# *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts* by L. Stephanie Cobb (review)


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sociology and liturgy will find several stimulating proposals. And scholars working on the Hippolytan corpus will be grateful finally to have an English translation of the *In Cant.*, and to have its various fragments presented together.

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L. Stephanie Cobb
*Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts*
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While the iconic stories of Daniel in the lions' den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego facing the fiery furnace (Dan 3, 6) have often been dubbed the first martyr acts, the striking contrast with both later Jewish and Christian martyrological narratives is, of course, that the heroes do not die; God intervenes to save them. While the narrator of Daniel nods in the direction of the contrasting fortunes of those persecuted and—with no divine deliverance—killed under Antiochus IV (Dan 3.18), the martyr tradition that flowed from Daniel shares only the faithful resolve of the heroes rather than the outcome. Instead, both Jewish and Christian martyrologies almost invariably result in the death of the martyr. With apparently no divine intervention, accounts of Christian martyrdom celebrate those who most closely followed the model of Jesus's acceptance of suffering, endured—or even embraced—pain and torture to maintain their confession, and ultimately won martyrdom. Indeed, since Judith Perkins's landmark work on the "Suffering Self," a scholarly consensus has emerged that sees pain and suffering as the representation of the way in which Christians understood their collective self: a suffering body. Thus, pain—specifically the endurance of it—stands as a central interpretive focus for constructions of Christian social identity.

However, in *Divine Deliverance*, Stephanie Cobb mounts an assault on this consensus. In the first three chapters, through a close and convincing reading of martyr texts, Cobb argues, paradoxically, that while torture is described—often in graphic detail—there is in fact no (or little) valorization of pain in Christian martyr stories, not even a celebration of heroic endurance. This is a dramatic and significant intervention given the role suffering has played in constructions of Christian identities. Textual violence is not "real" violence, insists Cobb, and perhaps most provocative of all, "within the discrete narrative worlds of these texts—if not in reality—martyrdom does not hurt" (217). To be sure, the martyrs suffer, but they do not feel pain. The bodies of the martyrs are textual bodies that primarily communicate a message to the hearer.

Cobb perceptively notes that the world of these texts and their hearers was a world full of pain, with no medical pain relief readily available. Therefore, against all audience expectation, in that world of pain, the martyrs' faith, a faith

they share, is uniquely analgesic. In paying attention to the audience of these Christian writings, Cobb demonstrates how Christian identity could be created and reinforced through the dramatic communal reading and hearing of the martyr acts. Martyrology, she argues, is affective literature that evokes emotions in the hearer in order that they might identify with those being tortured. The audience cannot be disinterested bystanders; Christians are automatically set on the side of the tortured martyr. The confession *Christianos sum* blurs the distinction between the individual martyr and those who read or hear the martyr narrative, reinforcing the boundary between persecuted and persecutor. Moreover, by convincingly demonstrating that pain is not a major concern of these texts, Cobb undermines the traditional Bollandist notion that the presence of miraculous elements, such as insensibility to pain, should be a primary factor in dismissing the historicity of a martyr account; the purpose of *all* martyr texts is primarily theological.

In the fourth chapter, Cobb turns to the texts in which pain is discussed. Largely, the pain martyrs feel is separated from their persecution, and is associated instead with the pain of leaving family members or fellow Christians behind. Indeed, Christian identity is reinforced, as Cobb notes that it is generally those who are faithless and recant (as especially in the *Martyrs of Lyons*), rather than the martyrs, who feel pain. Similarly, in other texts, pain is transferred from the tortured to the torturer.

In the final chapter, Cobb places discourses of pain and painlessness in its Graeco-Roman context. While she notes similarities with Stoic ideas of resistance to pain, Cobb argues that painlessness in Christian martyr texts constitutes a counter-narrative to a dominant Roman judicial ideology that would render the Christians defeated criminals.

While Cobb's rejection of pain as a locus of interpretative significance is important, an equally significant intervention is her calling attention to a theological reading of martyr acts that has been, to my knowledge, overlooked: the implied presence of the character God, who might otherwise appear to be missing from these texts. In other words, the apparent absence of God in Christian martyr texts is not in fact a significant departure from the non-martyr miraculous deliverance stories of Daniel. God does deliver the Christian martyr, but it is from pain rather than death. Through the divine gift of analgesia in the face of torture, God enters these Christian narratives to declare the martyr innocent against Roman judicial claims.

In *Divine Deliverance*, Stephanie Cobb challenges two significant areas of scholarly consensus: a lack of concern for pain in identity construction of early Christianity, and the apparent absence of God as a distinguishing feature of Christian martyrdom. This excellent book will encourage a re-evaluation of these early Christian martyr texts so that more attention is paid to the theological, christological, and eschatological commitments contained therein.

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