

Book Review: The Bronze Ladder

Reviewed by Donna Smith

The Bronze Ladder, Malcolm Lyon (Leicester, UK: Matador, 2006).

This is a great book for those who like their history in story form. Malcolm Lyon has carefully researched the life of the inhabitants of early third century Roman North Africa, particularly for Thuburbo Minus, Hadrumetum and Carthage, towns located in Proconsular Africa, now known as Tunisia. Drawing on source books that include the manuscript of 'The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas', he has accurately represented the known details of the lives of those early martyrs.

Lyon makes these historical characters come alive by having them tell their own stories. He has filled in the background and details missing in the early manuscripts by an imaginative, yet historically reasonable, presentation of both known and unknown people.

The book is divided into four sections. The first one, entitled *The Potter's Son*, has Saturus telling his story from his years as a rebellious young man up to the time of his despair as he feels tremendous guilt for his sins. Then the novel leaves Saturus and turns to Perpetua in the second part under the title *The Nobleman's Daughter*. She begins her story with an incident from her childhood that involves an actual ladder. The author

uses this scene for her to speak of her relationships with her father and her brothers. Later on the theme of the ladder will return, but then it will be from her dream of climbing the bronze ladder just before she is martyred. It is that vision which gives the book its title.

In *The New Family*, the third section of the novel, Lyon brings out the life of the early church by using Perpetua to describe her involvement with the other believers, including Saturus. In fact, a romance, purely fictional, develops between the two main characters. The life of the church is expressed through introducing issues of commitment to Christ, fellowship with other believers and discernment of possible errors as they are worked into the conversations of the main characters. Perpetua's struggle with her father, who objects to her faith, shows the stress in family relationships when one person chooses to follow Jesus Christ.

The final section is called *The Journey Home*. It is closely based on the actual manuscript, the historical document that recounts the true story of the martyrs from Thuburbo Minus who died in

Carthage on 7th March 203. Much of 'The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas' contains the prison diary of Perpetua where she records her dreams and visions. The faith and courage of the martyrs shines through the account of the suffering they endured. They looked beyond their pain to the hope of eternal life with their Lord. The final word in the novel is given to the real Pudens, who, while guarding them during their imprisonment, became a Christian. He comments on their victory in death over the might of Rome as he leaves his service and walks away from the arena in freedom to serve his new master.

Lyon has added a helpful explanation for the reader to know what is historical and what is fictitious. His book is dedicated to the young people of Tunisia 'who stand today between the echoes of the past and the choices of the future.' This story is much appreciated by present day North African Christians because it gives them a sense of identity with the past in their own land. It also relates to some of their actual problems of threatened persecution, family disapproval and church life. *The Bronze Ladder* is a good read. For more North Africans to benefit from this story, it needs to be translated into their languages for of those of them who do not read English.