

**“SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN”: CHILD SACRIFICE, MARTYRDOM, AND  
IDENTITY FORMATION IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY**

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There is no shortage of contenders for the historical low point in Christian-Jewish relations. The early Christ movement’s emergence from Second Temple, and then post-Second Temple Judaism were characterised by varying degrees of conflict, as nascent Christianity began to attempt to define the limits of its borders.<sup>1</sup> While revisionist historians have rightly corrected a simplistic “parting of the ways” between “two religions” model,<sup>2</sup> it is clear from early Christian sources that tension existed between those who incorporated (338) devotion to Jesus within their religious practice and those who did not.<sup>3</sup> Despite holding much in common, “the Jew” came to be defined as “the other” in early Christian rhetoric, a status that would be solidified in post-Constantine Christianity (Lieu 2003).

From the seventh century onwards, the rise of Islam began to constitute a second external “threat” to Christianity. Whereas Judaism threatened the *theological* boundaries of Christianity, Islam posed a direct threat to the *physical* borders of the Christian Empire. In 638, Jerusalem fell to the invading Muslim army, and in subsequent centuries, Islam spread into Europe as far as Spain. However, by the mid-tenth century, Christian forces had retaken territory, raising hopes that Jerusalem itself might once again come under Christian control. It was the first Crusade, launched ostensibly to deal with the Islamic threat, that led to one of the most notorious and brutal incidents in Christian interactions with Jews.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For classic treatments, see Dunn (1991; 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Among the many important works, see Becker and Reed (2007); Boyarin (2006); Lieu (1994).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Hurtado (1999), Horbury (1998), and Wilson (1995).

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent overview of the Crusades, see Tyerman (2006). On the Jews and the First Crusade, see Shepkaru (2006, 161–210); Cohen (2006); Chazan (1987).

Inflamed by Pope Urban II's famous Clermont speech of 1095<sup>5</sup> the armies of the First Crusade marched through the Rhine Valley with the aim of "liberating" Jerusalem. However, the army, led by Count Emich, attacked the Jewish communities of Speyer, Worms, Mainz, and Cologne, slaughtering thousands. While the campaign was specifically aimed at the Muslims in the Holy Land, one Jewish chronicler reflects the Crusaders' apparent logic:

They said to each other: "Look now, we are going to a distant country to make war against mighty kings and are endangering our lives to conquer the kingdoms which do not believe in the crucified one, when actually it is the Jews who murdered and crucified him." They stirred up hatred against us in all quarters and declared that either we should accept their abominable faith or else they would annihilate us all, even infants and sucklings.<sup>6</sup>

Dramatic accounts of the pogroms are found in three well-known Jewish writings: *Chronicles of Solomon bar Simson*, *Chronicles of Eliezer bar (339) Nathan*, and the *Mainz Anonymous*.<sup>7</sup> Each portrays the suffering and martyrdom of the Jews in a heroic and idealised way, insisting that they preferred death to forced conversion, even to the extent of taking their own lives rather than waiting to be killed by the Christian mob. Such idealised presentation of martyrdom leads to the suspicion of exaggeration. However, their accounts are largely corroborated in Christian sources, such as Richard of Poitiers, Hugh of Flavigny, Sigebert of Gembloux, Albert of Aachen, and the *Historiae Regum Francorum*.

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<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps more accurately, the subsequent publicity surrounding it. Tyerman (2006, 66) suggests the speech itself was "something of a damp squid."

<sup>6</sup> The so-called *Mainz Anonymous* (trans. Eidelberg 1977, 99–115). The Christian Guibert of Nogent suggests similar reasons for the assault on the Jews in Rouen: "The people who had undertaken to go on that expedition under the badge of the cross began to complain to one another. 'After traversing great distances, we desire to attack the enemies of God in the East, although the Jews, of all races the worst foes of God, are before our eyes.'" (In Shepkaru, 2006, 162).

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of the dating and relationship between the three texts, see Abulafia (1982). Some of Abulafia's conclusions are challenged by the more recent general discussion of Chazan (2000, 28–111).

When the Crusaders reached Mainz, the Jews sought shelter in the Bishop's castle. However, the mob broke into his castle and began slaughtering the people. Albert of Aachen recounts the events:

Breaking the bolts and the doors, they killed the Jews, about seven hundred in number, who in vain resisted the force and attack of so many thousands. They killed the women also, and with their swords pierced tender children of whatever age and sex. The Jews, seeing that their Christian enemies were attacking them and their children, and that they were sparing no age, likewise fell upon one another, brother, children, wives and sisters, and thus they perished at each other's hands. Horrible to say, mothers cut the throats of nursing children with knives and stabbed others, preferring them to perish thus by their own hands rather than to be killed by the weapons of the uncircumcised (Trans. Krey 1921, 56).

Both Jewish and Christian accounts of the Rhineland pogroms agree that many Jews took their own lives or killed each other rather than wait to be murdered by the Crusading mobs.<sup>8</sup> It is also a common trope to find children killed by their parents in order to prevent them from being killed or falling into Christian hands to be forcibly baptised.

Solomon bar Simpson recounts the story of Rachael, a mother of four who, on facing the Crusaders, said to her friends, "I have four children. On them...have no mercy, lest these uncircumcised come and seize them alive and they remain in their pseudo-faith." After killing one of her sons, she then slew her two daughters: "The girls took the knife and sharpened it, so that it not be defective. They stretched forth their necks and she sacrificed them to the Lord God of Hosts." After killing her remaining son, she was herself slain by the Christians. The chronicler comments "She died for them as did that saintly woman with her seven sons" (Trans.

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<sup>8</sup> See Cohen (2006).

Chazan 1987, 243–261). It is noteworthy that in celebrating such extreme acts, the Hebrew (340) chroniclers turn to older Jewish traditions, chiefly the Maccabean martyrs and the *Aqeda*.

Shmuel Shepkaru argues that French Jewry of the early eleventh century was strongly influential in these later experiences having “made martyrdom a collective act, performed by ordinary men and women” (Shepkaru 2006, 142). However, as he also notes, many of these stories are consciously modelled on the earlier martyrological narratives of Maccabees, Josephus, and Philo. I will argue that in these and other early Jewish accounts of martyrdom, there is found not only the notion of collective Jewish martyrdom, but specifically the conviction that children should be ritually slaughtered in order to preserve Jewish identity. Furthermore, the role of children in Jewish martyrological discourse stands in sharp contrast to Christian martyr stories; children were an essential part of Jewish community and identity formation in a way in which Christian children were not.

### **Early Jewish Martyrology**

In the extreme accounts from the eleventh century we noted that the idealised response from Jews to the threat of conversion was martyrdom, even if it had to come by their own hand. In some cases, the accounts seem to suggest that at least some of these self-killings took place in the context of ritualised group martyrdom, where Jews would kill other Jews rather allow them to be converted or slain by the Crusader enemies. This was especially so for children. The chroniclers imply that good Jewish parents had an unspoken responsibility to kill their own children to prevent them from being killed or kidnapped and converted by Christians. Martyrdom in this context is presented as a means by which Jewish identity could be preserved. Jewish identity in these eleventh century Ashkanazic communities is presented as essentially communal, and so to preserve this communal Jewish identity, the Chroniclers insist that Jews had to face martyrdom in family units.

As the chroniclers themselves suggest, this extreme response was not without historical precedence in Judaism. Josephus recounts his own experience of being cornered in a cave by the Romans in Jotapata (*War* 3.340–392).<sup>9</sup> Although he wanted to give himself up, the others in the cave advocated self-killing rather than capture. Josephus suggests they decide who kills the others by drawing lots, and when there was only himself and one other left, they both handed themselves over to the Romans. While Josephus disapproves of his compatriots' suicidal actions, it is not because he is against self-killing in principle.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, in his account of Masada, we find narrated with (341) approval the near total self-slaughter of nearly a thousand Jews, including mothers and children. Jewish martyrdom in the ancient world was essentially corporate, and often familial.

Josephus' commentary on the conquest of the outpost at Masada is found in the words he puts in the mouth of the rebel leader, Eleazar. With the Romans about to take the citadel, and contemplating the fate that would befall them, their wives, and children should they be taken by the Romans, Eleazar gathered the community together to argue that they take their own lives:

Long since, my brave men, we determined neither to serve the Romans nor any other save God, for he alone is man's true and righteous Lord; and now the time is come which bids us verify that resolution by our actions. At this crisis let us not disgrace ourselves...I believe that it is God who has granted us this favour, that we have it in our power to die nobly and in freedom...Our fate at the break of day is certain capture, but there is still the free choice of a noble death with those we hold most dear...Let our wives thus die undishonoured, our children unacquainted with

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<sup>9</sup> See Jonquière (2011).

<sup>10</sup> See van Henten (1990); Droge and Tabor (1992, 85–96).

slavery; and, when they are gone, let us render a generous service to each other, preserving our liberty (Josephus, *War* 7.8.6. *LCL*).

For Josephus, through Eleazar, corporate suicide was the only way for the Jews of Masada to protect their wives and children from the Romans. In a second speech to convince the waverers, Eleazar affirms that they would be dying not just for their family honour, but for the Law, and in accordance with God's will:

Unenslaved by the foe let us die, as free men with our children and wives let us quit this life together! This our laws enjoin, this our wives and children implore of us. The need for this is of God's sending, the reverse of this is the Romans' desire, and their fear is lest a single one of us should die before capture. Haste we then to leave them, instead of their hoped-for enjoyment at securing us, amazed at our death and admiration of our fortitude. (*War* 7.8.7)

The people were convinced, and, according to Josephus, 960 people were killed. In Eleazar's anticipation of the Romans being impressed by Jewish fortitude, and Josephus' confirmation of this in his narration, we see Josephus' own approval for an act of mass self-inflicted slaughter, committed in order to preserve Jewish integrity and identity. For Josephus, the Jews at Masada die in order to protect and preserve their own and their families' religion; these were religious deaths. As with the Ashkenazi Jews of the Middle Ages, it became a parental duty to kill in order to preserve their children's Jewish identity, in this case, expressed in loyalty to God rather than slavery under the Romans.

Masada is not an isolated incident around the late second temple period. The same phenomenon (albeit on a smaller scale) is found in the story of (342) Taxo in the *Assumption of Moses*,<sup>11</sup> with a similar story recorded by Josephus. During a period of seemingly intense

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<sup>11</sup> The identity of Taxo as well as the symbolic meaning of his name—most commentators agree he is a purely literary figure—is disputed. For discussion of various possibilities, see Israeli (2009). The level of

persecution, Taxo, a Levite, takes his sons to the caves exhorting them, “Let us die rather than transgress the commandments of the Lord of Lords, the God of our fathers, for if we do this and die, our blood will be avenged before the Lord” (*Assumption of Moses* 9.6–7). Taxo believes his death and that of his sons will trigger God’s retribution against the enemies of the Jewish people,<sup>12</sup> and though not explicitly stated, presumably the author imagines Taxo and his family to have been killed by their enemies.<sup>13</sup> A more drastic version of a similar story appears in Josephus. As with the Taxo narrative, a father and seven children, this time with their mother, find themselves trapped in caves with the Romans advancing and slaughtering any Jews they come across. When his children and wife plead with him to allow them to give themselves up:

[H]e stood at the entrance and cut down each of his sons as he came out, and afterwards his wife, and after hurling their dead bodies over the precipice, threw himself down upon them, thus submitting to death rather than to slavery (*Antiquities* 14.15.5. *LCL*).

Again, there is no narrative criticism of the father’s action. He does what is necessary to preserve the religious integrity of his family.<sup>14</sup>

Mothers as well as fathers were responsible for preserving religious identity in early Jewish martyrology. In the books of the Maccabees, despite an injunction from Antiochus against circumcision, mothers defiantly had their sons circumcised.<sup>15</sup> As punishment, they

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uncertainty is such that Tromp in his commentary (1993, 124–128) makes no attempt to adjudicate on the question.

<sup>12</sup> See Atkinson (2006); Licht (1965).

<sup>13</sup> *Assumption of Moses* 10.3 states that the Lord will exercise ‘wrath on behalf of his sons’ which may represent the hoped for divine vengeance.

<sup>14</sup> Josephus also recounts a story of Simon, who similarly slays his family to avoid being taken by the Scythopolitans (*War* 2.18.4).

<sup>15</sup> 2 Macc. mentions two women, whereas the number is not stated in 1 and 4 Macc. While the author may be suggesting women were responsible for ensuring boys were circumcised, it is not likely they performed the operation themselves (Goldstein 1976, 139).

were “publicly paraded...around the city, with their babies hanging at their breasts, and then hurled...down headlong from the wall.”<sup>16</sup> In other martyr stories, children are more “active” (343) participants in martyrdom. After the fall of Masada, the *sicarii* fled to Alexandria, where many of them were finally arrested and tortured. Josephus, though by no means well-disposed to the rebels, notes that the people were amazed at the resilience of the martyrs, including their children, to withstand torture and remain steadfast in their opinion.

For under every form of torture and laceration of body, devised for the sole object of making them acknowledge Caesar as lord, not one submitted nor was brought to the verge of utterance; but all kept their resolve, triumphant over constraint, meeting the tortures and the fire with bodies that seemed insensible of pain...But most of all were the spectators struck by the children of tender age, not one of whom could be prevailed upon to call Caesar lord. So far did the strength of courage rise superior to the weakness of the frames (*War* 7.10.1).

Whereas in the other Jewish martyrologies we have encountered, children lack agency in their deaths, in Josephus’ account of the *sicarii*, the children die willingly under torture. However, arguably the best known family martyrdom in which a mother and children take the central martyrological role is the mother and her seven sons recorded in 2 Maccabees 7 and 4 Maccabees.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 2 Macc 6.10; cf. 1 Macc 1.60–61; 4 Macc. 4.24–25. Doran (2012, 149) suggests the emphasis on the mothers’ breasts is to emphasize their fertility. In 1 Macc. the babies are hung from their mothers’ necks, which Doran notes, was “more practical.”

<sup>17</sup> For the view that the narrative in 2 Maccabees 7 was preceded by one with a father and seven sons, not unlike the Taxo story, see Nickelsburg (2006, 97–109). On the other hand, Collins (1973) judges the Taxo account to be an amalgam of Eleazar (2 Macc 6.18–42), the seven brothers (2 Macc 7), and the Hasidim who hide and are burned in caves during the Maccabean revolt (1 Macc. 1.53; 2.31). There are several parallel stories in Rabbinic literature which appear not to be dependent on 2 Maccabees 7, which may indicate the story in some form is traditional: *Lamentations Rabbah* 1.50; *b.Gitten* 57b; *Eliyahu Rab.* 30; *Pesiq R.* 43.

### **The Maccabean Martyrs**

The iconic story of the martyrdom of the seven brothers recorded in 2 and 4 Maccabees, follows the model most associated with martyrologies.<sup>18</sup> The story is well known: a tyrant king tortures each of the brothers in turn in an attempt to force them from their ancestral religion and eat pork. Each of them refuses, and, in quite graphic accounts, are tortured and then killed. Their mother is (344) prominent in the narratives, and while she does not slay them herself, as in the Mainz accounts, she actively urges each one on to his death (7.5, 21). Her husband plays no role in the narrative, an absence explained in *4 Maccabees* by his earlier death (18.9).

Despite the absence of the brothers' father in the narrative, the father's role is nonetheless filled in two significant ways. First, there is a strong emphasis on Jewish ancestors (Doran 2012, 166). First, the elder brother sets the context for his and his brothers' deaths: "we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers (τοὺς πατρίους νόμους)" (2 Macc. 7.2);<sup>19</sup> the second brother answers the king "in the language of his fathers (τῆ πατρίῳ φωνῇ)" (7.8),<sup>20</sup> in which the mother also exhorts her sons to die (7.21, 27); the sixth is urged to turn "from the ways of the fathers (ἀπὸ τῶν πατρίων)" (7.24), while the youngest reaffirms as the oldest had done that they have all died "for the laws of their fathers (περὶ τῶν πατρίων

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<sup>18</sup> So the important definition of a martyrology by van Henten and Avemarie (2002, 3): "A martyr is a person who in an extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with a demand of the (usually pagan) authorities." Nonetheless, I have argued that martyrology is more concerned with community creation (Middleton 2006, 6–15), such that the narrator, as the creator of the martyr narrative, becomes more important than the martyr at the centre of the story (Middleton 2011, 30). The martyrdom stories described above could be excluded if one followed certain definitions of martyrdom. For discussion, see Middleton (2014).

<sup>19</sup> Schwartz (2008, 301) notes that it is only in chapter 7, where there is a particular emphasis on the laws of the ancestors. He takes this as evidence that 2 Macc. 7 originally came from a different source, although it is fully integrated into the final form of the book. See also van Henten (1997, 17–57); Doran (2012, 11–15). Aside from instances of *πάτριος* in 7.2, 8, 21, 24, 27, and 37, cognate forms are also found in 4.15; 5.10; 6.1, 6; 12.37, 39; 15.29.

<sup>20</sup> Martha Himmelfarb (1998) makes the important observation that the brother only says the word 'No' to the king in (presumably) Hebrew (cf. *4 Macc* 12.7). As 'surely any subject of the Hellenistic empires could have made this answer at least in Greek', she concludes that the function of Hebrew in this narrative is 'to assert defiance and resistance' (37).

νόμων)” (7.30). Thus, although their blood father is absent from the narrative in 2 Maccabees, their ancestral or spiritual fathers are very much present throughout the martyrology.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, prior to the martyrdom of the seven brothers in both 2 and 4 Maccabees, the elderly Eleazar is similarly tortured and executed. Given his age, the courtiers offer him an opportunity to pretend to eat pork. However, Eleazar refuses the offer on account that many of the young might then be led astray (2 Macc. 6.24). Eleazar instead offers himself as a model of how Jews (and in particular young Jewish men) should die:

By manfully giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws (2 Macc. 6.27–28).

The narrator affirms Eleazar’s desire to model paradigmatic Jewish behavior: “So in this way he died, leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation” (345) (6.31). The two chapters are linked by Eleazar’s wish to be a “fatherly” example to the nation’s youth, and to the seven young men following his example, with a particular concern for the nation’s ancestors (Doran 2012, 165).<sup>22</sup>

It is not clear just how young the brothers are. When the king is confronted with the youngest, he asks his mother to persuade him to choose life. The author indicates he is quite young: “When the young man (*νεανίας*) would not listen to him at all, the king called the mother to him and urged her to advise the boy (*μειράκιον*) to save himself” (7.25). He is also referred to as a child (*τέκνον*) by his mother (7.28), though this need have no bearing on his age (Schwartz 2008, 312).<sup>23</sup> Taking the terms together in the context of the narrative, the author of

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<sup>21</sup> There is also a concern for ancestral laws and customs in 4 *Macc.* 4.23; 5.33; 8.7; 9.1, 24, 29; 18.5. See van Henten (1997, 181–205).

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz (2008, 19–20), however, highlights some continuity problems between the two chapters. The king is present here in Jerusalem, having been located in Antioch in chapter 6. Schwartz concludes the two chapters were originally separate, but notes that the author has taken the trouble to align the theology (300).

<sup>23</sup> Three Greek words are, therefore, used to describe youngest brother: *νεανίας*, *μειράκιον*, and *τέκνον*. The terms *νεανίας* and *τέκνον* need not specify a child. Saul is described as a *νεανίας* (Acts 7.58), but is still old

2 Maccabees probably imagines him to be a young teenager. However, the brothers appear to be younger in the mind of the author of *4 Maccabees*. Antiochus urges the brothers to enjoy their youth (νεότησιν; 4 Macc. 8.8), while the sixth brother is already described as a lad (μειρακίσκος; 11.13). When narrating the seventh brother's confrontation, the narrator has even the tyrant king moved to compassion on seeing the youngest in chains (12.2).<sup>24</sup> Antiochus tries to persuade him to save his life, but affirming his brothers' death for their religion, the seventh brother kills himself (12.19). Of course, it is a central claim of the author of *4 Maccabees* that even the very young (μειρακίσκοι) by the use of reason can overcome torture.<sup>25</sup> The pity the king urges they have on themselves (4 Macc. 8.10) is dismissed as folly and passion (8.20). Nonetheless, in imagining this "false" response, the narrator has the king set commitment to familial ties in direct opposition to piety. However, as we have noted above, commitment to family entails commitment to God. In both 2 and 4 Maccabees, the mother urges her youngest son to die nobly. (346)

My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you...Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again with your brothers. (2 Macc. 7.27–29)

As Schwartz notes, both the mother and the king plead with the youngest son; the king urges him to save his life, while the mother urges him to die (Schwartz 2008, 311). In "competing" for the youngest brother, the narrator creates two clear sides of the conflict (Doran 2012, 166):

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enough to lead the arresting party that went house to house to arrest the Christians (Acts 8.3). Τέκνον technically refers to offspring of any age. However, μειράκιον and μειρακίσκος are age specific, referring to a "lad" or "stripling" (*LSJ*).

<sup>24</sup> The youngest son is only two and a half years old, and stops to be suckled before being killed in the *Lamentations Rabbah* version.

<sup>25</sup> For discussion on the purpose of the book, see deSilva (1998, 51–75); (2006, xxvi–xxviii).

<sup>26</sup> the tyrant on the one hand, and God *and* family on the other, which is consistent with the other Jewish narratives we have so far considered.

In both 2 and 4 Maccabees, the mother is singled out for praise:

The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their fathers. Filled with a noble spirit, she fired her woman’s reasoning with a man’s courage (2 Macc. 7.21–23).

Similarly, Four Maccabees also praises the mother for overcoming of her maternal passions, resisting her natural urge to protect her children (13.13–19).<sup>27</sup> Devotion to God demands this form of motherhood— that not only was she able to withstand seeing each of her sons tortured, but she could “urge them on, each child singly and all together, to death for the sake of religion” (15.12). In doing so, her steadfastness made her nobler and more “manly than men in endurance [*ἀνδρῶν πρὸς ὑπομονὴν ἀνδρειότερα*]” (15.30).<sup>28</sup> She becomes a “guardian of the Law” (15.32), and her attitude is compared to that of Abraham: “Sympathy for her children did not sway the mother of the young men; she was of the same mind as Abraham” (14.20).

The *Aqeda* figures prominently behind the retelling of the martyrdoms in 4 Maccabees. In explicitly casting the mother in the role of Abraham, the author imagines her sacrificing her sons. This trope is found in the speech of one of the brothers, who insists that in willingly dying for the law, they become like Isaac: “Remember whence you came, and the father by whose hand Isaac would have submitted to being slain for the sake of religion” (13.12). The

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<sup>26</sup> Others have noted a wider clash between Judaism and Hellenism present in 2 Maccabees (van Henten 1997, 17–57; Bickerman 1979)

<sup>27</sup> The author suggests that because of the labours of pregnancy, mothers tend to have ‘deeper sympathy’ for their children than fathers (4 Macc. 15.4–7).

<sup>28</sup> On gender in 4 Maccabees, see Moore and Anderson (1998).

Isaac motif is also present in the death of Eleazar. While he partially fulfils the role of the missing father, he too is compared to Isaac (347) through his embrace of death (7.14). In his exhortation to those who would follow his example—the sons in the narrative, but potentially the readers of the text—Eleazar identifies Jews as children of Abraham.

May we, the children of Abraham, never think so basely that out of cowardice we  
...become a pattern of impiety to the young, in becoming an example of the eating  
of defiling food...and not protect our divine law even to death. Therefore, O  
children of Abraham, die nobly for your religion (εὐσέβια)! (4 Macc. 6.17–22)

In a martyrological context, all Jews, young and old, are encouraged to connect the generic identity marker—children of Abraham—specifically with the example of Abraham’s child, Isaac. Indeed, 4 Maccabees closes with precisely this affirmation: “The sons of Abraham with their victorious mother are gathered together into the chorus of the fathers, and have received pure and immortal souls from God” (18.23).

Abraham, therefore, becomes the third component that replaces the absent father in 4 Maccabees. The model of his sacrifice of Isaac becomes the measure of martyrological faithfulness.<sup>29</sup> As the sons’ mother, it is the woman who most explicitly models Abraham. Indeed, she outdoes him. In a Talmudic retelling of the story, she says to her final son:

My son, go and say to your father Abraham, “You bound one [son] to the altar, but I have bound seven altars.” Then she also went up on to a roof and threw herself down and was killed. Then a voice came out of heaven saying, “A joyful mother of children.” (b.Gittin 57b)

As in the Talmud, the mother dies in both 2 and 4 Maccabees. In 2 Maccabees, it is noted in passing: “Last of all, the mother died after her sons” (2 Macc. 7.41), presumably executed. In

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<sup>29</sup> Despite the persistence of the model of Isaac for both Jewish and Christian martyrology, and indeed as a typology for Jesus’ death, it is noteworthy that Isaac (like the martyrological heroes in Daniel) did not die (Gen. 22.1–14).

4 Maccabees, it is only reported that she threw herself into the flames before the guards could seize her (4 Macc. 17.1). The mother, therefore, like Eleazar, models both Abraham and Isaac in her martyrdom.

In these Jewish martyrdom accounts, the family plays a crucial role in supporting and even facilitating faithful martyrs. It is important for the Jewish identity of parents that children also undergo martyrdom for the sake of the Law, even if they have to be slain at their parents' hands. Being children of Abraham in a martyrological context binds all Jews—young and old, male and female—to an identification with Isaac. This familial typology operates (348) on a metaphorical and literal level. In the past, Jewish martyrdom was a communal activity in which everyone should participate.

### **The Family and Christian Martyrdom**

If the family features positively in Jewish martyrdom, early Christian texts, by contrast, demonstrate some ambivalence, even hostility, to familial relationships. A saying attributed to Jesus material warns “If anyone comes to me and does not hate (μισέω) his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters...he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14.26). While Matthew's version is slightly less stark in not demanding hatred of family (Matt 10.37), all three synoptic gospels preserve tradition where true followers of Jesus will have to leave parents and children behind.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, while family structures *encourage* faithful martyrdom in Jewish stories, in early Christian tradition, familial relations are identified as a potential *cause* of martyrdom: “Brother will deliver brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death” (Mark 13.12; Matt 10.21;

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<sup>30</sup> Mark 10.29; Matt 19.29; Luke 18.29b. There are two sayings in Thomas which appear to be amalgams of Luke 14.26, Matt 10.37–38, and Mark 8.34: Jesus said, “Whoever does not hate his father and his mother cannot become a disciple to me. And whoever does not hate his brothers and sisters and take up his cross in my way will not be worthy of me.” (*G.Thom.* 55); “Whoever does not hate his father and mother as I do cannot become a disciple to me.” (*G.Thom.* 101; trans. Lambdin 1984).

Luke 21.16).<sup>31</sup> The family, in at least some early Christian texts, is a locus of division, and relatives appear to pose a direct danger to the safety of early Christians.

However, in Christian martyr acts there is a development of the role of the family. While there are still instances of persecution by family members, one of the main threats posed by family is their potential to *prevent* successful martyrdom. The ambivalent position of the family is the main cause of narrative tension in the *Passion of Perpetua*, in which Perpetua's status as both a daughter and mother threatens her potential status as a martyr. After Perpetua—who is twenty-two, newly married and weaning an infant son—is arrested, her father makes several attempts to dissuade her from going through with her Christian confession. His appeal for her to save her life centers around her identities as a daughter and a mother:

“Daughter,” he said, “have pity (*miserere*) on my grey head—have pity on me your father...Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of (349) your brothers, think of your mother...think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone.” (5.2–3)<sup>32</sup>

Perpetua's relationship with her son is prominent in the early part of the *Passion*. So while Perpetua was comforted by her father's absence after a difficult confrontation (3.4), any separation from her baby caused her great distress.<sup>33</sup> She was “tortured with worry” for her baby, but once she received permission for the child to join her in prison, her health recovered, “relieved as [she] was of [her] worry and anxiety over the child.” So overwhelmed was she by being reunited with her baby she was able to say, “[m]y prison had suddenly become a palace so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else” (3.9).

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<sup>31</sup> Van Iersel (1996) understands this saying to refer to Christians betraying one another to the authorities rather than persecution from blood relatives. However, Christian relationships are generally not cast as father-child relationship. See Middleton (2014b, 181–183).

<sup>32</sup> Translations of the Martyr Acts are from Musurillo (1972).

<sup>33</sup> On Perpetua's father, see Heffernan (2012, 22–28).

By the time of her trial, Perpetua's baby had once again been transferred to her father's care. Her father employed Perpetua's love for the child as a weapon to force her from a faithful Christian confession: "Perform the sacrifice; have pity on your baby (*miserere infanti*)" (6.2). The governor, Hilarianus, also put her commitment to family in direct opposition to her confession as a Christian:

"Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors."

"I will not," I retorted.

"Are you a Christian?" said Hilarianus.

And I said, "I am a Christian (*Christiana sum*)."<sup>34</sup> (6.3–4)

For the compiler of the narrative, Perpetua *cannot* be a martyr *and* a mother; the two stand in direct opposition. To emphasise the point, when Perpetua's father refused to allow the baby to re-join Perpetua in prison after the trial, God intervened: "But as God willed, the baby had no further desire for the breast...and so I was relieved of any anxiety for my child" (6.7). From this point, Perpetua's baby and father disappear from the narrative; her confession "*Christiana sum*" obliterates her former identity as a daughter and a mother.

If Perpetua's infant was a *potential* threat to her successful martyrdom, a second baby poses a *direct* threat to another female martyr. Also in prison is Felicitas, who, being eight months pregnant, was found to be in great distress that her martyrdom might be postponed since pregnant women were not allowed to be executed (15.2).<sup>34</sup> In this Passion, martyrdom and motherhood are incompatible. However, two days before the games, the Christians prayed (350) "in one torrent of common grief" (15.4) and she immediately "enjoyed the Lord's favour" (15.1) and went into labour prematurely (15.5).

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<sup>34</sup> "The execution of the penalty imposed upon a pregnant woman should be deferred until she brings forth her child" (*Dig.* 48.19.3). For discussion, see Gardner (1991, 161nn48–50) and Heffernan (2012, 306–307).

**PRE-PUBLISHED VERSION.**

**Published in *Journal of Religion and Violence* 4/3 (2016), 337–356.**

Felicitas, glad that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one blood bath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism. (18.3).

Having dealt with the “problem” of motherhood, both Perpetua and Felicitas can then fulfil their true identities as martyrs.

In the *Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonicê*, we encounter a further example of a child potentially threatening a mother’s successful martyrdom. There are two recensions of this story, a Greek version and a later Latin retelling. In the first, Agathonicê and her son are spectators in the arena as Carpus and Papyrus are tortured. However, after Carpus dies, she saw a vision,

[...and] realising that this was a call from heaven, she raised her voice at once:

“Here is a meal that has been prepared for me. I must partake and eat of this glorious meal.”

The mob shouted out, “Have pity on your son!”

The blessed Agathonicê said, “He has God who can take pity on him.”

...And taking off her cloak she threw herself joyfully on the stake. (42–44).

Agathonicê’s spontaneous suicide draws no negative judgement from the narrator, but once again we notice a plea that the potential martyr consider the child who will be left behind; in the case of Perpetua, from her father and governor, in Agathonicê’s case from the crowd. We do not, however, find any of the anguish Perpetua experienced in this narrative; Agathonicê impulsively and joyfully shakes off the shackles of motherhood and wins martyrdom for herself.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Lefkowitz (1976, 419) finds a “surprising eagerness” among women Christian martyrs to abandon their children.

In the Latin recension, Agathonicê's martyrdom is rather less radical. At the outset of the narrative, she is mentioned among those who have been arrested, but when she appears before the proconsul, her children (plural) are mentioned in the now familiar role of obstacles to martyrdom. While Carpus and Papyrus are asked to have pity or regard for themselves (2.3; 3.5), when it comes to Agathonicê's trial, her children are used in the attempt to steer her away from her Christian confession:

She replied, "I am a Christian (*Ego Christiana sum*)."

...While the crowd cried out to her, "Have pity on yourself and on your children (*miserere tibi et filiis tuis*)," the proconsul said, "Look to yourself; (351) have pity on yourself and on your children (*miserere tibi et filiis tuis*), as the crowd cries."

Agathonicê answered, "My children have God, who watches over them...Do what you will. But this is what I have come for, and this is what I am prepared for, to die for Christian's name." (6.2–3)

Agathonicê faces an additional pressure her male companions do not—the potential for children to block the way to martyrdom. However, as in the Greek recension, she is happy to leave her children to God; she is then burned to death.

Children, therefore, played a negative role in these Christian martyr accounts. They were barriers to martyrdom; obstacles which mothers had to overcome, and so, an additional hurdle women had to negotiate which men did not face.<sup>36</sup> Earlier in Agathonicê narrative, Papyrus is asked if he has children, to which he responds, "Yes, many, by God's grace." But it is quickly established that these are spiritual children (27–32), and not the type, which Stephanie Cobb observes, "binds him to the world" (Cobb 2008, 118)<sup>37</sup> While the proconsul

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<sup>36</sup> Lefkowitz (1976, 418) makes the point that there "is a distinctive emphasis in stories of Christian women's martyrdom on separation from the family and on death as a means to life." She also notes that women martyrs often die in isolation from or in defiance to their families.

<sup>37</sup> See also in *The Martyrs of Lyons* (1.50) in which Alexander the Phrygian is also said to be like a mother giving birth.

accuses Papyrus of lying, his answer does reflect the fictive kinship which is ubiquitous in early Christianity. Christians were “children of God” and therefore brothers and sisters to each other (cf. Mk 3.35).

We see other occasions where fictive parental relationships were created in the context of martyrology. In *the Martyrs of Lyons*, the martyr Blandina was put in the arena with a fifteen year old boy, Ponticus (who as far as I am aware is the youngest martyr in the early Christian martyrologies). The narrator complains the pagans had no respect for the woman or the boy’s age (1.53), although he is almost certainly making the point that even a Christian woman and child can overcome the might of the pagans. While the two are not related, Blandina becomes both the boy’s sister and his mother.

Ponticus, after being encouraged by his sister in Christ so that even the pagans realised that she was urging him on and strengthening him, and after enduring every torment, gave up his spirit. The blessed Blandina was last of all: like a noble mother encouraging her children, she sent them before her in triumph to the King, and then, after duplicating in her own body all her children’s sufferings, she hastened to rejoin them (1.54–55)

**(352)** There are almost certainly echoes of the Maccabean mother urging on her sons here,<sup>38</sup> but aside from Ponticus, the “children” of Blandina are clearly adults. While parents are said to hand their children over to death in Mark 13.12, and Pliny’s correspondence with Trajan indicates at least a range of ages of those condemned to him,<sup>39</sup> early Christian martyr texts demonstrate ambivalence towards biological children.

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<sup>38</sup> Frend (1965, 19–20) overstates the case in his conclusion that 2 Macc. was a source for *Martyrs of Lyons* and that the author was “saturated” in the Maccabean literature. Similarly, Perler (1949) exaggerates the influence of 4 Macc. See Middleton (2006, 106–115) for discussion.

<sup>39</sup> Pliny, who has never been to a Christian trial says to Trajan that he is unsure “whether any difference is to be made on account of age, or no distinction allowed between the youngest and the adult.” (Epistle 10.96 LCL)

Perhaps this is unsurprising. In a movement that urged its adherents to abandon their blood family to create new familial ties, it was following Christ on the road to suffering, on which one might be called to make the confession *χριστιανός εἰμι* / *christianus sum* before governors, that ultimately created Christian identity.<sup>40</sup> Blood family appears to have been an impediment to full membership of the Christian community. Until the practice of infant baptism became widespread there was little sense that children “belonged” to the Christian community in the same way that children belonged to the Jewish community through circumcision. (cf. Gen. 17.14). If martyrology was a key component of Christian identity, then maintaining that identity was ultimately dependent on an individual confession.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, even when martyrologies involving young people began to circulate, it was at the point at which they could make an independent decision to confess to being a Christian, and often in the case of girls, to be in a position to choose to remain virgins and refuse to marry.<sup>42</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The status of children in respect to identity formation in Christianity stands in sharp contrast to contemporaneous Judaism. Martyrology sharpened that difference even further. In both, children were sacrificed, either through being (353) given up by their martyr-mothers, or being slaughtered by their martyr-parents. Jews and Christians used children in their martyrologies in contrasting ways to preserve their religious integrity. In Judaism children *had* to be martyred in order to remain faithful; in Christianity, children *had* to be abandoned to *enable* martyrdom.

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<sup>40</sup> On Jesus as a model for discipleship, see especially Dehandschutter (1999); Hurtado (2004); Middleton (2006, 82–93); and Moss (2010). For the importance of suffering, martyrdom, and the confession ‘I am a Christian’ for identity formation, see (among others) Perkins (1995); Boyarin (1999); Lieu (2002); Matthews (2010); Moss (2010); Middleton (2014b).

<sup>41</sup> Those who fail to make Christian confession in *the Martyrs of Lyons* “are denied even the category ‘former Christian’; to fail to be martyred is to fail to be Christian” (Middleton, 2014b, 175).

<sup>42</sup> On women and martyrdom, see Cobb (2008) and Streete (2009).

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