Madigan, Kevin, and Carolyn Osiek, eds.

*Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*


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This is the collection of materials for which many of us have been waiting in regard to the evidence for female leadership, especially that of deaconess and presbyter, in the early church. Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek have worked well together to provide in accessible form a comprehensive resource of all extant literary, canonical, and epigraphical material from the Greek and Roman worlds. One does not need to know the ancient languages to appreciate or work with this volume. Notes, appendixes, maps, and indexes are invaluable.

Madigan and Osiek’s contribution is not just the collection itself but also in the correction of false assumptions that earlier studies have wielded: (1) that there were never women officeholders in the West; (2) that the title of deaconess displaced that of female deacon by the late third century; (3) that all women officeholders were celibate; (4) that by the fifth and sixth century the title deaconess was simply being given to female monastic superiors. They also acknowledge the methodological problems that effectively disappear as the evidence is put forth: (1) any reference to *diakonoi* as a group in the first and second centuries may refer to women as well as men; (2) there is a tendency on the part of modern writers to exaggerate the role of every major female figure in the early church to that of deacon; (3) the possible discrepancy between ancient and modern concepts of
ordained ministry and clergy must not be ignored. And, most important, female deacons and presbyters “cannot be confined to fringe or ‘heretical’ groups” (9).

Chapter 2 discusses three infamous Testament texts and their patristic commentators: Phoebe in Rom 16:1–2, female deacons or wives of male deacons in 1 Tim 3:8–11, and the role of widows in 1 Tim 5:3–13. In their conclusion to this chapter, Madigan and Osiek argue that the biblical texts are read for the most part by the patristic writers to support the practice of female deacons, since it is already being done, but caution that “the biblical texts are only the first step” (23).

It appears that the office of female deacon was more prevalent in the East than in the West. Chapters 3, 4, and 5, therefore, concentrate on the East. First consideration is given to the descriptive or real data about the lives and activities of female deacons, that is, literary texts, literary allusions, and inscriptions; the yield of this longest chapter is the diversity of contexts, roles, and backgrounds of female deacons in the East. The second consideration (ch. 4) focuses on the prescriptive texts found in canons and church practice. Madigan and Osiek conclude that the discrepancies from one piece of legislation to another show the developing self-understanding within and between the Eastern churches. The third matter of importance (ch. 5) centers on later texts, including John of Damascus, the Trullan Synod Canons, Photius, Theodore Balsamon, and other councils and canons. The concept of cultic purity as a replacement for temple sacrifice is evident in these later texts, and while it would appear to throw women out, these later texts “demonstrate the continuing memory in the church of what once was” (139).

Chapter 6 parallels chapters 3–4 with a focus on women deacons in the West and the literary texts, inscriptions, canons, and church practice that provide the evidence. According to the editors’ work, “the evidence for female deacons in the West is little and late” (148), which indicates that the female diaconate in the West was not as well defined and/or not as widely accepted as in the East.

The discussion of women deacons according to the historically ambiguous Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi and related texts is the basis for chapter 7. Surprisingly, widows are given more responsibility and honor in these texts than in any other church order and are clearly distinguished from deaconesses or female presbyters. (I especially like the Prayer of the Widows Who Sit in Front [155].) These texts are unusual in many ways and, according to Madigan and Osiek, are perhaps related to church structures as revealed in the Acts of Philip and the Martyrdom of Matthew.

Thus far the emphasis has been on female deacons. Chapter 8 considers women presbyters, and once again the difference between prescription and description is apparent. That is,
while synods and councils from both the East and West “condemned the practice of women presbyters, the epigraphical and literary evidence suggests their ongoing existence, even if in small numbers” (163). Literary texts, canons, legends, inscriptions, and episcopal letters are considered in this discussion, as well as the “three north Africans against women presbyters”: Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, and Augustine. The editors conclude that “the sources do not tell us what we would most like to know” (198); that is, prescriptions against female practitioners of the faith and descriptions of their very activities do not jibe. Ambiguity abounds, but “the material remains in manuscript and stone [allow] us to catch some glimpses of the lives of these Christian women of long ago” (206).

The conclusion (ch. 9) retraces the history of women holding the offices of deacon and presbyter in both the Eastern and Western Churches, proceeding from the earliest reference to a female deacon by Paul (Rom 16:1), to the third century, when women are specifically called to ministry, to the fourth through sixth centuries, when deaconesses are considered to be ordained clergy, to the decline of women’s offices in the church when only echoes of their leadership roles can be heard. While the reality of female leadership in the church remains ambiguous, Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek’s collection and analysis of the historical documents on the topic is important and relevant to church historians and modern church leaders alike. I look forward to this work’s consideration and inclusion in future early church studies, especially those that focus on women’s leadership roles past and present.