



Stigmata and the Pressure of Interpretation

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In Galatians 6:17, Paul’s *στίγματα* are not simply marks as such, they are τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, of Jesus. This special journal edition investigates Paul’s supplied meaning to his bodily marks, together with subsequent readings of the remark in Late Antiquity. Though our ancient authors are spread out in different languages and locations across the ancient Mediterranean, these articles allow us to see the shifting theological function of bodily trauma in each context, together with the fraught burden of interpretation.

In thinking about the context of Galatians, Steven Muir draws our attention to the use of *stigmata* within the context of Greco-Roman slavery, where it signifies the mark of ownership. The availability of other terms for scars and bruises punctuates the association with slavery even further. Here Muir asks some perceptive questions. In interpreting his own bodily marks, is Paul ‘borrowing’ the trauma of slavery? What does it mean for someone to interpret the trauma of insults and injuries as a badge of honor by means of a social and political category that they themselves have not endured? Muir suggests we see the language of *stigmata* (and *doulos*) as part of a larger ‘honorization’ of suffering and shame in Paul’s epistle. While I agree that these *stigmata* refer to the marks on Paul’s body and that Paul describes these marks with the language of slavery, I wonder if Paul’s strategy is even partially captured through the lens of an assertion of honor. “Let no one cause me trouble”, Paul says, “for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus”. The word for ‘trouble’ (κόπους), can mean work, exertion, beating, suffering, and fatigue. What is the ‘for’ in Paul’s logic? Is Paul saying that he does not want to have to keep working at resolving this issue in Galatia, because he has already shown himself to be an honorable slave of Christ by bearing the marks of violence carried out in the course of his travels and teaching? Or is it an expression of exhaus-

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tion and impending violence if things unravel further? Paul is already the recipient of *stigmata* and does not need any more and, more powerfully, by inflicting Paul, they are ‘marking’ Jesus, so “stop it”.

Interestingly, this is, in part, the reading that Augustine peruses at the turn of the fifth century and unpacked by Jimmy Chan. The issue in Galatia must stop so that Paul does not receive even more *stigmata*. But Augustine also ties Paul’s marks to the narrative of ‘Sauline’ persecution in Acts of the Apostles, suggesting that the *stigmata* received as an apostle are retribution for his earlier persecution of the “Way” (Acts 9:16). For Augustine, while these retributive punishments appear antithetical to liberation and salvation, they work to bring about a “crown of victory”. Chan focuses on this transformative element, but I would have liked to see more exploration of the retribution dynamic in Augustine, which falls off in Chan’s reading. Rather, Chan focuses solely on the notion of suffering transformed into eschatological reward, in contrast to the opponents in Galatia who do not suffer because they are operating outside the ‘church’². In Augustine, Paul’s bodily pain is not merely reread as signs of honor, but they become a necessary punishment with an eschatological upshot. The emphasis on suffering as a quasi-requirement for Christian membership is also felt in the work of Victorinus.

In Wendy Helleman’s analysis of Victorinus, the ‘mystery’ of suffering and the dimension of inner *stigmata* are prominent motifs. Victorinus understands the *stigmata* which Paul bears upon his body in both physical and immaterial ways. After all, Jesus’ body was punctured but he also endured “other *stigmata*”, those which are endured ‘within’. For Victorinus, just as there was more terrifying *passio* which physical crucifixion is but only a sign, Paul’s *stigmata* are likewise physical marks on his body in concert with a *passio*, a suffering, which cannot be seen. But Victorinus continues. This verse also means that, “I serve

² At times, Chan reads Paul along the same lines as Augustine, namely, according to fourth-century (and beyond) heresiology as well as a historically problematic Jew-Christian axis: “they [Paul’s opponents] lured the church community back to the way of receiving salvation by obeying the law, thus imprisoning themselves and others up in spiritual darkness and dividing the church by their false teaching” (J. Chan, *The Therapeutic Gospel for the Traumatic World. Stigmata Domini Iesu Christi in Corpore as the Crown of Victory*, VoxP 90 (2024) p. 112), “Contrary to Paul’s instruction to true Christians in Gal 6:10” (Chan, *The Therapeutic Gospel*, p. 112), “Paul asserts that the true mark of Christians is not circumcision but the Cross” (Chan, *The Therapeutic Gospel*, p. 113).

as a slave in fellowship with Christ, in the mystery; I suffer the mystery of Christ". Helleman rightly zeros in on this final exegetical comment, noting the infamous range and function of the term *mysterium*. Helleman notes that for Victorinus everything Christ enacts, performs, carries out, is done in mystery: the incarnation is a mystery, the resurrection is a mystery, that Christ's hanging flesh as a triumph is a mystery, etc. It seems to me that Victorinus includes the category of *mysterium* precisely Paul's describes *his own* physical *stigmata* as those of *Christ*. The 'of Christ' for Victorinus is not simply 'scars I have received while in service to Christ', but *Christ's stigmata*. The relationship being so close that it is unexplainable; a mystery in which Paul participates. Victorinus then mobilizes this reading towards his audience, *they* too are to endure many adversities for in this suffering one is 'with Christ': "you too ought to endure all your many adversities, because [like Paul] that person will be [united] with Christ who suffers with Christ"³. For Paul, the marks of past trauma on his body are reread as signs of metaphorical slavery to Christ. For Victorinus, the marks (whether external or internal) have become a kind of prerequisite for fellowship itself. Trauma has shifted from something that happened and needs interpretation, to an expected requirement. Are we witnessing here trauma used as a tool to measure group membership rather than an experience which *might* be transformed through interpretation?

Maria Dasios' article on Gregory of Nyssa's homily on the Song of Songs highlights most pointedly the ambiguity of interpreting suffering along and within theological lines. Dasios draws our attention to the violent turn in Song of Songs 5:7, noting that Gregory too configures the themes of striking and wounding as profitable; the instruments of spiritual healing even. For Gregory, the assailants afflicting these wounds, these watchmen who find and strike the bridge, are angels, the ministering spirits who represent a protective force. With this allegorical correspondence registered, Gregory is able to read the violent dream as a description of positive spiritual transformation. Wounding is configured as improvement; as healing, instruction, and deliverance.

Dasios perceptively notes the social influences guiding Gregory's reading of suffering as spiritual benefit. He occupies the seat of a bishop and himself metes out orders for social and theological 'benefit'. Gregory also creatively narrates how, as a younger man, in wandering

³ Marius Victorinus, *Commentarium in epistolam Pauli ad Galatas* II 6, 17.

away from a service, the Forty martyrs from Iborra appeared to him and beat him. This episode is integral to the rhetorical logic of the homily. The narration of Gregory being subjected to violence for spiritual purposes authorizes his interpretations of the violence experienced by his audience, or, if less direct, authorizes him to create a global interpretive framework for any suffering the audience may experience. Dasios reads this dynamic in concert with Kate Cooper and Jamie Wood's introductory remarks in *Social Control in Late Antiquity: The Violence of Small Worlds*⁴. Cooper and Wood draw attention to the 'small' relations operating in schools, monasteries, and churches which facilitates the reproduction of larger social orders, "cultivating obedience subjects" through "symbolic or actual violence"⁵. Dasios thinks carefully about the implications of Gregory's interpretive logic, the transforming of wounds into benefits, as well as the disciplinarian dimension of ancient pedagogies which undergird and support ideas of bodily pain as instructive. Dasios asks what it might mean for contemporary Christian contexts that ancient interpretive traditions preserve the marks of social institutions like slavery and modes of control now rejected. Dasios makes an important point here that "our reading practices (and guiding metaphors and hermeneutic models) have ethical and social as well as spiritual implications"⁶. Who then stands to benefit from these interpretive models of instruction and who suffers?

Dasios rightly highlights the underlying possibility that readings which seek to transform trauma may end up advancing, reopening, and normalizing violence precisely because it is something now imbued with therapeutic significance. Each of the ancient authors discussed here are faced with this pressure of interpretation. Paul's *stigmata* must be more than physical marks. The meaning of Song of Songs text, for Gregory, must be something more than a poetic account of physical and possible sexual battery, etc. In searching for that 'other meaning', they transform physical suffering into interpretation, but these readings may in fact reinscribe and normalize practices of violence as a theological prerequisite for spiritual benefit. Perhaps all of this says something more about trau-

⁴ See *Social Control in Late Antiquity: The Violence of Small Worlds*, ed. K. Cooper – J. Wood, Cambridge 2020.

⁵ K. Cooper – J. Wood, *Introduction*, in: *Social Control in Late Antiquity: The Violence of Small Worlds*, ed. K. Cooper – J. Wood, Cambridge 2020, p. 10.

⁶ M. Dasios, *Rendering Trauma Beneficial... for Whom? Gregory of Nyssa's Homily 12 on the Song of Songs*, VoxP 90 (2024) p. 103.

ma and suffering than it does about any of the individual interpreters discussed here. When trauma is the site of the interpretive process, whether embedded within the text being read or arising from the life experiences of the author, are the results inevitably fraught and ambiguous, somewhere between interpretive liberation and reoccurring violence? Can we truly transform trauma into something 'else' or is the point that it always and deceptively remains, needing to be transformed once again?