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Table of Contents

THE FOURTH CENTURY

Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER Pseudo-Justin's <i>Cohortatio ad Graecos</i> and the Great Persecution...	3
Atsuko GOTOH The 'Conversion' of Constantine the Great: His Religious Legislation in the Theodosian Code	13
Vladimir LATINOVIC Arius Conservativus? The Question of Arius' Theological Belonging	27
Sébastien MORLET Eusèbe le grammairien. Note sur les <i>Questions évangéliques</i> (À Mari- nos, 2) et une scholie sur Pindare	43
Thomas O'LOUGHLIN Some Hermeneutical Assumptions Latent within the Gospel Appa- ratus of Eusebius of Caesarea	51
Michael Bland SIMMONS Exegesis and Hermeneutics in Eusebius of Caesarea's <i>Theophany</i> (Book IV): The Contemporary Fulfillment of Jesus' Prophecies.....	65
Sophie CARTWRIGHT Should we Grieve and Be Afraid? Christ's Passions versus the Pas- sions of the Soul in Athanasius of Alexandria	77
William G. RUSCH Athanasius of Alexandria and ' <i>Sola Scriptura</i> '	87
Lois M. FARAG <i>Organon</i> in Athanasius' <i>De incarnatione</i> : A Case of Textual Inter- polation	93
Donna R. HAWK-REINHARD The Role of the Holy Spirit in Cyril of Jerusalem's Sacramental Theology	107
Olga LORGEUX Choice and Will in the Catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem	119

Florian ZACHER	
Marius Victorinus, <i>Opus ad Candidum</i> . An Analysis of its Rhetorical Structure	127
CAPPADOCIAN WRITERS	
Claudio MORESCHINI	
Is it Possible to Speak of ‘Cappadocian Theology’ as a System?.....	139
Nienke M. VOS	
‘Teach us to pray’: Self-Understanding in Macrina’s Final Prayer....	165
Adam RASMUSSEN	
Defending Moses. Understanding Basil’s Apparent Rejection of Allegory in the <i>Hexaemeron</i>	175
Marco QUIRCIO	
A Philological Note to Basil of Caesarea’s Second Homily on the <i>Hexaemeron</i>	183
Mattia C. CHIRIATTI	
ἀγών/θέα-θέαμα and στάδιον/θέατρον: A Reviewed ἔκφρασις of the Spectacle in Basil’s <i>In Gordium martyrem</i>	189
Arnaud PERROT	
Une source littéraire de l’ <i>Ep.</i> 46 de Basile de Césarée : le traité <i>De la véritable intégrité dans la virginité</i>	201
Aude BUSINE	
Basil of Caesarea and the <i>Praise of the City</i>	209
Benoît GAIN	
Le voyage de Basile de Césarée en Orient : hypothèses sur le silence des sources externes	217
Seumas MACDONALD	
Contested Ground: Basil’s Use of Scripture in <i>Against Eunomius 2</i>	225
Nikolai LIPATOV-CHICHERIN	
An Unpublished Funerary Speech (CPG 2936) and the Question of Succession to St. Basil the Great	237
Kimberly F. BAKER	
Basil and Augustine: Preaching on Care for the Poor.....	251

Oliver LANGWORTHY Sojourning and the Sojourner in Gregory of Nazianzus.....	261
Alexander D. PERKINS The Grave Politics of Gregory Nazianzen's Eulogy for Gorgonia.....	269
Gabrielle THOMAS Divine, Yet Vulnerable: The Paradoxical Existence of Gregory Nazianzen's <i>Imago Dei</i>	281
Bradley K. STORIN Reconsidering Gregory of Nazianzus' Letter Collection	291
Andrew RADDE-GALLWITZ Gregory on Gregory: <i>Catechetical Oration 38</i>	303
Andrew J. SUMMERSON Gregory Nazianzus' Mixture Language in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Ambigua</i> : What the Confessor Learned from the Theologian.....	315
Ryan CLEVINGER Ἐκφρασις and Epistemology in Gregory of Nazianzus.....	321
Karen CARDUCCI Implicit Stipulations in the <i>Testamentum</i> of Gregory of Nazianzos <i>vis-à-vis</i> the <i>Testamenta</i> of Remigius of Rheims, Caesarius of Arles, and Aurelianus of Ravenna	331
Michael J. PETRIN Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa on τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον	343
Andra JUGĂNARU The Function of Miracles in Gregory of Nyssa's Hagiographical Works.....	355
Makrina FINLAY Gregory of Nyssa's Framework for the Resurrected Life in <i>The Life of St. Macrina</i>	367
Marta PRZYSZYCHOWSKA Three States after Death according to Gregory of Nyssa	377
Ann CONWAY-JONES An Ambiguous Type: The Figure of Aaron Interpreted by Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem the Syrian	389

Robin ORTON	
The Place of the Eucharist in Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriology.....	399
Anne KARAHAN	
Cyclic Shapes and Divine Activity. A Cappadocian Inquiry into Byzantine Aesthetics.....	405
Hilary Anne-Marie MOONEY	
Eschatological Themes in the Writings of Gregory of Nyssa and John Scottus Eriugena.....	421
Benjamin EKMAN	
'Natural Contemplation' in Evagrius Ponticus' <i>Scholia on Proverbs</i>	431
Margaret GUISE	
The Golden and Saving Chain and its (De)construction: Soterio- logical Conversations between Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and the Cappadocian Fathers.....	441

‘Teach us to pray’: Self-Understanding in Macrina’s Final Prayer

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Macrina* is read from a mystagogical perspective. Mystagogy, in this case, is understood in a double sense as referring to the sacramental rituals of the church as well as to a more general process of spiritual formation. Such a layered mystagogical viewpoint applies particularly well to the *Vita Macrinae* because this inspirational text is saturated with liturgical references in terms of both terminology and ritual practice. By incorporating such language into the *vita*, Gregory appeals to the liturgical experience of his audience. Thus, hagiography and liturgy are closely connected here: not only in terms of writing and authorship, as worked out by Derek Krueger, but also as a communicative tool employed to connect with the recipients of the text, appealing to their personal experience. Macrina’s deathbed prayer represents a special instance of ritual setting and wording as it is highly reminiscent of the eucharistic prayer recited in the divine liturgy. The saint’s Final Prayer signals the high point in the text because it is an extensive section presented in direct speech. It is also the passage *par excellence* which enables the reader to identify with the ‘I’ of the saint. Via use of the first person singular the reader/hearer is encouraged to identify closely with Macrina and to appropriate her words. Because the prayer encapsulates his theology, Gregory takes on a mystagogical role here: he teaches to pray *and* he presents a particular, ascetic form of self-understanding, inviting the recipients of his texts to view themselves from that theological perspective, thus inscribing their stories into God’s. As a result, Gregory’s hagiographical prayer functions as mystagogical communication and spiritual formation at its most intense.

Introduction¹

The Cappadocian fathers are well known for their ability to connect spirituality and theology, experience and doctrine.² In fact, *theologia* is the place

¹ A more elaborate and adapted version of this contribution will appear in the proceedings of the second international conference organized by the Dutch Centre for Patristic Research (CPO) at Utrecht in August of 2014, entitled *The Early Christian Mystagogy of Prayer*, to be published in the LAHR-series (Late Antique History and Religion), by Peeters, Leuven (ed. Paul van Geest *et al.*).

² See Andrew Louth, ‘Later theologians of the Greek East’, in Philip Esler (ed.), *The Early Christian World I* (London, 2000), 580-601, 590.

where prayer and theological reflection meet.³ This integral approach to faith is also present in the *Life of Macrina*, a work of hagiography written around 381 A.D. by Gregory of Nyssa about his sister Macrina.⁴ It is quite an unusual *vita* because the saint already dies at two-thirds of the narrative. What follows are flashbacks which encourage the reader to piece together the meaning of Macrina's saintly life posthumously.⁵ Another striking element in the text is the prayer that Macrina prays on her deathbed, the so-called Final Prayer. In this contribution, I will reflect on this prayer from the perspective of mystagogy. Considering both liturgical and biblical allusions and citations, I will show how Gregory performs a mystagogical role in the *vita* as he teaches his readers to pray and, by extension, to live.

Mystagogy, liturgy, and hagiography

First, let us consider the term 'mystagogy', which can be defined in a number of ways.⁶ It has been described as 'a guided process of transformation, in which believers acquire an inner balance by a certain order of life, in that they become more receptive to God's being and operation, without losing touch with everyday life and the community of faith'.⁷ In this article, I will use the term 'mystagogy' to refer to the process of initiation in which one participates when joining the Christian church, and which continues throughout the rest of one's life as a Christian.⁸ Originally, the term was closely connected to the rite of baptism,⁹ but I will also apply it, as in the definition just mentioned, in a broader sense – of initiation as such. We might ask: what are new Christians being initiated into? Apart from the categories of dogmatics and ethics – in the sense of 'what do I believe' and 'how should I conduct myself' – I see other fields of initiation related to the liturgy, the reading of Scripture, and prayer.

³ See Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge 1997), 217-20.

⁴ I will refer to Gregory of Nyssa's *Vita Macrinae* [VM] in the following edition: *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. Pierre Maraval, SC 178 (Paris, 1971).

⁵ See Georgia Frank, 'Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*', *J ECS* 8 (2000), 511-30.

⁶ For the past few years, 'mystagogy' has been the focus of the research done at the Dutch Centre for Patristic Research (abbreviated in Dutch as CPO). Two international conferences have been organized: in 2011 and in 2014. For a more elaborate discussion of mystagogy, see the proceedings of the first international conference: Paul van Geest (ed.), *Seeing through the Eyes of Faith. New Approaches to the Mystagogy of the Church Fathers*, LAHR 11 (Leuven, 2016).

⁷ This is a translation of the Dutch definition that can be found on the website of the Dutch Centre for Patristic Research: <www.patristiek.eu/onderzoek/index.htm>.

⁸ See, for instance, Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, CA, 1998), 130.

⁹ See, for instance, Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation. Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN, 1999), 93-4.

So apart from dogmatics and ethics, I would distinguish ‘the spiritual life’ of which the liturgy is a core element. Needless to say, these fields easily shade into each other as the reading of Scripture and the performance of prayer are integral to the service of the liturgy.¹⁰ Similarly, one could argue that both dogmatics and ethics are aspects of one’s spiritual life. Thus, these distinctions are made solely for the purpose of clarification. Indeed, at times – as we shall see below – both meditation and prayer may occur in contexts somewhat removed from an actual liturgical setting, while still harbouring liturgical notions.

As we approach the *vita* of Macrina by Gregory of Nyssa, and especially the Final Prayer, from the angle of mystagogy, with its roots in the process of liturgical initiation, the liturgical dimension of the work lights up. When we view Macrina’s final days from the perspective of mystagogy, for instance, it becomes apparent how these are embedded within the liturgical rite of thanksgiving for the light – connected to the evening ritual of lighting the lamps. The Final Prayer, while presented (as other prayers in the *vita*)¹¹ as an *ex tempore* prayer, is clearly set within a liturgical setting. And not only the context, but the wording is also ‘liturgical’ as both Pierre Maraval and Derek Krueger have noted.¹² I will return to these liturgical dimensions more elaborately below, but first let us consider briefly two examples of liturgical allusions by way of illustration.

With the notion of mystagogy and its baptismal origin in mind, two elements in the text stand out: the image of the light and the description of a procession. The image of the light is referred to in two ways: first, Macrina’s Final Prayer is set within the context of ‘lighting the lamps’ at which ritual the hymn *Phōs hilaron* (Φῶς ἱλαρόν) would probably have been sung.¹³ *Phōs hilaron*, meaning ‘friendly light’, refers to Christ. This liturgical and prayerful celebration of light is then followed, after the death of Macrina, by the statement that the saint is mourned by women close to her as ‘light’, for we read: ‘The lamp of our eyes has been extinguished; the light to guide our souls has been carried off’.¹⁴

¹⁰ See F.M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis* (1997), 220.

¹¹ For instance, in *VM* 13, where Macrina’s mother Emmelia prays on her deathbed.

¹² *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. P. Maraval, SC 178 (1971), 72-7 and 220-5; see also Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness. The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East* (Philadelphia, 2004), 127-31.

¹³ *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. Maraval, SC 178 (1971), 73. Maraval explains that Basil of Caesarea, Gregory’s brother, mentions the same night office (of thanksgiving for the light) in his treatise on the Holy Spirit (*De Spir. Sancto* 73) and the fact that it included a specific ancient formula which was part of ‘Friendly Light’, the famous hymn celebrating Christ as the Light.

¹⁴ *VM* 26,23-4. The translation cited is by Kevin Corrigan, *The Life of Saint Macrina by Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa* (Eugene, OR, 2001), 44. Maraval qualifies the metaphors as ‘banal’ (‘métaphores banales’) because they occur elsewhere. I do not agree, however. It seems to me that in this context the words ‘light’ and ‘lamp’ are carefully chosen by the author. I do agree with another remark made by Maraval: he notes that these words by the maidens of Macrina’s community put into relief the saint’s educational role. He sees this as a case of ‘photagogie’ which

The second mystagogical element I want to highlight is that of the procession. It is mentioned as Macrina is brought to her final resting place: the procession is called ‘*pompē*’ (πομπή), which term is also used in the context of the Easter vigil when the catechumens are baptized.¹⁵ Thus we find two illustrations, *phōs*/light and *pompē*/procession, that capture the liturgical and baptismal glow inherent in the work, reinforcing its mystagogical quality.

With this in mind, let us now shift our focus to that other sacrament, the eucharist, and concentrate on the eucharistic quality of the language in the Macrina’s Final Prayer. The prayer, which is included in chapter 24 of the *vita*, is – as said – presented as an *ex tempore* prayer prayed by Macrina on her deathbed. It has been noted, however, that it is highly stylized. It both captures Gregory’s ascetic theology and includes – apart from many biblical quotations and allusions – quite a number of liturgical phrases.¹⁶ As our liturgical sources containing full eucharistic prayers are relatively late, it is difficult to speak of literary dependence, but it is clear that we find structural parallels between the eucharistic prayer and Macrina’s Final Prayer.¹⁷

In his study entitled *Writing and Holiness*, Derek Krueger analyses the *Vita Macrinae* in terms of liturgical authorship. He observes important parallels between the autobiographical narration of one’s life (in this case that of Macrina) *in speech* and the biographical narration of that life *in writing*. He also points out that in both cases, two major structural elements from the eucharistic liturgy are present: *anamnēsis* and *eucharistia*. The events of the life are recalled and this is done with a view to thanksgiving. While in the eucharistic liturgy the focus is on the mighty acts of God in the history of salvation, the more personal prayer offered by Macrina includes autobiographical reminiscences which are closely related to her spiritual life, more specifically her devotion to God in asceticism. In the prayer, Gregory presents salvation history and personal history as mirror images. Quite strikingly, the core components of the divine liturgy, remembering and thanksgiving, determine the dynamic of both the Final Prayer in chapter 24 and the authorship of Gregory of the *vita* as a whole.¹⁸

theme is developed by Gregory elsewhere in his homily on *Song of Songs* (*In Cant. Hom. XV*). See *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. P. Maraval, SC 178 (1971), 231 n. 3. Approaching matters from the perspective of mystagogy, I find the term ‘photagogie’ particularly apt. It also resonates with an important notion from Macrina’s final prayer: ‘cheiragogia’ – suggested by the reference to an angel leading Macrina ‘by the hand’. See *VM* 24,26-7; and K. Corrigan, *The Life of Saint Macrina* (2001), 42.

¹⁵ *VM* 34,12; see *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. P. Maraval, SC 178 (1971), 252-3.

¹⁶ For the biblical material see Eugenio Marotta, ‘La base biblica della *Vita s. Macrinae* di Gregorio di Nissa’, *Vetera Christianorum* 5 (1968), 73-88.

¹⁷ See *Vie de Sainte Macrine*, ed. P. Maraval, SC 178 (1971), 74-7 and 220-5; see also D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness* (2004), 127-31.

¹⁸ D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness* (2004), 110-32.

Two Final Prayers: the *Vita Macrinae* and the *Martyrium Polycarpi*

From the perspective of Macrina as a character in the story, the point is that she – as Krueger calls it – ‘inscribes her story into God’s’ by means of the prayer.¹⁹ How is this done? It is clear that the prayer is basically made up of two parts: a descriptive part and a request. The first part relates the important elements of salvation history, while in the second, Macrina appropriates these. While the prayer displays many examples of literary and compositional ingenuity (as I have shown elsewhere),²⁰ I want to focus here on one specific aspect related to the notion of ‘paradise’. While the first descriptive part of the prayer speaks of the creation of human beings (they are ‘fashioned’ from the earth: from the Greek διαμορφώω),²¹ and their ‘recreation’ (they are ‘transformed’: from the Greek μεταμορφώω),²² the second part zooms in on the related notion of paradise referring to both the fiery sword from *Genesis* 3 and the famous scene from the Gospel where Jesus and the sinner on the cross are in conversation.²³ The sinner asks the Lord to ‘remember him in his Kingdom’,²⁴ that is, to remember him when he will enter paradise. Jesus’ subsequent promise is that the sinner will enter paradise ‘today’.²⁵ Next, Macrina connects herself to both the state of being crucified – having crucified her flesh in asceticism – and the entrance into paradise. The prayer reads: ‘Remember me also in your kingdom, for I too have been crucified with you, for I have nailed my flesh out of reverence for you’.²⁶

It has been noted that Christian prayer has inherited much of its structure from the Greek prayers of the classical period.²⁷ The basic model is that of invocation, followed by a narrative part (*pars epica*) and a request.²⁸ While Macrina’s prayer does not open with a clear invocation, the twofold structure

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 130.

²⁰ One important structural element, for instance, is word repetition. The article in which I discuss the prayer more extensively is entitled ‘Gregory of Nyssa as Mystagogue: Macrina’s Final Prayer in Context’. It will be published in the proceedings of the CPO-conference *The Early Christian Mystagogy of Prayer* (held in 2014) by Peeters, Leuven (ed. P. van Geest). See note 1.

²¹ *VM* 24,8; K. Corrigan, *The Life of Saint Macrina* (2001), 41.

²² *VM* 24,9; K. Corrigan, *The Life of Saint Macrina* (2001), 41.

²³ *VM* 24,29-31; see *Gen* 3:24 and *Luke* 23:42-3.

²⁴ See *Luke* 23:42: ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom’.

²⁵ See *Luke* 23:43: ‘Amen, I say to you: today you will be with me in paradise’.

²⁶ *VM* 24,32-4; K. Corrigan, *The Life of Saint Macrina* (2001), 42. See also note 16.

²⁷ See, for example, Gerard Rouwhorst, ‘Hymns and Prayers in the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas’, in Clemens Leonhard and Hermut Löhr (eds), *Literature or Liturgy? Early Christian Hymns and Prayers in their Literary and Liturgical Context in Antiquity* (Tübingen, 2014), 195-212, esp. 197-200; and Gerd Buschmann, *Das Martyrium des Polykarp* (Göttingen, 1998), 226-57 (‘Exkurs: Traditionsgeschichtliche Analyse des Gebets in MartPol 14 – Ein jüdisches Dankopfergebet des Einzelnen als eucharistisches Märtyrergedächtnisgebet der frühchristlichen kleinasiatischen Gemeinden’), esp. 237.

²⁸ G. Rouwhorst, ‘Hymns and Prayers’ (2014), 197-8.

of a narrative or epic part followed by a request is obvious.²⁹ One could argue that in the case of Macrina's prayer, the invocation is now situated between the two parts, whereby the basic format has been adapted.³⁰ In fact, the request opens with an invocation which takes on an autobiographical colouring as Macrina's prayer refers to her devotion to God. In a sense, this is part of her personal *anamnesis*, inserted here in the invocation and introducing the request that is to follow. Recalling the importance of *anamnesis*, we must note that the narrative part in the prayer, about the saving acts of God, constitutes the *anamnesis* proper.

Now let us consider another hagiographical text which includes a 'Final Prayer' with eucharistic overtones: The Final Prayer by Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, from the *Martyrium Polycarpi*. Gerd Buschmann, rather than emphasising the influence of Greek hymns and prayers, focuses more on biblical material, for instance, the Psalms, and on the structure of Jewish blessings (*berachot*) at the dinner table.³¹ He notes that in the case of Polycarp's prayer, the section of the request is remarkably short – pointing out that the request would expand over time, also, or especially, in the eucharistic liturgy.³² Such an elaborate request is included in the *Life of Macrina*.

Another vital aspect concerning Polycarp's prayer is the following. Buschmann presents a source critical analysis of the martyr's prayer in which the text is constituted by three layers: that of a Jewish blessing, a Christianized layer reflecting eucharistic practice, and a third and final redactional layer relating specifically to martyrdom.³³ He then suggests that this prayer, which he believes incorporates actual liturgical language, could later function in the martyrological rituals of remembrance developed after Polycarp's death. That is: Polycarp's prayer, partly derived *from* the liturgy, could flow back *into* the liturgy, and thus be prayed by members of the Christian community.³⁴

This observation enables us to move from Krueger's focus on liturgy as a metaphor for authorial activity to an interpretation of liturgical notions in hagiography as mystagogical, that is, as primarily fostering religious communication and formation. Thus, while Krueger concentrates on *anamnesis* and *eucharistia* in the context of authorship, which enables him to envisage Gregory as a priest who offers Macrina's remains to God in thanksgiving as a writer,³⁵ a consideration

²⁹ The narrative part comprises lines 1 to 20 of chapter 24, while the request runs from line 21 to the end (line 46).

³⁰ The request starts with an invocation in line 21: 'God Eternal', after which three relative clauses follow (lines 22-5), before the actual request is articulated (starting line 26). See also K. Corrigan, *The Life of Saint Macrina* (2001), 42.

³¹ G. Buschmann, *Das Martyrium* (1998), 228-47.

³² *Ibid.* 243 and 247.

³³ See note 27.

³⁴ G. Buschmann, *Das Martyrium* (1998), 247, 254-6, 267-8, 288.

³⁵ D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness* (2004), 132.

of Polycarp's Final Prayer may shift attention to the field of spirituality and the dynamics of prayer. Indeed, such a shift in focus derives from the connections between the story of the saint, eucharistic experience, and personal prayer.

When we read Macrina's and Polycarp's prayer in conjunction in this way, a mystagogical interpretation becomes plausible which argues that Gregory was using Macrina's prayer to teach his audience. The scene has been set in such a way that one might imagine the readers as having asked Gregory what the disciples once asked Jesus: 'Teach us to pray'.³⁶ Significantly, the biblical book of hymns and prayers, the Psalms, often uses the first person, allowing for instant appropriation of the words. Similarly, the Lord's Prayer, taught by Jesus to his disciples, is easily repeated. The same is true of Gregory's prayer voiced by Macrina: it is set in the first person and can be easily repeated by the reader. As one reads the story of *vita*, one reads the prayer when arriving at chapter 24. Readers take Macrina's words upon their lips and consequently, these become their words.

From a linguistic and narratological point of view, it is important to note that the prayer is formulated in direct speech, which means that narrative and narrated time coincide.³⁷ In stories, narrative time generally slows down until the moment when direct speech happens. From a discourse linguistic point of view it signals that we have reached *a*, if not *the*, peak in the story, as climactic passages are often preceded by a slowing down of narrative tempo and communicated by way of direct speech.³⁸ From a linguistic perspective this is definitely the case in *Vita Macrinae* 24: the Final Prayer presented in direct speech represents a high point in the narrative. It is significant that the simultaneity of narrative and narrated time in direct speech helps readers to become maximally involved in the story – even to the extent of being immersed in it.³⁹ Buschmann's suggestion that Christians celebrating the festival of Polycarp could repeat his Final Prayer in the context of the eucharistic liturgy fits very well with this interpretation of appropriation.⁴⁰ While both the *Martyrium Polycarpi* and the *Vita Macrinae* may be understood as texts closely connected to the ritual remembrance of the saints, they can also quite easily be imagined as functioning

³⁶ Luke 11:1.

³⁷ See, for instance, Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (Abingdon, 2009), 33.

³⁸ See for the notion of the peak, for instance, Robert E. Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse: Second Edition* (New York, 1996), 42-3. See also Rutger J. Allan, 'Towards a Typology of the Narrative Modes in Ancient Greek: Text Types and Narrative Structure in Euripidean Messenger Speeches', in Stéphanie J. Bakker and Gerry C. Wakker (eds), *Discourse Cohesion in Greek* (Leiden, 2009), 171-204, 187-8.

³⁹ For the concept of immersion see, for instance, the chapter entitled 'Fictional vs. Factual Narration' by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, in Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid and Jörg Schönert (eds), *Handbook of Narratology*, *Narratologia* 19 (Göttingen, 2014), 179-96, 191-4. See also the Dutch article 'Homerus' narratieve stijl: enargeia en immersion' by Rutger J. Allen, Irene J.F. de Jong and Casper C. de Jonge in *Lampas* 47 (2014), 202-23.

⁴⁰ See note 34.

in non-liturgical contexts with readers and/or listeners taking in the words of the story including the Final Prayer. In a sense, the actual place where the recipient of the text is sitting or standing or even lying down then becomes a liturgical setting. In this way, via eucharistically informed language, one's actual surroundings may be transformed into a sacred space.

Mystagogy and spirituality

Krueger focuses on Gregory's self-understanding with a view to his authorship and explains how Gregory's writing can be seen as a liturgical activity mirroring both *anamnesis* and *eucharistia*. From the perspective of mystagogy, I would add that the reader is drawn into the liturgical dynamic of the work itself. As Macrina inscribes her life into God's,⁴¹ that is, as she inserts her biography into the story of the Scriptures by way of liturgically contextualized prayer, the reader may do the same. Macrina's 'I' may become the 'I' of the reader.

Mystagogically, Gregory has a twofold mission here: he teaches his readers to pray but in doing so, he also teaches them to understand themselves since his theology is encapsulated in the prayer. The prayer is his theology, or rather, his anthropology, and therefore his spirituality in a nutshell. In the prayer, life as Gregory understands it is condensed. Consequently, the Life culminates in the Prayer. This is an important observation also made by Krueger: life itself is a prayer and with the life, the prayer ends, or rather, the proper end of the prayer marks the end of Macrina's life.⁴² There is a perfect parallellism between the two, making the profound point that life is prayer and prayer is life. In this context, the notion of thanksgiving, of *eucharistia*, must again be mentioned as both the life and the prayer are offered to God in gratitude. Indeed, all of these notions are deeply connected to the theme of sacrifice. Typically, the term marks the final sentence of the Final Prayer as Macrina calls herself 'an offering of incense'.⁴³

Concluding remarks

A few years ago, the Convent of Saint Catherine (Catharijneconvent), an important museum of religious art in the Dutch city of Utrecht, put on an exhibition that focused on the role of the Bible in the seventeenth century, the so-called 'Golden Age'. It was entitled 'At Home in the Bible' and the final section of

⁴¹ See note 19.

⁴² See D. Krueger, *Writing and Holiness* (2004), 131.

⁴³ *VM* 24, lines 45-6.

the exhibition showed how the depiction of biblical stories had found its way into the homes of the Dutch in the seventeenth century: on tobacco containers, cupboards, buttons, linen, *etc.*⁴⁴ They also displayed exemplars of large family Bibles that were often placed on a special lectern in the home. On the first page of these Bibles the faithful often included their own family history recording births, marriages, and deaths. These Christians, like Macrina, were still 'inscribing their stories into God's'.

Apparently, we may read the Scriptures, but we also interpret our own stories and try to understand them, thereby understanding ourselves. We may use pre-existing stories to illuminate our own – as Macrina did – or Gregory for her. In such cases, one aims at acts of *anamnesis* and possibly also *eucharistia*: remembering the larger (biblical) story and one's own while giving thanks. It is a special kind of intertextual activity. Still, in the case of the *Life of Macrina*, yet another performer of memorization plays a major role, who is included in the story about the sinner on the cross.⁴⁵ For Macrina and Gregory, the ultimate act of *anamnesis* was performed by Christ who had promised to remember his own.

⁴⁴ The catalogue accompanying the exhibition was entitled *Thuis in de Bijbel: Oude meesters, grote verhalen* ('At Home in the Bible: Old Masters, Great Stories') (Zwolle, 2014).

⁴⁵ See notes 24 and 25.

Volume 1
STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXV

STUDIA PATRISTICA

Markus VINZENT	
Editing <i>Studia Patristica</i>	3
Frances YOUNG	
<i>Studia Patristica</i>	11
Mark EDWARDS	
The Use and Abuse of Patristics	15

PLATONISM AND THE FATHERS

Christian H. BULL	
An Origenistic Reading of Plato in Nag Hammadi Codex VI.....	31
Mark HUGGINS	
Comparing the Ethical Concerns of Plato and John Chrysostom	41
Alexey FOKIN	
Act of Vision as an Analogy of the Proceeding of the Intellect from the One in Plotinus and of the Son and the Holy Spirit from the Father in Marius Victorinus and St. Augustine	55
Laela ZWOLLO	
Aflame in Love: St. Augustine's Doctrine of <i>amor</i> and Plotinus' Notion of <i>eros</i>	69
Lenka KARFÍKOVÁ	
Augustine on Recollection between Plato and Plotinus	81
Matthias SMALBRUGGE	
Augustine and Deification. A Neoplatonic Way of Thinking.....	103
Douglas A. SHEPARDSON	
The Analogical Methodology of Plato's <i>Republic</i> and Augustine's <i>De trinitate</i>	109

MAXIMUS CONFESSOR

Paul A. BRAZINSKI	
Maximus the Confessor and Constans II: A Punishment Fit for an Unruly Monk	119
Ian M. GERDON	
The Evagrian Roots of Maximus the Confessor's <i>Liber asceticus</i>	129
Jonathan GREIG	
Proclus' Doctrine of Participation in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Centuries of Theology</i> 1.48-50	137
Emma BROWN DEWHURST	
The 'Divisions of Nature' in Maximus' <i>Ambiguum</i> 41?	149
Michael BAKKER	
Gethsemane Revisited: Maximus' <i>Aporia</i> of Christ's γνώμη and a 'Monarchic Psychology' of Deciding.....	155
Christopher A. BEELEY	
Natural and Gnostic Willing in Maximus Confessor's <i>Disputation with Pyrrhus</i>	167
Jonathan TAYLOR	
A Three-Nativities Christology? Maximus on the <i>Logos</i>	181
Eric LOPEZ	
Plagued by a Thousand Passions – Maximus the Confessor's Vision of Love in Light of Nationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Religious Persecution.....	189
Manuel MIRA	
The Priesthood in Maximus the Confessor.....	201
Adam G. COOPER	
When Action Gives Way to Passion: The Paradoxical Structure of the Human Person according to Maximus the Confessor	213
Jonathan BIELER	
Body and Soul Immovably Related: Considering an Aspect of Maximus the Confessor's Concept of Analogy	223

Luke STEVEN	
Deification and the Workings of the Body: The Logic of ‘Proportion’ in Maximus the Confessor	237
Paul M. BLOWERS	
Recontextualizations of Maximus the Confessor in Modern Christian Theology.....	251

Volume 2

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVI

EL PLATONISMO EN LOS PADRES DE LA IGLESIA

(ed. Rubén Pereto Rivas)

Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS	
Introducción.....	1
Viviana Laura FÉLIX	
Platonismo y reflexión trinitaria en Justino.....	3
Juan Carlos ALBY	
El trasfondo platónico del concepto de <i>Lex divina</i> en Ireneo de Lyon.....	23
Patricia CINER	
La Herencia Espiritual: la doctrina de la preexistencia en Platón y Orígenes.....	37
Pedro Daniel FERNÁNDEZ	
Raíces platónicas del modelo pedagógico de Orígenes.....	49
Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS	
La <i>eutonía</i> en la dinámica psicológica de Evagrio Póntico	59
Santiago Hernán VAZQUEZ	
El ensalmo curativo de Platón y la potencialidad terapéutica de la palabra en Evagrio Póntico	67
Oscar VELÁSQUEZ	
Las <i>Confesiones</i> en la perspectiva de la Caverna de Platón	79

Gerald CRESTA	
Acerca de la belleza metafísica en Pseudo-Dionisio y Buenaventura.....	91
Graciela L. RITACCO	
La perennidad del legado patrístico: Tiempo y eternidad.....	103

Volume 3

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVII

BECOMING CHRISTIAN IN THE LATE ANTIQUE WEST (3rd-6th CENTURIES)

(ed. Ariane Bodin, Camille Gerzaguët and Matthieu Pignot)

Ariane BODIN, Camille GERZAGUET & Matthieu PIGNOT	
Introduction	1
Matthieu PIGNOT	
The Catechumenate in Anonymous Sermons from the Late Antique West.....	11
Camille GERZAGUET	
Preaching to the <i>ecclesia</i> in Northern Italy: The Eastertide Sermons of Zeno of Verona and Gaudentius of Brescia.....	33
Adrian BRÄNDLI	
Imagined Kinship: Perpetua and the Paternity of God	45
Jarred MERCER	
<i>Vox infantis, vox Dei</i> : The Spirituality of Children and Becoming Christian in Late Antiquity	59
Rafał TOCZKO	
The Shipwrecks and Philosophers: The Rhetoric of Aristocratic Conversion in the Late 4 th and Early 5 th Centuries	75
Ariane BODIN	
Identifying the Signs of Christianness in Late Antique Italy and Africa.....	91

Hervé HUNTZINGER

- Becoming Christian, Becoming Roman: Conversion to Christianity
and Ethnic Identification Process in Late Antiquity 103

Volume 4**STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXVIII**

LITERATURE, RHETORIC, AND EXEGESE IN SYRIAC VERSE

(ed. Jeffrey Wickes and Kristian S. Heal)

Jeffrey WICKES

- Introduction 1

Sidney H. GRIFFITH

- The Poetics of Scriptural Reasoning: Syriac *Mêmrê* at Work..... 5

Kristian S. HEAL

- Construal and Construction of *Genesis* in Early Syriac Sermons..... 25

Carl GRIFFIN

- Vessel of Wrath: Judas Iscariot in Cyrillona and Early Syriac Tradition 33

Susan ASHBROOK HARVEY

- The Poet's Prayer: Invocational Prayers in the *Mêmrê* of Jacob of Sarug 51

Andrew J. HAYES

- The Manuscripts and Themes of Jacob of Serugh's *Mêmrâ* 'On the Adultery of the Congregation' 61

Robert A. KITCHEN

- Three Young Men Redux: The Fiery Furnace in Jacob of Sarug and Narsai 73

Erin Galgay WALSH

- Holy Boldness: Narsai and Jacob of Serugh Preaching the Canaanite Woman 85

Scott Fitzgerald JOHNSON

- Biblical Historiography in Verse Exegesis: Jacob of Sarug on Elijah and Elisha 99

Volume 5

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXIX

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

(ed. Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski)

Piotr ASHWIN-SIEJKOWSKI	
Introduction	1
Judith L. KOVACS	
‘In order that we might follow him in all things’: Interpretation of Gospel Texts in <i>Excerpts from Theodotus</i> 66-86	7
Veronika ČERNUŠKOVÁ	
The <i>Eclogae Propheticae</i> on the Value of Suffering: A Copyist’s Excerpts or Clement’s Preparatory Notes?	29
Piotr ASHWIN-SIEJKOWSKI	
<i>Excerpta ex Theodoto</i> – A Search for the Theological Matrix. An Examination of the Document in the Light of Some Coptic Treatises from the Nag Hammadi Library	55
Jana PLÁTOVÁ	
How Many Fragments of the <i>Hypotyposes</i> by Clement of Alexandria Do We Actually Have?	71
Davide DAINESI	
Cassiodorus’ <i>Adumbrationes</i> : Do They Belong to Clement’s <i>Hypotyposes</i> ?	87
Joshua A. NOBLE	
Almsgiving or Training? Clement of Alexandria’s Answer to <i>Quis dives salvetur</i> ?	101
Peter WIDDICOMBE	
Slave, Son, Friend, and Father in the Writings of Clement of Alexandria	109
H. CLIFTON WARD	
We Hold These ἀρχαί To Be Self-Evident: Clement, ἐνάργεια, and the Search for Truth	123
Annette BOURLAND HUIZENGA	
Clement’s Use of Female Role Models as a Pedagogical Strategy ...	133

Brice ROGERS	
‘Trampling on the Garment of Shame’: Clement of Alexandria’s Use of the <i>Gospel of the Egyptians</i> in Anti-Gnostic Polemic.....	145
Manabu AKIYAMA	
L’Unigenito Dio come «esegeta» (<i>Gv.</i> 1:18) secondo Clemente Alessandrino	153
Lisa RADA KOVICH HOLSBERG	
Of Gods and Men (and Music) in Clement of Alexandria’s <i>Protrep- ticus</i>	161
Joona SALMINEN	
Clement of Alexandria on Laughter	171
Antoine PARIS	
La composition des <i>Stromates</i> comme subversion de la logique aris- totélicienne.....	181

Volume 6

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXX

THE CLASSICAL OR CHRISTIAN LACTANTIUS

(ed. Oliver Nicholson)

Oliver NICHOLSON	
Introduction	1
John MCGUCKIN	
The Problem of Lactantius the Theologian	17
Mattias GASSMAN	
<i>Et Deus et Homo</i> : The Soteriology of Lactantius.....	35
Gábor KENDEFFY	
More than a <i>Cicero Christianus</i> . Remarks on Lactantius’ Dualistic System	43
Stefan FREUND	
When Romans Become Christians... The ‘Romanisation’ of Christian Doctrine in Lactantius’ <i>Divine Institutes</i>	63

Blandine COLOT	
Lactantius and the Philosophy of Cicero: ‘Romideologie’ and Legit- imization of Christianity	79
Jackson BRYCE	
Lactantius’ Poetry and Poetics	97
Oliver NICHOLSON	
The Christian Sallust: Lactantius on God, Man and History	119
Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER	
Persecution and the Art of Reading: Lactantius, Porphyry and the Rules for Reading Sacred Texts	139
David RUTHERFORD	
The Manuscripts of Lactantius and His Early Renaissance Readers ..	155
Carmen M. PALOMO PINEL	
The Survival of the Classical Idea of Justice in Lactantius’ Work ...	173
Ralph KEEN	
Gilbert Burnet and Lactantius’ <i>De mortibus persecutorum</i>	183

Volume 7

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXI

HEALTH, MEDICINE, AND CHRISTIANITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

(ed. Jared Secord, Heidi Marx-Wolf and Christoph Marksches)

Jared SECORD	
Introduction: Medicine beyond Galen in the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity	1

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Christoph MARKSCHIES	
Demons and Disease	11
Ellen MUEHLBERGER	
Theological Anthropology and Medicine: Questions and Directions for Research	37

CHRISTIANS, DOCTORS, AND MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE

Jared SECORD	
Galen and the Theodotians: Embryology and Adoptionism in the Christian Schools of Rome	51
Róbert SOMOS	
Origen on the Kidneys	65
Heidi MARX-WOLF	
The Good Physician: Imperial Doctors and Medical Professionaliza- tion in Late Antiquity	79
Stefan HODGES-KLUCK	
Religious Education and the Health of the Soul according to Basil of Caesarea and the Emperor Julian	91
Jessica WRIGHT	
John Chrysostom and the Rhetoric of Cerebral Vulnerability	109

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH,
DISABILITY, AND ILLNESS

Helen RHEE	
Portrayal of Patients in Early Christian Writings	127
Meghan HENNING	
Metaphorical, Punitive, and Pedagogical Blindness in Hell	139
Maria E. DOERFLER	
The Sense of an Ending: Childhood Death and Parental Benefit in Late Ancient Rhetoric	153
Brenda Llewellyn IHSEN	
‘Waiting to see and know’: Disgust, Fear and Indifference in <i>The Miracles of St. Artemios</i>	161

CONCEPTIONS OF VIRGINITY

Michael ROSENBERG	
Physical Virginity in the <i>Protevangelium of James</i> , the Mishnah, and Late Antique Syriac Poetry	177

Julia Kelto LILLIS Who Opens the Womb? Fertility and Virginitly in Patristic Texts	187
Caroline MUSGROVE Debating Virginitly in the Late Alexandrian School of Medicine	203

Volume 8

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXII

DEMONS

(ed. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe)

Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE Introduction	1
Gregory SMITH Augustine on Demons' Bodies	7
Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE Chaotic Mob or Disciplined Army? Collective Bodies of Demons in Ascetic Literature	33
Travis W. PROCTOR Dining with 'Inhuman' Demons: Greco-Roman Sacrifice, Demonic Ritual, and the Christian Body in Clement of Alexandria	51
Gregory WIEBE Augustine on Diabolical Sacraments and the Devil's Body	73
Katie HAGER CONROY 'A Kind of Lofty Tribunal': The Gathering of Demons for Judgment in Cassian's <i>Conference Eight</i>	91

Volume 9

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIII

EMOTIONS

(ed. Yannis Papadogiannakis)

Yannis PAPADOGIANNAKIS Introduction	1
--	---

J. David WOODINGTON
 Fear and Love: The Emotions of the Household in Chrysostom 19

Jonathan P. WILCOXSON
 The Machinery of Consolation in John Chrysostom’s Letters to
 Olympias..... 37

Mark THERRIEN
 Just an Old-Fashioned Love Song: John Chrysostom’s Exegesis of
Ps. 41:1-2 73

Christos SIMELIDIS
 Emotions in the Poetry of Gregory of Nazianzus 91

Yuliia ROZUMNA
 ‘Be Angry and Do Not Sin’. Human Anger in Evagrius of Pontus
 and Gregory of Nyssa 103

Mark ROOSIEN
 ‘Emulate Their Mystical Order’: Awe and Liturgy in John Chryso-
 stom’s Angelic πολιτεία 115

Peter MOORE
 Deploying Emotional Intelligence: John Chrysostom’s Relational
 Emotional Vocabulary in his Beatitude Homilies 131

Clair E. MESICK
 The Perils and Virtues of Laughter in the Works of John Chryso-
 stom 139

Andrew MELLAS
 Tears of Compunction in John Chrysostom’s *On Eutropius* 159

Maria VERHOEFF
 Seeking Friendship with Saul: John Chrysostom’s Portrayal of
 David 173

Blake LEYERLE
 Animal Passions. Chrysostom’s Use of Animal Imagery 185

Justus T. GHORMLEY
 Gratitude: A Panacea for the Passions in John Chrysostom’s Com-
 mentary on the *Psalms* 203

Brian DUNKLE	
John Chrysostom's Community of Anger Management	217
Andrew CRISLIP	
<i>The Shepherd of Hermas</i> and Early Christian Emotional Formation	231
Niki Kasumi CLEMENTS	
Emotions and Ascetic Formation in John Cassian's <i>Collationes</i>	241
Margaret BLUME FREDDOSO	
The Value of Job's Grief in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Job</i> : How John Blesses with Job's Tears	271
Jesse SIRAGAN ARLEN	
'Let Us Mourn Continuously': John Chrysostom and the Early Christian Transformation of Mourning.....	289
Martin HINTERBERGER	
Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus Speaking about Anger and Envy: Some Remarks on the Fathers' Methodology of Treating Emotions and Modern Emotion Studies	313

Volume 10

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIV

EVAGRIUS BETWEEN ORIGEN, THE CAPPADOCIANS, AND NEOPLATONISM

(ed. Ilaria Ramelli, with the collaboration of Kevin Corrigan,
Giulio Maspero and Monica Tobon)

Ilaria RAMELLI	
Introduction	1
Samuel FERNÁNDEZ	
The Pedagogical Structure of Origen's <i>De principiis</i> and its Christology	15
Martin C. WENZEL	
The Omnipotence of God as a Challenge for Theology in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa	23

Miguel BRUGAROLAS
 Theological Remarks on Gregory of Nyssa’s Christological Language
 of ‘Mixture’ 39

Ilaria VIGORELLI
 Soul’s Dance in Clement, Plotinus and Gregory of Nyssa 59

Giulio MASPERO
Isoangelia in Gregory of Nyssa and Origen on the Background of
 Plotinus 77

Ilaria RAMELLI
 Response to the Workshop, “Theology and Philosophy between
 Origen and Gregory of Nyssa” 101

Mark J. EDWARDS
 Dunamis and the Christian Trinity in the Fourth Century 105

Kevin CORRIGAN
 Trauma before Trauma: Recognizing, Healing and Transforming the
 Wounds of Soul-Mind in the Works of Evagrius of Pontus 123

Monica TOBON
 The Place of God: Stability and Apophasis in Evagrius 137

Theo KOBUSCH
 Practical Knowledge in ‘Christian Philosophy’: A New Way to
 God 157

Ilaria RAMELLI
 Gregory Nyssen’s and Evagrius’ Biographical and Theological Rela-
 tions: Origen’s Heritage and Neoplatonism 165

Volume 11

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXV

AMBROSE OF MILAN

Isabella D’AURIA
 Polemiche antipagane: Ambrogio (*epist.* 10, 73, 8) e Prudenzio
 (*c. Symm.* 2, 773-909) contro Simmaco (*rel.* 3, 10) 1

Victoria ZIMMERL-PANAGL <i>Videtur nobis in sermone revivescere... Preparing a New Critical Edition of Ambrose's Orationes funebres</i>	15
Andrew M. SELBY Ambrose's 'Inspired' Moderation of Tertullian's Christian Discipline	23
Sarah EMANUEL Virgin Heroes and Cross-Dressing Kings: Reading Ambrose's <i>On Virgins 2.4</i> as Carnavalesque.....	41
Francesco LUBIAN Ambrose's <i>Disticha</i> and John 'Reclining on Christ's Breast' (Ambr., <i>Tituli</i> II [21], 1).....	51
D.H. WILLIAMS Ambrose as an Apologist.....	65
Brendan A. HARRIS 'Where the Sanctification is One, the Nature is One': Pro-Nicene Pneumatology in Ambrose of Milan's Baptismal Theology.....	77
David VOPŘADA <i>Bonum mihi quod humiliasti me</i> . Ambrose's Theology of Humility and Humiliation.....	87
Paola Francesca MORETTI 'Competing' <i>exempla</i> in Ambrose's <i>De officiis</i>	95
Metha HOKKE Scent as Metaphor for the Bonding of Christ and the Virgin in Ambrose's <i>De virginitate</i> 11.60-12.68.....	107
J. WARREN SMITH Transcending Resentment: Ambrose, David, and <i>Magnanimitas</i>	121
Andrew M. HARMON Aspects of Moral Perfection in Ambrose's <i>De officiis</i>	133
Han-luen KANTZER KOMLINE From Building Blocks to Blueprints: Augustine's Reception of Ambrose's <i>Commentary on Luke</i>	153

Hedwig SCHMALZGRUBER Biblical Epic as Scriptural Exegesis – Reception of Ambrose in the So-called <i>Heptateuch</i> Poet	167
Carmen Angela CVETKOVIĆ Episcopal Literary Networks in the Late Antique West: Niceta of Remesiana and Ambrose of Milan.....	177
Stephen COOPER Ambrose in Reformation Zürich: Heinrich Bullinger’s Use of Ambrosiaster’s Commentaries on Paul.....	185

Volume 12

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVI

AUGUSTINE ON *CONSCIENTIA*

(ed. Diana Stanciu)

Diana STANCIU Introduction	1
Allan FITZGERALD Augustine, Conscience and the Inner Teacher	3
Enrique A. EGUIARTE <i>Conscientia</i> (...) <i>itineribus</i> (...) in <i>sapientiam</i>	13
Matthew W. KNOTTS With Apologies to Jiminy Cricket. The Early Augustine’s ‘Sapiential’ Account of <i>conscientia</i>	21
Anne-Isabelle BOUTON-TOUBOLIC <i>Conscientiae requies</i> (<i>Conf. X</i> , 30, 41): Sleep, Consciousness and Conscience in Augustine.....	37
Andrea BIZZOZERO <i>Beati mundi cordes</i> (<i>Mt</i> 5:8). <i>Coscienza</i> , <i>Conoscenza</i> e <i>Uisio Dei</i> in Agostino prima del 411.....	55
Josef LÖSSL How ‘Bad’ is Augustine’s ‘Bad Conscience’ (<i>mala conscientia</i>)? ...	89

Marianne DJUTH	
The Polemics of Moral Conscience in Augustine	97
Diana STANCIU	
<i>Conscientia, capax Dei</i> and Salvation in Augustine: What Would Augustine Say on the ‘Explanatory Gap’?	111
Jeremy W. BERGSTROM	
Augustine on the Judgment of Conscience and the Glory of Man....	119
Mark CLAVIER	
A Persuasive God: Conscience and the Rhetoric of Delight in Augustine’s Interpretation of <i>Romans</i> 7	135
John COMSTOCK	
The Augustinian <i>Conscientia</i> : A New Approach.....	141
Jérôme LAGOUANÈRE	
Augustin, lecteur de Sénèque: le cas de la <i>bona uoluntas</i>	153
Gábor KENDEFFY	
Will and Moral Responsibility in Augustine’s Works on Lying	163

Volume 13

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVII

AUGUSTINE IN LATE MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

(ed. John T. Slotemaker and Jeffrey C. Witt)

David C. FINK & John T. SLOTEMAKER	
<i>In Memoriam</i> David C. Steinmetz	1
John T. SLOTEMAKER & Jeffrey C. WITT	
Introduction	3
John T. SLOTEMAKER	
The Reception of Augustine’s Thought in the Later Middle Ages: A Historiographical Introduction	5
Peter EARDLEY	
Augustinian Science or Aristotelian Rhetoric? The Nature of Theol- ogy According to Giles of Rome	23

Bernd GOEHRING	
Giles of Rome on Human Cognition: Aristotelian and Augustinian Principles	35
Christopher M. WOJTULEWICZ	
The Reception of Augustine in the Theology of Alexander de Sancto Elpidio	47
Graham MCALEER	
1277 and the Sensations of the Damned: Peter John Olivi and the Augustinian Origins of Early Modern Angelism	59
Florian WÖLLER	
The Bible as Argument: Augustine in the Literal Exegesis of Peter Auriol (c. 1280-1322) and Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1349).....	67
Severin V. KITANOV	
Richard FitzRalph on Whether Cognition and Volition are Really the Same: Solving an Augustinian Puzzle.....	81
Simon NOLAN	
Augustine in Richard FitzRalph (c. 1300-1360)	95
Jack HARDING BELL	
Loving Justice: Cicero, Augustine, and the Nature of Politics in Robert Holcot's <i>Wisdom of Solomon</i> Commentary.....	109
John T. SLOTEMAKER	
Peter Lombard's Inheritance: The Use of Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i> in Gregory of Rimini's Discussion of the Divine Processions	123
John W. PECK	
Gregory of Rimini's Augustinian Defense of a World <i>ab aeterno</i>	135
Jeffrey C. WITT	
Tradition, Authority, and the Grounds for Belief in Late Fourteenth-Century Theology	147
Pekka KÄRKKÄINEN	
Augustinian, Humanist or What? Martin Luther's Marginal Notes on Augustine.....	161
David C. FINK	
Bullshitting Augustine: Patristic Rhetoric and Theological Dialectic in Philipp Melanchthon's <i>Apologia</i> for the Augsburg Confession	167

Ueli ZAHND	
The Early John Calvin and Augustine: Some Reconsiderations	181

Volume 14

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXVIII

LATREIA AND IDOLATRY: AUGUSTINE AND THE QUEST FOR RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

(ed. Paul Camacho and Veronica Roberts)

Veronica ROBERTS & Paul CAMACHO	
Introduction	1
Michael T. CAMACHO	
‘Having nothing yet possessing all things’: Worship as the Sacrifice of Being not our Own	3
Erik J. VAN VERSEDAAL	
The Symbolism of Love: Use as Praise in St. Augustine’s Doctrine of Creation	21
Paul CAMACHO	
Ours and Not Ours: Private and Common Goods in Augustine’s Anthropology of Desire.....	35
Christopher M. SEILER	
<i>Non sibi arroget minister plus quam quod ut minister</i> (S. 266.3): St. Augustine’s Imperative for Ministerial Humility.....	49
Robert McFADDEN	
Becoming Friends with Oneself: Cicero in the Cassiciacum Dia- logues.....	57
Veronica ROBERTS	
Idolatry as the Source of Injustice in Augustine’s <i>De ciuitate Dei</i> ...	69
Peter BUSCH	
Augustine’s Limited Dialogue with the Philosophers in <i>De ciuitate Dei</i> 19	79
Joshua NUNZIATO	
Negotiating a Good Return? St. Augustine on the Economics of Secular Sacrifice.....	87

Volume 15

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXXXIX

THE FOUNTAIN AND THE FLOOD:
 MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR AND PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY
 (ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis)

Sotiris MITRALEXIS	
Introduction	1
Dionysios SKLIRIS	
The Ontological Implications of Maximus the Confessor's Eschatology	3
Nicholas LOUDOVIKOS	
Consubstantiality beyond Perichoresis: Personal Threeness, Intra-divine Relations, and Personal Consubstantiality in Augustine's, Thomas Aquinas' and Maximus the Confessor's Trinitarian Theologies.....	33
Torstein Theodor TOLLEFSEN	
Whole and Part in the Philosophy of St Maximus the Confessor	47
Sebastian MATEIESCU	
Counting Natures and Hypostases: St Maximus the Confessor on the Role of Number in Christology	63
David BRADSHAW	
St. Maximus on Time, Eternity, and Divine Knowledge	79
Sotiris MITRALEXIS	
A Coherent Maximian Spatiotemporality: Attempting a Close Reading of Sections Thirty-six to Thirty-nine from the Tenth <i>Ambiguum</i>	95
Vladimir CVETKOVIĆ	
The Concept of Delimitation of Creatures in Maximus the Confessor	117
Demetrios HARPER	
The Ontological Ethics of St. Maximus the Confessor and the Concept of Shame.....	129
Smilen MARKOV	
Maximus' Concept of Human Will through the Interpretation of Johannes Damascenus and Photius of Constantinople	143

John PANTELEIMON MANOUSSAKIS St. Augustine and St. Maximus the Confessor between the Beginning and the End.....	155
---	-----

Volume 16

STUDIA PATRISTICA XC

CHRIST AS ONTOLOGICAL PARADIGM IN EARLY BYZANTINE THOUGHT

(ed. Marcin Podbielski)

Anna ZHYRKOVA Introduction	1
Sergey TROSTYANSKIY The Compresence of Opposites in Christ in St. Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Oikonomia</i>	3
Anna ZHYRKOVA From Christ to Human Individual: Christ as Ontological Paradigm in Early Byzantine Thought	25
Grzegorz KOTŁOWSKI A Philological Contribution to the Question of Dating Leontius of Jerusalem	49
Marcin PODBIELSKI A Picture in Need of a Theory: Hypostasis in Maximus the Confes- sor's <i>Ambigua ad Thomam</i>	57

Volume 17

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCI

BIBLICA

Camille LEPEIGNEUX L'éphod de David dansant devant l'arche (2S. 6:14): problèmes tex- tuels et exégèse patristique.....	3
Stephen WAERS <i>Isaiah</i> 44-5 and Competing Conceptions of Monotheism in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries	11

Simon C. MIMOUNI
 Jésus de Nazareth et sa famille ont-ils appartenus à la tribu des prêtres ?
 Quelques remarques et réflexions pour une recherche nouvelle..... 19

Joseph VERHEYDEN
 The So-Called *Catena in Marcum* of Victor of Antioch: Throwing
 Light on *Mark* with a Not-So-Little Help from *Matthew* and *Luke* .. 47

Miriam DECOCK
 The Good Shepherd of *John* 10: A Case Study of New Testament
 Exegesis in the Schools of Alexandria and Antioch 63

H.A.G. HOUGHTON
 The Layout of Early Latin Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles and
 their Oldest Manuscripts 71

David M. REIS
 Mapping Exilic Imaginaries: Greco-Roman Discourses of Displace-
 ment and the Book of *Revelation* 113

Stephan WITETSCHEK
 Polycrates of Ephesus and the ‘Canonical John’ 127

Gregory Allen ROBBINS
 ‘Many a Gaud and a Glittering Toy’ (Sayers): Fourth-Century Gospel
 Books 135

PHILOSOPHICA, THEOLOGICA, ETHICA

Frances YOUNG
 Riddles and Puzzles: God’s Indirect Word in Patristic Hermeneutics. 149

Methody ZINKOVSKIY
 Hypostatic Characteristics of Notions of Thought, Knowledge and
 Cognition in the Greek Patristic Thought..... 157

Elena Ene D-VASILESCU
 Early Christianity about the Notions of Time and the Redemption of
 the Soul..... 167

Jack BATES
 Theosis *Kata To Ephikton*: The History of a Pious Hedge-Phrase ... 183

James K. LEE	
The Church and the Holy Spirit: Ecclesiology and Pneumatology in Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine.....	189
Maria LISSEK	
In Search of the Roots. Reference to Patristic Christology in Gilbert Crispin's Disputation with a Jew	207
Pak-Wah LAI	
Comparing Patristic and Chinese Medical Anthropologies: Insights for Chinese Contextual Theology	213

HAGIOGRAPHICA

Katherine MILCO	
<i>Ad Proendam Virtutis Memoriam</i> : Encomiastic Prefaces in Tacitus' <i>Agricola</i> and Latin Christian Hagiography.....	227
Megan DEVORE	
<i>Catechumeni</i> , Not 'New Converts': Revisiting the <i>Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis</i>	237
Christoph BIRKNER	
Hagiography and Autobiography in Cyril of Scythopolis.....	249
Flavia RUANI	
Preliminary Notes on Edifying Stories in Syriac Hagiographical Collections.....	257
Nathan D. HOWARD	
Sacred Spectacle in the Biographies of Gorgonia and Macrina.....	267
Marta SZADA	
The Life of Balthild and the Rise of Aristocratic Sanctity	275
Robert WIŚNIEWSKI	
Eastern, Western and Local Habits in the Early Cult of Relics.....	283

ASCETICA

Maria Giulia GENGHINI	
'Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything' (<i>AP</i> Moses 6): How the Physical Environment Shaped the Spirituality of Early Egyptian Monasticism	299

Rodrigo ÁLVAREZ GUTIÉRREZ	
El concepto de <i>xénitéia</i> en la hagiografía Monástica primitiva.....	313
Sean MOBERG	
Examination of Conscience in the <i>Apophthegmata Patrum</i>	325
Daniel LEMENI	
The Fascination of the Desert: Aspects of Spiritual Guidance in the <i>Apophthegmata Patrum</i>	333
Janet TIMBIE	
‘Pay for Our Sins’: A Shared Theme in the Pachomian Koinonia and the White Monastery Federation.....	347
Paula TUTTY	
The Political and Philanthropic Role of Monastic Figures and Mon- asteries as Revealed in Fourth-Century Coptic and Greek Corres- pondence.....	353
Marianne SÁGHY	
Monica, the Ascetic.....	363
Gáspár PARLAGI	
The Letter <i>Ad filios Dei</i> of Saint Macarius the Egyptian – Questions and Hypotheses.....	377
Becky LITTLECHILDS	
Notes on Ascetic ‘Regression’ in Asterius’ <i>Liber ad Renatum Mona-</i> <i>chum</i>	385
Laura SOURELI	
The ‘Prayer of the Heart’ in the <i>Philokalia</i> : Questions and Caveats	391
Brouria BITTON-ASHKELONY	
Monastic Hybridity and Anti-Exegetical Discourse: From Philoxenus of Mabbug to Dadišo Qatraya	417

Volume 18

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCII

LITURGICA AND TRACTATUS SYMBOLI

Liuwe H. WESTRA	
Creating a Theological Difference: The Myth of Two Grammatical Constructions with Latin <i>Credo</i>	3

Tarmo TOOM	
<i>Tractatus symboli: A Brief Pre-Baptismal Explanation of the Creed..</i>	15
Joseph G. MUELLER	
The Trinitarian Doctrine of the <i>Apostolic Constitutions</i>	25
Gregory TUCKER	
‘O Day of Resurrection!’: The Paschal Mystery in Hymns.....	41
Maria MUNKHOLT CHRISTENSEN	
Witnessed by Angels: The Role of Angels in Relation to Prayer in Four Ante-Nicene Euchological Treatises	49
Barry M. CRAIG	
He Lifted to You? Lost and Gained in Translation	57
Anna Adams PETRIN	
Reconsidering the ‘Egyptian Connection’ in the Anaphora of Fourth- Century Jerusalem	65
Anthony GELSTON	
The Post-Sanctus in the East Syrian Anaphoras	77
Graham FIELD	
Breaking Boundaries: The Cosmic Dimension of Worship	83
George A. BEVAN	
The Sequence of the First Four Sessions of the Council of Chalcedon	91

ORIENTALIA

Todd E. FRENCH	
Just Deserts: Origen’s Lingering Influence on Divine Justice in the Hagiographies of John of Ephesus.....	105
Benedict M. GUEVIN	
Dialogue between Death and the Devil in Saint Ephrem the Syrian and Saint Romanos the Melodist	113
Paul M. PASQUESI	
<i>Qnoma</i> in Narsai: Anticipating <i>Energeia</i>	119

David G.K. TAYLOR Rufinus the Silver Merchant's Miaphysite Refutation of Leontius of Byzantium's <i>Epaporemata</i> (CPG 6814): A Rediscovered Syriac Text.....	127
Valentina DUCA Pride in the Thought of Isaac of Nineveh	137
Valentin VESA The Divine Vision in Isaac of Niniveh and the East Syriac Christology	149
Theresia HAINTHALER <i>Colossians</i> 1:15 in the Christological Reflection of East Syrian Authors	165
Michael PENN, Nicholas R. HOWE & Kaylynn CRAWFORD Automated Syriac Script Charts.....	175
Stephen J. DAVIS Cataloguing the Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts in the Monastery of the Syrians: A Preliminary Report	179
Damien LABADIE A Newly Attributed Coptic <i>Encomium</i> on Saint Stephen (BHO 1093)	187
Anahit AVAGYAN Die armenische Übersetzung der pseudo-athanasianischen Homilie <i>De passione et cruce domini</i> (CPG 2247).....	195

CRITICA ET PHILOLOGICA

B.N. WOLFE The Gothic Palimpsest of Bologna	205
Meredith DANEZAN Proverbe (<i>paroimia</i>) et <i>cursus</i> spirituel : l'apport de l'Épitomé de la Chaîne de Procope.....	209
Aaron PELTTARI <i>Lector inueniet</i> : A Commonplace of Late Antiquity	215
Peter VAN NUFFELEN The Poetics of Christian History in Late Antiquity	227

Yuliya MINETS	
Languages of Christianity in Late Antiquity: Between Universalism and Cultural Superiority	247
Peter F. SCHADLER	
Reading the Self by Reading the Other: A Hermeneutical Key to the Reading of Sacred Texts in Late Antiquity and Byzantium	261

HISTORICA

Peter GEMEINHARDT	
Teaching Religion in Late Antiquity: Divine and Human Agency ...	271
David WOODS	
Constantine, Aurelian, and Aphaca.....	279
Luise Marion FRENKEL	
Procedural Similarities between Fourth- and Fifth-Century Christian Synods and the Roman Senates: Myth, Politics or Cultural Identity?	293
Maria KONSTANTINIDOU	
Travelling and Trading in the Greek Fathers: Faraway Lands, Peoples and Products	303
Theodore DE BRUYN	
Historians, Bishops, Amulets, Scribes, and Rites: Interpreting a Chris- tian Practice	317
Catherine C. TAYLOR	
Educated Susanna: Female <i>Orans</i> , Sarcophagi, and the Typology of Woman Wisdom in Late Antique Art and Iconography	339
David L. RIGGS	
Contesting the Legacy and Patronage of Saint Cyprian in Vandal Carthage.....	357
Jordina SALES-CARBONELL	
The Fathers of the Church and their Role in Promoting Christian Constructions in <i>Hispania</i>	371
Bethany V. WILLIAMS	
The Significance of the Senses: An Exploration into the Multi- Sensory Experience of Faith for the Lay Population of Christianity during the Fourth and Fifth Centuries C.E.....	381

Jacob A. LATHAM
Adventus, Occursus, and the Christianization of Rome 397

Teodor TĀBUŞ
 The Orthodoxy of Emperor Justinian’s Christian Faith as a Matter
 of Roman Law (*CJ I,1,5-8*)..... 411

Nicholas MATAYA
 Charity Before Division: The Strange Case of Severinus of Noricum
 and the Pseudo-Evangelisation of the Rugians..... 423

Christian HORNING
 Die Konstruktion christlicher Identität. Funktion und Bedeutung der
 Apostasie im antiken Christentum (4.-6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.) 431

Ronald A.N. KYDD
 Growing Evidence of Christianity’s Establishment in China in the
 Late-Patristic Era..... 441

Luis SALÉS
 ‘Aristotelian’ as a *Lingua Franca*: Rationality in Christian Self-
 Representation under the ‘Abbasids’ 453

Volume 19

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCIII

THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

Joshua KINLAW
 Exegesis and *Homonoia* in *First Clement* 3

Janelle PETERS
 The Phoenix in *1Clement*..... 17

Jonathan E. SOYARS
 Clement of Rome’s Reconstruction of Job’s Character for Corinth:
 A Contextual Reading of the Composite Quotation of LXX *Job* 1-2
 in *1Clem.* 17.3 27

Ingo SCHAAF
 The Earliest Sibylline Attestations in the Patristic Reception: Eru-
 dition and Religion in the 2nd Century AD 35

J. Christopher EDWARDS	
Identifying the Lord in the <i>Epistle of Barnabas</i>	51
Donna RIZK	
The Apology of Aristides: the Armenian Version.....	61
Paul R. GILLIAM III	
Ignatius of Antioch: The Road to Chalcedon?	69
Alexander B. MILLER	
Polemic and Credal Refinement in Ignatius of Antioch	81
Shaily SHASHIKANT PATEL	
The ‘Starhymn’ of Ignatius’ <i>Epistle to the Ephesians</i> : Re-Appropriation as Polemic	93
Paul HARTOG	
The Good News in Old Texts? The ‘Gospel’ and the ‘Archives’ in <i>Ign.Phld.</i> 8.2	105
Stuart R. THOMSON	
The Philosopher’s Journey: Philosophical and Christian Conversions in the Second Century	123
Andrew HAYES	
The Significance of Samaritanism for Justin Martyr	141
Micah M. MILLER	
What’s in a Name?: Titles of Christ in Justin Martyr.....	155
M ADRYAEL TONG	
Reading Gender in Justin Martyr: New Insights from Old Apologies	165
Pavel DUDZIK	
Tatian the Assyrian and Greek Rhetoric: Homer’s Heroes Agamemnon, Nestor and Thersites in Tatian’s <i>Oratio ad Graecos</i>	179
Stuart E. PARSONS	
Trading Places: Faithful Job and Doubtful Autolycus in Theophilus’ Apology	191
László PERENDY	
Theophilus’ Silence about Aristotle. A Clandestine Approval of his View on the Mortality of the Soul?.....	199

Roland M. SOKOLOWSKI 'Zealous for the Covenant of Christ': An Inquiry into the Lost Career of Irenaeus of Lyons	213
Eric COVINGTON Irenaeus, <i>Ephesians</i> , and Union with the Spirit: Examining the Scriptural Basis of Unity with the Spirit in <i>AH V 20.2</i>	219
Sverre Elgvin LIED Irenaeus of Lyons and the Eucharistic Altar in Heaven.....	229
John KAUFMAN The Kingdom of the Son in the Theology of Irenaeus	237
Thomas D. MCGLOTHLIN Why Are All These Damned People Rising? Paul and the Generality of the Resurrection in Irenaeus and Tertullian	243
Scott D. MORINGIELLO Allegory and Typology in Irenaeus of Lyon.....	255
Francesca MINONNE Aulus Gellius and Irenaeus of Lyons in the Cultural Context of the Second Century AD	265
Eugen MAFTEI Irénée de Lyon et Athanase d'Alexandrie: ressemblances et diffé- rences entre leurs sotériologies	275
István M. BUGÁR Melito and the Body.....	303

APOCRYPHA AND GNOSTICA

Pamela MULLINS REAVES <i>Gnosis</i> in Alexandria: A Study in Ancient Christian Interpretation and Intra-Group Dynamics.....	315
Csaba ÖTVÖS Creation and Epiphany? Theological Symbolism in the Creation Narrative of <i>On the Origin of the World</i> (NHC II 5).....	325

Hugo LUNDHAUG	
The <i>Dialogue of the Savior</i> (NHC III,5) as a Monastic Text	335
Kristine Toft ROSLAND	
Fatherhood and the Lack thereof in the <i>Apocryphon of John</i>	347
Jeremy W. BARRIER	
Abraham's Seed: Tracing <i>Pneuma</i> as a Material Substance from Paul's Writings to the <i>Apocryphon of John</i>	357

Volume 20

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCIV

FROM TERTULLIAN TO TYCONIUS

Anni Maria LAATO	
Tertullian, <i>Adversus Iudaeos</i> Literature, and the 'Killing of the Prophets'-Argument	1
Ian L.S. BALFOUR	
Tertullian and Roman Law – What Do We (Not) Know?	11
Benjamin D. HAUPT	
Tertullian's Text of <i>Galatians</i>	23
Stéphanie E. BINDER	
Tertullien face à la romanisation de l'Afrique du Nord : une discus- sion de quelques aspects	29
Christopher T. BOUNDS	
The Doctrine of Christian Perfection in Tertullian	45
Kathryn THOSTENSON	
Serving Two Masters: Tertullian on Marital and Christian Duties ...	55
Edwina MURPHY	
Widows, Welfare and the Wayward: 1 <i>Timothy</i> 5 in Cyprian's <i>Ad Quirinum</i>	67
Charles BOBERTZ	
Almsgiving as Patronage: The Role of the Patroness in Third Cen- tury North African Christianity.....	75

Daniel BECERRA	
Origen, the Stoics, and the Rhetoric of Recitation: Spiritual Exercise and the <i>Exhortation to Martyrdom</i>	85
Antti LAATO	
A Cold Case Reopened: A Jewish Source on Christianity Used by Celsus and the <i>Toledot Yeshu</i> Literature – From Counter-Exegetical Arguments to Full-Blown Counter-Story	99
Eric SCHERBENSKE	
Origen, Manuscript Variation, and a Lacking Gospel Harmony	111
Jennifer OTTO	
Origen’s Criticism of Philo of Alexandria	121
Riemer ROUKEMA	
The Retrieval of Origen’s <i>Commentary on Micah</i>	131
Giovanni HERMANIN DE REICHENFELD	
Resurrection and Prophecy: The Spirit in Origen’s Exegesis of Lazarus and Caiaphas in <i>John 11</i>	143
Elizabeth Ann DIVELY LAURO	
The Meaning and Significance of Scripture’s Sacramental Nature within Origen’s Thought	153
David Neal GREENWOOD	
Celsus, Origen, and the Eucharist	187
Vito LIMONE	
Origen on the <i>Song of Songs</i> . A Reassessment and Proposal of Dating of his Writings on the <i>Song</i>	195
Allan E. JOHNSON	
The Causes of Things: Origen’s Treatises <i>On Prayer</i> and <i>On First Principles</i> and His Exegetical Method	205
Brian BARRETT	
‘Of His Fullness We Have All Received’: Origen on Scripture’s Unity	211
Mark Randall JAMES	
Anatomist of the Prophetic Words: Origen on Scientific and Herme- neutic Method	219

Joseph LENOW	
Patience and Judgment in the Christology of Cyprian of Carthage...	233
Mattias GASSMAN	
The Conversion of Cyprian's Rhetoric? Towards a New Reading of <i>Ad Donatum</i>	247
Laetitia CICCOLINI	
Le texte de 1 <i>Cor.</i> 7:34 chez Cyprien de Carthage.....	259
Dawn L'VALLE	
Feasting at the End: The Eschatological <i>Symposia</i> of Methodius of Olympus and Julian the Apostate	269
Marie-Noëlle VIGNAL	
Méthode d'Olympe, lecteur et exégète de Saint Paul	285
Johannes BREUER	
The Rhetoric of Persuasion as Hermeneutical Key to Arnobius' <i>Adversus nationes</i>	295

Volume 21

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCV

THE FOURTH CENTURY

Elizabeth DEPALMA DIGESER	
Pseudo-Justin's <i>Cohortatio ad Graecos</i> and the Great Persecution ..	3
Atsuko GOTOH	
The 'Conversion' of Constantine the Great: His Religious Legislation in the Theodosian Code.....	13
Vladimir LATINOVIC	
Arius Conservativus? The Question of Arius' Theological Belonging	27
Sébastien MORLET	
Eusèbe le grammairien. Note sur les <i>Questions évangéliques</i> (À Mari- nos, 2) et une scholie sur Pindare	43
Thomas O'LOUGHLIN	
Some Hermeneutical Assumptions Latent within the Gospel Appa- ratus of Eusebius of Caesarea	51

Michael Bland SIMMONS	
Exegesis and Hermeneutics in Eusebius of Caesarea's <i>Theophany</i> (Book IV): The Contemporary Fulfillment of Jesus' Prophecies.....	65
Sophie CARTWRIGHT	
Should we Grieve and Be Afraid? Christ's Passions versus the Pas- sions of the Soul in Athanasius of Alexandria	77
William G. RUSCH	
Athanasius of Alexandria and ' <i>Sola Scriptura</i> '	87
Lois M. FARAG	
<i>Organon</i> in Athanasius' <i>De incarnatione</i> : A Case of Textual Inter- polation	93
Donna R. HAWK-REINHARD	
The Role of the Holy Spirit in Cyril of Jerusalem's Sacramental Theology.....	107
Olga LORGEUX	
Choice and Will in the Catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem.....	119
Florian ZACHER	
Marius Victorinus, <i>Opus ad Candidum</i> . An Analysis of its Rhetorical Structure.....	127

CAPPADOCIAN WRITERS

Claudio MORESCHINI	
Is it Possible to Speak of 'Cappadocian Theology' as a System?.....	139
Nienke M. VOS	
'Teach us to pray': Self-Understanding in Macrina's Final Prayer...	165
Adam RASMUSSEN	
Defending Moses. Understanding Basil's Apparent Rejection of Allegory in the <i>Hexaemeron</i>	175
Marco QUIRCIO	
A Philological Note to Basil of Caesarea's Second Homily on the <i>Hexaemeron</i>	183

Mattia C. CHIRIATTI ἀγών/θέα-θέαμα and στάδιον/θέατρον: A Reviewed ἔκφρασις of the Spectacle in Basil's <i>In Gordium martyrem</i>	189
Arnaud PERROT Une source littéraire de l'Ep. 46 de Basile de Césarée : le traité <i>De la véritable intégrité dans la virginité</i>	201
Aude BUSINE Basil of Caesarea and the <i>Praise of the City</i>	209
Benoît GAIN Le voyage de Basile de Césarée en Orient : hypothèses sur le silence des sources externes	217
Seumas MACDONALD Contested Ground: Basil's Use of Scripture in <i>Against Eunomius 2</i>	225
Nikolai LIPATOV-CHICHERIN An Unpublished Funerary Speech (CPG 2936) and the Question of Succession to St. Basil the Great	237
Kimberly F. BAKER Basil and Augustine: Preaching on Care for the Poor	251
Oliver LANGWORTHY Sojourning and the Sojourner in Gregory of Nazianzus	261
Alexander D. PERKINS The Grave Politics of Gregory Nazianzen's Eulogy for Gorgonia....	269
Gabrielle THOMAS Divine, Yet Vulnerable: The Paradoxical Existence of Gregory Nazianzen's <i>Imago Dei</i>	281
Bradley K. STORIN Reconsidering Gregory of Nazianzus' Letter Collection	291
Andrew RADDE-GALLWITZ Gregory on Gregory: <i>Catechetical Oration 38</i>	303
Andrew J. SUMMERSON Gregory Nazianzus' Mixture Language in Maximus the Confessor's <i>Ambigua</i> : What the Confessor Learned from the Theologian	315

Ryan CLEVENGER	
Ἐκφρασις and Epistemology in Gregory of Nazianzus.....	321
Karen CARDUCCI	
Implicit Stipulations in the <i>Testamentum</i> of Gregory of Nazianzos <i>vis-à-vis</i> the <i>Testamenta</i> of Remigius of Rheims, Caesarius of Arles, and Aurelianus of Ravenna.....	331
Michael J. PETRIN	
Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa on τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον..	343
Andra JUGĂNARU	
The Function of Miracles in Gregory of Nyssa's Hagiographical Works.....	355
Makrina FINLAY	
Gregory of Nyssa's Framework for the Resurrected Life in <i>The Life of St. Macrina</i>	367
Marta PRZYSZYCHOWSKA	
Three States after Death according to Gregory of Nyssa.....	377
Ann CONWAY-JONES	
An Ambiguous Type: The Figure of Aaron Interpreted by Gregory of Nyssa and Ephrem the Syrian	389
Robin ORTON	
The Place of the Eucharist in Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriology	399
Anne KARAHAN	
Cyclic Shapes and Divine Activity. A Cappadocian Inquiry into Byzantine Aesthetics	405
Hilary Anne-Marie MOONEY	
Eschatological Themes in the Writings of Gregory of Nyssa and John Scottus Eriugena	421
Benjamin EKMAN	
'Natural Contemplation' in Evagrius Ponticus' <i>Scholia on Proverbs</i>	431
Margaret GUISE	
The Golden and Saving Chain and its (De)construction: Soterio- logical Conversations between Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and the Cappadocian Fathers	441

Volume 22

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVI

THE SECOND HALF OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

Kelley SPOERL Epiphanius on Jesus' Digestion	3
Young Richard KIM Nicaea is Not Enough: The Second Creed of Epiphanius' <i>Ancoratus</i>	11
John VOELKER Marius Victorinus' Use of a Gnostic Commentary	21
Tomasz STEPIEŃ Action of Will and Generation of the Son in Extant Works of Euno- mius	29
Alberto J. QUIROGA PUERTAS 'In the Gardens of Adonis'. Religious Disputations in Julian's <i>Caesars</i>	37
Ariane MAGNY Porphyry and Julian on Christians	47
Jeannette KREIJKES The Impact of Theological Concepts on Calvin's Reception of Chrysostom's Exegesis of <i>Galatians</i> 4:21-6	57
Hellen DAYTON John Chrysostom on <i>katanuxis</i> as the Source of Spiritual Healing ...	65
Michaela DURST The <i>Epistle to the Hebrews</i> in the 7 th <i>Oration</i> of John Chrysostom's <i>Orationes Adversus Judaeos</i>	71
Paschalis GKORTSILAS The Lives of Others: Pagan and Christian Role Models in John Chry- sostom's Thought	83
Malouine DE DIEULEVEULT L'exégèse de la faute de David (2 <i>Règnes</i> 11-12) : Jean Chrysostome et Théodoret de Cyr.....	95

Matteo CARUSO	
Hagiographic Style of the <i>Vita Spyridonis</i> between Rhetoric and Exegetical Tradition: Analogies between John Chrysostom's Homilies and the Work of Theodore of Paphos.....	103
Paul C. BOLES	
Method and Meaning in Chrysostom's <i>Homily 7</i> and Origen's <i>Homily 1</i> on <i>Genesis</i>	111
Susan B. GRIFFITH	
Apostolic Authority and the 'Incident at Antioch': Chrysostom on <i>Gal. 2:11-4</i>	117
James D. COOK	
Therapeutic Preaching: The Use of Medical Imagery in the Sermons of John Chrysostom.....	127
Demetrios BATHRELLOS	
<i>Sola gratia? Sola fide?</i> Law, Grace, Faith, and Works in John Chrysostom's <i>Commentary on Romans</i>	133
Marie-Eve GEIGER	
Les homélies de Jean Chrysostome <i>In principium Actorum</i> : le titre pris comme principe exégétique	147
Pierre AUGUSTIN	
Quelques sources Parisiennes du <i>Chrysostome</i> de Sir Henry Savile ..	157
Thomas BRAUCH	
The Emperor Theodosius I and the Nicene Faith: A Brief History ..	175
Sergey KIM	
Severian of Gabala as a Witness to Life at the Imperial Court in Fifth-Century Constantinople.....	189

FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY ONWARDS
(GREEK WRITERS)

Austin Dominic LITKE	
The ' <i>Organon</i> Concept' in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria ..	207
Barbara VILLANI	
Some Remarks on the Textual Tradition and the Literary Genre of Cyril of Alexandria's <i>De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate</i> ...	215

Sandra LEUENBERGER-WENGER	
All Cyrillians? Cyril of Alexandria as Norm of Orthodoxy at the Council of Chalcedon.....	225
Hans VAN LOON	
Virtue in Cyril of Alexandria's <i>Festal Letters</i>	237
George KALANTZIS	
Passibility, Tentability, and the Divine Οὐσία in the Debate between Cyril and Nestorius	249
James E. GOEHRING	
'Talking Back' in Pachomian Hagiography: Theodore's Catechesis and the <i>Letter of Ammon</i>	257
James F. WELLINGTON	
Let God Arise: The Divine Warrior <i>Motif</i> in Theodoret of Cyrrhus' Commentary on <i>Psalm 67</i>	265
Agnès LORRAIN	
Exégèse et argumentation scripturaire chez Théodoret de Cyr: l' <i>In Romanos</i> , écho des controverses trinitaires et christologiques des IV ^e et V ^e siècles.....	273
Kathryn KLEINKOPF	
A Landscape of Bodies: Exploring the Role of Ascetics in Theodoret's <i>Historia Religiosa</i>	283
Maya GOLDBERG	
New Syriac Edition and Translation of Theodore of Mopsuestia's Reconstructed <i>Commentary on Paul's Minor Epistles</i> : Fragments Collected from MS (<i>olim</i>) <i>Diyarbakir 22</i>	293
Georgiana HUIAN	
The Spiritual Experience in Diadochus of Photike	301
Eirini A. ARTEMI	
The Comparison of the Triadological Teaching of Isidore of Pelusium with Cyril of Alexandria's Teaching	309
Madalina TOCA	
Isidore of Pelusium's Letters to Didymus the Blind.....	325

Michael MUTHREICH	
Ein äthiopisches Fragment der dem Dionysius Areopagita zuge-	
schriebenen <i>Narratio de vita sua</i>	333
István PERCZEL	
Theodoret of Cyrrhus: The Main Source of Pseudo-Dionysius’	
Christology?	351
Panagiotis G. PAVLOS	
Aptitude (Ἐπιτηδειότης) and the Foundations of Participation in the	
Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite	377
Joost VAN ROSSUM	
The Relationship between Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus	
the Confessor: Revisiting the Problem.....	397
Dimitrios A. VASILAKIS	
Dionysius <i>versus</i> Proclus on Undeclared Providence and its Byzantine	
Echoes in Nicholas of Methone	407
José María NIEVA	
The Mystical Sense of the Aesthetic Experience in Dionysius the	
Areopagite	419
Ernesto Sergio MAINOLDI	
Why Dionysius the Areopagite? The Invention of the First Father ..	425
Alexandru PRELIPCEAN	
The Influence of Romanos the Melodist on the <i>Great Canon</i> of Saint	
Andrew of Crete: Some Remarks about Christological Typologies..	441
Alexis TORRANCE	
‘Assuming our nature corrupted by sin’: Revisiting Theodore the	
Studite on the Humanity of Christ.....	451
Scott ABLES	
The Rhetoric of Persuasion in the Polemic of John of Damascus.....	457
James A. FRANCIS	
Ancient Seeing/Christian Seeing: The Old and the New in John of	
Damascus.....	469
Zachary KEITH	
The Problem of ἐνυπόστατον in John Damascene: Why Is Jesus Not	
a Human Person?	477

Nicholas BAMFORD	
Being, Christian Gnosis, and Deified Becoming in the ‘Theoretikon’ .	485
Alexandros CHOULIARAS	
The <i>Imago Trinitatis</i> in St Symeon the New Theologian and Niketas Stethatos: Is this the Basic Source of St Gregory Palamas’ own Approach?	493
GREGORY PALAMAS’ <i>EPISTULA</i> III	
(ed. Katharina Heyden)	
Katharina HEYDEN	
Introduction: The Two Versions of Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos	507
Katharina HEYDEN	
The Two <i>Epistulae</i> III of Palamas to Akindynos: The Small but Important Difference between Authenticity and Originality.....	511
Theodoros ALEXOPOULOS	
The Problem of the Distinction between Essence and Energies in the Hesychast Controversy. Saint Gregory Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III: The Version Published by P. Chrestou in Light of Palamas’ Other Works on the Divine Energies.....	521
Renate BURRI	
The Textual Transmission of Palamas’ <i>Epistula</i> III to Akindynos: The Case of Monac. gr. 223	535
Dimitrios MOSCHOS	
Reasons of Being versus Uncreated Energies – Neoplatonism and Mathematics as Means of Participating in God according to Nicephorus Gregoras	547

Volume 23

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVII

FROM THE FOURTH CENTURY ONWARDS (LATIN WRITERS)

Anthony P. COLEMAN	
Comparing Institutes: Lactantius’ <i>Divinae Institutiones</i> in Calvin’s <i>Institutio christianae religionis</i> 1.1-5.....	3

Jessica VAN 'T WESTEINDE Jerome and the <i>Christianus Perfectus</i> , a Transformed Roman Noble Man?	17
Silvia GEORGIEVA Domina, Filia, Conserva, Germana: The Identity of the Correspondent in Saint Jerome's Letters.....	37
Roberta FRANCHI <i>Muliercularum socii</i> (Hier., <i>Ep.</i> 133,4): donne ed eresia nell' <i>Epistolario</i> di Gerolamo	51
Richard SEAGRAVES Prudentius: <i>Contra orationem Symmachi</i> , Bk. I	63
Klazina STAAT 'Let him thus be a Hippolytus' (<i>Perist.</i> 11.87): Horror and Rhetoric in Prudentius' <i>Peristephanon</i> 11.....	79
Diane Shane FRUCHTMAN Witness and Imitation in the Writings of Paulinus of Nola.....	87
Lorenzo SCIAJNO Salvation behind the Web (Paul. Nol., <i>Carm.</i> XVI 93-148): Connections and Echoes of a Fairy-tale Theme in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages between West and East	97
Ewa DUSIK-KRUPA Politician, Theologian, Tutor. Luciferi Calaritanis' Use of Holy Scripture.....	103
Vincenzo MESSANA Massimino ariano e la Sicilia: il dibattito storiografico negli ultimi decenni su una <i>vexata quaestio</i>	115
Salvatore COSTANZA Il variegato panorama di accezioni dei termini <i>Romanus</i> e <i>barbarus</i> , <i>Christianus</i> e <i>paganus</i> negli scritti di Salviano.....	129
Matthew J. PEREIRA The Intertextual Tradition of Prosper's <i>De vocatione omnium gentium</i>	143

Raúl VILLEGAS MARÍN	
Abjuring Manichaeism in Ostrogothic Rome and Provence: The <i>Commonitorium quomodo sit agendum cum Manichaeis</i> and the <i>Prosperi anathematismi</i>	159
Mantè LENKAITYTĖ OSTERMANN	
John Cassian Read by Eucherius of Lyon: Affinities and Diver- gences	169
Daniel G. OPPERWALL	
Obedience and Communal Authority in John Cassian.....	183
Gerben F. WARTENA	
Epic Emotions: Narratorial Involvement in Sedulius' <i>Carmen</i> <i>Paschale</i>	193
Tim DENECKER	
Evaluations of Multilingual Competence in Cassiodorus' <i>Variae</i> and <i>Institutiones</i>	203
Hector SCERRI	
On Menstruation, Marital Intercourse and 'Wet Dreams' in a Letter by Gregory the Great.....	211
Jerzy SZAFRANOWSKI	
To See with Body and to See with Mind: Corporeal and Spiritual Cognition in the 'Dialogues' of Gregory the Great.....	219
Pere MAYMÓ I CAPDEVILA	
Chants, Icons, and Relics in the Evangelization Doctrine of Gregory the Great: The Case of Kent.....	225
Stephen BLACKWOOD	
Scriptural Allusions and the Wholeness of Wisdom in Boethius' <i>Consolation of Philosophy</i>	237
Juan Antonio JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ	
A Brief Catalogue of Superstitions in Chapter 16 of Martin of Bra- ga's <i>De correctione rusticorum</i>	245
Alberto FERREIRO	
' <i>Sufficit septem diebus</i> ': Seven Days Mourning the Dead in the <i>Let-</i> <i>ters</i> of St. Braulio of Zaragoza	255

Susan CREMIN	
Bede's Interpretative Practice in his Homilies on the Gospels.....	265

NACHLEBEN

Bronwen NEIL	
Reception of Late-Antique Popes in the Medieval Byzantine Tradition.....	283
Ken PARRY	
Providence, Resurrection, and Restoration in Byzantine Thought, Eighth to Ninth Centuries	295
Eiji HISAMATSU	
Spätbyzantinische Übernahme der Vorstellung von der Lichtvision des Euagrius Pontikos, erörtert am Beispiel des Gregorios Sinaites .	305
Catherine KAVANAGH	
Eriugena's Trinity: A Framework for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue.....	311
Tobias GEORGES	
The <i>Apophthegmata Patrum</i> in the Context of the Occidental Reformation of Monastic Life during the 11 th and 12 th Centuries. The Case of Peter Abelard	323
Christopher M. WOJTULEWICZ	
Augustine and the Dissolution of Polarity. Some Thoughts on Augustine Reception in the Late 13 th and Early 14 th Centuries According to Thomas Aquinas and Meister Eckhart	329
Marie-Anne VANNIER	
Origen, a Source of Meister Eckhart's Thinking	345
Lavinia CERIONI	
The Patristic Sources of Eriugena's Exegesis of the Parable of the Bridesmaids	355
Thomas F. HEYNE	
A Polemicist rather than a Patrologist: Calvin's Attitude to and Use of the Early Church Fathers	367

Volume 24

STUDIA PATRISTICA XCVIII

ST AUGUSTINE AND HIS OPPONENTS

Susanna ELM	
Sold to Sin Through <i>Origo</i> : Augustine of Hippo and the Late Roman Slave Trade.....	1
Michael J. THATE	
Augustine and the Economics of Libido	23
Willemien OTTEN	
The Fate of Augustine's <i>Genesis</i> Exegesis in Medieval Hexaemeral Commentaries: The Cases of John Scottus Eriugena and Robert Grosseteste.....	51
Midori E. HARTMAN	
Beginning Again, Becoming Animal: Augustine's Theology, Animality, and Physical Pain in <i>Genesis</i>	71
Sarah STEWART-KROEKER	
Groaning with the Psalms: The Cultivation of World-Weariness in Augustine's <i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i>	81
Marie PAULIAT	
<i>Non inueni tantam fidem in Israel</i> : la péricope de l'acte de foi du centurion (<i>Matt. 8:5-13</i>) interprétée dans les <i>Sermones in Matthaëum</i> d'Augustin d'Hippone	91
Joseph L. GRABAU	
Christology and Exegesis in Augustine of Hippo's XV th Tractate <i>In Iohannis Euangelium</i>	103
Teppeï KATO	
Greek or Hebrew? Augustine and Jerome on Biblical Translation...	109
Rebekka SCHIRNER	
Augustine's Theory of Signs – A Hermeneutical Key to his Practice of Dealing with Different Biblical Versions?	121
Erika KIDD	
The Drama of <i>De magistro</i>	133

Douglas FINN	
The Holy Spirit and the Church in the Earliest Augustine: An Analysis of the Character of Monnica in the Cassiciacum Dialogues.....	141
John Peter KENNEY	
<i>Nondum me esse</i> : Augustine's Early Ontology.....	167
Maureen A. TILLEY	
Pseudo-Cyprian and the Rebaptism Controversy in Africa	173
Heather BARKMAN	
'Stubborn and Insolent' or 'Enfeebled by Riches'? The Construction of Crispina's Identity.....	181
David E. WILHITE	
Were the 'Donatists' a National or Social Movement in Disguise? Reframing the Question	191
Naoki KAMIMURA	
The Relation of the Identity of North African Christians to the Spir- itual Training in the Letters of Augustine	221
Edward Arthur NAUMANN	
The Damnation of Baptized Infants according to Augustine.....	239
Jane MERDINGER	
Defying Donatism Subtly: Augustine's and Aurelius' Liturgical Canons at the Council of Hippo	273
Marius Anton VAN WILLIGEN	
Did Augustine Change or Broaden his Perspective on Baptism?	287
Jesse A. HOOVER	
'They Agreed with the Followers of Arius': The 'Arianization' of the Donatist Church in Late Antique Heresiology	295
Joshua M. BRUCE	
The Necessities of Judgment: Augustine's Juridical Response to the Donatists	307
Carles BUENACASA PÉREZ	
Why Suicides Instead of Martyrs? Augustine and the Persecution of Donatists	315

Colten Cheuk-Yin YAM	
Augustine's Intention in Proceeding from ' <i>mens, notitia, amor</i> ' to ' <i>memoria, intelligentia, voluntas</i> '	327
Robert PARKS	
Augustine and Proba on the Renewed Union of Man and Woman in Christ's Humanity and the Church	341
Victor YUDIN	
Augustine on Omnipotence versus Porphyry Based on Appropriation of Plato's <i>Timaeus</i> 41ab	353
Johanna RÁKOS-ZICHY	
The Resurrection Body in Augustine.....	373
Pierre DESCOTES	
Une demande d'intercession bien maladroite : la correspondance entre Augustin d'Hippone et Nectarius	385
Giulio MALAVASI	
John of Jerusalem's Profession of Faith (CPG 3621) and the Pelagian Controversy	399
Katherine CHAMBERS	
The Meaning of 'Good Works' in Augustine's Anti-Pelagian Writings	409
Kenneth M. WILSON	
Re-dating Augustine's <i>Ad Simplicianum</i> 1.2 to the Pelagian Contro- versy.....	431
Nozomu YAMADA	
Pelagius' Narrative Techniques, their Rhetorical Influences and Neg- ative Responses from Opponents Concerning the Acts of the Synod of Diospolis	451
Piotr M. PACIOREK	
The Controversy between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum: On Law and Grace	463
Timo NISULA	
'This Three-Headed Hellhound' – Evil Desire as the Root (<i>radix</i>) of All Sins in Augustine's Sermons	483

Jonathan Martin CIRAULO Sacramental Hermeneutics: Augustine's <i>De doctrina Christiana</i> in the Berengarian Controversy.....	495
Elizabeth KLEIN The Silent Word: Speech in the <i>Confessions</i>	509
Christian COPPA The Creatureliness of Time and the Goodness of Narrative in Augus- tine's <i>Confessions</i>	517
D.L. DUSENBURY New Light on Time in Augustine's <i>Confessions</i>	529
Math OSSEFORTH Augustine's <i>Confessions</i> : A Discourse Analysis	545
Sean HANNAN Demonic Historiography and the Historical Sublime in Augustine's <i>City of God</i>	553
Jimmy CHAN The Restoration Word Group in <i>De civitate Dei</i> , Books XI-XXII: A Study of an Important Backbone of Augustine's Theology of His- tory.....	561
Michael L. CARREKER <i>Sapientia</i> as Dialectic in Book XV of Augustine's <i>De Trinitate</i>	569
Augustine M. REISENAUER Wonder and Significance in Augustine's Theology of Miracles.....	577
Makiko SATO Confession of a Human Being as Darkness in Augustine	589
Rowena PAILING Does Death Sting? Some Thoughts from the Mature Augustine	599
Kitty BOUWMAN Wisdom Christology in the Works of St. Augustine.....	607
Mark G. VAILLANCOURT The Predestinarian Gottschalk of Orbais: Faithful Augustinian or Heretic?: The Ninth Century Carolingian Debate Revisited.....	621

Matthew DREVER	
Speaking from the Depths: Augustine and Luther’s Christological Reading of <i>Substantia</i> in <i>Psalm 69</i>	629
Cassandra M.M. CASIAS	
The Vulnerable Slave-Owner in Augustine’s Sermons.....	641
Kyle HURLEY	
Kenoticism in <i>The Brothers Karamazov</i> and <i>Confessions</i> : Descending to Ascend.....	653
Elizabeth A. CLARK	
Augustine and American Professors in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: From Adulation to Critique.....	667
Shane M. OWENS	
Christoeclesial Participation: Augustine, Zizioulas, and Contemporary Ecumenism	675
Dongsun CHO	
The Eternal Relational Submission of the Son to the Father: A Critical Reading of a Contemporary Evangelical Trinitarian Controversy on Augustine.....	683