

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengolt

1 Introduction

1.1 Why was this Martyrdom written?

> **Read and discuss:** Martyrdom of Polycarp (MP) Salutation-1:1; 4:1; 19:1; 20:1-2.

1.2 History of the documents of MP

The text of MP is preserved in eight Greek manuscripts.

- The oldest of those eight is named Atheniensis (10th century).
- One of those eight Greek manuscripts is the Codex Hierosolymitanus (1054AD)
- A late Greek manuscript, the Moscow Manuscript (13th century) has a slightly different ending (MP 22:2-3).
- Eusebius (*History of the Church* 4.15) quotes the Salutation, 1:1a, and 8:1-19:1a. He paraphrases 2:2-7:3.

There is a Latin version of the letter.

There are Slavonic, Armenian, Syriac and Coptic translations, but all these are translated from Eusebius, so they do not add to our knowledge of the original text.

1.3 Importance of MP in the early Church

This is the oldest written account of a Christian martyrdom after the New Testament; it was a model for what would become a popular genre of literature, the so-called *martyrdom stories*. The document must therefore have been important in the early Church. Eusebius says: 'I consider it most important that his death, a written account of which is still extant, should be recorded in this history.' (*History of the Church* 4.15.1)

1.4 The first original copies of MP

> **Read and discuss:** MP 21:1-22:3. Note that the end of the original letter was MP 20:2. The people who made copies added MP 21:1-22:3. These additions give credibility to the document; it is traced back to the papers of Irenaeus, who

had known Polycarp personally. This supports the historicity of MP.

1.5 Date of the martyrdom

> **Read MP 20:1.** This gives the impression that the letter was written shortly after the death of Polycarp.

When was he martyred? MP mentions the date of Polycarp's death as 22 or 23 February (see MP 21), but not the year. But as

it happened on a 'Great Sabbath', it was most likely in 155-156AD.

It happened under Statius Quadratus as we read in chapter 21; he was proconcul over Smyrna from ca. 155-160, confirming the date. This also fits with the trip that Polycarp had made to Rome for meeting with pope Anicetus. Anicetus became pope in 154AD.

So it seems Eusebius was mistaken with his date of 166-167AD for the death of Polycarp.

2 Content of Polycarp's Martyrdom

2.1 What was Polycarp accused of?

> **Read and discuss:** MP 3:2; 4; 8:2; 9:1-10:1; 12:1-3

2.2 How did Polycarp die?

> **Read and discuss:** MP 13:1-14:1; 15:1-16:2

2.3 The MP's "theology of suffering"

> **Read and discuss:**

- a) 1:2; 2:2-3; 6:2;



b) 9:3; 11:2

c) 14:1-2; 15:2

d) 17:1; 18:2; 19:1-2

2.4 What does 'Martyrdom according to the Gospel' mean?

We come across this term 'Martyrdom according to the Gospel' (or: 'in accordance with the will of God') in 1:1; 2:1. The martyrdom of Polycarp showed the believers what 'martyrdom according to the Gospel' means.

- He waited to be betrayed. MP 1:2; 4:1.
- He looked not only for his own interest but to the interest of others as well. MP 1:2
- Nobility, patient endurance, bravery, loyalty to Christ. MP 2:2; 3:1-2.
- Absent from the flesh during martyrdom. MP 2:2-3

It seems clear that the document is not just an eyewitness account, but that it is a theologically edited version of that event. Especially interesting in this regard is how the editor made the martyrdom of Polycarp resemble the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe that is also meant with 'martyrdom according to the Gospel'. Some examples:

> **Read and discuss:** MP 2:2; 5:1; 6:2; 7:1; 8:1; 12:2; 14:1.

2.5 Polycarp's prayer on the stake

> **Read and discuss:** 14:1-3

Note the carefully chosen theological language; this is also liturgical language. Also note the Eucharistic language regarding Jesus Christ and his martyr Polycarp. In this context, consider how the death of Polycarp is described: he was baked as bread. (cup: MP 14:2; bread: MP 15:2)

2.6 Beginning of veneration of saints

> **Read and discuss:**

- MP 13:2: even during his life, because of his holiness, people wanted to touch his blessed flesh.
- MP 17:2-3: enemies were worried that they would worship his corpse. Look at the theological response.
- MP 18:1-3: what did the early Church do around the place where the martyr was buried? Why?

