

# Hidden Transcripts of Violence and Partial Recovery in the First Two Centuries

Four Sketches on the Way  
to One Specific Portrait

Hal Taussig

The Sebasteion at the ruins of the ancient city of Aphrodisias in current day Turkey is a stunning picture of the cartoons, subtexts, longings, and propaganda of life in the Roman empire of the first and second centuries. With much of the long colonnade between a temple and the ancient marketplace still accessible, this huge monument has over a hundred scenes of Roman glory, conquest, and regrets.

There is one particular large plate that has fascinated me. The image is of the hero Achilles (on the right) carrying his adversary in battle, Penthesileia, whom he has just mortally wounded in battle. Her powerful body towers over him

as he carries her, and it is not clear whether she is still alive. He gazes into her eyes, acknowledging that, as a previously celebrated story from another time described and was in the first century portrayed in stone, Achilles has fallen in love with her, perhaps even as he vanquished her and her famous and—up to now—undefeated army. This expressive stone plate fully and hauntingly extends the aching melancholy of the story.



Penthesileia and Achilles, Aphrodisias  
Museum

It is far from accidental that this poignant picture of tenderness and violence was made in Aphrodisias in the first century. Although more or less all of Asia Minor was under the rule of Rome, Aphrodisias was technically a “free” city. Landlocked and

surrounded by Roman territory, Aphrodisias was not militarily occupied and had its own governance. The emperor indeed patronized this (“free”) city, giving it occasional gifts and praising its legacy. And the monumental Sebasteion celebrated the Roman victories, peace, and connection to Aphrodisias, not unlike similar monuments to Roman power in many other Mediterranean cities that were explicitly under Roman control.

Perhaps none of these monuments, however, contain a picture like the Sebasteion’s conquering hero of Achilles and the defeated, yet loved, dying Penthesileia. Somehow someone in this somewhat “free” city had managed—under the guise of an ancient war story—to show the conquering hero as the one stricken with affection and the defeated Penthesileia as the nobler person looming large. Although Rome was ruthless in its rule and unwilling to see itself as anything but righteous and all-powerful conquerer, here is a melancholic portrait of both the conquering and the conquered. Just barely hidden—or perhaps for many in Aphrodisias, just visible enough to prompt a wry smile—here is the conquering hero who appears shaken and undone. And here is Penthesileia, known in lore around Aphrodisias for centuries as the surprising and successful defender of Asia Minor, who even in her dying appears in charge of the picture.

### **Violence in the First and Second Centuries of the Mediterranean World**

The closer recent historians have looked at Rome, the more thorough its state violence has become evident. For instance, the Sebasteion’s portrayal of Rome’s conquest of Britain pictured the emperor in a rape pose over the female figure



Claudius standing over Britannia

representing the fallen nation. Rome’s policy in its military conquests indeed regularly involved the command that the conquering soldiers rape the devastated (male) enemies. Similarly, the conquest of each nation incorporated the forced enslaving of thousands for use in other parts of the empire as manual labor and skilled administrative personnel. The empire was also known for its heavy plundering and taxing of the conquered nations. Rome proclaimed its domination as the will of the gods, and Augustus and other emperors after him proclaimed themselves as divine. For the first three centuries of Rome’s rule, all non-Romans were labeled barbar-

ians, not fully human. The empire performed massive torture and ritualized public killings in the forms of crucifixions and arenas.

So the portrait of Achilles and Pentethesileia somehow escaped Rome's thorough-going self-glorification and control. It can be seen implicitly as a critique of Roman power, and almost certainly was understood that way by many of the people of the "free" city of Aphrodisias. Perhaps even more for the locals, a closer look seemed to underline what it meant to live in Aphrodisias, where violence and freedom were knotted together and where melancholy and irony were at least as present as freedom and glory.

This unusual plate helps think about the overall picture of Roman state violence around the Mediterranean, especially in asking how it related to the first two centuries of literature mentioning Jesus or Christ. The picture of Achilles and Pentethesileia could not be straightforward critique of imperial slavery, conquest, and dominance. The empire was well-known for its vicious punishment. Indeed crucifixion itself—always carried out in public—under Roman law was reserved for those plotting to overthrow Rome and was regularly used to intimidate the occupied countries by random crucifixions. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus recounts how in Judea alone the Roman governor Pilate crucified thousands. So, the Achilles and Pentethesileia portrait was a "hidden transcript"<sup>1</sup> of state violence, since open speech about the violence that surrounded the city of Aphrodesias would have been punished.

### **Reading Jesus/Christ Literature about Violence as Hidden Transcripts**

Such "hidden transcripts" occur often also in the Jesus/Christ literature of the first two centuries. The artful hiddenness of these powerful textual portraits of loss, trauma, and violence did allow them to think and feel deeply about their circumstances without putting their writers and readers in trouble with the Roman rulers. Oddly for much later Christian modern readers, the cleverness of these ancient stories was by and large so successful that their subtle meanings and hidden messages about violence are almost completely lost to the modern reader. In large part it was the ingenuity of the ancient texts that have made it very difficult for modern minds to see the violence at all. Instead twentieth- and twenty-first-century eyes can only see in the ancient texts modern Sunday school lessons for children, theological treatises, and quaint Roman customs.

The ways modernity has looked past and covered over the deep social and interior ancient work on how to live with heartache and torture is strong enough that I take up a series of examples in the Jesus/Christ-related literature of the first two centuries. In fact, in the collections of that literature many seemingly

1. Cf. Box 1.

## BOX 1

**Hidden Transcripts Resisting and  
Making Fun of Violence**

It turns out that the way this story of the possessed man in the tombs distances the torture experiences of people under foreign occupation resembles how many “peasants, serfs, untouchables, slaves, laborers and prisoners” . . . “create a secret” language that makes fun of those dominating them.

James C. Scott, the author of the idea of a “hidden transcript,” gives several examples of such mockery of such cruel exploitation. “In the case of spirit possession, a woman seized by a spirit can openly make known her grievances against her husband and male relatives, curse them, make demands, and, in general, violate the powerful norms of male dominance. She may, while possessed, cease work, be given gifts, and generally be treated indulgently. Because it is not she who is acting, but rather the spirit that has seized her, she cannot be held responsible for her own words. The result is a kind of oblique protest that dares not speak its own name but that is often acceded to if only because its claims are seen to emanate from a powerful spirit and not from the woman herself.” (Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 141)

Scott has found many such examples in “carnivals” of Europe and Latin America. In these cases it is not some kind of “spirit possession” that allows a group under duress and violent threats to criticize the rulers. Rather, it is the festive spirit of the carnival and the chance to wear costumes and masks that help members of the groups in difficulty to express their discontent and critique. Under the cover of masks, costumes, and festivities, they can speak “normally suppressed speech and aggression.” In a carnival, such criticism simply on one level seems like just fun and festivity,” even while speaking truth to power.

Europe still has such carnivals. Perhaps the liveliest example is in mid-winter in Basel, Switzerland. There, giant floats parade down the middle of the streets with huge satirical figures of current local and international authorities on colorful display. The population in general carries huge bags of confetti, which they throw in the faces of policemen and stuff down the pants of the mayor and city council members. The pubs are full of roving musical groups singing bawdy and politically critical lyrics. Although much of the early literature about the Jesus people now is read as “holy” and “solemn” literature, it seems likely that its ancient readers saw it as comical and irreverent “hidden transcripts.”

unfocused yet persistent images, stories, worries, fantasies, and analyses of violence show up. Many do seem to fix, if only involuntarily or flailingly, on Roman violence, damage, and power. As it turns out, these bundles and threads of such literature about violence have surprising twists, humor, and melancholy along with a certain disinterest in tragedy.

### **A Man Goes Crazy**

The first example of such twisted, darkly humorous literature is found in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. My retelling of it relies slightly more on Luke's version:<sup>2</sup>

The man was sick—possessed it seemed. So much so that his misery was beyond bearing. He screamed so much that he retreated to living among the tombs. The agony was so great that he was often found smashing himself with rocks, perhaps to get himself out of the terrible pain, or maybe not even knowing why. The story proposes subtly that the possession came mostly from the presence of the occupying Roman army legion's presence around the Sea of Galilee, where the man lived. And indeed—according to the symbolic, fanciful, and analytic way the story unfolds—the man was relieved of his pain when the “spirits” of the occupying army are transferred by a healer from the man to an exact number of pigs standing nearby that equaled the number of Roman soldiers in the region. When those spirits of the occupying army were transferred to the pigs, the man's possession was gone, and all the pigs ran over the edge of a cliff and died. The man was sort of saved from the violence the army did to him. The army violence against the man went away, although not the army occupation itself. The man indeed returns to his right mind, although the people of the area are not pleased, asking him to leave. Somewhat puzzled, but certainly relieved, one wonders about the dead pigs and the real occupying army that could still make other people crazy and hurt themselves.

The story accurately addresses the massive damage an occupying army can do to the population it controls and gives such a population ways to think about how to cope, escape some of the pain, and even laugh a bit about the similarities between armies and pigs. But any suspicious Roman authorities would have a hard time making a case against the author of the story or those who listened attentively to it. Not worried so much about whether the story is encouraging a calamity in which many Roman soldiers fall off a cliff and die, the people under the thumb of the Roman army can tell the story of the pigs running off the edge of the cliff and laugh at the way telling of the story links the pigs and the soldiers. It is a chance to wish the cruel soldiers ill, fantasize about them going over the cliff, and be happy that the man is no longer possessed by the cruelty of the soldiers—all without being accused of rebelling against Rome.

2. Luke 8:26–39.

The nagging questions about the fact that the army is still ruling the countryside in the middle of the satisfaction of the giggles reminds the story-tellers that all still is not right.

### **A Singer Imagines the Destruction of Rome**

The second example is a song that imagines that Rome is on fire and all its power has been destroyed. The song—from the Revelation to John—was probably written several decades after Rome was indeed damaged by a fire set perhaps by those against Roman rule and more or less centuries before Rome was destroyed. My shortened telling is from chapters 17–18 and, although written near the height of Roman domination, is told as if it is the far off city of Babylon that is destroyed, only with the imagination that Babylon stood on seven hills, just like ancient Rome:

One of seven angels takes a dreamer to a lonely place and points out a giant sex worker riding on a monster. The angel says to the dreamer that the giant woman is Babylon the Great, and that the seven heads of the monster on which she rides are seven hills. The angel identifies the giant woman as the great city that holds sway over all the rulers of the earth. Then another angel descends from the sky and starts singing of how Babylon the Great has fallen. All the wealth that she had is now destroyed. In a single hour all the ships carrying great commerce have been destroyed. Another voice from the sky announces that God has remembered the cruelty of Babylon in order to destroy it and will reward the dreamer and his people to make up for all the torture and misery they have experienced.

The song rages against the violence of this great city that rules over all the earth. It promises revenge and reward for those who have been tortured and in misery. Although there is little if any sign in the late first century that Rome can be destroyed and punished and that the people it has cruelly pillaged can be restored, the song paints a massive tableau in which the reigning city is completely annihilated and the dreamer's people are saved. Indeed, nothing like what the song described happened.

What then happened to those who heard the song of the Great City's destruction? Did some sing along? As NT scholar Adela Yarbro Collins has suggested, did the raging song bring catharsis to those who had suffered so much at the hands of Roman imperial power or other violence? Was this song a way of escaping the violence—if only in reading, singing, or performing it? Did it give those who were under the thumb of such cruelty some perspective? It is clear in many situations of violence that anger and fantasy help people survive unthinkable damage and loss. Was this anger and hope good news for the composers and singers of this song?

These two chapters in Revelation may be the closest of any Jesus/Christ literature for a call to attack Rome. And the voice of the dreamer claims in the first

chapter that he has been punished for his teachings. On the other hand, here too there is no explicit attack on Rome, but on the much more ancient city of Babylon in faraway Mesopotamia. Rather than humor and healing, the response to violence is anger, fantasy, and outrageous hope.

### Divinity Hidden in the Rubble of Trauma and Loss

The third example of responding to violence in this literature is a long poem in the voice of a divine figure. Not unlike many ancient Mediterranean divine voices from literature of the first and second centuries, this divine figure announced itself in long stanzas full of self-praise. Although only one ancient manuscript exists of this poem, called *The Thunder: Perfect Mind*, there are many similar long poems in the literature of the Egyptian gods and goddesses, the Hebrew scriptures, and—somewhat less long, yet clearly similar—in the late first century Gospel of John. The first verses of *Thunder* are especially similar to these other collections of that time:

I was sent out from power  
 I came to those pondering me  
     and I was found among those seeking me  
 Look at me, all you who contemplate me  
 Audience, here me.  
 Those expecting me, receive me  
 Don't chase me from your sight  
 Don't let your voice or your hearing hate me  
 Don't ignore me any place, any time  
 I am the first and the last. (1.1–5a)

Found in the Egyptian desert along with fifty some Christ related documents near a fourth-century Christian monastery, *Thunder's* date of composition could be anywhere from the first century BCE to fourth century CE. Even with this lack of clarity of when it was written, it still falls within the time of the Roman empire, and its discovery along with many other Christ-related literature points in that direction. Although its beginning sounds like a powerful and dominating deity, the text quickly diverges into images much closer to the pain and vulnerability of the Gospel of Luke and Revelation to John.

I am she who is honored and she who is mocked . . .  
 I am a sterile woman and she has many children. . . .  
 I am the slavewoman of him who served me. . . .  
 I am she who is disgraced and she who is important . . .  
 Do not be arrogant to me when I am thrown to the ground . . .  
 Do not stare at me in the shit pile, leaving me discarded . . .  
 Do not stare at me when I am thrown out among the condemned  
 Do not laugh at me in the lowest places  
 Do not throw me down among those slaughtered viciously. . . .

In my weakness do not strip me bare  
 Do not be afraid of my power. . . .  
 I am she who exists in all fears and in trembling boldness. . . .  
 I shall shut my mouth among those whose mouths are shut  
 and then I will show up and speak  
 Why then did you hate me, you Greeks?  
 Because I am a barbarian among barbarians? . . .  
 Hear me in tenderness, learn from me in roughness  
 I am she who shouts out and I am thrown down on the ground  
 I am the one who prepares the bread and my mind within. . . .  
 (1.5b, 7a, 10a; 2.10b, 12a, 13a, 14–15, 17, 18b; 3.2–3; 4.24–25a)

It is difficult to miss the many images of social humiliation evoked in mocking, sterility, slavery, disgrace, being thrown to the ground, being condemned, in the lowest places, among the slaughtered, weakness, being hated, being stripped bare, and among barbarians. Nor is this voice ever not in danger of all kinds of violence: being chased, enslaved, beat, condemned, slaughtered, and stripped. On the other hand, “trembling boldness” is around more than one corner of these images, and the one speaking, *even* when in danger or disgrace, is neither pitied nor beyond the human.

This *Thunder: Perfect Mind* seems to live in the mire of humiliation and violence. Its voice—usually female, but not always—cries out in pain, fears being overwhelmed, and experiences loss and loneliness. At the same time, s/he sounds like a goddess and almost certainly is modeled in part on the powerful Egyptian goddess Isis. But Isis never lost a battle and was always in control, while the *Thunder* voice is both divine and human. She is honored and mocked, disgraced and important, and shouting out and thrown to the ground. Although divine and violently humiliated, these are not treated as opposites. The tension between the divine and the beaten is irregular, with the experience of violence, slaughter, and disgrace being mentioned somewhat more than the powerful divine. When she is divinely strong, it has the character of being “the one who prepares the bread and the mind within.”

Although *Thunder* does not mention Jesus at all, she resembles the way Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel of John. There it is he who regularly in a divine voice proclaims “I am.” And Jesus in the Gospel of John, even with his divine authority, cries when his best friend dies and is finally tortured to death on the cross. These two figures are more or less alone in the ancient world as being divine, even while being overwhelmed by violence.

### **Building Community Alongside the Experience of Crushing Pain**

The final example of this literature facing quizzically into violence in the first and second century is my imagination of a group gathered in the typical setting of that era, a common meal in an urban neighborhood. It draws directly from the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*:

**BOX 2****Festive Meals, Supper Clubs,  
and “Worship” of Early Christ Groups**

This example of penetrating violence in the lives of first/second century people, some of whom told stories and sang songs about Jesus, points directly to three major dimensions of life in that time. They are:

- The immensely popular tradition of festive meals together among wide swaths of people in the Mediterranean. Such evening meals occurred in the quite small homes of ordinary people, the quite lavish dining rooms of aristocrats, rented spaces, and occasionally buildings owned by supper clubs. They happened upon many different occasions: regular gatherings of specific groups one or several times a month, family and friendship occasions, such as birthdays or visits from other towns or countries, and traditional festivals. These meals date back to the classical period of Greece but had grown rapidly from the first century BCE to the third century CE. Common at these meals was the position of reclining that meant to express leisure, a range of food eaten with hands near the beginning of the meal, festive toasts at a mid-point in the meal, a great deal of wine-drinking, discussion, and games.
- The formation of thousands of different supper clubs. Here too these traditions hearkened back to Greek classical culture, but in the later eras, often referred to as Hellenistic and/or Greco Roman periods, such supper clubs grew to such an extent that five different Roman emperors attempted—unsuccessfully—to have all supper clubs banned. Although these gatherings in classical times were mainly philosophical in character, the later times expanded into much less distinguished groups, like carpenters, bricklayers, neighborhood groups, and religious associations. A number of such supper clubs welcomed slaves and women into full membership, so much so that there is much evidence that both women and slaves were elected leaders of their clubs.

The groups that gathered in the name of Jesus or Christ or discussed Jesus in the first one hundred fifty years most closely resembled the supper clubs and more or less always based their time together around meals described here. Although rarely featured as such in modern-day churches, this means that “worship” and “church” for the first six to eight generations were meals at something like a Jesus of Christ supper club. For instance, inasmuch as there were “sermons” at these early gatherings of those interested in Jesus in one way or another, the “sermon” was in

the mode of the speakers at supper club gatherings with somewhat different stories and content. The early writings of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles have clear pictures of people gathering in these settings around the meals. Similarly, the gospel portrait of Jesus has many stories about him teaching at meals, although in those cases Jesus is almost always a guest at such meals, rather than Jesus participating in what might be thought of as a Jesus supper club.

Simmias had often heard their songs as he walked underneath their second floor window. He never quite stopped fully to listen, but had to admit that he slowed down to listen to the music and catch snatches of the words. But now he was walking up the steps to the improvised dining space, all because one evening last week as he was slowing down to listen to the music, all of a sudden he saw his neighbor, Aelius, and his wife, Gavia, walking into the building with the music. They had stopped to greet each other, ending in the neighbors inviting him to join them. He didn't have time, but they encouraged him to join them the next week at the same time. And now, a week later, he was following them up the steps.

Like so many of these neighborhood meals, the room was crowded with the reclining diners tightly wedged in, some draped over one another. They were fashionably late and no one noticed, especially since lively conversation and eating were in full swing. No music yet and the food was tasty. Gavia reclined on the other side of the room with the other women. Simmias smiled to see her reclining, since that was not always the case at meals in this city; Simmias and Aelius ended up reclining on the same couch. Across the way he saw one other person he knew, and it was clear that several of those reclining were from the Egyptian neighborhood next to his.

Before long he saw the symposiarch starting to stand for the libation, while others were making sure they had a bowl to drink from.

Quickly the host and at least five others, men and women, were singing just as he had often heard from the street in previous weeks. With bowls of wine raised high, they sang strongly:

The verb walks through creation as the fruit of creation's heart and the face of its love.

This active word bears all things, choosing and receiving all things,

Bringing them back to the Father, the Mother, Jesus of boundless sweetness.<sup>3</sup>

Now between gulps of wine, most everyone was singing. He did not, since he did not know this libational song. But as the music wafted over him, he noticed that words about creation and sweetness certainly matched the mood of the moment and the taste of the wine.

3. *Gosp. Truth* 10.5, 6

As the libation shifted to a spoken toast, Simmias noticed a girl of about ten or eleven making her way through those reclining toward his neighbor, Aelius. And as she came closer, he surmised from one other occasion that this was probably the daughter of his Aelius and Gallia, reclining with him right now on the couch. Since children were not often around for such suppers, her approach caught him off-guard, but when he looked more closely, there was more to see. The whole left side of her face was so sunken that he could not quite tell whether she even had an eye on that side of her face. It was as if something had smashed her cheekbone in, displacing the contour of her cheek and gnarling her flesh into what now was mangled burrows and mounds.

And now she was right next to him as she excitedly told her father that her favorite uncle from Sardis had just arrived at the house.

"He is picking up some supplies at the port tomorrow, and brought a slave and a servant with him to help carry the stuff back."

"Rufina, are those other two with him?" her father quickly worried.

"No, he said that they will find a place to sleep down near the port. But he will stay with us tonight. When will you and Momma come home?"

### BOX 3

#### *The Gospel of Truth*

"The Good News of Truth is Joy" are the first words of this free-flowing, non-story document, most likely from the early-to-mid second century. As it overflows with joy, fulfillment, and sensuousness, this gospel by turns sounds like a poem, a letter, or an ecstatic sermon.

The Nag Hammadi Library has two copies of this gospel, and there are substantial differences between the two, indicating that this gospel was probably well-known around the Mediterranean. Some scholars think that it was authored by the well-known early Christian thinker Valentinus (who was also accused of heresy, resulting in many of his works being destroyed or lost).

The *Gospel of Truth* takes seriously human pain and error, but concentrates on the ways the goodness and beauty of life continue to overflow everywhere.

The *Gospel of Truth's* portrait is full of old and new details and at the same time unique in the way all those details gush forth. One of the major meditations on the meaning of Jesus in early Christianity, it contains many dimensions, including a strong awareness of Jesus as teacher of parables, developed references to him as the Word in the Gospel of John, calling him "the Mother," an extended portrait of Jesus' cosmic role as the one whose teaching corrected the Transgression that made all humanity ignorant, and significant attention to the meaning of Jesus' death continues to overflow everywhere.

"We'll stay longer, but not too much. You can have your favorite uncle to yourself until then. But don't bother him if he has something else to manage.

Meanwhile Simmias found himself—and a few others around him—alternately staring at the girl's face and trying not to call attention to her. As she walked away, he couldn't help but ask Aelius what had happened to his daughter.

"Almost four years ago, Rufina was playing in the street, when one of those small squads of soldiers was chasing several men down the street. You know how children run toward the hubbub in the street at least as much as away from it. A few of her friends accidentally ended up in the way of the pursuing soldiers. The *decanus* took a hefty swing with the broad side of his sword to clear the children out of the way, and it caught her full force in the left side of her face, just as she had ducked the wrong way."

Several other recliners listening immediately erupted in protest. Simmias did feel the same, but was perhaps even more surprised at the resiliency of this child. As word spread into other parts of the room, it seemed that some others already knew the story. There were small waves of sympathy for the girl, grumbling about soldiers in general, and fondness by those who knew her.

It was as if Rufina was still her, her short visit had such a stir. The *symposiarch* leaned over to two of the better singers in the room, and before long they were singing:

God opens his bosom . . . and reveals a hidden self.  
This hidden self is the Child of God,  
So that through God's compassion,  
The generations learn about God.<sup>4</sup>

Simmias noticed though that this *symposiarch* wasn't any better than most at guiding conversation or entertainment at the meal. Already someone else he did not know was talking in a loud voice to his neighbor about the young girl.

"Aelius, I am sorry that you have been dishonored here tonight. You must be feeling great shame with your damaged daughter coming here."

"My friend," Aelius responded thoughtfully, "I do not have shame. I was glad to have my daughter here. She brought me important news and I love her."

The room was silent. Since Simmias was new, and he too was undone by the appearance of the girl, he had no idea of how to receive the oddly sympathetic gesture of the one on the other side of the room. Nor could he quite take in the public tenderness of Aelius himself. He could feel a similar discomfort to his own in the room.

Then the song. It was coming from Gavia, Rufina's mother. First her voice alone, and then quickly other voices.

He was nailed to a tree and became the fruit of the God's knowledge.  
This fruit did not cause destruction when it was eaten,  
But it caused those who ate it to come into being and find contentment

4. *Gosp. Truth* 10.7, 8a.

As the song began to swell, Simmias wondered what this story was. Of course, he knew that hundreds had been tortured to death by crucifixion over the decades in this city. And he sensed that somehow the shame and open-heartedness of Rufina belonged to this song, even though she had been brutally maimed by a soldier, not crucified. The song went on, at times softly, at other moments swelling:

And he discovered them in himself,  
 And they discovered him in themselves  
 —the uncontainable, the unknowable . . . one who is full and made all things.  
 All things are in that one and all things have need of him.<sup>5</sup>

Now Simmias began to hum along, not knowing the story or the words, but sensing that many here knew a way beyond shame for this father and his daughter, and perhaps for a lot of them in the room and the humiliation they knew. They kept singing.

He came into their midst and spoke a teacher's words . . .  
 After all these, the little children came . . .  
 When they had been strengthened . . .  
 They knew and they were known . . .<sup>6</sup>

On one level for Simmias, he did not really need to know who this story was about, since it seemed mostly just to carry the curious mix of joy and pain in the room. And he let it sink in why he—as he had walked down the street outside this second story dining room on other nights and heard this singing—had been drawn to the poignant sounds and words of the singing. Maybe he didn't need to know the story of some teacher whose followers had “discovered themselves in him” and who had been crucified, but he wouldn't mind singing the songs rather than just humming along.

Lost in thought, he did not know that the song had stopped and now some conversation among different individuals was going on. Slowly though once again a particular conversation seemed to catch his and others' attention. It was a woman from the Egyptian neighborhood.

“Somehow this thing about Aelius' daughter coming into our meal this evening has me wondering about that execution in the market last month of that old man. I did not know him, but I think some of you did. What was his name?”

From across the room someone said, “Polycarp. Yes, I knew him.”

“Yes, Polycarp,” the woman said. “Anyway, just being with this girl tonight and knowing her disfigurement by a soldier makes me angry all over again about the soldiers last month killing that old man. What did he do to deserve death?”

Across the room came another response: “He had refused to offer incense in honor of the emperor. He was part of a group that followed the anointed teacher of Israel that we sometimes talk and sing about. You know how the Romans hate

5. *Gosp. Truth* 4.5–8.

6. *Gosp. Truth* 5.8, 11, 12a.

**BOX 4****The Killing of the Smyranean Leader, Polycarp**

Stories of the death of Polycarp were probably well known in Asia Minor (current day Turkey) and even more widely. These stories focus on an elderly man, who was a long-time leader of one or more local or regional gatherings of Christ followers, most likely in or near the city of Smyrna.

The stories tend to agree on some basic elements: Polycarp has refused to make a standard gesture of loyalty to the Roman emperor, which has put him at odds with local authorities. These authorities seek a compromise with Polycarp, suggesting what they ask him to do is a minimal, almost meaningless, gesture, but Polycarp does not do the gesture, which would have been something like offering a small symbolic gift to the emperor. This refusal eventually causes the authorities to have him arrested. After additional negotiations fail, Polycarp is killed.

There are other aspects of these stories that fit less well together. These elements include: Polycarp fleeing from the authorities' attempt to arrest him; Polycarp hosting those who want to arrest him at a meal; Polycarp praying fervently and for long times before he is arrested; after being arrested, Polycarp successfully fending off an attempt to burn him at the stake; Polycarp being stabbed to death; Polycarp brought to the arena and threatened with death by wild animals; Polycarp choosing to die by fire; blood and a dove extinguished the fire that was meant to burn Polycarp to death; Judeans promoting the killing of Polycarp; the authorities not releasing Polycarp's body and burning it so that it would not be venerated by the people; some people taking some of his bones and arranging for them to be venerated.

There is a great deal of scholarly debate about when the initial story of Polycarp's death was written. Some say that, although there are other second-century writings about Polycarp, the first story of his death was not written until the third century, the fourth century, or the eleventh century. The range of opinions on what actually happened range as follows: Polycarp died violently, but it is impossible to know how; some of the elements of the stories are not historically accurate; the most detailed story of his death was the first and contains a good portion of historically accurate details.

it when people don't say 'Caesar is Lord.' I guess this Polycarp ignored it one too many times."

"But an old man? Why couldn't they let him be? Is the emperor so insecure that an old man not offering incense is a threat?" The woman was yelling now: "Anyway, everybody knows that the people of Israel have an exemption from incense to the emperor, and Jesus who Polycarp followed was belonging to Israel. And why did this girl get so mangled?"

Simmias was aware that this conversation was more frank and open about these painful aspects of his life than usual. And strangely his body was more relaxed—perhaps because it was a relief to talk openly about the bruising character of his and his neighbors' lives. And then there was the way the songs made him feel safer and something like hopeful.

The man who knew Polycarp was speaking now: "When Polycarp learned that the soldiers or somebody were after him for not sacrificing to the emperor, he left the city and asked me to come with him. We went and stayed with friends in the country. That didn't last long, because we learned they were still chasing us. So we hid in a neighboring farmhouse where two slaves of our friends were lodged. But then we heard that soldiers were still on our trail, so we left for another farm where my uncle lived and we would almost certainly be safe. It was hard for Polycarp to walk so far."

It's true, Simmias thought, that he had known at least eleven people who had been chased or hunted by soldiers. And at least some of them were almost certainly innocent, enough to make him wary of whether this could happen to him.

"But the soldiers found the place where the slaves lived and tortured them successfully to find out where Polycarp and I were hiding. They came at night time and ordered him to come with them. I was worried they would turn to me next. But even before that could happen there was Polycarp inviting the soldiers to dinner before they would leave. I was surprised that they accepted, and there we were all together reclining and—admittedly with a bit of nervousness all around—telling stories and enjoying the mostly leftover food from earlier in the evening. By this time I had decided to disappear toward the end of the evening."

Simmias noticed the coincidence of Aelius and Gavia inviting him to this meal and the generosity of Polycarp inviting the soldiers to recline with him and his friends. But of course, in tonight's meal there was little at stake, while apparently Polycarp risked a great deal. For some reason he suddenly found himself thinking of how his own wife had died. She had died in childbirth, as well as the child, around this time of evening.

The man was still talking about Polycarp, and most everyone seemed interested.

The woman who had been so upset to hear about Polycarp's death asked, "So did the soldiers take him away?"

"Yes, eventually, but they did something that made me stay beyond when I had planned. As we were lying there together they began to encourage him to save himself. They said things like, 'You don't have to really mean it, just say that Caesar is Lord and we will let you go.'"

"And he didn't save himself?" someone shouted. Simmias later learned that he was a slave.

"Well, it's not really clear, is it? Polycarp had been on the run, hoping to escape at least until the authorities were distracted by something else. But no, it seemed like lying about his convictions was too much. I don't quite understand. But it was at that point I excused myself for a few minutes and then let myself out the back door."

Simmias was still thinking about his wife and his almost son. Strange how the combination of the devastating face of the young girl, this story about an old man who was executed, and the pleasure of this meal had unloosened his brave exterior.

Such slippage seemed to be happening to others. Another woman whom Simmias thought he knew from his neighborhood was telling about a dream she had. "I was fighting with someone. It was dark. And then others came from behind me and started beating me. And then I was falling from great heights or flying without wings. People were killing their neighbors, smeared with their blood."<sup>7</sup> She said then she awakened, and it felt as if all this was nothing.<sup>8</sup> Simmias then knew that this woman did live in his neighborhood, because actually a fight very much like her dream had actually happened in their neighborhood last month.

The slave that had just asked the question about Polycarp certainly did not act like a slave in this gathering, and Simmias did know that at most of these supper clubs slaves could participate and even be a *symposiarch*. At any rate, that slave was talking again. He was standing, so it seemed like he was going to give a speech or something.

"I know some think the way Polycarp died somehow makes the bad things that happen to us better. And the death of Socrates is supposed to be some kind of example for us. Even tonight, at least one of our songs about the teacher Jesus being crucified sounds like his death sustains us. But I'm not sure I follow. With Polycarp, couldn't our association with him get us in trouble? Maybe the soldiers will come after us too. And besides, it sounds like Polycarp was trying to run away, and I heard some story that Jesus, when he was being crucified, yelled at God for abandoning him. Neither sounds all that much like a clear example for us."

The slave did not stay standing as long as Simmias expected, and now Aelius himself was—still reclining right beside him—responding.

"Brother, these seem to me like the right questions. But telling stories and singing songs together isn't really so much about having examples to follow as having stories and songs to live with. You know, like the song this evening about Jesus, who 'discovered them in himself, and they discovered him in themselves.' In a way, it's actually better when people like Polycarp and Jesus are not especially good examples. Their stories are untamed in ways that make us more alive than if he always had done the right thing."

Simmias was thinking again about the girl Rufina, how alive she had been, even though half of her face was gone. He could feel that it was also this mangled face that was still so vibrant that had opened him to reflection about the

7. *Gosp. Truth* 14.12, 13.

8. *Gosp. Truth* 14.14, 15.

death of his wife and child. The tension between his own unhealable loss and the renewal of Rufina was hard to take. But the freedom of conversation—including the accidental encounter with Rufina—had put something inside him in motion. Not that his ache and fear were all better, only that there seemed to be more space for him to maneuver.

How long had he been musing? He did not know, but now the *symposiarch* himself was standing and singing. Everyone else was singing. And it was a song he knew, or at least the chorus.

He leapt in to singing it: “As long as you live, shine.”<sup>9</sup> It was good to be able to sing something. Then he did not know the chorus. It was different.

Destroying the hostility, the good news of peace for you who were far off

But then again he could sing the chorus, “As long as you live, shine.” More than that, he did not know.

Peace for those who were near, no longer strangers, but citizens<sup>10</sup>

Now some were starting to get up to leave, and they were still singing. He sang the chorus when he could. He noticed that Aelius and Gavia were leaving, and so he followed them out.

They walked home together. They talked about the visit of Aelius’ brother.

## Conclusion

Once the strong, although sometimes cleverly disguised, presence of violence and its painful consequences in the first and second century writings are noticed, it is necessary to re-think some basic assumptions. It has already been noticed that contemporary Americans often miss the violence in these texts altogether. Even when the widespread Roman torture and execution of crucifixion occurs in these texts, most readers today do not think about it as a part of a wholesale government tactic for keeping an occupied countryside in check. Rather, people in our time read that solely as a religious text about Jesus (and only Jesus!) saving people from their sins. This of course is a small portion of the meaning an ancient person would receive. The frightening effect that thousands of crucifixions a year had on the general population forced the ancient readers to see in Jesus’ crucifixion—no matter what other thoughts they had—a representation of the many thousands of other people’s crucifixions.

In the four examples given here of early Christ-related texts, it seems clear that making sense of the violence that the first and second centuries saw and experienced was very important to the ancient writers and readers of these

9. “Hoson Zns,” *Epitaph of Seikilos*, first century CE, rendered by Micael Levy, Track Seven, *The Just Intonation of Antiquity* (<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=ancient+drinking+songs&view=detail&mid=DAD913C3B45AF3FDFAFDAD913C3B45AF3FDFACF&FORM=VIRE>).

10. Eph 2:17, 19.

writings. These people needed to come to grips with seeing neighbors, strangers, or their own family humiliated, tortured, robbed, enslaved, maimed, impoverished, and killed. The clever, if indirect, ways that the texts addressed a wide variety of violence testifies to how much it mattered to them to think, feel, and come to terms with it. As has become clear in the “hidden transcripts,” not only of the Christ-related texts but the other public expressions like the portrait of Pentethesileia, the tricky language the people used indicates more their commitment to talk about the violence than that other parts of their lives were more engaging.

It is time then to reclaim the attention these Christ-related texts gave to systemic violence and the ingenious ways they addressed it without losing their lives. Instead of reducing the meaning of Jesus’ experiences of violence and death to a sacrifice for sins, a wide range of texts see Jesus’ death in primary ways as an effort to make sense of people’s pain and loss. For instance, the only thing Jesus says in Mark’s whole story of his death is, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?” (15:34). This story of Jesus’ crucifixion is evoking the myriad losses and pains of many other people. In direct relationship to his own painful struggles, Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ, and yet I live. So it is no longer I that live, but it is Christ who lives in me. As for my present earthly life, I am living it by confidence in God’s child. . . . For you all are children of God, through your confidence in Christ Jesus” (Gal 2:20; 3:26). In this text Paul saw the crucifixion of Christ as a cipher for a way to understand the trauma in his and other people’s lives, and it was the way Christ faced torture and death that gave both Paul and those to whom he wrote confidence in a landscape of violence.

It is also interesting to notice in the addresses to violence in the four textual examples here that there is no standard interpretation of what to do with violence. In the story of Jesus with the “demoniac” in the tombs, the way to face violence of soldiers terrorizing the countryside is through cleverly naming the villainous soldiers, laughing darkly about it, and celebrating an (at least temporary) recovery from the violence. But in the case of the dreamer in the Revelation to John, the strategy of facing violence has to do with being angry at Rome and having confidence in God’s revenge. In the *Thunder*, the approach to humiliation and violence is to merge “all fears and trembling boldness” in a (nameless) divine figure (2.18b). And finally in the imagined gathering at a meal, the approach is to get together, to tell stories of heartbreak, to sing about crucifixions that turn into fruit trees and one’s hidden self becoming the Child of God, and to drink a fair amount of wine together. Not unlike the differences between the way of the Gospel of Mark and Paul’s letter to the Galatians, the four examples here mostly use Jesus in different ways to work on how to process and strategize about the huge losses in people’s lives.

This proposal then sees a certain almost haphazard group of early texts about violence improvising responses to and preparing one’s self for permeat-

ing violence. The responses in the four texts here as well as the characterization of Mark and Galatians do not share answers, but rather share the courage to address violence and its effects. In no case does one find a tragic approach to violence. And in no case is violence completely and successfully solved. What this provisional funky group of writings share is a courageous and clever response to and plan for experiencing (almost inevitable) violence. And one might add that all of these negotiations with the experience of violence make some kind of provisional advance in the on-going struggle.

There is no reason to apply this almost accidental bundle of writings to all of the Christ-related writings of the first two centuries. On the other hand, neither is there reason to ignore their temporary ways of getting a leg up on violence that keeps coming at them. As for how much violence itself has to do with all of the Christ-related writings of the first two centuries, two answers seem to work: 1) the strong picture of violence in this parcel of story, song, dream, and poem points toward making sense of violence as a significant part of a larger collection of Christ-related writings; and, 2) there are almost certainly other major issues and themes in the bigger bundle of the first two centuries of Christ-related texts.

### **Works Cited**

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1990.