

*Women in Early Christianity. Introduction*¹

Las mujeres en el cristianismo primitivo. Introducción

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1. Gender Studies and Early Christian History

Scholarly research on gender-related aspects in the field of the history of early Christianity has, by now, a long tradition. Building upon the scientific heritage of feminist theory developed over the second half of the past century², new approaches continue to emerge, and a multitude of studies related to women's social and religious roles –against the wider background of the influence exercised by gender identity on the shaping of social dynamics– are currently flourishing³. Despite intense and multifaceted contemporary investigations into gender issues in early Christian contexts, much work remains to be done. This is due to the relatively recent emergence of gender identity as a scholarly focus compared to more 'classical' and traditional lines of investigation and theoretical approaches⁴.

Within this broader trend, the study of gender-related aspects in the narrow context of early Christianity required even more time to gain acceptance and practical application. Moreover, analyzing women's social and religious roles in ancient societies demands a high level of interdisciplinarity. Nonetheless, the significance of women's agency has been demonstrated as a key factor in gaining a comprehensive understanding of Christianity, here conceived as an emergent religious system in late antiquity, especially in terms of the interaction between religion and society.

1. This introduction was planned and written collaboratively by the two authors. Maria Dell'Isola is responsible for the first paragraph, while Mario Resta wrote the second.

2. The bibliography on this topic is extensive; it will suffice to mention one milestone here: Schüssler Fiorenza (1983).

3. The bibliography in this case is also quite extensive. Here, I will mention only a few of the most recent relevant publications, highlighting the flourishing studies on this topic in recent years. See, for instance: Levine – Robbins (2008); Vander Stichele – Penner (2009); Dunning (2019); Parks – Sheinfeld – Warren (2022).

4. Here, the most immediate reference is to Butler (1990).

In line with recent theoretical trends, this thematic section has been conceived and organized around the analysis of the experiences underlying the religious and social agency of women in the first four centuries. The contributions address relevant questions related to this topic, focusing on diverse sources ranging from literary and documentary texts to archaeological and iconographic evidence. The case studies at the core of each contribution aim to explore contemporary Christian perceptions of women's religious and social agency, particularly in terms of gender-related differences in religious experiences and practices. Recognizing the overlap between religion and society, these gender-based differences help illuminate broader social disparities between men and women. The central question guiding these collected papers is the extent to which the spread of Christianity throughout the ancient Mediterranean world altered women's social roles. The answers provided by the authors reveal thought-provoking insights that contribute significantly to a comprehensive understanding of Christianity as a whole.

2. Thematic Section: Women in Early Christianity (1st-4th cent.)

This collection comprises papers presented during two editions of the CISSR (Italian Centre for Advanced Studies on Religions) *Annual Meetings on Christian Origins*, which aim to foster scholarly discussion on the history of early Christianity. Since 2021, we have co-organized and directed the panel on *Women in Early Christianity*, during which numerous presentations have been delivered over the years. This thematic section includes five papers selected from the 2022 and 2023 editions. The papers are arranged in chronological order based on the sources and topics addressed.

The first article, authored by Aliyah El Mansy, is titled *Ready to Strike a Blow – Women and Violence in Petitions from Egypt and Early Christian Discourse*. The discussion begins with the episode from Luke 18:5, where a judge fears that a widow might physically strike him, figuratively giving him a black eye. The author questions whether this reflects everyday realities. The article investigates instances of physical violence perpetrated by women, drawing on petitions from Egypt that occasionally accuse women of violent actions. Through analyzing these sources, certain patterns of female violence emerge. Using these findings as a backdrop, early Christian texts can be interpreted with greater nuance relative to their social environment. The study argues that these petitions support a literal interpretation of Luke 18:5 and challenge the misconception that women in antiquity refrained from engaging in everyday acts of violence.

Barbara Crostini's article, titled *Women Baptizers: Restoring Baptismal Typology to the Birth of Moses from a Painting at Dura Europos (c. 240 CE)*, comes next. In it, Crostini examines a painted panel from the Dura Europos synagogue depicting Moses' rescue from the Nile, connecting it to the debate about the role of women baptizers as addressed in the *Didascalia apostolorum*. Both the artwork and the text are from the same region, Syria, and are approximately contemporary. By interpreting the panel through a performative lens, where women are portrayed as facilitating Moses' salvation from exposure, naming him, and ceremonially washing him with ritual vessels, the scene's baptismal symbolism becomes apparent. Nevertheless, patristic tradition largely overlooks this episode in favor of other baptismal typologies from Moses' life. This omission highlights a theological decision that diminished the ritual importance of birth and naming – practices traditionally associated with women, particularly mothers – thereby contributing to the exclusion of women from baptismal rites.

The third contribution, authored by Carmelo Nicolò Benvenuto, is titled *Saint Catherine through the Lens of Feminism?* Benvenuto notes that modern scholars often describe St. Catherine of Alexandria as a «Ghost Saint», possibly representing a hagiographical reinterpretation of the Late-Antique philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria. Given that Hypatia is frequently viewed as a feminist or proto-feminist symbol, the author explores whether applying a Female Studies framework could deepen contemporary scholars' understanding of Catherine as a figure in her own right. This paper seeks to offer potential interpretations of St. Catherine's role and significance through the perspective of Female Studies. Employing a diachronic approach, it examines pivotal moments in her literary and scholarly portrayal, with particular attention to the key phase of her reception during the early modern period.

The article *The «Women of Clement»: The Importance of Being a Woman in a Newly Recovered Pseudo-Clementine Fragment* by Marianna Cerno focuses on an unpublished fragment, first discovered in 2018 and now in preparation for publication. This fragment is considered a significant piece of evidence, offering fresh insights into the Pseudo-Clementine tradition. Thought to date from the late 4th century, though based on a 3rd-century source, the fragment introduces the beginnings of the Clementine narrative, in contrast to Rufinus' *Recognitiones*, which recounts its conclusion. The fragment highlights several women who stand out due to their roles, characterizations, and contributions to the unfolding events. These women differ in their beliefs and customs, yet they share core values and virtues that nurture the development of the young Clement. This fragment serves as a powerful reflection of the cultural and religious diversity within early Judeo-Christianity, and it played a crucial role in conveying and internalizing the new religious ideas, particularly among the educated women of pagan society, who were the most open and receptive to these teachings.

The final article, written by Alessandro De Blasi, which concludes the thematic section, is titled *(Impious) Sisterhood: Maximus the Cynic's Dangerous Liaisons. A new conjecture on Greg. Naz. carm. II 1, 41, Contra Maximum*. De Blasi's paper delves into Gregory of Nazianzus' poem (II 1, 41), which addresses his rival Maximus the Cynic. The author argues that reconsidering the roles of women in Early Christianity through a gender-focused lens provides valuable textual-critical insights. In verses 49-53, Gregory seems to reference female companions who allegedly collaborated with Maximus against him, though this allusion remains unclear and needs further exploration. After reviewing existing scholarship, the paper offers a fresh analysis and interpretation of the passage. By situating this reference in a broader context and drawing connections to female communities in Gregory's writings and contemporary patristic texts, the paper demonstrates that Gregory's accusation is linked to the emerging trend of «syneisaktism». This detailed and updated analysis achieves two primary goals: first, it provides a more nuanced and culturally informed interpretation of the poem, and second, by scrutinizing the manuscript tradition of the passage and its Syriac translation, it identifies textual corruptions and proposes a new conjectural reading.

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