CHAPTER 2

A Legacy of Manly Courage

The discourse on Gethsemane to be unraveled and constructed here must be seen against the backdrop of ideals on how to face death and master the desires in ancient thinking. This brings us into contact with the legacy of Socrates and Greek moral philosophy and how these ideals were accommodated in both Jewish and Christian martyr texts. Through the latter, we are of course already touching upon the discourse on Gethsemane itself among Christians.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, death and fear necessarily evoke cultural ideals and touchstones. Clement of Alexandria construed martyrdom according to contemporary ideals on death and manliness; in fact, his philosophical orientation was informed by a wider Socratic legacy. The ideals underpinning his concept of martyrdom resonate well with ideals holding pride of place in the stories about Socrates and his death: “most notably the iconic figure of Socrates, played an instrumental role in shaping ideas of self-sacrifice and noble death.”1 This chapter demonstrates that a discourse on the agony of Jesus owes much to these cultural sensitivities. In fact, pagan polemics drawing on Gethsemane rely on the mores of the time. Hence, the present chapter paves the way for Chapter 3, which directly addresses the polemics against Jesus in Gethsemane. The aim here is to provide a background against which we can understand why Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane was contested in antiquity in general and why it caused disturbances within the church. This was clearly a story one had to cope with, a need that triggered interpretations and negotiations of several kinds.

The key figure in what became cultural touchstones or ideals on fear and death is Socrates, or more precisely the stories about him and the legacy that they spawned. The accounts of his disciples Plato and Xenophon formed a legacy that bears directly upon the way Gethsemane was perceived in the ancient world.2 For the purpose of the present work, it is this legacy—not the history as

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2 The playwright Aristophanes adopts a critical attitude to Socrates in The Clouds, where the philosopher is portrayed as a town character to be mocked. Xenophon blames Aristophanes’ satire for having led Socrates into the hands of those who killed him (Apol. 19C). Emily Wilson, The Death of Socrates (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) rightly addresses the legacy of Socrates’ death under the title “Who Created the Death of Socrates?” (pp. 89–94).
such—that is central to the cultural parameters about death and fear. Socrates’ way of facing death epitomized ideals at work not only in polemics against the Christians, but also among the Christians themselves. Socrates has much in common with Jesus, since both faced death and reflected on the will of a deity regarding their fates. The fact that Socrates held a place of honor among many early Christians, though hardly all, makes it evident that his portrayal in antiquity is perfectly relevant for understanding the agony in Gethsemane. The confrontation with death is one element where a comparison of the Son of God with the philosopher brought with it real complications rather than easy affirmations for those eager to view the two figures as more or less equal. The account of Socrates’ trial and its aftermath are recorded in both Plato and Xenophon, who serve as our starting points, especially Plato. The Socratic legacy departs from Plato’s dialogues Crito and Phaedo and Xenophon’s Apology and a short report on Socrates’ death in his Memorabilia 4:8.1–4. At the end of this chapter we will see how this legacy was perpetuated more or less independently of the specific stories about Socrates.

2.1 Plato’s Crito: “Saving Oneself”

The narrative framework for this dialogue is that Crito pays a visit to Socrates in his prison cell early in the morning (43a–b). Finding Socrates asleep, Crito says to him that he has been watching “how sweetly (ὡς ήδέως) you sleep” (43b). This marks a strong contrast to Crito, who finds himself in turmoil (ἐν ἀγρυπνίᾳ καὶ λύπῃ). Crito takes the pleasant sleep as indicative of his friend’s calmness in the situation. From a narrative perspective, the pleasant sleep of Socrates contrasts with the wild emotions of Crito, whose main concern is clinging to life at almost any cost.


4 See for example Pseudo-Justin, Hortatory Address to the Greeks 36 (ANF 1:288).

5 Unless otherwise specified, references are taken from the LCL editions.

6 The adjective ἡδύς means pleasant; see LSJ s.v.