



Rereading Late Ancient Christianity: Introduction

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This special issue of *JMEMS*, “Rereading Late Ancient Christianity,” is dedicated to Dr. Elizabeth A. Clark, John Carlisle Kilgo Professor of Religion at Duke University.

The essays collected in “Rereading Late Ancient Christianity” share a number of themes and one inspiration. The title suggests two of those themes. The authors all consider early Christianity, particularly Christianity of the fourth century. They also all read primary texts with new critical historiographic awareness and theoretical sophistication. Apologetics are absent; philology is a method and not an objective. The authors all treat religious practices—whether intellectual or material—within a broad social framework. The essays in this volume present us with a set of exemplary models of contemporary constructions of the past.

The contributors’ common concern with social practice is manifest despite the distinctive categories of their subjects—gender (Brakke, Burrus, and Miller), asceticism (Goehring and Hunter), and historiography (Cameron, Elm, and Trout). These categories, however, index the authors’ shared inspiration: Elizabeth Clark and her work.

Elizabeth Clark is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and last year was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Uppsala. She is a past president of the American Academy of Religion, of the American Society of Church History, and of the North American Patristics Society. She founded and continues to edit the methodologically revisionist *Journal of Early Christian Studies*. The volumes she authored or edited trace her intellectual trajectory. *Clement’s Use of Aristotle: The Aristotelian Contribution to Clement of Alexandria’s Refutation of Gnosticism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1977), demonstrated both her philological facility and her control of intellectual history. In its critique of conventional assumptions about the dominance of Platonism in Clement’s thought,

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this volume also prefigured the consistently revisionist positioning of Clark's scholarship.

More revealing of Clark's passions were a series of works of the late seventies and eighties: *Women and Religion: A Feminist Sourcebook of Christian Thought*, with Herbert Richardson and, in the new edition, with Gary Brower and Randall Styers (Harper and Row, 1977 and rev. 1996); *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends: Essays and Translations* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1979); *Women in the Early Church* (Michael Glazier, 1983); *The Life of Melania the Younger: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1984); and *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1986). These works demonstrate Clark's scholarly interest in mapping the role of women in the past; they also reveal something of her ardent commitment to the improvement of women's place in the present. They have made a powerful contribution to the field of early Christianity not only by engaging women's issues, but also by grounding a feminist position in compelling empirical research.

As feminism has broadened into gender studies and as the place of women in the academy has improved, Clark's revisionism involved her in the culture wars. Just as she brought women to bear on the fathers of the church, she took theory to historical theology. In *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton University Press, 1992), Clark dissects theological issues to reveal their non-theological implications. Current social network theory is put to work to understand how theological contentions are also social and political claims. Clark's engagement with theory is even more apparent in her volume, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1999). This work offers a poststructuralist excavation of texts as sites of social and political archaeology. Asceticism was read into texts in order to have those texts work powerfully for their privileged interpreters. Finally, theory, or perhaps more specifically, historiography is the subject of Clark's most recent project, a work that should be in press by the time this issue appears: *History, Theory, and the Study of Early Christianity*.

The essays in this *JMEMS* collection pay homage to Clark's scholarship both by referring to her work and by adding further to the substance of her contribution. Patristic studies, as viewed through the contributions in this special issue, emerge as independent of religious sectarianism. Rather, their authors are committed to the understanding of power relations involving sex (gender), the body (asceticism), and the academy (historiography). Each of the contributors is prominent in the field of late ancient Christian

studies. Each, too, feels a close association with Clark, regarding her an essential interlocutor and friend. Only Patricia Cox Miller was Clark's student, but she studied with Clark not as a graduate student at Duke University, but as an undergraduate at Mary Washington College. Dennis Trout, who received his Ph.D. in Classical Studies at Duke University, worked closely with Clark, though she was not his dissertation advisor. Clark has mentored the younger contributors—David Brakke, Virginia Burrus, Susanna Elm, and David Hunter—informally over the years. James Goehring was appointed to the daunting task of replacing Clark when she left Mary Washington for Duke University. Averil Cameron is a long-time friend and fellow eminence in the field.

In January 2003, Elizabeth Clark received a Distinguished Achievement Award from the American Society of Church History. The acclamations that she received there dwelt on the importance of her work and on the vastness of her intellectual generosity. David Brakke's observation sums up her place in the academy: "Elizabeth Clark was not my teacher, nor was she the teacher of seventy-five percent of the younger scholars working in early church history today. It just seems that way." In her scrupulously rigorous scholarship, in her unstinting generosity, and in her remarkable modesty, she is a model for us all. More than this, I can add, as Liz's colleague for nearly two decades at Duke University, that she has an insistent sense of justice and tenacious commitment to honesty that makes that model into an ideal.