

# Perpetua's Husband

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The identity of the husband of Vibia Perpetua, the young mother martyred at Carthage with her companions in 203 C.E. and immortalized in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*,<sup>1</sup> has remained a mystery. Perpetua is said to be about twenty-two years old, of the upper social stratum (*honeste nata*), with a baby son still being nursed. She has a surviving mother, father and two brothers (2), an aunt (5) plus a younger brother who died in childhood (7). She is arrested with two slaves, Revocatus and Felicitas,<sup>2</sup> and two others, Saturninus and Secundulus, of undetermined social status (2), and is baptized while under apparent house arrest and before being committed to prison (3). One of her brothers is like her a catechumen at the time of her arrest but is not himself arrested (20). Her mother, father, and brother are able to visit her in prison and for a while she is able to keep her baby with her (3). Her father, adamantly against her Christian commitment, takes the lead among family members in trying to dissuade her, admitting that she is his favorite child above her brothers (5, 6, 9). Finally, he takes the baby away and refuses to give him back to his daughter (6).

Nowhere is a husband mentioned, and there has been little interest in trying to find one.<sup>3</sup> Some speculate that he had recently died,<sup>4</sup> but Perpetua would then

1. The text is extant in three Latin mss. of the 10th–11th century and a fourth known in the seventeenth century and now lost, besides a shorter version and a Greek translation, both derivative of the Latin text. Critical editions: J. Armitage Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua*, TSt 1.2 (1891); W. H. Shewring, *The Passion of SS. Perpetua and Felicity: A New Edition and Translation of the Latin Text Together with the Sermons of S. Augustine upon These Saints* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1931); Cornelius I. M. I. van Beek, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1936); idem, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis, Latine et Graece*, Florilegium patristicum 43 (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1938). Latin text and English translation: Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) xxv–xxvii, 106–31.

2. In spite of the fact that nothing in the story links Perpetua and Felicitas except as fellow catechumens, popular tradition persists that Felicitas was Perpetua's slave. Even Musurillo (*Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, xxvi) calls Felicitas "her personal slave-girl."

3. Mary Lefkowitz, "The Motivations for St. Perpetua's Martyrdom" (*JAAR* 44.3 (1976): 417–21, develops a Freudian interpretation of the conversion process as separation from family, but with special focus on the father. Judith Perkins, *The*

have been called a widow, which she is not. Others speculate that he was away at the time of the arrest, trial, and execution.<sup>5</sup> According to Roman marriage customs established over two centuries earlier, most marriages by this time were *sine manu*, that is, the woman did not legally leave her *familia* of origin to pass over into the *familia* of her husband and his ancestors, as had been done in earlier *cum manu* marriages of the Republican period.<sup>6</sup> Thus she remained a member of her own family and under her father's *potestas* as long as he was alive. According to Roman law, however, the child even in this kind of marriage should belong not to the mother's *familia* but the father's. Thus Perpetua's father is acting quite within his expected role to exercise *patria potestas* over her and to take the lead in trying to dissuade her. But why does he, the maternal grandfather, exercise authority over the child, and seemingly alone? This could conceivably happen if there were no father or father's family to claim the child, or if they were too afraid or too ashamed to do so.

This and many other elements of the narrative fall into place if Perpetua's husband and the father of her child is Saturus, also sufficiently alienated from his family by his faith that they will have nothing to do with him or his wife. He is an elusive character in the story, but with some kind of special relationship to Perpetua. He is the only person under arrest who is not introduced in the first telling about it, since he is not present when the others are arrested. He is first introduced in chapter 4 as a principal character in Perpetua's first dream. He is unlikely to be her slave, since the relationship between them is mutual and in a certain sense, exclusive. Saturus even takes the lead in her first dream (4). He is unlikely to be her brother because others of Perpetua's brothers appear in the narrative and are identified as such. There is an oblique reference to him here as "the one who built us up" (*quia ipse nos aedificaverat*) and who gave himself up to arrest afterwards. This is sometimes interpreted to mean that Saturus was the catechist of the group. That is unnecessary, but it does seem to mean that he had been a strong member of the group. The focus of his relationships, however, wherever he appears, is not the whole group, but Perpetua alone. The reference also means that when he appeared in Perpetua's ladder dream, he had not yet been arrested, so she did not know of his impending fate. The audience needs no

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*Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995), 104–12 also gives primary attention to the relationship between Perpetua and her father. Even Augustine (*Serm.* 281.2) had deflected attention from husband to father, saying that the devil did not present her with her husband, lest she resist fleshly temptation and so triumph; rather, he tried to weaken her with filial love.

4. E.g., Shewring (xiv): ". . . her husband, of whom we hear nothing, may have been a timid Christian and in hiding; more probably he had died before."

5. Maureen Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 2:843; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 282 n.3.

6. The expressions *cum manu* and *sine manu* are modern inventions, but the two realities are well documented. Cf. Susan Treggiari, *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges From the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 28–36.

introduction of him and seems to know the story of his arrest so that it does not need to be given at length or in any detail.

Perpetua's brother suggests that she ask for a vision, whereupon she sees a ladder, threatened by a dragon, that leads to a place to be interpreted as paradise (4). Here Satorus, appearing without introduction for the first time, goes up the ladder first, then looks back to encourage her with the words: "Perpetua, I'm waiting for you. But take care; do not let the dragon bite you." Likewise, at the end of Perpetua's portion of the whole narrative, there is an account of a vision of Satorus, written by himself, in which Perpetua is again with him, this time at his side, as they are transported together to paradise (11–13). When they have greeted the Lord together, Satorus says to Perpetua: "Your wish is granted." Then they encounter their bishop and presbyter in need of reconciliation and try together to effect it, until angels interfere (13).

When Perpetua dreams, Satorus is central to her dream. When Satorus dreams, Perpetua is central in his dream. The narrative of Satorus' vision ends with the editorial comment that "These are the visions of Satorus and Perpetua, written by themselves" (14). To some extent, Perpetua's dreams are more original in their imaging: the child Dinocrates drinking from a fountain (7); Perpetua's transformation into a male Egyptian gladiator (10). Satorus uses more traditional images: being carried by angels; kissing an old male figure on a throne (11–12). Yet Perpetua's dreams also contain traditional images: the ladder and serpent, the garden, a shepherd (4). There is definitely some kind of unspoken relationship between the two, which will be referred to again at the very end, when the two of them are the last to die, Satorus first and finally Perpetua (21). The two of them are the only ones whose visions are recorded, four of Perpetua (4, 7, 8, 10) and one of Satorus (11–13). Given the centrality of Perpetua in the whole story, it is strange that the summary at the beginning of chapter 14 gives the name of Satorus first, unless he is her husband. Perpetua is called *matrona Christi* and *Dei delicata* in chapter 18 as she and the others go to the amphitheater on the day of their death, but clearly this is not a reference to her celibacy since she is a married mother. Attempted spousal language would use *sponsa*, not *matrona*. The analogy is closer to household membership than marriage: Perpetua is a respected member of the household of Christ. Her ascription as *delicata* of God evokes familiar household language of children kept as special objects of delight, often with sexual connotations, which clearly is not meant here.<sup>7</sup> It has also been suggested that the maternal language has little to do with her actual husband and child, but with her ecclesial identity as newly committed to the church.<sup>8</sup> This may be a level of allegorizing to which the text is not otherwise given.

After a brief description of the animal encounters of Saturninus and Revocatus in the amphitheater and the failed attempt to kill Satorus with boar or bear (19), the scene shifts back to Perpetua and Felicitas together, then back to Satorus.

7. I owe this association to Christian Laes in a paper presented at the conference on the Early Christian Family held in Fort Worth, Texas, Nov. 30–Dec. 3, 2000, forthcoming in the proceedings of the conference.

8. Tilley, "Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," 843–44.

Once the focus returns to Perpetua, the others besides Saturus drop out of sight except in general terms. Only Perpetua and Saturus have farewell scenes, Perpetua with a hitherto unknown catechumen called Rusticus and with her brother (20), Saturus with the convert soldier Pudens (21). There is no farewell scene between Perpetua and Saturus because they are not in the arena together until he is unconscious. He seems never to have regained consciousness before being finished with the sword, if that is the correct interpretation of the account that he “took the sword in silence and without moving” (21). In the final death scene, Saturus, first up the ladder in Perpetua’s first vision, is the first to die, “once again waiting for Perpetua,” who must still guide the hand of her executioner to her throat.

This examination of literary features shows that the strongest relationship in the narrative is surely not that of Perpetua and Felicitas, nor that of Perpetua and her father, but of Perpetua and Saturus. If the argument of their marital connection can be sustained, why is it never made explicit? An answer may lie in the audience for whom the narrative was edited in its present form. The introduction (end of chapter 1) implies that some readers of this text will have been witnesses to the events, others not. It is taken for granted that Saturus is known to the audience. Perhaps their marital relationship was so well known that it did not need to be stated.

The circumstances surrounding Saturus’ absence at the time of the arrest and his later self-surrender are alluded to so indirectly that the audience must already know the story, but one wonders then why so many narrative details are given for the others, for surely their story was also known. Perhaps the story of Saturus’ arrest contained elements embarrassing to Saturus or to the community in general. Perhaps he equivocated about turning himself in, and because of Perpetua’s heroism the editor was reluctant to make the connection between the two of them explicit. Since he was not with the original group that was arrested, it would have taken extra courage for him to act on his own initiative to turn himself in, and perhaps he did not do it as quickly as expected.

Why did he do it at all? Simple fervor and desire for martyrdom is sufficient answer in the context, but a deeper connection with Perpetua also invites explanation. She and the rest were arrested by force; he later had to make the decision to give himself up, a more heroic gesture than suffering arrest, unless there was some question of why he was not arrested with the others in the first place. A further possible indication that there was embarrassment about Saturus is that in spite of the centrality of the figures of Perpetua and Saturus in the narrative, the account has always been known as the Passion (or Acts) of Perpetua and Felicitas, even though Felicitas appears much less in the story and speaks only once (15). The commanding character of Perpetua is sufficient reason why her name heads the list, but nothing evident explains the titular focus on Felicitas. Embarrassment about Saturus on the part of the community is speculation, but something about him is deliberately left unstated. Saturus may have been more a part of Perpetua’s life than meets the eye.

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