

November 20

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Rabbi Akiva (ca. 50-135) Jewish martyr

On an unknown day of the year 135 of the common era, Rabbi Akiva died of torture at the hands of his Roman prison guards, happy to give his life in fulfillment of the Torah's command, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your strength."

A native of Galilee, Akiva was probably born in the middle of the first century to a poor family of 'am ha-arez. A shepherd by profession, he was hired by a rich landowner of Jerusalem, who strongly objected to Akiva's proposal of marriage to his daughter Rachel. The couple were abandoned to dire poverty, but according to tradition, Rachel agreed to marry Akiva on the condition that he devote himself entirely to studying Torah. So it was that Akiva spent thirteen years at the school of Lydda, and perhaps almost that much time at the school of Yavneh. He became one of the greatest tannaim, and probably the most accomplished Jewish scholar of his era.

Akiva opened his own school at Benè Beraq, dedicated himself with utmost humility to commenting upon the Torah, and became one of the most ardent defenders of the canonicity of the Song of Songs. As intense as his love of Scripture was, it did not distract him from attending to the needs of the very poor.

When the Bar Kokhva revolt began in 132, Akiva joined those who hoped the messianic era had arrived. He was imprisoned for refusing to stop teaching the Torah in public, despite an imperial prohibition. With his martyrdom he sanctified the Lord's name, giving the supreme gift of a life that had been wholly dedicated to listening obediently to God.

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

ANGLICANS:

Edmund (d. 870), king of the East Angles, martyr

Priscilla Lydia Sellon (d. 1876), restorer of the religious life in the Church of England

WESTERN CATHOLICS:

Crispin of Ecija (3rd cent.), bishop (Spanish-Mozarabic calendar)

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (1 hatur/hedar):

Anne, mother of the virgin Mary

Pachomius (d. 346), monk

Elsa', monk (Ethiopian Church)

LUTHERANS:

Bernard of Hildesheim (d. 1022), bishop

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:

Forefeast of the entrance of the most holy Mother of God into the Temple

Gregory the Decapolite (d. ca. 862), monk

Proclus (d. 446), archbishop of Constantinople

Dosio di Durostoro (d. 303), martyr (Romanian Church)