

Life and Death, Confession and Denial: Birthing Language in the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*

Stéphanie Machabée
Yale University

Abstract:

This study analyzes the peculiar language of birth, abortion, and rebirth in the second-century *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*. I argue that the metaphor of birthing, particularly in its relationship to the Virgin Mother, is deemed rhetorically useful by the letter's author in order to communicate his understanding of what constitutes a true or 'legitimate' Christian (that is, the confessor) and an 'illegitimate' Christian (that is, the denier). The author uses the notion of 'coming back to life' in order to demonstrate that Christian deniers are still eligible for legitimate birth through the Virgin Mother, representative of the Church, by means of life-giving confession. Thus, the author's rhetoric simultaneously naturalizes a sharp division between legitimate and illegitimate Christians while also opening up a permeability which allows for deniers to be reinstated as confessors. This grey space may be a response to the fact that the lines in the early church between insiders and outsiders were themselves quite porous.

Available Open-Access Formats:
PDF (with pagination), HTML, ePub

<http://comingbacktolife.mcgill.ca>

Published by
McGill University Library and Archives

Bibliography:

Machabée, Stéphanie. 2017. "Life and Death, Confession and Denial: Birthing Language in the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*." Pages 287–308 in *Coming Back to Life: The Permeability of Past and Present, Mortality and Immortality, Death and Life in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Edited by Frederick S. Tappenden and Carly Daniel-Hughes, with the assistance of Bradley N. Rice. Montreal, QC: McGill University Library. Online: <http://comingbacktolife.mcgill.ca>.

Copyright:

© Stéphanie Machabée, 2017. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

**Life and Death, Confession and Denial:
Birthing Language in the *Letter of the Churches
of Vienne and Lyons*¹**

Stéphanie Machabée
Yale University

I. INTRODUCTION:

THE METAPHOR OF PROCREATION

Considerable scholarly attention has been given to how early Christian martyrologies portray women as rejecting biological motherhood in order to achieve salvation (Cobb 2008; Salisbury 2004), such as in the account of the noblewoman Perpetua and the slave Felicitas (*Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*). In this paper, however, I propose that the language of birthing and motherhood was deemed useful by some early Christians for communicating the experiences of persecuted Christians. In her book *Making Christians*, Denise Kimber Buell (1999, 3) demonstrates how the metaphor of procreation was utilised by some early Christians to construct “an authoritative discourse of Christian identity.” Because the notion of procreation is inscribed in power relations, the symbolic use of procreative language could be used to *naturalise* (that is, attribute to nature) power differentials.² This language, which favours sameness over difference (Buell 1999, 14), posited *natural* similarities and

¹ I would like to thank the editors of this volume, the two anonymous reviewers, and Meaghan Matheson (Concordia University) for their valuable feedback and suggestions during the editing process. I would also like to give special recognition to my master’s supervisor, Ellen Aitken, who imparted to me a passion for reading martyr literature.

² That is, the metaphor of procreation could be used to make existing inequalities appear “even god-given” (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995, 1).

Coming Back to Life

dissimilarities among early Christians and between Christians and non-Christians, thereby legitimizing or delegitimizing community members. That is, some Christians were rhetorically using a natural concept (procreation) to also mean legitimate. When the language of procreation was used in early Christian texts, Buell rightly demonstrates that it played an important and strategic role in authorizing and contesting early Christian perspectives.

In this paper, I will use Buell's work to frame my investigation into the notable and strange language of birth, abortion, and rebirth in the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons to the Churches of Asia and Phrygia* (hereon referred to as *Lyons*). *Lyons* is a second-century martyrology preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea's fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History*.³ This Greek-language letter was sent from two Gallic communities in Lyons and Vienne to communities in Asia Minor and Phrygia. *Lyons* projects a heightened awareness of and warning against those who have denied or lapsed in their confessions as Christians. Through the language of birthing, the text sets up a stark contrast between the experiences of Christian confessors and deniers, which I will argue is reflective of the author's attempt to construct his concept of Christian identity. The metaphor

³ In this article I treat *Lyons* as a second-century letter. Our only source for this text, however, is Eusebius's fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History*. This Christian polemicist and historian states that he repeats parts of the letter as may be *needful* for his present purpose. Additions or modifications may have been made to the original letter (Dehandschutter 2005, 5–6). However, Eusebius proceeds by quoting verbatim large portions of *Lyons* and only making marginal notes. According to Doron Mendels (1999, 29), Eusebius's preservation of the letter "confers a relatively high degree of credibility of the information." Other scholars agree, such as Paul Keresztes (1967, 75), who writes: "there is nothing in this moving description of the Lugdunum [Lyons] tragedy that would discredit the historical value of what we have, thanks to Eusebius's transmission of the original document." I agree with Keresztes; very few scholars accuse *Lyons* of being false and of those who do (see Thompson 1912, 1913), not many scholars have been convinced by their arguments. For these reasons, I have chosen to treat *Lyons* as a second-century production and have therefore analysed it within a second-century discourse interested in the construction of a Christian and martyr identity.

of birthing, particularly in its relationship to the Virgin Mother, is used to *denaturalise* deniers, or at least the act of denial, while *naturalizing* Christian confessors.

My aim is to demonstrate how the author of *Lyons* finds the language of birth, abortion, and rebirth particularly useful in putting forward his concept of Christian identity. This language also enables him to demonstrate how denying or lapsed Christians can come back to life through the act of confession. To begin, I will engage some of the scholarship on martyrdom by discussing how martyrologies were particularly fertile sites for the construction of Christian identity. As a second-century text, *Lyons* emerges within this flux and participates in (re)defining the concept of martyrdom and Christian identity. Next, through a rhetorical-critical analysis of *Lyons*, I will look at specific passages in order to demonstrate the ways in which the author uses the metaphor of birthing, and I will explain how this language is tied up in his construction of a Christian identity. Whereas Buell primarily investigates the metaphor of procreation in the works of Clement of Alexandria, I will use *Lyons* to extend her argument to the discourse of martyrdom.

II. MARTYROLOGIES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

Early Christian martyrologies are important literary sources because they function as sites for the construction of identity among Christians (Matthews 2010, 7). The authors or communities that produced martyr texts negotiated a variety of categories, including what it meant to be a Christian and a martyr, as well as what it meant to stand outside these categories. In order to construct an identity, there needs to be an understanding of who or what does not belong to a given classification; that is, there needs to be an *other*.⁴ Identity necessitates difference and so a boundary is created

⁴L. Stephanie Cobb (2008, 6) writes: “Humans construct identities by aligning themselves with others, and since being a member of one group often requires not being a member of another . . . the social world is categorized and differentiated.”

Coming Back to Life

between *us* and *them*. On this topic, Judith Lieu (2004, 98, my italics) writes:

Thus boundedness is integral to the idea of identity, for it is boundaries that both enclose those who share what is common and exclude those who belong outside, that both ensure continuity and coherence, and safeguard against contamination or invasion—or so it seems. *It is part of the seduction of identity that the encircling boundary appears both given and immutable, when it is neither.*

Identity, therefore, is in constant mediation. Early Christian martyrologies negotiate such boundaries; they set up those who belong to the Christian community by intending to clearly demarcate those who do not. Outsiders can include pagans, Jews, or other Christians/Christian communities considered to be misguided or outright erroneous. Although martyr texts imply that categories such as Christian or martyr are an absolute thing, the reality is that these categories were much more fluid.

Daniel Boyarin (1999, 21), for instance, explores ancient martyrologies in order to argue that such texts “seem to be a particularly fertile site for the exploration of the permeability of the borders between so-called Judaism and so-called Christianity in late antiquity.” Although martyr narratives present categories such as Jew and Christian, or pagan and Christian, as well defined and impermeable, a careful reading actually suggests that these categories were in flux and much more porous than the reader is led to believe. Martyrologies should instead be approached as proof for the intimate contact between the communities the author of a text seeks to set apart. As I will demonstrate later, the author of *Lyons* uses his letter to negotiate the categories of confessor and denier, and although he advocates for a sharp distinction between the two, he nevertheless creates an opening that allows for much more permeability between the two parties. The author’s negotiation of Christian identity marks an *intragroup* dispute.

Machabée, Life and Death

Early Christian martyrologies are highly rhetorical texts. Although scholars have questioned the authenticity or accuracy of events depicted in martyr narratives, instead treating such texts as highly stylised forms of writing intended to be didactic (see, for instance, Hartog 2014, 63, 66), these texts nevertheless give us a lens into the concerns and interests of the communities which produced these narratives. Martyrologies, therefore, are perhaps best approached “as records of individuals’ responses to persecution” (Cobb 2008, 4). In *Lyons*, one can read not only the types of responses Christians exhibited when faced with persecution (confession, denial, relapse, hesitation, etc.), but one can also analyse an author’s or community’s response to such moments of persecution. Unlike what much Christian martyr literature would lead one to think, the reality was that large numbers of Christians denied being Christian, or recanted previous confessions, during periods of persecution. Eusebius, for instance, confirms in his *Ecclesiastical History* that some denied their Christian allegiance: “But some advanced to the altars more readily, declaring boldly that they had never been Christians. Of these the prediction of our Lord is most true that they shall ‘hardly’ be saved. Of the rest some followed the one, others the other of these classes, some fled and some were seized” (6.41.12). Tertullian, writing around the beginning of the third century, also reports in his *On Flight in Persecution* that Christians, when faced with Roman persecution, fled in search of safer locales (6.1 [≈ §6 in ANF]). Given the real possibility of denying or relapsed Christians, the author of *Lyons*, I argue, aimed to prevent such a probability. With every martyrological account, there lies a rhetorical purpose for preserving its events in writing. Therefore, a rhetorical-critical analysis of *Lyons* will allow me to explore the ways in which the author is using the language of birthing, and how such language is tied up in his construction of Christian identity. By coupling such an analysis with historical reflections, I will also consider the motivation behind *Lyons’s* rhetoric.

Coming Back to Life

In her book *Rhetoric and Ethic*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1999, 108) states that rhetorical criticism is focused “on the persuasive power and literary strategies of a text that has a communicative function in a concrete historical situation.” Such a rhetorical discourse is produced by a particular situation that invites a response among its audience, drawing out certain kinds of emotions, principles, and identifications that invite the possibility of altering the situation. Through rhetoric, Schüssler Fiorenza insists that an author attempts to convince his or her reader “to *act rightly*” (108, her italics). In this paper, I will demonstrate one productive way in which the author of *Lyons* promotes confession as the right action to be taken during times of persecution⁵—through the language of birthing. In turn, this concern defines, for the author, those who prove to be truly or legitimately Christian (that is, confessors) and those who fall outside that group (that is, deniers). Although this rhetoric is unsurprising for a martyrology, the language the author embraces to achieve this end proves more interesting. By adopting the symbolic language of birth, abortion, and rebirth, the author of *Lyons* articulates a discourse that portrays his conception of Christian identity as being *natural* and *valued*.

III. RHETORICAL ANALYSIS: LIFE AND DEATH IN *LYONS*

The letter of *Lyons* opens by narrating how Christians of Lyons and Vienne were at first excluded from public areas such as the baths and public square (1.5), and then some were physically attacked by an enraged mob, which dragged the Christians to the forum for

⁵ The fact that a martyr text would support confession over denial is to be expected. The discursive effort of early Christian martyr literature constructed confession under duress as the enactment of Christian allegiance. The writings of church fathers such as Tertullian and Ignatius also fervently participated in the ideological conceptualisation of martyrdom. They portrayed those who died for their religious affiliation as imitators of the passion of Christ (see Moss 2010). Tertullian argues in *Scorpiace* that one cannot deny his or her Christian identity without also refuting Christ himself (9.10 [≈ §9 in *ANF*]). However, not all Christians viewed martyrdom in the same favourable light as these writers. I will pick up this point again later in this paper.

interrogation before the tribune and city authorities ([1.7–9](#)).⁶ This persecution appears to be a local event. Although the text gives no historical pretext for the targeting of these Christians,⁷ it understands and imbues these events with apocalyptic significance. The author of *Lyons* presents the persecution as a “prelude to [Christ’s] imminent final coming,” where the opponent is “preparing and training his own against the slaves of God” ([1.5](#)). The martyrs are said to be assaulted by “the Evil One,” but through their torture, they illustrate that “the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared to the coming glory which will be revealed for us,” an allusion to [Rom 8:18](#).

The letter continues to recount in dramatic detail the excessive torments applied to Christians of all ages, genders, and social statuses.⁸ For instance, there is the ninety-year-old Pothinus, the bishop of Lyons; Sanctus, the deacon of Vienne; Marturus, the newly-baptised Christian; Attalus, of Pergamene descent; and Blandina, the female slave. Despite the author’s claim that “the holy martyrs endured punishments beyond all description” ([1.16](#)), he

⁶ The text of *Lyons* survives in Book 5 of Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* (see further, n. 3 above). Numbering of *Lyons* follows the chapter and verse of *Hist. eccl.* Book 5; thus, [Lyons 1.5](#) = [Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.1.5](#). Unless otherwise indicated, direct quotations of *Lyons* are from Weidmann 2000, with some slight modifications made; the embedded hyperlinks connect to the Loeb edition (Lake and Oulton 1926–1932).

⁷ Elizabeth Castelli (2004, 45) remarks: “Indeed, the absence of any sort of legal precision in rationalizing the violence that took place is especially striking in this text.” Although the text lacks clarity in this regard, it does suggest some possible charges made against the Christians. The text narrates how the elder Zechariah makes a defence “that neither atheism nor impiety” was found among the Christians ([1.9](#)). Later, the text indicates that gentile slaves “falsely alleged against us Thyestean feasts and Oedipean sexual intercourse and such things as for us it is neither appropriate to speak about or to think about, or even to believe might ever happen among human beasts” ([1.14](#)).

⁸ As Moss (2012, 106) puts it, the Christians in *Lyons* “ran the gamut of possibilities (slave, free, wealthy, citizen, noncitizen, male, female, young, educated, and old).”

Coming Back to Life

describes the tortures anyway, and in vivid detail. The bodies of Christians are broken, opened, and burned; they are dragged, suffer blows, and are exposed to the beasts. The pagans are creative in their methods of torture, and the author of *Lyons* does not hesitate to share the gory details. The martyrs Marturus and Sanctus, for instance, endure the gauntlet of whips, the mauling by beasts, and also the iron chair, on which their bodies are roasted (1.38).

In several passages, the author of *Lyons* promotes and understands Christian identity through confession under persecution. From the beginning of the letter, two separate factions emerge among the group of persecuted Christians. On the one hand, there are the “first martyrs,” that is, those who “were clearly ready and who were fulfilling the confession of martyrdom with all enthusiasm” (1.11). On the other hand, there are those “who appeared unready, untrained, and still weak,” and “of whom about ten in number were even aborted [ἐξέτρωσαν].” The author of the letter indicates that these weak Christians “effected in us great grief and immeasurable sorrow, and cut off the enthusiasm of the others who had not been arrested” (1.11). Their denial not only impacts themselves vis-à-vis their own salvation, but it also affects the other Christians, the *us* of the text, that is, those who have confessed and the soon-to-be-arrested community members. A stark division is set up between the first- and third-person plural subjects of the text.

The fear of denial is a central concern of the text from this point on. The author describes all Christians as fearful on account of “the uncertainty of the confession” and the dread “that a given individual would fall away” (1.12). The central fear is not of the impending punishments, but of Christians who are too weak to confess. The text attempts to reconfigure the meaning of imprisonment, stating that only the “worthy ones were being arrested” (1.13). For the author of *Lyons*, to be arrested becomes a sign of election. As the text moves forward, the ideal Christian identity becomes increasingly tied up with a martyr identity.

The author again emphasises a stark division between deniers and confessors in 1.33, which reads:

Machabée, Life and Death

Those who became deniers at the first arrest were themselves confined and shared in the terrors. At this time denial was no advantage. Rather, the ones confessing that which they were, were confined as Christians (no other charge being forwarded against them), while the others were held as murderers and foul creatures, being punished twice as much as the rest.

Denial provides no benefit to the Christian. In fact, it is a nonsensical choice, given that those who deny are punished twice as much. There is no physical relief in denial.

Significantly, this kind of punishment presents a different kind of pain than that of the confessors' suffering. The division at work in *Lyons* between pain and suffering has been noted by Candida Moss (2012). Although these two terms are oftentimes viewed as synonymous and as equally negative, she remarks that, according to the logic of this letter, "they are clearly demarcated from each other" (Moss 2012, 110). The confessors' suffering is not equivalent to pain. For instance, the martyr Sanctus is described as follows: "in him Christ, while suffering, was achieving great glory, rendering the opponent idle and showing, for the example of others, that there is nothing fearful where the Father's love is, neither is there anything painful where the glory of Christ is" (1.23). Suffering in Christ is not the equivalent of experiencing pain. In fact, the text is quite clear that there is no pain in Christ. Suffering is actually regenerating. We read in the following verse that Sanctus's "body was even straightened out in the subsequent tortures, and he assumed his former look and the use of his body parts, so that not punishment but *cure* was what, through the grace of Christ, the second torture became for him" (1.24, my italics). Similarly, Biblis, who had previously denied, regains her senses through torture. It is "as if to say she awakened out of a deep sleep [ἐκ βαθέος ὕπνου ἀνεγρηγόρησεν], having been reminded by these temporary torments about the eternal punishment in Gehenna" (1.26). If we take into consideration that wakening is a common metaphor for the notion of coming back to life, this verse almost suggests that Biblis is "coming to life" through the process of suffering. Likewise, the elder Pothinus,

Coming Back to Life

despite his near inability even to breathe “on account of the bodily weakness affecting him,” finds that he is strengthened “through the pressing desire for martyrdom [διὰ τὴν ἐγκειμένην τῆς μαρτυρίας ἐπιθυμίαν]” (1.29). In other words, the confessors’ suffering is productive. It is curative.

Suffering is also productive in identity formation.⁹ Moss (2012, 110) notes that the physical eradication of Sanctus through torture leads to de-identification, which, in turn, allows him to assume a new identity; that is, Christ inhabits Sanctus’s body. In *Lyons*, torture of the confessors is a painless communion with Christ, enabling them to take up a new identity with Christ. On the other hand, the deniers’ pain, their double punishments, does not allow them to assume an identity with Christ because they have no communion with Christ. Pain is not a productive experience in *Lyons*, whereas suffering is indeed productive.

In 1.35, the author of *Lyons* embellishes his account in order to distinguish between the two groups of Christians. The passage reads as follows:

The former went ahead cheerfully, glory and great grace having blended together in their looks so that even their chains were draped around like a fitting ornament, as on a bride adorned with dappled gold brocade, and altogether they were smelling of the sweet smell of Christ so that to some it seemed that they had even been anointed with worldly perfume. The latter were downcast, humiliated, ugly, and filled with disgrace, and beyond that they were derided by the gentiles as being ignoble and cowardly. Holding the charge of murderers, *they had let go of the honorable, glorified, and life-giving title.* (my italics)

⁹ Judith Perkins (1995) takes up this point in *The Suffering Self*. She argues that the memory of suffering in early Christian narratives imparts “a self-definition that enabled the growth of Christianity as an institution” (12). Suffering acts as a triumphant force in martyrologies. She argues that “the discursive focus in the second century on the suffering body contributed to Christianity’s attainment of social power by *helping to construct a subject that would be present for its call*” (3, my italics).

Machabée, Life and Death

This verse is rich in sensory imagery. The “sweet smell of Christ” and the “worldly perfume” invoke the sense of smell. The sense of touch is alluded to in the description of the chains (“like a fitting ornament”). The sense of sight is appealed to, where attention is brought to the confessors’ chains, which here appear like the gold fabric worn by a bride. The differences in physical form between the deniers and the confessors are observable enough to make up the minds of the non-arrested Christians. The text continues by stating the following: “The others, seeing these things, were strengthened, and the ones being arrested were confessing without any doubt, giving no thought to the devil’s reasonings [μηδὲ ἔννοιαν ἔχοντες διαβολικοῦ λογισμοῦ]” (1.35).

The language of denial and confession becomes tied up in the metaphorical language of birth, abortion, and rebirth most discernably in 1.45–46. The two verses read as follows:

The intervening time was neither idle nor fruitless. Rather, the mercy of Christ was manifested immeasurable through their endurance, because through the living the dead were being made alive [διὰ γὰρ τῶν ζώντων ἐζωοποιοῦντο τὰ νεκρά]. The martyrs were supplying grace to those who did not make testimony, and there was great joy for the Virgin Mother, who was recovering those living ones whom she had aborted as dead [οὓς ὡς νεκροὺς ἐξέτρωσε, τούτους ζώντας ἀπολαμβάνουση]. For it is by the martyrs that most of the deniers were measuring themselves, and were conceiving again and coming alive again [καὶ ἀνεκτίσκοντο καὶ ἀνεζωπυροῦντο], and were learning to confess. And now living [καὶ ζῶντες ἤδη] and braced up, they proceeded to the governor’s judgment seat cheered by a God who does not wish for the death of a sinner but is kind with regard to repentance, in order that they might again be questioned by the governor.

This passage is the most striking for the purposes of this study. The author constructs his strongest boundary between the group of confessors and deniers, but instead of referring to them as such, in 1.45 he uses the terms “the living ones” (τῶν ζώντων) and “the dead”

Coming Back to Life

(τὰ νεκρά). Therefore, he equates confession with life and denial with death. What is most paradoxical in this passage is the figure of the Virgin Mother, described as aborting Christian deniers who later return to her, alive, once they find the strength to confess.

In order to understand this passage, it is important to note that early Christians viewed the church as a figurative birthing mother, “the mother of the twice-born children” (Jensen 2008, 139), an image applied to the church from the second century onwards (Solevåg 2013, 82).¹⁰ By using the figure of the Virgin Mother to represent which Christians are rejected from her womb and which ones are properly birthed, the author of *Lyons* can represent Christian confessors as true members of the church because they are legitimate or natural offspring of the Virgin Mother. Christians who cannot find the strength to confess are portrayed as aborted by the Virgin Mother (the verb used by the author of *Lyons* is ἐξέτρωσε).¹¹

¹⁰ Baptismal fonts of two early Christian churches, in the Basilica of Vitales (5th–6th century) and in the Chapel of Jucundus of the Basilica of Bellator (4th–5th century) in Sbeitla, modern-day Turkey, are remarkable in that they have an unusual shape resembling a vulva. I thank David Eastman for bringing these baptismal fonts to my attention. Robin Jensen (2008, 153) has remarked on the unusual shape of these baptismal fonts, writing that the Christian candidate undergoing baptism would have emerged “from the Mother Church’s vagina.”

¹¹ According to LSJ, ἐκτιρώσκω can mean to “bring forth untimely,” to “miscarry,” or to “attempt to procure abortion” (522B). I have been taking this term to mean “abort” in *Lyons*, but the author may also be conveying that the Virgin Mother miscarries these Christian deniers. The difference lies in the intent. Abortion would suggest that the Virgin Mother is actively seeking to reject Christians from her womb, whereas miscarriage suggests that this figure is passively involved in the rejection. Evidently, these different scenarios evoke different images of the Virgin Mother. However, with either translation of ἐκτιρώσκω, the term clearly suggests that Christian deniers cannot experience a proper birth.

The noun form of this verb is found in [1 Cor 15:8](#): “Last of all, as to one untimely born (ὡσπερὲι τῷ ἐκτρώματι ὠφθη κάμοι), he appeared also to me” (NRSV). Scholars have interpreted this passage in a variety of ways (for a succinct summary, see Schnabel 2008, 46–47). One reading applies this term

Therefore, when the author pushes his rhetoric to its uttermost logic, he concludes that denying Christians cannot be legitimate members of the church.

This portrayal of denying or lapsed Christians is not absolutely consistent in the letter. Although the Virgin Mother may have rejected those Christians who did not confess, [1.45–46](#) (cited above) also demonstrates that there is still the possibility for those deniers to return to her. Those who found death in denial can experience rebirth through confession. They can come back to life and experience a proper birth; abortion is reversible. The boundary between life and death is thus a permeable one. This permeability of life and death, a notion which cuts across the ancient Mediterranean, creates a conceptual space in which the rhetoric of “coming back to life” can flourish in *Lyons*.

Another scene in *Lyons* depicts Christians as coming back to life, but on this occasion it is through expulsion from the beast’s stomach. At the end of the letter we read the following: “Indeed this was the greatest battle for them, on account of the genuineness of their love, that the beast [ὁ θήρ], having choked on those whom it had earlier thought to have swallowed down [πρότερον ᾤετο καταπεπωκέναι], might vomit up living beings” ([2.6](#)). The reference to ὁ θήρ could be an allusion to the beasts of the arena, that is, those who attacked and literally swallowed pieces of Christian confessors. At the same time, ὁ θήρ is almost certainly referring to the devil. According to the author of *Lyons*, the devil is the force that compelled some

to Paul’s situation before his “conversion” experience; prior to becoming a follower of Christ, Paul was in a miserable state in which he persecuted the church ([v. 9](#)). On this reading, which perhaps finds some resonance in early Pauline interpretation (cf. [Eph 2:3](#)), Paul’s use of the term highlights the fact that he was not worthy of encountering Christ, and further alludes to his pathetic pre-Christ condition (Schnabel 2008, 47). Accordingly, ἔκτρομα can refer to a particular state vis-à-vis one’s relationship with Christ. In the case of *Lyons*, one’s denial of his or her Christian identity, which the author might have understood as one’s denial of Christ, makes him or her unworthy of being Christian. Denial, akin to abortion or miscarriage, keeps community members in a miserable state where they cannot experience proper life.

Coming Back to Life

Christians to deny, and the figure who thought he had swallowed up *Biblis* (ἤδη δοκῶν ὁ διάβολος καταπεπωκέναι; see [1.25](#)). Thinking he had consumed these Christians, the devil must now vomit them out because they have learned to confess. For the author of *Lyons*, those Christians who were aborted from the Virgin Mother become swallowed up by the devil. Illegitimate members of the community are part of the devil and legitimate ones find life through a proper birth in the Virgin Mother.

Once deniers have found life again through confession ([1.45–46](#), see above), there is a surprising switch in attitude by the imperial authorities towards the act of denial: “The emperor had written that they were to be beaten to death, but if particular ones were to deny, these were to be let go” ([1.47](#)). Until this point, the author of *Lyons* made it clear that, if any Christian were to deny, he or she would be (or was) treated more cruelly by the persecutors than if he or she were to confess. However, as soon as the deniers confess, the author of *Lyons* portrays the imperial authorities as having changed their methods; now the former deniers are given the chance to escape pain altogether through denial. Although there is now an incentive for them to recant, it is no longer a viable option for these Christians; they have found life through their testimony and there is no returning to their former state. The author of *Lyons* inverts the meaning of life and death in his letter. From the perspective of the pagans, denial means life and confession means death. For Christians, however, denial means death and confession means life.

A couple verses later in the text, Alexander the Phrygian, a physician by profession, encourages confession among those who have denied. His intervening actions read as follows:

[Alexander] was advancing to the judgment seat and by signals encouraging them in their confession. He appeared as though in labor to those standing around the judgment seat [φανερὸς ἦν τοῖς περιεστηκόσιν τὸ βῆμα ὥσπερ ὠδίνων]. The crowd, irritated since those who had previously denied again confessed, shouted down Alexander as though the one making this happen. ([1.49–50](#))

Machabée, Life and Death

While Alexander is urging the Christians to make their confession, he appears as one who is giving birth. It is paradoxical that it is a *man* who is depicted in such a way. Although this image may at first appear unexpected and perhaps even comical, it nevertheless fits nicely into the text's rhetoric. If the author of *Lyons* equates confession with life, then anyone who struggles to help in producing life-giving confession among his or her community members is therefore involved in this production of life. Alexander appears as though in labour because he is in the process of delivering life to the Christian deniers. The author of *Lyons*, therefore, not only promotes confession as the right action to be taken during times of persecution, but he also uses birthing imagery to portray those who support confession as acting rightly.

Elsewhere in the text, maternal language is used to signal proper action. At the end of the letter, the author indicates that Christians provide support for those in need (the weak Christians) by developing “motherly feelings” (μητρικὰ σπλάγχνα)¹² and by shedding many tears before God (2.6). Having acted in such a way, these supporters ask for life, which the Father provides, and “they divided this life among others, thereby departing to God as victors in everything” (2.7). Thus, both confession and those who support it are tied up in the notion of coming back to life.

Without a doubt, the primary concern of the author of *Lyons* lies with Christians who deny or recant a previous confession when under the pressure of torture. Through his use of fear, the author of *Lyons* initially creates the choice between two stark ends: confession or increased torture through denial (1.33). The former option is presented clearly as the better option, and later in the text, he uses

¹² Unfortunately, the letter does not indicate what it means to have “motherly feelings.” This phrase suggests that certain qualities and characteristics were implicit in the concept of motherhood. For further information on motherhood in the ancient world, see historical studies of childbirth and the family in Roman antiquity, which examine literary, archaeological, legal, and epigraphic materials (e.g., Balch and Osiek 2003; Dixon 1990, 1992; Rawson 1991).

Coming Back to Life

the language of life and death to the same effect. He employs deliberative rhetoric, which has the goal of persuading “the audience to take action for the future and to believe that this action is in its best interest” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 114). The author of *Lyons* wishes to persuade his audience that the best action one can undertake in a similar instance is to confess one’s identity as a Christian. Denial does not provide any advantage. Denial is death, regardless of whether the denying Christian is allowed to live.

Although the author of *Lyons* intends to create an outsider/insider dichotomy between those who are true Christians (confessors) and those who do not belong to this category (deniers) as something that is absolute, a permeability is nevertheless opened up between the two groups. The author sets up both porous and rigid boundaries for the Christian community—there exists a kind of grey space in which deniers can be reinstated as confessors. It seems, therefore, that the text produces or permits a space in which deniers are not fully on the outside. This fact is also supported by the compassionate and intimate relationship exhibited between confessors and deniers in the text. For instance, the female slave Blandina strengthens other Christians in their confession: “just like a well-born mother who has encouraged her children and sent them before her as victorious ones to the King, even repeating all the contests of the children herself, she hastened to them, being pleased and rejoicing exceedingly at the end” (1.55).¹³ Moreover, deniers are revitalised not only through the Virgin Mother, but also through the martyrs themselves: “it is by the martyrs that most of the deniers were measuring themselves, and were conceiving again and coming alive again” (1.45). While it is true that denying Christians are presented as illegitimate community members, they are not, however, positioned as wholly separate from Christian confessors. In fact, it seems that confessors strive to keep denying Christians as “insiders” by motivating them to find strength to confess. Why, therefore, the simultaneous fixity and fluidity within the author’s rhetoric? I suggest that this opening, which creates a degree of permeability

¹³ My translation. See also [2 Macc 7:20–21](#).

within the social group, may provide evidence that the lines between insider and outsider—between legitimate and illegitimate members—in some early Christian communities were also in fact quite porous.

The nature and significance of martyrdom was a contested space in the early church. Although martyr literature and early Christian writers such as Tertullian and Ignatius endorsed confession as the correct response to Roman oppression,¹⁴ not all Christians viewed persecution in the same light. Evidence suggests that not all Christians understood dying for one's beliefs and the ideal of self-sacrifice as an essential component to their Christian identity. In North Africa, for example, surviving *libelli* (written certificates attesting that sacrifices were performed to the emperor or imperial gods) as well as the letters of the bishop Cyprian¹⁵ suggest that perhaps some Christians did not identify “strategies of compliance or compromise with Roman authority as apostasy that called into doubt their identities as Christians” (Daniel-Hughes 2015, 37).

Some Christians, therefore, may not have regarded confession as the right action to be taken in times of Roman oppression. Other Christians, even if they wished to become martyrs, were unable to remain firm in their conviction when faced with persecution. Ancient sources tell us that many community members first admitted and then denied their Christian identity when questioned by Roman authorities (e.g., [Pliny, Ep. 10.96](#)). Although the author of *Lyons* uses birthing language with the aim of convincing his audience that denial is an illegitimate means of being Christian, it is likely that he

¹⁴ See above, n. 5.

¹⁵ Cyprian's letters attest to a number of Christian responses to imperially sanctioned persecution: members fled, bought forged *libelli*, and bribed officials. Cyprian himself escaped during the Decian persecution to a secure area, asserting that he did so in order to guide the church from afar through letters (see, for instance, [Epistle 14](#)). Allen Brent (2010, 10) explains: “Cyprian was to insist that flight and exile were in themselves forms of martyrdom, and not examples of lapsing, in a convenient argument that . . . exonerated himself.” Cyprian would, however, eventually perish under Valerian's persecution.

Coming Back to Life

needed to account for Christians who denied but nevertheless remained community members. In the third century, for instance, Cyprian's writings confirm that apostatised Christians could, under certain circumstances, be readmitted into the church after suitable penance.¹⁶ It is not unreasonable to think that earlier Christian communities also responded to lapsed Christians in similar ways.

The author of *Lyons*, therefore, seems to be negotiating a complicated social dynamic and he does so by means of a rebirthing rhetoric that highlights social permeability. The possibility of coming back to life is left open in order to account for the reality of denying or lapsed Christians within early Christian groups. The author of *Lyons*, therefore, both naturalises confessors as true Christians while simultaneously allowing for permeability within the early Christian gathering.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through his account of the events in Lyons and Vienne, the author of *Lyons* constructs a Christian identity around the concept of martyrdom. An individual's identification as a Christian is connected with his or her confession to be Christian. This identification stands above all else, as is evident in the following passage:

[Sanctus] resisted them with such certainty that he did not declare his own name or nationality or from which city he came, not even whether he might be slave or free, but to all the questions he responded in Latin: "I am a Christian." This he confessed in place of name, city, ethnicity, and everything otherwise. (1.20)

In turn, this confession is also what will render these Christians into martyrs. Judith Lieu (2002, 213) picks up on this relation when she argues that a Christian identity was enacted in confession: "it is when confronted with the choice of confession or denial that the true commitment for or against identity is made, and so, implicitly,

¹⁶ See above, n. 15.

until that moment there is only potential.” Martyrdom puts one’s allegiance on trial. Therefore, in the logic of the letter of *Lyons*, it is through confession that a Christian achieves his or her true identity. In order to articulate his rhetoric against denial, the author of *Lyons* found the metaphor of birthing particularly useful in authorizing his discourse of Christian identity. Christian confessors are portrayed to be the legitimate or natural offspring of the church, whereas the author’s portrayal of aborted deniers renders them illegitimate or unnatural children of the church. However, the author also finds the notion of coming back to life—communicated through the reversal of abortion—rhetorically useful in order to demonstrate that Christian deniers are still eligible for proper or natural birth through the Virgin Mother by means of life-giving confession.

By conceptualizing martyrdom as an act that enables life after death, the author of *Lyons* situates himself within broader Christian ideals about life after death, more specifically within salvation and resurrection modes of thinking, which are themselves tied up in birthing discourses. For instance, in her book *Birthing Salvation*, Rebecca Anna Solevåg (2013) explores how childbearing discourse interfaces with salvation discourse in some early Christian texts. She looks in particular to the Pastoral Epistles, the *Acts of Andrew*, and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* in order to demonstrate that these three texts configure childbirth and soteriology in radically different ways, actively creating a discourse which links the two. The discourses of salvation, resurrection, and martyrdom create the possibility of reversing death.

As I have demonstrated, the rhetoric of birthing serves a performative function in early Christian martyrologies. The peculiar language of birth, abortion, and rebirth in *Lyons* reflects the author’s attempt to construct a particular conception of Christian identity. The metaphor of birthing plays an important and strategic role in authorizing and contesting one early Christian perspective of what a Christian martyr ought to be. The author’s writing may also be reflective of intragroup disputes regarding the status of lapsed Christians in persecuted communities. Through his letter to

Coming Back to Life

communities in Asia Minor and Phrygia, the author of *Lyons* tries to fix the permeable boundaries of Christian identity, and does so by constructing those boundaries around the concept of martyrdom. However, the grey space, which allows for deniers to be reinstated as confessors, suggests a communal, on-the-ground wrestling with the question of denying or lapsed Christians. The example of *Lyons* demonstrates how the legitimizing language of birthing and rebirthing was deemed useful for negotiating this complicated situation. The author, therefore, is able to leave open the possibility that all Christians can come back to life through life-giving confession.

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balch, David L., and Carolyn Osiek, eds. 2003. *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Boyarin, Daniel. 1999. *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brent, Allen. 2010. *Cyprian and Roman Carthage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buell, Denise Kimber. 1999. *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Castelli, Elizabeth A. 2004. *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cobb, L. Stephanie. 2008. *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Daniel-Hughes, Carly. 2015. "Producing and Contesting Martyrdom in Pre-Decian Roman North Africa." Pages 19–41 in *Spring 2015 Seminar Papers*. Santa Rosa, CA: Westar Institute.
- Dehandschutter, Boudewijn. 2005. "A Community of Martyrs: Religious Identity and the Case of the Martyrs of Lyons and Vienne." Pages 3–22 in *More than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*. Edited by Johan Leemans. ANL 51. Leuven: Peeters.
- Dixon, Suzanne. 1990. *The Roman Mother*. London: Routledge.
- . 1992. *The Roman Family*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hartog, Paul. 2014. "The Maltreatment of Early Christians: Refinement and Response." *SBJT* 18:49–79.

Machabée, Life and Death

- Jensen, Robin M. 2008. "Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna: The Church and her Womb in Ancient Christian Tradition." Pages 137–55 in *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*. Edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins. FCNTECW 12. London: T&T Clark.
- Keresztes, Paul. 1967. "The Massacre at Lugdunum in 177 A.D." *Historia* 16:75–86.
- Lieu, Judith M. 2002. *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- . 2004. *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Matthews, Shelly. 2010. *The Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mendels, Doron. 1999. *The Media Revolution of Early Christianity: An Essay on Eusebius's Ecclesiastical History*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Moss, Candida R. 2010. *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2012. *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Perkins, Judith. 1995. *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era*. London: Routledge.
- Rawson, Beryl, ed. 1991. *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Salisbury, Joyce E. 2004. *The Blood of Martyrs: Unintended Consequences of Ancient Violence*. London: Routledge.
- Schnabel, Eckhard J. 2008. *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 1999. *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Solevåg, Rebecca Anna. 2013. *Birthing Salvation: Gender and Class in Early Christian Childbearing Discourse*. BibInt 121. Leiden: Brill.
- Thompson, James Westfall. 1912. "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177." *AmJT* 16:358–84.
- . 1913. "The Alleged Persecution of the Christians at Lyons in 177: A Reply to Certain Criticism." *AmJT* 17:249–58.
- Weidmann, Frederick W. 2000. "The Martyrs of Lyons." Pages 398–412 in *Religions of Late Antiquity in Practice*. Edited by Richard Valantasis. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Yanagisako, Sylvia, and Carol Delaney, eds. 1995. *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis*. New York: Routledge.

Coming Back to Life

Embedded Online Works:

Lake, Kirsopp, and J. E. L. Oulton, trans. 1926–1932. *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History*. 2 vols. LCL. London. Heinemann.

Vol. 1: archive.org/stream/ecclesiasticalhi01euseuoft.

Vol. 2: archive.org/stream/ecclesiasticalhi02euseuoft.

Melmoth, William, and W. M. L. Hutchinson, trans. 1915. *Pliny: Letters*. 2 vols. LCL. London: Heinemann.

catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100320380.

Nestle, E., and K. Aland, eds. 2012. *Novum Testamentum Graece*. 28th rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/novum-testamentum-graece-na-28.

Rahlfs, Alfred, and Robert Hanhart, eds. 2006. *Septuaginta*. 2nd rev. ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

www.academic-bible.com/en/online-bibles/septuagint-lxx.

Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson, eds. 1885–1887. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. 10 vols. New York: Scribner's Sons.

catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/010248796.