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'THAT WE TOO MIGHT BE IMITATORS OF HIM': THE MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP AS *IMITATIO CHRISTI*

Shawn J. Wilhite

Cursory readings of the Martyrdom of Polycarp reveal faint traces of Jesus' passion narrative. This article demonstrate how the author(s) present the historical narrative in order to encourage readers towards imitatio Christi.

Introduction

This paper will seek to show how the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* presents the death of Polycarp so as to invite the reader towards *imitatio Christi* motifs. It engages with three scholars who have addressed this question over the past ten years.¹ By doing this, I will be able to place the current research adequately within an ongoing conversation of three premier scholars in early Christian scholarship. I describe how Michael Holmes is relatively sceptical of such a theme shaping the literary composition of the work. Paul Hartog is reluctant to see such themes, but nonetheless, affirms that they are present. Candida Moss, on the other hand, identifies the literary reshaping but ties it to the historicity of the document and concludes that the text is a forgery.

The author(s) of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* reshape the historical events and recollection of Polycarp's death for pedagogical purposes in order to communicate *imitatio Christi* motifs. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* presents the narrative of Polycarp's death in order to recast him as an imitator of Christ. That is, it provides a narratological mirroring of details, his persona, and the villains to match the Gospel narratives.² The narrative reflects an historical event that is literarily reframed in order for

¹ In more recent times, Stephanie Cobb likewise identifies similar motifs in *Mart. Pol.* Her work, moreover, although given to the *imitatio* motif, gives predominant attention to the *imitatio Socrates* relationship. My argument is in continuity with this article, but offers an analysis of the *Mart. Pol.* that connects to the literary and ethical framework of *imitatio Christi*. L. Stephanie Cobb, 'Polycarp's Cup: *Imitatio* in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*,' *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 2 (June 2014): pp. 224–40.

² In older scholarship, imitation themes were attributed to Hellenistic influence as opposed to a Christian origin. Boudewijn Dehandschutter, 'The *Martyrium Polycarpi*: A Century of Research,' in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), p. 510.

it to have a certain effect upon the hearers and readers. A primary motif intended to affect the hearers and readers of the narrative is imitation. In order to prove such a thesis, I will argue for the cumulative effect of three literary features expressing *imitatio* motifs. (1) The author(s) describe this martyrdom account 'in accordance with the gospel' (*Mart.Pol.* 1:1). (2) A twofold imitation model exemplifies Polycarp as an *imitatio*-mediator of Christ, whereby readers will obtain salvation by following his example. (3) The narrative of Polycarp is generally told in such a way as to conform to the passion narratives of the Jesus tradition.

The Concept of *Imitatio Christi* in Recent Scholarship

Michael Holmes

Michael Holmes is critical of identifying *imitatio*-related themes in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, especially the idea of borrowings from Gospel texts. Holmes has published two works that partially engage the similarities between *imitatio* and the passion narratives. He frames his article around one problem and three questions. The problem, according to Holmes, is how 'the opinion of many' points to the parallels and allusions to the gospel traditions as 'the key to understanding Polycarp's martyrdom as an *imitation* of the passion of Jesus.'³ So, Holmes begins to critique these assumptions based upon his correct observation, that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* never cites a Gospel text.⁴ Therefore, from the outset, any type of allusion is ignored and he is only seeking to investigate the possibility of quotations and visible signs of textual influence.

The first question Holmes asks is whether or not there is any 'demonstrable evidence that the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* has made use of any of the written gospels now included in the canonical New Testament?'⁵ After evaluating eighteen possible quotations, Holmes concludes that there are none. Although the author(s) of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* are deeply indebted to Gospel traditions, they leave no traces of which Gospel or which version of the Gospel from which they drew.⁶ However, the author(s) of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* were not trying to

³ Michael W. Holmes, 'The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the New Testament Passion Narratives,' in *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers* (ed. Andrew F. Gregory and Christopher M. Tuckett; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 407.

⁴ Holmes, 'New Testament Passion Narratives,' p. 407.

⁵ Holmes, 'New Testament Passion Narratives,' p. 407.

⁶ Holmes, 'New Testament Passion Narratives,' p. 417.

leave textual traces of the Gospels, but to reshape an historical account and figure through Jesus traditions. Holmes is asking questions about the status of the canon and the shape of the Gospels instead of evaluating the literary allusions to Jesus traditions.

The second question Holmes asks is ‘what, precisely, does it mean for a martyrdom to be ‘in accord with the gospel’?’⁷ For Holmes, a martyrdom in ‘accord[ance] with the gospel’ means three things: (1) It is a matter of divine calling rather than human accomplishment or initiative; (2) It demonstrates a concern for the salvation or well-being of others; (3) It displays endurance in the midst of suffering.⁸ Imitation is not included, so the presence of Gospel allusions does not imply imitation motifs of a particular person, but a particular approach to writing martyrdom accounts. Consequently, Holmes concludes that the use of parallels with the gospel narratives is ‘a widely shared feature of early Christian martyriological accounts... It is a mistake, therefore, to elevate a feature of the genre to the level of an interpretive key.’⁹ Holmes rightly identifies the martyr genre and pattern of partial mirroring of Gospel passion accounts. Given that the concept of imitation is introduced in *Mart.Pol.* 1:2, it is plausible that mirroring of the gospel passion narrative also conveys a model of imitation too.

Holmes’ next work engaging imitation motifs, albeit briefly, is the Introduction to *The Martyrdom of Polycarp in The Apostolic Fathers*.¹⁰ His argument about *imitatio* is really a summation of his previous article.¹¹ *Imitatio* themes are ‘subordinated to the idea of following after, which emphasizes more the concept of faithfulness and obedience to God’s will.’¹² Furthermore, Holmes identifies two reasons why there are Gospel narrative parallels:

1. To establish the character of Polycarp—as a charismatic and prophetic bishop. He is the one who models martyrdom in obedience to God.

2. To embody the many heroic, athletic virtues, and characteristics idealised by Graeco-Roman culture.¹³

⁷ Holmes, ‘New Testament Passion Narratives,’ p. 419.

⁸ Holmes, ‘New Testament Passion Narratives,’ p. 421.

⁹ Holmes, ‘New Testament Passion Narratives,’ p. 422–21.

¹⁰ Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (3d edn.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 298–305.

¹¹ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 299, n1.

¹² Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 299. Unlike Candida Moss, Holmes states that the Gospel narrative parallels tell us nothing about the date of the document. See p. 301.

¹³ Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 300.

In summation, Holmes asks specific canonical and quotation questions, ultimately shaping his results. He finds no direct quotation of one particular Gospel. He, however, is not opposed to all four Gospels somehow shaping Polycarp's narrative. Yet, mirroring the Gospel narratives, if they do at all, according to Holmes, does not argue for *imitatio Christi* motifs, but speaks to the character of Polycarp and reflects Graeco-Roman culture.

Paul Hartog

Paul Hartog engages this theory briefly. He highlights how some have understood *imitatio* themes and subtly reveals his own position. He affirms the critiques of some who observe the 'artificial' mirroring with Gospel passion narratives. 'Nevertheless,' he argues, 'the notion of mimesis in *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is not merely theatrical imitation.'¹⁴ Furthermore, he affirms how the parallel of Polycarp's passion with that of Jesus seems undeniable. He notes how some of notions of mimesis 'seem weak or superficial...not only awkward—they seem unduly forced.'¹⁵

Hartog, however, only admits *imitatio* themes in relation to the expression 'in order that we too might be imitators of him' (*Mart.Pol.* 1:2; see also 17:3; 19:1; 22:1). He also affirms that parallels to the Gospel narratives 'may not have been in the mind of the original author(s), and most cannot be traced to any specific Gospel text.'¹⁶ So imitation is not due to Gospel allusions, but occurs because Polycarp was the eminent martyr setting a path worthy of imitation and because the author(s) desire that 'we also might become imitators of him' (*Mart.Pol.* 1:2; cf. 22:1).¹⁷

So Hartog essentially affirms the presence of Gospel-related material in the *Martyrdom* but argues that scholars have overdone such parallels and remains relatively sceptical as to whether or not the author(s) always have a Gospel in mind.¹⁸ Ultimately, if Hartog affirms the presence of the *imitatio Christi* theme, he does so on the basis of *Mart.Pol.* 1:2 and does not incorporate any allusions to Gospel narratives and Jesus traditions.

¹⁴ Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, p. 206.

¹⁵ Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, p. 206.

¹⁶ Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, p. 208.

¹⁷ Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, p. 208–9.

¹⁸ See Paul A. Hartog, 'The Martyrdom of Polycarp as Communal, Moral Formation' (paper presented at the International Society of Biblical Literature, St. Andrews, Scotland, July 8, 2013), n.p.

Candida Moss

Candida Moss is the most prolific published writer on this theme. Her argument has more critical nuances than that of Holmes or Hartog. Moss has four different works interacting with *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and I will articulate her views in chronological order as they relate to the present thesis.

Her revised dissertation (2010) is entitled *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*.¹⁹ Here, she is highly sympathetic to the author(s) of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in their portrayal of Polycarp as an imitator of Christ. She says, ‘The author deftly but overtly weaves references to the Gospels throughout the account, beginning with an outright declaration of Polycarp’s imitation and proceeds to mirror the passion narratives from the garden of Gethsemane to the moment of death.’²⁰ She points out such parallels as similar ‘villains’ in the narratives, the demeanour of Polycarp, the timing of the arrest, the prayers of Polycarp, and the entrance into the city.²¹

She does admit that there are places where the imagery of *imitatio* breaks down. In those cases, she gives a balanced description of two options without hinting which of the two she prefers. Either the author(s) portray Polycarp as one who ‘overshoots even the achievements of the crucified Jesus,’²² or Jewish themes (e.g. *akedah*—‘binding traditions’) help link ‘Christian typological constructions of history’ and, therefore, reinforce *imitatio*.²³

In 2010, Moss also published an article entitled ‘On the Dating of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in the History of Christianity’ in *Early Christianity*.²⁴ In this article, she combines historiography and literary interpolations of *imitatio* themes to nullify the genuine elements in the account. That is, arguments for history and the genuine record are ‘tainted’—so to speak—by *imitatio* themes so as to make a judgment upon the historicity of the record. According to Moss, ‘If the presence of the *imitatio Christi* must be expressed in terms of ‘genuineness,’ rather than in literary terms, then Lightfoot’s argument

¹⁹ C.R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xi.

²⁰ Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 57.

²¹ Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 57–58.

²² Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 58.

²³ Moss, *The Other Christs*, p. 59.

²⁴ Candida R. Moss, ‘On the Dating of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in the History of Christianity,’ *Early Christianity* 1, no. 4 (2010): pp. 539–74.

seems decidedly shaky.²⁵ That is, if the literary interpolations are regarded as historically authentic and connected to the genuineness of the historical event, then the argument makes a counter move it was not intending and proves that the text is inauthentic.

Moss' second argument concerns the portrait of Polycarp. If the author(s) are casting Polycarp as an imitator of Christ, then the eyewitness reports are dubious. 'The self-conscious representation of Polycarp as Christly mimic,' Moss continues, 'coupled with the numerous allusions to scriptural narratives of Jesus' death, cast doubt on the text's status as an eyewitness report.'²⁶ Moreover, according to Moss, the presence of *imitatio* themes argues for the inauthenticity of the accounts. 'The presentation of isolated elements of a martyrdom account as *imitatio* differs from the way in which the account of Polycarp's death is stretched over the frame of the passion narrative as a whole. The sustained presentation of Polycarp as *alter Christus* shrouds the text with a different kind of suspicion.'²⁷ If passion narrative allusions appeared sporadically, then the authenticity of the *Martyrdom* text would increase. Yet, because the vast majority of the Polycarp martyrdom narrative is framed within the literary personification of Christ, the narrative as a whole is more suspect. As Moss concludes, 'The use of the passion narratives as a structuring device in the account calls into question the historical authenticity of the events the text purports to describe and cannot easily be dismissed as vague or violent.'²⁸

In my opinion, Moss' *Ancient Christian Martyrdom* is her finest work so far.²⁹ In it she makes almost the same argument as she does in her 2010 article. Eusebius provides corroborating evidence for a historical core and the literary embellishments cannot be tied to that. If they are, according to Moss, it does not bode well for the historicity of the text. In other words, if the literary embellishments are historically genuine, it diminishes the historical credibility of the historian—as is the case with J.B. Lightfoot—and the historicity of the document. 'The self-conscious representation of Polycarp as Christly mimic coupled with the numerous allusions to scriptural narratives of Jesus' death certainly cast doubt on the text's status as an eyewitness report.'³⁰

²⁵ Moss, 'On the Dating,' p. 552.

²⁶ Moss, 'On the Dating,' p. 552.

²⁷ Moss, 'On the Dating,' pp. 552–3.

²⁸ Moss, 'On the Dating,' p. 557.

²⁹ C.R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

³⁰ Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, p. 63.

Moss' most recent work, *The Myth of Persecution*, takes a milder position than her previous works.³¹ This text is not meant for scholars but for lay people. Rather than changing or modifying her positions, she attempts to make her arguments more palatable to her audience by claiming that the parallels between Jesus and Polycarp could be stronger but do not automatically rule out authenticity.³² Moreover, the parallels, she explains, 'provide a moral example for imitation.'³³ The *imitatio* themes are pedagogical and assist the readers to imitate Christ.³⁴

Integral to Moss' argument is the conflation of literary and historical elements. Uniting both features shows signs of literary reconfiguration so as to make the historical account more malleable and less historically reliable. So, for Moss, merging literary features with the historical core decreases the likelihood of the account being historically plausible. However, Moss does affirm the presence of *imitatio* motifs and says that these motifs are paradigmatic for the hearer.³⁵

Martyrdom of Polycarp as Imitatio Christi

As Hartog explained, the text envisages other communal ethical ideals.³⁶ Polycarp is a real figure, his martyrdom happened, and other historical accounts in the text also occurred. However, the author(s) reconfigured the historical narrative so that it would have a pedagogical effect upon the hearer and encourage him to imitate Polycarp and ultimately Christ. That is, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was written to communicate *imitatio*-related themes to the hearer/reader through a historical narrative.³⁷ In this way, the historical features of the text may have been reshaped, the so-called Gospel parallels are intentional, and the desire of the author(s) was to encourage imitation.

³¹ C.R. Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New Haven: HarperOne, 2013).

³² Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, p. 98.

³³ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, p. 99.

³⁴ Moss, *Myth of Persecution*, p. 99.

³⁵ Also H.W. Surkau. See Dehandschutter, 'Martyrium Polycarpi,' p. 511.

³⁶ Hartog, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp as Moral Formation,' n.p.

³⁷ According to Schoedel, imitation themes are regarded too highly developed for a second-century document. Also, because they are not followed with any consistency, Schoedel, ultimately, denies imitation of the passion narratives. William R. Schoedel, 'Polycarp, Martyrdom of,' in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5 (New York: Double Day, 1992), p. 393–94.

Three related ideas, taken cumulatively, support such a claim. First, the expression 'in accordance with the Gospel' (*Mart. Pol.* 1:1) may simultaneously refer to the broader Jesus tradition and ethical implications of the 'Gospel' story. The author(s) reveal this as one of the primary reasons for writing the letter (*Mart. Pol.* 1:1; cf. 20:1). Second, the model of discipleship is a two-fold imitation: imitate Polycarp so as to imitate Christ. Finally, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* contains too many similarities (narrative order, Polycarp as an imitator of Christ, secondary historical features, and the story's villains) with the Jesus tradition and the passion account not to conclude that there was some intentional reshaping by the author(s). This cumulative argument contends that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* communicates the idea of an *imitatio Christi* through a literarily refashioned historical narrative.

'In Accordance with the Gospel'

In the opening verses, the author(s) tell the reader why they are writing to the church in Philomelium (*Mart. Pol.* Pref). The topic(s) of the letter are to explain the account of the martyrs, especially that of the 'blessed Polycarp' (*Mart. Pol.* 1:1). All the subsequent events found in the narrative are in order for the Lord to 'show us once again a martyrdom that is in accord with the Gospel.' BDAG claims that *ἄνωθεν* in 1:1 means 'anew' or 'again' rather than 'from above.'³⁸ Because of the pervasive imagery of the Jesus tradition in the *Martyrdom*, I conclude that the 'again/anew' refers to Jesus as the one who was previously 'martyred in accordance with the Gospel.' 'Again' is probably to be preferred,' Hartog argues, 'however, as the Lord 'again' revealed truths through Polycarp that were previously revealed in Jesus' own passion.'³⁹

Some, however, have interpreted 'in accordance to the gospel' (*Mart. Pol.* 1:1) differently. For example, Holmes' argument can be subsumed under the category of ethics—i.e., how one can model a life 'in accordance to the gospel.' In his view, the phrase refers to three items:

(1) It is a matter of divine calling rather than human accomplishment or initiative; (2) It demonstrates a concern for the salvation or well-being of others; (3) It displays endurance in the midst of suffering.⁴⁰ Furthermore,

³⁸ William F. Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (3d edn.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 92.

³⁹ Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, p. 274.

⁴⁰ Holmes, 'New Testament Passion Narratives,' p. 421.

to claim this phrase corresponds to Gospel parallels ‘confuses a literary feature of the narrative with the meaning of the narrative.’⁴¹

In many ways, I fully affirm Holmes’ interpretation. *Mart.Pol.* 2:1 identifies noble martyrdoms that take place ‘in accordance with the will of God.’ *Mart.Pol.* 1:2 demonstrates both Christ’s and Polycarp’s martyrdom as ‘looking out for the interests of others’ (cf. Phil 2:1–4). Finally, *Mart.Pol.* 2:2 assigns ‘endurance’ to the martyrs. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 19:2 connects Polycarp’s endurance with a martyrdom *κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον* (‘in accordance with the Gospel’; *Mart.Pol.* 19:1).

I would add to Holmes’ ethical list and seek to modify his concerns, mentioned above, about literary parallels with the Gospel narratives. For a start, the trait of ‘nobility’ can be added to a ‘martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel’ (cf. *1 Clem.* 5:1).⁴² *Mart.Pol.* 2:1 calls them ‘blessed and noble’ if martyred ‘in accordance with the will of God.’ Although the text is titled *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it also tells a story of two other figures. The first one is Germanicus, who courageously endured his execution. He is described as ‘the most noble Germanicus’ (*Mart.Pol.* 3:1). The second story is about Quintus. He turned away as a coward and the author(s) conclude the story by saying ‘For this reason, therefore, brothers and sisters, we do not praise those who hand themselves over, since the gospel does not so teach’ (*Mart.Pol.* 4). The gospel teaches bravery, nobility, and a passive reception of martyrdom. Although the author(s) do not use the similar Greek word (*γενναος*), the narrative of Polycarp begins in chapter 5 and they introduce him as ‘the most admirable Polycarp’ (*ὁ θαυμασιώτατος Πολύκαρπος*). Hartog argues that this carries the connotation of nobility.⁴³

This concern for nobility serves to explain the purpose of writing this account. As Clayton Jefford says, ‘The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* does not seek to caution its readers concerning any particular teaching of the faith, but instead is concerned to demonstrate the true nature of a valid martyrdom, presumably to serve as a model for encouragement.’⁴⁴

⁴¹ Holmes, ‘New Testament Passion Narratives,’ p. 419.

⁴² So, Paul Hartog, ‘Polycarp’s Martyrdom ‘According to the Gospel’ and Paul’s Philippians,’ in *Studia Patristica*, vol. XLV (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), p. 392; As hinted at below, Socrates could serve as another parallel to Polycarp’s death. According to Middleton, the theme of nobility also coalesces around Socrates’ martyrdom narrative. Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity*, ed. Mark Goodacre, Library of New Testament Studies 307 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 116–7.

⁴³ Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, p. 284.

⁴⁴ C.N. Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: A Student’s Introduction* (2d edn.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 92.

Second, as will be argued below, the amount of material that parallels the Gospel is too extensive to attribute it to coincidence or to accidental mirroring. Holmes is correct when he says, '[in] not a single instance have we been able to observe more than the possibility of dependence on a specific written gospel.'⁴⁵ To allow for no quotations does not mean there is no purposeful reshaping around the gospel narratives. As argued below, cultural memory of Jesus tradition can influence such composition so as to reshape the historical narrative.

The reference to 'gospel' has led some to have a particular written Gospel in mind. Dehandschutter says the following:

The notion of 'gospel' in the expression 'martyrdom according to the gospel' can be taken in the sense of written gospel. It remains undecided, however, whether this implies one or more gospels. The author of the *Martyrdom* can be considered as having not a particular gospel in mind, although he might have known more than one gospel, as we do nowadays.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, there is surely more value in seeing multiple ideas in this expression: (1) It can reference a tangible Gospel, if clearly reflecting a single tradition; (2) It can refer to an oral Jesus tradition if it cannot be traced to a specific source; and (3) It can refer to the ethics of the Gospel (cf. *Did.* 11:3; 15:3–4).

Therefore, what does it mean for the author(s) to cast the narrative in light of a divine retelling of martyrdom accounts 'in accordance with the Gospel'? It is a both/and idea. A 'martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel' is one that literarily and literally imitates the gospel passions and one that 'abstractly' resembles the ethics that accord with the gospel.⁴⁷ That is, it communicates the ethics of the Gospel (1) to portray trust in the divine will (*Mart. Pol.* 2:1) (2) to demonstrate a concern for others (*Mart. Pol.* 1:2; cf. *Phil* 2:1–4), (3) to demonstrate endurance in suffering (*Mart. Pol.* 2:2 4; 3:1; 19:2; cf. *1 Clem.* 5:5), and (4) to show nobility (*Mart. Pol.* 2:1; 3:1; cf. 5:1).⁴⁸ The 'martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel' is also a literary feature designed to recast the person of Polycarp, the

⁴⁵ Holmes, 'New Testament Passion Narratives,' p. 417.

⁴⁶ B. Dehandschutter, *Polycarpiana: Studies on Martyrdom and Persecution in Early Christianity. Collected Essays* (ed. J. Leemans; Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium CCV; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), p. 139.

⁴⁷ So, Moss, *Other Christs*, p. 48.

⁴⁸ Hartog also argues for 'nobility' as being another trait of Polycarp. Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, pp. 207, 220.

narrative of his death, and the secondary features so that they will parallel the *passio* Jesus tradition. This both/and idea, as opposed to an either/or bifurcation, helps undergird the pedagogical theme of the *imitatio Christi*.

The Twofold Imitation Model

A second way the *Martyrdom* communicates *imitatio*-themes is through a twofold imitation model. In this way, the author(s) see Polycarp as a discipleship mediator. They portray him as one worthy of imitation as he imitates the Lord (*Mart.Pol.* 1:2). Thus, through the retelling of the Polycarp narrative, the readers/hearers are called to follow Polycarp's example, and, as a result, they imitate the Lord.

The patience of Polycarp serves as the basis of imitation. Describing the 'martyrdom in accordance with the Gospel,' Polycarp shows passive traits and waits to be betrayed (*Mart.Pol.* 1:2). This passivity and patience models how the Lord was betrayed (*Mart.Pol.* 1:2). This happened so that we, the reader, 'might become imitators of him' (*Mart.Pol.* 1:2). What is the antecedent of 'him'? Both Polycarp and the Lord appear in the sentence. The idea of imitation very well can be applied to both and the effect is the same. Whether or not the readers imitate Polycarp or the Lord, readers will ultimately imitate the Lord via Polycarp. Although the figure of imitation may be intentionally vague, it most likely is applied to Polycarp.⁴⁹

So, Polycarp, through his martyrdom, is modelling the ethics of the gospel by (1) looking out for the interest of others and (2) providing a way of salvation through mimesis. Polycarp is 'looking not only to our interests but to our neighbors' interests as well' (*Mart.Pol.* 1:2). Salvation via Polycarp is not judicial in nature, but models endurance during travesty so that others might secure their salvation: 'for it is the mark of true and steadfast love to desire that not only oneself be saved but all the brothers and sisters as well' (*Mart.Pol.* 1:2).

These expressions follow the twofold imitation model of Paul in Phil 2:1-4 and 1 Cor 10:23-11:1. Like the expression of 'gospel' in *Mart.Pol.* 1:1, the imitation of Christ in Phil 2:5 presumes a 'manner of life worthy of the Gospel' (Phil 1:27), one who looks after the interests of others (Phil 1:24-26; 2:4), and there is a final call to imitation via martyrdom (c.f., Phil 3:17). Secondly, 1 Cor 10:23-11:1 calls the believer to seek the 'good of his neighbour' (1 Cor 10:24), Paul sets an example of seeking the interest of others so 'that [others] may be saved' (1 Cor 10:33), and calls his hearers/readers to imitate him as he imitates Christ

⁴⁹ So Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, p. 274.

(1 Cor 11:1). So Paul's mediated imitation is similar to Polycarp's role as the *imitato*-mediator. Imitating Polycarp is the pathway to imitating the Lord and secures salvation for others.

In the rest of the *Martyrdom*, Polycarp and the true martyrs serve as emblematic models for imitating the Lord. So that, if they imitate Polycarp and other true martyrs, then their lives are imitating the Lord. *Mart.Pol* 17:3 'For we worship this one, who is the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord, as they deserve, on account of their matchless devotion to their own King and Teacher. May we also become their partners and fellow disciples.' The author(s) exhort the hearers/readers to become disciples of the martyrs and to imitate Polycarp. As *Mart.Pol*. 19:1 says, 'He proved to be not only a distinguished teacher but also an outstanding martyr whose martyrdom all desire to imitate since it was in accord with the pattern of the gospel of Christ.' In one of the many epilogues,⁵⁰ modelling Polycarp is correlated to eschatological (i.e., Kingdom motif) salvation. *Mart.Pol*. 22:1 says, 'We bid you farewell, brothers and sisters, as you walk by the word of Jesus Christ that is in accord with the gospel; with whom be glory to God for the salvation of the holy elect; just as the blessed Polycarp was martyred, in whose footsteps may we also be found in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.'

The author(s) portray Germanicus and Polycarp as true martyrs, worthy of imitation. This excludes Quintus as a model of imitation, because although he encouraged 'others to come forward voluntarily' (*Mart.Pol*. 4), he himself recoiled when he saw the wild beasts. Chapter 4 concludes by distancing Quintus from the corporate call of imitation: 'For this reason therefore, brothers and sisters, we do not praise those who hand themselves over, since the gospel does not teach this' (*Mart. Pol*. 4). The community is not to follow Quintus' example on the basis of 'voluntary martyrdom.'⁵¹ This call to passive martyrdom, then, is one that

⁵⁰ See Hartog, *Epistle to the Philippians and Martyrdom*, p. 330; See also William R. Schoedel, *Polycarp, Martyrdom of Polycarp, Fragments of Papias* (vol. 5, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary*; London: Nelson, 1967), p. 80. Schoedel states that the epilogue 'appears to present itself as a conclusion to the book; but there can be no doubt that it is an addition. The presence here of language associated with the imitation theme—"in accord with the gospel"—need not be taken as further evidence that its appearance in 1:1 is secondary. It is more likely that our editor hit upon this as a device to round off the letter.'

⁵¹ See the following for more examples of 'voluntary martyrdom' and the churches disapproval of such actions. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *Christian, Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (ed. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 155–64.

takes ‘place in accordance with the will of God’ (*Mart.Pol.* 2:1) and as Polycarp, who refused to keep running from his captors, says, ‘May God’s will be done’ (*Mart.Pol.* 7:1).

Therefore, the author(s) of the *Martyrdom* portray a twofold imitation model, similar to the model of Paul (cf. 1 Cor 10–11; Phil 1–2). Noble martyrs are paradigmatic models of imitation. That is, the author(s) portray true martyrs, Germanicus, and Polycarp as visible models worthy of imitation. When people imitate Polycarp, in fact they are imitating the Lord. This twofold imitation model further encapsulates the author(s) reshaping of Polycarp, the true martyrs—including Germanicus—and the historical narrative so as to incite or encourage *imitatio Christi*.

Narratological Gospel Mirroring

The third and (for our purposes) final way that the *Martyrdom* communicates *imitatio*-motifs is by providing a narratological mirroring of the account of Polycarp’s *passio*. The historical and literary ideas in the *Martyrdom* account are thus reshaped to imitate the Jesus tradition of the passion. Various discrepancies exist but they are not significant enough to make it impossible to claim *imitatio* as a valid literary category when dealing with the suffering of Polycarp.

Other scholars have also noticed this.⁵² As Moss states, ‘The parallels between the passion narrative and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* are apparent to the most cursory of readers.’⁵³ Jefford says, ‘From beginning to end, the bishop’s arrest, trial, and execution are painted against the canvas of similar events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as they are recorded in the New Testament Gospels.’⁵⁴ Dehandschutter provides the clearest statement of this:

Could his appeal on the ‘martyrdom according to the gospel’ have made any sense, if it was not based upon a common understanding between himself and his readership about what the ‘gospel’ was, or what it concretely contained in terms of the passion story?...It remains difficult

⁵² Majella Franzmann only attributes a narratological reading to the *imitatio Christi*. For her, these parallels are enough to highlight imitation motifs. See M. Franzmann, ‘Imitatio Christi: Copying the Death of the Founder and Gaining Paradise,’ in *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne* (ed. Zuleika Rodgers, Margaret Daly-Denton, & Anne Fitzpatrick McKinley; vol. 132, *Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism*; Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 370–72.

⁵³ Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, p. 63.

⁵⁴ Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers*, p. 97.

not to consider a passages such as *MPol*6,2–7,1 in direct dependence of a specific gospel text.⁵⁵

Holmes, however, provides a different perspective of the parallels. As hinted at early in this paper, Holmes rightly affirms there are no signs of 'direct dependence.' Also, it is unfounded to attribute the saying 'according to the Gospel' as the interpretive key of uncovering Gospel parallels.⁵⁶

Some of Holmes' conclusions appear to be justified but others require some modification. First of all, there are too many literary similarities with the passion narratives to downplay the Gospel parallels as a vital component of understanding the *Martyrdom* narrative. Secondly, Holmes equates 'no quotations' with no signs of probable canonical influence, although he does affirm some influence of Gospel tradition.⁵⁷ But how can there be signs of Gospel passion parallels with no canonical influence? Thirdly, Holmes undervalues the role of early Gospel traditions. *Mart. Pol.* 23:2, as one tradition among many, ascribes the composition of the *Martyrdom* account to the pen of Gaius, who based it on the stenographic notes of Irenaeus. If this tradition is valid, then Holmes must take into account a possible earlier form of all four canonical Gospels, as described by Irenaeus in *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1.⁵⁸ Lastly, I would suggest a third option, which allows for allusive Jesus traditions without making them the 'interpretive key.'⁵⁹

Polycarp as Alter Christus

The *Martyrdom* account portrays Polycarp as *alter Christus*, that is, another Christ.⁶⁰ As Moss rightly claims, 'The presentation of the martyr must cohere with the generally held presentation of Jesus in the passion narratives insofar as it is possible.'⁶¹ That is, the narratological mirroring does not need to correspond completely to the Gospel passion narratives, but only to be in general agreement with them. For example, Polycarp waited to be passively betrayed (*Mart. Pol.* 1:2). The night before

⁵⁵ Dehandschutter, *Polycarpiana*, p. 92.

⁵⁶ Holmes, 'New Testament Passion narratives,' pp. 417, 419.

⁵⁷ Holmes, 'New Testament Passion narratives,' p. 417.

⁵⁸ Dehandschutter, *Polycarpiana*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ Holmes, 'New Testament Passion Narratives,' p. 422.

⁶⁰ This title is taken from Moss' general work, *Other Christs*, but I use the term somewhat differently. According to Franzmann, when Polycarp is filled with grace (12:1), this parallels the martyrdom account of Stephen (Acts 7). Franzmann, 'Imitatio Christi,' p. 370.

⁶¹ Moss, *Other Christs*, p. 53.

Polycarp is praying with a few close companions (*Mart.Pol.* 5:1). Polycarp prophetically tells of his death (*Mart.Pol.* 5:2). Polycarp prays ‘may your will be done’ just prior to being arrested (*Mart.Pol.* 7:1; cf. Matt 26:42).

Once conversations about inter-textual identifications get going, identifying allusions to the cultural repertoire of events and ideas readily available to the readers becomes natural. The Church Fathers and the *Martyrdom* integrate Gospel texts into their own writings in a subtle way, which is nevertheless clear enough for us to spot allusions to them.⁶² Does each early Christian writer have canonical texts at his disposal so as to show signs of direct dependence on them? Sometimes, but not necessarily so. Allusions are intended by the writer whether they refer to a particular document or not.

In the case of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* it is highly likely the author(s) are giving a self-conscious presentation of the *passio*. As Moss says,

In order for the martyr to appear to be imitating Christ, he or she must be portrayed in as Christly a fashion as possible. The presentation of the martyr must cohere with the generally held presentation of Jesus in the passion narratives insofar as is possible. For the presentation to be effective, the author cannot drift too far from his or her audience’s understanding of scripture even as he or she seeks to reimagine and control it.⁶³

The author(s) of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* take the historical account and reconfigure Polycarp, the surrounding events, and even seemingly accidental events⁶⁴ to match the passion narratives. Polycarp is betrayed on a Friday (*Mart.Pol.*7:1). Polycarp is seated on a donkey to ride into town, similar to the ‘triumphal entry’ (*Mart.Pol.* 8:1). When tempted to recant, Polycarp maintains silence (*Mart.Pol.* 8:2; cf. Matt 26:63). Polycarp hits his knee when getting out of the carriage (*Mart.Pol.* 8:3).⁶⁵ Just as Jesus hears the divine voice from heaven at his baptism (Matt 3:17) and a few nights

⁶² Consult John J. O’Keefe and R.R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005); Paul M. Blowers, ‘Patristic Interpretation,’ in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Steven L. McKenzie; vol. 2; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 81–89.

⁶³ Moss, *Other Christs*, p. 53.

⁶⁴ See Hartog, ‘Martyrdom of Polycarp as Moral Formation.’ n.p.

⁶⁵ The soldiers mistreated Jesus prior to his execution. Although the whipping and scourging of Jesus is more severe when compared to Polycarp scraping his knee, they both received ill treatment that resulted in injury.

before his betrayal (Jn 12:28), Polycarp is also encouraged by the divine voice (*Mart.Pol.* 9:1). On the verge of death, Polycarp offers up a final call to the Father (*Mart.Pol.* 14:3). Upon his final 'Amen,' Polycarp dies as he is engulfed by flames of fire (*Mart.Pol.* 15:1). While Polycarp is tied to the stake, an executioner is commanded to come stab Polycarp with a dagger (*Mart.Pol.* 16:1). When Polycarp is stabbed with a dagger, a large quantity of blood gushes forth (*Mart.Pol.* 16:6; cf. John 19:34). Furthermore, when Polycarp is stabbed, the author(s) give a confession of who he really was, just like the confession of the centurion at the foot of the cross, 'Certainly this man was innocent!' (*Mart.Pol.* 16:2; Luke 23:47).

The 'Villains'

Not only do Polycarp's martyrdom and the surrounding events reflect a similar Gospel tradition, the villains in Polycarp's story are recast in light of Christ's passion also. Polycarp is betrayed by someone close to him (*Mart. Pol.* 6:1). The captain of the police is called 'Herod' (*Mart.Pol.* 6:2; 8:2; 17:2). The author(s) of the *Martyrdom* make sure to slow the pace of the narrative so that the reader will make a connection to the Gospel accounts by saying, 'who just happened to have the same name—Herod, as he was called' (*Mart.Pol.* 6:2). Moreover, those who betrayed Polycarp ought to 'receive the same punishment as Judas' (*Mart.Pol.* 6:2). There is an army sent to capture Polycarp, similar to the Gethsemane scene (*Mart.Pol.* 7:1). The band of captors recognize the piety of Polycarp in a similar way the group of soldiers bowed before arresting Jesus (*Mart.Pol.* 7:2; cf. John 18:6). The captors attempt to persuade Polycarp to recant (*Mart.Pol.* 8:2). The proconsul and the crowd are simultaneously condemning and judging Polycarp (*Mart.Pol.* 9:2). The crowd calls for Polycarp to be eaten by animals, but the proconsul says that he is unable to grant their request. Then the crowd responds a second time for Polycarp to be 'burned alive' (*Mart. Pol.* 12:2–3). This scene is reminiscent of Pilate being unable to pronounce a sentence upon Jesus and passively hearing the verdict of the Jewish crowd.

Narratological Discrepancies

Although the narrative of Polycarp shows a high amount of allusion to the passion narratives, there are also differences between the two accounts, though this does not necessarily nullify a mirroring of Christ's *passio*. As Moss indicates, there are enough allusions activating the audience's mind for them to be able to identify the Jesus tradition in the narrative of Polycarp.

For example, Jesus does not have a time of extended prayer after his arrest but before his crucifixion (cf. *Mart.Pol.* 7:2–3). Prior to the passion,

Peter denies Christ three times, whereas Polycarp exceeds the example of Peter and confesses Christ, so that a herald comes into the stadium to proclaim three times ‘Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian’ (*Mart. Pol.* 12:1). The dead body of Polycarp may already have been considered a relic by the author(s). *Mart. Pol.* 17:1 says, ‘Many desired to do this [i.e., take away his body] and to touch his holy flesh.’ Furthermore, Polycarp’s body is cremated after his death (*Mart. Pol.* 18:1).

The *imitatio* themes begin to break down when the scene shifts to the death narrative. Rather than being crucified like Christ, Polycarp decides to be tied up and bound like a ‘lamb’ (*Mart. Pol.* 14:1). Is it possible that Polycarp is portrayed as one whose sufferings exceed those of Christ? As Moss argues, the author(s) very possibly begin to portray him as one ‘beyond’ Christ or as one who ‘excels’ Christ.⁶⁶ She argues, ‘The reader might be forgiven for thinking that here, at the crucial moment, the *imitatio* breaks down...The self-assured request to remain unnailed in Polycarp’s crucifixion overshoots even the achievements of the crucified Jesus.’⁶⁷ However, even though the narrative begins to diverge from the passion tradition of Jesus, the Christological imagery, and therefore *imitatio* themes, do not diminish. Rather than ‘exceeding’ the Christological images, Polycarp appears as something of a Christ figure by resembling the Jewish sacrificial process. Moss affirms this ‘typological’ idea in an earlier work, but later rejects it and sees Polycarp’s binding as an *imitatio Socratis*.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Moss, *Other Christs*, p. 58.

⁶⁷ Moss, *Other Christs*, p. 58.

⁶⁸ See Moss, *Other Christs*, p. 59; ‘On the Dating,’ p. 554. Consult also her ‘Nailing Down and Tying Up: Lessons in Intertextual Impossibility from the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*,’ in *Vigiliae Christianae* 67, no. 2 (2013): pp. 117–36. See also Geert Roskam, ‘The Figure of Socrates in the Early Christian Acta Martyrum,’ in *Martyrdom and persecution in late antique Christianity. Festschrift Boudewijn Dehandschutter*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, CCXLI (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), pp. 241–56.

The influence of Socrates on Christian martyrdom accounts is not as far-fetched as one might think. According to Roskam, ‘A name which frequently returns in such a context is that of Socrates. *A priori* this is not really surprising, since the Athenian philosopher and the Christians had an important thing in common: both were summoned to court because they did not believe in the gods in which everyone else believed. The Christian apologists soon took advantage of this opportunity and several martyrs likewise connected their own fate with that of Socrates.’ Roskam, ‘Figure of Socrates,’ pp. 241–42.

Conclusion

Although Hartog has previously admitted some of these parallels are beyond the victim's choice (e.g., executed on Friday, Polycarp placed on a donkey, etc.),⁶⁹ some apparently *imitatio* themes weaken the parallel between Polycarp and the Gospel narratives. I lean towards a nuanced position. First, if allusions are present in a text, they are signs of literary intentionality. Secondly, clearer allusions strengthen vaguer allusions. Lastly, I freely admit the possibility of historical coincidence. But a coincidence in history does not mean that the literary resonances are coincidental, as is the case in *Mart.Pol.* 6:2.

Thus we find that the *Martyrdom* narrative imitates the Gospel passion narratives. Whether it focuses on the personal character traits of Polycarp, the account of Polycarp's journey to death, the secondary, seemingly accidental themes, or even the story's villains, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is reshaped around the Gospel tradition, even if it is impossible to confine this to one particular Gospel.⁷⁰ Therefore, rather than seeing the author(s) as depending on one of the four Gospels, I suggest that there is a dependence on common Jesus traditions. The few discrepancies and divergences from the Gospel passion events do not nullify the narratological mirroring of the Gospel passion. The author(s) have reconfigured the narrative of Polycarp's death in accordance with the Jesus tradition in order to continue the *imitatio Christi* motif.

In this paper the precise meaning of the *imitatio Christi* has been left intentionally vague. Does it refer to Polycarp as one who imitates Christ? Does it refer to the narrative itself as it reflects the passion events? Or does it invite the readers to imitate Polycarp, Christ or both? All three of these elements are present. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1:1–2 creates a framework for the reader to understand why the narrative was written. It was intended to communicate anew how martyrdom can reflect the Gospel. Polycarp was presented as an imitator of Christ so that readers may be imitators of Polycarp.

SHAWN J. WILHITE is Associate Professor of Christian Studies at California Baptist University, Riverside, California. He is also the co-founder of the Center for Ancient Christian Studies.

⁶⁹ See Hartog, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp as Moral Formation.' n.p.

⁷⁰ Nineteenth-century scholarship focused on Johannine influence. Dependency discussions subsequently progressed to Paul, Hebrews, and Revelation before the other Gospels were considered. Dehandschutter, 'Martyrium Polycarpi,' pp. 503–8; According to Buschmann, all New Testament allusions are currently under review. Buschmann, 'Martyrdom of Polycarp,' p. 145.