

## Religion professor explores historic context of early Christian texts



How does one ask research questions about a subject often accepted on faith alone?

"It's really hard," says Stephanie Cobb, George and Sallie Cutchin Camp Professor of Bible. "I

don't think that there are wrong questions, but there are ways that we can phrase questions as historians that don't require us to be theologians."

The historic context surrounding religious stories has long been a guiding principle of Cobb's research. As an undergraduate archaeology major, her program focused on Palestinian archaeology and the Hebrew bible. Combining the study of religious texts with the material culture of archaeology, raised many questions about the historic accuracy of the texts.

"We were working on the digs at a

strata that should have been about the time of the Exodus," she says. "There should be evidence of that mass migration from Egypt into Palestine, but there's really not.

"My professors were sensitive to the religious perspectives of their students, but there weren't questions that were off limits. They were engaging with me in questions, such as 'so what if this text isn't historical? What is it doing? Why is it telling this story?'"

Cobb eventually moved away from archaeology, but the questions of the text remained. She ultimately narrowed her focus to Christianity in the second and third centuries, a period that held many conflicts for the burgeoning religion.

"Christians haven't figured out who they are and what they believe," she says. "They have a lot of conflicts with Judaism, with Roman religions, and among ourselves. They're fighting over whether there's one god, or whether there are hundreds of gods. It's a really messy and fun time period to work in because nothing's settled yet. For me, today's conflicts are so tame."

Cobb explains how these conflicts required early Christians to establish their place in Roman social constructs. While still considered an underdog, Christians often attempted to "rewrite history before they've

actually won," she says. "That's an interesting thing—normally we think of the winners writing history. They write these stories that ramp up the narrative of persecution and hold these martyrs up as heroes. It's an interesting PR move that the church does, and it actually works."

In support of the narrative of martyrs as heroes, these texts also depict a hierarchy of masculinity, with Christians at the peak. Even women are presented as "manly"—stronger than their opponents—as a way of further proving the power of Christians.

This masculine portrayal is an exception to typical representations of women in ancient societies, but Cobb believes there's more to the story. In her book, *Dying to be Men*, she argues that the image of strong women often is countered with graphic and sexualized descriptions of their bodies, and they are always mothers. "If the women are more manly than the pagan persecutors, that sets up the problem of women in the church," she says. "They need to be in their place. They're not allowed to teach, they're not allowed to be bishops. They still need to be good Christian women."

Even as Cobb tries to dissect the meaning of these early texts, she stresses it's impossible to know what was really going through the minds of early Christian

writers. When she was featured in a recent *National Geographic* documentary about the lives of the apostles in the days after Jesus' crucifixion, Cobb was careful to draw the line between documented evidence and making assumptions based on texts.

"We have incomplete information about what the worldview was in the first century," she says. "Our accounts don't come from the disciples themselves. They come from people who may or may not have known disciples, some decades later. Even in Paul's own letters, he always has a point to make. I have to take it with a little bit of skepticism, asking the question, what is he getting out of this narrative?"

She may not be able to understand the inner thoughts of the apostles, but Cobb believes the questions and arguments posed in her research, book, and the documentary are all part of an important dialogue.

"People say we should never talk about politics and religion in public ever," she says. "I wish that those were the two things we could find a way to talk about. Not assuming that everyone agrees with an underlying statement may help us talk about the importance of beliefs. I don't think faith-based discourse is wrong or even inferior, but maybe as a society, we could learn to have a variety of discourses in a variety of settings." ❖