

BOOK REVIEW

Perpetua: Athlete of God. By BARBARA K. GOLD. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 266. Hardback, 4 black-and-white figures and 2 maps. \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-19-538545-8.

The narrative of Perpetua remains of interest to many, both for what it may reveal about the richness and complexity of the ancient world and what it may convey about the key figure(s) in the text. Barbara Gold's text seeks to illuminate both aspects. Gold is interested in placing the text in its proper historical, social, political, literary, religious, and material contexts in the high Roman empire in order to measure the text vis-à-vis the broader culture of that period.

Chapter 1 ("Perpetua's *Passio*: Text, Authorship, Authenticity") discusses the textual matters, the authorship of the framing subdivisions and the authenticity of the various sections. The different portions of the text are from different authors; the editor(s) may have played a much more significant role in the final product than previously understood; and hoping to find some sort of authenticity remains an elusive and complicated endeavor. The most fruitful enterprise, in the author's understanding, is to analyze the text closely to see what its social and theological goals are.

The second chapter ("And I became Male: Gender and the Athlete") explores the importance of gender in Perpetua's life, as textualized, in particular in the context of the fourth vision. There, she is transformed into a male athlete to face the brutality and the physicality of a foe in the figure of an Egyptian. An Examination of the theological, as well as the social and philosophical contexts of Perpetua as a (wo)man athlete, shows how problematic the gendering quality of courage is in the text.

The third chapter ("A Matter of Genre and Influence: The Passion and Greco-Roman Pagan and Christian Narratives") delves into the matter of the specific genre of the text. The author compares the *Passio* with other ancient texts that

might have been influential or that might have played various functions in giving the text its texture: the Greek and Roman novels, the Christian novel, other Christian martyr narratives, the Gospels and the apocryphal acts of the Apostles. There were fluid and cross boundaries between the genres and literatures. It is only through an analysis of how the wider culture influenced the text that one may understand its place in relation to other writings of the period.

Chapter 4 (“Carthage: Pagan Culture, Religion, and Society in the High Roman Empire”) steps a little outside the text proper to consider what life might have been in Carthage for a young Christian woman in the late-2nd and early-3rd centuries CE. The chapter also shows that the small number of Christians who lived in Carthage made use of Greek and Roman “pagan” texts, even if they tried at the same time to distance themselves from accommodating to Roman social and religious mores.

“Carthage: The Early Christian Community” is the topic of the fifth chapter. In this chapter, the author looks more closely at Christian life in Carthage and the ways in which Christian life interconnected with other aspects of life in the city. The plural identities of the Christians, with its different doctrines and beliefs, constituted a multiform entity that makes the topic of identity to be a very complex issue of analysis. Boundaries between Christians, Jews and “pagans” were complex, fluid, unstable and should push the researcher to be much more prudent and flexible in trying to understand the identity of a woman like Perpetua of Carthage.

Chapter 6 (“Perpetua’s Life”) analyzes how Perpetua’s life is presented in the text, especially the issues related to her family, her social status, education and other Christ-followers within her group. There is also a glance over Felicitas, presented as a plausible member of Perpetua’s household.

The last chapter (“The Nachleben of Perpetua: Her Unwitting Legacy”) studies the afterlife of Perpetua and how the text has been received by subsequent generations. The church fathers, and some early Christian women, utilized her narrative for their particular theological perspectives. By the time of Augustine (354-430 CE), there is already a growing cult devoted to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas, although Augustine himself tried “to take control of the very substance of the *Passio*” (153). The author highlights some of the interpretations and appropriation of Perpetua’s voice and message in subsequent theological and

ideological debates.

The book is well written and it may serve as a good reference for anyone interested in the narrative of Perpetua. Although I enjoyed the book immensely, the author could have been more nuanced in her presentation of Perpetua in relationship to Felicitas. The narrative is conceived from the perspective of the noble woman, who takes center stage. The two women are the heroines of the tale, but the presentation and the agency of one trumps that of the other. The narrator(s)/editor(s) seem to convey the message that sharing with someone some particular life circumstances does not equate overcoming social differences and boundaries. The two women may be in prison together and awaiting execution for a common religious belief and practice, but socially, from the onset of the narrative, they are presented as different. That could have been highlighted in Gold's treatment, which is otherwise a very important treatise of the text that came to be known as that of Perpetua and Felicitas.

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