Here now is the second of three posts by Stephanie Cobb on her recent book about early Christian accounts of the martyrs. As you’ll see, she makes some rather astonishing and counter-intuitive claims. But I think she’s completely right. This is fascinating material.

Stephanie Cobb’s most popular books are *Dying to Be Men* and *Divine Deliverance*.

In the previous post, I detailed the reasons martyr texts *ought* to focus on the suffering and pain of early Christians experiencing torture and being executed for their faith. I also, though, noted that despite those reasons, the texts exhibit an interest in protecting the Christian body from the experience of pain. In this post, we’ll look at some of the ways Christian authors accomplish their goals of illustrating Christian insensitivity to pain.

But first, a quick caveat: in my work, I focus on rhetoric and narrative—not history per se. That is, I am *not* arguing that torture does not hurt. In fact, I am certain that torture hurts and to deny that is a dangerous political/theological stance to take in the world in which we live. So I want to be crystal clear that I am not making a claim about historical bodies and their insensitivities to judicial torture. There *are* ways one could make these arguments (i.e., bodies go into shock, etc.) but those arguments go beyond the evidence given in the narratives themselves: they assume the historicity of the narrative account and then try to explain it physiologically. I think that is a rather backwards approach. Instead, I ask about how the rhetoric of painlessness works within the larger narrative world constructed within the martyr text: what does pain represent in the narrative world? What does rejection of pain mean in the narrative world? Who is acting effectively and whose actions are ineffective? By asking these questions—rather than those of history—I hope to get a sense of how these texts functioned for Christian communities in ways that go far beyond recording the death of an individual Christian.

So, turning to these early Christian texts, when we ask of them “Does martyrdom hurt?”, they answer back unequivocally: “no.” This assertion is ubiquitous: it is found in ...

This is a very strange and amazing claim. To see more about it, you will need to keep reading — which means you need to be a member of the blog. Join up and see!

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