

SILVIA RONCHEY, *Indagine sul martirio di San Policarpo: Critica storica e fortuna agiografica di un caso giudiziario in Asia Minore*. (Nuovi Studi Storici, 6.) Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1990. Paper. Pp. 241.

Although scholars have debated the authenticity of the *Martyrium Polycarpi* since the seventeenth century, most recent studies have agreed that the *Martyrium* is in fact what it purports to be—a contemporary account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, second-century bishop of Smyrna, sent by the church at Smyrna to the church at Philomelium. Silvia Ronchey's study challenges this view, claiming a late-third-century date for the text's composition and assigning it new polemical aims. If Ronchey is right, the implications of her thesis are considerable, for the *Martyrium* is generally acknowledged to be the earliest of the genuine *acta martyrum* and thus a critical document for the history of the church in the Roman Empire of the second century.

Like B. Dehandschutter (1979), Ronchey believes that the *Martyrium* displays a literary integrity which marks it as the work of a single author. In her view, the text's dominant rhetorical motifs—the Gospel metaphors which advocate flight in the face of persecution and which assimilate Polycarp's death to the passion of Christ—are integral to the text's design and proof of its compositional unity (see, e.g., pp. 67, 180). Thus our text of the *Martyrium* is not, as H. von Campenhausen argued (1957), the product of a series of redactions exercised upon a second-century *Urtext*. Unlike Dehandschutter, however, Ronchey employs this conclusion, not to vindicate the *Martyrium*'s authenticity, but to establish its "carattere spurio" (p. 157). For Ronchey, amplifying arguments anticipated by Lipsius and Keim in the late nineteenth century, contends that if the *Martyrium* is a unified text, then its (perceived) anachronisms stigmatize it as a work composed considerably later than events it pretends to record faithfully (p. 206). Elucidating the text's anachronisms and distortions becomes the monograph's primary goal.

Ronchey first considers the *Martyrium*'s denunciation of voluntary martyrdom ex-

pressed in the narration of Polycarp's flight to the country and the apostasy of the Phrygian Quintus (part 1, chapters 2 and 4). She not only argues, as did H. Grégoire and others, that this hortatory message is aimed at the extremist behavior of the Montanists (p. 53), but also contends that it specifically targets the church of Philomelium (p. 76). Ronchey suggests, moreover, that the elliptical quality of the text's message indicates composition at a time when Montanism was well known (p. 67), and she finds a specific context for the *Martyrium's* monitions amid the third-century "Christians for Christians" inscriptions of the nearby upper Tembris valley, considered Montanist by W. Calder and others (p. 72). In Ronchey's view then, the anti-Montanist polemic of the *Martyrium* is only comprehensible in a third-century context, when Montanism was strong in Phrygia.

The second part of Ronchey's study weaves a complex series of arguments around the implications of the text's other dominant rhetorical motif—the Gospel metaphor which, likening Polycarp to Christ, settles blame for Polycarp's death, not upon the proconsul Quadratus (Pilate), but upon the municipal police and local population, particularly the Jewish community of Smyrna. The real political issue raised by the *Martyrium*, Ronchey rightly observes, is not the legitimacy of Roman authority but popular hostility against the Christians (p. 91).

Ronchey identifies the *Martyrium's* scheme of blame, which some have accepted, as the work's most disingenuous trait and the key to its proper interpretation (p. 100). In support she adduces several primary arguments (part 2). First, other *acta*, notably those of Pionius and Carpus, depict the municipal authorities and local population as neutral, tolerant, or even sympathetic and more accurately reflect the realities of contemporary urban life. Moreover, by falsely crediting Polycarp's arrest to the irenarch and the local police, the *Martyrium* has disguised the primary role of the proconsul and imperial troops, dictated by second-century administrative practice (chapters 2–4). Second, the *Martyrium* anachronistically assigns the *demos* of Smyrna a judicial competence which it could not have exercised in the Antonine age (chapter 5). Third, it is implausible that Jews and Christians, who in the second century shared so much and were identified with each other in pagan eyes, would have assisted the Roman government in mutual persecution. Only in the Decian period did friction between the two groups arise in Smyrna (chapter 7).

These distortions, Ronchey believes, suggest that the *Martyrium* was composed at a time of peace and alliance between church and state (p. 143). The text's author, accommodating past to present, intended both to exculpate the Roman governor, who had in fact sought out and executed the bishop of Smyrna, and to preserve Tertullian's fictitious philo-Christian portrait of Marcus Aurelius, who had in fact instigated the general persecution under which Polycarp died (chapters 9 and 10). Like the text's anti-Montanist message then, this pro-Roman polemic indicates composition in the late third century, sometime between the reigns of Gallienus and Probus (p. 221).

It should be noted that Ronchey's separation of the *Martyrium* from the events it reports reduces the importance for her thesis of the actual date of Polycarp's martyrdom. Supporters of the *Martyrium's* authenticity, however, have struggled to assign his death (and thus the text) to a specific year within the range 155–77. This problem, complicated by the seemingly contradictory evidence of the *Martyrium* itself and of Eusebius's *Historia ecclesiastica* and *Chronicon*, has generated a vast bibliography but no consensus. Here (part 1, chapter 3) Ronchey follows the lead of others, accepting Grégoire's (1951) rebuttal of W. H. Waddington's date of 155 but rightly rejecting Grégoire's own date of 177, determined by his reconciliation of the work's (assumed) anti-Montanist character with the Eusebian date (171) for the movement's origins. With the support of P. Brind'Amour's convincing study (*Analecta Bollandiana* 98 [1980], 456–62), Ronchey finally declares for

the year 167 (p. 65), a date which harmonizes with her reconstruction of Marcus Aurelius's legislation against *sacrilegi* (pp. 118, 199).

Ronchey's study is exemplary in its utilization of a considerable range of evidence and its sensitivity to historical context, but it will not convince everyone. There may be valid reasons for rejecting the interpolation theory articulated by von Campenhausen (in addition to Dehandschutter, see V. Saxer's article in *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome: Antiquité* 94 [1982], 979–1001), but Ronchey's literary and rhetorical analysis remains necessarily subjective. Furthermore, Ronchey's assertion of the *Martyrium's* anti-Montanist character, explicitly denied by some, assumes a less problematic understanding of Montanism than presently exists. Not only has the early Montanist penchant for voluntary martyrdom recently been questioned (W. Tabbernee, *Colloquium* 17 [1985], 33–44), but the inscriptions of the Tembris valley present difficulties of interpretation not fully acknowledged here (e.g., E. Gibson, *Harvard Theological Studies* 32 [1978], 131–44). Most importantly, anachronisms and distortions are difficult to prove within a context of events and documents themselves often of insecure date and for a text which may present the earliest evidence on particular issues. The *Martyrium Carpi* and the *Martyrium Pionii*, for example, laden with Decian material, are dubious proof texts for the second century; and the history of pre-Decian legislation against Christianity remains controversial. Moreover, while legal sources and administrative history offer valuable critical perspectives, urban violence and intimidation were not always respectful of the parameters of official or judicial competence. Finally, the arguments here are at times difficult to follow, not least because the plot unfolds like that of a mystery novel. Nevertheless, it is the virtue of this work to realize that the study of the *Martyrium Polycarpi* is also the study of the relations of the early Christian communities with their surrounding urban and imperial neighbors.

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