

WHAT DOES MARTYRDOM LORE TELL US?

Miriam Bodian

Oscar Wilde once memorably noted that “a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.”

It’s a curiously pungent statement. Wilde was saying something about martyrdom that experience tells us is obvious. Yet we also know that the willing sacrifice of life, a sacrifice most people aren’t capable of making or are not asked to make, has the mysterious effect of strengthening commitment to the belief or cause for which the martyr died. That mysterious effect is what gives Wilde’s remark its pith. The power of martyrdom has everything to do with reinforcing the *perception* of truth, but nothing to do with *establishing* truth.

Because a martyr’s death is such a valuable communal asset, it is preserved for future generations in the form of oral narratives, chronicles, and elegies. Of course, it is human nature to embellish and emend these accounts. People may even invent martyrdom accounts, depicting in a highly condensed and personalized way the drawn-out struggles of a group against an oppressor. The body of lore around the death of martyrs is worked and reworked, with new episodes introduced using

familiar rhetoric and literary conventions.

What is the scholar to do with such material? More

particularly, what is the Jewish history scholar to do with a body of lore that stretches back to Hellenistic times?

A key task among scholars studying Jewish martyrdom has been to try to establish “what really happened,” to use a quaint nineteenth-century formulation. This has meant examining texts through the lens of context, bringing evidence from non-Jewish sources, comparing different versions of the same story, and so on. Much of the work that has been done has been highly

traditional lore can really tell us about historical events.

Without drawing conclusions about the First Crusade chronicles or any other episode outside my field of research, I’d like to discuss briefly how, in the course of my work, Inquisition documents have served to corroborate or confute stories of crypto-Jewish martyrdom that circulated in the Portuguese-Jewish diaspora.

Some of the Portuguese-Jewish lore does not even attempt to tell a real story in particular; examples include the contrived commemorative poetry of Daniel Levi de Barrios, Antonio Enrique Gomez, and others. But there are some thumbnail sketches of crypto-Jewish martyrs recorded by Isaac Cardoso



“Different Manners in which the Office of the Inquisition Asked the Question,” from Picart, Bernard, and Jean Frédéric Bernard, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Prud’homme, 1807).

illuminating. Yet the controversies still hovering about some of the classic texts most conspicuously, perhaps, about the First Crusades chronicles, leave doubts about what

and Menasseh ben Israel that are of a different nature. They, too, are highly idealized, but unlike the poetic tributes, they offer the reader specifics and aim for verisimilitude.

A good example is Cardoso's description of a sixteenth-century case, which I will quote in full:

[A] singular event occurred in Coimbra a hundred years ago. They arrested as a Jew one Diogo Lopes Pinhancos, in a place near the town of Guarda in Portugal, in the Serra da Estrela, and, from the time he was taken, he began to announce that he was a Jew, and wished to live and die in the Law of Moses. He was brought before the Inquisition, and although they brought in theologians to convince him, he always remained firm in his resolve. They sentenced him to be burned alive. When he was placed upon the stake, tied with chains of iron, and raised high, the fire began to touch him. But then a great portent took place, for the chains fell into the fire, and he disappeared and was no longer to be seen. All of which caused consternation among the multitudes of people who were present, and they said that the demons had such a craving and desire for him that they snatched him away body and soul, and in this way they eased their suspense and astonishment. To this day, in

particularly the specifics of time, name, and place. Moreover, Cardoso had grown up in this central region of Portugal, and may himself have heard elderly Old

the body away, interpreting it as a psychological defense on the part of frightened onlookers. But this did not prevent him from accepting the fundamental facticity of the story.)

THE POWER OF MARTYRDOM HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH REINFORCING THE PERCEPTION OF TRUTH, BUT NOTHING TO DO WITH ESTABLISHING TRUTH.

Christians (that is, persons with no Jewish or Muslim ancestry) telling the story. In any case, he had apparently seen the painting in the Coimbra convent depicting Pinhancos and labeled with the latter's full name, a painting some of his readers may also have seen.

But then there is the "great portent": the disappearing body. Cardoso did not dismiss this remarkable occurrence out of hand. In fact, it served a purpose in making his narrative convincing: it explained what made the story memorable to elderly Old Christians, who otherwise would presumably have had no particular interest in the death of a Judaizer. Did the body disappear? Of course not; but perhaps, we might

There is, though, another puzzling element in the account, an element that is striking because it appears in other thumbnail sketches of crypto-Jewish martyrs. Had the Inquisition actually called in theologians to try to convert a defiant Judaizer? Would this not have been overkill, given the extensive theological training of the inquisitors, and the meager religious traditions of crypto-Jews? Surely, even a highly educated crypto-Jew, of the type Cardoso had once been, could not easily have defended his beliefs under the punishing conditions of controlled interrogation. In any case, even if such theological disputations occurred, who would have known about them, since the audiences were conducted in strict secrecy and the victims had been burned at the stake?

A KEY TASK AMONG SCHOLARS STUDYING JEWISH MARTYRDOM HAS BEEN TO TRY TO ESTABLISH "WHAT REALLY HAPPENED."

the Convento de la Cruz in Coimbra, he is painted, among others being burned, with two demons at his shoulders, and with the name of Diogo Lopes de Pinhancos. And elderly Old Christians used to relate that they themselves had seen him, and had been present at the event.

There are elements of this story that give it the "ring of truth,"

rationalize, the body's "disappearance" was a distortion of something unusual that *did* happen—the accidental collapse of the stake, for example, which may have led astonished onlookers to lose sight of the body. In any case, this fantastic detail does not preclude the possibility that the basic facts of the story are accurate. (Cardoso himself rejected the notion that demons had snatched

Luckily, in the case of the famous crypto-Jewish martyrs (in contrast to virtually every other episode of premodern martyrdom), we possess an astonishingly rich record of events and interrogations set down in detail by unsympathetic but disciplined scribes, the notaries of the Inquisition tribunals. This brief essay is not the place to revisit the old issue of the authenticity and reliability of such records. Let me just emphatically affirm that for the most part these documents offer detailed, unfalsified (yes), and unvarnished accounts of what transpired in prison cells and audience chambers.

Not all of these records have survived, but as luck would have it, an Inquisition dossier does exist that allows us to test Cardoso's story. It was one of those thrilling moments in the humdrum life of a historian when I found it at the National Archives in Lisbon—a dossier for a person named Diogo Lopes Pinhancos. That was the good news. The bad news was that it was in quite fragmentary and otherwise poor condition. It did, at least, confirm that a man named Diogo Lopes Pinhancos existed, and that he was tried for Judaizing and burned alive at the stake. Moreover, it revealed that efforts were indeed made by theologians, including two Jesuit priests, to try to convert the defendant. But the incomplete dossier revealed little about the verbal exchanges between Pinhancos and the theologians.

Still, by extrapolation from other cases, one could conclude that a lively exchange *might* have taken place. The Inquisition did take enormous pains to convert defiant Judaizers, and such Judaizers, it turns out, possessed the means not only to defend their positions but to go on the offensive. I have explored this in my book *Dying in the Law of Moses*, and will not repeat myself here. What I want to stress is this: that a claim made in the martyrdom lore in this case—a claim about the polemical skills of the martyrs, one that could well have been dismissed by responsible scholars as being far-

fetched and polemically motivated—proved, after a study of the records of the prisoners' trials, to be accurate. (I should add that evidence from other sources reveals some of the channels by which *conversos* were able to obtain information about the trials.)

But to return to the specific case of the Diogo Lopes Pinhancos. Once I had found the dossier, I had firm grounds to believe that the fundamental outlines of Cardoso's story were correct, as I had suspected from the start. It came as a sobering challenge to my assumptions to discover, upon a careful study of the dossier fragments, that while Pinhancos did die at the stake, he did not, apparently, die as a crypto-Jew. It is true that during the first part of his trial he seems to have held firmly to crypto-Jewish beliefs. But at some point during his imprisonment he underwent a crisis of belief. From October 1570 to April 1571, not long before his execution, he repeated, with variations, his conviction that he no longer believed there was a God, that he regretted having adopted the Judaism he was taught by his family, and that he had absolutely no intention of embracing Catholicism. He

died, it would seem, a martyr to atheism.

A word by way of conclusion: "Reading between the lines" of martyrological literature to establish historical facts, however intelligently, is a verifiably risky business. As some scholars have stressed, and as my own research has underscored, martyrological literature may tell us more about the survivors' experiences than about the motivations, experiences, and trajectories of thinking of the martyrs themselves. We will continue to want to know "what really happened." But to borrow awkwardly from Oscar Wilde, a story of martyrdom is not necessarily accurate because its protagonist can be shown to have chosen a martyr's death.

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