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## EARLY CHRISTIAN MARTYR STORIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN *ACTA ANDREAE* 51-65 AND *ACTA PETRI* 33-41

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## EARLY CHRISTIAN MARTYR STORIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN *ACTA ANDREAE* 51-65 AND *ACTA PETRI* 33-41<sup>1</sup>

Antigas histórias cristãs de martírio: uma análise comparativa entre  
Atos de André 51-65 e Atos de Pedro 33-41

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## RESUMO

Neste artigo, analisamos comparativamente as seções de martírio encontradas em dois antigos documentos cristãos: *Acta Andreae* 51-65; *Acta Petri* 33-41. Estes Atos Apócrifos foram escritos em algum momento do final do século II da Era Comum e podem ser utilizados para estudar o fenômeno do cristianismo em sua relação com a sociedade romana. Discutimos aqui questões como o papel da violência na construção das identidades sociais, a instrumentalização do martírio como instrumento de propaganda religiosa, a função dos heróis martirizados na construção de identidades sectárias. Esta reflexão nos ajuda a entender a forma como comunidades religiosas enfrentam o problema da violência em outros períodos históricos.

**Palavras-chaves:** Atos Apócrifos dos Apóstolos. Martírio. Cristianismo Antigo. Identidade Social. História das Religiões.

## ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyze comparatively the sections of martyrdom found in two ancient Christian documents: *Acta Andreae* 51-65 and *Acta Petri* 33-41. These Apocryphal Acts were written sometime in the late second century AD and can be used to study the phenomenon of Christianity in its relationship with Roman society. We also discuss issues such as the role of violence in the construction of social identities, the use of martyrdom as an instrument of religious propaganda, the role of martyred heroes in the construction of sectarian identities. This reflection helps us understand how religious communities face the problem of violence in other historical periods.

**Keywords:** Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. Martyrdom. Early Christianity. Social Identity. History of Religions

## INTRODUCTION

The five greatest Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (AAA) (*Acta Andreae*, *Acta Johannis*, *Acta Petri*, *Acta Pauli* and *Acta Thomae*)<sup>3</sup> tell stories about travels, prodigies and discourses. These works present a common shape, content and social function, so they can be considered as a specific literary genre. There are different authors, writing from different places but, however, they have organized stories that are similar in storyline and structure. Invariably, all the narratives finish with the death of the hero.

In all the AAA, this hero is an apostle who, after winning their opponents in public debates and performing impressive and curious prodigies, such as resurrections, turning smoked fish into life, teaching dogs and lions to speak, finishes his mission with his own death. In Act of John, the apostle dies peacefully. He demands to open his pit, lies down in it and dies (AJ 111). In the others AAA, the apostles' death occurs due to persecution by a violent society. In ATh, Thomas dies pierced by four spears at the same time (ATh 168). In APi, Paul was decapitated. Both AA and APt, the hero dies crucified (AA 51-65; APt 33-41).

These initial observations introduce the questions that we want to chase in this paper. Which kind of historical and literary phenomenon is this? To which audience these stories were narrated? Which interests were being attended in these unique representations of suffering and death?

3 *Acta Andreae* (AA), *Acta Johannis* (AJ), *Acta Petri* (APt), *Acta Pauli* (APi) and *Acta Thomae* (ATh).

## 1. A CONCEPT OF MARTYRDOM

These questions demand a view on martyrdom's Christian category and, specially, on some bases from which it has developed. H. Strathman<sup>4</sup> defines *martyrdom* from Greek nominatives “*martyrs*, *martyros* and *martyr*”. The martyr is the one who remembered things; he was a sort of expert in something and could expose his opinion about specific subjects. In this same root, the verb *martyrein* meant “to be a witness” or “to witness something”. *Martyria* indicated the behavior of the witness; *martyrion* pointed into the proof of the witness.

These terms were used in judicial demands, when a testimony needed to be checked or justified. The same basic definition also made them to be found in Septuagint and in most occurrences of Christian New Testament. However, just after 155 A.D., when an anonymous author from Smyrna, in Minor Asia, wrote a document entitled “Polycarp's Martyrdom”, the meaning of the word has been enlarged: “Brothers, we wrote for thee about the martyrs and the blissful Polycarp, who finish the persecution, sealing it with his own martyrdom. Happy and generous be all martyrs who rise according to God's will” (Mart. Pol. 1.1, 2.1).

In this work, “martyrdom” is not only related to the act of “confirming the veracity of any story”, but to the death of the witness. Martyr, therefore, is the witness who dies. The story talks about the death of the old bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, under the persecution. Eusebius, from Caesarea, afterward, will tell that Polycarp was burned alive in an arena:

Now when He had uttered his Amen and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit it, and a great flame blazed up and we, to

4 STRATHMANN, H. *Martys, martyreo, martyria, martyrion*. In: KITTEL, Gerhard (ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968, vol. VI, p. 475.

whom it was given to see, saw a Marvel. And we have been preserved to report to others what befell. For the fire made the likeneww of a room, like the sail of a vessel filled with Wind, and surrounded the body of the martyr as with a wall, and He was within it not as burning flesh, but as gold and silver being refined in a furnace. And we perceived such a fragrant smell as the scent of incense or other costly spices. (Hist. Ecl. IV, 15, 36-37)

The chronicle about the martyrdom of Polycarp is important because it seems to be one of the most ancient documents of the Ancient Christianity that was written specially to describe a Christian's death. The idea of testimony still was there in the chronicle attached to the martyrdom, but its notion of suffering received an enlargement. As result, martyr is the one who suffers to testify. The term became to mean a person who proved the hardship and, finally, death, in terms of his belonging to the Jesus' movement.

## 2. THE MACCABEES MARTYRS

It is possible to point some traditions that had an important role in how the Christianity has shaped the term martyrdom. One of these comes from the ancient stories about the Jewish who died in confrontation to a Hellenistic monarch, in the middle of second century B.C., called the Maccabees War.

Some of these reports are significant to the comprehension of martyrdom adopted later by the Christians, such as the story of a widow and her seven sons, who refused to eat pork because of the religious laws. The narrative is long and it tells the details of the torture of each son, right before their mother. At last, the widow herself was violently killed. In a story like this, dying is not enough. It needs to be preceded by the highest level of suffering. The sons of the widow have been scalped, mutilated, toasted in a baking tray or in potholes by the tor-



turers. They had their members amputated, their bellies open, their eyes pierced and their mouth cut off. Before each death, both torturer and tortured had short dialogues, constructed to evidence the courage and faith of those who suffered:

It happened also that seven brothers and their mother were arrested and were being compelled by the king, under torture with whips and cords, to partake of unlawful swine's flesh. One of them, acting as their spokesman, said, "What do you intend to ask and learn from us? For we are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our fathers." The king fell into a rage, and gave orders that pans and caldrons be heated. These were heated immediately, and he commanded that the tongue of their spokesman be cut out and that they scalp him and cut off his hands and feet, while the rest of the brothers and the mother looked on. When he was utterly helpless, the king ordered them to take him to the fire, still breathing, and to fry him in a pan. The smoke from the pan spread widely, but the brothers and their mother encouraged one another to die nobly, saying, "The Lord God is watching over us and in truth has compassion on us, as Moses declared in his song which bore witness against the people to their faces, when he said, 'And he will have compassion on his servants.'" After the first brother had died in this way, they brought forward the second for their sport. They tore off the skin of his head with the hair, and asked him, "Will you eat rather than have your body punished limb by limb?" He replied in the language of his fathers, and said to them, "No." Therefore he in turn underwent tortures as the first brother had done. And when he was at his last breath, he said, "You accursed wretch, you dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws." After him, the third was the victim of their sport. When it was demanded, he quickly put out his tongue and courageously stretched forth his



hands, and said nobly, "I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again." As a result the king himself and those with him were astonished at the young man's spirit, for he regarded his sufferings as nothing. When he too had died, they maltreated and tortured the fourth in the same way. And when he was near death, he said, "One cannot but choose to die at the hands of men and to cherish the hope that God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!" Next they brought forward the fifth and maltreated him. But he looked at the king, and said, "Because you have authority among men, mortal though you are, you do what you please. But do not think that God has forsaken our people. Keep on, and see how his mighty power will torture you and your descendants!" After him they brought forward the sixth. And when he was about to die, he said, "Do not deceive yourself in vain. For we are suffering these things on our own account, because of our sins against our own God. Therefore astounding things have happened. But do not think that you will go unpunished for having tried to fight against God!" The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Though she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. She encouraged each of them in the language of their fathers. Filled with a noble spirit, she fired her woman's reasoning with a man's courage, and said to them, "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws." Antiochus felt that he was being treated with contempt, and he was suspicious of her reproa-

chful tone. The youngest brother being still alive, Antiochus not only appealed to him in words, but promised with oaths that he would make him rich and enviable if he would turn from the ways of his fathers, and that he would take him for his friend and entrust him with public affairs. Since the young man would not listen to him at all, the king called the mother to him and urged her to advise the youth to save himself. After much urging on his part, she undertook to persuade her son. But, leaning close to him, she spoke in their native tongue as follows, deriding the cruel tyrant: “My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God’s mercy I may get you back again with your brothers.” While she was still speaking, the young man said, “What are you waiting for? I will not obey the king’s command, but I obey the command of the law that was given to our fathers through Moses. But you, who have contrived all sorts of evil against the Hebrews, will certainly not escape the hands of God. For we are suffering because of our own sins. And if our living Lord is angry for a little while, to rebuke and discipline us, he will again be reconciled with his own servants. But you, unholy wretch, you most defiled of all men, do not be elated in vain and puffed up by uncertain hopes, when you raise your hand against the children of heaven. You have not yet escaped the judgment of the almighty, all-seeing God. For our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of everflowing life under God’s covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your ar-

rogance. I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our fathers, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation and by afflictions and plagues to make you confess that he alone is God, and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty which has justly fallen on our whole nation.” The king fell into a rage, and handled him worse than the others, being exasperated at his scorn. So he died in his integrity, putting his whole trust in the Lord. Last of all, the mother died, after her sons. Let this be enough, then, about the eating of sacrifices and the extreme tortures. (2Mac 7.1 – 42)

In general, the war reports are full of violence scenes, but the descriptions of the Maccabees are outstanding for some reasons. First, they seem to indicate that the confrontation has started because of religious quarrels. According to the anonymous author's, the Jewish fought not necessarily for the control of a particular plot of land, but for the freedom of practicing their cult and religious rites. It is a war fought for their God. It is a holy war. Second, the plasticity of violent deaths raised a certain kind of hero. This one died violently due to his religion. The descendants of these heroes will praise the memory of their brothers who were killed violently. The stories of the Maccabees heroes would inspire many Christians later.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> MOSS, Candida R. **Ancient Christian Martyrdom**: Diverse practices, theologies, and traditions. London: Yale University Press, 2012, p. 44.

### 3. THE SUFFERING OF JESUS

A second element that help us to construct the concept of Christian martyrdom comes from the death of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Although the author of Matthew's Gospel argues that the suffering of Jesus was already expected (Mat. 16. 21), his apostles, who came down from Galilee to Jerusalem some point of the thirties in the first century A.D., could hardly imagined such violent death. He was killed a few days after he had arrived to the city, being crucified on a Roman cross:

Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall, and gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers. And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe. And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head. And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him. And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross. And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull, They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink. And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots. And sitting down they watched him there; And set up over his head his accusation written, 'this is Jesus the king of the jews'. (Mat. 27.26-37)

6 MOSS, 2012, p. 49.

The report of his resurrection has been spread right after his death, but it was not enough, in a isolate way, to stop the breakdown of the movement. It was not enough to say that he had revived. It was necessary to reflect about the place of his death in the context of messianic traditions. The answer of the disciples, verbalized in sources as ancient as Paul's letter (1Cor 15.1-58), about more than a decade after Jesus' death, pointed to the definitive necessity of his death. The description which the old prophet Isaiah (eighty century B.C) had made of the "suffering servant" (Isa 53. 1-12) helped the disciples' communities to reinterpret the suffering and death of their Master. For these people, it has been necessary that Jesus had died in such a painfully and violently way so God could release the forgiveness of their sins and save the Humanity.

#### 4. AN INVITATION TO MARTYRDOM

The debate about the messianic profile of Jesus has returned in the last book of Christian scriptures, Revelation of John, written in the last decade of the first century. The author of the book has already tied suffering and death to the term "martyrdom". He has denominated Jesus as the "faithful martyr" (*martys pistos* – Rev 3.14). He had already done this with Antipas also, one of the members of Pergamum church, which had died some time before: "and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." (Rev 2.13)

One of the most significant passages to illustrate the use of martyrdom in the Book of Revelation is in its sixth chapter. This is when the author describes the opening of a sealed book with seven seals (Rev 6.1-17), a literary strategy to narrate eschatological events. The fifth seal and its consequent scene present a group of people under the altar (Rev 6.9-11). It reunites,

there, men and women who had died because of the testimony (*martyria*). They want to know when God would revenge their blood. As an answer, they hear a sort of apocalyptic enigma:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

The lecture of the fifth seal, if it had the expected effect, should have promoted in the readers the desire of receiving a violent death, because the Judgment Day would come only when a certain number of deaths would occur. The persecution, the suffering, the death were necessary elements for obtaining the ultimate victory.

## 5. MARTYRDOM AS ADVERTISING

“Martyr” has become a terminology to describe the one who suffered and died because of his faith. The Christian communities looked to the Maccabees’ example and they were inspired by their courage before persecution. They have also looked to Jesus and they have seen him not only as the firstborn from the dead, as Paul described him (Col 1.18), but also the first of the martyrs. He has been the first, so that his disciples would follow Him.

When they praised their dead, the Christians created the martyrs, the faith heroes, in an important moment for the consolidations of the movement’s identity. Writers as Tertulian (160-220) understood that Christianity had grown boost up by

the blood of their martyrs. The Carthaginian theologian wrote that, as much as the Christians died by the hands of Roman Empire, more people become Christians. Thereupon, in the end of his Apology, he has challenged the magistrates: “Torture us, torment us, convict us, and smash us”. Because, according to him, “*semen est sanguinis Christianorum*” (Apol 50. 12. 14).<sup>7</sup>

According to Candida Moss, what would have facilitated both idealization and martyrdom’s practice were Greek and Roman ideas about the death, especially what she calls “good death”:

Ideas about and examples of good death were not confined, however, to the academy: they are implicit in the rituals surrounding sacrifice, in which a compliant sacrificial animal was a good omen; in the dramatic deaths of the heroes and heroines of Greek theater and epic poetry; and in the anecdotes of the historians.<sup>8</sup>

We can find an example in Socrates, from Plato, who scorns of death and the ones who fears it (Phaedo 118). From Marcus Aurelius to Constantine, quoting E. R. Dodds, “there is evidence for thinking that in these centuries a good many persons were consciously or unconsciously in love with death”.<sup>9</sup>

The Christian deaths, when ritualized according to the martyr’s model, were sufficient tools of advertising to the Christianity in a society that had learned to respect who “knew how to die”.

<sup>7</sup> “The blood of Christians is the seed”.

<sup>8</sup> MOSS, 2012, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> DODDS, E. R. **Pagan and Christian in an age of anxiety**: some aspects of religious experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965, p. 135.



## 6. ANDREW AND PETER’S MARTYRDOMS

Among the five AAA, we want to focus a bit more now on the episodes present in *Acta Andreae* (AA) and *Acta Petri* (APt). In both, death pass by crucifixion. These are works in the late second century. The communities were already accustomed to stories as Polycarp’s. Very soon, the stories would multiply remarkably, especially during the great persecutions that took place before Constantine emperorship. The episodes were presented as martyrdom narrative.<sup>10</sup>

In AA, the section is entitled “*Marturion tou hagiou apostolou kai protokletou Andreou*”. In APt, “*Marturion tou hagiou apostolou Petrou*”.<sup>11</sup> The martyrdom stories were not new to the Christian communities in the period. Some of them remained to the posterity, just as Polycarp’s death or Lion’s martyrs.

This means that AA and APt audiences would not have difficulties in perceiving an curious element: the lack of suffering in a crucifixion story and martyrdom.<sup>12</sup> The apostle dies, his death occurs on a cross, but he does not experience it violently. The cross was a torture instrument. Its role was not only promote the death of a criminal; but also make him suffer before dying. The cross has a double role: torturing and killing. Maybe we can also mention a third role: humiliating. After all, crucifixion was a public act. One thing is killing a person in some hidden place. Another thing is killing him in front of a multitude.

The cross role has not been changed in the second century, nor its effect over the convict person who was going to

10 PIÑERO, Antonio; DEL CERRO, Gonzalo (orgs.). *Hechos apócrifos de los Apóstolos I*. Madri: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2012, p. 640

11 A portuguese translation of AP can be found in: MIRANDA, Valtair Afonso. *Atos Apócrifos de Pedro: introdução e tradução*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2019.

12 PESTHY, Monika. Cross and death in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. In: BREMMER, Jan N. (ed.) *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter: Magic, miracles and gnosticism*. Leuven: Peeters, 1998, p. 125.

be crucified. It means that the simple mention of it could bring discomfort. But we can't see this in AA and APt.

Andrew was convicted to crucifixion because his preaching on chastity has driven Maximila away from her husband Egeates. In the day of his death, he walks peacefully towards the crucifixion place. He does not need to carry his cross. The executioners fixed it in the ground, just waiting for him. During his walk, he talks to Estratocles, one of his disciples, comforting him that it suits to the servant that is worthy of Jesus.

When he arrives at the crucifixion place, Andrew strangely salutes the cross:

And leaving them all Andrew went up to the cross and said to it in a loud voice: 'Hail, O cross, for indeed I know that you may truly rejoice, since now henceforth you rest, when for a long time you have been weary, set up and waiting for me. Wherefore, O cross, pure and shining and full of life and light, receive me, the one greatly wearied.' And having said this the most blessed one, standing on the ground and gazing steadfastly, went up on it, bidding the brethren that the executioners should come and do what they were ordered; for they were standing at a distance. And they did not cut either his hands or his feet or his sinews, having received this command from the proconsul. For he wished to torture him as he hung, and that in the night he should be eaten alive by dogs. And the brethren who stood round, whose number could not easily be counted, they were so many, saw them going away and that they had not done in the case of the blessed one any of the things which those crucified (usually) suffer; but they were expecting to hear again something from him, for as he hung he moved his head, smiling. (AA 54.1-55.1)

The report describes him already surrounded by a crowd, "women, children, elderly, slaves and free people" (AA 56.1), to whom he did not hesitate to start preaching a long sermon.

He preached for three days and nights on a roll. As his death comes closer, the crowd gestured to save him from it, forcing his accuser to release him. Foreseeing that it could really happen, and it would be humiliating to him, he begged to God for the privilege of dying in the cross. After his pray, he died.

In APt, the death of the apostle also occurs because of his preaching on chastity, that compelled some important women from Rome to abandon their husbands. When Peter received a death threat, people advised him to leave the city and so he did. However, while he was passing through the gates of Rome, the Christ himself surprised Peter. This is the famous scene:<sup>13</sup>

And as he went out of the gate he saw the Lord entering Rome; and when he saw him he said: Lord, whither (goest thou) here? And the Lord said to him: I am coming to Rome to be crucified. And Peter said to him: Lord, art thou being crucified again? He said to him: Yes, Peter, I am being crucified again” (APt 35, 2-3).

After this, Peter perceives that the new crucifixion of Jesus would happen by the means of his own crucifixion. He gives up escaping and returns in order to follow the same way Jesus followed.

The description of Peter’s crucifixion is shorter than Andrew’s, but they are similar in many aspects:

Then when he had approached and stood by the cross he began to say. ‘O name of the cross, mystery that is concealed! O Grace ineffable that is spoken in the name of the cross! O nature of man that cannot be parted from God! O Love unspeakable and inseparable, that cannot be disclosed through unclean lips! I seize thee now, being come to the end of my release from here. I Will declare thee, what thou art; I Will not conceal the mystery of the cross that has long been enclosed and hidden from my soul.

<sup>13</sup> SCHNEEMELCHER, W. **New Testament Apocrypha**. v. 2. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, p. 314.

You who hope in Christ, for you the cross must not be this thing that is visible; for this, like the passion of Christ, is something other than this which is visible. And now above all, since you who can hear, can hear it from me, who am at the last closing hour of my life, give ear; withdraw your souls from every outward sense and from all that appears but is not truly real; close these eyes of yours, close your ears, withdraw from actions that are outwardly seen; and you shall know the facts about Christ and the whole secret of your salvation. Let so much be said to you who hear as though it were unspoken. But it is time for you, Peter, to surrender your body to those who are taking it. Take it, then you whose duty this is. I request you therefore, executioners, to crucify me head-downwards – in this way and no other. And the reason, I will tell to those who hear’.

Peter approaches the cross and chants a hymn to the cross’ mystery. Peacefully, he asks the soldiers to crucify him upside down. There, in that position, he preaches his last sermon to a crowd. After that, he prays for the last time and dies.

55

Both episodes of crucifixion do not show evidences of pain. The apostles do not show discomfort in the cross. Hanging on the cross, they rejoice. They are so pleased that they chant to the cross. Andrew and Peter walk calmly to the place where they will find death. They had no punctured bodies, battered or lacerated corpses. Their lucidity, even after their crucifixion, is such that they seized the opportunity to preach about their favorite subject: the evanescence of human life. Andrew was strong enough to preach for three days and nights. Peter didn’t last this long, but still does it, even being upside down.

If the ancient narrative of Maccabees describes with details the quartering of their heroes; if the author of Canonical Gospels narrates the stokes, the lance, the crown of thorns and the crucifixion of Jesus itself, the authors of AA and APT

describe the heroes as immune to pain. They do not complain. They amuse themselves. Andrew smiles to the audience when he is being crucified.

Let us go back to the initial question. Which kind of identity this narratives demonstrate? Apparently, a community that accepted suffering as part of her existence. Its members still may suffer, but they understood the death as the maximum act of fidelity to the following of Jesus. If Jesus died, why they could not die too?

The narrative of AA and APt are full of prodigies. Both Andrew and Peter perform miracles that impress the people. Concerning the specific case of Peter, he revives many people during his stay in Rome, but he does not do anything to prevent his own death. In two initial scenes of APt, we find the paradox of infirmity. Peter cures many city people, probably Jerusalem, but he does not cure his own daughter (APt 1). In front of a confused audience, he cures her, just to make her infirm again, explaining that it was useful for her life and her parents; the same occurs in the episode of the daughter of the gardener (APt 2). After praying to God that he would do for the girl what was useful, she dies. Her father, nonconformist, begs for her resurrection. Peter realizes the prodigy and she revives, just to run away with a stranger later. One could conclude that her death was better for her and her parents than going away from family.

These narratives show evidences of a community which understands itself as a carrier of life, but does not fear death. A community that describes itself as a healing channel, but that needs to find meaning in disease. This community found its meaning in pain and death and doing it so, not only it has lost the fear of suffering, but also has desired it. Suffering means participating of Christ's work. John Gager wrote the following:

On the Christian side, the phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom was quite common, so much

so that it had to be curbed by ecclesiastical authorities. One study has revealed, for instance, that as many as one-half of those who suffered death during the reign of Diocletian were either volunteers or in some fashion strove to bring attention to themselves.<sup>14</sup>

In the period in which they produce the AA and APt, the Christian communities are marginalized, discriminated and occasionally pursued, but they used marginalization, discrimination and persecution as elements of construction and definition of identity.<sup>15</sup> It is an inversion of values. It is an action described by Janos Bolyki as a world inversion.<sup>16</sup> The majority values of Roman society, as wealth, health and well-being, these communities reverse and despise all of them. In a message, which appears to be programmatic, especially in these fictionalized narratives, the Christian communities describe their self-comprehension and their role in the world by embracing values as weakness, poverty and suffering.

## CONCLUSION

The authors of AA and APt constructed stories in which the main characters are powerful figures who accepted willingly the way of suffering and death. Promoting this kind of hero, these texts have become an affirmation of individual identity (subjective) and definition of social identity (community). Defining a hero is constructing a model of life and conduct. Defining a hero is constructing the community itself.

14 GAGER, John G. **Kingdom and Community**: The Social World of Early Christianity. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975, p. 125.

15 PERKINS, Judith. **The Suffering Self**: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era. Londres: Routledge, 1995, p. 129

16 BOLYKI, Janos. "Head Downwards": The cross of Peter in the lights of the Apocryphal Acts, of the New Testament and of the Society-transforming claim of Early Christianity. In: BREMMER, Jan N. (ed.) **The Apocryphal Acts of Peter**: Magic, miracles and gnosticism. Leuven: Peeters, 1998, p. 111-122.

This type of reflection contributes to the understanding of the dynamics and conflicts in the process of cultural construction of Latin American Christian communities. They are communities accustomed to suffering violence against the bodies of their members. Latin American dictatorships are full of episodes of violence that have transcended political spaces and reached the interior of religious communities. Javier Saravia gathered some testimonies of violence against religious communities in his article “Guatemalan refugees and their spirituality of resistance: testimonies”.<sup>17</sup>

And even in states where democracy has manifested itself, large cities still experience local urban guerrillas in communities dominated by drug dealers. In these contexts, where people witness violence daily, churches multiply and grow. In some communities of Rio de Janeiro, for example, Christians worship in churches whose walls are drug outlets or in alleys patrolled by youth armed with rifles.

These people learned to survive the regime of violence. The large number of churches in these communities means that their believers find no contradiction between the message they hear from their leaders and the harsh reality in which they live. They see meaning and dignity in poverty and suffering. In their hymns and prayers, they describe themselves as victorious and exalted. Society still has power over their bodies, but it no longer controls their spirits.

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<sup>17</sup> SARAVIA, J. Os refugiados guatemaltecos e sua espiritualidade de resistência – Testemunhos. **Ribla**, São Paulo, n. 13, p. 90-95, 1992.



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