Eusebius of Caesarea, Martyrs of Palestine XI.7-13

The Roman judge, Firmilianus, worries that a Christian city is about to arise against Rome

**Name of the author:** Eusebius of Caesarea
**Date:** 313 CE to 314 CE
**Place:** Caesarea Maritima
**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Christian
**Literary genre:** History

**Title of work:** Martyrs of Palestine

**Reference:** XI.7-13

**Commentary:**
Eusebius’s *Martyrs of Palestine*, in which Eusebius narrates the fates of numerous Christians martyred in this region during the Diocletianic persecution, has come down to us in two recensions; one longer, which is extant only in Syriac, and one shorter, which we possess in its original Greek. It is the shorter version which we quote above. The dating of the two recensions of the *Martyrs of Palestine* has been a matter of debate over the years, somewhat more so than the content of the text itself until more recently. Most scholars now follow the argument established by Richard Burgess, according to which the longer version was completed very soon after the Diocletianic persecution ended in 311 CE. This text was then edited by Eusebius to produce the shorter version, which he included in the first edition of the *Ecclesiastical History*, completed in 313/314 CE. In 315/316 CE, when Eusebius produced a second edition of the *Ecclesiastical History*, he replaced the shorter version with what is now book VIII (see Barnes, “Some Inconsistencies,” p. 470-471; on the dating, see the seminal article of Burgess, “The Dates,” esp. p. 502-503, and Timothy Barnes’s “The Editions,” esp. p. 193-196).

As was recognised by Timothy Barnes, however, far from intending to give a complete list of all the Christians in Palestine executed during the persecution, Eusebius’s account aimed rather in part at preserving the memory of his friends and acquaintances. This is made somewhat apparent in the preface to the long recension, where he prays that he may be able to tell the stories of those he knew personally (Constantine and Eusebius, p. 154). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the account of Pamphilus’s martyrdom is given a substantial amount of space (it begins at the beginning of chapter XI). Eusebius was a student of Pamphilus, a priest at Caesarea Maritima who had used his fortune to build a library in the city containing the books which his patron Ambrosius had provided the famous theologian Origen with, as well as Origen’s own writings. Both Eusebius and Pamphilus endeavoured to preserve Origen’s literary heritage, and defended his views when they came under attack. The martyrdom of Pamphilus, along with several companions, some of whom he had been imprisoned with for over two years, and five Egyptians, occurred in 310 CE according to Eusebius’s account. The narrative is found in both the longer and shorter recensions of the *Martyrs of Palestine*, the present extract being taken from the latter. In addition to presenting an intriguing discussion about the notion of the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem, the story of these martyrs before the Roman governor Firmilianus has also been suggested to reveal something of Eusebius’s purposes as a historian, particularly in relation to the way that he understood the changing relationship between the Church and the Roman state in the fourth century.

In the present extract, we read of five Egyptians who were martyred with Pamphilus. They had arrived in Caesarea after having accompanied Egyptian confessors condemned to the mines in Cilicia, and were on their way back to Egypt (XI.5-6). They were promptly arrested by the “barbarous” guards at the city gates, however, and taken to trial with Pamphilus and his companions. The group find themselves before the governor of Palestine, Firmilianus, who after subjecting them to various tortures, asks the Egyptians for their names, starting with their leader (XI.8). Their response, however, is to offer the names of prophets from the Hebrew Bible. The names Eusebius provides are Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Samuel, and Daniel, and he claims that these names were adopted to replace the pagan names given at birth, thereby indicating that they were inwardly Jews, and the “true Israel of God.” This was exemplified not only in their deeds (????, erga), but also through their words (?????, ph?nai; i.e. the names they gave to the governor). Firmilianus, however, does not understand the real meaning of the word “Israel” (which Eusebius suggests the leader of the Egyptians had spoken). Therefore, the governor proceeds to ask the
Egyptians where their native land (???????, patris) is, to which the Egyptian leader replies that it is Jerusalem (XI.9). What the Egyptian actually refers to, Eusebius explains, is the “Jerusalem above” that Paul speaks of in Galatians 4:26. However, Firmilianus’s lack of comprehension leads him to believe that the Egyptians speak of a physical city on earth (XI.9-10). The implication that the governor does not know where the earthly city of Jerusalem is will be briefly discussed below. The governor then becomes determined to find out where this place is, and so subjects the Egyptian leader to many painful tortures towards that end. He remains steadfast, however, and bears them all, stating only that the place of which he speaks is a country purely of the pious (?????????, theoseb?s ), and lies in the East (XI.10-11).

Worried that the Christians have built for themselves a city which will rise against the Romans, the increasingly enraged Firmilianus persists in trying to establish exactly where it is located. After failing to get the information he wants from further physical torture of the Egyptian, the governor condemns him to death. Some scholars have understood the fact that Firmilianus apparently has no awareness of where the city of Jerusalem is as evidence that the name “Jerusalem” had become almost completely erased from Roman memory by the fourth century (see Gustave Bardy, Eusèbe de Césarée, p. 159, n. 15; Robert Wilken, The Land Called Holy, p. 83). The precise circumstances surrounding Jerusalem’s re-founder as a Roman colony named Aelia Capitolina by Hadrian after its destruction following the Bar Kokhba Revolt is debated (for a discussion, see the commentary on Cassius Dio, Roman History LXIX.12.1). Whether or not we give any historical credence to Eusebius’s story (and as we shall see below, there is significant reason not to), this implication may be quite intentional, to emphasise that despite the physical city of Jerusalem having been destroyed and condemned in Roman memory, the true city of God, that which exists above the earth, cannot be so easily erased.

Erica Carotenuto has recently argued that Eusebius invented this narrative entirely, taking the content from Origen’s On First Principles IV.3.6-8, and the context for the martyrdom from two other martyr accounts in the longer recension of the Martyrs of Palestine (“Five Egyptians,” p. 500). She argues that his aim was both to sure up his own understanding about the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’ and to present the story as an allegory for the structure and character of the Church. As she explains, before Eusebius the interpretation of Jerusalem as a heavenly residence is only found in Origen’s work listed above. Adam Gregerman has pointed out Eusebius’s negative portrayal of the physical Jerusalem in his Proof of the Gospel, where he mocks it as having little significance for religion, as God ought to be worshipped everywhere (Building on the Ruins, p. 100; on the notion of the heavenly Jerusalem, see further Wilken, The Land Called Holy, p. 65, 70-72; and on Eusebius’s view of Jerusalem, see also Peter Walker, Holy City, p. 65, and Michael Hollerich, Commentary on Isaiah, p. 160-164, 174-175). Perhaps this is the reason why Eusebius has the Egyptian give a vague, far-away location in the East for Jerusalem when it becomes clear that the Roman governor thinks he is speaking of a physical city; as far as Eusebius is concerned, the notion of a specific earthly location where the worship of God is concentrated is an outdated notion of the ancient Jews, and no longer applicable. His identification simply of “the East” might therefore intend to mock the governor’s misunderstanding. It may also, however, play on the fact that the Romans constantly feared invasion from the East (see below).

Origen points out that the Israel of the Scriptures is a representation of the spiritual Israel, just as the city of Jerusalem is also a representation of the heavenly, spiritual Jerusalem. For Carotenuto, the similarity between Origen’s and Eusebius’s accounts of this is easily explained by Eusebius inventing the present martyr story on the back of his knowledge of Origen (whom we know he greatly admired). This would also be consistent with his representation of Jerusalem in his other writings (Carotenuto, “Five Egyptians,” p. 502). In his Commentary on Isaiah, Eusebius understands Jerusalem in three ways: 1) as a historical city; 2) as a figure for the Church as an institution (a “godly polity”); and 3) as an angelic polity, which exists spiritually in heaven. Carotenuto goes on to argue that in the present passage from the Martyrs of Palestine, Eusebius implies a difference between a historical city of Jerusalem (which Firmilianus believes is the topic of discussion) and Jerusalem as a godly and angelic polity (which is what the Egyptian really means). Why, however, does Eusebius bring the debate about the spiritual Jerusalem to his martyr narrative? For Carotenuto, this is Eusebius’s method of providing an allegory for the character and structural hierarchy of the Church as an institution. In the course of chapter XI, Eusebius describes various martyrs of differing social standing and character. The most prominent, of course, is Pamphilus himself, who held the position of presbyter at Caesarea. However, among the others are individuals both elderly and young, examples of both the highly educated and household servants, and even a former Roman soldier. The martyrs, therefore, might be seen as representing the variety of those which the Church now encompasses, from its leaders to the lowest members of its congregation. This echoes the Commentary on Isaiah, in which the Church as an earthly institution is a major focus, set against a theological framework where it is viewed as a godly polity, symbolised by the heavenly Jerusalem. In the Martyrs of Palestine, then, this same framework is represented, but this time woven into a story that fits with Eusebius’s historical narrative style. The earthly institution of the Church,
though it embodies great difference, is held together and ultimately unified (“Five Egyptians,” p. 504). This is something which the Roman governor questioning the party cannot understand, and his authority is thereby mocked and undermined. Eusebius’s view of the Roman state and its authority figures is not straightforward, however. The Ecclesiastical History does not give a consistently positive or negative view of Rome’s state leaders, with individual emperors, for instance, portrayed as either defenders of or specific enemies of Christianity. As previous authors had argued, Eusebius also puts forward the view that Christianity and Rome can successfully operate together extremely beneficially (for discussions of this, see the commentaries on VIII.1.7-2.2 and VIII.13.9). This requires us to re-evaluate how we understand extracts such as the present one.

This question has been addressed recently by James Corke-Webster, who analyses the way in which Roman authorities are presented throughout the Martyrs of Palestine. Along with other governors and judges, he identifies Firmilianus as conforming to a “Eusebian literary types of illegitimate authority” (“Author and Authority,” p. 64). During his questioning of the Egyptians, Firmilianus’s frequent recourse to cruel tortures is emphasised by Eusebius (XI.7, 8, 10, 12); however, as his confusion and impatience regarding the Egyptians’ native country increases, the resolve of the martyrs remains steadfast and calm. Shortly after the passage quoted above, Firmilianus is even described in bestial, vicious terms when questioning one of the household servants of Pamphilus: “Thereupon the judge, not a man, but a wild beast, or if anything more savage than a wild beast, giving no consideration to the young man’s age, asked him only the same question. When he learned that he confessed himself a Christian, as if he had been wounded by a dart, swelling with rage, he ordered the tormentors to use their utmost power against him” (XI.16). Indeed, he shows himself to be “inflexibly merciless and inhuman” (XI.18). In the longer recension of the text, his anger is so great that his body physically spasms. On the contrary, however, throughout the long narrative in chapter XI the martyrs themselves display the opposite temperament. Eusebius indulgently describes their individual virtues of piety and intelligence, which form a stark contrast to the impious and rash behaviour of Firmilianus. While this may seem like the typical rhetoric expected of martyrdom accounts, Corke-Webster argues that in the present case, Eusebius has a slightly different aim than his predecessors in earlier centuries. He suggests that by representing authority figures such as Firmilianus as failing to achieve submission from their inferiors, Eusebius comments upon their failure to live up to the model of an ideal Roman leader and male. That Firmilianus is so unable to get the information he needs out of the Egyptian leader that he has to repeatedly torture him shows a weakness in his power (“Author and Authority,” p. 75).

In the present extract, Firmilianus’s weakness is particularly emphasised through his fear that the Christians are inhabiting a mysterious city getting ready to strike against Rome. He is portrayed as extremely desperate to get to the bottom of the situation which he believes to be a physical threat, while Eusebius’s commentary on the heavenly Jerusalem all the while essentially mocks his misunderstanding. The martyrs in this story therefore gain something in the power dynamic (even though they still eventually die). A comparison might be drawn here with Eusebius’s account—which he takes from Hegesippus—of the questioning of some of Jesus’s relatives by the emperor Domitian in the Ecclesiastical History III.20.1-5 (the story is almost certainly fictional). In this story, all those from the line of David are being sought out, in order to ensure that there were no more messianic pretenders likely to arise from among the Jewish people and cause problems for the Romans. Jesus’s relatives explain to Domitian that they are loyal tax payers, who farm their small amount of land for a living, and that the kingdom of Christ which they profess is something otherworldly. Satisfied that they pose no threat to Roman state security, the two men are released. There are some clear differences of course between this story and that of the martyrs before Firmilianus: Jesus’s relatives are released, not tortured and executed, and Domitian is not presented as a tyrannical, impious brute. However, both portray the Roman authorities as having a similar concern with establishing from those in their custody whether Rome is in danger from an uprising, and in both cases, the non-earthly kingdom of God is something which the Roman authorities do not understand. The Roman obsession with the threat of revolts and maintaining social order is well known, and in particular their constant efforts to supress threats from the East. When we consider the preoccupation of Firmilianus with establishing the geographical location of the martyr’s home in this context, we can see that Eusebius plays upon this insecurity to mock the misunderstanding of the Roman authority.

Corke-Webster argues that unlike the martyr acts of the second and third centuries, Eusebius’s accounts are functioning specifically for the fourth century, when the situation was different. Rather than wanting his martyrs to act purely as resisters to Rome, he argues that Eusebius saw one of his purposes as showing that the Church could provide leaders which displayed the qualities of good Roman leaders (learnedness, piety, self-control), better than many of those currently in authority. The Church, therefore, was something which the Roman state ought to recognise as a useful asset (see “Author and Authority,” p. 77). Whether or not we accept this suggestion, what is clear from the present passage, and indeed the rest of chapter XI, is that Firmilianus’s authority and control of the situation is seriously undermined by his failure to comprehend the true meaning of the “Jerusalem” that the
Egyptians speak of. From Eusebius's perspective, the governor’s eventual order to execute the Egyptian leader signals his defeat on a significant level. He can do nothing to attain the information he wants, with repeated torture proving entirely ineffective, and is left none the wiser about what he wrongly perceives to be a potential threat to Rome.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- Christian city
- city
- country
- East
- Egyptians
- Firmilianus
- heavenly Jerusalem
- idol
- Israel
- Jerusalem
- Jews
- judge
- martyr
- name
- Pamphilus
- prison
Bibliographical references:


Barnes, Timothy D., “The Editions of Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History”, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 21 (1980) : 191-201


Corke-Webster, James, “Author and Authority: Literary Representations of Moral Authority in Eusebius of Caesarea’s *The Martyrs of Palestine*”, in Christian Martyrdom in Late Antiquity: History and Discourse, Tradition and Religious Identity (ed. Peter Gemeinhardt, J. Leemans; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 51-78


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