

REVIEW

THE FATE OF THE DEAD IN
THE PASSION OF PERPETUA

Eliezer Gonzalez, *The Fate of the Dead in Early Third Century North African Christianity: The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas and Tertullian*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014. Pp. xii + 253. Paperback, €64.00. ISBN 978-3-161-52944-3.

Few early Christian texts enjoyed as much popularity as *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (henceforth *Perpetua*); so much so that Augustine even had to remind his readers that *Perpetua* was not *scriptura canonica* (Augustine, *On the Soul* 3.9). This martyrdom story of five North African catechumens and their catechist has not only sparked much enthusiasm among Christians throughout history. It was also one of the most controversial and influential stories up until the seventeenth century, when the orthodoxy of the text was questioned by Protestant readers who saw Montanist influence in the preface.

In this adaptation of his doctoral dissertation (Macquarie University, 2013) Eliezer Gonzalez shows that academic interest in *Perpetua* is still very much alive, even though almost every aspect of this text has been debated by prominent scholars over the last hundred years or so. Gonzalez chooses to investigate one particular, often overlooked, aspect of *Perpetua*: the concept of the afterlife and the fate of the dead in early Christianity (36–7).

As stated in the very brief introductory chapter 1 (1–4), Gonzalez’s main aim is to answer this central question: ‘where do Christians, both martyrs and those who are not “so fortunate”, go when they die?’ (3). While this study focuses on the original historical context of *Perpetua*, it also explores a variety of texts dealing with the idea of the afterlife in Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman traditions and seeks to establish how and explain why a shift in the afterlife discourse occurred in the early third century. Indeed, Gonzalez emphasises the importance of *Perpetua* in this respect, as it is ‘the first datable Christian text that describes an immediate post-mortem ascent of the soul according to the Greco-Roman *topos*’ as opposed to the concept of eschatological and bodily resurrection that was widely accepted at the time (4).

Chapter 2 (5–37) serves both as a literature review and as a summary of the origins of the text, providing us with plenty of the information needed to situate it in its historical context and also reflecting the vast amount of scholarship that *Perpetua* has engendered in the last few decades. Gonzalez starts

off with reminding us of the unusual layout of the text which consists of four distinct sections written by three different persons: Perpetua herself, Saturus the catechist, and an unknown editor who wrote the preface and conclusion, including the martyrdom account. *Perpetua* has come down to us through nine Latin manuscripts and one Greek. Although the original language of *Perpetua* has been much debated due to the presence of Greek idioms in the Latin, Gonzalez follows Robinson's view of the Latin origin of the text (6-8). Gonzalez then proceeds to show the popularity of *Perpetua* and the respect it was held in by early Christians, citing Augustine's use of the text in three of his sermons, and also material evidence such as the depiction of Perpetua's martyrdom on a fourth-century Spanish sarcophagus (8-10). As for *Perpetua*'s literary genre, Gonzalez, like his predecessors, is at a loss when it comes to classifying this text within an already existing denomination. Indeed, the composition and content of the text make it difficult to classify *Perpetua* as there are autobiographical and biographical elements, as well as apocalyptic claims made in the preface by the editor. Gonzalez, therefore, warns us here against rushing to the conclusion that *Perpetua* belongs to the *Acta Martyrum* genre in spite of some similarities between *Perpetua* and these texts. It could have been beneficial here to compare *Perpetua* to previous martyrdom accounts and *Acta*, such as the *Letter of the Churches of Vienna and Lyon*, the *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus and Agathonike*, or even the *Acta Scillitanorum* which was written in Carthage as well, two decades before *Perpetua*. Indeed, while most of the earlier martyr acts seem to follow the same pattern, with a particular emphasis on the martyrs' trials where they vehemently assert and defend their faith, in *Perpetua*, hardly a few lines are dedicated to the prisoners' interrogation. Such a comparison could have brought out not only the originality of *Perpetua*, but also the differences in early Christians' concerns that these texts reveal; it may have also shed light upon the need for a new literary genre. Gonzalez also emphasises the liturgical purposes of *Perpetua* as he states: 'The liturgical terminology of the introduction ... suggests ... a key reason for its composition and early transmission', which, according to him, makes *Perpetua* a 'Christian innovation' (12).

Gonzalez goes on to discuss the authorial authenticity and dating of the text and, following the mainstream academic views in these matters, accepts the claim from the text itself that Perpetua and Saturus indeed wrote the accounts of their dreams and visions themselves prior to their execution in Carthage in AD 203 (12-19). Concerning the identity of the editor, Gonzalez here considers the different views of scholars who argued for or against Tertullian's involvement in the redaction of the preface and conclusion, based on style and allegedly Montanist overtone. This is a concern that Gonzalez keeps coming back to throughout this thesis, but his arguments against Tertullian's authorship (Tertullian's only reference to *Perpetua* is either erroneous

or manipulative) and Montanist influence on *Perpetua* (some elements in the preface, considered by some to be Montanist, were actually typical of the third-century Church in North Africa) are convincing and supported by prominent scholars such as Timothy Barnes and Maureen Tilley (19–25). Gonzalez then gives an account of the scholarly debates concerning ideological subversion from a social (identity, gender, and hierarchy) and feminist point of view. While these concerns are not central to the overall argument, the subversive nature of *Perpetua* is important here, as it is also reflected in its ideology of afterlife and critique of existing ideologies (26–32). Gonzalez concludes this most valuable chapter with a discussion of mysticism and early Christian apocalypticism, influenced by the Jewish apocalyptic strand, which underlie the text (33–6).

Chapter 3 presents an overview of early Christian ideologies of the afterlife, both before and after *Perpetua*. As the analysis of material evidence remains rather unfruitful, apart from showing the Greco-Roman influence on funerary customs of early Christians, Gonzalez then turns to the literary evidence, starting with the New Testament's position on the soul, the resurrection, and the notion of ascent to heaven. Unsurprisingly, Gonzalez concludes that the concept of the 'immortality of the soul' is altogether absent from the NT which rather focuses on a general, eschatological resurrection of the body as taught by Jesus (*Luke* 14:14; *John* 5:28–9) and emphasised, for instance, by Paul in *1 Corinthians* 15:12.

Gonzalez does not deny the presence of the notion of ascent in the NT, but puts the stress on its eschatological and material (resurrection of the body) aspects, as opposed to the 'immediate post-mortem ascent of the soul' featured in *Perpetua* (44–52). Regrettably, Gonzalez chooses to relegate to his footnotes some controversial passages, which some have read as an idea of immediate ascent of the righteous to heaven, such as *Luke* 23:43 in particular (Jesus' words to the criminal: Ἀμήν σοι λέγω, σήμερον μετ' ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ), but also possibly *Ephesians* 2:6 and *Hebrews* 12:22–3. Although Gonzalez is certainly right in asserting that these passages are exceptions to the overwhelmingly present teachings on the eschatological resurrection of the dead, it would have been profitable to push the analysis of these ambiguities within the NT further. A discussion of *Philippians* 1:23 (which Gonzalez does not even mention), for example, could have revealed Paul's view of his own fate in the afterlife as he seemed, in this particular letter, to set himself apart from the rest of the righteous, believing he would be in Christ's presence immediately after his death (τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν ἔχων εἰς τὸ ἀναλῦσαι καὶ σὺν Χριστῷ εἶναι). Admittedly, this is an isolated statement. Nonetheless, it could have had some impact on early Christian conceptions of the afterlife.

Gonzalez then treats the *Book of Revelation* separately because of its apocalyptic nature but his argument here is less convincing (52–4). Indeed, follow-

ing Pattemore's interpretation of *ψυχή* in *Rev.* 6:9–11, Gonzalez sees John's use of the word as simply meaning 'people who have died', which seems rather far-fetched, considering the mystical aspect of the *Apocalypse*. Furthermore, Gonzalez discusses the several mentions of the righteous and of the martyrs in heaven but concludes that 'they have not yet received their ultimate reward' and that 'given that the *Apocalypse of John* is clearly presented as a prophetic text, we cannot with any confidence affirm that the author intends us to understand that what John sees is the present reality. ... Therefore none of these visions can be understood as depicting the dead as already having ascended to heaven' (54). While the latter affirmation is almost certain as, after all, the souls are crying, they also ask God, 'How long ... until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' This sentence thus suggests that the end of days has not yet taken place. In a Christian community such as that of *Perpetua*, heavily imbued with the cult of the martyrs, this passage which mentions both the souls of the martyrs and their being already in the presence of God could have had much impact on their vision of the afterlife, at least for the righteous and the martyrs. Gonzalez then turns to the writings of the Apostolic Fathers and examines a variety of texts such as Ignatius' letters, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, *1 Clement*, and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, which all seem to follow the eschatological resurrection of the flesh preached in the NT with the exception of some ambiguity where the martyrs are concerned.

Gonzalez here stresses the absence of a 'concept of a soul as separate from the body [and] of the notion of ascent of the martyrs to God' (54–8). The apologists of the second century, however, seem to have been more divided on the subject (59–68). While Justin Martyr defends the eschatological bodily resurrection concept against the Docetists' view on the salvation of the soul alone, he also appears to make an exception for the martyrs as, when asked (in *Martyrdom of Justin*, 5) if he believes he will ascend to heaven if he is beheaded, Justin replies: 'I do not think ... but I am fully convinced of it.' Gonzalez does recognise the explicit reference to post-mortem ascension in this passage but discards it as it does not mention whether the ascent will take place immediately after the death of the martyr or at a later time. With the exception of Athenagoras, who was the first to argue for the immortality of the soul (along with the resurrection of the dead), the other apologists vehemently defend their eschatological view on the resurrection of the body against increasing Gnostic views influenced by Jewish Apocalyptic texts such as those found in Nag Hammadi. The *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, notably, contains a description of the immediate ascent of the soul and could be dated prior to *Perpetua* (early to late second century).

The next section of this chapter is dedicated to the literary evidence after *Perpetua*. Gonzalez is here cautious not to attribute the shift in afterlife ideolo-

gies to the influence of *Perpetua* but argues rather that this text is representative of the more popular view of the ‘second church’ (‘church of the people’ as opposed to the ‘Great Church’ represented by the elite) against the earlier, more conservative, view of the Church Fathers. Gonzalez nonetheless argues for the influence of *Perpetua* on the *Vita Cypriani* as well as the similarities between *Perpetua* and subsequent North African *passiones* (*Passio Montani et Lucii* and *Passio Mariani et Jacobi*, for example). Cyprian, writing roughly fifty years after *Perpetua*, is unambiguous in his view of the afterlife (*Mortality*, 22): ‘we pass by death to immortality ... This is not an end but a passage, a crossing over to eternity’ (69–71). Gonzalez then cites Origen (who still also defends the idea of resurrection), Augustine, and Anthony of the Desert as followers of the immediate ascent of the soul ideology (71–7).

Chapter 4 explores the possible sources and influences on *Perpetua*’s ascent ideology as well as the contexts in which the text was written. The first sections of this chapter show the use of, and the parallels between, the *Vetus Latina* (Latin translation of the Christian Scriptures) and *Perpetua*. Gonzalez provides us here with a chart of quotes from both books, demonstrating the references to the Scriptures identifiable in *Perpetua*. Despite the fact that this chart appears to reveal a certain influence of *Revelation* over *Perpetua*, Gonzalez, arguably, seems reluctant, as in chapter 3 with *ψυχή*, to acknowledge this influence (80–3). The imagery of the ladder in *Perpetua* is central to this study as the whole ascent of the soul concept stems from it. While Gonzalez does not rule out a likely allusion to Jacob’s ladder which, in *Genesis* 28, signifies the ascent to heaven, he proceeds to the analysis of other possible influences such as Egyptian cultic symbolism that passed into Greco-Roman popular culture (84–9). Gonzalez concludes with one of his key points regarding *Perpetua*’s view of the afterlife: ‘the Christianity depicted in *Perpetua* is one that is so imbued with popular culture that in many ways it was as understandable from the view point of popular Greco-Roman culture as by Christians’ (88).

The following section deals with ‘one of the richest traditions that appears to have influenced *Perpetua*: Jewish apocalypticism’ (89), which also seems to have been the source of dissension amongst early Christian communities in Carthage regarding the mystical experiences issue. Gonzalez argues that one of the main functions of apocalyptic texts was to address the fate of the dead, which also appears to be *Perpetua*’s central purpose. In this regard, *Perpetua* is very much an apocalyptic text and the influence of Jewish texts such as *1 Enoch* or the *Ascension of Isaiah* is evident (89–93). Gonzalez then proposes an overview of the ascent motif in the Greco-Roman tradition, ranging from the apotheosis of the emperor to astral immortality (99–103). The Greco-Roman influence on *Perpetua* is further emphasised in the next section on *Perpetua*’s education and Gonzalez concludes that *Perpetua*’s background and education were thoroughly pagan. Moreover, it is unlikely

that Perpetua, as a catechumen, had been a Christian for long before her martyrdom, thus she was still imbued with Greco-Roman popular culture when she wrote down her visions (103–7).

Chapter 5 (109–27) is rather short and seeks to demonstrate the existence of two different traditions regarding the concept of the afterlife that co-existed in the early third century in Carthage. Gonzalez indeed emphasises the importance of reading *Perpetua* along with the writings of Tertullian as they ‘were products of the same period, the same location, and essentially the one religious community’. Gonzalez highlights here the idea that in *Perpetua* not only do the martyrs immediately ascend to heaven, but so do also all the righteous Christians who have died. Following Bremmer’s interpretation of one particularly controversial passage (*Perpetua*, 13.8), Gonzalez convincingly argues that the use of *sed et* in the sentence *et coepimus illic multos fratres cognoscere, sed et martyras* is ‘inclusive’ and should be translated as ‘and also’, meaning therefore that heaven is populated by both martyrs and righteous Christians (111–12). This point in particular is at odds with Tertullian’s notion of the afterlife as, although Tertullian believed the martyrs received their heavenly reward immediately after their death, he also vehemently argued for the eschatological bodily resurrection and rejected any other view as heretical (like those of the Valentinians or the Gnostics). Gonzalez thus reiterates in this chapter the idea that *Perpetua* expresses a more popular, perhaps widespread, notion of the afterlife, than that of the more traditional Church Fathers.

Chapter 6 considers mainly the material evidence of the cult of the dead and aims at showing the influence of this Roman funerary custom in *Perpetua*, focusing particularly on the practice of *refrigerium* (‘refreshment of the dead’). This fascinating chapter first provides us with information regarding the attitude of early Christians towards the dead. Gonzalez vividly depicts here the Christians’ reunions in cemetery churches where they shared food with the martyrs to commemorate the day of their death, but also with their deceased loved ones. Like Andrew McGowan before him, Gonzalez sees in this practice the pagan custom of *refrigerium* and also argues that before the fourth century (the first material evidence for *refrigerium* in North African Christianity is the *mensa* at Ain-Kebira and is dated to AD 299, at 133), Christian and non-Christian burials were so similar that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other (130–9). Gonzalez then analyses *Perpetua* in search for allusions to *refrigerium* as food and drink appear to be central imagery in *Perpetua*. A few thought-provoking points are raised here such as the lingering sweetness of the cheese that Perpetua eats in her vision which not only serves as a link between heaven and earth, but also signifies that Perpetua already belongs to heaven and by extension that she already is a martyr (141–4).

In the remaining sections of this chapter, Gonzalez explores the ideology of *refrigerium* in *Perpetua* as well as its social functions. Gonzalez's main point here is to highlight the importance of community in the text. Six out of the seven instances of the use of *refrigerium* cognates in the text are linked to the Christian community and intercession. As Gonzalez puts it, 'ultimately, *refrigerium* seems to have been fundamentally about the continuity of community' between the dead and the living, interceding for each other (148–62).

Chapter 7 considers the ideological conflicts in Carthage over the problematics both of the afterlife of the righteous and of the cult of the dead. The first section of this chapter feels somewhat redundant and probably should have been included in chapter 5, as Gonzalez merely reasserts here his point on the ideological differences between Tertullian's writings and *Perpetua* as proof of 'the multifaceted struggle of popular Christianity against the traditionalistic forces of the church in North Africa' (169). The second section, however, provides a useful insight into how the cult of the dead was criticised and condemned by Tertullian, and eventually by the church clergy, as a pagan practice, which, although eventually suppressed as such, was still absorbed into some aspects of later Christian funerary customs (169–76).

Chapter 8 introduces the notion of *refrigerium interim*, coined by Tertullian, and is primarily concerned with the fate of non-Christian souls. Gonzalez first surveys early Christian apocalyptic texts, namely the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, due to their similarities with *Perpetua* regarding the afterlife, in order to find hints of an interim state ideology in them. While in all three texts we find apparent mentions of an immediate presence of non-martyred righteous in heaven, nothing hints directly at the idea of an interim state, although Gonzalez recognises the influence of the *Apocalypse of Peter* on the later developments of the concepts of the interim state and hell (177–86).

The next section on Tertullian's *infernus* is well argued and rewarding as it illustrates the thought process the early Christian thinkers went through to accommodate Christian ideologies with pagan popular culture. Indeed, Tertullian developed an elaborate concept of Hades as a place where the souls of both the righteous and the wicked go after their death to await the end of days. The complexity of this notion resides in the fact that, for Tertullian, it is only the *soul* of the dead that goes to Hades. Therefore, whatever punishment or joy the souls experience in Hades, deprived of their body, their experience is only limited until the general resurrection. This conceptualisation of Hades is evidently rooted in the Greco-Roman tradition of the afterlife but is, in this context, only a temporary place for the dead (186–90).

In the last section of chapter 8, Gonzalez investigates Perpetua's vision of her brother Dinocrates who died as a pagan child. The description of the place where Perpetua sees her brother, as well as the appearance and miser-

able state of the child, points to a vision of Greco-Roman Hades. However, Gonzalez concludes that Dinocrates' location is not *interim* as, in spite of his condition being improved thanks to Perpetua's intercession, the boy remains in the same place, i.e. Greco-Roman Hades (190–5). However, in the light of Tertullian's writings, this conclusion might somehow seem a bit rushed. Indeed, as Dinocrates was a pagan when he died, it is not surprising that he should remain in Hades (even as conceptualised by Tertullian) as, after all, only Christians (whether martyrs or simply believers) are seen in heaven by Perpetua and Saturus. Admittedly, the Dinocrates issue raises more questions than it gives answers. For example, how could Perpetua believe that the souls of non-Christians simply go to a pagan Hades after their death? Or, to put it more bluntly, how could she believe in a strictly pagan Hades? Gonzalez explains this by stating: 'Since Dinocrates was not a Christian, the author of *Perpetua* reverts to popular beliefs to explain his fate' (194). Could it perhaps be that Perpetua was familiar with Tertullian's notion of Hades and differed with it only on the Christians' fate? As Gonzalez recognises in chapter 7, *Perpetua* never mentions the resurrection of the dead in any form and Gonzalez's study works in part on an argument of silence (167). Moreover, as it is repeatedly made clear in this book, Tertullian and Perpetua evolved in the same Christian community. It is possible, therefore, that Tertullian's writings reflect the development of this new Christian concept of Hades and that it is how this passage in *Perpetua* would have been understood by its readers.

Chapter 9 is concerned with the body, the soul, and material continuity in early third-century Carthaginian Christianity (197–208). While the subject discussed here is important for our understanding of *Perpetua*'s ideology of the afterlife, this brief chapter feels misplaced and could have been more useful elsewhere in the book. Following Perkins and Shaw's studies on the Christian vision of the body, Gonzalez asserts the importance of the material body for early Christians as reflected in the idea of bodily resurrection and contrasts it with *Perpetua*'s representation of the 'materiality' of the soul. Again, the similarities and differences between the ideologies of Tertullian and *Perpetua* are stressed here as, even though they both express a concept of material continuity in the afterlife, it is achieved in different ways. While in *Perpetua* the soul is clearly and entirely corporeal, without the need for a bodily resurrection, Tertullian argues for a limited materiality of the soul in Hades and, thus, for the necessity of the resurrection of the flesh. Gonzalez makes an interesting point here on the purpose of the 'material imagery' in the text as he states (207):

Seeing the text not merely as literary, but as ritualistic, allows us to begin to understand how the community understood it as allowing them to enter into a 'more real world' ... Through the ritual reading

and hearing of these texts, the community experienced this world, and as such experienced and maintained 'material' continuity with the martyrs.

In lieu of a conclusion, chapter 10 (209–14) first provides a useful summary of the findings of each chapter. Gonzalez then proceeds to reassert the importance of his thesis regarding the analysis of the polemics about the afterlife in early third-century Carthage and concludes: 'It is reasonable to come to the conclusion that popular Christianity won the day in terms of the ideology of the afterlife' (213).

The Fate of the Dead in Early Third Century North African Christianity is a well-written, appealing, and pertinent book, which offers a valuable insight into the ideologies of the afterlife in early Christianity. While some aspects of *Perpetua* could have been a little more elaborated, like that of the concept of *Imitatio Christi*, this study analyses *Perpetua* from many different perspectives and sources, and feels, if not exhaustive, definitely very satisfying. The bibliography is rich and inspiring for anyone interested in martyrology and early Christian eschatology. However, it is worth noting that Gonzalez often quotes non-English sources without translation, which not only disrupts the text in a rather frustrating way, but could also be problematic for students and non-polyglots. This book could also have benefitted from more scrupulous copy-editing, as it is riddled with typos, especially in the French quotations.

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