

Book Review

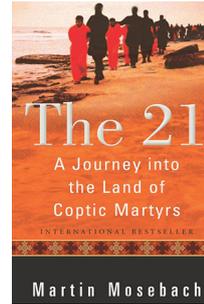
Martin Mosebach.

The 21:

A Journey into the Land of Coptic Martyrs

Walden NY: Plough Publishing House, 2020. iii + 239 pages

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Martin Mosebach is a German Catholic novelist/poet and winner of the Kleist Prize in 2002. In *The 21*, Mosebach investigates the backstory and lives of the twenty-one men, who prior to their martyrdom were unknown to much of the world. On the 15th of February 2015, a horrific video was released showing twenty-one men in Libya wearing orange jumpsuits and taken along a beach to be beheaded by an ISIS-affiliated militia group. This video, widely viewed on the internet, was met with global denunciation for the brutality of Isis, as well as words of condolences and sympathy for the persecution of Coptic Christians. While the video captured the attention of many and became widely discussed, relatively little was known about the twenty-one men themselves. Mosebach is not merely concerned about knowing more factual details about these men but is driven by the phenomenon of martyrdom itself. How was it that these men were so calm and peaceful in the final moments leading up to their death? What was the socio-religious context of these otherwise ordinary men that enabled them to face martyrdom with peace and strength? Was there something in their villages that foreshadowed their readiness to be martyrs for Jesus Christ?

The book is divided into twenty-one chapters, each chapter beginning with a picture of one of the twenty-one men. The first four chapters serve as an introduction into Mosebach's investigation, addressing his desire

to learn more about the lives of these martyrs, the video that brought their story to global attention, and the perceptions of martyrdom by those in Egypt. Chapters five to nine take us into the Upper Egyptian village of El-Aour to learn more about their village, homes, families, and church where thirteen of the martyrs were from. Chapters ten to twelve take a detour to Libya, the place where the twenty-one men had gone in search of work and were subsequently kidnapped. We also learn that one martyr, Matthew, a Ghanaian Christian, refused to be let go and chose rather to suffer with the Coptic men. Chapter thirteen to eighteen take us back to El-Aour and continues to explore the socio-religious context of the martyr's land. It is in these five chapters that Mosebach also does more theological and sociological reflection into the implication of the men's stories for the global church and the world at large. Chapters nineteen to twenty-one serve as a pre-epilogue devoted exclusively to a reflection on the significance of the Martyr's land for the world at-large and the future of the Western Church. The book concludes with an epilogue on the perseverance and growth of the Coptic Church (the self-described 'Church of the Martyrs') amid persecution.

While the book sets out to learn more about the lives of these twenty-one men, now Saints in the Coptic Church, Mosebach's goal is rather to provide a profile of the communities that shaped these men. We never learn personal details such

as what trade each man held, how many brothers and sisters they had respectively, and so on. While this may be a disappointment to some, the noticeable absence of such particularities serves the purpose of accentuating the centrality of the wider community in their lives. As Mosebach reports on his conversations with the people from their villages, the topic of the Church in the life of the village and the formative practices of the Coptic liturgy is significant (pp. 55, 81, 135, and 233). The picture that is painted for the reader is one of a Coptic Christian community that sees itself as the heirs of a great tradition; a tradition which continues to sustain life for the people through its liturgy and provides a rubric for their self-conceptualisation. In other words, the people see their lives through the lens of the Church. For example, in the Coptic Martyrs frequent trips to the monastery in Gebel-el-teir, founded in the 4th Century and believed to be one of the sites where the Holy Family (Jesus and His parents) stayed during their flight into Egypt, the Coptic Martyrs not only experienced the events of redemptive history anew but saw themselves as heirs of this rich heritage. The visit to the monastery strengthened their commitment to the faith.

While there is much to benefit by simply learning more about the land the Coptic Martyrs came from, there is also something to be said about the reflections that Mosebach offers throughout his book. The stories of these men aren't simply facts to be registered and filed, rather Mosebach attempts to consider the implication of their stories for his life and his community, and by extension invites the reader to do the same (p. 213). For example, in chapter 19, Mosebach imagines a history of the Coptic Church that never experienced the harsh and consistent persecution that has made up much of her story (p. 210). Would that Coptic

Church be a stronger, more vibrant Church? It is difficult to come to such a conclusion, Mosebach suggests (p. 212). It appears that the persecution and hardship faced by Coptic Christians was a means by which they were able to rely more on God and deepen their faith. It is exactly this experience which invites the reader to apply the story of the Coptic Church to the future of Christianity. Mosebach envisions this application specifically for the future of Western Christianity, which is increasingly finding itself in hostile territory (p. 212). What might the history of the Coptic Church have to say for the future of the Western Church concerning a rich, vibrant, deep, and immovable faith amid a hostile and intolerant society? In pursuing this application, Mosebach commends the history and communal vitality of the Coptic Church to the Western Church as she faces her own challenges in an evolving late-modern society (p. 212).

Mosebach does well in offering an ethnographic and journalistic profile of the lived theology of the Coptic Christian community, which shaped the lives of the twenty-one martyrs. His reflections, however, on Western Christianity in light of the story of the Coptic Church, while being instructive, are incomplete. After reading *The 21*, one might easily be left to conclude that the Coptic Church is the embodiment of the Christian ideal; the supreme model of all churches for ages to come. However, this belies a degree of romanticism on Mosebach's part. Any sustained application of one context (the Coptic Church) to another context (Western Christianity) would do well to be a critical application; an application wherein lessons are offered considering the Church's successes (as Mosebach does well) and failures (as is unexplored in this work).

Notwithstanding the lopsided application

of the story of the Coptic Church to Western Christianity, Mosebach's *The 21* stands as an excellent work of explanatory journalism. This is a work that students and scholars of church history would find to be an informative and stimulating read. Additionally, to Mosebach's credit, *The 21* would benefit both clergy and laity within the Western Church who desire to expand their vision of the historic and global Church in strengthening their communities within an increasingly hostile environment.

