

One of my most accomplished former students is Stephanie Cobb, now the George and Sallie Cutchin Camp Professor of Bible in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Richmond. While doing her PhD at UNC, Stephanie became deeply interested in the accounts of martyrdom in early Christianity, leading to a dissertation with one of the best titles ever (it really does describe the book but it's unusually clever): *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*.

Stephanie has become one of the leading experts in this field, backed up now with an intriguing and important second book on the martyr texts. It will be of particular interest to members of the blog and so I've asked Stephanie to make some guest posts about it. Here is the first.

Bart recently asked if I would be interested in writing a few posts about my latest book, *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts*. But before diving into *Divine Deliverance* itself, I want to back up for a moment to talk a bit about what I love so much about early Christian martyr texts. I became fascinated by these (mostly 2nd and 3rd cen. ce) accounts in grad school. My first sustained study of them—*Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*—looked at the ways martyr texts utilized gendered language to make arguments about Christian superiority over against pagans and Jews, on the one hand, and to dictate a normative gendered hierarchy within the Christian community, on the other hand. As I worked on this book, scouring the Greek and Latin texts carefully for gendered language and allusions, I stumbled upon another sort of language that I wasn't expecting and that, to be honest, confounded me: over and over again, in a variety of different ways, these texts claimed that the martyrs did not feel pain when they were tortured!

And so, *Divine Deliverance*, at its core, asks a rather simple question: "Does martyrdom hurt?" The answer may seem so obvious as to make the question ridiculous. These texts talk about Christians being burned alive, thrown into the amphitheater to face gladiators or beasts, being hanged by their thumbs, and a wide assortment of other kinds of tortures that I'm fairly certain hurt a lot. The point of torture was to entice Christians to deny their faith and return to the traditional religions of the Roman empire. Pain was a judicial tool used by the Roman government. Pain not only worked to push individuals to deny their faith, since it was typically publicly inflicted, it served as a deterrent for others. Every tool in the prosecutors' tool bag inflicted some sort of pain—whether psychological, physiological, or emotional. So, martyrdom *must* hurt.

Theologically speaking, moreover, the point of these narratives must surely be—right?—to communicate to audiences the details of the torture and execution of these exceptional Christians. For most of us, I think, the martyrs stand as exemplary individuals who withstood excruciating pain in order to faithfully witness to Jesus. (The term "martyr," by the way means "to witness" in Greek; it is judicial language that Christians appropriated and eventually applied to those who testified in court and were executed for doing so.) When we hear about their travails, we might wince and wonder whether we have what it takes to do what they did. They are the superheroes of Christianity: they have powers that

we can't imagine having ourselves, and they use them to build up the faith. As the third-century North African Christian, Tertullian, famously said: "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Indeed, it is precisely the detailed descriptions of the dissolution of bodies that has led scholars to the consensus that Christian authors of this period specifically focused on Christian suffering. This interest was part and parcel of a larger social movement—as Judith Perkins argues in her wonderful analysis of Christianity of this period in *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*—that acknowledged, for the first time, bodies that feel pain and experience suffering. She calls this new cultural representation the "suffering self." Authors of this period—Roman, Jewish, and Christian—began discussing in some detail the experiences of the suffering body: twisted ankles, intestinal distresses, fevers, disembowelment. Christian writings of the period, it could be argued, are all concerned—at some level—about persecution/prosecution, suffering, and their effects on the faith. Perkins rightly notes that stories of individuals in Christian literature have a social function much larger than communicating one person's experience: they simultaneously describe the individual *and* social body. If the second century bishop, Ignatius, anticipated he would face "fire and cross, packs of beasts, dissections, divisions, scattering of bones, chopping up of limbs, grinding up of the entire body," he was also describing what Christianity at large should expect. To be a Christian, Perkins argues, *is* to suffer.

Didn't Jesus and Paul, after all, teach that their followers should expect rejection and suffering? In Matthew 5, Jesus tells his followers to pray for those who persecute them. They should expect, that is, to suffer. In Luke 14, Jesus teaches that only those who "take up the cross" are his disciples. In Mark 13, Jesus' followers are told they will be hated by everyone. In Matthew 23, Jesus predicts that some of those listening to him will be crucified. Paul speaks often of his own imprisonment and torture. (2 Cor 11; 1 Thess 2; Rom 8; Gal 6). He recites this history as a way of authenticating his faith. As heirs of these texts and traditions, then, surely the martyr texts anticipate and value bodily suffering. It fulfills Jesus' prophecies and, like Paul's, differentiates true from false Christians. This understanding of Christian pain is not only biblical, though. Pope Benedict XVI taught that true Christian love entails suffering. "The cross," he explained, "reminds us that there is no true love without suffering, there is no gift without pain."

(<https://zenit.org/articles/benedict-xvi-no-suffering-no-love/>) Christian identity—both individually and corporately—seems inextricably connected with bodily pain.

Does martyrdom hurt? Despite all that I've said above. Despite the sensibleness of these arguments and the obviousness of the answer "yes," in *Divine Deliverance* I argue that the martyr texts reflect a very different approach to the question. These ancient discussions of Christian martyrdom reveal an abiding interest in the *insensitivity* of the Christian body during torture and martyrdom. Claims to painlessness are crucial to the texts' work of (re-)defining Christianity in the ancient world: while Christians could not deny the reality that they were subject to state violence, they could argue that they were not ultimately vulnerable to its painful effects. Thus early Christian texts distinguish categories that modern readers tend to collapse: torture and suffering, injury and pain. The martyrs are tortured and injured but they do not experience suffering and pain. Texts produced between the second and fourth centuries reflect Christian communities' interactions with their contemporaries—pagans, Jews, and other Christians—and the development of their belief systems. The martyr texts' claims to impassibility (the martyrs' inability to feel pain) and/or impassivity (the martyrs' lack of response to pain) have repercussions not only for the power

structures undergirding Roman violence but also for the development of Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. And *that* will be the subject of my next post.

This particular post is available to everyone with Internet and Interest. But most posts aren't on the blog aren't. There are five posts a week. Wanna read them? Join! It won't cost much and all the proceeds go to charity.



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