

BEFORE CHRISTENDOM



Artist's rendering of Perpetua and Felicitas

MID TWO HUNDREDS

THE ACTS OF THOMAS (HERETICAL)

The Acts of Thomas is a clearly pseudepigraphic book that claims to follow the latter career of Judas Thomas (also called the Twin, the same Thomas who wanted to see Jesus' wounds). It begins with Thomas' unwillingness to go to India, which the book tells us is where he was selected to go by drawing lots. Eventually Jesus shows up in the flesh to Thomas and sells him as a slave who will work as a carpenter in the court of the King of India, Gundaphorus. The book follows Thomas' career in India and eventual martyrdom being speared to death by soldiers who were chasing him.

The Acts of Thomas is considered a heretical work that alludes to the beliefs of a religion that we today know as Manicheanism. Manicheanism is marked by a strong sense of struggle between good and evil (as opposed to the Christian notion of victory over evil, in Manicheanism, the struggle continues). However many of the stories in the Acts of Thomas have been included in histories of the apostle's life, most notably the story of his building a castle for King Gundaphorus. In this story, Thomas builds not a real castle, but takes all of the money given to him to build the castle and gives it to the poor – thus “making a castle in heaven” for King Gundaphorus.

“Now when the king came to the city he inquired of his friends concerning the palace which Judas that is called Thomas was building for him. And they told him: Neither hath he built a palace nor done aught else of that he promised to perform, but he goeth about the cities and countries, and whatsoever he hath he giveth unto the poor, and teacheth of a new God, and healeth the sick, and driveth out devils, and doeth many other wonderful things; and we think him to be a sorcerer. Yet his compassions and his cures which are done of him freely, and moreover the simplicity and kindness of him and his faith, do declare that he is a righteous man or an apostle of the new God whom he preacheth; for he fasteth continually and prayeth, and eateth bread only, with salt, and his drink is water, and he weareth but one garment alike in fair weather and in winter, and receiveth nought of any man, and that he hath he giveth unto others. And when the king heard that, he rubbed his face with his hands, and shook his head for a long space. 21 And he sent for the merchant

which had brought him, and for the apostle, and said unto him: Hast thou built me the palace? And he said: Yea. And the king said: When, then, shall we go and see it? but he answered him and said: Thou canst not see it now, but when thou departest this life, then thou shalt see it. And the king was exceeding wroth, and commanded both the merchant and Judas which is called Thomas to be put in bonds and cast into prison until he should inquire and learn unto whom the king's money had been given, and so destroy both him and the merchant.

THE MARTYRDOM OF PERPETUA AND FELICITAS

This account of the martyrdom of female Christian believers was not only popular during its time but well written. However, there is little evidence of Perpetua and Felicitas being real people, and the story may have been an amalgamation of stories of female martyrs to the Christian faith.

In the story not only two martyrs but actually six. Three young men and three young women lose their lives in the course of the story that ends in the Roman amphitheater.

“When the populace called for them into the midst, that as the sword penetrated into their body they might make their eyes partners in the murder, they rose up of their own accord, and transferred themselves whither the people wished; but they first kissed one another, that they might consummate their martyrdom with the kiss of peace. The rest indeed, immoveable and in silence, received the sword-thrust; much more Saturus, who also had first ascended the ladder, and first gave up his spirit, for he also was waiting for Perpetua. But Perpetua, that she might taste some pain, being pierced between the ribs, cried out loudly, and she herself placed the wavering right hand of the youthful gladiator to her throat. Possibly such a woman could not have been slain unless she herself had willed it, because she was feared by the impure spirit.

O most brave and blessed martyrs! O truly called and chosen unto the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ! whom whoever magnifies, and honours, and adores, assuredly ought to read these examples for the

edification of the Church, not less than the ancient ones, so that new virtues also may testify that one and the same Holy Spirit is always operating even until now, and God the Father Omnipotent, and His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, whose is the glory and infinite power for ever and ever. Amen.”

ORIGEN

Origen is likely one of the greatest Christian minds in existence even today, a sort of New Testament era Solomon. Origen began life in Alexandria, Egypt where he sought martyrdom but was eventually put into the work of Christian academics. Origen was something of an early church seminary professor who wrote as much or more than he taught. One of the things that Origen was able to bring into being and/or popularity was the notion of a “Biblical commentary,” a book that discerned the meaning of a text through examining its form, syntax, and grammar. In addition to this, Origen wrote vociferously on the subject of preaching and on theological concepts.

“Concerning the four Gospels which alone are uncontroverted in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the Gospel according to Matthew, who was at one time a publican and afterwards an Apostle of Jesus Christ, was written first; and that he composed it in the Hebrew tongue and published it for the converts from Judaism. The second written was that according to Mark, who wrote it according to the instruction of Peter, who, in his General Epistle, acknowledged him as a son, saying, “The church that is in Babylon, elect together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Mark my son.” And third, was that according to Luke, the Gospel commended by Paul, which he composed for the converts from the Gentiles. Last of all, that according to John.”