THE MARTYR DEATH AS SACRIFICE: PRUDENTIUS, *PERISTEPHANON* 4. 9-72

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In *Peristephanon* 4 Prudentius gives fullest expression to his understanding of the soteriological significance of the martyr death. Taking in his purview the entire history of the Church of Caesaraugusta, he attributes the conversion of the city and its ultimate salvation at the Last Judgement to the efficacy of the martyrs' self-sacrifice. In his portrayal of the martyr death as a sacrifice that redeems and purifies a given community constituted by ties of shared blood, soil, and historical experience, the poet voices views that were seldom expressed in the west and, in the east, most explicitly formulated by Origen.

Prudentius boldly avers that it was the blood of the martyrs that first cleansed of demons the erstwhile pagan Caesaraugusta: Omnibus portis sacer inmolatus/ sanguis exclusit genus invidorum/ daemonum et nigras pepulit tenebras/ urbe piata./ Nullus umbrarum latet intus horror,/ pulsa nam pestis populum refugit;/ Christus in totis habitat plateis,/ Christus ubique est. (The sacrifice of holy blood has shut out the race of malign devils from all thy gates and driven black darkness from thy cleansed city. No shuddering fear of spirits lurks within, for the plague has been driven away in flight from thy people, and Christ dwells in all thy streets, Christ is everywhere, 65-72). The thought of these strophes is quite different from that of the famous apophthegm that Tertullian flung at the pagan oppressors of Christianity: *Etiam plures efficimur quotiens metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis Christianorum!* While the apologist was extolling the powerful attraction that Christian heroism in the face of death exerted upon curious outsiders, Prudentius asserts the efficacy of the martyr death itself. Through the sacrificial shedding of their blood, the numerous martyrs of the city drove out the envious powers of darkness and thereby redeemed their townspeople just as Christ's death has freed the entire race from servitude to the devil.

We can spot this soteriological conception of the martyr death—while
Christ offered Himself for all humanity, the martyrs died on behalf of their own people—also in the preceding praise of St. Cassian of Tangier, whose death, says Prudentius, brought the Massyli of Africa under the yoke of Christ. The same ideas figure prominently in Peristephanon 2, where St. Lawrence, from the grill, conjures Jupiter to flee Rome now that the city has been washed in the blood of the apostles: Discede, adulter Iuppiter, ... relinque Romam liberam/ plebemque iam Christi fuge! Te Paulus hinc exterminat, te sanguis exturbat Petri,/ tibi id quod ipse armaveras/ factum Neronis officit. (Away, thou lecherous Jupiter, ... Leave Rome at liberty, flee from her people, who now are Christ's. Paul banishes thee hence, the blood of Peter drives thee out. That deed of Nero's for which thou didst put the sword in his hand hurts thee, 465-72). Here, as in the fourth hymn, the martyrs' passive resistance ends the rule of the evil forces that has separated their fellow citizens from God.

In Peristephanon 4, the parallelism of the martyrs' victory over the envious demons with that won by Christ on the cross is reinforced by the use of Passover imagery. In lines 65-68, the blood of the Christian heroes, which drives the demons from the city gates, recalls the blood of the paschal lamb that the captive Hebrews smeared on doorposts to protect their homes from the Lord's destroying angel (Ex. 12.3-13). The poet's audience would compare the martyrs not only to the Hebrew animal offering but also to the Lamb of God. In fact, in Apotheosis, Prudentius describes Jesus' death on the cross as the fulfilment of the Passover sacrifice prescribed by the Mosaic law. Those of us whose heads are marked with the blood of the Lamb need not fear the assault of the powers of sin and death: Apostrophizing the Jewish nation, he asks, Non sapis, inprudens, nostrum te effingere pascha/ legis et antiquae praeductis pingere sulcis/ omne sacramentum, retinet quod passio vera,/ passio quae nostram defendit sanguine frontem/ corporeamque domum signato conlinit ore? Hanc fugit exclusis Aegyptia plaga procellis,/ haec regis Farii regnum ferale resolvit. (Art thou so ignorant as not to understand it is our Passover thou dost represent? That in the lines drawn before by the old law thou dost portray all the mystery contained in the true passion, that passion which protects our foreheads with blood and smears it on our bodily dwelling in a mark on the brow? It is from this that the Egyptian plague flees, its violence shut out; it is this that gives release from the deathly rule of the king of Egypt, 355-61). Here an imagery very similar to that of Pe. 4.65-72 is applied to