrdom in the Bible

Martyrdom of Stephen

International Ecumenical Symposium

A CLOUD OF WITNESSES:

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ECUMENICAL COMMEMORATION

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Bose, 30 October 2008

Introduction

The person who renders testimony (*ho martyrôn*) to the truth, defends it in word and action, can justly be called “witness” (*mártys*). According to the usage of the brethren who have been impressed by the behavior of those who have fought even to the death for the truth, however, “martyr” (*mártys*) is not used with the full force of this term except for those who in the shedding of blood have given testimony (*martyrésantas*) to the “mystery of piety” (1Tm 3, 16).

These words by Origen (middle of the third century A.D.) in his commentary on John (II.210) fit well to introduce a reflection on the topic of witness (or testimony)/martyrdom in the Bible. It is well-known, in fact, that the Greek terms *martyréo/martyría/mártys,* which originally belonged to the sphere of legal language with the meaning of “witnessing, testifying, making a public declaration”, began to be used as technical terms to indicate martyrdom only in the *Passiones* and *Acta Martyrum* of the second century, at the time of the widespread persecution of Christians y the Roman empire. In the Septuagint and in the New Testament, with some rare exception, *martyréo* and related words are used rather to signify “testify, give testimony”, like the Hebrew root underlying them *'ud* (from which is derived *'ed,* witness).

We likewise know that in the Gospels according to Mark (cf. Mk 14, 55–56.59.63) and Matthew (cf. Mt 18, 16; 26, 65) the language of the *martyría* is always limited to the legal sphere, while in Luke (Gospel and Acts) it assumes also a wider significance, that of rendering testimony to Jesus (cf. Lk 4, 22; Ac 1, 8) and to the resurrection (cf. Lk 24, 48; Ac 1, 22; 3, 15). In the fourth Gospel, then, this vocabulary describes the mission of Jesus and consequently that of the apostles: the verb *martyréo,* which recurs a good thirty-three times, is used to express concisely the testimony that Jesus rendered to the Father (cf. Jn 5, 36) and vice versa (cf. Jn 8, 18), to the truth (cf. Jn 18, 37), to the light (cf. Jn 1, 7–8); it should be noted, however, that Jesus is never designated as *mártys.*

Prescinding, however, from these lexical considerations, I believe it is more important to reflect on the *reality of martyrdom:* that of a public testimony of faith in God and in Jesus Christ given by men and women, a testimony that does not shrink even before violent death and which from a certain epoch came to be designated by the term “martyrdom”, which sums up its meanings. In this sense it is undeniable that Sacred Scripture presents models of “martyrs’ *ante litteram,* on whom Christian faithful from the first generations have meditated to strengthen their faith.

I shall try, hence, to analyze the most significant figures of witnesses/martyrs present in the Bible, exemplary models that attest to the continuity of the tradition of martyrdom for the faithful of the First and of the New Covenant.

1. Testimony and martyrdom in the Old Testament

a) Martirdom and prophecy

According to Jewish tradition, as it appears, for instance, in the apocryphal *Lives of the Prophets,* which were composed at the time of the end of the second temple, but transmitted by Christians, the lot of authentic prophets is that of being persecuted. In particular, martyrdom and violent death are the seal *par excellence* on the prophetic mission, the culmination of testimony rendered to God and opposing the dominant idolatry and human disobedience to his will. Conscious of this, the Levites in the expiatory liturgy celebrated upon the return from exile confess that “*[our fathers]* have rebelled against you, o God, have thrown aside the Torah, *have killed your prophets who admonished them to return to you* and have greatly insulted you” (Ne 9, 26). Jesus too in word and deed will place himself in their wake, and Stephen in the long discourse that preceded his being stoned asks his murderers: “Which of the prophets have your fathers not persecuted?” (Ac 7, 52).

This long history opens with *Moses,* “the Lord’s servant” (Dt 34, 5), whom the children of Israel strongly contested and put to the test in various ways during their wanderings in the desert (cf. Ex 17, 1–7, and others). In a tradition taken up by Hosea there are two verses that, although their interpretation is very uncertain, seem to testify to the sufferings to the point of blood-shedding inflicted on the great prophet. I give you a literal translation.

Through a prophet the Lord made Israel depart from Egypt and through a prophet preserved him. But [Ephraim] provoked him to of bitterness: therefore his blood will return to fall on him, and his opprobrium his Lord will render him (Ho 12, 14–15).

The martyrdom of the prophets, however, is attested with certainty already by Elias already in the middle of the ninth century B.C. When he was fleeing from the persecution of queen Jezabel towards the mountain of God, Horeb-Sinai, the Lord asked him: “What are you doing here, Elias?” He replied: “I am full of zeal for the Lord, the God of the universe, because the sons of Israel have abandoned your covenant, they have demolished your altars, they have killed your prophets with the sword. Only I remain, and they seek to take my life” (1K 19, 9–10.13–14). The “guilt” of the prophets is that of opposing idolatrous power, a source of economic and social oppression of the poor: through their defense of justice they testify to the absolute sovereignty of JHWH and confess their faith in him even to the point of giving their life.

Other examples of prophets persecuted to the point of martyrdom could be cited, outstanding examples of which are Uriah (cf. Jer 26.20–23) and Zachariah, recalled also by Jesus (cf. 2Chr 24, 17–22; Mt 23, 35; Lk 11, 51). I would like, however, to examine more closely only the paradigmatic case of *Jeremias,* who lived at the turn of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. His entire prophetic ministry can be read as one uninterrupted passion, born of the contrast between his announcing the word of God, which “for him is a cause of shame and derision all the day long” (cf. Jr 20, 8), and the persecution of him by the legitimate religious authorities (cf. Jr 18, 18), so that he comes to feel “like a meek lamb, conducted to the slaughter” (Jr 11, 18). The priest Pascur has him beaten and put in prison (cf. Jr 20, 2), and, on account of his prophecy concerning the temple, Jeremias is arrested and receives the death sentence, commuted at the last moment (cf. Jr 26).

Just as Zacharias on the point of death had done (cf. 2 Chr 24, 22), so too Jeremias asks God to vindicate him (cf. Jr 15, 15). God, however, does not intervene against his enemies, he lets the prophet descend to the *she'ol* of despair, he confronts him with the false prophets without letting it appear clearly that his testimony is authentic. Jeremias will see burned the roll on which his words were written (cf. Jr 36, 1–26), he will end up in a muddy cistern at the risk of death (cf. Jr 38, 1–12) and will be dragged to Egypt, in solidarity with his people’s sin (cf. Jr 43, 1–7). In the tragic moments of this man’s existence God appears to abandon him and to refuse him his testimony; Jeremias, however, always gives his testimony to God, remains faithful to him until his death outside the holy land. His death, according to one interpretation of Jewish tradition, is a real and true martyrdom: “Jeremias died at Tafni, in Egypt, stoned by the people” (*Lives of the Prophets,* 2).

b) The Servant of the Lord

Within our itinerary a special place belongs to the mysterious figure of the *'eved Adonaj,* the *Servant of the Lord* described by Deutero-Isaias in the middle of the sixth century B.C., in the four so-called “Songs of the Servant” (cf. Is 42, 1–9; 49, 1–7; 50, 4–11; 52, 13–53, 12). These are extremely dense and complex texts, which have received through the centuries numerous interpretations. Among these I wish to single out that which sees in him an individual Messiah, an interpretation already present in Judaism and then attested in continuity by Christian tradition, and the collective interpretation that sees in the Servant the people of Israel taken as a corporate personality (cf. Is, 49, 3).

In this last view, within a kind of trial before the *gojim,* to the exiled nation among hostile peoples is rendered testimony by the Lord himself. Three times the Lord’s oracle resounds with force: *“You are my witnesses”* (*'edaj* [*mártyres* according to the LXX]: Is 43, 10.12; 44, 8). The basic testimony rendered by Israel to God is that of perseverance even in a situation of extreme suffering. In its apparent passivity the people remain “the servant whom God has chosen” (cf. Is 43, 10) and in this way gives public testimony through its faith, which remains firm even in the midst of persecution.

The songs of the Servant, however, describe also an individual prophet. Filled with the Spirit of God, he is invested with the mission of “manifesting to the people the *mishpat*” Is 42, 1), “radical judgment in the name of the unique love of God, therefore judgment of salvation for all men” (Alberto Mello). His mission, however, seems to be marked only by a lack of success: a prophet rejected because of the testimony he rendered to God’s word, he suffers abuse and persecution; nevertheless, he continues to trust in God and declares himself disposed to testify in tribunal before his enemies (cf. Is 50, 4–9). In the fourth song the mistreatment meted out to the Servant reaches its apex, making of him “a man of sorrows, acquainted with suffering” (Is 53, 3), condemned to suffer an unjust and violent death and a burial among the impious (cf. Is 53, 8–9). Like a lamb without voice the *'eved Adonaj* is led to the slaughter (cf. Is 53, 7), yet his death appears as a true sacrifice of expiation, which permits God’s plan to be realized. For the very reason of his ignominious death, in fact, he will see the light, he will be a sign for the multitudes (*rabbim*), he will be a source of justification thanks to his intercession for sinners (cf. Is 53, 11–12).

In the life of this anonymous martyr there is public testimony before worldly authorities, a voluntarily accepted death, the expiatory value of sacrifice, and the blessing that follows, which descends on all men, among whom are numbered his killers. These at the sight of him cannot but acknowledge: “He was pierced by our sins, broken for our iniquities… By his wounds we were healed” (Is 53, 5). This is the *absolute uniqueness of the Servant:* by not imputing the sin to the multitudes, but taking upon himself their violence, he puts an end to violence; the killers’ guilt falls on the Servant, who assumes the injustice of which he was victim and interposes himself as mediator between God and sinners, in order to ask mercy of God and transmit pardon to the multitudes.

As appears in many passages of the Gospel, Jesus must have pondered his deepest vocation in the light of this figure of the Servant, assuming it as the form of his own life, to the point of interpreting by it his own end. Did he not say to his disciples shortly before being arrested: “In me must be fulfilled this word of Scripture: ‘He was numbered among the malefactors’ (Is 53, 12)” (Lk 22, 37)? In consequence, the figure of the Servant will become a stable reference in every Christian reflection on martyrdom.

c) The martyrdom of the Maccabees

If we take a chronological leap to the beginnings of the second century B.C., the time of the Hellenistic persecution, we come to martyrdom met for the love of God and of his Law on the part of some faithful (*chassidim*) and of some wise men (*maskilim*). Their witness, narrated in the books of the Maccabees and theologically reread by Daniel, will assume the value of an exemplar for Christians oppressed by the Roman empire. Not by chance *the Maccabee martyrs* were very soon inserted into Christian martyrologies, and their tomb in Antioch was taken over by Christians who wanted to honor their memory.

Antiochus IV Epiphanius (175–164 B.C.), a king of the Seleucid dynasty, began a fierce persecution of the faithful of the Torah who opposed the introduction of pagan customs and of idolatry in Israel. The abolition of the Torah, the substitution of the feast of the Tabernacles by the Bacchanals, finally, the introduction of the cult of Zeus into the temple, an act defined as the “abomination of desolation” (Dn 9, 27; cf. 1 Mac 1, 54), met with strong opposition by the priestly family of the Maccabees. Freed from its nationalistic elements and of its features of “holy war”, evident especially in the figure of Judas Maccabeus, this opposition shows paradigmatic characteristics of martyrdom, as is inferred from several passages of the books of the Maccabees. To the enemies who attacked them on a Sabbath day they did not respond or throw stones or obstruct their hiding places, but declared: “We all die in our innocence. Heaven and earth are our witnesses that you unjustly make us die.” So they rushed against them in battle, and these died with their wives, their children, and their cattle, to the number of about one thousand persons (1Mac 2, 36–38).

The scribe *Eleazar* likewise readily met torture, saying under the blows: “The Lord well knows that, although I could escape death, in my body I suffer atrocious torments under the beatings, but in my soul I gladly bear all this out of fear of him” (2Mac 6, 30–31). The most impressive *testimony,* destined to enjoy enormous fortune, however, is the *of the seven brothers and their mother,* ready to die rather than deny the Torah (cf. 2Mac 7). While they are tortured one by one, they attest before the king that God will give them consolation, raising them to new and eternal life; that it is good to die on account of men in order to await from God the fulfillment of the hope of being resurrected by him. They sacrifice their own life with *parrhesia* and full faith in the one God, whom they confess as their avenger.

The meaning of the testimony of these faithful is well understood by Daniel, who, projecting the historical facts of his times back to the times of the Babylonian kingdom, assimilates the Maccabee martyrs to the three youths thrown into the burning furnace by Nabuchodonosor (cf. Dn 3, 8–97); in contrast, he judges the armed revolt as an attempt made by human hands, “a little help” (Dn 11, 34), incapable of stopping the persecution because it has little confidence in true help, that of God (cf. Dn 2, 34; 8, 25). He recognizes as witnesses of God “those wise persons (*maskilim*) who will teach the multitudes, but will fall by the sword, will be given to the flames, led into slavery and oppressed for many days… Some of them will fall, so that among them there would be those that have been purified, washed, made clean until the time of the end” (Dn 11, 33.35). Their unwavering hope is that of the resurrection: on account of this Daniel can affirm that “they will shine like the splendor of the firmament; those that have led many to justice will shine like stars forever” (Dn 12, 3).

These last elements are already very close to the Christian concept of martyrdom. We could say that only one thins is missing, but that one thing is essential: the event and person of Jesus Christ, the reason of life and of death for his disciples. First, before passing to the second part of my reflections I would like to read a final passage, taken from the book of Wisdom, composed on the threshold of the Christian era. The author, in comparing the lot of the just and of the impious, writes words that constitute an ideal *trait d’union* with what will follow.

The just who die are in God’s hands, no torment can touch them any longer: in the eyes of the foolish they are considered dead, their passing is judged a misfortune, but they are in peace for always. If to men they appeared to be afflicted, yet they have hoped in life without end: after a brief trial they receive a great recompense… On the day of the Lord’s visitation they will shine, they will glitter like sparks of fire, they will judge the nations, they will have power over peoples, and the Lord will reign for always over them (W 3, 1–5.7–8).

2. The witness and martyrdom of Jesus of Nazareth

I would like to deal with the topic of witness/martyrdom in the New Testament from a special point of view. It is often said that in the New Testament three episodes of martyrdom are narrated: the beheading of John the Baptist (cf. Mk 6, 17–29), the stoning of Stephen (cf. Ac 7, 55–60), and the crucifixion of Jesus. Nevertheless, if in the first two cases the character of martyrdom is evident, things are rather different in the death of Jesus. In fact, although it is true that through a reading of faith and theology *the death of Jesus* has come to be interpreted as a sacrifice of expiation (cf. Mt 26, 38; 1Pt 2, 24–25), as the “normative principle for discerning the truth of Christian martyrdom” (Bruno Maggioni), it nevertheless remains true that in his historical vicissitude he experienced the death of the cursed through *a shameful end,* through *the anti-sacrifice* par excellence: *death on the cross.* For Scripture this is the death of one cursed by God (“Cursed is he who hangs from the wood”: Gal 3, 13; cf. Dt 21, 23), hanging between heaven and earth because rejected by God and by men: this is the *mors turpissima crucis* (Origen, *Commentary on Matthew,* xxvii.22), the extreme torment

inflicted on one judged harmful to the *polis* by Roman political authority and enemy of the community of believers by the legitimate religious authority.

What happened in Jerusalem on the eve of the Passover Sabbath, 7 April of the year 30? Jesus, a Galilean who had gathered around himself a community of a few men and some women fully drawn into his itinerant life, held as rabbi and prophet by these disciples and by a wider number of sympathizers, was condemned and put to death by crucifixion. This ending in failure at once appeared as a scandal — "the scandal of the cross" (1Cor 1, 23), Paul will say — an obstacle to faith in him, especially when he began to be confessed as the Messiah of Israel, hence Son of God, sent by God to announce the coming of his Kingdom. This is why, still at the beginning of the second century A.D. the Jewish rabbi Trypho declares in his dialogue with the Christian Justin: "We know that the Messiah must suffer and be led like a sheep (cf. Is 53, 7), but that he should be crucified and die such a shameful and ignominious death, through the death accursed by the Law, this we cannot even begin to conceive" (*Dialogue with Trypho,* 90.1). Not by chance some groups of Christians will end by denying that Christ died on the cross, and it is highly significant that for the Koran Jesus at the last moment was replaced by another man because such a death was impossible for the Messiah (cf. Sura iv.157).

Yet, for authentic Christian faith it is exactly the one crucified who "has narrated God" (cf. Jn 1, 18); even on the cross, or rather, especially on the cross, Jesus "has rendered testimony to the truth" (cf. Jn 18, 37: verb *martyréo*), transforming an instrument of capital punishment into the place of greatest glory. But how was it possible that a man hanging on a cross become him on whom Christians gaze as Savior and Lord? That is: can his death be considered a martyrdom? I believe that in order to answer this question it is necessary to ask oneself why Jesus was put to death and how he confronted the prospect of his imminent violent death.

Augustine has affirmed: *"Martyres non facit poena sed causa"* (*Exposition on the Psalms,* 34.ii.13), that is, "what makes martyrs is not the torment but the reason for their death". Well then, what was the reason, the cause in the double sense of historical cause and of profound interior principle that animated Jesus' acting as he did?

The Gospels take care to tell us clearly that Jesus went towards his death *not by chance or out of necessity, that is, because of a destiny that fell to his lot.* No, Jesus, was not arrested by chance: he himself had foreseen his own end, the end that comes to all prophets, the end that fell to the lot of his teacher John the Baptist only a few years before, the end that was the outcome of the growing opposition to him on the part of the religious powers. In this connection his invectives against those who built the tombs of the prophets and in that way showed solidarity with those who had killed them (cf. Mt 23, 29–31; Lk 11, 47–48), or his lament over Jerusalem that "kills the prophets and stones those sent to her" (cf. Mt 263, 37; Lk 13, 34). Nor was his destiny inevitable: Jesus remained free before the circle that was tightening around him, free to fell and return to Galilee or to terminate in Jerusalem, in the temple, that wandering around and preaching to the people begun in the synagogues and village squares.

Neither chance nor necessity: Jesus goes towards his death *in freedom and out of love,* "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (*eis télos:* Jn 13, 1). He had said that his passion "was necessary" (*deî:* Mk 8, 31 and parallel), but it was a precise "*necessity*", first of all a *human* one, on which the wise men of Israel had already meditated: "in a world of the unjust, the just man can only meet with hostility, persecution, and, if possible, be put to death", as the first tow chapters of the book of Wisdom testify. History confirms this intrahuman necessity: he who is thirsty for justice, who lives and preaches it, finds hostility and rejection, yesterday like today. Jesus could have remained silent or have passed to the part of the unjust: then the hostility towards him would have ceased. By continuing instead to be faithful to the will of God, by continuing to pass among men doing good (cf. Ac 10, 38), he could only prepare his rejection by the Roman authority, which saw in him a threat to the totalitarian claims of the emperor, and by the Jewish religious authority, which could not stand the face of God narrated by Jesus. Human necessity, thus, becomes also *divine necessity:* not in the sense that God, his Father, wants him on the cross, but in the sense that obedience to the will of God, a will that asks that love be lived to the limit, requires a life of justice and of love even at the cost of a violent death.

Here it is essential to stress that Jesus in assuming this tragic end never separated it from his faith in God who comes to save the just man, who does not abandon his friend forever in the hands of the impious (cf. Ps 37, 28). Yes, the ever clearer revelation of the future that awaited him was lived by Jesus in trusting adherence and in hope placed in the God who intervenes, in the Fatherr who responds: the last word would be God's, who certainly would raise from the dead his beloved Son! In other words, the faith of Jesus in the coming Kingdom and his communion with God and with his brethren always remained unshaken and sustained and carried to completion his love: even in the face of death and in death Jesusb continued to love his brethren and to accept to be loved by them, continued to believe in God's love.

This Jesus was raised by God in reposnes to the life that he had lived, to his way of living in love to the limit: we could say that it was his love stronger than death that caused the Father's decision to recall him from the dead. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus is the seal that God placed on his life: by raising him from the dead Gos has declared that everything that is essential to know him was testified in the love lived by that man. It is in this that *"the testimony of Jesus"* (*he martyría Iesoû:* Ap 1, 2.9; 12, 17; 19, 10; 20, 4) consists, as the visionary of the Apocalypse defines it; it is this that made him *"the faithful witness"* (*ho mártys ho pistós:* Ap 1, 5; 3, 14), the one who from his glorious cross teaches his disciples how to face tribulations and sufferings for the Gospel in faithfulness and in love.

Conclusion. The testimony and martyrdom of Christians

Bruno Maggioni has written: “The martyr does not choose death, but a way of living, that of Jesus”. This is what distinguishes the Christian martyr, his specific radicality. In the light of this we can go over in summary the testimony given by those who believe in Jesus Christ as it is presented to us in the New Testament:

- Stephen, who before dying in imitation of his Lord asks pardon for his killers (cf. Lk 23, 34; Ac 7, 60);
- James, put to death by the sword by Herod (cf. Ac 12, 2), grandson of the Herod who had persecuted Jesus (cf. Lk 23, 7–12);
- Peter, “witness (*mártys*) of Christ’s sufferings and participant of the glory that is to become manifest” (1Pt 5, 1);
- Paul, who in faith exclaims: “Always and everywhere we carry in our body the death of Jesus, so that also the life of Jesus may be made manifest in our body” (2Cor 4, 10);
- Antipas, who in the Apocalypse is defined by Christ “my faithful witness” (*ho mártys mou ho pistós:* (Ap 2, 13);
- finally, again in the Apocalypse, the multitude of “those who come from the great tribulation and have washed their garments, making them white, in the blood of the Lamb” (Ap 7, 14), “who have overcome the Accuser thanks to the blood of the Lamb and to the word of their testimony (*ho lógos tês martýrias autôn*)” (Ac 12, 11).

Where the memory of Christ becomes authentic and efficacious, there the Christian must know that it becomes possible to drink the chalice of a violent death, as Jesus had foretold to James and John (cf. Mk 10, 38). Martyrdom is not a project to be plotted, it is not even a project of one’s own sanctification, but is pure gift of God in Jesus Christ. *It is always worthwhile to live and to die for Jesus,* and martyrdom is the act *par excellence* by which the Christian lays down his life for Christ, it is the very event by which he testifies that he belongs only to his Lord, that the love of him and for him is worth more than life (cf. Ps 63, 4). Yes, as wrote Ignatius of Antioch on his way towards martyrdom:

Then I will be truly the Lord’s disciple when the world will no longer see my body, because in martyrdom I will begin to be disciple (cf. *To the Romans,* iv.3; v.3).

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