

Yesterday I began to talk about the Martyrdom of Perpetua, one of the most interesting and moving texts to come down to us from early Christianity. It is an account of a 23-year old Roman matron who is willing to die a gruesome death for her Christian faith. Among other things, the text shows that her faith is far more important to her than her family. In particular, she is shown in conflict especially with her father (no husband is mentioned, which has led to considerable speculation: Divorced? Widowed? Unwed mother? Something else?). And even though it is with regret, she is willing to leave behind her own infant child by being martyred.

Family figures prominently in the two excerpts here. In the first her father begs her to avoid martyrdom, to no avail. In the second (chs. 7-8) we have an account of her dream and intervention on behalf of her dead brother Dinocrates. This is the part that I will be most interested in for the next post. Is it an early adumbration of the later doctrine of Purgatory?

Part of the intrigue in these early sections ...

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Part of the intrigue in these early sections (before the description of the martyrdom itself) claim to be in Perpetua's own hand - a kind of diary she kept in prison. One of the major issues in scholarship is whether this really is her writing - in which case it would be the earliest Christian writing of any kind known to be by a woman - or whether it was forged to make it *appear* to be by her. The latter opinion seems to be the one taken by most scholars today. In either event, it's an unusually important text (would she really have the leisure and materials to write in a dark, dank prison?). Here are the two passages.

5 A few days later there was a rumor that we were going to be given a hearing. My father also arrived from the city, worn with worry, and he came to see me with the idea of persuading me. "Daughter," he said, "have pity on my grey head—have pity on me your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favored you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life. Do not abandon me to be the reproach of others. Think of your brothers, think of your mother and your aunt, think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you."

This was the way my father spoke out of love for me, kissing my hands and throwing himself down before me. With tears in his eyes he no longer addressed me as his daughter but as a woman. I was sorry for my father's sake, because he alone of all my kin would be unhappy to see me suffer.

I tried to comfort him saying: "It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills; for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power." And he left me in great sorrow.

Then Tertius and Pomponius, those blessed deacons who tried to take care of us, bribed the soldiers to allow us to go to a better part of the prison to refresh ourselves for a few hours. Everyone then left that dungeon and shifted for himself. I nursed my baby, who was faint from hunger. In my anxiety I spoke to my mother about the child, I tried to comfort my brother, and I gave the child in their charge. I was in pain because I saw them suffering out of pity for me. These were the trials I had to endure for many days. Then I got permission for my baby to stay with me in prison. At once I recovered my health, relieved as I was of my worry and anxiety over the child. My prison had suddenly become a palace, so that I wanted to be there rather than anywhere else.

7Some days later when we were all at prayer, suddenly while praying I spoke out and uttered the name Dinocrates. I was surprised; for the name had never entered my mind until that moment. And I was pained when I recalled what had happened to him. At once I realized that I was privileged to pray for him. I began to pray for him and to sigh deeply for him before the Lord.

That very night I had the following vision. I saw Dinocrates come out of a dark hole, where there were many others with him, very hot and thirsty, pale and dirty. On his face was the wound he had when he died. Now Dinocrates had been my brother according to the flesh; but he had died horribly of cancer of the face when he was seven years old, and his death was a source of loathing to everyone. Thus it was for him that I made my prayer. There was a great abyss between us: neither could approach the other. Where Dinocrates stood there was a pool full of water; and its rim was higher than the child's height, so that Dinocrates had to stretch himself up to drink. I was sorry that, though the pool had water in it, Dinocrates could not drink because of the height of the rim. Then I woke up, realizing that my brother was suffering. But I was confident that I could help him in his trouble; and I prayed for him every day until we were transferred to the military prison. For we were supposed to fight with the beasts at the military games to be held on the occasion of the emperor Geta's birthday. And I prayed for my brother day and night with tears and sighs that this favor might be granted me.

8On the day we were kept in chains, I had this vision shown to me. I saw the same spot that I had seen before, but there was Dinocrates all clean, well dressed, and refreshed. I saw a scar where the wound had been; and the pool I had seen before now had its rim lowered to the level of the child's waist. And Dinocrates kept drinking water from it, and there above the rim was a golden bowl full of water. And Dinocrates drew

close and began to drink from it, and yet the bowl remained full. And when he had drunk enough of the water, he began to play as children do. Then I awoke, and I realized that he had been delivered from his suffering.[/private]



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