

EABS/SBL 2018 (Helsinki)

Programm unit: Virtue in Biblical Literature

### **The Male Gender of Virtue: The Allegorical Interpretation of Pharaoh's Decree in Exodus 1**

In Exodus 1:16, 22 the Egyptian Pharaoh decrees that the male Hebrew newborns shall be killed while the female ones may live. Philo and, following him, Origen interpret the gender of the newborns in allegorical terms: The “male” represents the virtues which Pharaoh wants to repress, while the “female” represents the vices which are promoted by him. Origen's interpretation is much more elaborated in this respect and goes as far as to maintain that the Hebrew midwives killed the female babies. Later Christian authors follow Origen and present virtue as male, e.g. Cyrill of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa. They pick up this motif in different manner and pass it down to the later exegetical catenae. Christian virtue is portrayed as male, whereas vices are represented as female. The way to Christian perfection, therefore, is to become male and eliminate anything female from one's spirit. This paper asks for the hermeneutical presuppositions and especially the consequences of this gendered view of virtue.