

This now is the final of Stephanie Cobb's posts on the painlessness of martyrdom, as explained more fully in her recent book. And now we get to the heart of the matter: if it doesn't hurt, uh, why is that???

Again, Stephanie has graciously agreed to answer your questions — so ask away.

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In my first two posts, I asked "Does martyrdom hurt?" and explored reasons why early Christian martyr texts might reasonably answer "yes!" but then detailed the ways in which these texts actually make the counterintuitive argument: "No! Martyrdom doesn't hurt." In this—my last—post on *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts*, I want to explore a slightly different question: "Why doesn't martyrdom hurt?"

To read a text and note the language it uses is the easy part of research. To explain why certain language is preferred by a particular author or across time and space—especially when it's unexpected language—is not only the hard part of research, it's also the part that makes it meaningful. In other words, not many people will care *that* martyr texts used language of analgesia and anesthesia; they may (I hope) care *why*. And so the rest of this post offers a few ways of contextualizing the claims I originally found so confounding.

1. Eschatological hopes. The discourse of painlessness would have been easily understood in terms of eschatological expectations. The martyr texts are apocalyptic texts in that they posit a dualistic worldview, anticipate the coming end of time, final judgment, and the eternal rewards of the faithful. But, at least for some of these authors, Christians enduring torture do not have to wait until the end of time to receive the benefits of their salvation. Rather, the texts suggest that the martyrs attain these rewards—at least in part—even before their deaths. That is, we may find in some of these narratives an assertion of a realized eschatology: for the martyrs, the benefits of future glory are translated into the present world.

Of particular import in this case are the beliefs about the resurrected and glorified body. The third century North African author, Tertullian, asserts that the resurrected flesh will be "impassible, inasmuch as it has been liberated by the Lord so that it is no longer possible for it to suffer" (*Res.* 57.13). The medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum uses a beautiful phrase to explain this expectation: she suggests that a "sort of anesthesia of glory" might spill over from the "promised resurrection into the ravaged flesh of the arena" (*The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 200-1336*, 45). Relevant to this promise is Revelation 21:4, which describes the New Jerusalem: in this glorified place, "death will be no more, mourning and crying and distress/pain will be no more." In the bodies of the martyrs, Satan has been defeated and through the martyrs' impassibility, the kingdom of God has been realized.

2. Stoic discourses. Martyr texts—like so many other Christian texts in antiquity—draw on Stoic philosophy. Assertions of Christian disinterestedness in pain correspond with certain understandings of Stoic teachings. For Stoic philosophy, pain must be understood within the larger goal of living in accordance with nature. One must accept what one cannot change. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, for instance, taught that we cannot change whether or not

we are executed, but we can control how we react to execution: I can stop myself from groaning or crying out or wailing. Generally speaking, Stoics did not claim that the philosopher could overcome the sensation of pain altogether; rather, they argued for self-control in the face of pain. But there is evidence of certain misunderstandings of Stoic teachings on this exact point.

The Jewish Stoic author of 4 Maccabees is one case in point: he argues that “devout reason” masters the passions that stand in the way of manliness, namely: anger, fear, and pain (1.4). In relating the story of the elderly Jewish man Eleazar, the narrator explains that reason “masters external pain” (6.34). Similarly, a group of brothers who successfully resist the tyrant’s demands demonstrate that they were “complete masters of pain” (8.28). 4 Maccabees was known and used by early Christians, and so it would not be surprising for Christians, too, to associate reason with the ability to rise above the experience of bodily pain.

3. Judicial discourses. I mentioned in my last post that inflicting pain was central to the judicial system of the Roman empire. One way of understanding claims to Christian painlessness is to see it as a response to pagan claims to the efficacy of judicial torture. That is to say, both pagans and Christians used existing discourses to claim cultural capital for themselves and to deny that capital to their opponents.

Pagan authors cast Christians as stubborn members of politically threatening groups who, as such, were justly tortured and executed. These authors narrate the triumph of Roman power over lawless individuals who threaten the empire. Since, as we have already seen, judicial pain was inflicted publicly in order to serve as a deterrent to others, Christian rejection of the experience of pain was especially subversive. In their claims to Christian insensitivity to pain, the martyr texts upend the entire logic of the Roman judicial system: through these narratives, Christian audiences are taught that what appears to be happening is not what, in fact, happens. Christian martyr texts reject the premise that Rome can harm the bodies of the faithful.

By undermining the judicial theory of pain, the early Christian martyr texts destabilize the entire system that supports the social, political, and religious life of imperial Rome. The Roman persecutors are found to be wholly inept at achieving their two related goals: first, they cannot hurt the Christian body—no matter how much torture they apply—and second, their attempts to dissuade others from joining the Christian faith inevitably backfire. Far from being a deterrent, the martyr texts assert that public torture brings *more* people into the fold.

Even more important than what the texts teach us about the individual body, however, is the lesson this counter-discourse teaches about the social body. The martyr’s body is simultaneously individual and social: it illustrates the strengths and (potential) weaknesses of Christianity as a social phenomenon as much as it does those of any particular individual. As such the Christian body’s resistance to the power of Rome takes on even more meaning. If the persecution of Christianity had as its aim the destruction of the movement, the impenetrability of the individual body demonstrates the impenetrability of the social body. Rome can no more destroy Christianity as a whole than it can harm any one of its members.

Before ending my stint as guest blogger, I’d like to make one final point about the discourse of painlessness in early Christian martyr texts. I have come to believe that we misread these texts if we insist on their historicity or that they must have at least a veneer of historicity to them. In the contexts in which they were written—when Christians feared (rightly or not) that they might be caught up in Roman persecutions—these texts have much loftier aims

than merely reciting the “facts” of a particular event. Rather, I now read these texts as nothing less than miracle stories. It is not the individual Christian martyr whose story is front and center. These narratives focus primarily on the work of God. In the moments when an individual would feel most alone, these authors insist that nothing could be further from the truth. Bodies that *should* be in pain are not because they have been divinely delivered from that experience. God is not absent when Christians are standing in the arena; God is there, suffering *for* them, protecting their bodies from the pain that inevitably results from physical torture. The Christian martyr texts are not interested in “real” bodies. They are telling the story of God’s interaction in and with his people. These texts teach us not to be deceived by what we see with our eyes. Rather, we must look with the eyes of faith to see that the Lord is standing by, strengthening the martyrs, comforting them, healing them, protecting them, and rewarding them. In the end, the martyr texts narrate the miracle of divine deliverance.



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