

STUDIA PATRISTICA

VOL. LIII

Papers presented at the Sixteenth International Conference
on Patristic Studies held
in Oxford 2011

Edited by
MARKUS VINZENT

Volume 1:
Former Directors



PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – WALPOLE, MA

2013

Table of Contents

Gillian CLARK, Bristol, UK 60 Years (1951-2011) of the International Conference on Patristic Studies at Oxford: Key Figures – An Introductory Note.....	3
Elizabeth LIVINGSTONE, Oxford, UK F.L. Cross.....	5
Frances YOUNG, Birmingham, UK Maurice Frank Wiles.....	9
Catherine ROWETT, University of East Anglia, UK Christopher Stead (1913-2008): His Work on Patristics.....	17
Archbishop Rowan WILLIAMS, London, UK Henry Chadwick.....	31
Mark EDWARDS, Christ Church, Oxford, UK, and Markus VINZENT, King’s College, London, UK J.N.D. Kelly	43
Éric REBILLARD, Ithaca, NY, USA William Hugh Clifford Frend (1916-2005): The Legacy of <i>The Donatist Church</i>	55
William E. KLINGSHIRN, Washington, D.C., USA Theology and History in the Thought of Robert Austin Markus	73

Christopher Stead (1913-2008): His Work on Patristics

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ABSTRACT

Professor Christopher Stead was Ely Professor of Divinity from 1971 until his retirement in 1980 and one of the great contributors to the Oxford Patristic Conferences for many years. In this article I reflect on his work in Patristics, and I attempt to understand how his interests diverged from the other major contributors in the same period, and how they were formed by his milieu and the spirit of the age. As a case study to illustrate and diagnose his approach, I shall focus on a debate between Stead and Rowan Williams about the significance of the word *idios* in Arius' theology (in the course of which I also make some suggestions of my own about the issue).

Patristic Scholars come in a number of varieties. There are those who come to Patristics from a classical training, those who come with an interest in the history of religions in late antiquity, and those who come with an interest in philosophy. Like Maurice Wiles, and unlike Henry Chadwick, Christopher Stead was a philosopher by training, although he had originally started with Classics before changing to the Moral Sciences Tripos for the second part of his degree in Cambridge.

But even within the philosophical approach, there are a number of different outlooks one might take towards the work of the Fathers. The most common approach in the twentieth century seems to have been what I would call an 'Oxford Approach', which takes contemporary analytic philosophy ('Oxford Philosophy') as a model of excellence, and tries to diagnose confusions and faults in what the Fathers were trying to do – mistakes that would not have seduced them had they been able to call upon the logical tools developed in the early 20th Century by Frege, Russell, Austin, Gilbert Ryle and so on. A second variant of the philosophical approach, which adds further opportunity for critical deconstruction of the Patristic doctrines, and for diagnosis of their philosophically suspect underpinnings, is one which starts by assuming that the Fathers were intellectually rather weak, and less good at philosophy than the great classical thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle or the best of the Stoics. It follows that much of what the Fathers wrote would struggle to get a 2.1 in an exam on Platonic metaphysics or on Aristotle's theory of substance, or indeed an exam in the Theology Tripos. The Patristic Scholar sees himself as a tutor, writing in the margin where the essay is confused and adding 'Could do better; read more Aristotle!' at the end.

By contrast, a more charitable approach to the Fathers, which seeks to find in their work genuine philosophical progress and insights that might still be valuable (or, better still, could wake us from our self-satisfied slumbers) – this seems to be almost entirely lacking in the mid-twentieth century, emerging only a generation later, in scholars trained from the 1970s on. The origins of that newer and more generous outlook would be another research topic and is not for us to examine now. Suffice it to say that Stead was, at least in his early to middle periods, a product of the old school, having learnt his philosophy in Cambridge and Oxford in the first half of the century, and having done almost no theological study at all.

I say ‘early to middle periods’ as though Stead had an ‘early period’. In fact he was a remarkably late developer, at least as far as publication goes. He published his first and most important book, *Divine Substance*,¹ when he was 64, six years after taking up the Ely chair in Cambridge, so the ‘early period’ will be the work he published between the ages of 48 and 64.² From the ensuing steady stream of articles, Christopher helpfully compiled two volumes of papers on Patristic topics, one published in 1985 and the second in 2000 (covering work he had published right up to 1998 and some further items not previously published).³ He became my doctoral supervisor when he was already 66, and by the time I finished my thesis he was 70.⁴ It seems that the twenty years from age 65 to 85 were among his most productive, with contributions on Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius and a range of work on philosophical aspects of the doctrinal debates in the Early Church. All this alongside the important research he was conducting in his spare time towards a book on the birth of the Steam Locomotive, which came out just before he was 90.⁵

But I suspect that the publishing pattern is just a little distorted. Clearly years of ongoing research from the early period underpins *Divine Substance* (research which must have been undertaken at Oxford during the years when Stead was tutoring undergraduates and serving as chaplain at Keble College). Some of it

¹ Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford, 1977).

² Christopher Stead, ‘The Significance of the Homoousios’, *SP* 3 (1961), 397-412 (Reprinted in G.C. Stead, *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* [London, 1985], Chapter I) appeared more or less exactly half way through his life, at the age of 48. About nine further articles preceded *Divine Substance*, including Christopher Stead, ‘The Platonism of Arius’, *JTS* 15 (1964), 16-31 (Reprinted in G.C. Stead, *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* [1985], Chapter III) at the age of 51, and Christopher Stead, ‘The Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity (Parts 1 & 2)’, *Theology* 77 (1974), 508-17, 582-8 (Reprinted in G.C. Stead, *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* [1985], Chapter VI) ten years later.

³ Christopher Stead, *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers*, Collected Studies (1985); *id.*, *Doctrine and Philosophy in Early Christianity*, Variorum Collected Studies (Aldershot, 2000).

⁴ My doctoral thesis was later published as Catherine Osborne, *Rethinking Early Greek Philosophy* (London, 1987). (I continued to publish under my married name, Catherine Osborne, until 2011). My undergraduate tutor in Patristics was Rowan Williams.

⁵ Christopher Stead, *The Birth of the Steam Locomotive: A New History* (Haddenham, 2002).

was indeed already appearing as articles.⁶ But we should not be surprised by a relative sparsity of published papers in that period, given the expectation (which Christopher Stead surely shared) that teaching came first, and research would be published only after one stopped teaching those topics to undergraduates. Besides, it was less common then to bring things out first as articles and then assemble the argument for a book, although it does seem that Stead did some of that. Publishing habits have changed. There is also an interesting question about the role of the Patristic Conference itself in assisting the process of dissemination of work in progress, and in stimulating exchanges of ideas and responses without the need to go through a formal written publication at that stage. In Stead's later years many of these free-standing Patristic Conference papers did appear in print, often in *Studia Patristica*. But arguably the print publications were not the primary mode for disseminating ideas. Although it is the print versions that are more obvious to us now, they are just the dead relics of a live debate. The regular Patristic Conferences during the second half of the century ensured that the debate started, issues were aired, and papers received their most influential outing, while the Patristic Conference itself was in session.

For a short time during his undergraduate years, Christopher had attended lectures by Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1934-5. This was in the period that we know as the early Wittgenstein. Christopher Stead's approach to philosophy was very much of that age, although he was not an enthusiast for Wittgenstein, of any period, and Wittgenstein was very far from being the main influence on him. There is only one reference to Wittgenstein by name in *Divine Substance*. That is no more than there are references to Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Quine and Russell. But Stead's detailed work on diagnosing ambiguities and difficulties that arise from careless use of words like 'being' and 'existence', explaining the risks, dissolving puzzles and misunderstandings that (in his view) beset the early development of doctrine – all this belongs to the philosophy of that period, the philosophical world which formed him at Cambridge, and, even more so, the one into which he had moved, when he went to Oxford for post-graduate research in the 1930s, and to which he returned as Chaplain and Fellow at Keble, during the 1950s and 60s.

In *Divine Substance*, Stead engages in an extended discussion of Plato's notion of *ousia* and of the various senses of 'being' and 'to be' that can be intended by the term. It is striking that he was evidently writing this book, on the Greek words for 'being', during the very same years when Charles Kahn,

⁶ In addition to those mentioned in note 2, see, for instance, Christopher Stead, 'Divine Substance in Tertullian', *JTS* 14 (1963), 46-66 (Reprinted in G.C. Stead, *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* [1985], Chapter II), *id.*, 'The Concept of Divine Substance', *VC* 29 (1975), 1-14 (Reprinted in G.C. Stead, *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* [1985], Chapter VII), *id.*, 'Ontology and Terminology in Gregory of Nyssa', in H. Dörrie, M. Altenburger and U. Schramm (eds), *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie* (Leiden, 1976), 107-27.

well known to those working in ancient philosophy, was also investigating the Greek verb ‘to be’, as an enquiry into issues in ancient philosophy including Plato, first in a widely cited article of 1966, followed by a book length study in 1973, and further articles in 1972, 1976, 1981, 1988 and 2004.⁷ Of these works by Kahn, four were published before *Divine Substance* appeared, and three after. So it is clear that Kahn was working on the same topic in the same period. But they are talking quite past each other. Stead does cite Kahn’s 1973 book, just once, in his first footnote in the Plato chapter. But he cites it only for a tiny scholarly point concerning certain dialect forms of *ousia* in Philolaus. He makes no mention of its more general views on the very topic that Stead was discussing. Meanwhile on the other side Kahn apparently knows nothing of Stead’s treatment of the subject, and never cites it. It seems that Kahn and Stead were ploughing parallel furrows in silence, for a decade, and it seems that what Stead has to say about the meaning of the verb *einai* is at least as wise as what Kahn says, and often more sensitive. Yet Stead’s treatment is completely unknown in classical discussions, all of whom cite Kahn assiduously.

Interesting and important as Stead’s work on Plato, Aristotle and the post-Aristotelian philosophers is – or could have been, had the right people read it – that is not immediately to the point for our purpose. We should turn to his work on issues in Early Christian thought.

Much of Christopher’s work revolved round Arius, Arianism and the work of Athanasius. This evidently arose out of (or perhaps also inspired) his interest in terms for substance and what is meant by ‘sameness of substance’. It was also an area in which it is sensible to ask about the philosophical underpinnings of both sides of the dispute, since both Arius and the Athanasian party were seeking a way to express their understanding of the relation between the first and second person of the Trinity that respected logic and employed philosophical terminology in a way that was recognisable and complied with the recognised usage outside theological circles. For this reason I have selected a

⁷ Charles H. Kahn, ‘The Greek Verb ‘To Be’ and the Concept of Being’, *Foundations of Language* 2 (1966), 245-65 (Reprinted in Charles H. Kahn, *Essays on Being* [Oxford, 2009], 16-40), *id.*, *The Verb ‘be’ in Ancient Greek* (Dordrecht, 1973), *id.*, ‘On the Terminology for *Copula* and *Existence*’, in S.M. Stern, A. Houvani and V. Brown (eds), *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1972), 141-58, *id.*, ‘Why existence does not emerge as a distinct concept in Greek philosophy’, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 58 (1976), 323-34 (Reprinted in Charles H. Kahn, *Essays on Being* [2009], 62-74), *id.*, ‘Some philosophical uses of ‘To Be’ in Plato’, *Phronesis* 26 (1981), 105-34 (Reprinted in Charles H. Kahn, *Essays on Being* [2009], 75-108), *id.*, ‘Being in Parmenides and Plato’, *La Parola del Passato* 43 (1988), 237-61 (Reprinted in Charles H. Kahn, *Essays on Being* [2009], 167-91), *id.*, ‘Parmenides and Plato Once More’, in Victor Caston and Daniel W. Graham (eds), *Presocratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos* (Aldershot, 2002), 81-93, *id.*, ‘A Return to the Theory of the Verb *Be* and the Concept of Being’, *Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2004), 381-405 (Reprinted in Charles H. Kahn, *Essays on Being* [2009], 109-42).

case study to illustrate Stead's detailed work from his middle and later productive years, taking his views on Arius' philosophical background as an example, and particularly a debate in print with Rowan Williams.

In 1987 Rowan Williams' *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* appeared. Williams dedicated it to Christopher Stead.⁸ By the time it came out, Williams was in Oxford, but it was clearly the fruit of his Cambridge years, where Stead too had been working on some of his best contributions in this field. Stead was generally impressed with Williams' Arius book, but he was not happy with Part III, in which Williams tried to show that Neoplatonism figured in Arius' intellectual formation, particularly grounding his reflections on creation, intellect and the notion of participation (*methexis*). Stead was not convinced. In the early 1990s, for the Twelfth International Patristic Conference in 1995, Stead wrote a response disputing Williams' reading of the evidence.⁹ The paper is not one of his best, which is understandable in the circumstances, particularly since he missed the discussion of it at the Patristic Conference. It remains badly written in places, and it sometimes drops its points before explaining why they matter. For these reasons I shall not nitpick through it in detail. But I think it is interesting to reflect on his objections to Williams' ideas, not just in terms of whether he is right or wrong about what the evidence can support, but also in terms of Stead's implicit intellectual and theological values. What, if anything, made Stead dislike Williams' hypothesis about the Neoplatonism of Arius?

Let me explain the question. In the first chapter of *Arius*, Rowan Williams does some anthropology on the history of scholarship about Arianism.¹⁰ He unpacks the way in which scholars have repeatedly read the Arian crisis through contemporary spectacles, demonising Arius, or rehabilitating him, as they find in him features that they love or hate in the church of their own time or in its perceived enemies. The best examples are from the nineteenth century (Newman and Harnack, for instance) – a period sufficiently distant for us to stand back and see their prejudices, which are not exactly our own, and find them amazing. By contrast, it seems – at least to us – that post-war patristic scholarship was better at more open-minded and detached assessment, doing justice to the ambitions and virtues of both sides, as far as the evidence allows.

⁸ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London, 1987).

⁹ Christopher Stead, 'Was Arius a Neoplatonist?', *SP* 32 (1997), 39-52 (Reprinted in G.C. Stead, *Doctrine and Philosophy in Early Christianity* [2000], Chapter V). Stead was expecting to deliver it at the conference himself but in the event, due to being taken ill on the way to the conference, he was in the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford, and was unable to take part in the Arius seminar. It is an indication of the charitable nature of the dispute that, on that occasion, Christopher Stead entrusted Rowan Williams with the task of oral delivery and defence of a paper designed to refute Williams' own position.

¹⁰ R. Williams, *Arius* (1987), 'Introduction: Images of a heresy', 1-28.

One of the heroes of Williams' chapter is Christopher Stead, particularly Stead's 1978 paper on the *Thalia* of Arius.¹¹ In that paper, and in the one on the Platonism of Arius,¹² Stead had avoided treating Arius as someone with no religious sense or spirituality, but had sought instead to understand his motives, looking out for explanations in terms of Arius' serious commitments to things that he cared about, for reasons other than a sterile adherence to rules of logic. This approach had already been anticipated in Maurice Wiles' 'In Defence of Arius', in 1962.¹³

In his discussion of the history of treatments of Arius, Williams suggested that the later 20th century had stopped reading the Arian crisis as a mirror of its own angst. But from our current distance we might think again about that. Was it not that the 20th-century writers, including Wiles, Stead and even Williams himself were doing just the same thing as their predecessors of the nineteenth century, only that the earlier obsession with demonising the other is now replaced by a post-war obsession with taking the part of the maligned and dispossessed, seeing the other as all too human, and seeking to redress damage done in times of hatred and apartheid. The age of ecumenism and interfaith dialogue, the age of building bridges not bombing them, is reflected in the willingness to look at Arius from Arius' point of view, which is there in Stead and in Wiles, and of course in Williams himself.

So here too, the assessment of Arius is of its time. Williams is right that twentieth century scholars were trying to be fair, and to countenance the idea that the Nicene party might not have all the moral high ground; but this was not just because scholarly detachment had improved, but also because rehabilitating the other side was the new orthodoxy. It was perhaps just another prejudice, though a more humane and attractive one, certainly.

What, then, of the dispute between Williams and Stead? The essence of it seems to be that Williams had suggested, both in his 1983 article called 'The Logic of Arianism',¹⁴ and then in the 1987 book,¹⁵ that some features of Arius' thinking, and some of his vocabulary, plausibly belonged to a Neoplatonic tradition, and he proposed (on the basis of echoes in the vocabulary and ideas) that Arius might have encountered Neoplatonic philosophy directly, particularly through Porphyry and Iamblichus.

It was not the old complaint, that Arius was a logician with no nose for theological or spiritual nuances. Williams did not want to say that Arius was

¹¹ Christopher Stead, 'The *Thalia* of Arius and the Testimony of Athanasius', *JTS* 29 (1978), 20-52 (Reprinted in G.C. Stead, *Substance and Illusion in the Christian Fathers* [1985], Chapter X).

¹² G.C. Stead, 'The Platonism of Arius' (1964). See R. Williams, *Arius* (1987), 17.

¹³ Maurice Wiles, 'In Defence of Arius', *JTS* 13 (1962), 339-47 (Reprinted in Maurice Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine* [London, 1976], 28-37).

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, 'The Logic of Arianism', *JTS* 34 (1983), 56-81.

¹⁵ R. Williams, *Arius* (1987).

too much a philosopher or too little a theologian,¹⁶ but he suspected that his cosmos was more Neoplatonic, and less Middle Platonic, than that of Eusebius of Caesarea or Athanasius and so on.

Stead was not convinced. Why not? One possibility is that he just didn't think that the texts yield the results that Williams tries to get out of them. Stead's response contains plenty of scholarly quibbles,¹⁷ and he plainly intends us to see that he is motivated by nothing other than a concern to stick to the evidence, and not over-interpret it. Clearly there is some truth in that. But we should surely also do some of that cultural anthropology on the relation between Stead and Williams in the last decades of the last century.

Stead's 1997 response to Williams includes a discussion of the claim that Arius believed that the son was not proper (ἴδιος) to the Father's substance. Stead argues, rather confusingly, that Williams has confused the neuter ἴδιον with the adjective ἴδιος, and that his comparison of Arius with Porphyry, and his claims about the divine properties depend upon muddling the neuter substantive (ἴδιον meaning 'property') with the adjective (ἴδιος meaning 'proper'). Stead's explanation is far from clear, but I think he means that Williams' conclusions would require the neuter substantive ἴδιον, meaning a 'property', but cannot be got from the adjective ἴδιος, whether masculine or neuter, when it means 'one's own', as in 'God's own Son', which is a description perfectly acceptable to all parties, and is so used of the Son in scripture. Since ἴδιος in this sense can evidently be used of something that is a substance and an individual in its own right, it does not reduce the Son to a mere property of the Father, as Williams had implied.

Fair enough, but is this relevant? Although this point is developed at some length, it is not where the meat of Stead's objection lies, as becomes clear on page 42 of his paper.¹⁸ Stead wants to show that Arius objected to the term ἴδιος (or the phrase in which it occurs) not because it demotes the Son to a mere impersonal property (as Williams had suggested), but because it unduly promotes him to equality with the Father. This point is not properly developed in the 1997 paper, for it depends *only partly* on the claim which Stead tries to develop there – mistakenly as I shall suggest – namely that Arius *supports his objection to the Nicene position with arguments based on asserting the Son's inequality*. That is, Stead takes [Text 1] a pair of lines from the *Thalia*, quoted by Athanasius in *De synodis* 15, to be the lines that Athanasius has in mind when he claims that Arius denied that the Son was ἴδιον or ἴδιος of the Father. And then he points out that in the second line, where Arius offers the *reason* for refusing the term ἴδιον, the reason is that the Son is not equal to the Father, nor consubstantial with him.

¹⁶ R. Williams, *Arius* (1987), 230.

¹⁷ G.C. Stead, 'Was Arius a Neoplatonist?' (1997).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 42.

Text 1

ἴδιον οὐδὲν ἔχει τοῦ θεοῦ καθ' ὑπόστασιν ἰδιότητος
οὐδὲ γὰρ ἔστιν ἴσος, ἀλλ' οὐδὲ ὁμοούσιος αὐτῷ

Arius apud Athanasius, *De synodis* 15

So, as Stead reads this couplet, the status indicated but rejected in the first line would evidently be one that made the Son too equal and too similar to the Father; the argument is given in the second line: because he is less than equal, we must not say those things of him, Arius thinks. This is, he says, the opposite of what Williams was suggesting, which was that the expression wrongly demoted the Son to a mere impersonal property, something too lowly, not too exalted.

This point has nothing really to do with a distinction between the substantive ἴδιον meaning a property, and the adjective ἴδιος meaning ‘proper’. For the first line is not talking about whether the Son is proper (ἴδιος) to the Father, nor about whether the Son is a property (ἴδιον) of the Father. In fact, it is not really talking about any of the things that Williams was talking about, and is probably not the right text to consider at all.

Stead was actually recapitulating some work that he did earlier in *Divine Substance*, where he also discussed this couplet [Text 1].¹⁹ But there seem to me to be several things wrong with what he tries to do with it in both places. First, and most obviously, as I’ve just suggested, the text is not the one he needs in order to address the claims that Williams was making. Nor is it plausible that this was the text that Athanasius had in mind, when he claimed that Arius refused to accept that the Son was (as Athanasius held that he was), ἴδιος (in a sense that I will explain in a minute). For this text does not consider whether the Son *is* one of the Father’s essential properties, but rather whether he *has* the essential attributes of God. We might translate as follows:

[Text 1]

Nor does he have even one of the proper hallmarks of god, as regards what marks out God as a distinct entity.

For he is neither another thing equal to God (*isos theoi*), nor the very same being as God (*homoousios theoi*).

Arius apud Athanasius, *De synodis* 15

It’s not clear that Stead has seen that there are two premises in the second line of Text 1: the two things denied there are not two alternative ways of expressing the same claim (as Stead seems to suppose). Surely they are the two alternative results that Arius thinks would follow if you allowed the Son to have any of the proper and essential attributes of [a] God. One of two things would then be true: either he would be a second thing equal to the original God, so

¹⁹ G.C. Stead, *Divine Substance* (1977), 244-5

there would be two equal gods,²⁰ or he would be the very same thing as the original God, so there'd be one God, and the Father and the Son would be one and the same entity. Neither of these is orthodoxy *for either party*, so Arius concludes that the Son cannot *have* any of the divine attributes that are exclusive to God, without appealing to any disputed premise.

So this text tells us nothing about whether the term ἴδιος can be applied to the Son. It is not talking about the Son being himself an essential property of God, nor about whether the Son belongs or is proper to God, but only about whether the Son shares any of God's proper attributes. It seems to be the wrong text to invoke if we want to know whether the term ἴδιος can be applied to the Son himself.

Stead had already given us a much more relevant analysis, that does bear on this issue, in his 1964 paper called 'The Platonism of Arius'.²¹ If we go back to that paper, we shall find some material relevant to the issue that Williams was addressing.

In 'The Platonism of Arius' Stead explains how Arius insists that the *logos* or Son obtains his various titles by having them conferred upon him by the Father, rather than actually *being* himself the defining properties of the Father.²² For instance, when the Son is described as God's wisdom (*sophia*), word (*logos*), truth (*aletheia*) or might (*dunamis*), it would be a mistake (Arius thinks) to take these to be naming the essential properties of God himself. For God is essentially possessed of wisdom, truth, might and so on: without these features he would not be God, or would not be the God he is. But when these descriptions are used of the Son, they do not refer to God's properties. Taking them as the names of God's essential properties leads into a terrible dilemma. For either the Son is not a distinct hypostasis from the Father but merely his attributes (in which case nothing external to the Father has been generated and the second person is not a second person at all). Or alternatively, and equally unacceptably if not worse, the Father has detached his Logos and his wisdom and so on from himself and made them into a separate freestanding hypostasis, thereby losing all his essential attributes. So God would no longer be wise, true *etc.* This cannot be sound, since those are his inalienable attributes (they are what is proper, *idion*, to him, and he cannot alienate them without losing his identity).²³

²⁰ Equality is a relation between at least two things, so to say that the Son is another God equal to the first is ditheism.

²¹ G.C. Stead, 'The Platonism of Arius' (1964).

²² *Ibid.* 19-21. As Stead explains, these moves exclude various heretical positions that both parties would agree are unacceptable (on which more below), and also conform to a Platonist tradition.

²³ See the list of choices offered by Athanasius in the second half of *Contra Ar.* I 9. These are surely the choices that Arius thinks impossible.

It is this dilemma that motivates Arius to choose the third way, which he expresses in the famous statements quoted from the *Thalia* by Athanasius,²⁴ and also in Arius' credal letter to Alexander.²⁵ Arius says

[Text 2]

οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ ἀληθινὸς καὶ μόνος αὐτὸς τοῦ Πατρὸς λόγος ἀλλ' ὀνόματι μόνον λέγεται λόγος καὶ σοφία, καὶ χάριτι λέγεται υἱὸς καὶ δύναμις

Arius apud Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* I 9

He is not really the very word itself, the one and only word of the Father. He is just called 'word' and 'wisdom' merely nominally, and is called 'son' and 'might' as grace and favour titles.²⁶

The point of saying that the Son is not the one true Logos and so on, is to ensure that when we insist, as we should, that he is a separate hypostasis, we have not deprived the Father of his Logos, wisdom, might and so on. Hence also, when Arius says that he is not the one proper and eternal *dunamis* of God, but is one of many things called *dunamis*,²⁷ the word *idia* designates the one that is the essential attribute of God, the Father's *own* power, as opposed to the many other powers distributed to others, and external things that are called powers. So when he says, rather strangely, that the Son is not *idios* of the Father's *ousia* because he is a creature and an artefact,²⁸ [Text 3] we must presume that he is still talking in the same terms about the same problem.

[Text 3]

Οὐκ ἔστιν ἴδιος τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς· κτίσμα γάρ ἐστι καὶ ποίημα.

Arius apud Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* I 9

That is, whatever titular and honorific descriptors we use of the Son, in each case he is not the one that is proper and exclusive to the essence of God, but only a metaphorical one.²⁹ Arius is trying to ensure that the Son is neither numerically identical with one of the Father's own defining properties, nor is

²⁴ Athanasius, *De syn* 15; *Contra Ar.* I 9.

²⁵ Athanasius, *De syn* 16.

²⁶ Note the emphatic placement of ἔστιν, which is more than just the copula, but rather is a claim about what the Son really is in essence. I've tried to capture this with 'really'. There is no exact English equivalent for λέγεται, which does not really mean named or called, but rather spoken of (here by contrast with having the name that he is called by right, it being his own proper descriptor).

²⁷ ὅτι πολλαὶ δυνάμεις εἰσὶ· καὶ ἡ μὲν μία τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐστὶν ἰδία φύσει καὶ αἰδῖος· ὁ δὲ Χριστὸς πάλιν οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθινὴ δύναμις τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἀλλὰ μία τῶν λεγομένων δυνάμεων ἐστὶ καὶ αὐτὸς (Arius apud *Contra Arianos* I 9.)

²⁸ PG 26, 29.18.

²⁹ Probably the positive – and rather obscure if not nonsensical claim – that the Son is *idios* of the Father's *substance* is first made by Athanasius in order to distance himself from the more specific and comprehensible Arian suggestion of another Logos, and another Wisdom *etc.*, in each case one that is *not* God's own. And then in that general and meaningless form, it is denied again by Arius.

he part of the Father's essence. The Son may have attributes in common with the Father, but they are not the Father's own properties, and he is not any one or more of the Father's properties.

This leads Arius on to the idea that *methexis* or μετοχή has some use in explaining the relationship of a derivative example of a property to the authentic exemplar.³⁰ If it is important to deny that the Son is the Father's very own wisdom (as Arius feels he must), or that he *has* the Father's very own wisdom (which would also be absurd unless the Son is the Father), then we need some other account of how the Son can be called the Wisdom of the Father. Here the relationship can either be of two lateral equals (both the Father and the Son have wisdom in the same sense, two individual examples of the same kind, like Christopher Stead's wisdom and Henry Chadwick's wisdom for instance). Or it can be a relationship of dependence, whereby one is the archetype of wisdom, and the other is a derived example. It looks as though Arius opted for the latter relation because of the problems he could see in the former one. He imagines the Father hypostasising what is normally a property of some substance, and making it into an independent entity, which then bears the name of one of his own properties,³¹ and also bears the name 'Son'. Since the Father does this by an act of will (that is, it is not an automatic or random effect of his nature or his other activities) the resulting hypostasis is a κτίσμα or ποίημα produced at will, having, in virtue of this procedure, a nature and essence that is not the Father's own but a kind of second instance with similar properties.

On this account (which I've developed from one or two hints in Stead's 1964 article)³² the claims in Arius' documents that struck Athanasius as so objectionable can be re-read as an attempt to avoid identifying the Son with an essential property of the Father. This is roughly what Williams was saying. Hence his suggestion that Arius was trying to avoid that, because it would lead to a kind of Sabellianism, by failing to make the Son a separate hypostasis from the Father.³³ Williams diagnosed the worry as a concern with the status of the Son. But is that really where the problem lay for Arius? What Stead saw and disliked in Williams was the idea that Arius was bothered by how low the status of the Son would be if he were 'merely' an essential property of the Father, if he were 'a mere impersonal property', not a decent respectable hypostasis in his own right. And Stead thought that Williams was wrong there, because that was not the worry, but rather the reverse: as he observed, Arius was surely quite keen to demote the Son, and seemed more worried by the risk of over-promoting him. That was what led Stead to discuss text 1.

³⁰ E.g. Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* I 9: οὐκ ἔστιν ἀληθινὸς θεὸς ὁ χριστὸς ἀλλὰ μετοχῆ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐθεοποιήθη.

³¹ *Letter to Alexander* (in Athanasius, *De synodis* 16).

³² G.C. Stead, 'The Platonism of Arius' (1964), 20.

³³ R. Williams, 'The Logic of Arianism' (1983), 60.

By contrast, if we consider the potential threat to the Father's essence, the risk is quite different. It is that, in hypostasising the Son, God has alienated some of his inalienable properties. This has nothing whatever to do with either upgrading or downgrading the Son. It is about a perceived threat to the integrity of *the Father*, and to his eternal possession of his own proper attributes. When Athanasius insists that the Son *is* the one and only Wisdom and the True Logos and so on, *his* worry (like that of Williams and Stead) is about the loss of status to the Son, if anyone says he is not the real Logos of the Father but a second one named after the Father's Logos. But surely Arius was worried about something else entirely, when he insisted that the Logos was not the Father's genuine logos. He did not mean either to demote the Son as Stead suggests,³⁴ nor to resist demoting him (as Williams had implied).³⁵ He meant above all to preserve the essential attributes of the Father as inalienable, so that (a) God could not be said to lose his best qualities in generating the Son as a separate being, while also (b) preserving the idea that the Son is indeed a second hypostasis (as Williams notes), not just some one or all of the Father's attributes nor part of his substance. Yet at the same time, in an ecumenical spirit, he wanted to insist on the Son's right to those precious titles ('Word', 'Wisdom', 'Might' and so on) in no merely adoptionist or docetic manner. The Son, he thought, was directly hypostasised as such, by the Father's will, not by adoption of some other more ordinary creature, and he was given the right to those titles by divine will, not by human convention.

Perhaps I am mistaken in finding these points at least adumbrated in Stead's 1964 article. Perhaps Stead wasn't clear at that stage about how it would make sense of Arius's worries. At that stage he seems unable to see why Athanasius would attribute to Arius the idea that there were two Words and two Wisdoms and so on, one of which is proper to God and the other of which is hypostasised as a second person.³⁶ He thought this was an 'absurd' idea invented by Athanasius. Williams also follows Stead in this, considering it most improbable that Arius held it.³⁷ Yet later, in his spoof Arian document (on which see below) Stead does seem to present the view that I have just offered.³⁸ And surely it makes good sense both of Arius' worries and of Athanasius' testimony. The claim that the Son is not the one and only Logos proper to the Father, and his claim that the Son obtains the titles by the Father's own deliberate favour, all fall into place, without needing to invoke any commitment to philosophical theories about what the term *idios* can mean, or about the nature of properties

³⁴ G.C. Stead, 'Was Arius a Neoplatonist?' (1997), 42.

³⁵ R. Williams, 'The Logic of Arianism' (1983), 59.

³⁶ G.C. Stead, 'The *Thalia* of Arius and the testimony of Athanasius' (1978), 33.

³⁷ R. Williams, 'The Logic of Arianism' (1983), 59.

³⁸ Christopher Stead, 'The Arian Controversy: A New Perspective', in H. Eisenberger (ed.), *Ἡρμηνεύματα: Festschrift in honour of Hadwig Hörner* (Heidelberg, 1990), 51-9, 56.

or even (I think) of participation and the other technical terms that Arius employs to try to express the points. The serious work is not really being done by those terms, or by the Platonism to which they might seem to allude, but simply by the unsophisticated notion that if God has a certain attribute that is part of what makes him awesome and divine, it would be damaging to his awesome divinity if he lost that attribute by letting it become something outside himself – and even if you say that the result is another person of the Trinity, nevertheless the Father must not lose his own personal attributes in the begetting of that second person. So the worry was surely about the Father's dignity – not the Son's, as Stead and Williams had supposed, perhaps intuitively acquiring that worry from Athanasius and the Nicene party.

But aside from the truth, or otherwise, of that suggestion, my point was really to ask whether Christopher Stead's approach to Arianism betrays his own theological concerns and interests. Stead was keen to reinstate Arius as a serious thinker, and to see him as a bit of a philosopher, trying to be faithful to both logic and revealed truths. He was happy to trace in Arius' ideas an innocuous Platonism such as we find in many of the early Fathers. I see in Stead's Arius someone a bit like Christopher Stead himself.

So perhaps it is no wonder that Stead was rather less happy to have Arius dabbling with Iamblichus and Porphyry in the way that Williams was suggesting, than with the Middle Platonists as he had earlier imagined. My guess is that while a mild and rational Platonism was palatable to Stead, the excesses of mature Neoplatonism were anathema. An Arius like that, reading degenerate thinkers in the late Neoplatonic tradition such as Iamblichus, would not have seemed to him such a good role model for a fine upstanding Anglican divine of Christopher Stead's mould, renowned more for his finely turned sermons than for his willingness to tolerate anything like fancy ritual.

It seems that whereas earlier thinkers had demonised Arius, making him into all that they most feared, Christopher Stead not only avoided that, but rather found in Arius something closer to a congenial and like-minded thinker, though perhaps not exactly a role model. In a mischievous piece that he published in 1990,³⁹ in which he pretends to have discovered a new document written in the name of Arius, he writes (of his spoof discovery, actually a composition of his own): 'It is indeed written in the name of Arius, and is presumably the work of an Arian writer, or at least of one who had some measure of sympathy with the Arian cause. But it cannot have been written by Arius himself, nor indeed during his lifetime, since it clearly shows knowledge of Athanasian theology, not simply from oral tradition but as it is presented in his writings.' With tongue in cheek, Stead is describing himself. For sure he is not 'an Arian

³⁹ *Ibid.*

writer' but he must mean that he has enough sympathy with the Arian cause to be able to attempt to get inside the skin of someone in that position.⁴⁰

That part-joke part-serious publication illustrates Stead's high-brow sense of humour. A fitting tribute to that side of his character would require me to construct something similar – perhaps a newly discovered fragment, from the Egyptian desert, of a technical treatise by Arius, in which Arius used the Ball of Aeolus to illustrate some finer points of doctrine, such as the emission of power to the Son from the Father? The Ball of Aeolus (or Aeolipile) is explained in chapter 1 of Stead's book on the birth of the Steam Locomotive.⁴¹ It is the earliest precursor of the modern steam locomotive. Invented by Hero of Alexandria in around the first century AD, such an engine could, in principle, have been known to Arius and Athanasius. So they could, in principle, have seen its potential as an analogy for crucial theological motifs such as the divine power and wisdom and begetting. So I could, in principle, have written a spoof Arian text that realised that potential. But how plausible would that have been? For the ancient Alexandrians never did see what was wonderful about steam engines.⁴²

⁴⁰ The piece is very entertaining and well imagined: 'The prophet of old instructed his disciple saying "My son, if thou comest to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for trials..."' the spoof document begins, in 'the English version which I have prepared', as Stead put it, *ibid.*, 51. He even inserts the Greek term where he imagines that there is a kind of joke or pun in the 'original Greek'. Evidently the irreverence misfired among some German Scholars (see Stead's commentary at G.C. Stead, *Doctrine and Philosophy in Early Christianity* [2000], xii-xiii).

⁴¹ C. Stead, *The Birth of the Steam Locomotive* (2002), 1-2.

⁴² This paper has benefited greatly from the discussions at the workshop at the Patristic Conference in 2011, particularly the question raised there by Sarah Coakley who asked us to reflect on the ways in which the various thinkers under discussion differed in their approach to their subject and why. In addition I have profited from several useful discussions with Rowan Williams who read an earlier draft and raised some useful questions.

STUDIA PATRISTICA
PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE SIXTEENTH INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE ON PATRISTIC STUDIES
HELD IN OXFORD 2011

Edited by
MARKUS VINZENT

Volume 1
STUDIA PATRISTICA LIII

FORMER DIRECTORS

Gillian CLARK, Bristol, UK 60 Years (1951-2011) of the International Conference on Patristic Studies at Oxford: Key Figures – An Introductory Note.....	3
Elizabeth LIVINGSTONE, Oxford, UK F.L. Cross.....	5
Frances YOUNG, Birmingham, UK Maurice Frank Wiles.....	9
Catherine ROWETT, University of East Anglia, UK Christopher Stead (1913-2008): His Work on Patristics.....	17
Archbishop Rowan WILLIAMS, London, UK Henry Chadwick.....	31
Mark EDWARDS, Christ Church, Oxford, UK, and Markus VINZENT, King’s College, London, UK J.N.D. Kelly	43
Éric REBILLARD, Ithaca, NY, USA William Hugh Clifford Frend (1916-2005): The Legacy of <i>The</i> <i>Donatist Church</i>	55
William E. KLINGSHIRN, Washington, D.C., USA Theology and History in the Thought of Robert Austin Markus	73

Volume 2
STUDIA PATRISTICA LIV

BIBLICAL QUOTATIONS IN PATRISTIC TEXTS
(ed. Laurence Mellerin and Hugh A.G. Houghton)

Laurence MELLERIN, Lyon, France, and Hugh A.G. HOUGHTON, Birming- ham, UK Introduction	3
--	---

Laurence MELLERIN, Lyon, France Methodological Issues in Biblindex, An Online Index of Biblical Quotations in Early Christian Literature	11
Guillaume BADY, Lyon, France Quelle était la Bible des Pères, ou quel texte de la Septante choisir pour Biblindex?	33
Guillaume BADY, Lyon, France <i>3 Esdras</i> chez les Pères de l'Église: L'ambiguïté des données et les conditions d'intégration d'un 'apocryphe' dans Biblindex	39
Jérémy DELMULLE, Paris, France Augustin dans «Biblindex». Un premier test: le traitement du <i>De Magistro</i>	55
Hugh A.G. HOUGHTON, Birmingham, UK Patristic Evidence in the New Edition of the <i>Vetus Latina Iohannes</i>	69
Amy M. DONALDSON, Portland, Oregon, USA Explicit References to New Testament Textual Variants by the Church Fathers: Their Value and Limitations	87
Ulrich Bernhard SCHMID, Schöppingen, Germany Marcion and the Textual History of <i>Romans</i> : Editorial Activity and Early Editions of the New Testament	99
Jeffrey KLOHA, St Louis, USA The New Testament Text of Nicetas of Remesiana, with Reference to <i>Luke</i> 1:46	115

Volume 3

STUDIA PATRISTICA LV

EARLY MONASTICISM AND CLASSICAL *PAIDEIA*

(ed. Samuel Rubenson)

Samuel RUBENSON, Lund, Sweden Introduction	3
Samuel RUBENSON, Lund, Sweden The Formation and Re-formations of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers	5

Britt DAHLMAN, Lund, Sweden
The Collectio Scorialensis Parva: An Alphabetical Collection of Old Apophthegmatic and Hagiographic Material..... 23

Bo HOLMBERG, Lund, Sweden
 The Syriac Collection of *Apophthegmata Patrum* in MS Sin. syr. 46 35

Lillian I. LARSEN, Redlands, USA
 On Learning a New Alphabet: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers and the Monostichs of Menander..... 59

Henrik RYDELL JOHNSÉN, Lund, Sweden
 Renunciation, Reorientation and Guidance: Patterns in Early Monasticism and Ancient Philosophy 79

David WESTBERG, Uppsala, Sweden
 Rhetorical Exegesis in Procopius of Gaza's *Commentary on Genesis* 95

Apophthegmata Patrum Abbreviations 109

Volume 4

STUDIA PATRISTICA LVI

REDISCOVERING ORIGEN

Lorenzo PERRONE, Bologna, Italy
 Origen's 'Confessions': Recovering the Traces of a Self-Portrait 3

Róbert SOMOS, University of Pécs, Hungary
 Is the Handmaid Stoic or Middle Platonic? Some Comments on Origen's Use of Logic 29

Paul R. KOLBET, Wellesley, USA
 Rethinking the Rationales for Origen's Use of Allegory 41

Brian BARRETT, South Bend, USA
 Origen's Spiritual Exegesis as a Defense of the Literal Sense..... 51

Tina DOLIDZE, Tbilisi, Georgia
 Equivocality of Biblical Language in Origen..... 65

Miyako DEMURA, Tohoku Gakuin University, Sendai, Japan
 Origen and the Exegetical Tradition of the Sarah-Hagar Motif in Alexandria 73

Elizabeth Ann DIVELY LAURO, Los Angeles, USA The Eschatological Significance of Scripture According to Origen...	83
Lorenzo PERRONE, Bologna, Italy Rediscovering Origen Today: First Impressions of the New Collection of Homilies on the <i>Psalms</i> in the <i>Codex monacensis Graecus</i> 314....	103
Ronald E. HEINE, Eugene, OR, USA Origen and his Opponents on <i>Matthew</i> 19:12	123
Allan E. JOHNSON, Minnesota, USA Interior Landscape: Origen's Homily 21 on <i>Luke</i>	129
Stephen BAGBY, Durham, UK The 'Two Ways' Tradition in Origen's <i>Commentary on Romans</i>	135
Francesco PIERI, Bologna, Italy Origen on <i>1Corinthians</i> : Homilies or Commentary?	143
Thomas D. MCGLOTHLIN, Durham, USA Resurrection, Spiritual Interpretation, and Moral Reformation: A Func- tional Approach to Resurrection in Origen	157
Ilaria L.E. RAMELLI, Milan, Italy, and Durham, UK 'Preexistence of Souls'? The ἀρχή and τέλος of Rational Creatures in Origen and Some Origenians	167
Ilaria L.E. RAMELLI, Milan, Italy, and Durham, UK The <i>Dialogue of Adamantius</i> : A Document of Origen's Thought? (Part Two)	227

Volume 5

STUDIA PATRISTICA LVII

EVAGRIUS PONTICUS ON CONTEMPLATION

(ed. Monica Tobon)

Monica TOBON, Franciscan International Study Centre, Canterbury, UK Introduction	3
Kevin CORRIGAN, Emory University, USA Suffocation or Germination: Infinity, Formation and Calibration of the Mind in Evagrius' Notion of Contemplation	9

Monica TOBON, Franciscan International Study Centre, Canterbury, UK Reply to Kevin Corrigan, 'Suffocation or Germination: Infinity, Formation and Calibration of the Mind in Evagrius' Notion of Contemplation'	27
Fr. Luke DYSINGER, OSB, Saint John's Seminary, Camarillo, USA An Exegetical Way of Seeing: Contemplation and Spiritual Guidance in Evagrius Ponticus	31
Monica TOBON, Franciscan International Study Centre, Canterbury, UK Raising Body and Soul to the Order of the <i>Nous</i> : Anthropology and Contemplation in Evagrius	51
Robin Darling YOUNG, University of Notre Dame, USA The Path to Contemplation in Evagrius' Letters	75

Volume 6

STUDIA PATRISTICA LVIII

NEOPLATONISM AND PATRISTICS

Victor YUDIN, UCL, OVC, Brussels, Belgium Patristic Neoplatonism	3
Cyril HOVORUN, Kiev, Ukraine Influence of Neoplatonism on Formation of Theological Language ...	13
Luc BRISSON, CNRS, Villejuif, France Clement and Cyril of Alexandria: Confronting Platonism with Chris- tianity	19
Alexey R. FOKIN, Moscow, Russia The Doctrine of the 'Intelligible Triad' in Neoplatonism and Patristics	45
Jean-Michel COUNET, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium Speech Act in the Demiurge's Address to the Young Gods in <i>Timaeus</i> 41 A-B. Interpretations of Greek Philosophers and Patristic Receptions	73
István PERCZEL, Hungary The Pseudo-Didymian <i>De trinitate</i> and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areo- pagite: A Preliminary Study	83

Andrew LOUTH, Durham, UK Symbolism and the Angels in Dionysios the Areopagite.....	109
Demetrios BATHRELLOS, Athens, Greece Neo-platonism and Maximus the Confessor on the Knowledge of God	117
Victor YUDIN, UCL, OVC, Brussels, Belgium A Stoic Conversion: Porphyry by Plato. Augustine's Reading of the <i>Timaeus</i> 41 a7-b6.....	127
Levan GIGINEISHVILI, Iliia State University, Georgia Eros in Theology of Ioane Petritsi and Shota Rustaveli.....	181

Volume 7

STUDIA PATRISTICA LIX

EARLY CHRISTIAN ICONOGRAPHIES

(ed. Allen Brent and Markus Vinzent)

Allen BRENT, London, UK Transforming Pagan Cultures	3
James A. FRANCIS, Lexington, Kentucky, USA Seeing God(s): Images and the Divine in Pagan and Christian Thought in the Second to Fourth Centuries AD.....	5
Emanuele CASTELLI, Università di Bari Aldo Moro, Italy The Symbols of Anchor and Fish in the Most Ancient Parts of the Catacomb of Priscilla: Evidence and Questions	11
Catherine C. TAYLOR, Washington, D.C., USA Painted Veneration: The Priscilla Catacomb Annunciation and the <i>Protoevangelion of James</i> as Precedents for Late Antique Annuncia- tion Iconography.....	21
Peter WIDDICOMBE, Hamilton, Canada Noah and Foxes: <i>Song of Songs</i> 2:15 and the Patristic Legacy in Text and Art.....	39
Catherine Brown TKACZ, Spokane, Washington, USA <i>En colligo duo ligna</i> : The Widow of Zarephath and the Cross.....	53

György HEIDL, University of Pécs, Hungary Early Christian Imagery of the ' <i>virga virtutis</i> ' and Ambrose's Theology of Sacraments	69
Lee M. JEFFERSON, Danville, Kentucky, USA Perspectives on the Nude Youth in Fourth-Century Sarcophagi Representations of the Raising of Lazarus	77
Katharina HEYDEN, Göttingen, Germany The Bethesda Sarcophagi: Testimonies to Holy Land Piety in the Western Theodosian Empire	89
Anne KARAHAN, Stockholm, Sweden, and Istanbul, Turkey The Image of God in Byzantine Cappadocia and the Issue of Supreme Transcendence	97
George ZOGRAFIDIS, Thessaloniki, Greece Is a Patristic Aesthetics Possible? The Eastern Paradigm Re-examined	113

Volume 8

STUDIA PATRISTICA LX

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LATE ANTIQUE *SPECTACULA*

(ed. Karin Schlapbach)

Karin SCHLAPBACH, Ottawa, Canada Introduction. New Perspectives on Late Antique <i>spectacula</i> : Between Reality and Imagination	3
Karin SCHLAPBACH, Ottawa, Canada Literary Technique and the Critique of <i>spectacula</i> in the Letters of Paulinus of Nola	7
Alexander PUK, Heidelberg, Germany A Success Story: Why did the Late Ancient Theatre Continue?	21
Juan Antonio JIMÉNEZ SÁNCHEZ, Barcelona, Spain The Monk Hypatius and the Olympic Games of Chalcedon	39
Andrew W. WHITE, Stratford University, Woodbridge, Virginia, USA Mime and the Secular Sphere: Notes on Choricus' <i>Apologia Mimerum</i>	47

David POTTER, The University of Michigan, USA Anatomies of Violence: Entertainment and Politics in the Eastern Roman Empire from Theodosius I to Heraclius.....	61
Annewies VAN DEN HOEK, Harvard, USA Execution as Entertainment: The Roman Context of Martyrdom.....	73

Volume 9

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXI

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND DIVINE INSPIRATION IN AUGUSTINE

(ed. Jonathan Yates)

Anthony DUPONT, Leuven, Belgium Augustine's Preaching on Grace at Pentecost	3
Geert M.A. VAN REYN, Leuven, Belgium Divine Inspiration in Virgil's <i>Aeneid</i> and Augustine's Christian Alter- native in <i>Confessiones</i>	15
Anne-Isabelle BOUTON-TOUBOULIC, Bordeaux, France Consonance and Dissonance: The Unifying Action of the Holy Ghost in Saint Augustine.....	31
Matthew Alan GAUMER, Leuven, Belgium, and Kaiserslautern, Germany Against the Holy Spirit: Augustine of Hippo's Polemical Use of the Holy Spirit against the Donatists	53
Diana STANCIU, KU Leuven, Belgium Augustine's (Neo)Platonic Soul and Anti-Pelagian Spirit.....	63

Volume 10

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXII

THE GENRES OF LATE ANTIQUE LITERATURE

Yuri SHICHALIN, Moscow, Russia The Traditional View of Late Platonism as a Self-contained System	3
Bernard POWDERON, Tours, France Y a-t-il lieu de parler de genre littéraire à propos des Apologies du second siècle?	11

John DILLON, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland
 Protreptic Epistolography, Hellenic and Christian 29

Svetlana MESYATS, Moscow, Russia
 Does the First have a Hypostasis? Some Remarks to the History of
 the Term *hypostasis* in Platonic and Christian Tradition of the 4th –
 5th Centuries AD 41

Anna USACHEVA, Moscow, Russia
 The Term πανήγυρις in the Holy Bible and Christian Literature of the
 Fourth Century and the Development of Christian Panegyric Genre 57

Olga ALIEVA, National Research University Higher School of Economics,
 Moscow, Russia
 Protreptic Motifs in St Basil’s Homily *On the Words ‘Give Heed to
 Thyself’* 69

FOUCAULT AND THE PRACTICE OF PATRISTICS

David NEWHEISER, Chicago, USA
 Foucault and the Practice of Patristics..... 81

Devin SINGH, New Haven, USA
 Disciplining Eusebius: Discursive Power and Representation of the
 Court Theologian..... 89

Rick ELGENDY, Chicago, USA
 Practices of the Self and (Spiritually) Disciplined Resistance: What
 Michel Foucault Could Have Said about Gregory of Nyssa 103

Marika ROSE, Durham, UK
 Patristics after Foucault: Genealogy, History and the Question of
 Justice 115

PATRISTIC STUDIES IN LATIN AMERICA

Patricia Andrea CNER, Argentina
 Los Estudios Patrísticos en Latinoamérica: pasado, presente y future 123

Edinei DA ROSA CÂNDIDO, Florianópolis, Brasil
 Proposta para publicações patrísticas no Brasil e América Latina: os
 seis anos dos Cadernos Patrísticos..... 131

Oscar VELÁSQUEZ, Santiago de Chile, Chile	
La historia de la patrística en Chile: un largo proceso de maduración	135

HISTORICA

Guy G. STROUMSA, Oxford, UK, and Jerusalem, Israel	
Athens, Jerusalem and Mecca: The Patristic Crucible of the Abrahamic Religions	153
Josef LÖSSL, Cardiff, Wales, UK	
Memory as History? Patristic Perspectives	169
Hervé INGLEBERT, Paris-Ouest Nanterre-La Défense, France	
La formation des élites chrétiennes d'Augustin à Cassiodore	185
Charlotte KÖCKERT, Heidelberg, Germany	
The Rhetoric of Conversion in Ancient Philosophy and Christianity	205
Arthur P. URBANO, Jr., Providence, USA	
'Dressing the Christian': The Philosopher's Mantle as Signifier of Pedagogical and Moral Authority	213
Vladimir IVANOVICI, Bucharest, Romania	
Competing Paradoxes: Martyrs and the Spread of Christianity Revisited	231
Helen RHEE, Santa Barbara, California, USA	
Wealth, Business Activities, and Blurring of Christian Identity	245
Jean-Baptiste PIGGIN, Hamburg, Germany	
The Great Stemma: A Late Antique Diagrammatic Chronicle of Pre-Christian Time	259
Mikhail M. KAZAKOV, Smolensk, Russia	
Types of Location of Christian Churches in the Christianizing Roman Empire	279
David Neal GREENWOOD, Edinburgh, UK	
Pollution Wars: Consecration and Desecration from Constantine to Julian	289
Christine SHEPARDSON, University of Tennessee, USA	
Apollo's Charred Remains: Making Meaning in Fourth-Century Antioch	297

Jacquelyn E. WINSTON, Azusa, USA The 'Making' of an Emperor: Constantinian Identity Formation in his Invective Letter to Arius	303
Isabella IMAGE, Oxford, UK Nicene Fraud at the Council of Rimini	313
Thomas BRAUCH, Mount Pleasant, Michigan, USA From Valens to Theodosius: 'Nicene' and 'Arian' Fortunes in the East August 378 to November 380	323
Silvia MARGUTTI, Perugia, Italy The Power of the Relics: Theodosius I and the Head of John the Baptist in Constantinople	339
Antonia ATANASSOVA, Boston, USA A Ladder to Heaven: Ephesus I and the Theology of Marian Mediation	353
Luise Marion FRENKEL, Cambridge, UK What are Sermons Doing in the Proceedings of a Council? The Case of Ephesus 431.....	363
Sandra LEUENBERGER-WENGER, Münster, Germany The Case of Theodoret at the Council of Chalcedon.....	371
Sergey TROSTYANSKIY, Union Theological Seminary, New York, USA The <i>Encyclical</i> of Basiliscus (475) and its Theological Significance; Some Interpretational Issues	383
Eric FOURNIER, West Chester, USA Victor of Vita and the Conference of 484: A Pastiche of 411?	395
Dana Iuliana VIEZURE, South Orange, NJ, USA The Fate of Emperor Zeno's <i>Henoticon</i> : Christological Authority after the Healing of the Acacian Schism (484-518).....	409
Roberta FRANCHI, Firenze, Italy <i>Aurum in luto quaerere</i> (Hier., <i>Ep.</i> 107,12). Donne tra eresia e ortodos- sia nei testi cristiani di IV-V secolo.....	419
Winfried BÜTTNER, Bamberg, Germany Der <i>Christus medicus</i> und ein <i>medicus christianus</i> : Hagiographische Anmerkungen zu einem Klerikerarzt des 5. Jh.....	431

Susan LOFTUS, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia Episcopal Consecration – the Religious Practice of Late Antique Gaul in the 6 th Century: Ideal and Reality	439
Rocco BORGOGNONI, Baggio, Italy Capitals at War: Images of Rome and Constantinople from the Age of Justinian	455
Pauline ALLEN, Brisbane, Australia, and Pretoria, South Africa Prolegomena to a Study of the Letter-Bearer in Christian Antiquity	481
Ariane BODIN, Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense, France The Outward Appearance of Clerics in the Fourth and Fifth Centuries in Italy, Gaul and Africa: Representation and Reality	493
Christopher BONURA, Gainesville, USA The Man and the Myth: Did Heraclius Know the Legend of the Last Roman Emperor?	503
Petr BALCÁREK, Olomouc, Czech Republic The Cult of the Holy Wisdom in Byzantine Palestine	515

Volume 11

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXIII

BIBLICA

Mark W. ELLIOTT, St Andrews, UK <i>Wisdom of Solomon</i> , Canon and Authority	3
Joseph VERHEYDEN, Leuven, Belgium A Puzzling Chapter in the Reception History of the Gospels: Victor of Antioch and his So-called ‘Commentary on <i>Mark</i> ’	17
Christopher A. BEELEY, New Haven, Conn., USA ‘Let This Cup Pass from Me’ (<i>Matth.</i> 26.39): The Soul of Christ in Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, and Maximus Confessor	29
Paul M. BLOWERS, Emmanuel Christian Seminary, Johnson City, Ten- nessee, USA The Groaning and Longing of Creation: Variant Patterns of Patristic Interpretation of <i>Romans</i> 8:19-23	45

Riemer ROUKEMA, Zwolle, The Netherlands The Foolishness of the Message about the Cross (1Cor. 1:18-25): Embarrassment and Consent.....	55
Jennifer R. STRAWBRIDGE, Oxford, UK A Community of Interpretation: The Use of 1Corinthians 2:6-16 by Early Christians.....	69
Pascale FARAGO-BERMON, Paris, France Surviving the Disaster: The Use of <i>Psychē</i> in 1Peter 3:20	81
Everett FERGUSON, Abilene, USA Some Patristic Interpretations of the Angels of the Churches (<i>Apo- calypse</i> 1-3).....	95

PHILOSOPHICA, THEOLOGICA, ETHICA

Averil CAMERON, Oxford, UK Can Christians Do Dialogue?	103
Sophie LUNN-ROCKLIFFE, King's College London, UK The Diabolical Problem of Satan's First Sin: Self-moved Pride or a Response to the Goads of Envy?	121
Loren KERNS, Portland, Oregon, USA Soul and Passions in Philo of Alexandria	141
Nicola SPANU, London, UK The Interpretation of <i>Timaeus</i> 39E7-9 in the Context of Plotinus' and Numenius' Philosophical Circles	155
Sarah STEWART-KROEKER, Princeton, USA Augustine's Incarnational Appropriation of Plotinus: A Journey for the Feet	165
Sébastien MORLET, Paris, France Encore un nouveau fragment du traité de Porphyre contre les chrétiens (Marcel d'Ancyre, fr. 88 Klostermann = fr. 22 Seibt/Vinzent)?	179
Aaron P. JOHNSON, Cleveland, Tennessee, USA Porphyry's <i>Letter to Anebo</i> among the Christians: Augustine and Eusebius.....	187

Susanna ELM, Berkeley, USA Laughter in Christian Polemics.....	195
Robert WIŚNIEWSKI, Warsaw, Poland Looking for Dreams and Talking with Martyrs: The Internal Roots of Christian Incubation	203
Simon C. MIMOUNI, Paris, France Les traditions patristiques sur la famille de Jésus: Retour sur un problème doctrinal du IV ^e siècle	209
Christophe GUIGNARD, Bâle/Lausanne, Suisse Julius Africanus et le texte de la généalogie lucanienne de Jésus	221
Demetrios BATHRELLOS, Athens, Greece The Patristic Tradition on the Sinlessness of Jesus	235
Hajnalka TAMAS, Leuven, Belgium <i>Scio unum Deum vivum et verum, qui est trinus et unus Deus: The Relevance of Creedal Elements in the Passio Donati, Venusti et Her- mogenis</i>	243
Christoph MARKSCHIES, Berlin, Germany On Classifying Creeds the Classical German Way: ‘Privat-Bekennt- nisse’ (‘Private Creeds’)	259
Markus VINZENT, King’s College London, UK From Zephyrinus to Damasus – What did Roman Bishops believe?....	273
Adolf Martin RITTER, Heidelberg, Germany The ‘Three Main Creeds’ of the Lutheran Reformation and their Specific Contexts: Testimonies and Commentaries	287
Hieromonk Methody (ZINKOVSKY), Hieromonk Kirill (ZINKOVSKY), St Peters- burg Orthodox Theological Academy, Russia The Term ἐνυπόστατον and its Theological Meaning	313
Christian LANGE, Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany Miaenergetism – A New Term for the History of Dogma?	327
Marek JANKOWIAK, Oxford, UK The Invention of Dyotheletism.....	335
Spyros P. PANAGOPOULOS, Patras, Greece The Byzantine Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption.....	343

Christopher T. BOUNDS, Marion, Indiana, USA
 The Understanding of Grace in Selected Apostolic Fathers 351

Andreas MERKT, Regensburg, Germany
 Before the Birth of Purgatory 361

Verna E.F. HARRISON, Los Angeles, USA
 Children in Paradise and Death as God’s Gift: From Theophilus of
 Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyons to Gregory Nazianzen 367

Moshe B. BLIDSTEIN, Oxford, UK
 Polemics against Death Defilement in Third-Century Christian Sour-
 ces 373

Susan L. GRAHAM, Jersey City, USA
 Two Mount Zions: Fourth-Century Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic... 385

Sean C. HILL, Gainesville, Florida, USA
 Early Christian Ethnic Reasoning in the Light of *Genesis* 6:1-4 393

Volume 12

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXIV

ASCETICA

Kate WILKINSON, Baltimore, USA
 Gender Roles and Mental Reproduction among Virgins 3

David WOODS, Cork, Ireland
 Rome, Gregoria, and Madaba: A Warning against Sexual Temptation 9

Alexis C. TORRANCE, Princeton, USA
 The Angel and the Spirit of Repentance: Hermas and the Early
 Monastic Concept of *Metanoia* 15

Lois FARAG, St Paul, MN, USA
 Heroines not Penitents: Saints of Sex Slavery in the *Apophthegmata*
Patrum in Roman Law Context 21

Nienke VOS, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
 Seeing *Hesychia*: Appeals to the Imagination in the *Apophthegmata*
Patrum 33

Peter TÓTH, London, UK	
‘In volumine Longobardo’: New Light on the Date and Origin of the Latin Translation of St Anthony’s Seven Letters.....	47
Kathryn HAGER, Oxford, UK	
John Cassian: The Devil in the Details.....	59
Liviu BARBU, Cambridge, UK	
Spiritual Fatherhood in and outside the Desert: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective.....	65

LITURGICA

T.D. BARNES, Edinburgh, UK	
The First Christmas in Rome, Antioch and Constantinople.....	77
Gerard ROUWHORST, University of Tilburg, The Netherlands	
Eucharistic Meals East of Antioch.....	85
Anthony GELSTON, Durham, UK	
A Fragmentary Sixth-Century East Syrian Anaphora.....	105
Richard BARRETT, Bloomington, Indiana, USA	
‘Let Us Put Away All Earthly Care’: Mysticism and the <i>Cherubikon</i> of the Byzantine Rite.....	111

ORIENTALIA

B.N. WOLFE, Oxford, UK	
The Skeireins: A Neglected Text.....	127
Alberto RIGOLIO, Oxford, UK	
From ‘Sacrifice to the Gods’ to the ‘Fear of God’: Omissions, Additions and Changes in the Syriac Translations of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius.....	133
Richard VAGGIONE, OHC, Toronto, Canada	
Who were Mani’s ‘Greeks’? ‘Greek Bread’ in the <i>Cologne Mani Codex</i>	145
Flavia RUANI, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, France	
Between Myth and Exegesis: Ephrem the Syrian on the Manichaean <i>Book of Giants</i>	155

Hannah HUNT, Leeds, UK 'Clothed in the Body': The Garment of Flesh and the Garment of Glory in Syrian Religious Anthropology.....	167
Joby PATERUPARAMPIL, Leuven, Belgium <i>Regula Fidei</i> in Ephrem's <i>Hymni de Fide</i> LXVII and in the <i>Sermones de Fide</i> IV.....	177
Jeanne-Nicole SAINT-LAURENT, Colchester, VT, USA Humour in Syriac Hagiography	199
Erik W. KOLB, Washington, D.C., USA 'It Is With God's Words That Burn Like a Fire': Monastic Discipline in Shenoute's Monastery	207
Hugo LUNDHAUG, Oslo, Norway Origenism in Fifth-Century Upper Egypt: Shenoute of Atripe and the Nag Hammadi Codices	217
Aho SHEMUNKASHO, Salzburg, Austria Preliminaries to an Edition of the Hagiography of St Aho the Stran- ger (ܐܫܘܟܐ ܪܫܐܝܢ)	229
Peter BRUNS, Bamberg, Germany Von Magiern und Mönchen – Zoroastrische Polemik gegen das Christentum in der armenischen Kirchengeschichtsschreibung.....	237
Grigory KESSEL, Marburg, Germany New Manuscript Witnesses to the 'Second Part' of Isaac of Nineveh	245

CRITICA ET PHILOLOGICA

Michael PENN, Mount Holyoke College, USA Using Computers to Identify Ancient Scribal Hands: A Preliminary Report	261
Felix ALBRECHT, Göttingen, Germany A Hitherto Unknown Witness to the Apostolic Constitutions in Uncial Script.....	267
Nikolai LIPATOV-CHICHERIN, Nottingham, UK, and St Petersburg, Russia Preaching as the Audience Heard it: Unedited Transcripts of Patristic Homilies	277

Pierre AUGUSTIN, Paris, France Entre codicologie, philologie et histoire: La description de manuscrits parisiens (<i>Codices Chrysostomici Graeci VII</i>)	299
Octavian GORDON, București, Romania Denominational Translation of Patristic Texts into Romanian: Elements for a Patristic Translation Theory	309

Volume 13

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXV

THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES

William C. RUTHERFORD, Houston, USA Citizenship among Jews and Christians: Civic Discourse in the <i>Apology</i> of Aristides	3
Paul HARTOG, Des Moines, USA The Relationship between <i>Paraenesis</i> and Polemic in Polycarp, <i>Phi-</i> <i>lippians</i>	27
Romulus D. STEFANUT, Chicago, Illinois, USA Eucharistic Theology in the Martyrdom of Ignatius of Antioch	39
Ferdinando BERGAMELLI, Turin, Italy La figura dell'Apóstolo Paolo in Ignazio di Antiochia.....	49
Viviana Laura FÉLIX, Buenos Aires, Argentina La influencia de platonismo medio en Justino a la luz de los estudios recientes sobre el <i>Didaskalikos</i>	63
Charles A. BOBERTZ, Collegeville, USA 'Our Opinion is in Accordance with the Eucharist': Irenaeus and the <i>Sitz im Leben</i> of <i>Mark's Gospel</i>	79
Ysabel DE ANDIA, Paris, France Adam-Enfant chez Irénée de Lyon	91
Scott D. MORINGIELLO, Villanova, Pennsylvania, USA The <i>Pneumatikos</i> as Scriptural Interpreter: Irenaeus on 1 <i>Cor.</i> 2:15 ..	105
Adam J. POWELL, Durham, UK Irenaeus and God's Gifts: Reciprocity in <i>Against Heresies</i> IV 14.1...	119

Charles E. HILL, Maitland, Florida, USA ‘The Writing which Says...’ <i>The Shepherd</i> of Hermas in the Writings of Irenaeus	127
T. Scott MANOR, Paris, France Proclus: The North African Montanist?	139
István M. BUGÁR, Debrecen, Hungary Can Theological Language Be Logical? The Case of ‘Josipe’ and Melito	147
Oliver NICHOLSON, Minneapolis, USA, and Tiverton, UK What Makes a Voluntary Martyr?	159
Thomas O’LOUGHLIN, Nottingham, UK The <i>Protevangelium of James</i> : A Case of Gospel Harmonization in the Second Century?	165
Jussi JUNNI, Helsinki, Finland Celsus’ Arguments against the Truth of the Bible	175
Miroslaw MEJZNER, Warsaw (UKSW), Poland The Anthropological Foundations of the Concept of Resurrection according to Methodius of Olympus.....	185
László PERENDY, Budapest, Hungary The Threads of Tradition: The Parallelisms between <i>Ad Diognetum</i> and <i>Ad Autolyicum</i>	197
Nestor KAVVADAS, Tübingen, Germany Some Late Texts Pertaining to the Accusation of Ritual Cannibalism against Second- and Third-Century Christians.....	209
Jared SECORD, Ann Arbor, USA Medicine and Sophistry in Hippolytus’ <i>Refutatio</i>	217
Eliezer GONZALEZ, Gold Coast, Australia The Afterlife in the <i>Passion of Perpetua</i> and in the Works of Tertul- lian: A Clash of Traditions	225

APOCRYPHA

Julian PETKOV, University of Heidelberg, Germany Techniques of Disguise in Apocryphal Apocalyptic Literature: Bridging the Gap between ‘Authorship’ and ‘Authority’.....	241
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Marek STAROWIEYSKI, Pontifical Faculty of Theology, Warsaw, Poland St. Paul dans les Apocryphes.....	253
David M. REIS, Bridgewater, USA Peripatetic Pedagogy: Travel and Transgression in the <i>Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles</i>	263
Charlotte TOUATI, Lausanne, Switzerland A ‘Kerygma of Peter’ behind the <i>Apocalypse of Peter</i> , the <i>Pseudo-Clementine Romance</i> and the <i>Eclogae Propheticae</i> of Clement of Alexandria	277

TERTULLIAN AND RHETORIC

(ed. Willemien Otten)

David E. WILHITE, Waco, TX, USA Rhetoric and Theology in Tertullian: What Tertullian Learned from Paul	295
Frédéric CHAPOT, Université de Strasbourg, France Rhétorique et herméneutique chez Tertullien. Remarques sur la composition de l' <i>Adu. Praxean</i>	313
Willemien OTTEN, Chicago, USA Tertullian’s Rhetoric of Redemption: Flesh and Embodiment in <i>De carne Christi</i> and <i>De resurrectione mortuorum</i>	331
Geoffrey D. DUNN, Australian Catholic University, Australia Rhetoric and Tertullian: A Response	349

FROM TERTULLIAN TO TYCONIUS

J. Albert HARRILL, Bloomington, Indiana, USA Accusing Philosophy of Causing Headaches: Tertullian’s Use of a Comedic Topos (<i>Praescr.</i> 16.2)	359
Richard BRUMBACK, Austin, Texas, USA Tertullian’s Trinitarian Monarchy in <i>Adversus Praxean</i> : A Rhetorical Analysis	367
Marcin R. WYSOCKI, Lublin, Poland Eschatology of the Time of Persecutions in the Writings of Tertullian and Cyprian.....	379

David L. RIGGS, Marion, Indiana, USA The Apologetics of Grace in Tertullian and Early African Martyr Acts	395
Agnes A. NAGY, Genève, Suisse Les candélabres et les chiens au banquet scandaleux. Tertullien, Minucius Felix et les unions œdipiennes.....	407
Thomas F. HEYNE, M.D., M.St., Boston, USA Tertullian and Obstetrics.....	419
Ulrike BRUCHMÜLLER, Berlin, Germany Christliche Erotik in platonischem Gewand: Transformationstheoretische Überlegungen zur Umdeutung von Platons <i>Symposion</i> bei Methodios von Olympos.....	435
David W. PERRY, Hull, UK Cyprian's <i>Letter to Fidus</i> : A New Perspective on its Significance for the History of Infant Baptism	445
Adam PLOYD, Atlanta, USA <i>Tres Unum Sunt</i> : The Johannine Comma in Cyprian.....	451
Laetitia CICCOLINI, Paris, France Le personnage de Syméon dans la polémique anti-juive: Le cas de l' <i>Ad Vigilium episcopum de Iudaica incredulitate</i> (CPL 67°).....	459

Volume 14

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXVI

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Jana PLÁTOVÁ, Centre for Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Texts, Olomouc, Czech Republic Die Fragmente des Clemens Alexandrinus in den griechischen und arabischen Katenen.....	3
Marco RIZZI, Milan, Italy The Work of Clement of Alexandria in the Light of his Contemporary Philosophical Teaching.....	11
Stuart Rowley THOMSON, Oxford, UK Apostolic Authority: Reading and Writing Legitimacy in Clement of Alexandria	19

Gregory Allen ROBBINS, Denver, USA 'Number Determinate is Kept Concealed' (Dante, <i>Paradiso</i> XXIX 135): Eusebius and the Transformation of the List (<i>Hist. eccl.</i> III 25)	181
James CORKE-WEBSTER, Manchester, UK A Literary Historian: Eusebius of Caesarea and the Martyrs of Lyons and Palestine	191
Samuel FERNÁNDEZ, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile ¿Crisis arriana o crisis monarquiana en el siglo IV? Las críticas de Marcelo de Ancira a Asterio de Capadocia	203
Laurence VIANÈS, Université de Grenoble / HiSoMA «Sources Chrétien- nes», France L'interprétation des prophètes par Apollinaire de Laodicée a-t-elle influencé Théodore de Mopsueste?	209
Hélène GRELIER-DENEUX, Paris, France La réception d'Apollinaire dans les controverses christologiques du V ^e siècle à partir de deux témoins, Cyrille d'Alexandrie et Théodoret de Cyr	223
Sophie H. CARTWRIGHT, Edinburgh, UK So-called Platonism, the Soul, and the Humanity of Christ in Eus- tathius of Antioch's <i>Contra Ariomanitas et de anima</i>	237
Donna R. HAWK-REINHARD, St Louis, USA Cyril of Jerusalem's Sacramental <i>Theōsis</i>	247
Georgij ZAKHAROV, Moscou, Russie Théologie de l'image chez Germinius de Sirmium	257
Michael Stuart WILLIAMS, Maynooth, Ireland Auxentius of Milan: From Orthodoxy to Heresy	263
Jarred A. MERCER, Oxford, UK The Life in the Word and the Light of Humanity: The Exegetical Foundation of Hilary of Poitiers' Doctrine of Divine Infinity	273
Janet SIDAWAY, Edinburgh, UK Hilary of Poitiers and Phoebadius of Agen: Who Influenced Whom?	283
Dominique GONNET, S.J., Lyon, France The Use of the Bible within Athanasius of Alexandria's <i>Letters to Serapion</i>	291

William G. RUSCH, New York, USA Corresponding with Emperor Jovian: The Strategy and Theology of Apollinaris of Laodicea and Athanasius of Alexandria.....	301
Rocco SCHEMBRA, Catania, Italia Il percorso editoriale del <i>De non parcendo in deum delinquentibus</i> di Lucifero di Cagliari	309
Caroline MACÉ, Leuven, Belgium, and Ilse DE VOS, Oxford, UK Pseudo-Athanasius, <i>Quaestio ad Antiochum</i> 136 and the <i>Theosophia</i>	319

Volume 15

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXVII

CAPPADOCIAN WRITERS

Giulio MASPERO, Rome, Italy The Spirit Manifested by the Son in Cappadocian Thought	3
Darren SARISKY, Cambridge, UK Who Can Listen to Sermons on <i>Genesis</i> ? Theological Exegesis and Theological Anthropology in Basil of Caesarea's <i>Hexaemeron</i> Hom- ilies	13
Ian C. JONES, New York, USA Humans and Animals: St Basil of Caesarea's Ascetic Evocation of Paradise.....	25
Benoît GAIN, Grenoble, France Voyageur en Exil: Un aspect central de la condition humaine selon Basile de Césarée	33
Anne Gordon KEIDEL, Boston, USA Nautical Imagery in the Writings of Basil of Caesarea	41
Martin MAYERHOFER, Rom, Italien Die basilianische Anthropologie als Verständnisschlüssel zu <i>Ad ado- lescentes</i>	47
Anna M. SILVAS, Armidale NSW, Australia Basil and Gregory of Nyssa on the Ascetic Life: Introductory Com- parisons.....	53

Antony MEREDITH, S.J., London, UK Universal Salvation and Human Response in Gregory of Nyssa.....	63
Robin ORTON, London, UK 'Physical' Soteriology in Gregory of Nyssa: A Response to Reinhard M. Hübner.....	69
Marcello LA MATINA, Macerata, Italy Seeing God through Language. Quotation and Deixis in Gregory of Nyssa's <i>Against Eunomius</i> , Book III	77
Hui XIA, Leuven, Belgium The Light Imagery in Gregory of Nyssa's <i>Contra Eunomium</i> III 6..	91
Francisco BASTITTA HARRIET, Buenos Aires, Argentina Does God 'Follow' Human Decision? An Interpretation of a Passage from Gregory of Nyssa's <i>De vita Moysis</i> (II 86).....	101
Miguel BRUGAROLAS, Pamplona, Spain Anointing and Kingdom: Some Aspects of Gregory of Nyssa's Pneu- matology	113
Matthew R. LOOTENS, New York City, USA A Preface to Gregory of Nyssa's <i>Contra Eunomium</i> ? Gregory's <i>Epis- tula</i> 29.....	121
Nathan D. HOWARD, Martin, Tennessee, USA Gregory of Nyssa's <i>Vita Macrinae</i> in the Fourth-Century Trinitarian Debate.....	131
Ann CONWAY-JONES, Manchester, UK Gregory of Nyssa's Tabernacle Imagery: Mysticism, Theology and Politics	143
Elena ENE D-VASILESCU, Oxford, UK How Would Gregory of Nyssa Understand Evolutionism?	151
Daniel G. OPPERWALL, Hamilton, Canada Sinai and Corporate Epistemology in the Orations of Gregory of Nazianzus	169
Finn DAMGAARD, Copenhagen, Denmark The Figure of Moses in Gregory of Nazianzus' Autobiographical Remarks in his Orations and Poems.....	179

Gregory K. HILLIS, Louisville, Kentucky, USA Pneumatology and Soteriology according to Gregory of Nazianzus and Cyril of Alexandria	187
Zurab JASHI, Leipzig, Germany Human Freedom and Divine Providence according to Gregory of Nazianzus	199
Matthew BRIEL, Bronx, New York, USA Gregory the Theologian, <i>Logos</i> and Literature	207

THE SECOND HALF OF THE FOURTH CENTURY

John VOELKER, Viking, Minnesota, USA Marius Victorinus' Remembrance of the Nicene Council	217
Kellen PLAXCO, Milwaukee, USA Didymus the Blind and the Metaphysics of Participation	227
Rubén PERETÓ RIVAS, Mendoza, Argentina La acedia y Evagrio Pónico. Entre ángeles y demonios	239
Young Richard KIM, Grand Rapids, USA The Pastoral Care of Epiphanius of Cyprus	247
Peter Anthony MENA, Madison, NJ, USA Insatiable Appetites: Epiphanius of Salamis and the Making of the Heretical Villain	257
Constantine BOZINIS, Thessaloniki, Greece <i>De imperio et potestate</i> . A Dialogue with John Chrysostom	265
Johan LEEMANS, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Leuven, Belgium John Chrysostom's First Homily on Pentecost (CPG 4343): Liturgy and Theology	285
Natalia SMELOVA, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg, Russia St John Chrysostom's Exegesis on the Prophet <i>Isaiah</i> : The Oriental Translations and their Manuscripts	295
Goran SEKULOVSKI, Paris, France Jean Chrysostome sur la communion de Judas	311

Jeff W. CHILDERS, Abilene, Texas, USA
 Chrysostom in Syriac Dress..... 323

Cara J. ASPESI, Notre Dame, USA
 Literacy and Book Ownership in the Congregations of John Chrysostom..... 333

Jonathan STANFILL, New York, USA
 John Chrysostom’s Gothic Parish and the Politics of Space..... 345

Peter MOORE, Sydney, Australia
 Chrysostom’s Concept of γνώμη: How ‘Chosen Life’s Orientation’ Undergirds Chrysostom’s Strategy in Preaching..... 351

Chris L. DE WET, Pretoria, South Africa
 John Chrysostom’s Advice to Slaveholders 359

Paola Francesca MORETTI, Milano, Italy
 Not only *ianua diaboli*. Jerome, the Bible and the Construction of a Female Gender Model..... 367

Vít HUŠEK, Olomouc, Czech Republic
 ‘Perfection Appropriate to the Fragile Human Condition’: Jerome and Pelagius on the Perfection of Christian Life 385

Pak-Wah LAI, Singapore
 The *Imago Dei* and Salvation among the Antiochenes: A Comparison of John Chrysostom with Theodore of Mopsuestia..... 393

George KALANTZIS, Wheaton, Illinois, USA
Creatio ex Terrae: Immortality and the Fall in Theodore, Chrysostom, and Theodoret 403

Volume 16

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXVIII

FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY ONWARDS (GREEK WRITERS)

Anna LANKINA, Gainesville, Florida, USA
 Reclaiming the Memory of the Christian Past: Philostorgius’ Missionary Heroes..... 3

Vasilije VRANIC, Marquette University, USA The Logos as <i>theios sporos</i> : The Christology of the <i>Expositio rectae fidei</i> of Theodoret of Cyrillus	11
Andreas WESTERGREN, Lund, Sweden A Relic <i>In Spe</i> : Theodoret's Depiction of a Philosopher Saint.....	25
George A. BEVAN, Kingston, Canada Interpolations in the Syriac Translation of Nestorius' <i>Liber Heraclidis</i>	31
Ken PARRY, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia 'Rejoice for Me, O Desert': Fresh Light on the Remains of Nestorius in Egypt	41
Josef RIST, Bochum, Germany Kirchenpolitik und/oder Bestechung: Die Geschenke des Kyrill von Alexandrien an den kaiserlichen Hof	51
Hans VAN LOON, Culemborg, The Netherlands The Pelagian Debate and Cyril of Alexandria's Theology	61
Hannah MILNER, Cambridge, UK Cyril of Alexandria's Treatment of Sources in his <i>Commentary on the Twelve Prophets</i>	85
Matthew R. CRAWFORD, Durham, UK Assessing the Authenticity of the Greek Fragments on <i>Psalm 22</i> (LXX) attributed to Cyril of Alexandria.....	95
Dimitrios ZAGANAS, Paris, France Against Origen and/or Origenists? Cyril of Alexandria's Rejection of John the Baptist's Angelic Nature in his <i>Commentary on John 1:6</i>	101
Richard W. BISHOP, Leuven, Belgium Cyril of Alexandria's Sermon on the Ascension (CPG 5281).....	107
Daniel KEATING, Detroit, MI, USA Supersessionism in Cyril of Alexandria	119
Thomas ARENTZEN, Lund, Sweden 'Your virginity shines' – The Attraction of the Virgin in the <i>Annunciation Hymn</i> by Romanos the Melodist	125
Thomas CATTOI, Berkeley, USA An Evagrian ὑπόστασις? Leontios of Byzantium and the 'Composite Subjectivity' of the Person of Christ.....	133

Leszek MISIARCZYK, Warsaw, Poland The Relationship between <i>nous</i> , <i>pneuma</i> and <i>logistikon</i> in Evagrius Ponticus' Anthropology.....	149
J. Gregory GIVEN, Cambridge, USA Anchoring the Areopagite: An Intertextual Approach to Pseudo-Dionysius	155
Ladislav CHVÁTAL, Olomouc, Czech Republic The Concept of 'Grace' in Dionysius the Areopagite	173
Graciela L. RITACCO, San Miguel, Argentina El Bien, el Sol y el Rayo de Luz según Dionisio del Areópago	181
Zachary M. GUILIANO, Cambridge, UK The Cross in (Pseudo-)Dionysius: Pinnacle and Pit of Revelation	201
David NEWHEISER, Chicago, USA Eschatology and the Areopagite: Interpreting the Dionysian Hierarchies in Terms of Time	215
Ashley PURPURA, New York City, USA 'Pseudo' Dionysius the Areopagite's <i>Ecclesiastical Hierarchy</i> : Keeping the Divine Order and Participating in Divinity	223
Filip IVANOVIC, Trondheim, Norway Dionysius the Areopagite on Justice	231
Brenda LLEWELLYN IHSEN, Tacoma, USA Money in the Meadow: Conversion and Coin in John Moschos' <i>Pratum spirituale</i>	237
Bogdan G. BUCUR, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, USA Exegesis and Intertextuality in Anastasius the Sinaite's Homily <i>On the Transfiguration</i>	249
Christopher JOHNSON, Tuscaloosa, USA Between Madness and Holiness: Symeon of Emesa and the 'Pedagogics of Liminality'	261
Archbishop Rowan WILLIAMS, London, UK Nature, Passion and Desire: Maximus' Ontology of Excess	267
Manuel MIRA IBORRA, Rome, Italy Friendship in Maximus the Confessor.....	273

Mariusus PORTARU, Rome, Italy	
Gradual Participation according to St Maximus the Confessor.....	281
Michael BAKKER, Amsterdam, The Netherlands	
Willing in St Maximus' Mystagogical Habitat: Bringing Habits in Line with One's <i>logos</i>	295
Andreas ANDREOPOULOS, Winchester, UK	
'All in All' in the Byzantine Anaphora and the Eschatological Mys- tagogy of Maximus the Confessor	303
Cyril K. CRAWFORD, OSB, Leuven, Belgium (†)	
'Receptive Potency' (<i>dektikē dynamis</i>) in <i>Ambigua ad Iohannem</i> 20 of St Maximus the Confessor.....	313
Johannes BÖRJESSON, Cambridge, UK	
Maximus the Confessor's Knowledge of Augustine: An Exploration of Evidence Derived from the <i>Acta</i> of the Lateran Council of 649 ..	325
Joseph STEINEGER, Chicago, USA	
John of Damascus on the Simplicity of God.....	337
Scott ABLES, Oxford, UK	
Did John of Damascus Modify His Sources in the <i>Expositio fidei</i> ? ...	355
Adrian AGACHI, Winchester, UK	
A Critical Analysis of the Theological Conflict between St Symeon the New Theologian and Stephen of Nicomedia.....	363
Vladimir A. BARANOV, Novosibirsk, Russia	
<i>Amphilochia</i> 231 of Patriarch Photius as a Possible Source on the Christology of the Byzantine Iconoclasts	371
Theodoros ALEXOPOULOS, Athens, Greece	
The Byzantine <i>Filioque</i> -Supporters in the 13 th Century John Bekkos and Konstantin Melitiniotes and their Relation with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.....	381
Nicholas BAMFORD, St Albans, UK	
Using Gregory Palamas' Energetic Theology to Address John Ziziou- las' Existentialism	397
John BEKOS, Nicosia, Cyprus	
Nicholas Cabasilas' Political Theology in an Epoch of Economic Crisis: A Reading of a 14 th -Century Political Discourse	405

Volume 17

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXIX

LATIN WRITERS

Dennis Paul QUINN, Pomona, California, USA In the Names of God and His Christ: Evil Daemons, Exorcism, and Conversion in Firmicus Maternus.....	3
Stanley P. ROSENBERG, Oxford, UK Nature and the Natural World in Ambrose's <i>Hexaemeron</i>	15
Brian DUNKLE, S.J., South Bend, USA Mystagogy and Creed in Ambrose's <i>Iam Surgit Hora Tertia</i>	25
Finbarr G. CLANCY, S.J., Dublin, Ireland The Eucharist in St Ambrose's Commentaries on the <i>Psalms</i>	35
Jan DEN BOEFT, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands <i>Qui cantat, vacuus est</i> : Ambrose on singing	45
Crystal LUBINSKY, University of Edinburgh, UK Re-reading Masculinity in Christian Greco-Roman Culture through Ambrose and the Female Transvestite Monk, Matrona of Perge.....	51
Maria E. DOERFLER, Durham, USA Keeping it in the Family: The law and the Law in Ambrose of Milan's Letters	67
Camille GERZAGUET, Lyon, France <i>Le De fuga saeculi</i> d'Ambroise de Milan et sa datation. Notes de philologie et d'histoire.....	75
Vincenzo MESSANA, Palermo, Italia Fra Sicilia e Burdigala nel IV secolo: gli intellettuali Citario e Vit- torio (Ausonius, <i>Prof.</i> 13 e 22)	85
Edmon L. GALLAGHER, Florence, Alabama, USA Jerome's <i>Prologus Galeatus</i> and the OT Canon of North Africa.....	99
Christine McCANN, Northfield, VT, USA Incentives to Virtue: Jerome's Use of Biblical Models	107
Christa GRAY, Oxford, UK The Monk and the Ridiculous: Comedy in Jerome's <i>Vita Malchi</i>	115

Zachary YUZWA, Cornell University, USA To Live by the Example of Angels: Dialogue, Imitation and Identity in Sulpicius Severus' <i>Gallus</i>	123
Robert McEACHNIE, Gainesville, USA Envisioning the Utopian Community in the Sermons of Chromatius of Aquileia.....	131
Hernán M. GIUDICE, Buenos Aires, Argentina El Papel del Apóstol Pablo en la Propuesta Priscilianista	139
Bernard GREEN, Oxford, UK Leo the Great on Baptism: <i>Letter</i> 16.....	149
Fabian SIEBER, Leuven, Belgium Christologische Namen und Titel in der <i>Paraphrase des Johannes- Evangeliums</i> des Nonnos von Panopolis	159
Junghoo KWON, Toronto, Canada The Latin Pseudo-Athanasian <i>De trinitate</i> Attributed to Eusebius of Vercelli and its Place of Composition: Spain or Northern Italy?	169
Salvatore COSTANZA, Agrigento, Italia Cartagine in Salviano di Marsiglia: alcune puntualizzazioni.....	175
Giulia MARCONI, Perugia, Italy <i>Commendatio</i> in Ostrogothic Italy: Studies on the Letters of Enno- dius of Pavia	187
Lucy GRIG, Edinburgh, UK Approaching Popular Culture in Late Antiquity: Singing in the Ser- mons of Caesarius of Arles.....	197
Thomas S. FERGUSON, Riverdale, New York, USA Grace and Kingship in <i>De aetatibus mundi et hominis</i> of Planciades Fulgentius	205
Jérémy DELMULLE, Paris, France Establishing an Authentic List of Prosper's Works.....	213
Albertus G.A. HORSTING, Notre Dame, USA Reading Augustine with Pleasure: The Original Form of Prosper of Aquitaine's <i>Book of Epigrams</i>	233

Michele CUTINO, Palermo, Italy Prosper and the Pagans	257
Norman W. JAMES, St Albans, UK Prosper of Aquitaine Revisited: Gallic Friend of Leo I or Resident Papal Adviser?.....	267
Alexander Y. HWANG, Louisville, USA Prosper of Aquitaine and the Fall of Rome.....	277
Brian J. MATZ, Helena, USA Legacy of Prosper of Aquitaine in the Ninth-Century Predestination Debate	283
Raúl VILLEGAS MARÍN, Paris, France, and Barcelona, Spain Original Sin in the Provençal Ascetic Theology: John Cassian.....	289
Pere MAYMÓ I CAPDEVILA, Barcelona, Spain A Bishop Faces War: Gregory the Great's Attitude towards Ariulf's Campaign on Rome (591-592).....	297
Hector SCERRI, Msida, Malta Life as a Journey in the Letters of Gregory the Great.....	305
Theresia HAINTHALER, Frankfurt am Main, Germany Canon 13 of the Second Council of Seville (619) under Isidore of Seville. A Latin Anti-Monophysite Treatise	311

NACHLEBEN

Gerald CRESTA, Buenos Aires, Argentine From Dionysius' <i>thearchia</i> to Bonaventure's <i>hierarchia</i> : Assimilation and Evolution of the Concept.....	325
Lesley-Anne DYER, Notre Dame, USA The Twelfth-Century Influence of Hilary of Poitiers on Richard of St Victor's <i>De trinitate</i>	333
John T. SLOTEMAKER, Boston, USA Reading Augustine in the Fourteenth Century: Gregory of Rimini and Pierre d'Ailly on the <i>Imago Trinitatis</i>	345

Jeffrey C. WITT, Boston, USA Interpreting Augustine: On the Nature of ‘Theological Knowledge’ in the Fourteenth Century.....	359
Joost VAN ROSSUM, Paris, France Creation-Theology in Gregory Palamas and Theophanes of Nicaea, Compatible or Incompatible?	373
Yilun CAI, Leuven, Belgium The Appeal to Augustine in Domingo Bañez’ Theology of Efficacious Grace	379
Elizabeth A. CLARK, Durham, USA Romanizing Protestantism in Nineteenth-Century America: John Williamson Nevin, the Fathers, and the ‘Mercersburg Theology’	385
Pier Franco BEATRICE, University of Padua, Italy Reading Elizabeth A. Clark, <i>Founding the Fathers</i>	395
Kenneth NOAKES, Wimborne, Dorset, UK ‘Fellow Citizens with you and your Great Benefactors’: Newman and the Fathers in the Parochial Sermons	401
Manuela E. GHEORGHE, Olomouc, Czech Republic The Reception of Hesychia in Romanian Literature.....	407
Jason RADCLIFF, Edinburgh, UK Thomas F. Torrance’s Conception of the <i>Consensus patrum</i> on the Doctrine of Pneumatology	417
Andrew LENOX-CONYNGHAM, Birmingham, UK In Praise of St Jerome and Against the Anglican Cult of ‘Niceness’	435

Volume 18

STUDIA PATRISTICA LXX

ST AUGUSTINE AND HIS OPPONENTS

Kazuhiko DEMURA, Okayama, Japan The Concept of Heart in Augustine of Hippo: Its Emergence and Development	3
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Therese FUHRER, Berlin, Germany The ‘Milan narrative’ in Augustine’s <i>Confessions</i> : Intellectual and Material Spaces in Late Antique Milan	17
Kenneth M. WILSON, Oxford, UK Sin as Contagious in the Writings of Cyprian and Augustine.....	37
Marius A. VAN WILLIGEN, Tilburg, The Netherlands Ambrose’s <i>De paradiso</i> : An Inspiring Source for Augustine of Hippo	47
Ariane MAGNY, Kamloops, Canada How Important were Porphyry’s Anti-Christian Ideas to Augustine?	55
Jonathan D. TEUBNER, Cambridge, UK Augustine’s <i>De magistro</i> : Scriptural Arguments and the Genre of Philosophy	63
Marie-Anne VANNIER, Université de Lorraine-MSH Lorraine, France La mystagogie chez S. Augustin.....	73
Joseph T. LIENHARD, S.J., Bronx, New York, USA <i>Locutio</i> and <i>sensus</i> in Augustine’s Writings on the Heptateuch.....	79
Laela ZWOLLO, Centre for Patristic Research, University of Tilburg, The Netherlands St Augustine on the Soul’s Divine Experience: <i>Visio intellectualis</i> and <i>Imago dei</i> from Book XII of <i>De genesi ad litteram libri XII</i>	85
Enrique A. EGUIARTE, Madrid, Spain The Exegetical Function of Old Testament Names in Augustine’s <i>Commentary on the Psalms</i>	93
Mickaël RIBREAU, Paris, France À la frontière de plusieurs controverses doctrinales: <i>L’Enarratio au</i> <i>Psaume 118</i> d’Augustin	99
Wendy ELGERSMA HELLEMAN, Plateau State, Nigeria Augustine and Philo of Alexandria’s ‘Sarah’ as a Wisdom Figure (<i>De</i> <i>Civitate Dei</i> XV 2f.; XVI 25-32)	105
Paul VAN GEEST, Tilburg and Amsterdam, The Netherlands St Augustine on God’s Incomprehensibility, Incarnation and the Authority of St John.....	117

Piotr M. PACIOREK, Miami, USA The Metaphor of ‘the Letter from God’ as Applied to Holy Scripture by Saint Augustine	133
John Peter KENNEY, Colchester, Vermont, USA Apophysis and Interiority in Augustine’s Early Writings	147
Karl F. MORRISON, Princeton, NJ, USA Augustine’s Project of Self-Knowing and the Paradoxes of Art: An Experiment in Biblical Hermeneutics	159
Tarmo TOOM, Washington, D.C., USA Was Augustine an Intentionalist? Authorial Intention in Augustine’s Hermeneutics	185
Francine CARDMAN, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA Discerning the Heart: Intention as Ethical Norm in Augustine’s <i>Homilies on 1 John</i>	195
Samuel KIMBRIEL, Cambridge, UK Illumination and the Practice of Inquiry in Augustine	203
Susan Blackburn GRIFFITH, Oxford, UK Unwrapping the Word: Metaphor in the Augustinian Imagination...	213
Paula J. ROSE, Amsterdam, The Netherlands ‘ <i>Videbit me nocte proxima, sed in somnis</i> ’: Augustine’s Rhetorical Use of Dream Narratives.....	221
Jared ORTIZ, Washington, D.C., USA The Deep Grammar of Augustine’s Conversion	233
Emmanuel BERMON, University of Bordeaux, France Grammar and Metaphysics: About the Forms <i>essendi, essendo,</i> <i>essendum,</i> and <i>essens</i> in Augustine’s <i>Ars grammatica breuiata</i> (IV, 31 Weber)	241
Gerald P. BOERSMA, Durham, UK Enjoying the Trinity in <i>De uera religione</i>	251
Emily CAIN, New York, NY, USA Knowledge Seeking Wisdom: A Pedagogical Pattern for Augustine’s <i>De trinitate</i>	257

Michael L. CARREKER, Macon, Georgia, USA The Integrity of Christ's <i>Scientia</i> and <i>Sapientia</i> in the Argument of the <i>De trinitate</i> of Augustine	265
Dongsun CHO, Fort Worth, Texas, USA An Apology for Augustine's <i>Filioque</i> as a Hermeneutical Referent to the Immanent Trinity	275
Ronnie J. ROMBS, Dallas, USA The Grace of Creation and Perfection as Key to Augustine's <i>Confes- sions</i>	285
Matthias SMALBRUGGE, Amsterdam, The Netherlands Image as a Hermeneutic Model in <i>Confessions X</i>	295
Naoki KAMIMURA, Tokyo, Japan The Consultation of Sacred Books and the Mediator: The <i>Sortes</i> in Augustine	305
Eva-Maria KUHN, Munich, Germany Listening to the Bishop: A Note on the Construction of Judicial Authority in <i>Confessions VI 3-5</i>	317
Jangho JO, Waco, USA Augustine's Three-Day Lecture in Carthage	331
Alicia EELLEN, Leuven, Belgium <i>1Tim. 1:15: Humanus sermo</i> or <i>Fidelis sermo</i> ? Augustine's <i>Sermo</i> 174 and its Christology	339
Han-luen KANTZER KOMLINE, South Bend, IN, USA ' <i>Ut in illo uiueremus</i> ': Augustine on the Two Wills of Christ	347
George C. BERTHOLD, Manchester, New Hampshire, USA Dyothelite Language in Augustine's Christology	357
Chris THOMAS, Central University College, Accra, Ghana Donatism and the Contextualisation of Christianity: A Cautionary Tale	365
Jane E. MERDINGER, Incline Village, Nevada, USA Before Augustine's Encounter with Emeritus: Early Mauretanian Donatism	371

James K. LEE, Southern Methodist University, TX, USA The Church as Mystery in the Theology of St Augustine	381
Charles D. ROBERTSON, Houston, USA Augustinian Ecclesiology and Predestination: An Intractable Problem?	401
Brian GRONEWOLLER, Atlanta, USA Felicianus, Maximianism, and Augustine's Anti-Donatist Polemic...	409
Marianne DJUTH, Canisius College, Buffalo, New York, USA Augustine on the Saints and the Community of the Living and the Dead.....	419
Bart VAN EGMOND, Kampen, The Netherlands Perseverance until the End in Augustine's Anti-Donatist Polemic ...	433
Carles BUENACASA PÉREZ, Barcelona, Spain The Letters <i>Ad Donatistas</i> of Augustine and their Relevance in the Anti-Donatist Controversy	439
Ron HAFLIDSON, Edinburgh, UK Imitation and the Mediation of Christ in Augustine's <i>City of God</i> ...	449
Julia HUDSON, Oxford, UK Leaves, Mice and Barbarians: The Providential Meaning of Incidents in the <i>De ordine</i> and <i>De ciuitate Dei</i>	457
Shari BOODTS, Leuven, Belgium A Critical Assessment of Wolfenbüttel Herz.-Aug.-Bibl. <i>Cod. Guelf. 237 (Helmst. 204)</i> and its Value for the Edition of St Augustine's <i>Sermones ad populum</i>	465
Lenka KARFÍKOVÁ, Prague, Czech Republic Augustine to Nebridius on the Ideas of Individuals (<i>ep. 14,4</i>).....	477
Pierre DESCOTES, Paris, France Deux lettres sur l'origine de l'âme: Les <i>Epistulae</i> 166 et 190 de saint Augustin.....	487
Nicholas J. BAKER-BRIAN, Cardiff, Wales, UK Women in Augustine's Anti-Manichaean Writings: Rumour, Rhetoric, and Ritual.....	499

Michael W. TKACZ, Spokane, Washington, USA Occasionalism and Augustine's Builder Analogy for Creation.....	521
Kelly E. ARENSON, Pittsburgh, USA Augustine's Defense and Redemption of the Body	529
Catherine LEFORT, Paris, France À propos d'une source inédite des <i>Soliloques</i> d'Augustin: La notion cicéronienne de «vraisemblance» (<i>uerisimile / similitudo ueri</i>).....	539
Kenneth B. STEINHAUSER, St Louis, Missouri, USA Curiosity in Augustine's <i>Soliloquies</i> : <i>Agitur enim de sanitate oculo- rum tuorum</i>	547
Frederick H. RUSSELL, Newark, New Jersey USA Augustine's Contradictory Just War.....	553
Kimberly F. BAKER, Latrobe, Pennsylvania, USA <i>Transfiguravit in se</i> : The Sacramentality of Augustine's Doctrine of the <i>Totus Christus</i>	559
Mark G. VAILLANCOURT, New York, USA The Eucharistic Realism of St Augustine: Did Paschasius Radbertus Get Him Right? An Examination of Recent Scholarship on the Ser- mons of St Augustine	569
Martin BELLEROSE, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá, Colombie Le sens pétrinien du mot <i>παροικικός</i> comme source de l'idée augus- tinienne de <i>peregrinus</i>	577
Gertrude GILLETTE, Ave Maria, USA Anger and Community in the <i>Rule</i> of Augustine.....	591
Robert HORKA, Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology, Comenius University Bratislava, Slovakia <i>Curiositas ductrix</i> : Die negative und positive Beziehung des hl. Augustinus zur Neugierde.....	601
Paige E. HOCHSCHILD, Mount St Mary's University, USA Unity of Memory in <i>De musica</i> VI.....	611
Ali BONNER, Cambridge, UK The Manuscript Transmission of Pelagius' <i>Ad Demetriadem</i> : The Evidence of Some Manuscript Witnesses.....	619

Peter J. VAN EGMOND, Amsterdam, The Netherlands	
Pelagius and the Origenist Controversy in Palestine.....	631
Rafał TOCZKO, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, Poland	
Rome as the Basis of Argument in the So-called Pelagian Controversy (415-418).....	649
Nozomu YAMADA, Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan	
The Influence of Chromatius and Rufinus of Aquileia on Pelagius – as seen in his Key Ascetic Concepts: <i>exemplum Christi, sapientia</i> and <i>imperturbabilitas</i>	661
Matthew J. PEREIRA, New York, USA	
From Augustine to the Scythian Monks: Social Memory and the Doctrine of Predestination	671