Madigan and Osiek provide an invaluable resource for all who are interested in the historical evidence relating to the ordination of women as deacons and presbyters in the early centuries up to roughly the sixth century. Carolyn Osiek is a renowned international scholar well published in the literature and history of the early church. Kevin Madigan is Professor of the History of Christianity at Harvard Divinity School, specializing in early and medieval scholastic theology. The book sets out to record all the known records mentioning women deacons and presbyters and one bishop (episkopa) in the Greek- and Latin-speaking worlds. My first response is therefore to offer enthusiastic thanks. The compilation of documents draws on a wide variety of sources, “church orders, conciliar decrees, funerary and dedicatory inscription, letters, biographies and other literary material.” The strength of this book is to be found in the collection of all available material, the rigorous scholarly research to bring all this material together, and the judicious comments on each text. The editors do not examine other church orders pertaining to women, such as the orders of widows and virgins, nor do they include a study of evidence from the Syriac Church.

The study begins with a brief introduction situating this research within similar studies of women’s ministry in the church. Here the editors’ historical expertise is evident as they note the methodological difficulties in interpreting the meaning of terms as they were
used and understood in earlier centuries. They give the example of a woman Sabiniana who is called both *diakonos* by John Chrysostom and *diakonissa* by Palladius, concluding that the terms were interchangeable. They note distinctions with regard to women and church leadership—ordination, membership in the clergy, and special group status (5)—commenting that these designations may overlap but not in all cases, as is demonstrated by the widows in Carthage who were apparently ranked among the clergy although not ordained. In other cases deaconesses were ordained and had a liturgical role but not a sacramental role at the altar. There is also the problem of generalizing, since there was significant regional variation. A further problem is that some texts have only been preserved in later copies and in Latin translations of an original Greek text. At the end of the introduction, there is a brief reference to the current debate about the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, noting in particular the findings of the American Catholic Canon Law Society, which in 1995 proposed the reintroduction of the order of female deacons. This was followed in 2002 by the document from the Vatican’s Theological Commission (*Quaestiones de Diaconatu*) that acknowledges that at one time deaconesses were members of the clergy, while refraining judgment on the sacramentality of their ordination (6). By the end of this brief introduction the reader knows she or he is dealing with careful, critical historical scholarship.

The rest of the book is divided into a study of the available evidence in the Greek and Latin churches. The material begins with a discussion of New Testament texts (Rom 16:1–2; 1 Tim 3:8–11; 5:3–13). This is followed by three chapters on women deacons in the East, a chapter on women deacons in the West, a chapter on women deacons in the *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesus Christi* from the fourth or fifth century, a single chapter on women presbyters in the East and West, and a concluding chapter. The three chapters given to the examination of women deacons in the East are divided into a chapter on literary references, allusions, and inscription; a chapter on church canons and major texts; and a brief chapter on later texts that refer to earlier church practice. Each source is quoted and followed by a brief comment. These comments tend to be explanatory rather than interpretive, and where there is interpretation it is offered cautiously, noting the difficulty of evaluating ancient evidence. The explanatory comments include details about the historical and geographical context of the source and, where known, information about the writer and the woman/women named. For some inscriptions a drawing gives the text in the original language, and a photographic plate is included in a few cases. Appendixes follow the text listing the location of the inscriptions and the locations of the women mentioned in the literary sources. There are maps showing the provenance of deacons and presbyters and a list of family relationships of the women named. The book concludes with an index of ancient names, an index of deaconesses, presbyters, and episkopa, and an index of modern authors.
The evidence reveals that the office of female deacons was more prevalent in the East, with approximately sixty-one inscriptions and forty literary references. In the West there are only four known inscriptions to female deacons and two literary references. The possible reason suggested for this sharp difference is the greater cultural separation and seclusion of women in the East than in the West, making it essential in the East for women deacons to instruct and visit women in their homes. The reverse is found in discussing the role of women presbyters. From a total of thirty-nine references across eleven different locations, only ten are from the East. This number includes one intriguing reference from the cemetery of St. Paul’s Basilica in Rome, “Here lies the venerable woman bishop Q [uenerabilis fem [ina] episkopa Q], buried in peace for five [years] … + Olybrio.” The editors note that with such a small number of surviving references it is difficult to assess if these numbers are representative.

While the book does not set out to argue for any particular position, the volume of evidence brought together in this book offers its own compelling argument that women in the earlier centuries had significant designated leadership roles in many church communities. Women had the title of deacon, and some the title of presbyter; they were part of a church “order” and were considered part of the clergy. There are references to women being ordained as widows and deacons and some possibly ordained as presbyters. There is some irony in the fact that a number of the references have been preserved in the writings of men who were strongly opposed to women’s leadership roles (Tertullian, Augustine). One suggested reason for the decline of women’s leadership after the sixth century is the rise of cultic sacramentalism and the concern about cultic purity. This is mentioned only briefly in the closing chapter.

For any scholar of history, this book is a study of historical method in evaluating ancient evidence. Since the issue of women in church ministry is so critical for the contemporary church, this book is an essential read for all engaged in Christian ministry, for the light it sheds on women’s leadership in the early church and its decline. My hope is that it will be reprinted in a paperback edition to make it more affordable for individuals to purchase.