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Zealous until Death: "Voluntary Martyrdom" and the Martyrs of Lyons

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ABSTRACT

For decades, many scholars have been uncomfortable with the idea that some early Christians were eager to die. This led to the creation of the category “voluntary martyrdom” by which modern historians attempted to understand those martyrs who provoked their own arrest and/or death in some fashion. Scholars then connected this form of martyrdom with an early Christian movement called the New Prophecy, which came to be known as Montanism. Thus, scholars have scoured martyr accounts in an attempt to identify volunteers and, in some cases, label them Montanists. The *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons* and the martyrs it depicts did not escape such scrutiny. I contend that the martyrs in that account who have been accused of heresy are not only innocent of heresy but also should not be considered volunteers.

This study surveys the role of the language of zeal and enthusiasm in the account of the martyrs of Lyons. I argue that this language in the text does not refer to emotional exuberance or reckless action. Rather, this language refers to the emulation of heroes and warriors often used by ancient Greco-Roman writers to describe the preparation of soldiers and athletes.

I then turn my attention to the theological aspects of the language of zeal and enthusiasm in the *Letter*, especially the connections between zeal and the Holy Spirit and the emulation of Christ. The author(s) of the *Letter* believes the martyrs to be acting under the direction of the Spirit. Their actions constitute a reenactment of the death of Christ in an attempt to become more like him. Thus, as far as the account itself is

concerned, these martyrs behave according to the plan that God has for them in the struggle against Satan.

Finally, I argue that the claims that have been made about the presence of Montanist influence in the *Letter* and the connection between Montanism and voluntary martyrdom are based in faulty assumptions. The historical data do not support either claim. Scholars have mistreated martyrs and Montanists in an attempt to preserve proto-orthodoxy.

Zealous Until Death:
“Voluntary Martyrdom” and the Martyrs of Lyons

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School of Theology
Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

In Ancient and Oriental Christianity

By

Matthew Robert Anderson

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INTRODUCTION

Eusebius preserves a letter describing the persecution and martyrdom of believers in the area of Lugdunum (Lyons) around 177 CE (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.1-3.4). Scholars generally refer to this account as the *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons*.¹ The account contains stories of several martyrs mentioned by name, and even more simply mentioned in passing. Modern scholars have mostly separated the account into smaller pieces to analyze specific details historically. Much contemporary scholarship is content to paint various characters in the story as fanatics and heretics without giving much attention to the theology and martyrology of the overall text. A reading of the narrative that pays close attention to the themes and concerns present throughout the account as it stands sheds light on early Christian understandings of martyrdom and the divine role in such deaths. Thus, in this project I will establish a narrative critical reading of the text, defining and assessing the theology and martyrology of the account.² I will focus mainly on the characterization of key figures, the symbolism used in the narrative, and the conflict driving the narrative. I will also briefly analyze the setting and address issues of intertextuality when appropriate. Eschewing evaluations foreign to the text that prompt the modern accusations of heresy and fanaticism, a narrative critical reading of the

1. The spelling “Vienne” occurs in some English treatments of the text and the events it recounts; in this thesis the more conventional spelling “Vienna” is used.

2. For a succinct introduction to narrative criticism, see Mark Allan Powell, “Narrative Criticism,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 239-255.

accounts of individual martyrs illuminate the reasons their contemporaries accorded them such respect and the tales of their persecution manifested such power for them.

The State of Modern Inquiry

Martyrdom itself presents difficulties for those who seek to define it. Martyrdom exists across boundaries of faith and ideologies concerning violence. Essentially, each group that reveres martyrs sets its own parameters for inclusion among the honored group.³ The account of the martyrs of Lyons intrigues modern scholars because it bears witness to a particular expression of martyrdom that has sparked considerable debate in the study of the history of Christianity. Essentially, this form of martyrdom necessitates the active provocation of the arrest and/or execution of the martyr by the martyr herself.⁴ The most common term for this form of martyrdom in modern treatments is “voluntary martyrdom.” The use of this phrase and the very creation of the category stem from the work of G. E. M. de Ste. Croix.⁵ In de Ste. Croix's analysis of martyrdom in the early Church, he distinguishes voluntary martyrdom from martyrdom in general. In the former category one or more of the following criteria are met: a) the martyr explicitly requested or demanded to be executed, b) the martyr presented herself for arrest during a time of persecution, or c) the martyr invited arrest by some public display designed to attract the

3. For a fairly recent attempt by a number of scholars to discuss the limits of the term martyrdom, see *Witnesses to Faith? Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam*, ed. Brian Wicker (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

4. Paul Middleton, *Radical and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, LNTS 307 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 1.

5. See “Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?” *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 6-38 and “Voluntary Martyrdom in the Early Church,” in *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, ed. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 153-200.

authorities.⁶ Thus, in de Ste. Croix's understanding, these martyrs effectively "volunteered" for martyrdom that otherwise might not have occurred.

Voluntary Martyrdom: Categorizing the Saints

The use of the term "voluntary" offends the sensibilities of several scholars who argue that every act of martyrdom is necessarily voluntary to the extent that a person chooses to maintain firm devotion to his belief system.⁷ The reader of any martyr account ought not to ignore this important point. Distinguishing a type of martyr by his or her volition certainly leads to extremely blurry boundaries between types (if the distinction can even truly be made). Similarly, Buck offers a different view of those labeled "quasi-volunteers" as "less a subcategory of the voluntary martyr than a more remarkable example of the true martyr, since he or she refused to be diverted from Christian duty by the risk of arrest."⁸ Middleton prefers the phrase "radical martyrdom" for martyrs who provoked their own arrest and/or death, maintaining a sense of distinction without making willingness the defining feature.⁹ Addressing the same examples as other scholars, his terminology allows us to see a distinction beyond just that of willingness.

Attempts to gain clarity in the handling of such categories are complicated by the dangers of imposing modern categories and modern ethical considerations of death on the ancient documents and their study. Thus, Moss accuses Droge and Tabor of having "muddied the waters" of modern discussions of martyrdom by applying the modern

6. Ste. Croix, "Voluntary Martyrdom," 153.

7. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 121; Andrzej Wypustek, "Magic, Montanism, Perpetua, and the Severan Persecution," *VC* 51 (1997): 281.

8. P. Lorraine Buck, "Voluntary Martyrdom Revisited," *JTS* 63 (2012): 128.

9. Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*.

classification of suicide to ancient discussions of martyrdom.¹⁰ Additionally, Droge and Tabor accuse the early Christians of having a “preoccupation with death”¹¹ and a “fascination with voluntary death”¹² which led to their “spontaneous acts of self-destruction”¹³ in the form of voluntary martyrdom.¹⁴ As Buck asserts, “in a world that offered nothing of value except the opportunity to leave it for a better one, surely voluntary martyrdom for the early Christians would have been, not self-destructive, but self-preserving.”¹⁵ There exist, then, two main interpretations of the actions of such “voluntary martyrs.” They are either fanatics and (possibly) heretics who leap to death ignorantly and unfaithfully, or they are devout Christians expressing their faith the best way they know. Either way, scholars seek to separate out those cases that appear to be a different kind of martyrdom from the standard, orthodox version.

Scholars have compiled lists of those events that they consider to be voluntary or provoked martyrdom, bringing a classification system to the martyr accounts that

10. Candida R. Moss, “The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern,” *CH* 81 (2012): 531-51; Arthur J. Droge and James A. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992); Arthur J. Droge, “The Crown of Immortality: Toward a Redescription of Christian Martyrdom?” in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, ed. John J. Collins and Michael A. Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 155–70.

11. Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 129.

12. *Ibid.*, 132.

13. *Ibid.*, 158.

14. For an argument that early Christians did not desire death, see D. W. Amundsen, “Did Early Christians Lust after Death?” *Christian Research Journal* 18 (1996): 11-21.

15. Buck, “Voluntary Martyrdom,” 132.

distinguishes between true martyrs and voluntary martyrs.¹⁶ One should bear in mind that such distinctions do not exist in the earliest martyr accounts themselves. In early accounts, those whom modern scholars have labeled “voluntary martyrs” simply receive the title martyr and garner the same respect and awe as other martyrs in the texts that bear witness to their martyrdom.¹⁷ The position that volunteering for martyrdom or provoking the authorities was a separate and illicit activity did not become a firm orthodox stance until the third century.¹⁸ Even once this had developed, Christian writers did not acknowledge that people who provoked their own death were in fact martyrs. Christian writers reserved the term martyr for those who were killed for the sake of Christ but without provoking their own deaths. Anyone outside the scope of their definition simply was not a martyr. The martyr accounts themselves, however, do not distinguish between some who died in a given persecution as martyrs and some as something else (like heretics). Those whom the authorities kill in martyr accounts are generally revered as true martyrs in their own texts. Only later authors, generally attempting to discredit a specific heresy, present negative views of those who have died.

Thus, modern readers of these texts must take care when attempting to re-categorize martyrs into more than one set. These categories do not play a role in the martyr accounts themselves. Anyone attempting to read these categories back into the accounts must understand that such categorization is foreign to the narrative laid out by the author(s) and later scribes. So, the relationship between the categories of true martyr

16. See Ste. Croix, “Voluntary Martyrs,” 153-200; Droge, “Crown,” 155-70; William Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy and Polluted Sacraments: Ecclesiastical and Imperial Reactions to Montanism*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 84 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 201-42.

17. Moss, “Discourse,” 539-40.

18. Philip L. Tite, “Voluntary Martyrdom and Gnosticism,” *J ECS* 23 (2015): 34.

and voluntary martyr and the reality as understood by the original author(s) is tenuous at best, because these categories do not exist in the presentations of the earliest accounts. This is especially true given that the main arguments for such classifications in these early texts are based largely upon the words of one man.

Clement of Alexandria: The Middle Road of Martyrdom

Most scholars critical of the practices of voluntary martyrs base their judgments (at least in part) on a few sentences from Clement of Alexandria:

Some of the heretics, having disobeyed the Lord, love life in a manner both impious and cowardly saying that true martyrdom is the knowledge of the truly living God, which we also confess, and that he is a self-killer and suicide who confesses through death, and they bring up with these things sophisms of cowardice. To these we will speak when the time demands, because they differ from us concerning the first principles. We censure also those who leap into death (for these do not belong to us, but share the name only), who hurry through hatred of the creator to hand themselves over, these wretches who desire to die. We say that these, even though they are punished publicly, expel themselves without being martyrs (ἁμαρτύρως). For they do not maintain the mark of faithful martyrdom. Not knowing the living God, they give themselves to death in vain, just as the gymnosophists of the Indians to foolish fire. (*Strom.* 4.16.3-17.3)¹⁹

According to Moss, Clement “condemns those who have charged forward to martyrdom.”²⁰ This, however, is not what Clement says. Clement censures those who have charged forward into *death*. Whatever it is that the latter group he describes does, it does so ἁμαρτύρως. For Clement, these people behave in such a way that they cannot be considered martyrs. Even so, one cannot ignore the fact that Clement cares more for the witness that comes from a life lived virtuously for God than he does for great displays of death.

19. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

20. Moss, “Discourse,” 543.

Earlier in the *Stromata*, Clement has explained what he considers martyrdom to be:

If, therefore, confession to God is witness (μαρτυρία), each soul that has conducted itself purely with the knowledge of God and has obeyed the commandments is a witness (μάρτυς) both in life and word, however it may be released from the body. For instance, the soul may pour out faith like blood throughout its whole life until its departure. (*Strom.* 4.15.3)

Clement advocates martyrdom strongly in these texts, but he sees the faithful working out of Christian belief as martyrdom, not only witness by death. He does not construct a taxonomy of martyrdom. He has no separate name for martyrdom done one way or another. Others speak of “true martyrdom” over against other kinds of martyrdom that they see in Clement’s thoughts on martyrdom in *Strom.* 4.16.3-17.3. Clement is content to narrow the scope of martyrdom in some ways (excluding those who rush into empty deaths) and broaden it in others (including the manner in which a life is lived as martyrdom).

Since the *Stromata* were written later (ca. 200 CE)²¹ than the accounts of some martyrs, including the account of the martyrs of Lyons, modern scholars ought to use more caution when applying the thoughts of later decades to material that likely originated before Clement wrote his opinions on the matter. We should not ignore Clement, since relevant sources on martyrdom in the late second century are scarce. We should, however, recognize that time and geographical distance might contribute to a difference in opinion concerning the actions of the martyrs of Lyons. Any assessment of martyrs and their motivations must certainly take place after the deaths of said martyrs

21. John Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria* (New York: Ardent Media, 1974), 17.

and the circulation of their story, so this is by no means the only reason for caution when applying Clement's reasoning to the accounts of early Christian martyrs.

Clement's larger concern seems to be discrediting specific groups who have either avoided martyrdom at all costs or completely forsaken life in a vain attempt at earning the honor of a martyr. He says that they "do not maintain the mark of faithful martyrdom" (*Strom.* 4.17.3). The meaning of this phrase does not receive the attention necessary in the arguments of those who see this discourse as support for a strong stance against voluntary martyrdom. What is the "mark of faithful martyrdom"? Clement does not specify in the immediate context but a few paragraphs earlier he claims that "confession to God is witness (μαρτυρία)" (4.15.3). If we understand this statement to mean that the act of confessing God before others is true martyrdom/witness (μαρτυρία), then Clement's concern would be the steadfastness of the confessions made by those who claim to be Christians. In this understanding of Clement's argument, then, those who failed to remain faithful in their trials and deaths would be the main concern. As we will see below in Chapter 3, this is the very concern surrounding Quintus in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. He rushes to become a martyr but does not have the faith to maintain his conviction through the trials set upon him. Clement is much more concerned with maintaining the integrity of testimony so that, whether by life or death, a person truly testifies to Christ. At the very least, we must admit that Clement's schema is not so easily boiled down to argument critiquing voluntary martyrdom, as some scholars have asserted. This understanding of Clement's mentality toward voluntary and true martyrdom has led scholars throughout many decades to malign those martyrs who seem to fit the category of voluntary martyr.

Heretical Martyrs: Montanism and Voluntary Martyrdom

Due in part to this general distaste for the idea of “voluntary,” “radical,” or “provoked” martyrdom among modern scholars and the development of the Clementine view of martyrdom and moderation, some martyrs who approached their death with a greater degree of willingness or provocation have been deemed heretics by modern scholars.²² Even those who allow for non-heretical voluntary martyrdom deem it inappropriate. Everett Ferguson states, “Christians sometimes were *guilty* of deliberate provocation. But the model which was commended as normative Christian conduct showed a more submissive demeanour in its resistance.”²³ Likewise, Tabbernee accuses some martyrs of being “volunteers in the worst sense of the word.”²⁴ Some have gone so far as to suggest that voluntary martyrdom was the key distinction between adherents of Montanism, or, more properly, the New Prophecy, and orthodox Christians.²⁵ Thus, some scholars have accused certain martyrs in the *Letter* of heretical beliefs based in part upon their participation in the category of voluntary martyrdom. By analyzing the literary, theological, and historical data pertinent to the martyrs of Lyons, I will demonstrate that such accusations of heresy do not represent the likeliest reality.

22. Moss, “Discourse,” 537.

23. Everett Ferguson, “Early Christian Martyrdom and Civil Disobedience,” *JECS* 1 (1993): 81 (emphasis mine).

24. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 210.

25. See, for example, Timothy D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 177-8; Ronald A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 49; A. R. Birley, “Persecutors and Martyrs in Tertullian’s Africa,” in *The Later Roman Empire Today*, ed. Dido Clark (London: Institute of Archaeology, 1993), 47; Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 201.

Synopsis of the Project

In the first chapter I will examine the assertion that there was an extra measure of enthusiasm or excitement for death on the part of some of the martyrs of Lyons. I will do so by analyzing the role of zeal (ζῆλος) and enthusiasm (προθυμία) in the *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons* and the connection of these words with the martyrs in the account. I will analyze the use of these words in other ancient sources to determine whether there is a general consensus as to the nature of the enthusiasm intended by these terms and an idea of the sources of such enthusiasm.

Based upon this discussion, I will argue in the second chapter that the Holy Spirit serves as the source of zeal and enthusiasm in the letter. To do so, I will survey Christian literature that speaks of both ζῆλος/προθυμία and πνεῦμα and argue that in such instances it is possible and sometimes preferable to interpret such phrases as referring to zeal/enthusiasm stemming from the Holy Spirit instead of the human spirit.

In the third chapter, I will discuss the issue of Montanism and its possible influence on the letter. First, I will evaluate Eusebius's reporting of the letter itself and the likelihood that his version is mostly unadulterated by him. Second, I will discuss the rise of Montanism and the likelihood that the participants in the letter would have been impacted by the teachings of Montanus. Third, I will discuss the themes and language of the letter itself as they pertain to Montanism.

Finally, I will discuss the relevance of this study to the status of the martyrs in this text. The value of this text to Christians in later decades and centuries is clear due to its preservation by Eusebius. Given the modern criticism of some of the martyrs in the text, I

will argue for their status as true and revered martyrs both in their own time and in the time of Eusebius.

CHAPTER I

THE ROLE OF ZEAL IN THE *LETTER*

A discussion of the voluntary nature of martyrdom in a document ought first to consider the language of desire and enthusiasm involved in the descriptions of the acts recounted. To establish a death as voluntary, one must be able to demonstrate that the person involved did in fact volunteer or go willingly to death. Thus, there must be some measure of desire involved, if the person is truly to be seen as a volunteer and not as a coerced or forced victim. Certainly there will be a measure of bias involved in the recounting of such events on the part of ancient Christian narrators, and the reader must not forget that establishing the motives of characters in a narrative will necessarily be an exercise in speculation. Despite these drawbacks, however, it is possible to assess the language used and compare it with the common usage of previous and contemporary writings to gain a deeper understanding of what the author likely intended.

I will analyze the specific rhetorical features of the language of zeal in the *Letter* to call into question the prevalent scholarly understanding of such language. Those who have discussed and debated the idea of “radical martyrdom” have generally neglected a precise examination of the language used in the narrative in the context of wider literary usage of the words, preferring instead to focus solely on the language of the document at hand and to rely upon modern understandings of the motivations surrounding voluntary death. As will be demonstrated below, the language of zeal and enthusiasm in the *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons* participates in a larger metaphorical family of

rhetorical usage associated with the forethought and training of soldiers and athletes.

Thus, the martyrs of Lyons approach death with the confidence and courage of soldiers, not the emotional lust for death of fanatics.

Emotion in the Ancient World

Before we embark upon an analysis of a specific set of emotions and desires, we must acknowledge that we are participating in a debate that has been ongoing for centuries. The ancient writers and philosophers did not agree on the nature and significance of emotions any more than do modern people. Generally, as Wasserman highlights, post-Enlightenment views of emotion tend toward the negative, seeing it as both irrational and essentially uncontrollable.¹ Thus, when modern readers encounter emotional language surrounding the actions of Christian martyrs, they may be inclined to ascribe a certain irrationality and instability to those actions. This may be due partly to an intention evident in the narrative to cast the subject as irrational or extreme in behavior, but even where that is not necessarily the case, modern interpreters have been quick to ascribe irrationality in such instances.

Plato considered the emotions/desires as part of the soul, housed in both the middle level (lion) and the lower level (many-headed beast) of the tripartite soul (*Rep.* 9.588c-591b). The desires, those feelings associated with physical needs/yearnings, reside in the lowest, most irrational level of the soul. The higher, somewhat reasonable emotions, reside in the middle level. Thus, basic human desires (hunger, thirst, and lust) are the least regulated by reason. Emotional responses are more closely impacted by

1. Emma Wasserman, *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7*, WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 20; Juha Sihvola and Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *The Emotions in Hellenistic Philosophy* (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic, 1998), vii.

reason, but still reside outside the seat of reason.² For Plato, emotions and desires did not derive from reason, but could be reined in by it.

The post-Enlightenment notions about emotion, then, are not completely removed from the ancient notions. The Stoics especially considered the emotions too irrational to be trusted.³ According to Galen, the great Stoic philosopher Chrysippus described emotion as an irrational, uncontrollable force that caused humans to act in ways contrary to their own reason (Galen, *PHP* 4.6.43-46). In fact, Chrysippus would say that, when we have emotional responses, it is “as if we have become different people from those who have been conversing beforehand” (*PHP* 4.6.46).⁴ Thus, such negative views of the rationality of emotion do not stem purely from a post-Enlightenment standpoint. The ancients themselves were often wary of the motivations behind emotional action. Those who would criticize so-called voluntary martyrs on the basis of their emotional states at the time of deciding to be martyred need not rely solely on modern ideas for their negative assessment of extreme emotions.

Some modern scholars have criticized the more enthusiastic martyrs of the ancient world, claiming that such people exhibited an unhealthy lust for death.⁵ This criticism calls into question the mental state of the martyr, because, by our modern sensibilities, a lust for death is clearly unhealthy. The mental state of the martyr, so the argument goes, can be assessed based upon their emotional state with reference to death. These martyrs’

2. For a fuller explanation, see Wasserman, *Death of the Soul*, 22-3.

3. Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.71-76, 4.37-57; Seneca, *De ira.* 1.9-10, 1.17, 3.3; Wasserman, *Death of the Soul*, 24.

4. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

5. Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 6; Amundsen, “Lust after Death?” 11-21.

enthusiasm and eagerness for death evidences an unorthodox and strange frame of mind.⁶ Because of the more extreme examples of this behavior, like Ignatius of Antioch, scholars began to categorize those who sought death as abnormal and even heretical.⁷ This has led, then, to the assumption that language concerning zeal and enthusiasm about martyrdom can be linked to an unhealthy lust for death itself.

When one views narratives about martyrs through a lens that colors zeal as morbid exuberance, this can lead to evaluations of the martyrs themselves as either orthodox true martyrs or heretical false martyrs, based on the martyrs' emotional states. The question, however, that must be answered is not whether the emotional state of the martyrs ought to affect the value or sincerity of their death. Rather, we must ascertain whether the language we often read as emotional truly implies the kind of rash, impulsive action that has been attributed to it. In order to properly understand the language used in the *Letter* to describe the zeal and enthusiasm of the martyrs, we will first turn our attention to the wider usage of the language of zeal and enthusiasm in other ancient writings.

The Language of Zeal: προθυμία and ζήλος in Ancient Writings

As we will discuss below, the *Letter* employs προθυμία and ζήλος to describe the martyrs and their attitudes toward the prospect of martyrdom. Ancient Greek writers use προθυμία and ζήλος (and their respective families of words) interchangeably quite often.

6. K. R. Morris, "'Pure Wheat of God' or Neurotic Deathwish?: A Historical and Theological Analysis of Ignatius of Antioch's Zeal for Martyrdom," *Fides et Historia* 26 (1994): 24-41; Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?", 24; G. W. Williams, *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 254; Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 25.

7. A. B. Luter, "Martyrdom," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Development*, ed. R.P. Martin and P.H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 720.

In some cases, this is likely an attempt to avoid using the same word repeatedly, i.e. due to stylistic considerations. Thus, Josephus claims the actions of the zealots (τῶν ζηλωτῶν) are driven by their passion (τὸ πρόθυμον) (*B.J.* 4.198). It would be fairly redundant to say that the zealots were motivated by zeal. There are several instances in ancient literature that not only connect these terms to one another, but also to action in the form of emulating a virtuous deed or the action of another virtuous person. Young, in her analysis of the Pastoral Epistles, contextualizes the language of imitation in those letters well:

The importance of imitation for the development of moral character in the perception of the ancient world can hardly be overestimated. Regularly the theme appears in treatment of the father-son relationship, young men being exhorted to pattern their lives after their fathers, and fathers to set a good example. It is also used of the relation of subjects and rulers, who were ideally expected to set forth a perfect model of virtue. Pupils, too, were expected to imitate their teachers, both in behaviour and practice, and a good teacher was regarded as far better than books. The good, too, were to be imitated, not just praised.⁸

Plutarch claims that humans ought not to fear the appreciation of objects or persons, but need only focus on those things that are inherently beneficial (*Per.* 1.1-3). He then elaborates on what he means by beneficial things, saying that they “are in works of excellence, which produce in those who examine them a certain zeal and enthusiasm (ζῆλόν τινα καὶ προθυμίαν) leading to imitation” (*Per.* 1.4). If one assumes a conceptual link commonly occurring between ζῆλον and προθυμίαν, the phrase ζῆλόν τινα καὶ προθυμίαν can be rendered “a certain great zeal.” Regardless, it is clear that Plutarch uses

8. Frances Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 87. Young does not actually mention the ζῆλος family of words in her discussion even though, as Lappenga observes, the use of these terms in the Pastorals indicates the sort of emulation she describes. See Benjamin J. Lappenga, “‘Zealots for Good Works’: The Polemical Repercussions of the Word ζηλωτής in Titus 2:14,” *CBQ* 75 (2013): 712.

these terms to refer to a strong desire instilled in the observer, which ultimately leads to the imitation of the excellence displayed by the object.⁹

Diodorus Siculus provides a clearer example. The admiral Callicratidas, having been informed by a seer that he would win the coming battle (but at the cost of his life), gives a rousing speech to his troops. “Therefore, having said these things, Callicratidas made not a few to be zealous (ζηλῶσαι) for his excellence and they became more enthusiastic (προθυμοτέρους) for the battle” (*Bib. hist.* 13.98). Although Diodorus Siculus lived and wrote about two centuries before the *Letter* would be written, this particular story bears mentioning because it not only highlights the use of the προθυμία and ζῆλος families of words but it also includes the concept of a person willingly, or voluntarily, going to face his own death. The protagonist knows that he faces death if he continues in his present course. He stays true to his mission in the face of death. In doing so, he inspires others to join him in his action. Here, again, these words are linked together and also linked to an action that fulfills the zealous desire.

The use of προθυμία and ζῆλος in the description of a battle or the moments leading up to one certainly paints a scene that would be inherently emotionally charged. One does not imagine soldiers in the heat of battle as emotionless. The words προθυμία and ζῆλος, however, occur in other contexts removed from such intense situations. Thus, Plutarch describes Theseus’s day-to-day training: “Thus in that same way marveling at the excellence of Heracles, by night even [Theseus’s] dreams were Heracles’s deeds, and by day his zeal (ζῆλος) was leading and training him, since he had in mind to do the same

9. For similar usage of these words in Plutarch see *Per.* 2.2; *Phil.* 6.11; *Virt. prof.* 84b; *Frat. amor.* 487b. Similar usage can be found in Philo, *Agr.* 91; *Mos.* 1.325; John Chrysostom, *Stat.* 49.38; 49.59; *Ign.* 50.594; *Macc.* 50.620; *Dros.* 50.688; Musonius Rufus, *Dissertationum* 15.35-36; Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* 5.19.18.

things” (*Thes.* 6.9). Here Plutarch personifies ζῆλος as the one who guides Theseus in his emulation of Heracles’s deeds. This is not the emotionally charged warfront, but the methodical training of a man who strives to accomplish great things. There is great passion and zeal, but not impulsive, irrational exuberance.

Likewise, Philo includes zeal as one of the most important factors in pursuing that which is most excellent: “Therefore, the contributions toward the most excellent are desire of virtue, zeal (ζῆλος) for good men, continuous care, constant practice, untiring and unwearied toils; the contributions for the opposite object are relaxation, indifference, luxury, weakness, and a complete change of habits” (*On Drunkenness* 21). Philo presents parallel lists of those activities that either pursue the most excellent or its opposite. The opposite of ζῆλος in the second list is ῥαθυμία, which can be understood as laziness or indifference. Since τῶν καλῶν could be taken as masculine, feminine, or neuter, the phrase τῶν καλῶν ζῆλος is ambiguous. Given the preceding discussion of the source of zeal, it seems likely that Philo would be referring to the emulation of good men. If we take ῥαθυμία to mean not simply laziness but indifference, then Philo not only implies a difference in the potential for action between ζῆλος and ῥαθυμία but also a difference in the value of the activity of others. An indifferent person would care very little about the good deeds of others while the zealous person would seek to emulate the good deeds of others.

Zeal (expressed as both ζῆλος and προθυμία), then, is no mere desire that comes and goes easily and on a whim. Rather, zeal can be inspired by someone or something that displays excellence and it can truly be characterized as zeal if it leads to an expression of the desire in action. Thus ζῆλος acts on Theseus to produce actions in him

toward the good deeds of Heracles.¹⁰ This does not mean that Plutarch had in mind a spiritual being named Zeal who encouraged certain actions. What this language accentuates is the view that zeal can be understood as an external force acting upon a person.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus also personifies ζῆλος: “But I do not place the wealth from a land in one sort of fruit, nor does a zeal (ζῆλος) to dwell move me where there are only rich arable lands and nothing or little else that is useful” (*Rom. Ant.* 1.36.3). The zeal described would have an active effect on Dionysius. In this case, the zeal is “of dwelling (οικήσεως)” in another place. Thus, the lack of such zeal allows Dionysius to stay put. Dionysius of Halicarnassus does not describe an intense situation in which one might expect exuberant emotion. He is simply discussing the desire to move to a new place or to stay put. Even if it could be shown that references to ζῆλος in the *Letter* describe an emotional desire, this does not necessarily imply an excess of emotional excitement that some have attached to the concept of voluntary martyrdom. The concept of zeal in the *Letter*, however, does not fall into the category of strictly emotional desire.

Zeal in the *Letter* functions similarly to the emulous desire to be like one’s heroes that we have seen above. When we encounter the language of zeal and passion in the *Letter*, we ought to consider the connection between this language and the ancient understanding of emulating those who exhibit virtuous excellence. Before considering these connections, we must first examine the importance of zeal to the author(s) of the *Letter* and the community described in the narrative.

10. Plutarch, *Thes.* 6.9.

The Importance of Zeal in the *Letter*

The importance of zeal in the letter is evident in the number of references to ζῆλος and προθυμία in the short document. Zeal is mentioned seven times throughout the account (see Table 1). The writer(s) of the letter prizes zeal as one of the most important characteristics of the believers.

Table 1: ζῆλος and προθυμία in the *Letter*

ζῆλος	5.1.9 (2x); 5.2.2
προθυμία	5.1.11 (2x); 5.1.29; 5.1.41

This emphasis on zeal is perhaps best illustrated by the description of those who confessed and those who denied Jesus before the tribunal before the chiliarch (5.1.8-11).

δὴ διεκρίνοντο οἱ λοιποί, καὶ φανεροὶ καὶ ἔτοιμοι ἐγίνοντο πρωτομάρτυρες, οἱ καὶ μετὰ πάσης προθυμίας ἀνεπλήρουν τὴν ὁμολογίαν τῆς μαρτυρίας, ἐφαίνοντο δὲ καὶ οἱ ἀνέτοιμοι καὶ ἀγύμναστοι καὶ ἔτι ἀσθενεῖς, ἀγῶνος μεγάλου τόνον ἐνεγκεῖν μὴ δυνάμενοι. ὧν καὶ ἐξέτρωσαν ὡς δέκα τὸν ἀριθμόν· οἱ καὶ μεγάλην λύπην καὶ πένθος ἀμέτρητον ἐνεποίησαν ἡμῖν καὶ τὴν προθυμίαν τῶν λοιπῶν τῶν μὴ συνειλημμένων ἐνέκοψαν (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.11).

Then the others were divided, and the first to testify were manifest and prepared, and with all zeal they supplied the confession of their testimony. But those who were unprepared, untrained, and still weak were not able to bear so great a struggle, about ten of whom were miscarried. They caused us great grief and immense sorrow and the zeal of the others who had not been seized was hindered.

The imagery of miscarriage for those who denied being Christians shows the seriousness with which these believers approached martyrdom. The greatest concern about the impact of such denials was that it caused the zeal of those who had not yet been seized to wane.

The grief and sorrow mentioned stem primarily from the failure of those who caved under pressure to fulfill their testimonies. Thus, the concern for the zeal of those who had not been seized is not simply a concern that they might not have the appropriate level of excitement, but that they might no longer be equipped to testify under pressure.

If one applies the same pattern in the *Letter* as was shown in the other ancient writers above, the zeal of those who had not been seized would eventually lead to their action, likely in the form of imitation. Instead of a rousing speech before a battle, like that of the admiral Callicratidas, the believers are to be spurred on to testimony by the witness of the martyrs who go before them. When believers give into the pressure and fear of the trial and recant their beliefs, this poses a threat to the continuance of the Christian testimony in the city. That is why the zeal of the believers matters so much.

One of the most significant contributions of the martyr Blandina was that she “caused much zeal among the combatants” (πολλὴν προθυμίαν τοῖς ἀγωνιζομένοις ἐνεποιεῖ [5.1.41]). Her fellow soon-to-be-martyrs were spurred on to continue their struggle toward martyrdom by her own actions. The text implies that, without the zeal gained from observing Blandina’s example, the others would not have been able to complete their task of testifying fully to their beliefs. One might expect the text to describe her impact on the pagans in the audience. Often, tales of martyrdom include descriptions of those who came to believe as a result of the martyr’s testimony. Here, however, the focus is on the effect of one martyr on others who are also on their way to becoming martyrs.

Zeal, then, is not only a virtuous trait prized by the author of the *Letter*, but it is also a primary ingredient in the process of martyrdom. Those who succeed in testifying to their identity as followers of Christ are those who are filled with zeal. Those who have not yet testified are in danger of never doing so should their zeal be allowed to wane. The zeal described in the letter, like the zeal in the other ancient writers above, results in an action that fulfills the zealous desire. The emulation of heroes does not function alone in

the *Letter*. Rather emulation fits squarely within the theme of cosmic warfare that permeates the *Letter*.

Zeal and War

One of the most common applications of ζῆλος and προθυμία is in discussions of great warriors and historic battles.¹¹ Thus, Plutarch (*Thes.* 25.5) informs the reader that the Isthmian games were instituted “according to zeal for Heracles.”¹² Here and as we have seen above, great warriors are the source of great zeal for many. Athletes in particular look to those who have accomplished great military feats for inspiration in their contests. Zeal, generally, applies only to those who have already accomplished something great, since it implies an emulation of the feats accomplished by that person. It can play a role in battle, as in the case of Callicratidas (discussed above); a soldier or leader may inspire fellow combatants in midst of battle to be zealous for the bravery exhibited by that person, and so change the outcome of the battle. Enthusiasm, on the other hand, tends to play a more active role in battle.

Thucydides offers προθυμία as an important element that led to various armies conquering their enemies.¹³ Likewise, Plutarch describes a great naval victory that was accomplished “not only through the common courage and enthusiasm (προθυμία) of all

11. In addition to the examples discussed below, see Plutarch, *Per.* 1.4; *Thes.* 6.9; Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 13.98 (discussed above).

12. Zeal here refers more specifically to emulation. The games are designed to mimic the feats of Heracles. Likewise, Plutarch (*Rom.* 16.5) describes the triumph of Romulus in battle against Acron as the “beginning and zeal (i.e., that which is to be emulated)” of future triumphs.

13. *Hist.* 1.74.1-2; 1.118.2.

who fought by sea, but also through the clever judgment of Themistocles.”¹⁴ Enthusiasm on the part of soldiers, then, played an integral role in a military strategy. Emulation of great warriors and enthusiasm are key ingredients to make great soldiers or athletes. This equation of athletes and soldiers does not simply exist in the emulation of military heroes by athletes but also the language of athletes often applied to soldiers.

Ancient writers often employed athletic imagery for military people and situations. Thucydides (*Hist.* 4.121) recounts how the people crowned Brasidas after a great military victory “like an athlete (ὥσπερ ἀθλητῆ).” Likewise, Plutarch presents similar scenes of the great heroes of antiquity receiving crowns like athletes after their great feats in battle.¹⁵ Isocrates (*Hellenae encomium* 23) describes Heracles and Theseus as “athletes on behalf of human life (ὕπὲρ τοῦ βίου τοῦ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀθληταὶ).”¹⁶ Athlete imagery clearly struck a chord in Greek thought when it came to honoring the valor of great soldiers and heroes.¹⁷

14. Them. 15.4. Similarly, Demosthenes speaks of fortifying various outposts in preparation for war as serving one’s country “with all foresight and enthusiasm and justice (μετὰ πάσης προνοίας καὶ προθυμίας καὶ δικαιοσύνης)” (*De Corona* 301).

15. Plutarch (*Per.* 28.5) provides a programmatic example: “The rest of the women were paying honor to him and giving wreaths and ribbons to him, as if he were a victorious athlete (αἱ ἄλλαι γυναῖκες ἐδεξιοῦντο καὶ στεφάνοις ἀνέδουν καὶ ταινίαις ὥσπερ ἀθλητὴν νικηφόρον).” See also *Per.* 4.2; *Fabius Maximus* 5.4; 19.3; 23.2; *Cato Maior* 4.3; *Philopoemen* 18.3; *Cimon* 13.3.

16. Diodorus Siculus (*Bib. hist.* 26.3.2) provides another fitting example of such imagery. When describing Fabius’s response to Hannibal’s taunts to lure Fabius into open combat, Diodorus claims that “like a good athlete, he attacked after training [lit. “practicing wrestling”] for much time, when he had gained great experience and power (καθάπερ γὰρ ἀθλητῆς ἀγαθὸς πολὺν χρόνον χειραλειπτήσας ἐπὶ τὸν ἀγῶνα καταντᾷ ἐμπειρίαν μεγάλην καὶ δύναμιν πεποιημένος).”

17. Such imagery was not restricted simply to the martial realm. Plutarch uses similar language to describe a politician arguing successfully against his opponents (*Comp. Aris. et Cat.* 2.4). For Philo, Abraham is an athlete competing with grief over the death of Sarah (*De Ab.* 256). Josephus (*AJ* 8.302) likens Baasha to an “athlete of wickedness,” as if he practiced to get better at being wicked.

War in the *Letter*

Anyone who reads martyr accounts will encounter the language of the arena. Imagery of athletes and gladiators abounds in martyr accounts,¹⁸ so much so that the application of the word ἀθλητής to Christian martyrs appears in the LSJ entry for the term. Tertullian (*Scorp.* 4.4) encourages Christians to swear an oath to fight (metaphorically) against their adversaries in persecutions that sounds similar to the oaths gladiators would pronounce before fights, as reported by Petronius (*Satyricon* 117).¹⁹ The martyr accounts attempt to establish a new order to the world in which those who are condemned to death as criminals (the believers) are actually valiant heroes participating in a righteous war for the true emperor, God.²⁰ The martyrs subvert the athlete/soldier/gladiator mythos by collapsing the distinction between victory and death; for the martyr, death *is* victory.²¹

In the minds of the Christians retelling the story, this subversive language describing the contest in which the martyrs participate describes an even greater event than simply an athletic contest: the war against Satan.²²

18. *Mart. Carpus* 35; *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.1; 5.1.17; *Mart. Perpetua* 10; Origen, *Exhortation* 1, 17-20, 34; *Mart. Ignatius* 5; Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 72-3; Cavan W. Concannon, “‘Not for an Olive Wreath, but Our Lives’: Gladiators, Athletes, and Early Christian Bodies,” *JBL* 133 (2014): 193-214.

19. C. A. Barton, “Savage Miracles: The Redemption of Lost Honor in Roman Society and the Sacrament of the Gladiator and the Martyr,” *Representations* 45 (1994): 56.

20. Judith B. Perkins, “The Passion of Perpetua: A Narrative of Empowerment,” *Latomus* 53 (1994): 837.

21. *Ibid.*, 844.

22. Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 79. This theme is common among other martyr accounts as well. See *Mart. Pol.* 3.1; 17.1; *Mart. Carpus* 5, 17; *Mart. Apoll.* 47; *Mart. Perpetua* 4.6-7; *Mart. Fruct.* 1.4. As Moss observes, the believers in Lugdunum would likely have been familiar with the teachings of Irenaeus who served as a priest in Lugdunum during the traditional time associated with the *Letter*. Assuming that his focus on Christ as victorious in a cosmic battle was present in his preaching as well as his writing, it is not out of the question to assume that the believers in Lugdunum had been taught to view themselves as soldiers already. Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91.

Indeed, within second- and third-century martyrial literature there was a growing trend toward rhetorically contextualizing the martyr, who had become the idealized symbol of Christian identity, as a necessary sacrifice and soldier in a cosmic struggle. This sacrifice produced both the highest eschatological honors for the individual and a symbol for the faithful of the imminent conquest and judgment of God's Kingdom over an idolatrous and demonically allied Empire.²³

The world of the Christian martyrs was torn between the forces of light and darkness, the sacred and the profane. "This fundamental dichotomy gives rise to images of a great encounter between cosmic forces—order versus chaos, good versus evil . . . which the real world struggles mimic. It is the image of war that captures this antinomy."²⁴ Thus, the Christians are not merely victims; they are soldiers. Martyrs are not simply casualties; they are heroes.

The martyr accounts, then, serve as war stories, tales of victory in the war against Satan.²⁵ Weaponry would not serve the Christian army. They fought with their lives and every death of one of their own counted as a decisive victory for the army of God.²⁶ This is Lee's reading of Revelation: a document calling believers to stand firm in their role as martyrs in the cosmic battle against Satan.²⁷ From the earliest periods of Christian persecution, believers conceptualized their suffering as participation in the victory of the kingdom of God. As different groups experienced persecution at various times, they came

23. Jonathan Koscheski, "The Earliest Christian War: Second- and Third-Century Martyrdom and the Creation of Cosmic Warriors," *JRE* 39 (2011): 105.

24. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 172.

25. Koscheski, "Earliest Christian War," 113. Brent D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs," *JECS* 4 (1996): 308.

26. Koscheski, "Earliest Christian War," 118; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 368.

27. Michelle V. Lee, "A Call to Martyrdom: Function as Method and Message in Revelation," *NovT* 40 (1998): 164-94.

back to these apocalyptic visions and hopes for imminent deliverance from the present, evil world.²⁸ Eusebius himself participated in this apocalyptic view of the sufferings of Christians, employing the language of τελειώσεις to speak of martyrs' deaths, language indicative of eschatological concerns.²⁹

The author(s) sets the narrative in a scene of war, introducing the main conflict of the narrative as a battle between two cosmic generals, God and Satan. Military/athletic imagery runs throughout the opening of the letter (see Table 2):³⁰

Table 2: Military/Athletic Imagery in the *Letter*

Word(s)	Occurrence(s)	Context
ἀντεστρατήγει	5.1.6	The grace of God made war against Satan
ὁμόσε ἐχώρουν	5.1.6	Christians joined in battle with Satan
ἐχθροὺς	5.1.7	Mob treated Christians as hostile people
πολεμίους	5.1.7	Mob treated Christians as enemies
στρατιωτῶν	5.1.14	The soldiers urge witnesses to lie about the Christians
στρατιωτῶν	5.1.17	The soldiers are enraged with the Christians who testify

After a brief introduction and a description of the activity of “the Adversary (ὁ ἀντικείμενος)” against the Christians in the region (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.1-5), the *Letter* claims

28. Paula Fredriksen, “Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity: From John of Patmos to Augustine of Hippo,” *VC* 45 (1991): 153.

29. *Hist. eccl.* 4.14, 4.16, 5.5, 6.2, 7.15, 8.10. For more on Eusebius’s eschatology and its impact on his account of martyrdom, see Mario Baghos, “The Impact of Martyrdom on Eusebius of Caesarea’s Commentary on Luke: Anticipating the Imminent Eschaton,” *Phronema* 28 (2013): 73-100.

30. This table includes references to actual military personnel in the story. While these occurrences are not figurative in the context, they still contribute to the overall depiction of the Christians as being involved in a battle.

that “the grace of God made war against [the Adversary] (ἀντεστρατήγει δὲ ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ),” (5.1.6). Then “they,” meaning the Christians, joined the grace of God in battle against the Adversary as well. The mob that leveled the accusations against the believers treated them as “hostile people” and “enemies.” At the outset of the *Letter*, then, the author(s) employ(s) language to evoke the imagery of war in the minds of the reader. These are not simply victims; they are soldiers. This is no human conflict; this is a battle between God and Satan.

The inclusion of the soldiers of the pagan government as characters in the narrative may certainly be purely incidental. The mentions of these soldiers, however, are both closely tied to a mention of the activity of Satan as well. In 5.1.14, the non-believing household slaves who bore false witness against the Christians are “in a trap of Satan (κατ’ ἐνέδραν τοῦ σατανᾶ)” and “the soldiers were urging them toward it (τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐπὶ τοῦτο παρορμώντων αὐτούς).” In 5.1.16, Satan strives to make the believers slander other believers and then, in 5.1.17, the whole populace, including the soldiers, is enraged at four of the Christian heroes of the story. Thus, the reader can easily associate these earthly soldiers with the implied army of Satan that has been at war with God and God’s followers throughout the narrative. So, the language of zeal and enthusiasm in the *Letter* serves to paint the martyrs of Lyons as brave soldiers in the army led by God.

Conclusion

The modern usages of zeal and enthusiasm have clouded the discussion of the martyrs in the *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons*. These terms have much broader ranges of meaning in the ancient world than just the abundance of positive emotion or

fervor. They often refer to the deeds of soldiers and athletes, behaving not based on spontaneous emotion but grounded in training and the desire to be like someone great by attempting to do the same great deeds.

This military/athletic focus ought to come as no surprise given the tendency of martyrological literature to include such themes. Likewise, given the survey of the use of the language of ζῆλος and προθυμία in ancient discussions of warriors, heroes, and soldiers, we can include those words as they appear in the *Letter* in our understanding of the military imagery at work in the *Letter*. The main force of the language is not simply to highlight the emotional state of the participants. Rather, these words serve to paint the martyrs and confessors as brave, well-trained soldiers who are entering into battle emulating the great deeds of other great soldiers, and themselves accomplishing feats worthy of emulation. Since these words do not refer strictly to emotional states or attitudes, they supply little or no evidence to support the assertion of the firm desire for martyrdom or death that one expects in voluntary martyrdom.

This does not exclude any emotional component from the terms ζῆλος and προθυμία. Certainly there are many emotions bound up in the act of emulating one's heroes: pride, joy, jealousy, contentment, frustration, etc. Depending on how strenuous one's training or the level of success in emulating the deeds of another, one might feel a range of emotions, both positive and negative. The factor that decides whether or not the emulous desire is inherently good concerns the source of the desire. Emulation needs a subject, an inspiration. More about the motivations of the martyrs of the *Letter*, at least as the author(s) characterize them is revealed in the source of their inspiration rather than

the language used to describe their emotions. Understanding the source of their zeal is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER II

THE DIVINE SOURCE OF ZEAL

Having addressed the presumption that the martyrs of the *Letter* were spontaneous or rash in their willingness to die, we turn now to the idea that some of these martyrs were driven by extreme human emotion or even a desire for death.¹ We have already established that the zeal/enthusiasm language of the *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons* participates in a larger body of metaphorical military/athletic language. The *Letter* not only depicts these martyrs as trained combatants, but it ascribes such training and emulative desire to a divine source. Essentially, zeal/enthusiasm in the *Letter* is directly connected to God's work in the community.

In order to understand the relationship between zeal/enthusiasm and the divine in the *Letter*, one ought first to seek to understand the relationship between zeal/enthusiasm and the divine in the wider Christian tradition. In the *Letter* the connection between zeal/enthusiasm and the divine is portrayed mostly through the activity of the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the testimony and endurance of the martyrs and the emulation of Christ by the martyrs. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the author(s) understood the zeal/enthusiasm of the martyrs to originate with God's actions in the Christian community facing persecution. But before focusing on the Christians at Lyons, let us

1. As argued by Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 129-32.

orient ourselves to the Jewish and Christian understandings of the Spirit and its relationship to zeal/enthusiasm.

Zeal and the Spirit in Judeo-Christian Tradition

In the absence of significant evidence to the contrary, we may assume that Christianity in Lyons shared many traits in common with the wider Christian world of its time. Since Christianity began as a Jewish movement, and conceptions of Christian martyrdom have antecedents in Jewish literature as well (e.g. the Maccabees), we must also reflect upon the influence of contemporary Jewish thought as well. Thus, in the following discussion we will focus on the relationship between the Spirit and zeal/enthusiasm in the wider realm of Judeo-Christian writings. However, the early Christians and their Jewish predecessors do not seem to have been very concerned to explain such a relationship thoroughly. Rather, what we encounter are a few references from which we can compose a sketch of their understanding of the Spirit's role in motivating believers.

The extant Jewish and Christian literature does not provide many examples of the combination of προθυμία/ζήλος and πνεύμα. Generally, references to the Holy Spirit refer at least to πνεύμα, though Christian authors switch between using Spirit alone, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the Lord, and other variations on these titles. My survey, conducted through TLG, included those references to προθυμία and/or ζήλος (and their families of words) within fifteen words of πνεύμα. Since we are primarily concerned with the relationship between προθυμία/ζήλος and πνεύμα from a Christian perspective, I limited the authors surveyed to those whose works specifically pertained to the development of early Christianity. Since the earliest version of the *Letter* available comes from Eusebius in the fourth century, I have included sources from the second to

the fourth century (in addition to those significant, earlier religious texts like the LXX, apocryphal works, and the New Testament). Out of these, I considered only those passages in which the author conceptually linked the Spirit (or spirit, in some cases) with προθυμία/ζήλος.

The majority of the references that combine these two ideas revolve around Jesus's words: τὸ μὲν πνεῦμα πρόθυμον ἢ δὲ σὰρξ ἀσθενής (Mark 14:38//Matt. 26:41). That is, they are either quotations of this statement or explanations of it.² We will not concern ourselves with teasing out the various interpretations of these words through the first few centuries of Christianity. It suffices to say that these words are generally understood to refer to a fundamental difference between the flesh and the spirit. That is, the flesh or body of a person can desire one thing while the spirit of the person can desire another (even opposite) thing. This distinction between the desires of the flesh and those of the spirit complicates any discussion of the Holy Spirit's influence on a human's desires, especially when the author uses only πνεῦμα with no modifiers. As we will see below, some ancient Greek and Hebrew writers conceptualized emotions themselves as spirits.

Septuagint and Apocrypha

The Septuagint has very little to offer in references to προθυμία/ζήλος within five lines of πνεῦμα. There is but one clear reference to a πνεῦμα ζηλώσεως. In reference to a man who suspects his wife of infidelity the text advises, "if there comes upon him a spirit of

2. Clement, *Strom.* 2.4.12; 4.7.45; 7.7.40; Polycarp, *Phil* 7.2; Gregory of Nyssa, *Ad Theophilum adversus Apollinaristas* 3.124.20; Athanasius, *Homilia de passione et cruce domini* 28.212.10; *Contra Arianos* 26.4; Basil of Caesarea *Homilia in Psalmum* 37 30.97.3; Origen *Contra Celsum* 2.25; John Chrysostom *De virginitate* 2.23.

jealousy (πνεῦμα ζηλώσεως), and if he is jealous (ζηλώση) for his wife, and she is defiled; or if there comes upon him a spirit of jealousy, and if he is jealous of his wife, and she is not defiled; then shall the man bring his wife to the priest” (LXX, Num 5:14-15). Whether one takes this language as a reference to some specific divine being in the heavenly court or as an expression of emotion in a culture that believes in an active spiritual realm,³ the feeling of ζήλωσις exists outside the husband and “comes upon him.” This usage of ζήλωσις is more clearly tied to the idea of jealousy than to the emulative impulse we observed in the previous chapter. Likewise, in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, Simeon describes how “the ruler of deceit blinded [his] mind by sending the spirit of jealousy (τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ζήλου)” and, thus, caused him to attempt to destroy Joseph (*Test. Sim.* 2.2.7). Descriptions of emotional changes in individuals, then, sometimes take the form of spiritual possession. An unmodified use of the word πνεῦμα, then, can easily refer to either an internal process within the human or an external force acting upon the human that is not necessarily the Holy Spirit.

Clement of Alexandria

Clement, in describing the act of prayer, speaks of the movements of the body as “following the eagerness of the spirit (τῇ προθυμίᾳ τοῦ πνεύματος) toward the intellectual substance” in an attempt to raise the body from the earthly realm to the region of holiness (*Strom.* 7.7.40). Certainly the spiritual language here conveys a sense of the dichotomy between that which is spiritual and that which is earthly. That is not, however, to say that one can assume Clement does not have the Holy Spirit in mind. Further along in the same discourse, Clement claims, “one who strives to be spiritual (πνευματικὸς)

3. For more on the arguments for both ideas see Esther J. Hamori, “The Spirit of Falsehood,” *CBQ* 72 (2010): 15-30.

through limitless love is united with the Spirit (πνεύματι)” (*Strom.* 7.7.44). Thus, the spiritual aspect of the human is directly connected to the Spirit. As one becomes more spiritual, one comes closer to union with the Spirit. So, one ought not to assume that Clement refers only to the spirit of a human when he uses the word πνεῦμα. In Clement’s mind, the spiritual part of a Christian is necessarily linked to the Spirit, so it is appropriate to allow for a link between the two in Clement’s thought.

An Example from Eusebius

Eusebius himself provides one other clear example of a pairing of ζήλος and πνεῦμα. In the middle of recounting the martyrdom of a young man named Apphianus (*Mart. Pal.* 4.1-15), Eusebius poses the question: “Who, after receiving report [of this] would not rightly marvel at the courage, the boldness, the firmness, and before these the daring act and the undertaking itself, ζήλου θεοσεβείας καὶ πνεύματος ὡς ἀληθῶς ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπον παρέχον τὰ τεκμήρια;” (4.7). The rendering of these last few phrases changes the presentation of the nature of the “zeal” described and its source.

McGiffert’s rendering is illustrative of the general interpretation of these words: “Who, that hears of it, would not justly admire his courage, boldness, constancy, and even more than these the daring deed itself, *which evidenced a zeal for religion and a spirit truly superhuman?*”⁴ There exists sufficient ambiguity in the genitive constructions to give us pause. The main verb of the clause, παρέχον, certainly makes more sense read as a neuter participle (as McGiffert takes it) rather than an imperfect verb referring to Apphianus, which is the other most viable option. I take issue, rather, with McGiffert’s rendering of the genitive relationships among ζήλου, θεοσεβείας, and πνεύματος.

4. Translated by Arthur Cushman McGiffert. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890), 1:214. Emphasis added.

Grammatically, McGiffert's rendering makes sense. It does not, however, do justice to the subsequent description of Apphianus's actions. Even McGiffert's own rendering highlights the divine source of the young man's zeal:

It is probable that this was done by the youth through a divine power which led him forward, and which all but cried aloud in his act, that Christians, who were truly such, were so far from abandoning the religion of the God of the universe which they had once espoused, that they were not only superior to threats and the punishments which followed, but yet bolder to speak with noble and untrammelled tongue, and, if possible, to summon even their persecutors to turn from their ignorance and acknowledge the only true God. (4.9, McGiffert)

The divine power leads the young man to proclaim the piety of the Christians. In fact, so great is their piety that they will not only resist their tormentors but also convert them in the process. Likewise, the narrator tells us twice in 4.5 that it is the Divine Spirit (πνεῦμα θεῶν) who leads Apphianus to Caesarea where he would be martyred.

When one takes this "divine power/Spirit" into consideration, one might understand the end of 4.7 a bit differently. Rather than reading two objects of παρέχον τὰ τεκμήρια, one can simply read ζήλου as the object and θεοσεβείας and πνεύματος as modifiers of ζήλου. Thus we could read, "Who, after receiving report [of this] would not rightly marvel at the courage, the boldness, the firmness, and before these the daring act and the undertaking itself, *which provides the proofs of a truly beyond human zeal for piety from the Spirit?*" (4.7). One of the main points raised in 4.5 and 4.9 is that Apphianus himself is not responsible for his martyrdom. Rather, God (through the Divine Spirit and divine power) guides and empowers Apphianus through the acts that lead to his martyrdom. The working of God is evident throughout the account. Why would the narrator then give so much credit to the spirit of this man? McGiffert and the standard translations of this text seem to suggest that Apphianus himself is somehow superhuman

in that moment. If, however, one reads his pious zeal as the product of the Spirit, the theme of divine providence and guidance remains intact.

Zeal as the Product of the Holy Spirit's Work

By the traditional interpretations of the text, the *Letter* does not explicitly state that the Spirit fills the believers with zeal. There are, however, two examples of the zealous martyrs explicitly described as being filled with the Holy Spirit, thereby providing the case for the Spirit as the source of zeal. These examples come from the descriptions of two men: Vettius Epagathus (5.1.9-10) and Pothinus (5.1.29-31). The traditional understandings of the descriptions of these two men imply that the zeal of the martyr comes from within the martyr himself. These descriptions can, however, be rendered in such a way that reflects the more likely source of the zeal described, the Holy Spirit.

Vettius Epagathus

The first, Vettius Epagathus, was a young man who, because of the zeal that burned inside him, spoke out in the tribunal on behalf of the Christians (5.1.9). Though the people would have expected someone older, like Zechariah the priest from Luke's Gospel whom the author(s) mentions, to speak, Vettius spoke out because he had the same Spirit as Zechariah (5.1.10). Vettius's reputation equals that of Zechariah, despite his youth. The author conveys this by repeating Luke's claims about Zechariah and Elizabeth. They "proceeded blamelessly in all the laws and ordinances of the Lord" (πορευόμενοι ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐντολαῖς καὶ δικαιομασιν τοῦ κυρίου ἄμεμπτοι, Luke 1:6b) and Vettius Epagathus likewise "proceeded blamelessly in all the laws and ordinances of the Lord" (πεπόρευτο γοῦν ἐν πάσαις ταῖς ἐντολαῖς καὶ δικαιομασι τοῦ κυρίου ἄμεμπτος, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.9). Thus, when the author claims that Vettius had the same Spirit as Zechariah, he

likely has in mind Zechariah’s prophetic speech made when he is “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:67).⁵

The description of Vettius also includes the phrase “having much zeal from God and being zealous in the Spirit” (ζῆλον θεοῦ πολλὸν ἔχων καὶ ζέων τῷ πνεύματι [5.1.9]). This understanding of the phrase differs greatly from the leading English editions to date (See Table 3 below).⁶

Table 3: Renderings of ζῆλον θεοῦ πολλὸν ἔχων καὶ ζέων τῷ πνεύματι

Lake	“having much zeal for God and zeal of spirit”
McGiffert	“zealous for God and fervent in spirit”
Musurillo	“possessing great devotion to God and fervour in spirit”
Williamson	“utterly devoted to God and fervent in spirit”
Crusé	“abounding in zeal for God and fervent in spirit”
Anderson (mine)	“having much zeal from God and being zealous in the Spirit”

The first difference lies in the treatment of the genitive θεοῦ. Those interpreters presented above opted for the objective genitive, while I have chosen the genitive of source. The

5. It seems ironic that the content of Zechariah’s prophetic speech in Luke’s Gospel focuses on God’s rescuing of the people of Israel from their enemies. Though, perhaps, the author(s) intentionally chose such a reference in order to enhance the idea that the martyrs were, in fact, conquering their oppressors even as they died. Death, in this instance, was the manner by which the Lord delivered the faithful from their oppressors.

6. Kirsopp Lake, trans., *Eusebius: Ecclesiastical History*, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926); McGiffert, trans., in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*; Herbert Musurillo, trans., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, OECT (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); G. Williamson, trans., *The History of the Church* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990); Christian F. Crusé, trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus* (Philadelphia: Rev. R. Davis & Brother, 1834).

second difference deals with the preservation of parallel terms. These interpretations, excepting Lake, do not reflect the etymological link between ζῆλος (“zeal,” lit. “hotness, boiling”) and ζεῖν (“to boil”). If one preserves the etymological relationship between the words, then the phrase is an emphatic iteration of a single idea. The final difference is a decision between τῷ πνεύματι as a reference to the human spirit or the Holy Spirit.

I have understood πνεύμα as a reference to the Holy Spirit; the other five translators above decided on the human spirit option. Certainly, this is a possibility. An issue, albeit slight, with this rendering is 5.1.28-29 where the believers are “empowered in body and soul” (ἐνδυναμούμενοι καὶ σώματι καὶ ψυχῇ) and Pothinus’s “body had been destroyed” (τοῦ σώματος λελυμένου) but his “soul was protected” (τηρουμένης τῆς ψυχῆς).⁷ Those who point to these instances argue that πνεύμα could have been used in these cases, but was not. Thus, the author does not operate with πνεύμα in mind as an important piece of the human being. This argument is fairly weak since these are the only references in the *Letter* that make a specific distinction between the body and some other part of the human (soul or spirit). It is too great a leap to say, like Weinrich, that this constitutes a σώμα/ψυχή understanding of humanity without a place for a human πνεύμα.

That the Holy Spirit would be connected to the zeal of Vettius Epagathus should not come as a surprise. He has already been associated with the priest Zechariah and the Holy Spirit who enabled Zechariah’s prophetic speech. This zeal then could be a product of that same Spirit as Origen claims of John the Baptist. When the Pharisees and

7. John Eifion Morgan-Wynne, *Holy Spirit and Religious Experience in Christian Literature ca. AD 90-200*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 193; William C. Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom: Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Context of Persecution and Martyrdom in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1981) 193-4, 211.

Sadducees come seeking John's baptism, "they are rebuked by John who has the zeal of Elijah by communion with the Spirit" (ἐπιπλήσσονται ὑπὸ τοῦ τὸν ζῆλον Ἰλίου κατὰ τὴν κοινωνίαν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἔχοντος Ἰωάννου, Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 6.121). Origen attributes the zeal of John, his emulation of Elijah in his prophetic rebuke, to his communion with the Holy Spirit. Vettius Epagathus's zeal is likewise from God through the Holy Spirit.

The best case to be made for reading the Holy Spirit in this instance is the narrative context itself. First, the next section of the text claims that Vettius had a share of the same Spirit as Zechariah (5.1.10, τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ Ζαχαρίου), so clearly the Spirit is playing a role in Vettius' actions. Second, the phrase itself, rendered as I have above, constitutes a parallel expression. Thus, the phrase is an emphatic statement of one idea. The terms for the persons of the Trinity are often fluid in Christian literature (e.g., "Spirit of the Father" [τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ πατρικόν, 5.1.34]), so θεός and πνεῦμα could easily be referring to the same entity. As discussed above, the etymological link between the adjective ζῆλος and the verb ζεῖν implies a strong connection in the present context. The phrase then could be rendered something like "having extreme zeal from God."

Vettius's actions do not only have the Spirit as divine inspiration. At the end of the account concerning Vettius the narrator says, "he showed [that he had the Spirit] through the fullness of his love, being pleased to lay down even his own life for the defense of his siblings. For he was and is a genuine disciple of Christ, following the Lamb wherever he leads" (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.10). The implication of this statement is that Vettius Epagathus was led by Christ into all his actions, including martyrdom. Likewise, as a disciple of Christ, Vettius would have been interested in emulating the actions of his

teacher. If Jesus, then, serves as the heroic object of Vettius's emulous desire, it is the Spirit who serves as the source of the zeal.

Pothinus

In much the same way as Vettius Epagathus, the second man, Pothinus, is described as being “strengthened by zeal from the Spirit” (ὕπὸ προθυμίας πνεύματος ἀναρρωννύμενος, 5.1.29). Again, the option for human πνεύμα exists, but, given the previous discussion, it is more likely that the Holy Spirit is intended as the source for this zeal. The fact that Pothinus's old age and frailty bear mentioning in the text signals to the reader that something supernatural is taking place when he is able to overcome those disabilities in order to testify. The only change that occurs in him is the zeal.

The account of Pothinus's arrest, testimony, and death appears in a section of the *Letter* devoted to describing those who died in prison, instead of in public executions (5.1.27-31). God's involvement in the fates of these martyrs is explicit throughout the section. The first group of martyrs suffocated in prison, having been stretched on racks or stocks of some sort, because “the Lord desired that they depart thus” (5.1.27). Some received such terrible torture that “it seemed not even if they obtained every cure would they be able to live” (5.1.28). Yet, “they were strengthened and empowered by the Lord in both body and soul” (ἀναρρωννύμενοι δὲ ὑπὸ κυρίου καὶ ἐνδυναμούμενοι καὶ σώματι καὶ ψυχῇ) so that only those who were too young and unable to endure their prison conditions died in confinement (5.1.28). Up to this point in the section, then, God has played a vital role in the survival or death of those who have testified in facing their tortures. The group whose weakness was highlighted just before Pothinus's narrative were the young, so now the narrative turns to the weakness of the elderly. An

understanding of πνεῦμα as the human spirit makes grammatical and conceptual sense, but it fails to preserve the theme running through this particular section of the *Letter* that God decides who overcomes certain tortures and physical weaknesses. Thus, it makes more sense to see the zeal as the aid of the Spirit in the Pothinus's moment of trial.

Regardless of the source of the zeal described, it is clear from both of these examples that the zeal of the two men was an integral part of their testimonies. The zeal of Vettius was necessary because it is what made him qualified to speak on behalf of the believers. Pothinus surely would not have been unable to overcome his physical disability without the zeal attributed to him. If one reads the source of this zeal as the Holy Spirit, then it is by divine intervention that these two men were able to testify. This option clearly is a better fit for the tone of the *Letter* and the general stance that those who became martyrs did so with the help of God.

The author credits the successful testimony of both Vettius Epagathus and Pothinus to their zeal/enthusiasm. If one understands this as a reference to their heightened emotional state and lust for death, then the accusation of voluntary martyrdom seems to fit nicely. If, however, we recognize the situation of the zeal/enthusiasm within the language of a cosmic conflict in which these men are soldiers of God, then we can see the zeal/enthusiasm as an integral part of their preparation as combatants. It is only fitting that soldiers serving under God as their general would receive such zeal/enthusiasm from their commander. This spiritual war symbolized by the persecution of the faithful, however, is not the only layer of representational activity at work in the circumstances of the persecution. Public execution held layers of meaning for Christians and pagans alike.

The Symbolic Nature of Public Executions

As the narrative descriptions of martyrdoms show, the execution of Christians in public, violent, and dramatic ways was charged with symbolic value for believers. However, in the political culture of empire, the spectacles also served to convey powerful messages to the general public as well. Public executions in the Roman Empire were designed to instill fear of the law; they also held value as entertainment.⁸ Additionally, the Roman officials and soldiers sometimes exploited the opportunity to shame Christian believers by dressing them in the vestments of pagan priests and priestesses.⁹ Thus, by shaming and ultimately killing those who had defied those in power, the public executions served to decrease the power of the condemned and to increase the power of the government.¹⁰

The martyrs, however, manage to reverse the flow of power, showing themselves, weak and wounded as they may be, to be more powerful than those who torture and kill them. Shaw explains:

The tortured can view the confrontation, however unequal, as a contest (*agôn*) between their body and those of the torturers and spectators. The active agents of domination can be forced to be amazed, to wonder (*thaumazein*) at the ability of the tortured body to defeat all the punishments inflicted upon it. Having that sort of control over one's own body enables the tortured to be silent, to speak through their bodies, and thus not to speak the required words. It is, rather, the spectators who will be forced to confess: to admit their defeat and to confess the superior power of the tortured body.¹¹

8. Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past and Present* 139 (1993): 4; K. M. Coleman, "Fatal Charades: Roman Executions Staged as Mythological Enactments," *JRS* 80 (1990): 46-7; C.A. Barton, "The Scandal of the Arena," *Representations* 27 (1989): 1-36.

9. Coleman, "Fatal Charades," 4-5; Tertullian, *Test.* 2; *Pall.* 4.10.

10. Shaw, "Passion," 6.

11. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity," 278.

The martyrs, then, repurposed a situation intended to bring shame in addition to death into an opportunity to bring glory to God instead, through their supernatural abilities to withstand tortures and violence and to accept death with calm and grace.

Likewise, according to Tertullian (*Apol.* 1.10-13), Christians who were killed in public executions did not exhibit the behaviors of guilty criminals: “blushing, sweating, signs of fear and shame, shuffling, bowing, scraping, signs of repentance and remorse, weeping, and so on.”¹² As an apologetic work, the rhetoric employed by Tertullian was certainly intended to paint the Christians in the best light, but, given the number of martyr accounts that portray martyrs behaving in these ways, it is likely that there were many who behaved thus when confronted with trial and execution. By presenting themselves as noble and righteous even in the face of death, the martyrs defied the expectations of the crowds and those who had condemned them.¹³ They likely did so not only because they were not criminals, but because they followed the example of Jesus in the stories of his own trials and execution.

Blandina: Emulation of Christ

One of the martyrs in the text of the *Letter* is a female slave named Blandina “through whom Christ showed that those things appearing worthless, unsightly, and contemptible before humans are held worthy of glory before God through love for him that is shown in power and not boasted in appearance” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.17). Blandina’s master fears that Blandina will not be able to maintain faith under pressure because she thinks Blandina will give in “because of the weakness of her body” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.18). The picture

12. Ibid., 302.

13. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 203-6; Shaw, “Body/Power/Identity,” 302.

painted by the author(s) shows a woman who embodies almost the exact opposite of inspiration. The woman who likely knew her best, her master, doubts that she will be able to hold on to her faith and make a good confession. The focus in martyr accounts on the weaker members of society (both physically and socio-economically) serves to highlight the toppling of the current power structure. Perkins describes this tendency in martyr accounts well:

If not always a cure, the endurance of pain is consistently represented as empowering in the early martyr *Acts*. It is, perhaps, to make this point more explicit that these *Acts* seem to focus particularly on society's most vulnerable members. Blandina is a slave woman; her companion in death is a fifteen-year-old boy. Perpetua is a nursing mother; the slave, Felicitas, rises from childbed to die. The texts underline the physical infirmity of even those martyrs with high status in the Christian community. Pothinus, the bishop of Lyons, is described as 'ninety years of age and physically quite infirm' (1.29). He only holds on to life, the text explains, so 'Christ might triumph in him.' Polycarp is also old, eighty-six when arrested. He might have escaped, but he refused and his captors 'were surprised at his old age, and why there should have been such concern to capture such an elderly man' (7.2). This focus on women and the infirm serves to emphasize the martyr *Acts'* position that the endurance of pain is empowering even for the most powerless in the contemporary society. All can share in the victory and triumph of death.¹⁴

By focusing on the least powerful people in society when describing how the tortured conquered the torturers, martyr accounts accentuate and increase the shame of those with authority. By exalting the endurance of the weak the mighty are brought low. In a similar way, it is possible that the focus on the courage of Blandina serves to highlight the honor of all Christians, since she is representative of the lowest stratum of society.¹⁵ If even the weakest among the Christians can stand up so well under the pressures of torture and

14. Perkins, "Passion of Perpetua," 847.

15. Elizabeth Clark, "Eusebius on Women in Early Church History," in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 257-8.

execution, then the endurance and strength of the whole group must certainly be remarkable. Blandina, however, does not endure her torments by her own power alone, but with the help of God.

Contrary to her physical appearance and social standing, Blandina makes a remarkable confession before her tormentors and before other martyrs. First, after being “filled with power (ἐπληρώθη δυνάμεως),” Blandina holds up so well under torture that her torturers are themselves broken and admit defeat (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.18). The authors do not specify the source of the power with which Blandina conquers her torturers, but it seems like a straightforward case of the “divine passive.”¹⁶ Much like Pothinus, discussed above, Blandina overcomes her physical weakness through power from a divine source.

Second, Blandina’s appearance, which was earlier mentioned as no source of boasting, transforms into the greatest appearance possible for a believer: the image of Christ himself. Since Blandina “had been hung upon a post” and “appeared to be hanging on a cross,” the other “combatants” saw “he who was crucified for them” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.41). This image of Christ “produced great enthusiasm (πολλὴν προθυμίαν) in the combatants” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.41). Through her suffering, Blandina practically becomes Christ in that moment,¹⁷ showing that the suffering of the martyrs is a participation in the victory that Christ won on the cross.

16. This is, of course, assuming that one operates within the framework of the *Letter* itself. Shaw attributes Blandina’s resilience to two traditions of resistance in the ancient world: that of women and that of slaves. See Shaw, “Body/Power/Identity,” 309. I prefer Heffernan’s understanding: “Such strength comes not from hidden reserves of the individual but the palpable presence of the Lord.” See Thomas J. Heffernan, “Martyrdom, Charisma, and Imitation: Paths to Christian Sanctity,” *GOTR* 55 (2010): 251-67.

17. This is not to say that Blandina loses her agency in the moment or that her courage ought not be admired. Rather, she is the one who “put on the great and invincible athlete Christ” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.42)

Blandina is brought out on the final day of the “games,” which was traditional for the treatment of females in these types of executions.¹⁸ Likely this was due to the fact that a woman entering into the arena was much more an unusual spectacle, especially if she were stripped as women in such situations often were.¹⁹ The true spectacle, however, is her embodiment of Christ on the cross, which spurs her fellow martyrs on to greater courage and enthusiasm in their fight.

While Blandina’s embodiment of Christ serves as the climax to the story, most of the divine intervention in the text is attributed to the Holy Spirit. In order to better understand the role of the Spirit in the zeal of the martyrs, we will examine the role of the Spirit elsewhere in the *Letter*. The Holy Spirit, much like God as the general at the beginning of the account, plays an active role in the activity of the martyrs.

The Holy Spirit and the Martyrs of Lyons

The Holy Spirit was with Vettius, filling him with zeal to speak (5.1.9-10). The Spirit also supplied zeal to Pothinus that he might overcome the frailty of his aging body to stand and to speak (5.1.29-31). The zeal of the believers was of great concern to those who wrote the letter. Blandina caused great zeal in the others who were being martyred with her (5.1.41-42) after she “was filled so great a power” (τοσαύτης ἐπληρώθη δυνάμεως, 5.1.18) that her tormentors could neither kill her nor stop her testimony. While the text does not specifically say that God is the one who filled her with this power, one

rather than Christ overcoming or entering her. For more on Blandina’s agency in the *Letter*, see Elizabeth A. Goodine and Matthew W. Mitchell, “The Persuasiveness of a Woman: The Mistranslation and Misinterpretation of Eusebius’ *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.1.41,” *J ECS* 13 (2005): 1- 19. Cf. Moss, *Other Christs*, 62.

18. Shaw, “Passion,” 18; M. Cebeillac-Gervasoni and F. Zevi, “Révisions et nouveautés pour trois inscriptions d’Ostie,” *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome* 88 (1976): 602-20.

19. Shaw, “Passion,” 18-19.

can read the verb ἐπληρώθη as a “divine passive,” implying God as the subject without making it explicit. Early Christian tradition, especially the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, often spoke of people being filled with the Holy Spirit, using πληρόω and πνεύμα with or without its various modifiers to indicate the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Either the original author(s) or some later redactor knew the writings of Luke. The *Letter* alludes to Zechariah (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.9-10) and Stephen (5.2.5), prominent minor characters from Luke and Acts respectively. The word πληρόω, then, could be a borrowing of Luke’s language for the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, however, does not fill Blandina in the *Letter*; she is filled with δύναμις. In the minds of the early Christians, this would likely amount to the same thing. They often linked the Holy Spirit and power conceptually (see Table 4).

Table 4: The Holy Spirit and Power in Early Christianity

Luke 1:35	The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest One will overshadow you.
Acts 1:8	But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.
Acts 10:38	. . . God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power . . .
Rom 15:13	May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you might abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit .
1 Thess 1:5	. . . because our message of the gospel came to you not in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit . . .
Hebrews 2:4	. . . God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various powers , and by gifts from the Holy Spirit . . .
Clement of Alexandria, <i>Quis div.</i> 34	. . . not knowing what treasure in an earthen vessel we carry, protected as it is by the power of God the Father, the blood of God the Son, and the dew of the Holy Spirit . . .
Justin Martyr, <i>Dial.</i> 87	The Scripture says these enumerated powers of the Spirit have come upon [Jesus]. . .

20. Luke 1:15, 41, 67; 4:1; Acts 1:2; 2:4; 4:8; 6:5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9, 52; *Acta Pauli* frag. 6, 9; *Mart. Pauli* 3; Clement of Rome, *Ep. i cor.* 2.2.

These writings highlight a direct connection between the Holy Spirit and power. Both the Spirit and power come from God and in many cases seem to be concurrent or even equivalent gifts. Given the references throughout the *Letter* to the Spirit (5.1.9, 10 [3x], 29, 34) and the author's apparent knowledge of Luke and Acts, the Christian community at Lyons probably recognized a connection between power and the Holy Spirit.

Thus, the zeal that Blandina later inspires in her fellow martyrs is a direct product of God's empowering. Certainly, other ancient writers surveyed above (e.g., Diodorus Siculus, Philo, Plutarch) believed that humans could inspire zeal on their own. The *Letter*, however, clearly shows the martyrs' zeal as coming from a divine source in the cases of Vettius Epagathus and Pothinus. Thus, the zeal inspired in those who observe Blandina stems from the same divine source that filled her with the power to testify in the first place. These are the most specific examples of divine intervention among the martyrs of Lyons, but they are not the only examples of God's working in the account.

There is also Sanctus who undergoes tortures beyond measure and beyond every human (ὕπὲρ πάντα ἄνθρωπον, 5.1.20). It is unlikely that the author intends to say that the tortures Sanctus experiences are greater than any tortures experienced by any other human. Rather, Sanctus experiences tortures that are beyond the ability of any human to endure. This implies, then, that it was not just human will or power that holds up under such torture. Even though God is not specifically mentioned in the context of Sanctus' torture, it is clear that the reader should infer divine intervention in his suffering. Thus, even if God's connection is not specifically made in every instance throughout the letter, there is a general understanding of God's involvement in helping the martyrs accomplish their testimony.

The Spirit's presence with the martyrs is made explicit in 5.1.34. The *Letter* again makes a distinction between those who denied their identity as Christians and those who stood firm in their convictions and testified (5.1.33). The Spirit of the Father (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ πατρικόν) supports the latter group (5.1.34). Those who denied being Christians but still awaited the final decision about their fate in prison with the faithful who stood firm do not receive the comfort of the Spirit. Thus, the author(s) understand the Spirit to be present with all of those who gave testimony. That same group is characterized by a great zeal that enables them to accomplish their mission of martyrdom. It seems likely, then, that the two factors separating those who remain true to their testimony as Christians and those who do not are the work of the divine in them and the zeal to fulfill their testimony. Since these remarks occur in a general statement that can apply to any martyr, one can infer that the Spirit's activity is assumed in each specific account of martyrdom throughout the *Letter*.

Conclusion

Some theologians argue that the description of the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.10) implies a court scenario, much like the scene that plays out in the *Letter*. The role of the Spirit, then, is to step in and speak for the believers.²¹ The *Letter*, however, offers a different view of the work of the Spirit. Instead of taking over the believer and speaking through her, the Spirit provides an extra measure of zeal, a dose of enthusiasm on top of the believer's own, which leads the believer to speak or act in such a way that their testimony can be heard and seen. This divine zeal overcomes physical weakness, imbues weaker members of society with the courage of

21. A. van de Beek, "The Spirit of the Body of Christ: The Holy Spirit's Indwelling in the Church," *AcT* 33 (2013): 261.

noble soldiers, and gives the believer the ability to withstand tortures and pain beyond the threshold of what is normally humanly possible. God/the Spirit does not simply provide words for the testimony of the believer. God supports the martyrs in their testimonies, their imprisonment, their tortures, and their executions. The hand of the divine guides the martyrs through the entire process of martyrdom.

This understanding of God's role in martyrdom coupled with the previous chapter's discussion of zeal/enthusiasm as part of the mythos of a trained soldier/athlete depicts the martyrs actions as both divinely inspired and the result of training and preparation. The narrative describes these martyrs as heroes of the faith. The questions left for the historian, then, deal with the authenticity of the account itself. Thus, in the following chapter, we will examine the likelihood of Montanist influence in Lyons in 177 and the degree to which Eusebius may have altered the account.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL PROBABILITY OF VOLUNTARY MARTYRDOM IN LYONS

Having dealt with the literary, rhetorical, and theological components of the *Letter* as they pertain to the concept of voluntary martyrdom, we must now consider the historical aspects of the account. Various scholars have seen fit to label three of the martyrs of Lyons as Montanists. To accuse any of the martyrs mentioned in the account of being Montanists, especially due to the alleged voluntary nature of their deaths, one must operate with several assumptions about the historical reality of the events in the text.

First, one must assume that the events related in the account actually occurred, at least in reference to the basic details of the account. If the account itself is a fabrication then it hardly behooves the person inventing it to hide hints subtly pointing in a veiled way to the presence of heretics throughout the account. Second, since the *Letter* contains no overt allegations of Montanism, one must assume that the true identity of these martyrs as adherents of the New Prophecy has been obscured at some point in the transmission of the account, whether by the original author(s) of the letter or by some later scribe (including Eusebius himself as a suspect). Third, one must assume that the behaviors exhibited by the martyrs whom one labels Montanists are the typical behavior of an adherent of the New Prophecy around 177 CE. If all three of these assumptions prove to be a reflection of reality, then there exists a strong case for labeling several of the martyrs as Montanists. I shall demonstrate, however, that the historical data available to us does not provide sufficient support for these assumptions, particularly the latter two.

The Trustworthiness of the Account

The first assumption deals with the historicity of the account itself. Scholars who debate the presence of Montanist influence in the community must believe that the account rests on a core of fact. Without such a core, the presence of heretics among the martyrs hardly matters. In order to argue for the presence of adherents of the New Prophecy in the *Letter* one must begin with the assertions that there was a persecution that took place in Lugdunum around 177 CE and the martyrs named in the account were indeed among the number killed in that persecution. Assessing the reliability of the account depends partly on assessing the reliability of the historian who reproduced the account.

Eusebius: Reporter or Author?

As Litfin observes, “it has become all too common to view the first ecclesiastical historian with grave skepticism, as if outright fabrication were his normal *modus operandi*, and his ancient readers were too credulous to know the difference.”¹ Some historians took the view that Eusebius completely invented many of the accounts he presented in his works.² Many have taken this view because he does not write like the pagan historians before or contemporary with him and he includes stories that do not appear in the accounts of any of those historians.³ Thus, in the estimation of some, Eusebius is more a writer of fiction than history. Were he a true historian, his work would mirror those of other historians before him, specifically the respected pagan historians.

1. Bryan Litfin, “Eusebius on Constantine: Truth and Hagiography at the Milvian Bridge,” *JETS* 55 (2012): 776.

2. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Age of Constantine the Great*, trans. Moses Hadas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 260, 299.

3. Including the events of the *Letter* itself. See note 9 below.

The comparison to pagan historians should not be given as much weight as it often has been. In more recent years, several scholars have observed a key difference between pagan and Christian historians: the pagans tended to neglect the religious and social aspects of history while the Christians highlighted and expanded upon such subjects.⁴ Eusebius's history, then, sounds very different at times from that of the pagan historians. This could very well explain some of the criticisms of Eusebius's history. Eusebius's history concerns the tangible and intangible kingdom of God, so we should expect there to be a mixture of verifiable and unverifiable information within it.

It is striking, however, that Eusebius seems aware of the incredible nature of some his material. For example, in his recounting of Constantine's vision of a cross in the sky accompanied by the words *τοῦτο νῖκα*, Eusebius admits that the story is difficult to believe and informs the reader that Constantine himself related the story, having sworn an oath to its veracity (*Vit. Const.* 1.28). While one could certainly view this hedging as the attempts of a liar to cover his tracks, it seems more like the careful reporting of an account recorded by the faithful subject of the dying emperor.⁵ The reason for the discussion of the unbelievable nature of the tale and the emperor's oath would then be that Eusebius wished to be perceived as a faithful and accurate reporter of historical events to a certain extent and he recognized that this particular account strained credulity, and he crafted his narrative respecting that his readers would have varying degrees of

4. Jason M. Scarborough, "Primitive, Unique, and True: Eusebius and the Legacy of His Ecclesiastical History," *SVTQ* 53 (2009): 67-97.

5. Litfin, "Eusebius on Constantine," 788.

skepticism. He does not function as a purveyor of fiction who may pass off fabrications and half-truths to an unsuspecting readership.

This does not mean, however, that Eusebius was a historian without bias and without a particular message to convey according to which he edited his materials.⁶ No historian can be. As Trueman claims, “historical actions and events are ineradicably complex; no single historian can ever hope to capture all of the complexity. Thus, history is necessarily selective, and this selectivity is shaped by the historian.”⁷ Eusebius, like any historian, had to assemble his sources into a cohesive narrative to make sense out of the data before him. In fact, a growing number of scholars recognize the literary and rhetorical abilities of Eusebius himself that surfaces throughout his works.⁸ We can easily recognize Eusebius’s most clear bias as that of a Christian who believes in the divine providence of God throughout history.⁹ Eusebius’s agenda to present history as the stage

6. Whether or not Eusebius edited his sources is not up for serious debate as he interjects with his own commentary occasionally and skips ahead to different portions of some documents. This is plainly evident in his handling of the *Letter*, for example. Rather, as Penland observes, many scholars have found it nearly impossible to find specific instances of Eusebius’s editorial hand within his quotations themselves. See Elizabeth C. Penland, “Eusebius Philosophus? School Activity at Caesarea through the Lens of the Martyrs,” in *Reconsidering Eusebius: Collected Papers on Literary, Historical, and Theological Issues*, ed. Sabrina Inowlocki and Claudio Zamagni (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 91.

7. Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 69.

8. James Corke-Webster, “A Literary Historian: Eusebius of Caesarea and the Martyrs of Lyons and Palestine,” *StPatr* 66 (2013): 198; Erica Carotenuto, “Five Egyptians Coming from Jerusalem: Some Remarks on Eusebius, ‘De martyribus palestinae’ 11.6-13,” *CIQ* 52 (2002): 500-6; Joseph Verheyden, “Pain and Glory: Some Introductory Comments on the Rhetorical Qualities and Potential of the Martyrs of Palestine by Eusebius of Caesarea,” in *Martyrdom and Persecution in Late Antique Christianity: Festschrift Boudewijn Dehandschutter*, ed. Johan Leemans, BETL 241 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 353-91; Marie Verdoner, *Narrated Reality: The Historia ecclesiastica of Eusebius of Caesarea*, Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 22; Penland, “Eusebius Philosophicus?” 87-98.

9. For more on Eusebius’s belief in God’s ordaining of events throughout history, see Glenn F. Chesnut, Jr., “Fate, Fortune, Free Will and Nature in Eusebius of Caesarea,” *CH* 42 (1973): 165-82; Arnaldo Momigliano, “Popular Religious Beliefs and Late Roman Historians,” in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 142.

showcasing the acts of divine providence can explain some of the cases where we find evidence that Eusebius altered an account or fabricated certain details of a story.

For instance, Carotenuto makes a compelling case that we may detect Eusebius's recycling of a short martyr account within another account for thematic and theological reasons.¹⁰ Essentially, she argues that the account of the five Egyptians martyred with Pamphilus and six others (*MP* 11.6-13) has been transposed and adapted from another account of Egyptian martyrs preserved only in the longer Syriac version of the *Martyrs of Palestine* (*MPSyr* 28-30). If true, then there must be some motivation for the inclusion of these Egyptians with Pamphilus's company. Carotenuto does not see any evil intent in Eusebius's actions, as some scholars may have been tempted to do. Rather, she argues that Eusebius uses these men to support a symbolic representation of the church in this group of martyrs, which revolves around his mentor Pamphilus.¹¹ In fact, their numbers are necessary to bring the total of the group up to twelve, which, as Eusebius claims, symbolizes the apostles (*MP* 11.1). Thus, the entire company serves as a representation of the church as whole, consisting of various ages, socio-economic statuses, and ethnicities.¹² Eusebius's motivation in redacting the account in this way, then, was theological, not malicious. This does not mean that his history was more accurate than if he had malicious intent, but we must beware the skepticism that comes from assuming ill intent where none exists.

10. Carotenuto, "Five Egyptians," 500-6.

11. *Ibid.*, 503-4.

12. *Ibid.*, 503.

If there are inaccuracies in the *Letter*, then one can either assume that Eusebius distorted the account out of an intent to deceive—e.g. to conceal the heretical inclinations of certain characters—or that Eusebius edited the account to fit into a larger work displaying the work of God through the Church. This latter option seems more likely in the instance of the Egyptian martyrs and in the case of the martyrs of Lyons as well. If one could make a strong case for Eusebius's editing the content of the sections of the text of the *Letter* he reproduces, then, hopefully, that person would assume the same thematic and theological motivations instead of assuming duplicitous intent. Since we are dealing with assertions about the motivations and beliefs of historical figures mentioned in the *Letter*, we must still assess, to the degree possible, the historicity of the content of the *Letter* itself.

The Authenticity of the *Letter*

Most scholars have generally accepted the account of the martyrs in Lyons as at least based in historical reality.¹³ Not only this, but it is generally accepted that Eusebius

13. Paul Kerezstes, "The Massacre at Lugdunum in 177 A.D.," *Historia* 16 (1967): 75-86; C.f. James W. Thompson, "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177," *AmJT* 16 (1912): 358-84. The only significant objection to the historicity of a persecution taking place in Lyons in 177 CE came from this article of Thompson in 1912:

Eusebius is our only source of information for this event. The argument from silence is very impressive. It is not recorded by any pagan or Christian writer, Greek or Latin, before Eusebius (ca. 280-340), nor was it known in the West before the beginning of the fifth century. The silence of pagan historians like Julius Capitolinus, Dion Cassius, Herodian, Libanius is absolute. That of Christian writers is quite as profound, such as Tertullian, Cyprian, Sextus Julius Africanus, Sextus Rufus, Arnobius, and Lactantius, the probable author of the *De mortibus persecutorum*, who once dwelt at Tr'ves. Christian Rome's ignorance is very remarkable. Irenaeus, though a native of Asia Minor, labored in Gaul. The *Adversus haereses* was probably written in Gaul when Eleutherius was bishop of Rome, between 174-89. No allusion is made in this work to the persecution at Lyons" (361-62).

Two other contemporary scholars, Adolf von Harnack and Paul Allard, challenged Thompson's argument quickly and, in Allard's case, repeatedly. For more on this scholarly dispute, see Adolf von Harnack, "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177," *ThLZ* 38 (1913): 74-77; Paul Allard, "Une nouvelle théorie sur le martyre des chrétiens de Lyon en 177," *Revue des Questions Historiques* 93 (1913): 53-67; James W. Thompson, "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177: A Reply to Certain

compiled and edited his *Collection of Ancient Martyrdoms*, which ostensibly contained the *Letter*, before he wrote his *Historia ecclesiastica*.¹⁴ While certainly not proof that Eusebius did not invent the account, it would certainly be brazen for a historian to invent an entire letter, record it in its entirety in one work, and then reference it piecemeal in another while encouraging others to go back and review the original. So, lacking sufficient evidence to the contrary, we will assume that Eusebius did in fact have a copy or copies of a letter written from the churches of Vienna and Lyons to other churches in Asia about a persecution that took place in 177 CE. Now, however, we must determine how faithful the account preserved by Eusebius is to the actual events that took place.

There have been some who make the case for Eusebius's possible editing of the excerpts from *Letter* that he includes in his account.¹⁵ Moss argues that the lack of any specific names of members of the group to which the *Letter* is attributed is striking.¹⁶ The only other examples of letters addressed from one group to another group without specific names are *1 Clement* and *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, so Eusebius could have edited the *Letter* to look more like these other documents, which also focus on martyrs.¹⁷ This is an interesting possibility, but ultimately unverifiable. We can be almost certain, however, that the document Eusebius preserves does not mirror the original *Letter*.

Criticism," *AmJT* 17 (1913): 249-258 (Thompson's reply); Paul Allard, "Encore la lettre sur les martyrs Lyonlais de 177," *Revue des Questions Historiques* 95 (1914): 83-89.

14. *Hist. eccl.* 5.pr.2; 5.4.3; Andrew Carriker, *The Library of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 38; James Corke-Webster, "A Literary Historian," 199.

15. Winrich A. Löhr, "Der Brief der Gemeinden von Lyon und Vienne," in *Oecumenica et patristica*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher et al., Festschrift für Wilhelm Schneemelcher zum 75 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1989), 135-45; Moss, *Other Christs*, 189; *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 104-6.

16. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 103.

17. *Ibid.*

The likelihood that Eusebius preserved exactly the wording of a document likely written at least 100 years before he encountered it is slim. “[P]apyrologists emphasize that ancient scholars ordinarily collated their manuscripts with other exemplars and that, as a result, the corrected manuscript was immediately contaminated ‘horizontally.’”¹⁸ Thus, the relationship between Eusebius’s presentation of the *Letter* and the original could be complicated by the scribes who undertook to copy the *Letter*, the number of times it was copied before Eusebius received it, and the number of editions of the *Letter* Eusebius had before him at the time of his own recounting. These pieces of information are, of course, lost to the modern reader trying to determine whether or not Eusebius edited the *Letter* heavily or not. The reality is that any instance of disagreement between Eusebius’s quotation of an extant source and the wording in that source as we know it could very well be the result of scribes prior to Eusebius, Eusebius himself, or even those scribes who copied Eusebius’s own work after it was written.¹⁹ Determining the authentic text of the original letter is certainly beyond the reach of modern scholars with the lack of any other documentary support for the *Letter*. Assessing the historicity of its claims, however, proves a bit easier.

The greatest obstacle to determining the historicity of the account contained within the *Letter* is the literary nature of the account itself. As discussed in Chapter 1, the *Letter* participates in the metaphorical language referring to the cosmic war between God

18. Carriker, *Library of Eusebius*, 46. For more on this type of “contamination” in ancient documents, see E. G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 93; Michael W. Haslam, “Apollonius Rhodius and the Papyri,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 3 (1978): 68-73.

19. Jaap Mansfield and David T. Runia, *Aëtiana: The Method and Intellectual Context of a Doxographer*, PhA 73 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 130-41; Carriker, *Library of Eusebius*, 47.

and Satan. Throughout the *Letter*, the persecution, the torture, and the killing are attributed to Satan.²⁰ As Koscheski observes:

The acts of the martyrs are a rhetorically loaded genre of early Christian literature presenting the trials/battles of martyrs engaging demonically inspired Roman authorities. These works always conclude with executions that are hailed as glorious victories and rewarded with the highest eschatological privileges. The texts preserve nothing short of individual pitched battles in this cosmic struggle carried out by named Christian heroes battling Roman authorities under the influence of the Devil.²¹

“Rhetorically loaded” does not necessarily mean “historically inaccurate.” It does, however, mean that certain liberties have been taken with the base material of the physical data of the persecution in order to more effectively convey a message that, to the author, means much more than the raw data alone. The spiritual reality of cosmic conflict between God and Satan matters much more to the believers than the physical activity of the pagan authorities. This would certainly make sense if, as some argue, martyr accounts like the *Letter* were written to be performed in a liturgical setting.²²

The changes that we can be most certain about in the account are not the possible edits of later scribes and Eusebius himself; rather, we can see the literary embellishments likely crafted by the original author(s) in an attempt to reflect a firm belief in a spiritual meaning that transcended the horror of the brutal tortures and deaths endured by the faithful.²³ The details that have been subsumed into these embellishments are likely

20. *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.5, 14, 16, 23, 25, 27, 35; 5.2.6.

21. Koscheski, “Earliest Christian War,” 113.

22. Moss, *Other Christs*, 13; Robin Darling Young, *In Procession before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001).

23. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 106-7.

irretrievable unless further corroboration for the events detailed in the *Letter* surfaces. The details that stand out as symbolic or exaggerated focus on the influence of the spiritual realm (God, Jesus, the Spirit, Satan, demons, etc.) on the events. Where details about the torturers themselves or the pagan officials' pronouncements and judgments might have been included, the author(s) chose instead to attribute the works to Satan and his minions. This does not have the feel of secrecy or deceit on the part of the author(s), but a firm belief in the outworking of an apocalyptic eschatology.

We can be reasonably sure, then, that the content of the *Letter* as we have it does not represent a purely factual account of the persecution that took place in Lyons in 177 CE. At best, the *Letter* represents an interpretation of these events, one that manifests a particular perspective and drives a particular aim. There are various actions and events attributed to God or Satan throughout the document and the martyrs are painted in an extremely positive light as soldiers of God while the pagan authorities are described as the minions of Satan. The historical details about the pagan officials and the tortures applied to the believers, however, do not concern the present line of inquiry. The area of alleged editing and whitewashing that concerns us is the evidence for Montanist beliefs among those who were martyred in the *Letter*. In order to assess the claims of those who have found evidence of Montanists among the martyrs of Lyons, we must determine whether or not the behaviors of the martyrs aligns with the evidence we have concerning second-century Montanism.

Hunting for Heretics: Finding Montanists in Martyr Accounts

When attempting to understand clearly the movement known by its adherents as the New Prophecy, which was later called Montanism, one must admit that the vast majority of

information available to the modern reader comes with not a little bias. Most of the information we have about Montanus and his followers comes from an anonymous source recounted by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 5.16.1-5.19.4).²⁴ In general, the data that we have come to us from the opponents of the New Prophecy, so we can certainly expect a significant degree of bias from the ancient sources on Montanism.²⁵ However, as with Eusebius's biased presentation of history as a whole, the presence of bias does not invalidate all the information presented in the biased source. But we simply must take care to keep such biases in mind as we assess the claims of those people who write about individuals or groups that they revile.

Another important factor to consider is the close relationship between Montanism and other forms of Asian Christianity in the second century. The eager expectation of the coming of the end of the world and the Lord's judgment parallels the development of Christianity in Asia.²⁶ Even the prophecies of the Montanists do not differ so greatly from the prophecies of the other Christians in Asia at the time as some ancient and modern sources claim. The fact that some sources (Montanus, *Fr.* 1; Maximilla, *Fr.* 5; Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4) retain oracles in plain and ordered speech suggests that at least some adherents of the New Prophecy did not prophesy only ecstatically and unintelligibly.²⁷

24. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 4.

25. Antti Marjanen, "Montanism: Egalitarian Ecstatic 'New Prophecy,'" in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'*, ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 188-89.

26. Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 95-105. Alistair Stewart-Sykes, "The Asian Context of the *Epistula apostolorum* and the New Prophecy," *VC* 51 (1997), 416-38; idem., "The Original Condemnation of Asian Montanism," *JEH* 50 (1999): 1-22.

27. Stewart-Sykes, "Original Condemnation," 5-6.

The existence of these oracles does not necessarily negate the reports of ecstatic or unintelligible prophecy. It does, however, cast some doubt on the main criticisms leveled at Montanus and his followers, as we will see below.

Montanism and Voluntary Martyrdom

Despite the relative lack of unbiased material concerning Montanism, scholars have often seen fit to portray them as dashing madly to their deaths in deliberate acts of provocation against the pagan government in order to achieve martyrdom. In fact, many have considered it to be one of the defining features that separated Montanism from other forms of early Christianity.²⁸ Generally, the basis for this evaluation comes from two oracles that Tertullian quotes:

If you truly seek counsel from the Spirit, what does he approve more than the speech of that Spirit? For it exhorts almost everyone to martyrdom, not to flight. So we also comment on this: "Are you publicly accused?" he says, "It is good for you. For whoever is not publicly accused before people will be accused publicly before the Lord. Do not be confused: righteousness brings you in [their] midst. Why are you confused about gaining glory? The opportunity is presented when you are seen by people." So also elsewhere: "Do not wish to expire in beds nor in miscarriages nor in soft fevers, but in martyrdoms, so that he who has suffered for you will be glorified." (*Fug.* 9.4)

Often scholars attribute these oracles to Montanus himself, but Tertullian merely presents these statements as Spirit-delivered speech.²⁹ This is not to say that there is much doubt

28. Albert Schweigler, *Der Montanismus und die christliche Kirche des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: L.F. Fues, 1841), 65; G. Nathanael Bonwetsch, *Die Geschichte des Montanismus* (Erlangen: Deichert, 1881), 108; V. Ermoni, "La Crise Montaniste," *Revue des Questions Historiques* 72 (1902): 84; Pierre Labriolle, *La Crise Montaniste* (Paris: E. Laroux, 1913), 52-54; Heinz Kraft, "Die altkirchliche Prophetie und die Entstehung des. Montanismus," *TZ* 11 (1955): 269-70; Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 291-2, 361; Barnes, *Tertullian*, 177-8; Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 25-27; Knox, *Enthusiasm*, 49; Birley, "Persecutors and Martyrs," 47, 61. C.f. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 202.

29. Robert M. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 160-61; Susanna Elm, "Montanist Oracles," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, vol. 2 of *Searching the Scriptures*,

about Tertullian's support of the New Prophecy.³⁰ Rather, this shows the almost haphazard way some scholars have approached these oracles. It is possible that a desire to tie Montanism to reckless, voluntary martyrdom has lead some to tie these statements directly to the founder of the New Prophecy in addition to interpreting the words as calls to voluntarily provoking martyrdom. Regardless, as Marjanen highlights, we must be careful when using Tertullian's works to analyze Montanism, since he does not represent the earliest form of the movement, he did not know Montanus, Priscilla, or Maximilla, and writes apologetically.³¹

Scholars who see these oracles as a call to voluntary martyrdom make this claim without more explanation than reporting the words of the oracles.³² Butler's argument is typical: "The New Prophecy, as mediated by Tertullian, at least, exhorted its followers to volunteer as martyrs and discouraged their flight, in opposition to the policy of the official church."³³ Butler at least goes on to support his assertion with Tertullian's own claim that "blood is the key to Paradise" (*An.* 55.5), meaning that a martyr's death is the

ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993–1994), 134; G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 2, 17–18.

30. For a summary of the evidence for Tertullian's Montanist beliefs, see Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 130–31.

31. Marjanen, "Montanism," 188; Anne Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the Liberation of Women*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 135; Trevett, *Montanism*, 66–69.

32. Johann L. Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History: Ancient and Modern* (New York: Carter, 1839), 1:65–66; August Neander, *Allgemeine Geschichte der christlichen Religion und Kirche* (Hamburg: F. Perthes, 1847), 1; Schwegler, *Montanismus*, 66; Bonwetsch, *Geschichte des Montanismus*, 105–6; Labriolle, *La crise montaniste*, 52–54; Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, trans. Bertram L. Woolf, 2d ed. (London: Lutterworth, 1961), 2:119–200; Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 292; Barnes, *Tertullian*, 177; David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 314–16.

33. Rex D. Butler, *The New Prophecy and "New Visions": Evidence of Montanism in The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 43.

only way to get into Heaven. This is indeed what Tertullian means, but the statement has been removed from the context of a discussion grounded in Revelation 6:9 in which John sees only the souls of martyrs under the altar (55.4). More will certainly enter Paradise at the second coming of Jesus; the martyrs are privileged not to wait (55.5).

Similarly, Tabbernee uses Tertullian's own words to justify understanding these oracles as a call to voluntary martyrdom.³⁴ Just before relating the oracles, Tertullian claims that the Spirit "incites all almost to go and offer themselves in martyrdom."³⁵ The first problem with Tabbernee's rendering of the statement is that he has added language of volunteerism to the text. The second problem is that he has stopped short of the full intention of the sentence. The text reads, "For it incites everyone almost to martyrdom, not to flight" (*namque omnes paene ad martyrium exhortantur, non ad fugam, Fug. 9.4*). As the whole document does, so this passage concerns flight during persecution, not voluntary martyrdom.

Let us, however, assess Tabbernee's reading as it stands: "It incites all almost to go and offer themselves in martyrdom." Certainly this statement shows that Tertullian does not find the idea of voluntary martyrdom abhorrent. A literal reading, however, misses the rhetorical thrust of Tertullian's statement. Tabbernee's rendering of the statement retains the hint that this statement does not represent reality. Perhaps it would be better to understand the statement as an exaggeration: "The Spirit incites all *almost* to go and offer themselves in martyrdom!" Thus, Tertullian emphasizes the glory of the martyrs and the power of the Spirit's words. He exaggerates about the desire to become

34. Tabbernee, "Early Montanism and Voluntary Martyrdom," *Colloquium* 17 (1985): 37-8.

35. Here I have supplied Tabbernee's own translation.

martyrs in an attempt to show that standing firm in faith surpasses fleeing from persecution.

Another problem with interpreting these sayings as encouraging or commanding voluntary martyrdom is that neither saying explicitly does so.³⁶ The first offers consolation to those who have been publicly accused or rebuked for their faith. The intended audience of the first quotation has been accused of being Christian already. Thus, they have no need to provoke punishment or volunteer for death. Rather, they need to stand firm in their faith. The second quotation speaks only of desire. Certainly, many people desire that their death be not in vain. This does not mean that such a person desires death to an unnatural degree, but simply that death, like life, might be wasted if it could have been used to accomplish more.³⁷ Additionally, the entire treatise concerns *fleeing* persecution. The opposite envisioned is not fleeing from life into death, but resisting the urge to flee and standing firm.³⁸ Read carefully and contextually, these statements provide little or no indication that they encouraged voluntary martyrdom, yet, some modern scholars found the insinuations sufficient to begin searching for Montanist tendencies in martyr accounts that exhibit some degree of volunteerism.

36. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 215-6.

37. A reading that renders *lectulus* as “marriage bed” in the second saying exposes the possibility of an intended female audience. Thus, it is more than a recommendation to desire martyrdom, but also a rejection of traditional marital expectations for women. So Marjanen, “Montanism,” 201.

38. For example, in *Fug.* 5 Tertullian argues that flight falls into the same category as denial. Fleeing persecution would then be as terrible as being arrested and denying being a Christian. This could perhaps lead some to provoke their own martyrdom through a misunderstanding of the argument, but that does not mean that the intention of these instructions was to command believers to bring about their own deaths.

The reality is that the critics of the New Prophecy generally focused on the ecstatic nature of their prophesying and the claim that the authority of the prophecies of the Paraclete (that is, the prophecies of Montanus and his followers) superseded that of the apostles and the instructions in scripture.³⁹ The ancient sources are not even in agreement on this point of Montanist practice. Apollonius's critique, preserved by Eusebius, does not even mention the ecstatic nature of the prophecies of the Montanists. This could be simply because some early Christian group believed in the validity of ecstatic prophecy (e.g. Athenagoras, *Legatio* 9.1). Apollonius's criticisms instead focus on allegations that the Montanists requested gifts and money in exchange for their prophetic work. This shows that the sources are not completely unified in their criticism of the movement. Yet, the earliest sources are unified in one aspect: they do not mention any fanatical voluntary martyrdom on the part of the Montanists.

In fact, of the four main early sources we have on Montanism (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.9; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 8.12; Apollonius [Eusebius], *Hist. eccl.* 5.18; Anonymous [Eusebius], *Hist. eccl.* 5.16-17) only the two preserved by Eusebius, the anonymous source and Apollonius, mention martyrdom at all in connection with the Montanists. The only criticisms Eusebius reports from the anonymous source is that Montanist martyrdoms were not nearly so numerous as the Montanists claimed and their deaths were not truly for the sake of Christ since their faith was warped.⁴⁰ The criticism he reports from Apollonius concerns the martyrdom of one individual, whom Apollonius

39. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.9; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 8.12; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.7-9; Marjanen, "Montanism," 210.

40. *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.20-22.

views as typical for the Montanists. Apollonius claims that this man, Alexander, was killed because he was a robber, not because of his faith.⁴¹

If the adherents of the New Prophecy craved martyrdom with a fanatical lust, surely these critical accounts would have given perfect opportunities to denounce such behavior. The only criticism Eusebius reports, however, consists of a vague distinction between true and false martyrdom. For Eusebius, the falsehood of Montanist martyrdoms stems not from the manner in which they were arrested or the cause of the persecutions in which they were caught but rather from the falsehood of their beliefs about the authority of the apostles and the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. Overly fanatical motivations for martyrdom are not in view in the early critics of Montanism.

Labeling Montanists in Martyr Accounts

Despite the absence of evidence for voluntary martyrdom as a significant identifier of the New Prophecy in the earliest Christian critiques of the movement, scholars have relied on a particular interpretation of the two oracles preserved by Tertullian as proof of Montanists encouraging voluntary martyrdom. Maintaining this assumption about Montanism and voluntary martyrdom, scholars proceeded to utilize apparent fanaticism as a criterion by which to identify Montanists in martyrological texts. This is especially true in episodes where other pieces of evidence seemed to corroborate the assumption, despite their inconclusive nature. For instance, Quintus in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* has thus been labeled.⁴²

41. *Hist. eccl.* 5.18.9.

42. Gerd Buschmann, *Das Martyrium des Polykarp*, KAV 6 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998), 51-52, 119-29.

One man, named Quintus, a Phrygian recently having come from Phrygia, was afraid upon seeing the beasts. This man was the one who compelled himself and others to come forward willingly. The proconsul, entreating earnestly, convinced him to swear and offer a sacrifice. Because of [cases like] this, brothers and sisters, we do not praise those who give themselves up, since the gospel does not teach thus. (*Mart. Pol.* 4)

Since Montanus began his work in Phrygia, Montanism came to be known as “the Phrygian heresy.” Thus, alongside Quintus’s willingness to come forward, his designation as a Phrygian has been taken as an indication that the author is identifying him as a Montanist. However, though the designation “Phrygian heresy” occurs in some sources, there are no unambiguous examples of the designation φρύξ used as shorthand for “Montanist,” as Tabbernee points out.⁴³ Examples abound of the designations “the heresy of the Phrygians (ἡ αἵρεσις τῶν φρυγῶν)”⁴⁴ and “the heresy from Phrygia (ἡ αἵρεσις κατα φρύγας).”⁴⁵ Tabbernee’s caution about reading too much into the designation “Phrygian” is well advised, but, given the prevalent association of Montanism with the area of Phrygia, one can imagine the audience of Quintus’s tale assuming certain influences on his faith, i.e. Montanism.

At the same time, one wonders why such a connection with heresy would not be made more explicit if the author truly intended to deter the audience from adherence to the teachings of Montanus. Quintus serves as a negative example because he failed to complete his witness by death. He lapsed and so stands condemned by the author. What about those who enthusiastically approach the authorities and fulfill their testimony in word and in death? Priscus, Malchus, and Alexander (who, “after deliberating [the

43. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 222.

44. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.27.1; 5.16.22; *Mart. Pionii* 11.2.

45. Gaius, *Frag.* 128.22; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.1; 6.20.3; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 2.308.

matter], hurry to Caesarea” to confront the authorities and be sentenced to death) were “adorned with divine martyrdom.”⁴⁶ Even more shocking is the example of Agathonice, who does not even bother with the authorities and leaps onto the stake to die with the martyrs.⁴⁷ The believers collect her remains and revere her along with the others who endured the entire process of trial, sentencing, and death.⁴⁸ Eusebius knows of her martyrdom (*Hist. eccl.* 4.15.48), but only mentions that she, along with Carpus and Papyrus, suffered martyrdom. Perhaps Eusebius knew the tale of Agathonice’s sudden, voluntary act of suicide and decided not to include a description of such behavior.⁴⁹ While this is certainly within the realm of possibility, again one must ask why a more explicit denunciation of her behavior would not have been more appropriate if he indeed believed her example to be folly.

While later Christian leaders argued against provoked martyrdom, it is clear that for the proto-orthodox⁵⁰ leaders there was no excuse for running from persecution and failing to follow through with one’s confession once arrested.⁵¹ In fact, one of the major criticisms of Marcion and other heretics by Justin Martyr is that the Roman officials do

46. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 7.12.

47. *Mart. Carp.* 44.

48. *Mart. Carp.* 47.

49. So Philip Schaff, *Eusebius*, NPNF 2.1 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 193.

50. This term is another contested word among scholars. There was certainly diversity among early Christian groups. By proto-orthodoxy in this study, I refer to those people, groups, and practices that were not considered heretics/heretical by their Christian contemporaries. For a brief orientation to the difficulties involved in establishing proto-orthodoxy as a unified group, see D. Jeffrey Bingham, “Development and Diversity in Early Christianity,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 45-66.

51. Paul Middleton, “Enemies of the (Church and) State: Martyrdom as a Problem for Early Christianity,” *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 29 (2012): 175.

not persecute or kill them (*Apol.* 1.26). Now, this is not necessarily a call to voluntary martyrdom, but certainly an early distaste for those who were not persecuted or who went to great lengths to avoid martyrdom. Martyrdom, however, was the highest form of glory attainable by the early Christians. Yet proto-orthodox were not the only ones who boasted of martyrs in their ranks. We can be almost certain the Montanists did so, since, as we observed above, the proto-orthodox felt the need to refute their claims of martyrdoms. If the demeanor of these Montanist martyrs had been qualitatively different from that of the Christians (reckless, over-enthusiastic, suicidal, etc.), then these authors could have used that detail in their arguments denying the validity of their martyrs. The fact that these authors seem to have recognized a superficial similarity between their martyrs and the true Christian martyrs led them to offer criticisms based in the truth of the faith of the person or in the reason for which he or she was arrested and condemned.

It appears that voluntary martyrdom was not recognized in the second century as a criterion by which someone might discover Montanists among groups of Christian martyrs. Now to be sure, it is difficult to discern and establish the motivations of individuals. Quintus and Agathonice may have been taught that they must seek out martyrdom. They may have been overcome by emotion or sought to stand with their friends and loved ones whom they saw being tortured and killed. We cannot say for sure in any instance that the martyrs' actions can be traced back to the teachings of Montanus. Extant primary sources offer no compelling evidence that the adherents of the New Prophecy were more likely than others to volunteer for martyrdom. More importantly, they were not criticized for such behavior by the earliest sources, even were it the case.

Voluntary martyrdom, then, should not be a major factor in determining whether specific martyrs can be identified as adherents of the New Prophecy. As we discussed in the previous chapters, the language of zeal and enthusiasm used in describing the martyrs and their deaths in the *Letter* does not primarily denote an emotional state. Rather, in the *Letter* this language highlights the trained and practiced emulation of the greatest Christian hero, Jesus, on the part of the martyrs. Thus, whether one analyzes the language of the account or the evidence of Montanist influence, there is no clear example of voluntary martyrdom in the *Letter*. Voluntary martyrdom is not, of course, the only reason scholars have accused specific martyrs in the *Letter* of heresy. Before we can declare these martyrs innocent, we must determine whether or not we can refute the other claims made about these possible heretics.

Three Heretics of Lyons: Montanists in the *Letter*

Montanism was an issue in Gaul at the time of the persecution in 177. Eusebius himself reports that two followers of Montanus had begun to teach and prophesy in Phrygia and were gaining wide circulation (*Hist. eccl.* 5.3.4). Their teaching became troublesome enough that the believers in Gaul sent out letters, even from prison before they were martyred, calling for peace among the churches in Asia and Phrygia with regard to the teachings of Montanus (5.3.4).

Scholars surveying the *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons* have often identified three probable Montanists in the text: Vettius Epagathus, Alexander, and Alcibiades. Vettius Epagathus stands up in defense of the Christians who have been arrested and is subsequently found guilty of being a Christian as well (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.9-10). The somewhat voluntary and rather provocative circumstances surrounding Vettius'

arrest and the references to the Paraclete (a favorite term of the New Prophecy)⁵² in the account in connection with his actions serve as proof enough for several scholars to name Vettius Epagathus a Montanist.⁵³ Lest we forget, however—this term did not originate with the Montanists as a reference to the Holy Spirit.

The Johannine literature in the New Testament uses παράκλητος to refer to the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 1:2). In John 15:26-27, Jesus promises the disciples that “whenever the Advocate (παράκλητος), whom I am sending from the Father, comes, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, that one will testify (μαρτυρήσει) concerning me. And also you should testify (μαρτυρεῖτε), because you were with me from the beginning.” This passage links the Paraclete directly with public testimony concerning Jesus. The verb μαρτυρέω is, of course, related to μάρτυς, which came to refer specifically to those who died for their faith. Simply based on the use of both terms, παράκλητος and μαρτυρέω, in John’s gospel, one can understand the reference to the Paraclete in the *Letter* as a deliberate allusion to Jesus’s own words concerning the testimony given by believers with the help of the Holy Spirit. Despite this connection to the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus, some scholars view the term

52. Even this detail is debated. It is possible, despite the fact that the surviving oracles traced back to the earliest members of the New Prophecy do not contain references to the Paraclete, that Montanus and his followers claimed it as their source. So Trevett, *Montanism*, 62-6; Marjanen, “Montanism,” 198 n39. Fairly early references in external sources claim their use of the term. See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.9; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.1.9-10; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 48.11.5-8; Tertullian, *Jejun.* 1; *Pud.* 21; *Res.* 11; *Virg.* 1; *Prax.* 1; *Mon.* 2-3; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 8.19.1; Pseudo-Tertullian, *Adv. omn. haer.* 7; Origen, *Princ.* 2.7.3. However, it is also possible that this usage was a later development once the movement reached Rome. See R. E. Heine, “The Role of the Gospel of John in the Montanist Controversy,” *Second Century* 6 (1987): 1-19.

53. T. Barns, “The Catholic Epistle of Themiso: A Study of 1 and 2 Peter,” *Expositor* 6 (1903): 44; Kraft, “Die altkirchliche Prophetie,” 269; Philip Carrington, *The Early Christian Church*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 2:244; cf. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 220; Jensen, *Self-Confident Daughters*, 137.

Paraclete as tied more closely to Montanus than to Jesus. Thus, the reference to the Paraclete is a remnant of Montanist influence on the author(s) of the text.

This reading of the use of the word Paraclete disregards the literary playfulness that the author(s) likely intended. The text reads, “And having confessed in a clear voice, he also was received into the lot of the martyrs, having been called the advocate (παράκλητος) of the Christians, because he had the Advocate (παράκλητον), the Spirit of Zechariah, in himself” (*Hist. eccl.* 5.1.10). Since παράκλητος can refer to a legal advisor in court, the author(s) employs the term as a play on words with the Holy Spirit. Vettius Epagathus is called the legal counsel of the Christians, because he has the divine legal counsel within him.

Alexander is labelled a Montanist as Quintus was, for being identified as a Phrygian.⁵⁴ There is no need to rehearse the weaknesses of this assumption, discussed above. In Alexander’s case, however, the reader finds even more evidence that this description is nationalistic and not a matter of ascribing heresy to him. He is not just a Phrygian, but “a Phrygian by race” (φρὺξ μὲν τὸ γένος) (5.1.49). Additionally, he has lived in Gaul for “many years” (5.1.49), so he can hardly be a convert to the teachings of Montanus recently come from Phrygia. Both of these details point to a purely nationalist description of Alexander.⁵⁵ Tabbernee classifies him with Quintus as a voluntary martyr.⁵⁶ However, Alexander is called before the court after the crowd has noticed him encouraging those who have denied Christ to repent and confess their faith (5.1.49-50).

54. Barns, “Themiso,” 44; Kraft, “Die altkirchliche Prophetie,” 269; Lietzmann, *History of the Early Church*, 2:199-200; cf. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 221-2.

55. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 223.

56. Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 222-3.

Nothing in the text suggests that Alexander is attempting to draw attention to himself, nor does he voluntarily present himself for judgment.

Scholars do not consider Alcibiades to be a volunteer, but he is held as a Montanist on account of his ascetic practices (5.3.2-3).⁵⁷ Asceticism, however, was no invention of Montanus. Alcibiades would not have been alone in expressing Christian belief through his asceticism without necessarily following the teachings of Montanus.⁵⁸ The early critics of Montanism, which we surveyed above, do not mention severe asceticism as a mark of Montanism. Although in the narrative another character (Attalus) discourages Alcibiades's asceticism, this need not mean that Alcibiades was understood to be Montanist. It is more likely that Attalus's main concern was that Alcibiades would not be physically strong enough to continue to testify publicly if he did not take more for sustenance. There is, then, no clear evidence in the text that Alcibiades was a follower of Montanus. Thus, all three of these martyrs are presented simply as faithful Christians killed for their faith, not Montanists.

Conclusion

There is no strong evidence in the *Letter* that any of the martyrs was a Montanist. The people named in the account exhibit none of the ecstatic prophecy or greed attributed by critics to the followers of the New Prophecy. There exists, of course, the possibility that the account has been altered to remove obvious connections to what became a heresy condemned by the Church. The suspects for such adulteration of the account are

57. Barns, "Themiso," 44; Charles Bigg and Thomas B. Strong, *The Origins of Christianity* (London: Clarendon Press, 1904), 186; Carrington, *Early Christian Church*, 2:248.

58. See Acts 10:9-16; Col 2; 1 Tim 4:1-5; Heb 13:9; Herm. *Vis.* 3.10.6; Herm. *Sim.* 5.3.7; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.25.5; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 26.13; 30.15.3; 30.16.1; Tabbernee, *Fake Prophecy*, 224.

numerous. The author(s) or editor(s) could have concealed the distinguishing features in an attempt to promote peace between the proto-orthodox groups and the Montanists, as the letters sent by that same community intended.⁵⁹ Later editors, concerned about the connection of Montanist martyrs to Christian martyrs, could have done away with the Montanist details. Eusebius himself could even be the culprit. Yet this is speculation, without the support of positive evidence and therefore ungrounded. Determining the exact form of the original letter sent from these Christians is beyond our reach, without the discovery of new documentary support, but the *Letter* as it stands cannot be held to indicate the martyrs were Montanist.

59. *Hist. eccl.* 5.3.4.

CONCLUSION

Martyrs played an important role in the development of Christianity through their actions and through the stories circulated about them. The martyrs of any group tend to be viewed with similar awe. This is likely why the opponents of heretical groups and those who reacted to persecution differently tended either to criticize the lack of martyrs among such groups or to deny the validity of the deaths of those so-called martyrs. The difficulty with such criticisms is that, as Middleton claims, “martyrs are not defined; martyrs are made.”¹ Both ancient and modern critics of certain types of martyrdom generally attempt to define true martyrdom. For instance, in the wake of terrorist attacks, some modern authors have tried to define martyrdom to the exclusion of those who use their deaths to cause harm to others.² This would, however, leave out people like the biblical Samson, who killed himself and many Philistines with God’s approval, the many Christians who died in the Crusades, whom several successive popes considered martyrs for their service, and the Islamic martyrs who were similarly considered martyrs when they died in battle under Mohammed.³ While many modern Christians, Muslims, Jews, and members of any faith might want to limit the definition of martyr to the exclusion of those who die through violent activity on their own part, in the history of many faiths there exist such

1. Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 11.

2. Middleton, “What is Martyrdom?” 117-18.

3. Ibid., 120.

martyrs, as some adherents of those faiths receive and revere them. Although we may criticize the beliefs and practices of those who condoned such violence, but we cannot claim that they were not representatives of their particular faith in their context.

This is, however, exactly what has happened to some martyrs of the Christian Church. Those who were deemed voluntary martyrs have been considered heretics. Although often cited in support of such a reading, the *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons* does not offer any firm evidence of either voluntary martyrdom or Montanist influence. This has not stopped many scholars from arguing for both of these based on the language of the letter and the historical data available.

We have seen, however, that the language itself is metaphorical and theological. Zeal and enthusiasm in the *Letter* do not simply refer to the emotional state of the martyr, but to their status as soldiers in the army of God. These martyrs, according to the only account we have of them, are not fanatical in their approach to death. Rather, they approach death as trained warriors emulating the greatest soldier in the battle they are fighting, Jesus.

Not only do these martyrs participate in the emulation of Jesus, as almost every Christian martyr account claims to some degree, but they also operated under the direction of God and through power and zeal from the Holy Spirit. The *Letter* claims divine intervention throughout the narrative, both directly and indirectly. While this is not verifiable by any critical method, it signifies that the author(s) of the text honored the deaths of these martyrs as the direct will of God. However the deaths took place in the account, whether the person seems to have volunteered or was arrested for reasons completely unknown to the reader, the *Letter* does not present these deaths as anything

other than martyrdom ordained by God. Death, for the Christians in the community at Lyons, was the duty of the martyr who wished to follow God's plan for him or her and strove to emulate Christ.

This is not to say that death is the best nor the most important way in which Christians might emulate the actions of Jesus. Certainly, Christians throughout the centuries have found many ways to lead long and meaningful lives, imitating Jesus's humility, generosity, love, etc. We should not, however, discredit the path of imitation chosen by another simply because we believe that a better form of emulation exists. This is certainly not the main motivation of scholars who have attempted to distinguish voluntary martyrdom from orthodox martyrdom. The rhetoric of their arguments, however, which claims some sort of mental instability and culpability for desiring death in a way that seems unhealthy according to modern sensibilities concerning life and death, betrays a deeper concern than just that of historical inquiry. Even if the historical data strongly supported reading some of the martyrs at Lyons as voluntary martyrs, we would not be able to deny that these men and women were revered as true martyrs for centuries among proto-orthodox and eventually orthodox Christians.

The historical data, upon closer scrutiny, do not prove conclusively that Montanists were any more likely to provoke their own arrests and executions than were proto-orthodox Christians of the time. The oracles preserved by Tertullian do not encourage voluntary martyrdom to any great extent. At best, Tertullian encourages voluntary martyrdom through a misreading of the oracles. At worst, the oracles do not even refer to voluntary martyrdom, but rather focus on not fleeing from persecution. Tertullian's main

concern in *De fuga in persecutione* is, unsurprisingly, flight during persecution. He is arguing *against* fleeing, not necessarily *for* voluntary martyrdom.

Even those Christians who criticized Montanism most strongly failed to mention anything about adherents to the New Prophecy recklessly offering themselves up for death. The early critics of Montanism were concerned with their claims to authority beyond that of Scripture and the apostles. They acknowledged the claims that Montanists had many martyrs, but they refuted them by calling such claims false or claiming that their “martyrs” were criminals. They did not claim that adherents of the New Prophecy sought out martyrdom enthusiastically or volunteered themselves to the authorities.

The result of the work of those who have assumed a connection between Montanism and voluntary martyrdom is that Christians who were venerated in their time as martyrs stand accused of heresy. Several of the martyrs from the *Letter* have suffered this fate. While I am not the first to attempt to remove the stigma from these martyrs, the attempts thus far have largely left out the literary aspects of the *Letter*. When one considers the literary, theological, and historical aspects of the *Letter* together, it becomes clearer that the martyrs do not fit the category of voluntary martyrs.

Defending the Martyrs

As discussed in the Introduction, a few recent scholars have criticized the argument that voluntary martyrdom represents a deviant, unorthodox form of martyrdom that generally sprang up among heretics. These scholars, however, tend to point only to the historical data concerning the category of voluntary martyrdom itself. They could bolster their arguments by examining the language of the sources themselves and the function of key phrases concerning emotion and volition in the general flow of the narratives and the

metaphorical constructs employed by the authors. What I have done in this study of the martyrs of Lyons could also be used to bolster arguments for other martyrs who have been cast as heretics, like Quintus and Agathonice. This is not to say that narrative criticism is a “silver bullet” that will erase any doubt about the influence of heresy on some martyrs. Nor will it do away with the concept of voluntary martyrdom as a form of martyrdom that puzzles modern readers. It does, however, add an additional set of tools with which historians can analyze documents. Narrative criticism can aid scholars by allowing modern readers to come closer to the intended meaning of the documents they survey. A better understanding of the text itself leads to a better understanding of the events and people the text describes.

Taking literary matters into consideration also gives the modern reader a better lens through which to see what the authors and scribes believed about what happened. This might be secondary in the minds of some historians who want instead to know what factually happened. Often, though, that knowledge is outside the realm of what can truly be known based on the documentary evidence. We must, instead, assign some level of trustworthiness to our sources and examine them as the literary and rhetorical constructions they are. By doing this, we can avoid jumping to hasty conclusions, either to condemn historical figures with too little evidence or to believe firmly in a dubious account. Without such care, modern readers import their own sense of morality and uneasiness into the evidence presented in the ancient documents. This leads not only to the unfair treatment of people revered as Christian heroes, but also the unfair treatment of those heretical groups upon whom such behavior is blamed.

Defending the Montanists

The martyrs in the *Letter* are not the only victims in the hunt for voluntary martyrs. As discussed in Chapter 3, in the earliest and most reliable documentary evidence on the beliefs and practices of Montanism there exists no significant evidence that the followers of the New Prophecy either provoked their own arrests and deaths or encouraged martyrdom to an unhealthy or excessive degree. Why, then, have so many been content to accuse Montanus and his followers of this behavior? Without knowing more about the individual authors who claim to have proof of such behavior, I cannot speak with certainty about their motivations. I can, however, speculate about what is likely a major factor. Whether consciously or not, these scholars are likely behaving in much the same way that many have assumed Eusebius did, “whitewashing” the history of the Church. That is, they have scrubbed what they perceive to be aberrant behavior in some early Christian groups in an effort to establish a clearly delineated proto-orthodoxy that fits more comfortably with modern concerns about death. Accounts describing martyrs who provoked their own deaths can unsettle the modern reader. It could be that, by associating voluntary martyrdom with groups whom proto-orthodox Christians considered deficient in other ways already, we feel more comfortable reading the accounts of these people who approach death in a manner that does not make sense to us.

Attaching voluntary martyrdom to a movement that ancient and modern Christianity generally consider to be in error makes the existence of voluntary martyrdom in early Christian documents easier to accept. If one believes that Christianity is a fairly reasonable religion and one believes that the only reasonable desire in the face of persecution is to survive, then the almost fanatical desire for martyrdom exhibited by

some early Christians creates a problem that must be solved. So, scholars bracketed voluntary martyrdom off from what they assumed were more reasonable expressions of Christianity.

Moving Forward

This study is by no means the first to question the use of voluntary martyrdom as a category or the accusations of heresy associated with it. Beyond its applicability to our understanding of the *Letter* and the vocabulary and early narratives of Christian martyrdom, one important result of this study is methodological, i.e. for more accounts to be treated with consideration for literary and rhetorical aspects in addition to the historical details and backgrounds, which have, for the most part, been researched thoroughly by others. Adding such narrative considerations to the historical analyses already in place will help us come closer to understanding voluntary martyrdom as a category and determine to what extent the category reflects the reality of early Christian martyrdom. Hopefully this will lead not only to a better understanding of and respect for those considered to be martyrs of the faith but also to a fairer treatment and depiction of minority groups like the Montanists within early Christianity.

The *Letter from the Churches of Vienna and Lyons* still remains fairly mysterious and its circumstances obscure. We have only one source for the *Letter*, Eusebius's *Historia ecclesiastica*. There is no corroboration for the events that the *Letter* describes in contemporary pagan or Christian histories. The content of the *Letter* provides the only window into the persecutions in Lyons in 177 CE. We must attempt to read behind the text in some way if we are to learn more about Christianity in Gaul in the second century. This means, however, that we must be that much more careful with the data and the

conclusions we draw. Without clearer evidence to the contrary, the martyrs of Lyons still deserve a place among the honored Christian martyrs of early Christianity.

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