

## Guest Editor Foreword: Rethinking Medical Metaphors in Late Ancient Christianity

*Special issue for Studies in Late Antiquity*

Scholars of Late Antiquity have long noted the medical, health, and healing metaphors found in early Christian sources. In older research, scholars have understood these metaphors—such as Christ as the divine physician or sin as illness of the soul—to be drawing ideas from the field of medicine to structure concepts in the field of religion. They have understood this conceptual structuring rather simplistically, for instance associating general ideas of “health,” or “unhealthfulness” with right belief or right practice and associating the role of the physician as healer with leadership positions in the church. In short, the points of contact between the source and target domains were assumed to be rather general and symbolic. Further, older scholarship has assumed that the medical language found in religious sources was not evidence of Christian medical practice, but rather should be read as mere rhetoric, with the intent of adding flourish and prestige to theological arguments. The fields of late ancient medicine and religions, older scholarship assumed, were quite distinct.

More recently, as scholars have read more widely in the medical sources, we have become better attuned to medical resonances in religious sources and we are beginning to discern the pervasive use of anatomical, physiological, and therapeutic reasoning. Moreover, as we analyze these resonances in detail and as we see religious sources’ intimate familiarity with medical ideas and practices, we have begun to question previous scholarly assumptions and approaches. The articles in this special issue join in this recent scholarly turn that is thinking about medical metaphors in significantly different ways.

First, the articles here resist a rigid distinction between the domains of medicine and religion. It was not the case that medicine’s purview was the body, while religion’s purview was the soul, with religious authors borrowing medicine’s concepts about *bodily* health in order to speak about the health of the *soul*. Rather, medicine and religion were both concerned with the health

of bodies and souls alike; both domains understood the health of body and soul to be interdependent. The articles in this special issue demonstrate the shared purviews and aims of these two spheres, revealing fuzzier boundaries between late ancient religion and medicine than previously assumed.

Second, the articles in this special issue unearth the complexity and nuance that characterize late ancient Christian metaphors. They reveal that our sources were not merely employing *general* or *symbolic* concepts from the field of medicine (e.g., health, illness, physician), but highly-specific and technical points of anatomy, physiology, diagnosis, and treatment. The essays provide evidence of Christian authors working adeptly with sophisticated systems of medical thought. As such, and coupled with what we already knew about the personal connections these authors had with practicing physicians, the research in this special issue indicates that late ancient Christians had a deeper familiarity with medical sciences than previously thought.

Finally, the articles in this special issue compel us to think about late ancient Christians' medical metaphors as more than just a *conceptual* or *linguistic frame* to borrow. Rather the articles each highlight the manner in which religious authors were borrowing medical ideas to think about early Christians' *material* bodies (both their anatomy and physiology) so that they could describe what ailed their congregants and prescribe material, ritualized interventions that would restore them to full health. For Christian leaders, medical theories of disease and medical practices of diagnosis and treatment served as a resource to consult when discussing the *real, material* well-being of those in their charge, informing Christians' ascetic, sacramental, and ethical discourse and practice.

Taken together, these articles reveal the instability of categories and divisions scholars have long assumed: we no longer find a meaningful divide between body and soul, between the fields of medicine and religion, and, perhaps most intriguingly, between the metaphorical and the literal. We are beginning to see language formerly read as metaphoric and reasoning formerly perceived as analogic as far more *literal* than we had previously assumed. As such, the articles in this special issue prompt us to question whether the term "metaphor" is a sufficient descriptor for much of the medical discourse found in late ancient Christian sources.

The next step in this scholarly paradigm shift will be to explore how the religious use of medical and physiological reasoning in turn reshaped medical views of the body-soul. While the primary interest of the papers in this special issue has been to map the influence of medicine on religion, we are convinced that the relationship should be characterized as multi-directional. We know that medical writers' understanding of the human body was influenced by their

cultural context (as we see most clearly in gynecological sources that anthropomorphize women's body parts and functioning in terms of female stereotypes). So too we suspect that theological notions of body-soul and religious practices that served as therapeutic prescriptions most certainly inflected later medical anatomy, physiology, diagnosis, and treatments. We leave to future scholars the work of discerning how religious adaptations of medicine in turn became instantiated in medical ideas.

Let me close with a few words of gratitude to those who were instrumental in seeing this special issue through to publication. Many thanks to the authors of the papers who saw the value of collecting their essays together in order to, together, make a methodological contribution, and who were willing to delay the publication of their work in order to do so. Many thanks to the Religion, Medicine, Disability, and Health in late antiquity working group (ReMeDHe, pronounced "remedy") for providing a collegial and stimulating environment in which scholars can share knowledge, support one another's work, and collaborate on scholarly projects like this special issue. Many thanks to *Studies in Late Antiquity* for providing a forum for scholarly innovation. As we aimed to recast the terrain, question commonly-held assumptions, and encourage dialogue across scholarly silos (namely historians of medicine and late ancient religious studies scholars), we found ourselves aligned intimately with the goals of *SLA*. A special thanks to Editor-in-Chief, Beth DePalma Digeser, and to editorial assistants, Lisa Meyers and Evan Andersson, for their thoughtful guidance throughout the process. ■