

‘WITH THE TASTE OF SOMETHING SWEET
STILL IN MY MOUTH’
PERPETUA’S VISIONS

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In the earliest phases of Latin Christian literature, the period from 200 to 313 (when Christianity was first legalized), Christian texts reflect the dominant position and influence of Christian martyrs. Many ‘passions’ or ‘acts’ of Christian martyrs were recorded, and this new genre rapidly gained strong popularity, both within the church, where such texts could be used in liturgy, and in private circles.

This paper will deal with one of the best known and most famous early Christian martyr texts, the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (hence: PPF),¹ the story of the martyrdom in 203 suffered by two young women and a number of their male companions. In this unique text, partly written by Perpetua herself (see below), visions play a central role. These important and influential visions have, of course, at-

¹ The best modern editions are: A.A.R. Bastiaensen, *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, testo critico a cura di A.A.R. Bastiaensen, traduzione di Gioachino Chiarini, in A.A.R. Bastiaensen et al., *Atti e passioni dei martiri* (Milano, 1987) 107-47, 412-52; J. Amat, *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité suivi des Actes* (Paris, 1996). The classical text edition is: C.I.M.I. Van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Diss. Nijmegen, 1936). This text has served as the basis for a useful Italian, bilingual edition: M. Formisano, *La passione de Perpetua e Felicità* (Milano, 2008) [review by Vincent Hunink in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2008.07.27: <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2008/2008-07-27.html>]. For recent secondary literature, cf. notably J.N. Bremmer & M. Formisano, *Perpetua's Passions. Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Oxford and New York, 2012); further references in e.g. J.E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion; the Death and Memory of a Young Roman woman* (New York, 1997); J.N. Bremmer, ‘Perpetua and her Diary: Authenticity, Family and Visions’, in W. Ameling (ed.), *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakten* (Stuttgart, 2002) 77-120; P. Habermehl, *Perpetua und der Ägypter oder Bilder des Bösen im frühen afrikanischen Christentum* (Berlin and New York, 2004²) 267-75; P. Kitzler, ‘“Passio Perpetuae” and “Acta Perpetuae”: between Tradition and Innovation’, *Listy Filologické* 130 (2007) 1-19; and V. Hunink, ‘Did Perpetua Write her Prison Account?’, *Listy Filologické* 133 (2010) 147-55. A Dutch, bilingual edition is: V. Hunink et al., *Eeuwig geluk. De passie van de vroeg-christelijke martelaressen Perpetua en Felicitas & drie preken van Augustinus* (Zoetermeer, 2004).

tracted much scholarly attention.² I will attempt to have a fresh look at the visions in the *PPF*, and to establish what function they fulfill within the text as a whole.

1. The power of vision

The text starts with a preliminary section of a rather abstract, theological nature, written by the author commonly considered to be the 'editor' of the assembled document that is the *PPF*. At first sight, this section does not seem very relevant for the present inquiry, since it deals with the power of the Holy Spirit. However, this divine power is said to manifest itself not only in historical examples but also in contemporary persons, as a sign of the approaching end of time, and in support of this claim the author quotes Acts 2:17 (Joel 3:1):

'And it shall be in the last days, saith God, I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all flesh: And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, And your young men shall see visions, And your old men shall dream dreams.'³

Right from the start, therefore, dreams and visions in the *PPF* are given a specific, deeper significance as being immediate manifestations of the Spirit itself, which obviously greatly increases their authority.⁴ The point is not repeated in the text itself, but is obviously to be kept in mind by the reader.⁵

² Specifically on Perpetua's visions, see P. Cox-Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton, 2004) 148-83; Amat, *Passion*, 38-50; Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 92-115; P. Habermehl, 'Perpetua: Visionen im Christentum', in T. Spaeth (ed.), *Frauenwelten in der Antike: Geschlechterordnung und weibliche Lebenspraxis* (Stuttgart, 2000) 174-82; Bremmer, 'Perpetua and her Diary'; and E. Ronsse, 'Rhetoric of Martyrs: Listening to Saints Perpetua and Felicitas', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14 (2006) 283-327; K. Waldner, 'Visions, Prophecy, and Authority in the *Passio Perpetuae*', in Bremmer & Formisano, *Perpetua's Passions*, 201-219 at 212-19.

³ Bible quotations follow the American Standard Version (ASV).

⁴ On the legitimation of dreams in *PPF* by means of the Bible quotation, see B.J. Koet, *Door dromen van Rome naar Jeruzalem* (Tilburg, 2010) 18-9; cf. D. Devoti, 'I vostri vecchi soghneranno sogni, i vostri giovani vedranno visioni', in B. Bàrberi Squarotti et al. (eds), *Voce di molte acque. Miscellanea di studi offerti a Eugenio Corsini* (Turin, 1994) 345-65 at 359-61. A monograph on traces of Montanism in the *PPF* is: R.D. Butler, *The New Prophecy & 'New Visions': Evidence of Montanism in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Washington DC, 2006) 58-61 on the preface and 88-96 for a survey of Montanist features in the whole text.

⁵ Dreams had been considered important and meaningful in various ways throughout non-Christian antiquity as well. Some general studies are A.H.M. Kessels,

After this theological introduction, the text presents the main persons involved in the events. Their arrest on account of their being Christians seems to be considered as a simple fact.

Arrest was made in the town of Thuburbo Minus of the young catechumens Revocatus and Felicity, his fellow slave, and of Saturninus and Secundulus. Among them was also Vibia Perpetua, who was well born, well educated, honourably married, and who had a father, a mother, and two brothers, one of them also a catechumen, and an infant son at her breast. She herself was about twenty-two years old. (PPF 2)⁶

No further comments are given here, although a modern reader might be curious to know more about the actual circumstances of the arrest and the identity of the martyrs. Apparently, this was of little interest to the author and the ancient reader.⁷

Next comes a verbatim account by Perpetua herself, written during the days in prison prior to the actual execution.⁸ The authenticity of this personal account is the subject of some modern debate among scholars,⁹ and likewise questions have been raised about the authen-

Studies on the Dream in Greek literature (Utrecht, 1973); and J.S. Hanson, 'Dreams and Visions in the Greco-Roman World and Early Christianity', *ANRW* II, 23.2 (1980) 1395-1427. A case study of the literary use of dreams in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is: V. Hunink, 'Dreams in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*', in A.P.M.H. Lardinois *et al.* (eds), *Land of Dreams. Greek and Latin studies in Honour of A.H.M. Kessels* (Leiden 2006) 18-38.

⁶ Quotations from the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* are given in the new English translation by J. Farrell and C. Williams, in: Bremmer & Formisano, *Perpetua's Passions*, 14-24. An older translation is: H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, introduction, texts and translations (Oxford, 1972).

⁷ For a reconstruction of the general context of the persecution, see Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 77-83.

⁸ The document is often wrongly designated as 'prison diary'; cf. also the title of the relevant chapter in Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*: 'Perpetua and her diary of dreams'. On Perpetua's references to prison, that reflect her desire for martyrdom, see T.J. Heffernan and J.E. Shelton, '*Paradisus in carcere*: The Vocabulary of Imprisonment and the Theology of Martyrdom in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*', *J ECS* 14 (2006) 217-23.

⁹ Doubts have been raised by e.g. T.J. Heffernan, 'Philology and authorship in the "Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis"', *Traditio* 50 (1995) 315-25; H. Vierow, 'Feminine and Masculine Voices in the Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas', *Latomus* 58 (1999) 600-19. A critical and sceptical approach is adopted by R.S. Kraemer and S.L. Lander, 'Perpetua and Felicitas', in Ph.F. Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World* (London and New York, 2000) 1048-68; R.S. Kraemer (ed.), *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman world, a Sourcebook* (Oxford, 2004) 5-6 and 356-7; and, extensively, Ronsse, 'Rhetoric'; further e.g. J. Perkins, *Roman Imperial Identities in the Early Christian Era* (London, 2009) 164-7. The whole question is discussed at some length by Hunink, 'Did Perpetua Write her Prison Account?', who associates himself with a wide majority of scholars in the field (e.g. Habermehl, *Perpetua und der Ägypter*; and Bremmer, 'Perpetua and her diary', who con-

ticity of the visions in *PPF*.¹⁰ In this paper, I will depart from the assumption that both the visions and the whole account are authentic.

After an opening section about a discussion she had with her father, who tried to persuade her to give in to the demands of the Roman magistrate, Perpetua gives a short, but graphical account of her first prison experience, underscoring the elements of darkness and heat (*PPF* 3). Eventually, she was given a better place in prison and felt more at ease.

2. First vision

Perpetua's brother then suggested her that she was worthy to receive a vision (*uisio*). Perpetua actually asked for it, she tells us, and next gives an account of this vision, her first one (*PPT* 4).

She sees a bronze ladder that reaches to the sky and that is beset with dangerous weapons, which compel a person to climb it with the utmost care. At the foot of the ladder there is a huge dragon or snake (*draco*), that tries to deter people from climbing the ladder. Saturus (who actually had been arrested a little later than the rest) goes up first, turns around and calls for Perpetua to come after him. Perpetua is not scared of the *draco*, puts her foot on its head and climbs the scale.

Then I saw a wide open space, a garden, and in the middle of it a grey-haired man sitting down. He was dressed like a shepherd, tall, milking some sheep. People dressed in white were standing around him, thousands and thousands of them. Raising his head, he looked over at me and said, 'Welcome, child.' And he called me over and gave me a mouthful or so of the cheese that he was milking out. I cupped my hands and took and ate it. And the people standing around all said, 'Amen'. Then I woke up with the sound of their voice in my ears, and I was still chewing on something sweet. Right away I told my brother. We realized that we were facing martyrdom, and at that point we gave up our hopes for this world. (*PPF* 4).

Perpetua's first vision raises a number of interesting questions. For instance, what is the status of this event? It is clearly not a simple,

clude that there is no sound reason to doubt that Perpetua actually is the author of the account in *PPF* 3-10.

¹⁰ See discussion in J. Amat, 'L'authenticité des songes de la passion de Perpétue et de Felicité', *Aug* 29 (1989) 177-91, who concludes that the visions may be considered authentic.

nocturnal dream and it is not explicitly stated that Perpetua receives it at night. So one might imagine her to be experiencing a kind of trance, perhaps even in the presence of others. However, she does tell her brother that she will report what she sees 'on the day of tomorrow' (*crastina die*) and at the end she says she 'came to' or 'woke up'.¹¹ These details do seem to suggest that what Perpetua describes was what she saw during the night and while she was sleeping. The term 'dream' then would not seem misplaced here. In general, however, it is probably best to refer to Perpetua's experiences as 'visions' rather than 'dreams'.¹²

Apparently, for privileged early Christian persons, such as the martyr-in-spe Perpetua, it was not necessary to wait passively for a dream to come spontaneously, but a vision could be evoked on purpose. Scholars do not comment much on this point, but these 'visions on demand' and the general interest in prophesy are clearly indicative of Montanism.¹³ For ancient readers, it may well be this conscious evocation of the vision that impressed them as a powerful sign of the martyr's almost superhuman status.

Much has been written on the symbol or allegory or spiritual meaning of the ladder, and it is hardly surprising to find it explained in various, often contrasting ways, depending on the interest and position of the scholar. Thus it has been seen as e.g. representing the biblical ladder of Jacob, as a phallic symbol in psychoanalytical terms,¹⁴ a foreshadowing of the Roman praetor's tribunal at which Perpetua is to be condemned, or, more simply and plausibly, as a symbol of passing from our world to the other world.¹⁵ The least one might add here

¹¹ *Experta sum*; the form is explained as a Vulgar Latin perfect of *expergiscor*; see Bastiaensen, *Passio*, 423 and Amat, *Passion*, 207. It may be added here that the use of the verb need not imply 'sleeping'; one may 'wake up' from a trance-like state as well.

¹² Cf. Ronsse, 'Rhetoric', 292-3; earlier e.g. Devoti, 'I vostri vecchi', 345. Ronsse, 'Rhetoric', 310 (and 318) also rightly draws attention to the verbs of 'seeing' (*uideo*) in Perpetua's narrative.

¹³ Cf. Amat, *Passion*, 200 and in greater detail Butler, *The New Prophecy*, 64.

¹⁴ A somewhat 'vulgarizing' psychoanalytical approach of Perpetua's story may be found in R. Rousselle, 'The Dreams of Vibia Perpetua: Analysis of a Female Christian Martyr', *The Journal of Psychohistory* 14,3 (1987) 193-206: the garden reflecting female genitals, milk evoking male sperm and so forth. I consider such explanations to be unscientific and in the remainder of this paper, I leave them out of account.

¹⁵ For these various explanations, see Formisano, *La passione*, 87-8 with further references.

is that the image is powerful and that it has influenced later representations, both in texts and in pictorial arts.¹⁶

Likewise, the garden scene has been given much attention,¹⁷ but in this case interpretations are rather less diverse. Obviously, the garden is a symbol for paradise, the fatherly man and shepherd represents Christ (or perhaps God the Father),¹⁸ and the people clad in white are associated with early martyrs (in an echo of the people dressed in white robes from *Revelation* 7,13). The milk (or as some translate it, cheese) is a symbol of the Eucharist.¹⁹

Thus within the scope of just a few lines, Perpetua evokes an appealing and fascinating image of paradise, such as she expected it to be awaiting her: a place of peace and harmony, where she will enjoy the best possible and happiest company. She interprets the vision as a clear sign that she will arrive there shortly, and hence, that martyrdom will soon become a reality for her on earth. The vision is something truly appealing and sweet to her (she actually still tastes something of the cheese or milk, once the vision has passed), and it comforts her in her present suffering.

3. *Second and third visions*

After a paragraph that deals with further discussions with her father (PPF 5) and an interrogation by the Roman magistrate (PPF 6), Perpetua reports another vision that took place a few days later. During prayer, at daytime, she had casually mentioned the name of Dinocrates, her younger brother who had died as a result of a disease. This had made her realize that she had to pray for him, and accord-

¹⁶ Cf. W. Cahn, 'Ascending to and Descending from Heaven: Ladder Themes in Early Medieval Art', in Ch. Pietri (ed.), *Santi e demoni nell' alto medioevo occidentale (secoli V-XI)* (Spoleto, 1989) 697-724 (with pl. I-XVI), esp. 713-6.

¹⁷ Cf. J.N. Bremmer, 'The Passion of Perpetua and the Development of Early Christian Afterlife', *NTT* 54 (2000) 97-111 at 100-5.

¹⁸ On the biblical image of God the Father as a shepherd, see A.P. Orbán, 'The Afterlife in *Passio SS Perpetuae et Felicitatis*', in A.A.R. Bastiaensen *et al.* (eds), *Fructus centesimus*, Mélanges offerts à Gerard J.M. Bartelink à l'occasion de son soixante-cinquième anniversaire (Steenbrugge and Dordrecht, 1989) 269-77 at 272. It may be observed that in Perpetua's visions, the figure of Christ hardly occurs at all. Apart from the passage on the shepherd, there is just Perpetua's exclamation in the first vision that the *draco* will not harm her 'in the name of Christ Jesus' (*in nomine Iesu Christi*; 4,6).

¹⁹ Bastiaensen, *Passio*, 422.

ingly she fervently directed prayers to the Lord.²⁰ Next, that very night (*ipsa nocte*), she was shown another vision.

She sees how Dinocrates comes out of a dark, crowded place,²¹ with the fatal wound on his face, thirsty and dirty. There is a great abyss between them.

And then, where Dinocrates was, I saw a basin full of water. Its rim was higher than the boy was tall and he kept standing on tiptoes, trying to get a drink. I felt dreadful. The basin had water in it but because its rim was so high up, he was never going to be able to drink from it. Then I woke up. I realized that my brother was in great difficulty, but I was confident that I would be able to help him in his difficulty. So I prayed for him every day until we were transferred to the garrison prison - (...) I prayed for him day and night, groaning and weeping for a gift. (PPF 7).

Perpetua's consistent effort on behalf of her brother was finally crowned with success. For during the day in military prison, she had another vision, again concerning Dinocrates. But in this instance the boy is clean and well dressed, with a scar instead of his wound, and the rim of the pool is considerably lower.

Dinocrates went up and started drinking from it; and the goblet never ran out of water. Once he had his fill, he began playing in the water the way little children do, gleefully. Then I woke up. And I realized that he had been released from his toils. (PPF 8)

The second and third visions are manifestly connected. They center around Dinocrates, Perpetua's deceased little brother, who is first seen as suffering and then, by the intercession of Perpetua, as being relieved from his powerless situation and somehow in peace. That is, the third vision actually comes as a response and sequel to the second one. This intimate connection is underscored by Perpetua's use of language. In both cases she introduces the vision with exactly the same words as in the very first vision: 'I had this vision shown to me' and ends with 'I woke up'.²²

Again, the visions do not come spontaneously but are consciously called up by the martyr herself, and again there is some uncertainty

²⁰ Again, the Montanist tendency here is evident; cf. Butler, *The New Prophecy*, 70-1.

²¹ The nature of this temporary abode is not clear; see Bremmer, 'Afterlife', 107-9. Obviously it does not represent heaven, nor can it be seen as some kind of purgatory. In Perpetua's visions, there is no mention of hell. As Bremmer rightly adds, Perpetua's description of Dinocrates' initial place seems to have been inspired by her own prison, which she has described as dark, hot, and crowded (3,5-6).

²² The Latin phrases are: *ostensum est mihi hoc*; 7,3 and 8,1 (cf. 4,2) and *experta sum* 7,9 and 8,4 (cf. 4,10).

about their status and actual occurrence. Certainly the second vision (the first one about Dinocrates) is said to have occurred at night, but the third one may have come at any moment.

Although the three visions are clearly linked, there is also a marked difference between the first one on the one hand and the second and third ones on the other hand. The first vision was clearly concerned with Perpetua herself and the fate that awaited her. Now her attention turns towards her family; in the text of the *PPF* the last thing she described before the second vision was her worry about her own little baby (*PPF* 6). It seems that Perpetua's mind, once she feels safe about her own future, is able to open up again and show some concern for her close relatives. No longer is the imagery one of a ladder directed up towards heaven, but everything is more earthly and simple. A minor element of wonder, however, is present in the golden bowl that remains filled, no matter how much it is used, but on the whole, the second and third visions seem more 'realistic'.²³

Interestingly, there seems to be an inversed parallel between the situation of Dinocrates and of Perpetua herself. During the second vision she feels pretty comfortable in prison, but Dinocrates is having a hard time; the second vision brings considerable improvement for Dinocrates, while Perpetua herself has meanwhile gone to the military prison where she is kept in chains.²⁴ On the level of the text it seems as if she has sacrificed some of her own well-being in order to improve her brother's situation.

Some dubious points, however, remain here too.²⁵ What exactly was spiritually wrong with Dinocrates? Had he died before baptism and is baptism somehow conferred to him through Perpetua's vision? Or had the boy committed some serious sin after baptism²⁶ and was he somehow forgiven for this error? Perpetua's words are simply not clear to

²³ In the abbreviated Medieval version of the *PPF* known as the *Acta*, the second and third visions of Perpetua are missing. One can only speculate about the reasons why these visions were left out. On the *Acta* see further particularly Kitzler, 'Passio and Acta', esp. 15-6; further J.W. Halporn, 'Literary History and Generic Expectations in the *Passio* and *Acta Perpetuae*', *VigChr* 45 (1995) 223-41, esp. 226-35; and some remarks in J.N. Bremmer, 'Het martelaarschap van Perpetua en Felicitas', *Hermeneus* 78 (2006) 128-37, and id., 'Felicitas: the Martyrdom of a Young African Woman', in: Bremmer & Formisano, *Perpetua's Passions*, 36-53.

²⁴ 'We were kept in chains' (*In neruo mansimus*) (*PPF* 8). The inversed parallel is noted by Formisano, *La passione*, 98-9, note 91.

²⁵ Cf. Bastiaensen, *Passio*, 426 s.v. *Dinocraten...eius*: 'restano però dei punti oscuri'; further Butler, *The New Prophecy*, 71-3.

²⁶ This was the view of Augustine, *De origine animae* 1,12, as Musurillo, *Acts*, 115, note 11 adds.

us here, but she herself must have of course known what exactly was the matter. By all means, she is convinced that her prayer has been effective and successful, and the two visions must have strengthened her confidence and self-esteem.²⁷

4. *Final vision*

The fourth and last vision of Perpetua may count as her most impressive one, since it gives her (and the readers) a spectacular foretaste of the actual battle in the amphitheatre which she is going to deliver on her final day.

In her vision, she sees how the Christian deacon Pomponius brings her from prison to the theatre, where he leaves her standing in the middle and encourages her. There is a great crowd, but instead of the beasts she is expecting, a fearsome 'Egyptian' comes out against her. Some handsome helpers come too to assist Perpetua. Then follows a famous, and famously puzzling passage:

And I was stripped down and became a man, and my assistants started rubbing me down with oil the way they do before an athletic contest. Over there I see him – the Egyptian – rolling around in the dust. Then a man came out, huge, towering over the top of the amphitheatre, with a loose robe on – a purple tunic framed by two stripes in the middle of the chest – and elaborate sandals made of gold and silver. He was holding a staff like a gladiatorial trainer, as well as a green branch which had golden apples on it. He asked for silence and then said: 'If the Egyptian beats her, he will kill her with a sword. If she beats him, she will be given this branch'. Then he withdrew. (PPF 10)

A fierce fight between the two contestants starts, with Perpetua quickly gaining the upper hand.

He fell down flat on his face and I stepped on his head. The crowd began to shout and my assistants to sing in joy. I went over to the trainer and took the branch. xiii. He kissed me and said, 'Peace be with you, daughter'. And I headed out in glory, towards the Gate of Life and Health. Then I woke up. And I realized that I was going to be fighting not with animals but with Satan. But I also knew that victory was mine. (PPF 10)

This thrilling scene describes what is, officially, a spiritual fight, but it does so in terms strongly suggestive of a real fight, presumably to the

²⁷ Kitzler, 'Passio and Acta', 9 mentions Perpetua's growing religious self-awareness' in her successive visions.

enjoyment of the ancient reader. Even Christian readers may have relished the rough details of the combat, since in this dreamlike scene preceding the actual description of events in the amphitheatre, it is the Christian Perpetua who is fighting for the good cause, and it is she who ultimately wins.

In a general sense, this fourth vision is closely connected to the first one, since both passages tell about heroic efforts of Perpetua herself. Several details underscore the link, notably Perpetua's trodding on the *draco's* head and stepping on the Egyptian's head,²⁸ her being victorious in both instances, and the warm welcome and support she receives from a fatherly figure who even addresses her.²⁹ Finally, the passage on the fourth vision is roughly as long as the first one (the second and third ones have the same length when taken together).

But the fourth vision is also standing rather apart from the first three ones. It is introduced with another formula involving a striking Greek word,³⁰ but there is no sign of its being called up by the martyr, as in the first three ones, nor of any indication of the time of day or night.³¹ The description itself is given ample room, while it also has a more dynamic and graphical character than the other ones. Thus the fourth vision comes as a climax in several ways.

Perpetua herself is the focus of this fourth vision in a much stronger manner than in the first vision. Now Perpetua is almost completely on her own (her handsome assistants during the fight are not given much attention), and her fight against what she explicitly declares to be the devil is even more prominent as the object of all attention. No longer does Perpetua's vision allot any room to either her family or her Christian companions, her vision being almost completely self-centered. This does not seem surprising, as she must have really lived up to the final day, on which her martyrdom will be effectuated. Quite naturally, her high expectations and her anxiety are reflected in this ultimate vision.

²⁸ The Latin at both places is entirely identical and graphical: *calcaui illi caput*: 4,2 and 10,11.

²⁹ 'I am glad you have come, my child' (*bene uenisti, tagnon*); 4,9; 'Peace be with you my daughter' (*Filia, pax tecum*); 10,13.

³⁰ 'I saw the following vision' (*uideo in horomate hoc*); 10,1. Here a rare Greek word replaces the normal Latin *uisio*, which would have come in rather awkwardly here in the combination with *uideo*, as Bastiaensen, *Passio*, 431 s.v. *pugnaremus* rightly notes.

³¹ The concluding 'then I awoke' (*et experta sum*; 10,13) by itself does not indicate a specific time, although it again carries the vague suggestion of a nocturnal vision.

From a literary point of view too, it allows for some good, exciting reading at the end of her personal account.³² It also shows to what extent ‘the theatre’ was a central concept for Romans: here we have a Christian martyr-in-spe presenting her best and greatest vision, the very last story she tells: it is about a fight in a theatre with a huge crowd attending.

The detail that has attracted most scholarly attention is, no doubt, the phrase ‘and suddenly I was a man’ (*et facta sum masculus*; 10,7), and here the interpretations are widely divergent again. Scholars do seem to agree however, that the most immediate cause for the surprising turn must be found simply in the gladiatorial context: in Perpetua’s vision she will have to wrestle, and nude wrestling in the arena is essentially a male activity; hence she ‘becomes a man’ in the course of her preparations for the fight.³³ But inevitably, the words invite readers to read rather more into them; e.g. as implying a ‘spiritual change’ in which a woman transcends her female, essentially ‘sinful’ nature, or the idea that spiritual growth will eventually blot out the differences between both sexes.³⁴ Others point out how Perpetua in the course of her tale gradually seems to take on the social role of a man,³⁵ thus replacing as it were, her father, husband, and brother.

Again, the least we may argue here is that the vision, whatever its exact significance, is a source of strength and comfort to Perpetua

³² It could be argued that in Perpetua’s fourth vision the border between human cognition and imagination on the one hand, and the outright ‘phantastic’ on the other hand, is in fact transcended; thus M. Frenschkowski, ‘Vision as Imagination. Beobachtungen zum differenzierten Wirklichkeitsanspruch frühchristlicher Literatur’, in N. Hömke *et al.* (eds), *Fremde Wirklichkeiten. Literarische Phantastik und antike Literatur* (Heidelberg, 2006) 339–66 at 352–4, who singles out this passage as one of the few relevant examples from Early Christian literature. When one analyzes the text, it certainly makes fascinating reading.

³³ Cf. Bastiaensen, *Passio*, 432, s.v. *expoliata... masculus*; Amat, *Passion*, 224–5 s.v. *facta sum masculus*; further Formisano, *La passione*, 103–4, note 107. For the different interpretations of the famous *facta sum masculus* passage, see e.g. Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion*, 108 and Kitzler, ‘*Passio* and *Acta*’, 11, note 37. See now also C. Williams, ‘Perpetua’s Gender. A Latinist Reads the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*’, in Bremmer & Formisano, *Perpetua’s Passions*, 54–77.

³⁴ Amat, *Passion*, 224–5 s.v. *facta sum masculus*.

³⁵ Cf. e.g. Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity*, 148–83 esp. 181–2; further e.g. S.L. Cobb, *Dying to Be Men: Gender and Language in early Christian Martyr texts* (New York, 2008) 105–7. Some sensible remarks are made by M. Marjanen, ‘Male women martyrs: the function of gender-transformation language in Early Christian martyrdom accounts’, in T.K. Seim and J. Økland (eds), *Metamorphoses. Resurrection, Body and Transformative Practices in Early Christianity* (Berlin and New York, 2009) 231–47 at 246–7, who argues that the idea that the words ‘do not stand for spiritual advancement or perfection but for an extra portion of courage, strength and firmness needed for the fight’.

herself, and hence to the Christian audience for which the text is intended.

5. *The use of visions*

Overlooking all four of Perpetua's visions, it is obvious that they share many features. All four are visions rather than dreams, and three of them are clearly called up by the martyr herself. Each vision concentrates upon the intense experiences and imagery itself, rather than providing readers with factual details. We do not read, e.g. how long Perpetua's visions lasted, how exactly she managed to put them on paper, or what impact they had on her companions.

Intriguingly, in spite of her small focus, Perpetua nonetheless has a keen eye for some rather prosaic details, notably armory (the various types of weapons hanging on the scale in 4,3) and athletic preparation with oil and dust (10,7). Most strikingly, she seems to be fascinated by clothes and shoes, mainly in her visions,³⁶ but also in the sequel of the *PPF*;³⁷ and by fluids.³⁸

³⁶ One may note the following passages: the fatherly man wearing a shepherd's outfit (4,8), surrounded by many people clad in white garments (4,8); Dinocrates who is first dirty and then properly dressed (7,4 and 8,2 *bene uestitum*); Pomponius wearing an unbelted white tunic and precious, elaborate sandals (*multiplipes galliculas*; 10,2); the undressing of Perpetua herself in the famous *facta sum masculus* section (10,7); the 'judge' dressed in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes ('one on either side') and wearing precious sandals worked with gold and silver (*galliculas multiformes ex auro et argento factas*; 10,8). Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 110-1 notices Perpetua's interest in feet, which the future martyr may have associated with power.

³⁷ In the execution scenes, it is noteworthy that Perpetua refuses to be dressed up in a openly pagan way as a priestess of Ceres (18,4); and that considerable attention is paid to the dress of the female martyrs (20,2-3), with a climax at the moment where Perpetua is lying on the soil, after being attacked by a mad heifer. The first thing she does is to sit up and to pull down her tunic that was ripped along her side so that it covered her thighs (20,4); she may do so, as the editor of the *PPF* explicitly adds, 'thinking more of her modesty than of her pain', but it may also show her special care for dress at an important moment.

³⁸ In the visions: the pastor milking his sheep (4,8) and the milk (or cheese) of which he lets her have a taste (4,8); the pool with water as a key element in visions two and three (7,7-8 and 8,2-4); and oil (10,7). Elsewhere in Perpetua's account one may note her nursing her baby (3,8). In the execution scenes there is also an interest in (bodily) fluids: blood (18,3; 21,2-3), and a mother's milk (20,2). According to ancient criteria, fluids were likely to be associated with women, but in the case of Christian martyrs, the powerful symbols of oil (cf. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 109), water and blood also come in quite naturally.

Of course, these and other 'realia', as well as echoes of biblical and other texts, reflect parts of Perpetua's identity and personal experience, knowledge, and interest, and the visions may properly be read as an illustration of a Christian woman's portrait.³⁹ Interestingly, all four visions are framed with expressions suggestive of Perpetua's desire for knowledge, with Latin words like *intellexi* being used repeatedly.⁴⁰

Within the *PPF* as a whole, Perpetua's visions may be compared with one other important vision,⁴¹ namely the vision of Saturus, which is reported in his own words in c.11 to 13.⁴² There are many links between his account and Perpetua's, e.g. the moving up towards another world and arriving in a paradise-like garden full of martyrs dressed in white clothes (11), while Perpetua herself is an important figure within Saturus' vision, but Saturus also shows a manifest interest in the relation between martyrs (such as he himself) and the clergy, that is: in the hierarchy within the church. The latter element gives his vision a rather different color.⁴³

³⁹ Cf. also Amat, *Passion*, 42-6 on the imagery in the visions, and their background in Perpetua's experience and education; further e.g. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 100-1. See also Habermehl, 'Visionen im Christentum', 175-6 and Amat, *Passion*, 190 who underscore the fusion of pagan, Jewish and Christian elements in the visions; further e.g. F. Corsaro, 'Memorie bibliche e suggestioni classiche nei sogni della Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis', in E. dal Covolo et al. (eds), *Gli imperatori severi. Storia Archeologia Religione* (Roma, 1999) 261-72, who focuses on pagan literary and non-literary elements.

⁴⁰ 'I at once told this to my brother and we realized that we would have to suffer...' (4,10); 'realizing that my brother was suffering' (7,7); 'and I realized that my brother had been delivered...' (8,117); 'I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew...' (10,13). This point has, of course, been observed before; see Formisano, *La passione*, 91n58 with further references. The first quote also illustrates how Perpetua is keen to share her knowledge with others, as is also apparent from her presenting the account in the first place.

⁴¹ Curiously, the *PPF* carries the suggestion that the four visions by Perpetua and the one vision by Saturus are merely 'the most noteworthy' visions, using a Latin comparative (*uisiones insigniores*); cf. Amat, *Passion*, *ad loc.* Several translators have missed this nuance; e.g. Musurillo, *Acts*; Bastiaensen, *Passio*; Hunink et al., *Eeuwig geluk*.

⁴² On this vision see particularly J.N. Bremmer, 'The Vision of Saturus in the Passio Perpetuae', in F. García Martínez and G. Luttikhuisen (eds), *Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome. Studies in Ancient Cultural Interaction in Honour of Ton Hilhorst* (Leiden, 2003) 55-73; further e.g. Orbán, 'The Afterlife', 274-6; Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 112-5; and Butler, *The New Prophecy*, 78-84.

⁴³ Cf. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion*, 114: 'It reads more like a polished theological tract designed to present a lesson to a Christian congregation'. On the assumption that Saturus and Perpetua wrote or dictated their accounts independently, or at least as reports of individual experiences, Saturus' vision is not necessary to understand Perpetua's visions, the topic of this paper.

Finally, it may be asked what function Perpetua's visions seem to be fulfilling. Here it may be helpful to distinguish between Perpetua herself and the audience to whom her account is addressed.

As to the former, it has been argued in the course of this paper that the visions must have strengthened Perpetua in the preparation of her suffering, allowing her to feel safe about her future in heaven, her immediate reward of martyrdom, her family (notably her dead little brother Dinocrates), and her spiritual fight against the devil. She must have drawn comfort from all this, while the visions must equally have stimulated her self-esteem as a martyr-in-spe being already closer to God and heaven than her fellow Christians, and her sense of personal identity. And by communicating these visions to these fellow Christians, she may have been aware of leaving them a proper 'legacy' that could encourage and inspire even later generations.

For the educated ancient reader of her account, the visions may function in a partly different way. Of course, these texts are bound to raise sympathy and admiration for the brave martyr. Perpetua's lively account seems trustworthy and convincing, and so can hardly have failed to intrigue and inspire.

There may well be, however, some additional, literary effects if we analyze the visions within the whole of ancient literature. As 'miraculous stories', these visions open up a window to a new, invisible world⁴⁴ and so surely exerted a powerful effect upon Early Christian readers, who must have been most eager to know more about the afterlife, that was expected to come soon. One might also read Perpetua as a tragic heroine⁴⁵ standing in marked contrast to her father and other male figures, as an imposing character recalling powerful, mythological women like Antigone or Medea or, for that matter, the prophetic Cassandra.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ There is an effective contrast in an account written in the lowest of places, an earthly prison, offering a way out to another world 'high above'. Although the four visions show some precious glimpses of Roman prison life, they tell much more about the Christian image of heaven.

⁴⁵ This does not imply that Perpetua had ever studied Greek tragedies herself. In fact, the text does not provide convincing evidence that she had read much of ancient Greek and Roman literature at all; see the sensible remarks on Perpetua's education by W. Ameling, '*Femina liberaliter instituta* – Some Thoughts on a Martyr's Liberal Education', in Bremmer & Formisano, *Perpetua's Passions*, 78-102.

⁴⁶ Comparisons between Perpetua and female heroes from ancient literature have hardly ever been made. A rare exception is: S. Weigel, 'Exemplum and Sacrifice, Blood Testimony and Written Testimony: Lucretia and Perpetua as Transitional Figures in the Cultural History of Martyrdom', in Bremmer & Formisano, *Perpetua's Passions*, 180-200. To ancient readers, literature of Greece and Rome was the paramount cultural

Finally, as embedded texts, or tales within tales, these visions simply also tell some exciting episodes that will catch any reader's imagination. In this, they may be compared with the numerous inserted tales in popular, narrative texts from antiquity, such as Homers *Odyssea* or (pagan) Greek and Roman novels. Good stories will always find new readers,⁴⁷ and Perpetua's visions seem as fresh and absorbing as ever.

factor, even during the rise of Christian culture. New lines of research seem possible here.

⁴⁷ Likewise, good stories are bound to inspire new stories in turn. The *PPF* has given rise to some recent, historical novels on the fate of Perpetua. In English see A.R. Peterson, *In Perpetua: a Bride, a Martyr, a Passion* (Lake Mary FL., 2004); and M. Lyon, *The Bronze Ladder* (Leicester, 2006); in Dutch J. Nijse-Schouwstra, *Het einde van de ladder: gebaseerd op het dagboek van Vibia Perpetua* (Houten, 2006).