

Editorial

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Editorial Introduction

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2024-0033>

received October 28, 2024

In recent decades, gender studies have gained increasing prominence across academic disciplines. The study of early Christianity is no exception. This escalating scholarly interest has engendered a prolific body of research scrutinizing the experiences of women, whose stories had previously been relegated to the periphery of the academic interest.¹ Many works focused on how early Christian theologies and early Christian authors – almost exclusively men – conceptualized women’s social and ecclesiastical roles and, in the rare cases where the sources allow it, how Christian women perceived themselves.² Yet, little attention has been devoted to the use of feminine imagery and metaphors in early Christian literature. As early as 1993, Claudia V. Camp exposed the “regularity of female metaphors’ unspoken presence in biblical texts,” suggesting that female metaphors are “structuring concepts” of the Hebrew Bible³ – a phenomenon that early Christian authors continued to elaborate in their theological investigations. Indeed, gendered metaphorical language became central to Christian theological discourse precisely because it had already been deeply embedded in biblical texts.⁴ Despite the emphasis within modern scholarship on discourse, rhetoric, and representation – particularly after the so-called “linguistic turn”⁵ – studies of early Christianity have yet to articulate a comprehensive paradigm for understanding the role of gendered metaphorical language in Christian literature. In her 1998 article, Elisabeth Clark captured the profound challenges the linguistic turn posed for historians in general and for feminist historians in particular. This shift fundamentally transformed the study of early and late antique Christianity by highlighting how rhetoric shaped not only Christian discourses but also the societies they helped construct.⁶ This point is particularly pressing when it comes to the representation of women in early Christian writings. Women are often depicted through male narratives, theologies, and discourses, where they appear as metaphors, allegories, typologies, and similes – and to a lesser extent as historical figures. This raises crucial questions: To what extent do these portrayals reflect “real” women? Are they merely constructs or figures created to “think with”? If so, how are women and the female gender employed in these texts, and what is their significance within the philosophical and theological perspectives of male early Christian authors? In light of the shift in scholarly paradigms brought forward by the linguistic turn, an exploration of gendered metaphorical language in early Christian texts is both necessary and overdue. However, the answers to these

1 To name only the most recent notable contributions, see Taylor and Ramelli, *Patterns of Leadership*. This is the first comprehensive scholarly analysis of women’s leadership roles in antiquity with a strong emphasis on the evidence on women’s ordination previously collected by Madigan and Osiek, *Ordained Women*. In 2013, Børresen and Prinzivalli, *Le donne nello sguardo degli autori antichi*, the most comprehensive and up-to-date volume on women’s role in society and religious communities in early and late antique Christianity.

2 For instance, Denzey Lewis, *The Bones Gatherer*, had published one of the few studies on women’s self-perception in Christian antiquity, as she analyzed female commissioned Christian art from the Roman catacombs in the first six centuries of Christianity, thus displaying the stories of women who subvert traditional gender social rules.

3 Camp, “Metaphor in Feminist,” 25.

4 Løland, *Silent or Salient Gender?*.

5 Petterson, “Linguistic Turn.”

6 Clark, “The Lady Vanishes;” Clark, “Thinking with Women.”

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questions are far from straightforward, and they are better approached through a careful comparative analysis and historical contextualization on a case-by-case basis.

The research presented in this special issue seeks to navigate these complexities, challenging the more extreme interpretations of the linguistic turn that dismiss historical subjects entirely,⁷ reducing ancient texts to mere rhetorical fabrications devoid of any factual grounding. Rather than rejecting textual evidence as unreliable, the articles in this issue critically engage with gendered metaphorical language in the writings of Origen of Alexandria. They aim to look beyond rhetorical superstructures to uncover the underlying assumptions, concepts, and purposes shaping the use of gendered metaphors in a crucial theologian like Origen. By subjecting Origen's narrative to rigorous critical, dialectical, and comparative scrutiny, the studies in this special issue argue for the value of literary evidence, not as unmediated truth, but as a vital resource for understanding historical perspectives – provided that we remain attentive to its inherent limitations. This special issue thus seeks to establish a foundational contribution to the relatively understudied field of Origen of Alexandria's use of feminine metaphorical language in early Christian literature. The theological and philosophical significance of exploring what “femininity” stands for in Origenian written production lies not only in the pervasive feminine metaphorical language present in his works – most notably in his *Commentary* and *Homilies on the Song of Songs* – but also in the systematic and coherent manner in which he engages with the concept of femininity across his entire corpus. His influence extends well beyond his time, shaping the theological and philosophical writings of later Christian thinkers, including figures such as Gregory of Nyssa, who adopted and adapted Origen's understanding of femininity into their own frameworks.⁸ Therefore, the women featured in this special issue are predominantly metaphors, allegories, or theological types, rather than historical figures. By adopting a gender-focused approach, this volume significantly enriches our understanding of Origen's nuanced depictions of the archetypal and metaphorical roles of women in early Christian exegesis. While Origen's portrayals reflect the deeply entrenched patriarchal values of the third century, they also reveal glimpses of a more intricate perspective. In particular, Origen occasionally assigns theological significance to women and the feminine, invoking traditionally “female” qualities as powerful symbols for exploring the complex dynamics between the human and the divine. These moments of divergence from normative views demonstrate a very sophisticated theological engagement with gender. They challenge conventional perceptions and invite a deeper investigation of the feminine in early Christian thought. Informed by the linguistic turn, the contributions in this special issue mark a significant step forward in understanding the ideological representation of femininity in early Christianity. Moreover, they offer valuable preliminary insights into how metaphorical imagery shaped early Christian narratives about women.

Despite the abundance of feminine imagery in his writings, Origen never proposed an explicit theoretical interpretation of what femininity stands for in the biblical narrative. This has led to only a relatively small number of detailed studies on the subject. The first major step in this direction was Emanuela Prinzivalli's 2013 article, which explored the diverse applications of feminine metaphorical language in Origen's works, emphasizing its role within his theological anthropology. Particularly noteworthy in Prinzivalli's study is her recognition of how Origen's analysis of the feminine interacts with and responds to earlier Valentinian uses of feminine metaphorical language. Though concise, her groundbreaking article opened the way for subsequent studies that further scrutinize Origen's treatment of women and the feminine.⁹ More recently, Maren Niehoff has examined how Origen used biblical matriarchs to navigate and redefine the ever-evolving theological boundaries between Jewish and Christian traditions, illustrating how biblical women played a powerful rhetorical role in shaping early Christian identity.¹⁰ In 2024, Ilaria Ramelli proposed a study on Origen's construction of gender, highlighting how his theological anthropology transcends post-Lapsarian gender distinctions. For Origen, gender differences are consequences of the fall. Thus, they hold no bearing on the

⁷ Fredriksen, “The Subject Vanishes.”

⁸ According to Ilaria Ramelli, for instance, the Cappadocians' support for women's ordination originates in Origen's theological anthropology. See Ramelli, “Theosebia.”

⁹ Prinzivalli, “La donna, il femminile.”

¹⁰ Niehoff, “Biblical Women.”

eschatological destiny of redeemed rational beings. Ramelli argues that Origen's transcendence of gender distinctions at an eschatological level underpins Origen's egalitarian outlook when it comes to the roles of men and women in the church, thus presenting Origen as openly in favor of women's ordination.¹¹

Building on and diverging from these prior investigations, this special issue offers a collection of six scholarly studies that revisit Origen's engagement with feminine metaphorical language, femininity, and women. These contributions engage with the existing scholarship while offering fresh perspectives on the theoretical, theological, and historical dimensions of Origen's thought. Collectively, they aim to deepen our understanding of how Origen conceptualized the feminine within his broader theological framework and the implications of such conceptualization for early Christian identity and gender dynamics. Four articles explore Origen's understanding of the feminine as an intellectual category – a way of representing theological ideas. Anders Christian Jacobsen examines the femininity of Wisdom in Origen's Trinitarian theology. Wisdom's femininity was an established feature in many apocryphal Jewish and Christian texts. In his article, Jacobsen claims that Origen negates Wisdom's femininity because of his precise intention to dismiss the use of female metaphorical language proposed by Valentinian Gnostics. Katarina Pålsson's article delves into the metaphors of "bride" and "soldier" in both Origen and Jerome. She demonstrates how the female metaphor of the bride and the masculine metaphor of the soldier are applied to ascetics regardless of their sex. According to Pålsson, gender is irrelevant in God's eyes when it comes to salvation and should similarly be inconsequential in describing men and women. Giovanni Hermanin de Reichenfeld focuses on Origen's doctrine of memory, particularly how women theologically represent the "voices" and "names" of God in a dialectical relationship with the divine presence in the history of salvation. He highlights how female allegories embody Origen's theology of spiritual transformation. My article compares the theological values attributed to the feminine by Origen and Plato. It argues that feminine metaphorical language serves as a preferred spectrum or continuum encompassing the complex dynamics of intra-divine and God-human interactions. The article emphasizes how the philosophical and theological attributes of the feminine are central to understanding Origen's theology of progress, which portrays history as a pedagogical path toward reunion with God. The contributions of Miriam DeCock and Maria Munkholt examine Origen's views on women and their societal roles. DeCock offers detailed observations on Origen's consideration of women's speech in homiletic texts. She notes how Origen's exegesis of female characters depends greatly on his audience and notes that Origen urges it to engage with women's evangelical words as a means of fostering spiritual growth. Munkholt investigates Origen's stance towards women as teachers, a topic widely debated in the early church due to Paul's pronouncement against it. Her analysis concludes that Origen's discussion of women's agency in ecclesiastical groups remains largely theoretical and that he does not distance himself much from Paul's position.

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¹¹ Ramelli, "Constructions of Gender."

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