

Women in Early Christianity

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Subject Area: World History

Time Required: 1-2 class sessions, depending on teacher's choice of activities

General Topics: Spread of Christianity 100-400 C.E.; Women and Authority in Early Christianity; Christian Martyrdom

Average Grade Level from Readable.io: 11.9

SUMMARY

This lesson plan approaches the early history of the Christian religion by focusing on women. It seeks to illuminate and allow students to think critically about a key element in Christianity's development: how women found places for themselves within Christian circles, even though the religion's earliest leaders had often provided only opaque or incomplete advice and instruction on women's roles. This lesson plan walks students and teachers through a fascinating ancient document partly written by a third century Christian woman in North Africa named Perpetua. This text, known as "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas," is one of only a small handful of writings from the ancient world that were written by women. It tells the story — sometimes as Perpetua's first-person account — of the elite noblewoman and mother Perpetua and her slave Felicitas. Perpetua, a Christian, defies her father and society by choosing to be martyred for her faith. This account offers a fascinating way to help high school students to think about issues of power, authority, personal faith, gender and society from the perspective of early Christians living under Roman rule.

ALIGNMENT WITH GEORGIA STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

World History:

SSWH3: Examine the political, philosophical and cultural interaction of Classical Mediterranean societies from 700 B.C.E./B.C. to C.E./A.D. 400.

SSWH3c: Analyze the impact of Greek and Roman culture, politics, and technology.

SSWH3e: Explain the origins and diffusion of Christianity in the Roman world.

Social Studies Information Processing Skills:

5. Identify main idea, detail, sequence of events, and cause and effect in a social studies context

6. Identify and use primary and secondary sources

11. Draw conclusions and make generalizations

Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies:

L11-12RHSS1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

L11-12RHSS2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

L11-12RHSS5: Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying and discussing this ancient primary source, students will be able to:

- describe how this text reflects the social and political tensions that often arose as Christianity spread in the Roman world;
- describe how this text reflects Christian experiences in a specific historical context, early third century C.E. Carthage;
- describe how this text reflects one understanding of the intersection of gender roles and religious authority in early Christianity;
- explain how some Christians created and circulated martyrdom accounts to create a sense of Christians' moral superiority over Roman officials and to provide role models of faithfulness; and
- identify how the text uses character portrayals and different types of material (a first-person diary and a third-person report) to express key themes.

PRIMARY SOURCES QUOTES

“Father,” I said, “do you see that vase lying there, some little pitcher or other, for the sake of example?” and he said, “Yes.” And I said to him, “Is it able to be called by any other name other than what it is?” “No,” he said, “I am also not able to be called by any other name other than what I am, a Christian.” (*Passion of Perpetua* 3.1-2)

“We came here of our own free will precisely so that our freedom might not be obstructed. Likewise we surrendered our lives, so that we would not have to do any such thing. We made this pact with you.” (*Passion of Perpetua* 18.4)

(translations by Jennifer Rea [unpublished])

ARTWORK

- Anonymous painting showing the martyrdom of Perpetua, Felicitas, Revocatus, Saturninus and Secundulus, from the Menologion of Basil II, an illuminated manuscript describing feast days of Eastern Orthodox saints from c. AD 1000).
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passion_of_St._Perpetua,_St._Felicitas,_and_their_Companions#/media/File:Perpetua,_Felicitas,_Revocatus,_Saturninus_and_Secundulus_\(Menologion_of_Basil_II\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passion_of_St._Perpetua,_St._Felicitas,_and_their_Companions#/media/File:Perpetua,_Felicitas,_Revocatus,_Saturninus_and_Secundulus_(Menologion_of_Basil_II).jpg)
- Elisabeth Lamar, "Saintes Perpétue et Félicité," 2012 at <http://www.perpetuafelicity.com/> - !SS. [Perpetue et Felicite/zoom/c55w/image_11xr](http://www.perpetuafelicity.com/zoom/c55w/image_11xr). Contemporary icon showing Perpetua and Felicitas embracing. Note that in this icon, these Christian martyrs are clearly from North Africa. This website (<http://www.perpetuafelicity.com>) has many other useful images with which students can do comparative work.

INTRODUCTION

This lesson plan builds upon students' understanding of Christian origins and the Roman world by introducing them to a third century Christian text known as *The Passion of Perpetua*. A two-part document consisting of a personal diary written in the first-person by a Christian woman named Perpetua followed by a third-person narrative description of Perpetua's death, *The Passion of Perpetua* reveals a prominent theme in formative Christianity: the persecution and martyrdom of Christians by Roman authorities.

This text is extraordinary in a number of ways. To begin with, it's a compelling story that reflects an actual historical incident. It's also one of a miniscule number of ancient documents partly written by a female. Vibia Perpetua was an elite woman; at the age of 22, she was already married and a mother. Her adoption of Christianity put her in direct conflict with her father, who knew the danger she faced from Roman authorities

for her steadfast Christian faith. Perpetua was arrested (although on what charge is not clear, since it was not illegal to be a Christian) and joined a number of others in prison, including her slave woman Felicitas. While in prison awaiting her punishment, Perpetua kept a record of her hopes and fears as well as dreams and visions she experienced. A fellow Christian and anonymous admirer of hers wrote what appears to be a harrowing eyewitness account of her execution by wild beasts at games celebrating the birthday of the emperor's son, Geta, on March 7, 203 C.E.

The Passion of Perpetua makes ideal reading for high school students, because it is vividly written and features quite gripping drama. It's a reasonable length to read in around an hour, and although it has a straightforward story, it raises several themes that can allow for various degrees of sophisticated analysis. It also stands on its own fairly well, without a great deal of historical contextualization needed for it to make sense.

Perpetua is considered a saint in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some Protestant churches.

The version of this text recommended for this assignment is W. H. Shewring, trans., *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (London 1931), available at:

- Internet Medieval Sourcebook, Fordham University (<http://www.legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/perpetua.asp>)
- Early Christian Writings (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/perpetua.html>)

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Why might scholars think that this book combines two different sources that were originally distinct?
- How does this particular text reflect relations between Christians and Roman authorities in the North African city of Carthage in the early third century C.E?
- What is it like to be a Christian, according to this document?
- What characteristics does this book attribute to Perpetua?
- What does the text's portrayal of Perpetua's relationship with her father reflect about notions of gender roles and parental authority held in the ancient Christian circles that preserved this book?
- What do the accounts of Perpetua's dreams reflect about Perpetua and her situation as a woman and a Christian in Roman society?
- What messages might early Christian readers have gotten from this book?

BACKGROUND

Before Emperor Constantine formally legalized Christianity in 313 C.E., Christians sometimes experienced skepticism or opposition toward their neighbors as well as city and imperial officials. It is important to realize that persecution was neither pervasive nor consistent. However, as discussed in “Christian Martyrdom” (<http://bibleodyssey.org/en/places/related-articles/christian-martyrdom.aspx>), it “cropped up in countless places in the empire under a series of rulers; of these emperors, Nero, Domitian, Decius and Diocletian were the most infamous. Decius was the first to put Christians to death simply for practicing Christianity; before him, there had been no comprehensive imperial persecution of Christianity as a religion. From the so-called Great Persecution of Diocletian (303-305 C.E.) the church gained dozens of new saints, incorporated into the formal commemoration of the martyrs. Most Christians did not choose martyrdom, and most, in fact, never needed to make the choice at all — martyrdom was far from inevitable and customary. But the stories of those who stood up to Roman cruelty with extraordinary courage, facing death with equanimity or joy, were told and retold by other Christians — today, they still provide some of the most powerful Christian literature we possess. Following the model of Jesus, who had suffered at Roman hands, the few hundred Christians who met their death in arenas and amphitheaters inspired countless others to live lives devoted to Jesus Christ.” Martyrdom accounts, like other ancient sources, vary in their level of historical accuracy. They should be understood as attempts to encourage fellow Christians by portraying them as morally superior to (what they viewed as) a morally decaying Roman Empire.

One of the most intriguing of the martyrdom accounts, *The Passion of Perpetua* is set in Carthage, North Africa, around the year 203 C.E. Christians constituted only 10 percent, at most, of Carthage’s population. It is crucial to note that this incident happened at a time when it was not illegal to be a Christian, and Roman administrations had not yet gone out of their way to persecute Christians. Roman officials, for their part, appear to have given Christians a great deal of latitude for their religious beliefs, but they also did not countenance seditious or treasonous behavior. This could include disrespecting the emperor or the gods of Rome, advocating political revolt, or acting in a manner seen as socially subversive. Perpetua is guilty most of all of this third “crime,” in that she behaves in ways that threatened the social cohesion of the Empire by refusing to honor her duties as a Roman woman: honoring her father, marrying a husband, and raising children. She is guilty, in short, of “civil disobedience.”

We do not know how or why Perpetua became Christian, but we do know from the document that doing so brought severe and lasting repercussions. Her father disowned her, and she gave away her own child and found a new “spiritual family” with fellow Christians. The situation of an elite pagan *paterfamilias* refusing to become Christian was quite common; Christianity was seen as something new and socially corroding, since it involved a rejection of both the religious and the social foundations of the Roman Empire.

One of the beauties of *The Passion of Perpetua* is that it paints Perpetua’s family in a generally sympathetic light. Perpetua’s refusal to deny her Christian beliefs causes her father substantial pain, since he cannot stand

that her religious choice will literally cause her to be tortured and executed. To modern readers, Perpetua's steadfast faith looks a little like a perverse stubbornness, and her willingness to give up her only child in order to die in the arena might prove vexing to students. The discomfort that this text potentially provokes in modern readers contributes to its "teachability."

PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS

This class can be run over a single or two class periods, depending on time. Students should arrive at class having already read *The Passion of Perpetua*. The instructor should choose particular passages in the text upon which to focus in class. The extensive dialogue in the text lends itself to being read aloud by different students. Teachers can choose in-class exercises and homework assignments from the three options listed below under "Lesson Activities."

TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

- [Perpetua and Felicity: Resources for Scholars and Students](#): An academic site with essays, a full bibliography and links to editions, images and videos.
- [Early Christian Martyrdom](#) (Bible Odyssey) (featuring a video of Prof. Candida Moss, University of Notre Dame).
- [Christian Martyrdom](#) (Bible Odyssey).
- [Mapping the Martyrs](#). An engaging interactive website from Professor David Eastman, Ohio Wesleyan University.

RESOURCES

Additional Bibliography:

- Thomas Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). (a new printed translation).
- Jennifer Rea, *Perpetua's Journey*. Illustrated by Liz Clarke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). (presentation of the text as a full-color graphic novel, with accompanying background essays, guided reading questions, map, timeline, and other resources).

LESSON ACTIVITIES

Below are three possible activities. The first involves individual students identifying and analyzing key themes in the text, particularly on the topic of women and gender in Christianity. The second requires students working in small groups to jointly compose a letter or prison diary dictated by the illiterate slave woman Felicitas, who appears only briefly in *The Passion of Perpetua* but nonetheless has an important history as a saint (along with Perpetua) in Christian tradition. The third allows students to write a dramatic script of the interaction between a Christian and a Roman tribunal.

Character Analysis in *The Passion of Perpetua*

The Passion of Perpetua contains a number of clearly drawn characters, starting with Perpetua herself. Fill out the tables below thoughtfully. You may use point form. Note that here, female characters are on a separate table from male characters. This division will help you to analyze the gender dynamics in the narrative later on.

Female character:	Chief qualities of this character:	Why is this character important to the narrative?
Vibia Perpetua		

Male character:	Chief qualities of this character:	Why is this character important to the narrative?
Vibia Perpetua's father		

After you have filled this out, discuss your findings in class. What qualities emerge from each character? How do these qualities conform to your own ideas of what constitutes “masculine” or “feminine” traits and behavior? Do the characters act in expected ways in terms of their gender identity and family relationship? In particular, does Perpetua exhibit “masculine” traits that seem to reflect a reverse of gender expectations?

A Roman Slave Woman Dictates a Prison Diary of her Own



Working together in small groups for collaborative discussion, your assignment is to compose a fictitious prison diary for the slave woman Felicitas (her name is often translated as Felicity). We know very little about Felicitas, although she is important as a saint paired with Perpetua in Christian tradition. She's mentioned at the beginning and the end of *The Passion of Perpetua*, but Perpetua herself never mentions her in her own prison journal. Imagine what a person in the position of Felicitas might have thought. Let's give Felicitas a voice!

Remember that Felicitas, as a slave, would have been illiterate, and thus, have had to dictate her diary. The style would have probably been simple and straightforward. As you begin to work, **first** make a list of everything you know about Felicitas from the text. **Next**, consider the sorts of concerns and hopes an ancient Christian slave may have had. She may or may not have been born Christian (you get to choose). If she wasn't born Christian, she may only have been converted because when slave owners converted to a religion, the slaves of a household were automatically

converted, too. If this was the case, how might Felicitas have felt in being arrested, thrown in prison, and ultimately sentenced to being thrown before wild beasts for a religion she hadn't chosen? **Finally**, consider what benefits women in the lower class and slaves like Felicitas might have perceived in being Christian. Be creative, but let the style and content of Felicitas's diary reflect the world of Roman antiquity portrayed in *The Passion of Perpetua*.

Some Helpful Resources

- [“Women and slavery in ancient Rome”](#) A brief essay from Women in the Ancient World website.
- [Slavery in Ancient Rome](#). From Wikipedia.
- [Slavery in the Roman World](#) from the Ancient History Encyclopedia.

Image source: SS. Perpetua and Felicity. Copyright Eileen McGuckin, The Icon Studio, New York.

Christians Facing a Roman Tribunal

Students, working as individuals or groups, write a script depicting the interaction of Carthaginian Christians being arrested and brought before a Roman Tribunal or court. What questions might Roman officials ask Christians? What information would they seek? How might Christians have responded to their accusers?

Additional sources

Students might also consult the following ancient texts to learn about the criticisms and accusations of Roman officials and the responses of early Christians:

- [The Persecution and Martyrdoms of Lyons in 177 CE](#) (Fordham University's Internet Medieval Sourcebook)
- [The Martyrdom of Polycarp](#), Asia Minor (modern Turkey) (Fordham University's Internet Medieval Sourcebook)
- [The Martyrdom of Ignatius](#), Asia Minor (NewAdvent)
- [The Passion of the Scillitan Martyrs](#) (Early Christian Writings)

EXTENDING THE LESSON

1. Christian “Gladiators”

The similarity between Christians and Gladiators is quite striking. Gladiators were slaves who were, unlike Christians, trained fighters. As slaves, they did not fight because they chose to do so, but because they were made to do so. In this way, gladiators were very different from Christians who fought in the arena. On the other hand, there were two significant similarities. First, both gladiators and Christians were fully prepared to die; gladiators swore an oath: “I will endure to be burned, to be bound, to be beaten, and to be killed by the sword” (“*uri, vinciri, verberari, ferroque necari*,” from Petronius’s *Satyricon* 117). Second, both gladiators and Christians became tremendously popular for their courage in the amphitheater, becoming “culture heroes,” as it were.

Fighting against wild beasts was popular entertainment in the Roman world, and in fact supported a whole industry involved with hunting, trapping, transporting, feeding, and providing exotic animals for gladiatorial fights. In the case of *The Passion of Perpetua*, Perpetua and her fellow Christians are condemned to die by wild beast, a practice known in Latin as *damnatio ad bestias*. It was more common for criminals to die this way than for gladiators, who had more refined fighting skills and were ordinarily matched in formal pairs.

Here are some online resources:

- [Panthers devouring a criminal](#). Third century, Tunisia
- [The Zliten mosaic](#) (2nd century), Libya
- [Arena: Gladiatorial Games](#) (VRoma)
- [The Roman Games](#) (at the University of Chicago)
- [Spectacles of Blood: Roman Gladiators and Christian Martyrs](#) (Professor M. Imber, Bates College)

2. Women and Authority in Early Christianity

The Passion of Perpetua is important because it demonstrates the tremendous authority that a young woman could have within a Christian community. This is unusual, in that Christianity tended to espouse patriarchal ideals; women could not become priests or join the ecclesiastical hierarchy; they could not preach or offer the sacraments to others; and in general they were second-class citizens. The proper role for women is clearly outlined in certain New Testament writings, particularly certain letters written by or attributed to Paul (1 Corinthians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus). In these biblical texts, women must not have authority over men; they may not teach or preach, but must conduct themselves modestly at all times.

Perpetua presents a different model for Christian female authority. She is smart, literate and writes an account she knows will be valued by a community. She defies her father; rejects her marriage; gives away her child for adoption; and seems comfortable with her choices and her high status within her community of fellow Christians.

Furthermore, Perpetua is a prophetess: she has a series of visions of what is to happen, and these visions are clearly an important source of her authority. Most remarkably of all, in one of her visions Perpetua transforms into a man to conquer the devil, and by doing so, she alone “redeems” her little brother Dinocrates’ soul.

Dinocrates died at a young age of something that disfigured his face — perhaps cancer — and it is clear that Perpetua felt, from her dreams, that his soul was suffering. While the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory had not yet developed, it is as if Dinocrates is stuck in a similar state until Perpetua, from her prayers and courage, literally heals him, restores him, and allows him to pass into Paradise.

At least one Christian group in antiquity, the Montanists, embraced a form of Christianity that seems similar to what we find in *The Passion of Perpetua*. The Montanists, who took their name from a middle second century (man) named Montanus, could be found in many parts of the Mediterranean by the middle of the second century. Montanus believed that he was a prophet, and that the Holy Spirit spoke through him. Two prominent women, Priscilla and Maximilla, joined Montanists as authoritative figures. Accordingly, Montanists believed that women could be prophets, channeling the Word of God, and thus be important leaders of the Christian movement. We don't know that Perpetua was a Montanist, but it has been proposed that Montanists perhaps preserved *The Passion of Perpetua* as an important text. Perpetua's activities in this document certainly match what we know of Montanism (also called the New Prophecy) as a historical Christian movement. So what happened to the Montanists? By the third quarter of the second century, members of a growing Christian orthodoxy condemned it as a heresy, because of its progressive views on women's authority. By the middle of the third century, this form of Christian had all but disappeared. Could *The Passion of Perpetua* be the only relic of a lost form of Christianity?

As a discussion/activity, students might read the following very short biblical passages. English translations vary in their wording Bible Odyssey (<http://www.bibleodyssey.org/bibles>) and Bible Hub (<http://www.biblehub.com>).

- 1 Corinthians 14:34: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.” (New International Version)
- 1 Timothy 2:11: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.” (New International Version)
- Titus 2:3-5: “3 Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, 4 so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, 5 to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored.” (New American Standard Bible)

Here are some suggested discussion questions:

- To what extent does Perpetua follow the ideals as laid out in these New Testament passages?
- How does Perpetua's Christianity shape her idea of what her life is about? What's the most important thing to her? The least?
- Why do you think Perpetua record her dreams? What happened in them that she considered noteworthy? Do you think she would have considered herself a prophetess?