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L. Stephanie Cobb, *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. ISBN: 9780520293359. Pp. 264. \$95.00. Hardcover.

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Stephanie Cobb's book *Divine Deliverance: Pain and Painlessness in Early Christian Martyr Texts* argues that the early Christian martyrs—as they are depicted in the extant literary traditions—do not experience pain as a result of their martyrdom. Her work follows the literary-critical and social-identity approaches most closely associated with Judith Perkins and Elizabeth Castelli. The main supposition undergirding this work is that Christian authors in late antiquity participated in a complex process of discursive self-definition and that the second- and third-century martyr texts fall into this same pattern. Cobb's thesis, however, contradicts the general scholarly consensus, which states that the martyrs celebrated pain and in fact accentuated suffering as the fulcrum of Christian identity formation. Instead of focusing on pain as the locus of meaning for the early Christian martyrologies, then, Cobb seeks to interpret depictions of pain and painlessness as literary devices meant both to distinguish between competing identity groups and to enhance the value of Christian membership. She insists that *Divine Deliverance* does not attempt to disprove theories centered on the subject of pain but rather offers a feasible alternative based on the existing literature. The literary investigation presented in this work seeks to read the texts for their sociological effect and not their historical value. This book, in other words, offers a reading of the martyr traditions as ideologically driven documents written to consolidate a unique Christian identity rather than written to provide historical data. Cobb's thesis is an intriguing alternative to the dominant scholarly conclusion concerning pain and suffering in the early Christian martyr texts.

The book is divided into five chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Chapter 1, "Bodies in Pain," sets the tone for the rest of the work. In this chapter, Cobb addresses the prevailing conclusion regarding pain and suffering in the early Christian martyr texts. She posits that scholars have emphasized pain as the pivotal point of the martyrologies because of an underlying assumption that the martyr texts tell us about what *really* happened historically. This position has been buttressed both by a Bollandist tradition that emphasized the historical reliability

of the martyrologies and by a medieval emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, itself predicated on a philosophy of Christian passibility. She contends that readers have implicitly imposed the feeling of pain when the narratives present detailed accounts of torturing, stabbing, and burning bodies because it is considered the appropriate reaction to such experiences and because medieval texts made pain the primary mechanism by which to imitate Christ. Instead, Cobb argues that the texts should be read as ideological compositions meant to develop Christian identity rather than recapitulate historical content. When read in this way, the narratives “do not reflect on the meaningfulness of pain, but rather they describe the martyrs’ deaths without betraying any interest in pain whatsoever” (23). Instead of making pain the primary experience of the martyrs, then, the texts craft martyrs who are invariably impervious to it.

Chapter 2, “Text and Audience,” explores the medium by which the principles of painlessness are expressed. According to Cobb, the martyr texts “build community by envisioning the world in dualistic terms: Christians are good and their goodness is manifest by God’s favor; pagans and other persecutors are bad” (37). The epistolary genre employed by the authors is particularly conducive for this sort of agenda. Its literary style is one that lures hearers and readers into the mind of the author and clearly establishes who *we* are in opposition to oppressive outsiders. In this way, Cobb argues, late antique Christian writers skillfully anticipated and subverted the expectations of their audience. In her own words, “martyr narratives replace the audience’s preliminary expectation—that of pain—with a new reading that asserts painlessness. The narrative descriptions of torture lead audiences past superficial observations to deeper, spiritual insights” (46). As such, situations that should illicit reactions of extreme anguish instead explicitly reject it or omit it entirely. The texts in question thus undercut the torture of the martyrs by state power in favor of a worldview based on divine salvation from pain and suffering. The absence of pain in these texts, coupled with salvation from oppressive powers, represents the primary trope of the martyrologies. In so doing, not only does the narrative assuage the experience of the martyrs but it also conceptualizes a binary contrast between the oppressive state and the power of God.

Chapter 3, “Divine Analgesia,” investigates how martyr texts deny pain as a locus of meaning for martyrdom. Cobb identifies five ways in which the narratives reject the existence of pain: using language of analgesia or anesthesia; separating the martyrs’ spirit/soul from their body; positing the presence of divine characters assisting the martyr; portraying unexpected outcomes of torture such as refreshment and healing; and depicting unexpected responses to torture like silence or humor. In each case, Cobb cites a litany of examples to corroborate her conclusions. Altogether, these strategies of painlessness function to construct martyrs—and, by association, Christians writ large—who claim victory over the expected outcomes of human oppression. The martyr texts exercise the authority to control the discourse about the execution of Christians and do so in order to portray martyrs who do not succumb to the pain and suffering of hegemonic persecution. Instead, the texts enhance the experience of the martyrs by focusing on the spiritual superiority of Christian heroes who oppose spiritually barbaric authorities. Cobb writes, “The Christian martyr texts I have discussed thus far do not shy away from detailed descriptions of the dissolution of the body. These Christian *ekphraseis*, however, serve a surprising goal: they claim divine analgesia at the moment of death in order to reframe, redefine, and replace the image of bloody defeat with one of miraculous anesthesia” (91).

In chapter 4, “Whose Pain?,” Cobb turns away from identifying painlessness in the martyr texts in order to analyze how the presence of pain operates as a rhetorical tool for group differentiation. “The discourse of painlessness,” Cobb notes, “does not exist in isolation apart from larger concerns about who experiences pain and why. Martyr texts do not merely reject pain as an

experience of the Christian body; they also employ pain to illustrate group allegiances” (120). The *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* and, more specifically, the pain that Perpetua exhibits by screaming in chapter twenty-one takes up the bulk of Cobb’s attention in this chapter. She argues that Perpetua’s experience of pain exists in relation to worldly attachments that distract from her martyrdom. This, for instance, includes Perpetua’s concern for her father and her commitment to her daughter. Once Perpetua is focused on her martyrdom she does not experience pain from the dragon, ladder, animals, or gladiator. Moreover, episodes of pain extend to apostates, pagan observers, and the persecutors who attempt to inflict damage on the martyrs. Cobb demonstrates passages in which people who renounce their faith to avoid prosecution end up suffering greater struggles than the martyrs; in which onlookers feel pity and mourn for the martyrs; and in which opponents—as well as their weapons!—grow weary and frustrated at their inability to inflict pain on the martyrs’ bodies. Cobb also briefly surveys later Christian reflections on the pain of the martyrs.

Finally, chapter 5, “Narratives and Counternarratives,” situates the rhetorical strategy of painlessness in the wider context of Christian and non-Christian discourses. Cobb maintains that rhetoric about pain functions on a cultural level beyond questions of historicity. For Cobb, the claim to impassibility in fact undermines Roman hegemony, borrows from Jewish and Christian eschatological narratives, and corresponds closely to Stoic teachings. This chapter is helpful for supporting the premise of impassibility in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman milieus. Furthermore, Cobb makes the interesting observation that the martyrologies shift the discourse from prosecution to persecution. That is to say, the torture depicted in the martyr texts is not meant to provoke a confession. On the contrary, the Christians offer their confessions proudly and vociferously. The martyr texts instead portray civil prosecution as the persecution of Christians for the very crime of *being* Christian in what can be read as a sort of quasi-identity politics. In the end, however, the oppressive power of the state exercises no strength over the Christian body—understood both individually and collectively. “Christian discursive practice,” Cobb suggests, “therefore, combats both judicial aims of the *quaestio*: they challenge Rome’s ability to torture Christian bodies and inflict pain, and they present martyrdom as motivating—not deterring—other Christians” (144). By appropriating contemporary discursive techniques, then, the martyrologies undermine a dominant discourse that says Christians are susceptible to Roman punishment in favor of one that elevates the status of Christians over and against their wicked oppressors.

The early Christian martyr texts have engendered a rich history of scholarship since at least the establishment of the Society of Bollandists in the nineteenth century. Yet, *Divine Deliverance* manages to propose a unique argument that potentially disrupts a large amount of previous publications and makes an entirely new swath of scholarship possible. In a neat summary of her study, Cobb writes:

My reading of the early Christian martyr texts suggests that Christians did indeed find the suffering self a useful discourse by which to construct their identities, distinguish their teachings, refute antagonistic claims, and retain believers. In these texts, however, suffering is not embraced as an identity but presented as a problem to be solved. Pain is the experience of those who live apart from God. At least in the moments at issue in martyr texts—trial, torture, and death—the Christian self is decidedly not a sufferer. God’s intervention miraculously transforms the physical experience. (157)

The beauty of Cobb's argument is its simplicity. Ultimately, her conclusion derives from a close reading of the martyr texts with specific attention to language associated with the feeling of pain. The frequent references to primary material and the cogent language characteristic of her first book also pepper this one. This makes her book a friendly resource for professional academics and students at any level.

One important question that remains unanswered concerns just how Cobb sees this work fitting into a broader discussion about the unity of a martyrological genre. It is clear that Cobb writes this book in light of the burgeoning field investigating identity formation, but she seems to identify a literary motif that brings the martyr texts into some unique coherency. The book addresses the topic of genre in order to suggest that the materials in question all cater to an audience and build the boundaries of their social environment. However, Cobb argues that all martyr texts come together "in depicting Christians being tortured but—with the exception of Perpetua and the sword—not being in pain" (136). This makes it sound as though she has attempted to discern the foundational layer of an early Christian martyr tradition in response to scholars like Candida Moss. In this light, Cobb's analysis seems to make the claim that all martyr texts function as identity-building documents in active resistance to Roman power. I wonder, in that case, if Cobb would suggest that authors of the martyrologies prepare themselves to write with a certain paradigm in mind for what these sorts of texts hope to achieve. Does Cobb suggest that all martyr texts *do* the same thing and that they do it in the same way? If not, which texts are included and which martyr texts are excluded from her analysis? Much of this might be fruitfully couched in a discussion about the Perpetua exception that Cobb notes, in which Perpetua shouts in pain before guiding the gladiator's sword to her own throat. Instead, however, her explanation for Perpetua's cry appears somewhat convoluted, concluding that it represents the author's rhetorical goal of essentially keeping readers on their toes. In so doing, it seems that Cobb is attempting to posit a strategy universal to martyr traditions and explain away anomalies instead of limiting her analysis to a number of stories that exhibit rhetoric of painlessness. Some readers may find this a too heavy-handed conclusion.

Altogether, Cobb's argument is a compelling interpretation of early Christian martyr texts that opens the field to new possibilities. The most interesting part of Cobb's hypothesis is, in my estimation, her argument that pain distinguishes between competing group identities. Cobb's comparison of passages in which persecutors experience the deleterious effects of their own machinations with passages in which martyrs pass through their ordeal physically unaffected is a creative and illuminating way to see pain as a boundary marker. Even scholars and public citizens unfamiliar with scholarship on early Christian martyrologies often refer to the martyrdoms in such a way that they glorify the martyrs' unwavering commitment to Christianity despite painful opposition. Cobb's point rebukes this position by arguing the exact opposite: the texts construct a world in which the commitment of the martyrs in fact saves them from any feeling of pain whatsoever. Scholarship moving forward might now ask how this strategy fits into a wider Christian discourse on or philosophy of pain; how stories of painlessness relate to postcolonial ambitions; and how it might function to attract potential congregants in its specific cultural habitus. Because of its theoretical sophistication, close literary critique, and avenue-opening conclusions, Cobb's *Divine Deliverance* is a fine addition to any scholar studying early Christianity.