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Melito of Sardis on Tyranny and the Reign of Marcus Aurelius

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Abstract: The article examines perceptions of tyranny in Melito's *On Pascha* and *Apology*, both written under Marcus Aurelius (161–180). This is the first systematic treatment of a key theme in Melito, approached not only from a theological perspective but also in the context of the Second Sophistic and Roman political developments. By proposing a more precise dating for *On Pascha*, we trace the development and consistency of Melito's thought and arguments in regard to the relationship between Roman Empire and Christian communities in Asia Minor during the second half of the second century CE.

Keywords: Melito of Sardis; Marcus Aurelius; tyranny; Second Sophistic; Stoicism

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1. Melito and His Work

Writing his *Ecclesiastical History* (*EH*) in the early decades of the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339) considered Melito of Sardis (active during the reign of Marcus Aurelius between 161–180) as one of the great Quartodeciman bishop-theologians of Asia Minor. Among several brief references to Melito (ed. Schwartz and Mommsen 1903, IV.13.8, IV.21, V.24.5 and V.28.5), Eusebius provides a more detailed presentation of the man's *opera et dies* in IV.26. Melito, we learn, was bishop at Sardis; he composed various works, including a liturgical homily *On Pascha* (*OP*) in two parts (Pseutongas 1971, p. 245) and an *Apology* (*Apol.*) addressing "Antoninus", namely Marcus Aurelius. The Syriac *Apol.* attributed to Melito the Philosopher is probably a third-century text, written in Syriac, perhaps in Mabug/Hierapolis. The style and tone are different than the *Apol.* preserved in Eusebius (Cureton 1855, pp. vi–xi, 41–51: considering the work authentic; Ramelli 1999, pp. 259–86: attributed to Melito; Lightfoot 2007, pp. 59–110: the *Apol.* is non-genuine). Since this is most likely not a genuine work, it is not discussed in the present article. Eusebius quotes Melito informing his fellow Christian Onesimus that he had travelled to Palestine, where he collected the books constituting what he himself called—for the first time in Early Christian literature—the "Old Testament" (Norris 2004, p. 41). In V.24.5–6 Eusebius records the letter of Polycrates of Ephesus to Victor of Rome (189–199), according to which Melito, by then "of blessed memory", had lived his life in Holy Spirit as a "eunuch" (perhaps a reference to ascetic virginity) and had celebrated Easter on 14 Nisan. In *Concerning Illustrious Men* (*De Viris illustribus*) XXIV (ed. Siamakis 1992), Jerome (d. 420), using Tertullian (d. 225) as a source, points out Melito's rhetorical elegance and ingenuity and notes that he was considered by many a prophet.

Melito's *OP* has long attracted the attention of scholars and has been discussed from a theological, liturgical, and philological perspective (Editions and translations include: Perler 1966; Cantalamessa 1972; Hall 1979; Stewart-Sykes 2001; Studies: Grant 1955; Pseutongas 1971; Grant 1988; Stewart-Sykes 1998; Knapp 2000; Aasgaard 2005; Giulea 2007; Hall 2013; Koukoura 2019, pp. 153–97). Despite being a major theme in both *OP* and the *Apol.*, the concept of tyranny has been entirely absent from any analysis of Melito's work. The article brings to the fore perceptions of tyranny in Melito, exploring the theological, cultural, and political dimensions of his argumentation in *OP* and the *Apol.* Placing these texts within their broader and local political, religious, and socio-cultural context enables us to date them with greater precision and, thus, follow the development and consistency

of Melito's thought. It will be argued that Melito's view of tyranny builds on the earlier Pauline tradition and is expressed in different ways, depending on his audience, particular political circumstances, and his strategy of presenting the Christians as a pious clan or community in terms easily grasped by educated Greeks and Romans of his time.

2. Dating *On Pascha*

Eusebius' testimony, based on Polycrates' letter to Victor (*EH* V.24.5–6), sets a *terminus ante* for Melito's death in *c.* 190. Since the *Apol.* anticipates Commodus' co-rule with Marcus Aurelius (σὺ διάδοχος εὐκταῖος γέγονάς τε καὶ ἔσῃ μετὰ τοῦ παιδὸς in IV.26.7), Robert M. Grant has dated the text before 27 November 176, when Commodus became Marcus Aurelius' co-emperor, and after 7 July 175, when—on the day of Romulus' *apotheosis*—he assumed the *toga virilis* before the legions at the Danube as a first step to the succession (Grant 1955, p. 27; Grant 1988, pp. 5–7; cf. Hekster 2002, pp. 36, 38; the *Paschal Chronicle*, ed. Dinforf 1832, pp. 482, 484, dates the *Apol.* in 169, after Justin's death in 165, but Grant's chronology is more convincing).

OP (ed. Hall 1979) is divided in two parts. Part I concentrates on the institution of the paschal feast during Israel's slavery in Egypt, the death of the first-born as divine punishment, the salvation of Israel through the blood of the lamb, and the typological interpretation of these events. Part II proceeds to a deeper, more spiritual interpretation of Pascha, focusing on Christ the Lord as the key to unlock the mysteries of faith. The suffering to be liberated from is no longer the slavery of Egypt, but sin and death; the Lord's Passion prefigured and prophesised in the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament, while Israel's betrayal is reproached and punished; Christ, on the other hand, is exalted in triumph and glory. Little is known about Melito's audience and the reception of his work. *OP* was delivered before a Christian congregation at Sardis, who, apart from the biblical books, seem to have been familiar with both the Passover Haggadah tradition and Hellenistic rhetoric. Defining the boundaries of Christian identity ("the New Israel") *vis-à-vis* the Romans, Jews, and other Christian groups most was probably something Melito had in mind when addressing his flock of Quartodeciman Christians during his paschal homily (e.g., Wilken 1976; Stewart-Sykes 1998; Murray 2004, pp. 101–16; Aasgaard 2005; Cohick 2016; de Andrado 2017).

There seems to be a number of possible allusions in the homily suggesting a date of composition before the *Apol.*, and more precisely soon after 12 October 166:

1. The Antonine Plague. Melito's extensive description of Egyptian suffering caused by the loss of first-born children (*OP* 16–33) places particular emphasis on the tragic and terrifying nature of death (Koukoura 2019, pp. 160–65). This may be read as an indirect reference to the Antonine Plague, known to have stricken western Asia Minor in 165. The urgent need for divine protection against evil is traced in Hierapolis, close to Sardis, which experienced a revival of the cult of Apollo *Alexikakos*, the averter of disease (Harper 2017, pp. 65–118, at 98; Asia Minor was also struck by earthquakes in *c.* 160: Elliot (2024, p. 132)). In his treatise *On Baptism*, from which only a fragment survives, Melito describes Christ as the rising and reigning sun (ed. Pitra 1884, p. 5). The bishop's use of solar language may be read as a Christian response to the cult of Apollo *vis-à-vis* the Antonine Plague.
2. The death of Titus Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus, Commodus' twin brother. In *OP* 17–20 Melito's focus is Pharaoh's grief for the death of his first-born. Marcus Aurelius lost his new-born twin sons in 149 and his little daughter, Domitia Faustina, in 151; in the same year, the emperor lost his baby girl and lost his surviving first-born son, Titus Aelius Antoninus, the following year. Another son, born in 157, died in 158, but 161 witnessed the birth of Marcus' twin sons, of whom only Commodus survived; the other boy, Fulvus Antoninus, died probably sometime in the winter of 165 (Groag and Stein 1933, p. 310, no. 1512; Ameling 1992; Hekster 2002, pp. 30, 119–20; McLynn 2009, pp. 92, 127). Faustina, Marcus' wife, was then sent to Asia Minor to seek consolation in the company of their daughter, Lucilla, who had married Lucius Verus, Mar-

cus' adoptive brother and co-August (161–169), in 164 (McLynn 2009, pp. 157, 191). The wedding had taken place in Ephesus, not far from Sardis, and the two empresses might have met there in late 165 or early 166. In any case, Antonine emperors and their consorts were honoured with colossi at the temple of Artemis at Sardis; the statues of Lucius Verus and Lucilla were possibly placed there sometime between 163 and 164, after their marriage (Burrell 2004, pp. 106–7). The city of Sardis was twice *neokoros* under the Antonines, being privileged with responsibilities concerning the imperial cult, primarily the custody and maintenance of the temples and the organising of festivals to honour the gods and the emperor (Burrell 2004, pp. 103–10). The special relationship between Sardis and Marcus Aurelius, and its vicinity with Ephesus, could strengthen the hypothesis that Fulvus Antoninus' death is echoed in *OP* 17–20.

3. Anti-Christian persecutions. The Pharaoh of *OP* 17–20 might be considered as an allusion to anti-Christian persecutions during the reigns of Antoninus Pius (138–161) and Marcus Aurelius (Keresztes 1968, 1971; Burliga 2011). Notable martyrs of the late 150s and 160s include Polycarp of Smyrna, who was martyred in 157 (Barnes 2010, pp. 367–73); Justin Martyr and his companions, executed in 165 (*Paschal Chronicle*, ed. Dinforf 1832, p. 482), namely during the second prefecture of Junius Rusticus (*c*. 162–168), Marcus Aurelius' Stoic teacher and friend (Barnes 2010, pp. 19–21); Carpus, Papylus, and Agathonice of Pergamum, perhaps killed early in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (de Ste. Croix 2006, p. 166); and in the 160s, Sagaris of Laodicea, mentioned by Melito (*EH* IV.26.3, dating *OP* soon after the martyrdom) and Polycrates (*EH* V.24.5) in Eusebius. The exact year of Sagaris' martyrdom is unknown, despite Melito's reference that he was executed when Σερουίλλιος Παύλος was proconsul of Asia. Rufinus (d. 410/11) translates *sub Sergio Paulo* ("under Sergius Paulus"; cf. Acts 13:7), but no other source confirms that the Antonine-period Lucius Sergius Paullus had served as proconsul of Asia before his second consulship in 168. We also possess no evidence about Quintus Servilius Pudens (identified by some scholars as Melito's Σερουίλλιος in Eusebius) serving as proconsul of Asia either before or after his consulship in 166 (Perler 1966, pp. 23–24; Keresztes 1968, pp. 324, 327, 332; Barnes 1970, pp. 406–8; Alföldy 1977, p. 185; Hall 1979, pp. xxi–xxii; Huttner 2013, pp. 334–35; Eck 2014, p. 222). Whatever the case, Melito himself dates *OP* after Sagaris' death, showing that his paschal homily addressed the Christian congregation of Sardis during or soon after a period of anti-Christian persecutions. That the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-emperor, was marked in Asia Minor by a rising wave of hostility against Christians is hardly surprising (Motschmann 2002, pp. 220–71). In the cultural and political climate created by Hadrian's (117–38) Panhellenic League—a community of cities in which Sardis belonged, boasting to have been the first *metropolis* of all Asia, Lydia, and Hellas—Hellenic identity became increasingly defined by ancestry and civic nobility; it was also rooted in socially respected traditions concerning Hellenic gods and heroes that the Christian faith rejected, together with the emperor's cult (Bowersock 1995, pp. 96–97; Romeo 2002, pp. 21–40, at 30, 36). According to Thomas Witulski (2007, p. 350), the Johannine Revelation was written sometime between 132 and 135 as an expression of uncompromising Christian resistance to the emperor's cult. Although criticised by other scholars (e.g., Arcani 2016), this theory seems to reflect the existence of different tendencies with the Christian Churches of Asia Minor in respect to the Roman Empire and the emperor's cult, namely the worship of the emperor and his family as divine. Apparently, some Christian groups and individuals in Asia Minor ("Balaam", "Jezebel", and the Nicolaitans in Revelation) participated actively in rituals honouring the gods and the divinity of the imperial family, which was rejected by John and his circle as a demonic practice (Friesen 2001, pp. 157, 192–93). It may be the case that some Christians at least were willing to sacrifice to the emperor's image or sacrifice to the gods on the emperor's behalf, which other Christians considered unacceptable and even demonic (Price 1984,

p. 222). Even if the Revelation is not to be dated under Hadrian, the Panhellenic League's legacy in Melito's time must have revived earlier questions concerning the way Christians should behave in respect to socio-political pressures to participate in the emperor's cult.

4. The triumph of Lucius Verus. *OP* 104–5 concludes with the Son's enthronement at the Father's right-hand side. In *OP* 102, we read that Christ has triumphed over the enemy (θριαμβεύσας τὸν ἐχθρόν), namely death, for which he is praised (*OP* 105) as *basileus* and *strategos*. The terminology employed here brings to mind the Roman triumphal celebrations (Perler 1966, p. 201). Two triumphs were celebrated under Marcus Aurelius. On 12 October 166, Lucius Verus was honoured in a triumph for his victory in the Parthian war; on that very day, Marcus' sons, Marcus Annius Verus (born in 162 and died in 169) and Commodus, received the title "Caesar" (Hekster 2002, p. 30; McLynn 2009, pp. 195–96). This date could be considered as *terminus post* for the writing of *OP*; it fits well into the broader picture of general mortality caused by the plague (165), the death of Fulvus Antoninus (winter 165), and anti-Christian persecutions (165). The second triumph was celebrated on 23 December 176 for Marcus Aurelius and Commodus' victory over the Germans. Commodus was granted *tribunicia potestas* and a consulship, beginning on January 177 (Hekster 2002, p. 38).
5. From what has been discussed so far, it seems that Melito wrote *OP* at a point when memories of the plague, the death of the emperor's son, Christian martyrdom, and Lucius Verus' triumph were still fresh. A compelling hypothesis that needs to be confirmed by future research is that Melito's *OP* might have been read during the paschal vigil of 167. This coincided for the Quartodecimans with the Jewish Pesach (14 Nisan of the year 3927 in the Hebrew calendar), which fell on Saturday, 21 March 167 of the Gregorian calendar, and more precisely on the night of 21 to 22 March (Beers 2018–2022; Sadinoff and Radwin 1992–2024; cf. Giulea 2007 on the paschal vigil).

3. Tyranny in *On Pascha*

There are various references to tyranny in Melito's paschal homily. Egypt surrounded the tyrant's (i.e., Pharaoh's) body like a robe of wailing (*OP* 20). After the Fall, humans were experiencing not the kingdom of freedom and life but the tyranny of slavery and death (*OP* 49), being seized by the tyranny of sin and being drowned into wicked and lawless tyranny (*OP* 50, echoing Plato, *Laws* 863e; see Perler 1966, p. 164). It is Christ who has led humans from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, from tyranny to eternal kingdom (*OP* 68); his suffering should have been caused not by Israel, God's elect people, but from foreigners, from those uncircumcised, from a tyrannical right hand (*OP* 76). Instead, Israel betrayed the Lord's love and salvific work, turning against him and crucifying him (*OP* 77–100).

Although the terms "tyranny" and "tyrant" (τυραννεῖν, τυραννία, τυραννικός, τυραννίς, and τύραννος) are not explicitly used in the New Testament, they appear several times in the Septuagint; some versions of it preserved in Christian codices Sinaiticus (fourth century), Alexandrinus (fifth century), and Venetus (ninth century) include 4 Maccabees (Is. 1:18, 9:3; Jb. 2:11, 42:18; Pr. 8:16, 28:15; Wi. 6:9, 6:21, 8:15, 10:14, 12:14, 14:16, 14:21, 16:4; Si. 11:5, 47:21; Hb. 1:10; Da. 3:3; 1 Ma. 1:4; 2 Mac. 4:25, 5:8, 7:27; 3 Ma. 3:8, 5:27, 6:24; 4 Ma. 1:11, 5:1, 5:4, 5:14, 5:38, 6:1, 6:21, 6:23, 7:2, 8:1, 8:3–4, 8:13, 8:15, 8:29, 9:1, 9:3, 9:7, 9:10, 9:15, 9:24, 9:29–30, 9:32, 10:10, 10:15–16, 11:2, 11:12–13, 11:21, 11:24, 11:27, 12:2, 12:11, 15:1–2, 16:14, 17:2, 17:9, 17:14, 17:17, 17:21, 17:23, 18:5, 18:20, 18:22; see Hatch and Redpath (1993, pp. 1378–79); deSilva (2006, p. xi)). Probably composed by an anonymous author of the Jewish Diaspora around the two first quarters of the second century CE and describing Jewish martyrdom under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE), this text, which was heavily influenced by Stoicism and the Asian rhetorical style, seems to have been a protreptic discourse on martyrdom as a philosophical praxis. It is possible that 4 Maccabees originated from a Hellenised Jewish community somewhere in south-eastern Asia Minor; not long after its circulation, the text became known to Christian authors, as

strongly suggested by Ignatius of Antioch's perception of martyrdom (Bowersock 1995, pp. 77–81; deSilva 2006; Barnes 2010, pp. 13–15).

Tyranny as an institution and a discourse was well-known in Asia Minor centuries before Melito but became increasingly important throughout the Eastern Mediterranean exactly during his age. In pre-Roman times, Sardis, Melito's city, had cultivated traditions that sacralised Lydian tyranny, the epitome of autocratic rulership in ancient Asia Minor, through the cult of the Mother of the Gods (Munn 2006, pp. 96–177). In the second century CE, tyranny, understood primarily as the monopoly and abuse of power against aristocratic freedom within a civic context, appears quite often in Greek and Roman writers (Horst 2013, pp. 143, 147, referring to Dio Chrysostom and Lucian). In the mid-170s, Herodes Atticus (d. 177), Marcus Aurelius' teacher and friend, was accused of being a tyrant by the Athenians, leading to the emperor's involvement in the affair so as to re-establish political peace while also preserving Marcus' public image as a "democratic" ruler (Kennell 1997; Horst 2013, pp. 175–82). Marcus' public persona corresponded to his own self-image in the *Meditations* (*Med*., ed. Haines 1916, IV.28, VI.30) and seems to have been successful in integrating the educated aristocratic elites into his style of governance, using as tools *paideia* and the practice of philosophy (Horst 2013, pp. 195–202). Tyranny is also a major theme in Lucian of Samosata (d. *p*. 180), particularly his satires, *The Downward Journey, or the Tyrant* (ed. Harmon 1915) and *The Tyrannicide* (ed. Harmon 1936). Plutarch (d. *p*. 119), in *Tiberius Gracchus* XIV.2 (ed. Perrin 1921), associates tyrannical rule with dressing in purple robes and wearing a crown (Dunkle 1967, p. 170), which recalls the tyrant's garments in *OP* 20. A few decades after Melito's death by the 190s, Philostratus (d. 240s) criticised Domitian's (81–96) "god-fighting" tyranny in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (Praet 2012).

Throughout his reign, Marcus Aurelius, a convinced Stoic, embodied the idea of the civilised philosopher-emperor, who ruled his subjects in a way that was far from the tyrant's stereotype. However true, this picture was part of a hegemonic discourse that needs to take into consideration the fact that Antonine Christians were largely considered "subalterns" (Buell 2009, pp. 866–69), namely people regarded as socially marginal for being Christian. This led to sporadic, yet violent, cases of martyrdom. From the perspective of the powerless and victimised Christians, Melito's references to tyranny in *OP*, dated *c*. 167, might have invoked, through their typological interpretation, the anti-Christian violence, both physical and symbolic, of the Roman Empire and its representatives. Persecuted Christians, of course, were not the only subaltern group in the Roman Empire: the poor and the slaves were, among others, experiencing the harshness and even violence of the Roman state and society (Mattingly 2013; Courrier and de Oliveira 2021). In this context, Christian subalternity and the need to interpret and endure calamities through a theological perspective of life emerges as a dynamic response of one among many lowly groups suffering in the Roman world.

We could, thus, read *OP* as a theological-liturgical *consolatio* to the Christian community of Sardis that had reached its own "limits of the endurable" (to paraphrase Rosenthal 2011, p. 114). Such a reading suggests that the narrative of salvation from bondage involved "Exodus politics" (Walzer 1985, pp. 131–49), namely a particular spiritual stance towards earthly powers in a historical period during which the dichotomy between "religious" and "secular" did not exist (Kloppenborg 2019, pp. 10–18). If Melito encouraged his flock to see the world they lived in as "Egypt", describing the Kingdom of God as a kind of "Promise Land", then the wilderness through which Christians had to march was persecution and suffering (cf. Walzer 1985, p. 149) because persecution and suffering was what Christ had experienced before his eventual triumph (*OP* 102, 105). For Melito, this eventual triumph is realised in the paschal vigil in the here and now, as strongly suggested by his use of light imagery and implication that Christ descends from heaven as glory (*kabod*) (Giulea 2007, pp. 39–41). *OP* 103 makes it clear that Christ is the "Pascha of salvation" (ἐγὼ τὸ πάσχα τῆς σωτηρίας), probably following Paul (1 Cor. 5:7) and his teaching that God's wisdom remains hidden from the earthly powers responsible for crucifying the Lord

of Glory (1 Cor. 2:6–9). Although a systematic exploration of Pauline attitudes towards earthly authority is beyond the scope of this article, it seems that for Paul, as for Melito, resistance to evil must be non-violent and spiritual, since the domination of evil is ultimately caused by spiritual powers (Eph. 6:10–20). Far from preaching the destruction of the imperial world order, as was the case of another text of Asian Christianity, the Johannine Revelation (cf. Polycrates' testimony in *EH* V.24.3 and Despotis 2005a, pp. 29–42, 54–57, 79, 89–90, 120–24; Meyers 2022; cf. Despotis 2005b), Melito finds a way for Christians to co-exist with Roman imperial authority, pointing out that sin and death are the primordial tyrants of humanity (*OP* 50–56). Submission and obedience to earthly powers, as part of God's all-encompassing order and in light of Christ's Second Coming, is a point made in Rom. 13 (Wan 2021, pp. 79–102; cf. 1 Pet. 2:15), where Paul instructs Christians to pay taxes and honour earthly authorities, not only to escape the state's wrath but because this is dictated by the Christians' own conscience, since earthly authorities are appointed by God. Yet Paul's understanding of submission to the state should be read in the context of history's eschatological destination. Describing the Lord's *Parousia* in 1 Thess. 4:13–18, Paul draws, like *OP*, from theophanic, apocalyptic, and Greco-Roman imagery (Peach 2016) in order to stress that Christ and only Christ is above all earthly power.

Therefore, when Melito calls his community to endure tyranny and rejoice in Christ's triumph, he does not exclude the Gentiles. On the contrary, *OP* 92 claims that the Gentiles treated Christ better (and even worshipped and admired him!) than the Jews, who killed their own Lord and benefactor and are thus excluded. This is not the moment to discuss Melito's complex relationship with the Jews and Judaism, and perhaps also his covert attack on heterodox Christians presented as Judaisers (Cohick 1998; Murray 2004, pp. 101–16; Aasgaard 2005, pp. 161–72). What is important to note is that Melito leaves the door open for Gentiles to be received into the Christian community and exculpates imperial authority from the ultimate responsibility of anti-Christian violence. This point is further developed in his *Apol.* to Marcus Aurelius.

4. Tyranny in Melito's *Apology*

In the spring of 175, Avidius Cassius, one of Marcus Aurelius' most trusted generals, was proclaimed emperor by his soldiers in Egypt, with Syria and Palestine also accepting him as their ruler. The rest of the empire remained loyal to Marcus and Commodus received the *toga virilis* in the Danube on 7 July. By the end of the month, Avidius Cassius was dead, and the revolt ended. Marcus and Commodus then embarked on a long journey to the eastern provinces (late summer 175 to autumn 176), especially in the areas recently in revolt, so as to re-affirm imperial control over Rome's subjects. It was during their return to Rome, possibly in the spring of 176, that Marcus and Commodus passed from western Asia Minor, stopping at Ephesus and Smyrna (Bowman 1970, p. 25; Hekster 2002, pp. 34–38; McLynn 2009, pp. 368–90). Grant suggested that Sardis was part of the emperor's tour and that Marcus' visit was the occasion for delivering the *Apol.*, as an expression of loyalty to Marcus and with the intention of attracting imperial protection against persecution (Grant 1988, pp. 5–7). Such an appeal would have been by no means a *unicum*; in the words of Olivier Hekster, "in practice the daily government of the empire consisted mainly of replying to individual petitions and requests. The physical vicinity of an emperor made an impact"(Hekster 2002, p. 38). In dealing with Cassius' revolt, Marcus had showed the world his famous *clementia*, adding to his reputation as a "good" emperor (Grant 1988, p. 6; Horst 2013, pp. 182–89). Melito must have seen all these as an opportunity to win over Marcus for his Christian community, as did Apollinaris of Hierapolis, who addressed the emperor in his own *Apology* (*EH* IV.26.1).

The rhetoric of tyranny in the *Apol.*, fragmentally quoted by Eusebius in *EH* IV.26.5–11, is tightly interwoven with Melito's aim to present Christianity as the philosophy of τῶν θεοσεβῶν γένος or *gens piorum* ("the clan or community of the pious"; cf. Smith 2006) in Rufinus' translation, responding to accusations that the Christians reject the gods (ἀθεότης) (Harnack (2010); note that the term θεοσεβὴς appears also in six fourth-century

[?] inscriptions from the Jewish synagogue at Sardis, perhaps denoting Gentile sympathisers of Judaism: (Koch 2006; Edwards 2009, p. 816)). This is the reason behind the *novi decretis per omnem Asiam promulgatis* (καινοῖς ἐλαυνόμενον δόγμασιν κατὰ τὴν Ἀσίαν; "new decrees throughout Asia"), which have introduced new persecutions against the "innocent" (μηδὲν ἀδικοῦντας, *innocentes*) Christian communities of Asia Minor (IV.26.5). Marcus is himself just and would not have wished to commit an act of injustice (IV.26.6). "Our philosophy" (ἡ γὰρ καθ᾽ ἡμᾶς φιλοσοφία, *etenim filosofia haec, qua nos utimur*), says Melito, had begun among the barbarians, meaning the Jews, but flourished during the reign of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE). The consolidation and growth of the Roman Empire, thus, coincided with the rise of Christianity, which was respected among other cults by nearly all Roman rulers, linked to Marcus and Commodus through a symbolic line of ancestry going back to Augustus (IV.26.7–8). As Melito's loaded rhetoric claims, only Nero (54–68) and Domitian (81–96), persuaded by the lies of evil advisors, persecuted the Christians; but even this wrongdoing was corrected by Marcus' pious fathers, as confirmed by Hadrian's rescript to Minucius Fundanus (122–23), proconsul of Asia (IV.26.9–10) (Cook 2010, pp. 252–80). Isn't it reasonable to expect Marcus, an emperor much more merciful and advanced in the philosophical life, to be benevolent towards the Christians (IV.26.11)?

Seeing philosophy and tyranny as opposite poles in Melito's argument and taking into consideration both *OP* and the *Apol.* enables us to understand more deeply the essence of his reasoning. Two points stand out:

1. In terms of teaching and beliefs, Stoicism and Christianity share some common ground, strengthening Melito's argument that Christianity should be treated as the philosophy of the *gens piorum*.[1] This is not the moment to provide an extensive discussion of these shared commonalities. Stoic terminology, ideas, and hermeneutical approaches have been traced in *OP* (and are discussed in more detail in the text's editions/translations and secondary bibliography), including the following: (i) The principle of God's immanence (*OP* 9; Perler 1966, p. 140); εὐστάθησον in *OP* 24 (preferred in ed. Perler (1966) but not in ed. Hall (1979), who reads συστάθητι) as a *paraenesis* to the first-born's friend to remain calm before death, thus being consistent between his impulses and actions (Perler 1966; cf. Sauvé Meyer 2018, p. 122, n. 22). (ii) The overall typological interpretation of biblical events throughout *OP*, especially at 34–43, is reminiscent of Stoic and pre-Stoic (e.g., Pythagorean and Platonic) views of symbolism and allegory, which interacted more or less with Jewish thought (Kwak 2022, pp. 35–64). Melito is considered the first ecclesiastical author to have defined with clarity the principles of Christian typological hermeneutics, namely that the subject of biblical interpretation is the Christological fulfilment of what had been foretold through symbols and prophecies (Panagopoulos 2010, pp. 197–202, 220). (iii) The concept that humans by nature are receptive of (or capable for) good and evil (ὁ δὲ ἄνθρωπος φύσει δεκτικὸς ὢν ἀγαθοῦ καὶ πονηροῦ in *OP* 47; (Perler 1966, p. 161; Karamanolis 2020, pp. 218–19)). (iv) The Spirit is presented as Christ's seal on our souls (ἐσφράγισεν ἡμῶν τὰς ψυχὰς τῷ ἰδίῳ πνεύματι in *OP* 67; cf. Eph. 1:13), implying the Spirit's materiality and alluding to the baptism ritual (Perler 1966, p. 173). Note that, according to Eusebius, one of Melito's works was a treatise on "God embodied" (περὶ τοῦ ἐνσωμάτου Θεοῦ), while Origen seems to have considered Melito an anthropomorphite (Hall (1979, pp. xii, xiv); on the material Spirit in Stoicism and Early Christianity, see (Engberg-Pedersen 2010, 2016)). Strong parallels with Homeric exegesis by Posidonius the Stoic (d. *c.* 51 BCE) have been also detected in a fragment of Melito's *On Baptism* (ed. Pitra 1884, pp. 3–5; Grant 1950). All the above indicate that Melito's perception of Christianity as the philosophy of the *gens piorum* was not a rhetorical firework but was based on the appropriation of philosophical, especially Stoic, elements in his own theological works. That Christians had been called by God to become his holy nation is an idea traced in Rom. 2:24 and 1 Pet. 2:9. What Melito does is that he describes this calling in philosophical terms, showing to

both Christians and non-Christians that Christianity is indeed the philosophy of the "pious clan or community".

2. The same "tyrannical" emperors, Nero and Domitian, had persecuted both Stoics and Christians; since Marcus is a just emperor and true Stoic philosopher, Christians should flourish under his rule. The historicity and degree of Melito's claim concerning these persecutions will not concern us here (cf. Barnes 2010, p. 37). The essence of the matter is that Melito's negative reference to Nero and Domitian intended to strike a chord with Marcus, drawing parallels between the Christian martyrs of the *gens piorum* and the Stoic heroes opposing tyranny (primarily Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus, but also Epictetus and others) (Boissier 1892, esp. at pp. 91–105; Wirszubski 1968, pp. 124–71; Wilkinson 2012, who criticises Boissier's understanding of a solid Stoic front against imperial power and stresses the concept of republicanism as an antidote to tyranny). That the first two Stoics are mentioned by Marcus in *Med*. I.14 as embodiments of virtue stresses the emperor's conscious attempt to follow their path, both in his private life and public actions. By dividing Roman emperors into "just" and "tyrants" in respect to Christianity (and implicitly Stoicism), Melito aimed at creating a connection with Marcus, based on the common experiences of both philosophies, namely their common opposition to tyrannical rule. What might be also implied here is the widespread Homeric theme that the reign of a bad leader negatively affects the lives of his subjects by causing divine wrath (cf. Pharaonic tyranny in OP), as well as that a virtuous ruler, as Melito seems to have considered Marcus, is beneficial for his people (Pavlou 2022, pp. 7–8).

5. Conclusions

The article set out to explore the concept of tyranny in Melito of Sardis, proposing a more precise dating for *OP* (*c.* 167) and building on Grant's suggestion that the *Apol.* to Marcus Aurelius was written during the emperor's visit to Asia Minor, possibly in the spring of 176. From the historian's perspective, Melito's work fits well into the theological, social, cultural, and political context of Marcus Aurelius' reign. Melito's perception of tyranny in the two texts seems to reflect the development and consistency of his thought regarding Roman political authority before and after Avidius Cassius' revolt. It also underlines the plasticity of the bishop's arguments in respect to different audiences: his congregation and the Roman emperor. Melito's Pauline spiritualisation of resistance and positive view of imperial authority was a realistic line of pastoral management that might suggest that his views were not shared by all members of his congregation, some of whom might have advocated a more uncompromising stance (cf. Witulski 2007, p. 289; Arcani 2016, p. 229, n. 16). Last but not least, Melito's understanding of tyranny sheds light into his appropriation of Stoicism and the apologetic presentation of Christianity as the philosophy of the *gens piorum*, regardless of his ultimate failure (cf. Burliga 2011) to persuade Marcus that Christianity was a valid equivalent to Stoicism (cf. *Med*. I.6, III.16, VII.68, VIII.51, XI.3). Melito and Marcus shared the same world but were, at the same time, worlds apart.

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Note

[1] Probably sometime in the fourth century, the Jewish community of Sardis employed the Stoic term πρόνοια, already used in 4 Maccabees and attested by epigraphic evidence from the Sardis synagogue, to denote God's divine providence. This suggests a high degree of integration into local Hellenic culture (Kraabel 1996; cf. Rajak 1998). The impressive synagogue of Sardis was a Roman basilica attached onto the palestra of the bath-gymnasium. There is no scholarly consensus on the chronology of the building (late fourth or even sixth century), which certainly post-dated Melito's episcopate (Rautman 2011, pp. 15–17). Generally, on Stoicism and Christian authors of the period, see Ramelli (2003), who tends to support the attribution of the Syriac *Apol.* to Melito.

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