



## [The Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran 3.1, 3-4](#)

The conflict between divine law and that of the emperor

**Date:** 304 CE May 27th

**Place:** Durostorum, Lower Moesia

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Christian

**Title of work:** The Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran

**Reference:** 3.1, 3-4

**Commentary:**

The *Martyrdom on Julius the Veteran* is a hagiographical account of a Roman soldier from Durostorum, lower Moesia (modern day Silistria in Bulgaria), who supposedly died a Christian martyr during the so-called “Great Persecution” of Diocletian (303-311 CE). The *Martyrologium Romanum*—or *Roman Martyrology*, the official list of martyrs recognised by the Catholic Church first published in the late-sixteenth century—has traditionally dated Julius’s death to the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, and it has been suggested that his execution occurred in 304 CE, shortly after the fourth edict of Diocletian was issued at the start of that year, requiring sacrifice to the gods on pain of death. Herbert Musurillo suggests that if he was indeed martyred in Durustorum then it would make him a veteran of the *legio XI Claudia*, who had been stationed there for a long while (Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, p. xxxix; see also L. Arik Greenberg, *My Share of God’s Reward*, p. 195). However, the document ought not to be considered historically reliable (see Timothy Barnes, *Early Christian Hagiography*, p. 110 n. 26, who notes that the information provided about Julius’s military service is extremely vague, with the soldier not giving any specific details about the unit that he served with, and merely stating that he retired as a veteran). It is possibly Julius and the others recorded as being martyred with him (see *Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 4) to which Glen Bowerstock alludes when he claims that the spreading of Christianity into the ranks of the Roman army led to the execution of several Roman soldiers at Durustorum during the Great Persecution, although he is not specific about the detail (*Martyrdom and Rome*, p. 41-42).

Regardless of its authenticity, for our purposes, Julius’s story is interesting because the martyr’s refusal to sacrifice is framed not simply as a conflict between loyalty to God and loyalty to the emperor, but precisely as a conflict between Roman law and divine law. Whilst it will not be the focus of our discussion, the source also offers another perspective regarding Christian service in the Roman army (on this issue, see the commentaries on [Tertullian, On the Military Garland](#) 1.1-4, XI.1-4; [Tertullian, On Idolatry](#) XIX; [Eusebius, Life of Constantine](#) II.33). As Elizabeth Castelli argues, by “reinterpreting suffering as salvation” the Christian martyr acts “interrupted the circuit of power created by Roman judicial structures,” creating a competing idea of power. The narratives from the third century onwards, such as the present story of Julius, resulted from persecutions based on imperial edicts (in contrast to earlier accounts such as that of Polycarp or [Ignatius](#)), and as such emphasise the legal dimension, answering this by portraying Christians who will only answer to a higher legal authority, that of God (see *Martyrdom and Memory*, p. 48, and p. 48-49 on Julius in particular). First, we will briefly overview the short narrative of Julius’s passion before moving to discuss these elements further.

The format of the account follows the pattern typical of such martyrdom stories in which a Christian martyr is questioned by a Roman official, who often tries to convince them to give up their stubborn adherence to their faith, sacrifice to the wellbeing of the emperor, and save themselves (see, for example, the commentaries on the [Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs](#), and the [Martyrdom of Polycarp](#)). Born a pagan, Julius claims he became a Roman soldier who had a long military career spanning twenty-seven years, taking part in seven military campaigns, and then retired as a veteran after having served his term. The martyr tells the Roman prefect questioning him, Maximus (we have no evidence to suggest that Maximus is a historical figure; Barnes, *New Empire*, p. 188) that despite having converted to Christianity early in his career, he had never previously been brought before a magistrate, because he was good in battle and a devoted soldier whose superiors could never find fault with him. His faith had never been at issue before now, and Julius refuses to suddenly now be unfaithful to his “higher orders” (i.e. those of Christ; *Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 2). Upon learning about his impressive military service the prefect Maximus praises Julius as wise and serious, and proceeds to offer him a ten-year bonus if he sacrifices to the gods. Moreover, Maximus states that if it will ease Julius’s conscience, he can allow Maximus to take the blame for



having forced him into sacrifice. However, predictably, the soldier refuses the prefect's offers and begs him to simply go ahead and execute him "as a Christian" (*Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 2). Eventually, after Maximus tries yet again to convince him to sacrifice, Julius is beheaded (the standard method of execution for a Roman citizen; see also the martyrdom of Roman citizens in the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* and that of Attalus the Roman citizen in the [Letter to the Churches of Vienne and Lyon](#)).

As L. Arik Greenberg argues, the juxtapositioning of the deficient physical world and the eternal spiritual world is a prominent feature of Julius's passion. When Maximus begs Julius to sacrifice so that he might "continue to live with us (i.e. his fellow brethren in the army and his fellow Roman citizens more broadly), the martyr replies that to take this option "would be death" for him, whereas if he dies for God then he will have eternal life (*Martyrdom of Julius the Veteran* 3.5; Greenberg, *My Share of God's Reward*, p. 197). The promise of eternal life as a reward for physical suffering was a staple theme of Christian martyrdom accounts of course, but here, we see the juxtaposition of physical and spiritual manifested through law, which for Julius is something that causes him difficulty as a Roman citizen and a Christian now that he is being forced to choose between one and the other. Julius has stated in his account to the prefect that for the majority of his career, his Christianity had been unproblematic, especially since he had shown exceptional character in his military activities. The implication is therefore that until now, Roman law had never directly come up against the divine commandments which Julius followed, or at least not enough to cause noteworthy problems. Diocletian's edict demanding an act of sacrifice to the Roman gods, however, required a blatant act of idolatry and denial of Christ.

Outi Lehtipuu notes that there is some variation in the ways that Christians in martyrdom stories react to imperial orders, with some, such as Crispina, denying awareness of the decree ordering that she sacrifice to the gods for the health of the emperor (*Martyrdom of Crispina* 1.2-3). However, Julius is perfectly aware, and makes clear that he is simply unwilling to follow the emperor's law over that of God (Lehtipuu, "Emperors and the Imperial Cult," p. 110). Lehtipuu compares Julius's faithful adherence to divine law with the Jewish martyrdom accounts in 4 Maccabees, where the word "law" appears around forty times ("Emperors and the Imperial Cult," p. 111 n. 87). Julius and Maximus both appeal to the law, but they understand it very differently; the martyr cannot hold the civic law (*lex patriae*) as the highest authority, and, therefore, while he is perfectly willing to "suffer for the law," he will only suffer for the *right* set of laws. Indeed, this topos of suffering is used to draw a contrast between the relative integrity of the martyr and the Roman governor. Maximus wishes for Julius to "endure" (*patior*) making the required sacrifice for the sake of the civil law, having attempted earlier to bribe Julius to do it just to satisfy the legal requirement, before leaving never to be hassled by the authorities again. However, for Julius, this does not constitute the true suffering required to honour the crucified Christ. Elizabeth Castelli has discussed the fact that many Christian martyrdom accounts are conflicted as to which version of law and justice is highest – God's or the emperors (Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory*, p. 33-68, for the reference, Lehtipuu, "Emperors and the Imperial Cult," p. 111). Lehtipuu draws particular attention to the explicit equation of divine law with the Gospels in this respect. For instance, she observes that in the Greek recension of the *Acts of Euplus*, the martyr appears with his "holy gospels" which the Roman governor questioning him claims are against the emperor's edict. Euplus, however, responds that they are the "law of the Lord." Moreover, the martyr Apollonius sums up the issue with his statement that "divine decree (?????) cannot be quelled by a human decree" (Lehtipuu, "Emperors and the Imperial Cult," p. 111-112; see the *Acts of Euplus* 1.2, and the *Martyrdom of Apollonius* 24). In Julius's case, Maximus cannot understand why the martyr would hold so steadfastly to laws given to him by a crucified man over those given by a living emperor. This ignorance makes his promise of "eternal glory" for Julius if he accepts his bribe and performs the sacrifice poignantly ironic, as the Christian reader of the text knows that for Julius, eternal glory lies precisely in the shunning of this particular decree of the emperor.

Keywords in the original language:

- [divinus](#)
- [Iulius](#)
- [lex](#)
- [lex patriae](#)
- [Maximus](#)
- [patior](#)
- [praeceptum](#)
- [praeses](#)



- [regalis](#)
- [rex](#)
- [sacrificio](#)
- [salus](#)
- [voveo](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [decree](#)
- [divine law](#)
- [martyr](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [prefect](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman soldier](#)
- [sacrifice](#)

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