

Worship and Ritual Practices in the New Testament

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The period from the first century AD to the middle of the second century AD has occasionally been called the dark period of Christian worship practices.¹ Details of Christian liturgy in this period, unlike later centuries, are not described in any systematic fashion. In fact, during the apostolic era the document that most closely resembles a “Church Handbook of Instructions”—a rulebook called the Teaching of the (Twelve) Apostles or simply the Didache (the “Teaching”)—did not make it into the books of the New Testament.² The alleged darkness of the historical sources from this period, however, should not prevent us from gleaning insights from the texts of the New Testament and other early Christian writings, even as these insights remain open to revision. While the New Testament authors and their respective communities did not always agree on the details of Christian worship, their texts do describe a diversity of practices that we can explore. This chapter surveys some of these rituals and worship practices, namely prayer, hymn singing, sacramental meals, the ritual kiss, discernment practices, baptism, footwashing, and foot dusting.

Prayer Practices

In the New Testament, daily prayer in Jerusalem occurred at regular intervals associated with both home and temple. In the book of Acts we read that prayer happened at the third, sixth, and ninth hours (Acts 2:15; 3:1; 10:9, 30–31). This corresponded to the temple sacrifices in the morning (about 9:00 a.m.), main meal of the day (about noon), and evening

sacrifice (about 3:00 p.m.).³ Worshippers would stand outside the sanctuary praying as the priest offered incense upon the altar (compare Luke 1:10).

The repetitive hourly aspects of prayer may have been an opportunity as well as a challenge. Jesus warned against vain or empty repetitions but encouraged his followers to persist in prayer until their request was granted (Matthew 6:7). He refers, for instance, to an unjust judge who eventually favored a relentless widow (Luke 18:1–5). On another occasion, Jesus told a parable of a (seemingly annoyed) neighbor who finally answered his acquaintance’s request. This was due to the petitioner’s “importunity” or shameless persistence (Luke 11:8).⁴ We can see this persistence exemplified in the verses that immediately follow this parable: “So I say to you: Keep asking, and it will be given you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened for you, because everyone who keeps asking will receive, and the person who keeps searching will find, and the person who keeps knocking will have the door opened” (Luke 11:9–10 ISV).⁵ In other words Jesus taught the disciples that they should not give up if their prayers were not answered initially but that they should continue to exercise their faith. In the parable the neighbor’s petitions were effective because they were relentless and urgent. This emphasis on persistent prayer fits within the Jerusalem culture of habitual prayers repeated three times a day.

In addition to the metaphorical direction of the petitioner’s prayer, ancient prayer practices were often directed toward a physical location or object. In Greek the very linguistic root of prayer refers to praying “toward” something.⁶ It was common, for instance, for Jews to pray toward Jerusalem or its temple (1 Kings 8:38). In other instances, a worshipper would direct eyes and voice upward toward heaven (Mark 6:41; John 11:41; 17:11). The body could also be situated so as to “elevate” its posture, as the petitioner would stand up and uplift the hands in prayer (1 Timothy 2:8; Luke 24:50).

As an expression of humility, prayer could also be directed away from the sky and toward the earth. Biblical accounts mention worshippers who kneel and others who even fall to the ground in prayer (Mark 14:35; Luke 22:41; 1 Kings 8:54; Acts 20:36). Such actions are in harmony with the word translated as “worship” in the New Testament, since the verb *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneō*) often referred to prostrating oneself before the feet of a ruler or the image of a god.⁷ Although Jesus often prayed looking up to heaven, he also praised the idea of praying while looking down at the ground (Mark 6:41; John 11:41; 17:1). In one parable Jesus praised a man who “would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven.” Instead of lifting his hands up in prayer, the man struck his chest with his hands (Luke 18:13). The gesture of praying with uplifted hands, or the *orans* posture, was a common posture for prayer among Jews, Christians, and pagans of the ancient world (fig. 1).

Throughout history, the *orans* posture has been interpreted in many different ways. Like other sacred rituals, it has been given various meanings as well as functions. In other words, people have inquired what this ritual might teach, or what changes this ritual might effect in the spiritual or physical world. In the Psalms we learn that raising hands in prayer mirrored the smoke of temple incense that ascended as a petition to God (Psalm 141:2). In the New Testament, praying with uplifted hands, moreover, signified that one prayed without



Figure 1. A woman praying in the *orans* posture. Catacomb of Callixtus, Rome, early 4th century. Wikimedia Commons.

doubt or anger (1 Timothy 2:8). Put differently, the *orans* posture was a sign that one had forgiven others and had faith that God would answer the petition. In other scriptural passages the *orans* performs various functions. In some instances, sacred buildings or people were blessed or consecrated with uplifted hands. Thus, Solomon dedicates the temple while praying in the *orans* posture, and Jesus “blesses” or “consecrates” his disciples before his ascension with the same gesture (1 Kings 8:22–38; Luke 24:50–51).⁸ During the ascension we might also wonder if Luke intends to associate the spreading of hands with the parting of the heavenly veil. As Jesus extends his crucified hands, the heavenly veil begins to part and Jesus ascends to heaven (Luke 24:50–51). It is also worth noting that in the following centuries some early Christians soon began to associate the *orans* posture with Jesus’s outstretched arms on the cross. One such reference comes from the second-century Odes of Solomon: “I expanded my hands: and I sanctified [them] to my Lord: For the expansion of my hands is his sign. And my expansion is the upright wood.”⁹

Hymn Singing

During the New Testament era, a strict categorical boundary between hymns, prayers, and scripture readings did not exist. Praising God could refer to prayer as well as to song (Acts 16:25; Hebrews 13:15). Teaching could take the form of songs, and reading psalms could be called singing “hymns and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). Spiritual songs also might have been impromptu performances inspired by the Spirit. Alternatively, since silent reading was much less common in the ancient world, “reading” could transform into a vocal or even musical activity.¹⁰

For some time, scholars have argued that there are hymns embedded within the text of the New Testament. Given overlap between scripture reading and hymn singing, this is a much-debated and entangled question. A number of possibilities have been put forward thus far (e.g., Philippians 2:5–11; Colossians 1:15–20; 1 Peter 3:18–22; 1 Timothy 3:16).¹¹ Such hymns express ideas such as Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, ministry to spirits in prison, and exaltation in heaven. Of these proposed hymns, the one that commands perhaps the most attention is found in Philippians 2:5–11:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The above hymn presents the congregation with a broad picture of Christ's role in the plan of salvation and human potential. Jesus sets the example by descending below all things, ultimately to rise above all things and become like his Father. Through Christ's abasement, he is exalted and every knee bows and every tongue confesses his name.

In addition to the hymn in Philippians, there may be no better place to consult than the choral hymns found in the book of Revelation, or "Apocalypse." Among others, scholar Leonard Thompson has argued that the heavenly liturgy in John's visions is a reflection of "the actual practice of the primitive church."¹² Lucetta Mowry is even bolder, concluding that "we may have [in the Apocalypse] the earliest known form of a Christian service of worship, possibly the Eucharist."¹³ Even critics of this viewpoint acknowledge Revelation's unique place as one of the most liturgical books in the New Testament.¹⁴ In spite of the numerous debates that will continue over this text, there seems to be a critical consensus forming over the past half century as to its liturgical character. Alan Cabaniss summarizes this view: "It is coming to be generally recognized that the author of the Apocalypse presents his visions, at least in part, against the background or within the framework of the church liturgy of the latter years of the first century."¹⁵

Such declarations are supported by a number of factors. While Mowry is correct in pointing out that the hymns in Revelation can mirror early Jewish and Christian liturgies, the most compelling evidence is found within the text itself.¹⁶ For instance, John's visions occur during the Sunday worship services, or the "Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10).¹⁷ Though John is in exile and thus cannot be present with his congregations, his letter was likely intended to inform their own worship services. Moreover, in early Christian worship services, one of the likely duties of the prophet was to present an "apocalypse," or a "revelation," to the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:26).¹⁸ John's "apocalypse" similarly was probably read in church. The text begins by invoking the congregation's leader "that

readeth” as well as the worshippers “that hear the words” of the revelation (Revelation 1:3). John’s visions, moreover, present us with a picture of worship that is not confined to heaven alone. Heaven and earth coalesce while earthly figures, both living and dead, join the angelic rites.¹⁹ The worship service includes the seer himself, angels, angels who were once prophets, elders, living creatures, martyrs, and the 144,000.²⁰ Finally, it seems fitting to ask, If John were concerned only with worship in heaven, why would he be so intent on criticizing certain worship practices on earth that he believed to be in error? (Revelation 2:14, 20; 9:20; 13:4, 8, 15; 16:2). It seems more likely that John’s criticisms, and his vision of the heavenly liturgy, were meant to provide ideals for actual worship practices in the early church.

Such practices are alluded to in a number of places in the book of Revelation. Scholars have recognized the presence of eight hymns within the text (4:8, 11; 5:9–14; 7:9–12; 11:15–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–8).²¹ In essence the songs take the form of short praises offered to the “Lord God” or “the Lamb.” They praise the holiness of God as Creator and the Lamb as Redeemer and offer thanks for being made kings and priests unto God. Such hymns often occur in the context of the heavenly temple and occur around God’s throne and the nearby altar.

In the ancient world, choruses were often highly ritualized just as they appear to be in the book of Revelation. As in some Jewish choruses, the worshippers in John’s vision join together in a circle or series of circles. In the first century, worshippers in certain Jewish worship services formed choral circles and moved about “wheeling and counterwheeling.” They sang antiphonally (i.e., with the call and response or repeating the words of the leader of the circle) and moved their hands and feet.²² In some Jewish sources, the angelic choir forms a circle around the heavenly throne, and Enoch takes the role of the celestial choirmaster.²³ In John’s vision the choruses likewise form “in a circle around the throne”²⁴ and its altar. These rings unite the angels, the living, and the dead in communion with God (Revelation 4:6; 5:11; 7:11). Their duty is to give glory to God, and as such they become, as it were, embodied extensions of the glorious halo of colored light that also encircles the throne.²⁵ The sound of the chorus becomes a type of aural glory that parallels the visual halo of colored light that glorifies God on his throne.

In the setting of a house church, these circles might have formed around a choirmaster, who would sing “in the middle of the assembly” (Hebrews 2:12, my translation).²⁶ Scholars also have noticed the antiphonal character of the hymns in John’s Revelation.²⁷ Almost like a musical dialogue, one group within the chorus sings forth certain lines of praise, and in response another group breaks forth in singing or chanting the “amen” in affirmation (Revelation 5:9–14; 7:11–12; compare 1 Corinthians 14:15–16). At other times one part of the chorus praises God (or the Lamb) and another responds in turn with ritual actions such as prostrations (Revelation 4:8–11; 7:9–11). Prostrating, sitting, and standing are all part of the repertoire of actions performed in the circle (4:4; 11:6).

Such ritual actions were also augmented by a pageantry of sacred objects, scents, and dress. Those in the circle don white clothing, wear wreaths, and often hold objects in

their hands such as palm branches or incense bowls. Sometimes the chorus takes an intermission so that prayer and incense can be offered at the altar. In one such instance, an angelic priest walks into the center of the silent circle and approaches the altar, cupping a golden censer in his hand. He then offers the prayers of the saints as “the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand” (Revelation 8:4). At other times incense is offered during the hymn. In the circle, for instance, those who sing the “new song” about becoming “kings and priests” cup in their hands incense bowls, “which are the prayers of the saints” (5:9–10). Taken together, what we see within the circle of the chorus is a very close relationship between praise, prayers, song, and the smell of incense. All these factors come together to glorify God’s name.

Within the heavenly chorus, the name of God is particularly important in the worship services. The attitude one adopts toward divine names is linked to the power of prophecy and distinguishes between the righteous and unrighteous. In the vision, the antagonists are said to blaspheme God’s name; meanwhile, the faithful sing praises to his name (Revelation 13:6; 16:9, 11, 21). There are also references to the names of Christ and the saved being so sacred that no one can know their names except themselves (2:17; 19:12). As the chorus encircles the altar, it often praises God, whose name transcends past, present, and future time (4:8; 11:17). As such, God is able to reveal the prophetic truths of the vision to John and all those who sing in the heavenly chorus. Those in the circle praise the Lamb and thus have “testimony of Jesus,” which is “the spirit of prophecy” (19:10).

It should also be mentioned that such hymns might have been situated in the context of the sacramental meal.²⁸ Those who sing in the chorus are those who have passed beyond the “door” into the throne room (Revelation 4:1, 8–11). Such individuals who “open the door” are said to “sup with [the Lamb]” (3:20). In another instance John records that those who worship God are invited to the “marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9).

Sacramental Meals

Sacramental meal practices were at the core of early Christian worship and were intended to keep alive the memory of Jesus and his teachings. From the earliest point in the Last Supper tradition, the emblems of bread and wine were associated with Jesus’s words “this do in remembrance of me” (1 Corinthians 11:24; Luke 22:19). For those whose memory of Jesus had faded, it could be reawakened “in breaking of bread” (Luke 24:35). At first the early Christians sought to keep this memory alive by breaking bread “daily” and offering prayer (Acts 2:42, 46). However, daily gatherings seem to have been an ideal that was not easily maintained, for later in the same book we find Christians breaking bread “the first day of the week” (i.e., Sunday; Acts 20:11).

Regardless of when the disciples gathered, scholars generally believe that this meal was both an ordinance and a real meal.²⁹ Just like Passover was both an ordinance and an actual supper, so too was Christian communion. Meal practices seem to have continued during

Jesus's resurrection ministry. As Jesus explained his doctrine further, his invitation was to "come and dine" (John 21:12). While we cannot know all the details of these early meal practices, New Testament accounts mention sacred meals that included items such as bread, wine, fish, honeycomb, and the like (Luke 24:39–43; John 21:12–13). It is also clear that early Christian meals were sacred rites, since they required personal introspection and worthiness and had symbolic significance (1 Corinthians 11:24–30). They also included activities such as preaching and praying as the members ate "their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46).

However, these ideals of unity or "singleness of heart" were not always realized. Paul laments that the "Lord's Supper" was profaned through divisions and contentions in the Corinthian church. Some members left the meals hungry (probably the poor), while others ate and drank in excess to the point of intoxication (1 Corinthians 11:20–21).³⁰ For Paul the function of the sacrament was not only to memorialize the death of Jesus, but it also had other, expanded meanings. It was supposed to symbolize the idea that the members of the church had become the "members" of Christ's body since they had ingested emblems of his body and blood (12:12). Each member of the body of Christ should thus act in harmony with one another. Whether the members were Jews, Gentiles, slaves, or freeborn, all drank from the same cup and thus were "made to drink into one Spirit" (12:13). Paul taught that although they each had different spiritual gifts, the most important gift members should bring to the meeting was that of charity and love (12:12–31; 13:1–8). One of the ways this principle of love was enacted in worship services was through the exchange of a ritual kiss.

The Ritual Kiss

Although it may seem peculiar to many modern minds, the ritual kiss was one of the central practices of early Christian worship. One expert in this area, Michael Penn, has remarked, "Along with rites such as baptism and a common meal, kissing is part of the earliest strata of Christian practice."³¹ Others scholars have lamented that despite the critical role kissing played in the worship services, "modern historians of the early Christian gathering mostly ignore it."³²

Indeed, the kiss is actually found at the linguistic heart of the action of worship. At the very root of the Greek verb for worship *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneō*) is the action of the kiss (*κυνέω/kuneō*).³³ In the New Testament, individuals "worship" Christ by offering gifts, falling down at his feet, holding them, and even kissing them (Matthew 2:2, 8–11; 18:26; 28:9; Luke 7:38).

In Paul's letters there is a concern to keep worship and the ritual kiss pure or "holy" (Romans 6:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26). This emphasis on holiness and propriety was likely critical. For a variety of reasons, even some rather conservative scholars³⁴ think that the New Testament ritual kiss was given and received on the mouth (try holding a grudge in that position!). It should be remembered, however, that

no New Testament texts describe the details of this practice, so we cannot be totally certain of this assessment. What we do know is that later anti-Christian critics accused the worship services of eliciting immorality and that later Christian leaders soon began to lay out very strict rules for kissing during worship.³⁵

Even during the New Testament period, there is evidence that church leaders were trying to protect worship services from such corruption. For his part, Paul was concerned that a number of breaches in chastity had occurred in the context of worship. In veiled symbolism, Paul hints that such improprieties began by allowing fornicators to participate in the “Passover” practices of Christians (1 Corinthians 5:1, 9–13). Peter also hints at certain “blemishes,” who had “eyes full of adultery” during the worship feasts (2 Peter 2:13–14). Jude calls such people “spots” who “crept in unawares” into the “feast of charity” and turned the “grace of our God into lasciviousness” (Jude 1:12, 4). Now, the question arises, If the ritual kiss presented so many problems, why was it practiced in the first place?

As is evidenced in other New Testament passages, the ritual kiss was ideally supposed to quell contention and bring about unity and forgiveness among the congregation (as were other rites). It should be remembered that Christians considered themselves spiritual family members and that it was common for family members in Greco-Roman society to exchange such kisses (Romans 16:13–16; Ephesians 3:15).³⁶ It was through the ordinances of the gospel, and the power of the Spirit, that Christians believed they had been united as one family in Christ as the seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:27–29). In a culture in which greetings could reinforce harsh social hierarchies—such as groveling and kissing the feet, hands, or knees—the Christian kiss of love was intended to transcend these divisions and establish a family of equals. As expressed by one scholar: “This practice expressed the mutual closeness of people who came from different social classes and was intended to transcend gender, religious, national, and ethnic divisions among people who believed that they were one in Christ.”³⁷ According to this logic, slaves, masters, Jews, Gentiles, males, and females saluted one another on equal terms through the rites of the gospel. For Paul, such a cultural and spiritual revolution seems to have been worth the risk, even as he emphasized that the kiss should be kept “holy” (1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 3:11).

In the Synoptic Gospels, we also learn that the kiss might have played an important role in the close circle of disciples that followed Jesus. Perhaps this provided the precedent for the later liturgical use of the kiss among early Christians. In the Gospel narratives, the kiss of Judas follows the account of Jesus’s sacrament meal with his disciples. The kiss may possibly have been a sign of fellowship among the group, for Jesus hails Judas as “friend” in response to the kiss (Matthew 26:50). On the other hand, it should also be mentioned that the term *friend* could also invoke a moment of social tension (22:12). In the nighttime shadows of the Garden of Gethsemane, it also seems that it was not easy to differentiate between the appearance of Jesus and his disciples. Thus, Matthew and Mark record that Judas needed a “sign” (*semeion*) or “token” (*sussēmon*) to reveal Christ to the mob (26:48; Mark 14:44). The

gesture revealed the identity of each person. Jesus was identified as “master” and Judas as “friend” and betrayer (Matthew 26:48–50; Luke 22:47–48; Mark 14:44–45). The kiss, then, became an important means of discernment.

Discernment and Worship

Discernment played an important role in the worship life of the early Christian church. It was critical to figure out which spiritual influences and doctrine belonged and which did not belong in the worship services. The New Testament era was a contentious time in which various teachers, apostles, and prophets competed for the hearts of the followers of Jesus. In the New Testament, we read of false teachers, false brethren, false Christs, false apostles, false prophets, and even one false prophetess (Mark 13:22; 2 Corinthians 11:13; Galatians 2:4; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1; Revelation 2:20). Because prophecy was a common gift exercised during worship services, it is not surprising that the warning against false prophets is particularly common.

So how were early Christians taught to discern between true and false leaders? In an interesting turn from conventional thinking about prophecy, Jesus taught that true prophets were revealed more through their actions than by their prophetic words (Matthew 7:15–24). Although words were important, emphasis was placed on proper action. Likewise, Paul defended his right to be an apostle because he had seen Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1; 11:1) and imitated his example by showing forth “signs and wonders and mighty deeds” (2 Corinthians 12:12). An analysis of deeds was critical in the process of discernment. Paul warned against wolflike church leaders who would abandon their function as lay ministers and gobble up the goods of their flocks (Acts 20:28–34). While the early church received various donations, lay ministers acted as a safeguard against corruption.

Some of the most detailed information about discernment during the apostolic era comes from the “handbook” called the *Didache*. These keys for discernment come in the form of practical guidelines and policies relevant for this era and culture. In particular, the text demonstrates a concern for prophets, who apparently had abused the generosity of the community in the past. Such prophets would prophesy “Give me money!” or demand that a meal be prepared for them (*Didache* 11.9, 12). True prophets, on the other hand, would labor to support their own needs and did not act as merchants “trading on Christ” (12.5). True teachers ought to teach the Christian gathering to love one another, to love God, to fast, to pray, to baptize, to partake of the sacrament, and to keep the other commandments of God (1–10). Such genuine apostles and prophets should “be welcomed as if [they] were the Lord” and be given the best hospitality the community could offer (11.4; 13.1–7). Though the general rule was simple—“If any prophet teaches the truth, yet does not practice what he teaches, he is a false prophet”—it was actually much more complex and nuanced (11.10). Once a prophet was tested and found to be a true prophet, his behavior need not be perfect, and could even seem to be quite rough: “But any prophet proven to be genuine who does something with a view to portraying in a worldly manner the symbolic meaning of the

church (provided he does not teach you to do all that he himself does) is not to be judged by you, for his judgment is with God. Besides the ancient prophets also acted in a similar manner” (11.11).

Thus, the *Didache* urges the members of the church not to be overly judgmental of true prophets, who are allowed to have human frailties and who sometimes even break cultural codes of holiness. If the prophet was otherwise proven to be true, then the members should leave the judgment of the prophet up to God, knowing that God had occasionally asked biblical prophets to transgress certain norms in order to achieve a greater good (e.g., Hosea 1:2).³⁸

The early church was also given keys to discern true messengers from heaven. When Jesus first appeared after his resurrection, we read that “[the eleven disciples] worshipped him: but some doubted” (Matthew 28:17). The passage seems to indicate that it is possible to worship God while still questioning, seeking, and even doubting. Moreover, it implies that Thomas was not the only one who initially had questions. Luke states that the disciples “were terrified and affrighted, and supposed they had seen a spirit” and began to have questioning thoughts in their hearts (Luke 24:37–38). To help the disciples discern the truth, Jesus invited them to put their fingers in his wounded hands and feet. Most famously, Jesus invited Thomas to “reach hither thy finger” and feel the nail prints in his hands and the wound in his side. Matthew calls such actions a gesture of “worship” (Matthew 28:9). In another New Testament passage these keys for discernment have been translated as “proofs,” “tokens,” “evidences” or “sure signs” of the resurrected Jesus (Acts 1:3).³⁹ John stated that there were “many other signs” that the resurrected Christ demonstrated, but these were not all written in his book (John 20:30).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, however, we can read about other keys of discernment. In some New Testament accounts, heavenly beings disguise themselves before mortals. Such passages hint at a connection between hospitality, worship, and discernment. The Epistle to the Hebrews mentions the importance of entertaining strangers for “thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (13:2; compare Genesis 18:1–8). Or in a slightly different fashion, the hospitality of Cleopas revealed a certain “stranger” to be the risen Christ through the breaking of bread (Luke 24:13–32).

Today such ideas are expressed during worship services, as congregations sing the popular hymn “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief.” In the hymn, the singer meets an unknown wandering stranger and serves him through various acts of hospitality and service. Such service eventually leads to the moment of revelation:

Then in a moment to my view
The stranger started from disguise.
The tokens in his hands I knew;
The Savior stood before mine eyes.⁴⁰

This hymn thus brings together the keys for discernment mentioned in the New Testament accounts of disguised heavenly messengers, including service, hospitality, and the revelation of Jesus’s hands. The hymn is particularly influenced by Jesus’s parable of the sheep and the goats

and implies that those who have devoted their lives “to the least” will ultimately comprehend the tokens in Jesus’s hands and see past Christ’s “disguise” (Matthew 25:31–46).

Baptism

The Greek verb βαπτίζω (*baptizō*) means to “dip” or “plunge” someone into water.⁴¹ In the New Testament the practice of baptism by immersion seems to be implied, because Jesus came “out of the water” after the rite was performed (Mark 1:10; compare Romans 6:3–6). The Synoptic Gospels agree that the purpose of John’s baptism was to bring about repentance and the remission of sins (Mark 1:4; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:3), even as the Gospel of John focuses its attention on “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The Gospel of John also likens baptism to being born again. This second birth has a dual meaning in the Greek text, since the word ἀνωθεν (*anōthen*) can mean “again” or “above.”⁴² In the text Nicodemus is confused because he thinks he must literally be “born again” but doesn’t understand that he must actually be spiritually reborn, or born from above (John 3:3–7). It should be noticed that elsewhere in the Gospel of John, the word ἀνωθεν (*anōthen*) means “above” (3:31; 19:11, 23).

In other New Testament writings baptism takes on yet other meanings. For Paul, baptism was participation in the body of Christ. Most famously, Paul compared baptism to the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3–6). Such symbolism works best when the initiate is baptized by immersion and thus can stand in the water, receive a water burial, and then rise again. Paul also taught that those who were “baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27). Christ was thought of, then, as the new clothing or tunic that the initiate would “put on” after getting soaked in the water. Is it possible that Paul’s crucifixion symbolism may be hiding in the metaphor of clothing? We might wonder if Paul, who himself had worked with fabrics, had recognized that the tunic was roughly a cross-shaped item that one could “put on” (Acts 18:3). The tunic not only took the shape of a cross when it was belted about the body (as an ancient T-shirt), but also when it was not worn, unbelted, and laid flat upon the ground (figs. 2–3).⁴³

Perhaps Paul endowed the tunic with new christological meanings and associated it with the new clothing the initiate put on after being immersed in baptism. For Paul, baptism was a ritual act in which the initiate performed the role of Christ in salvation history.

Those who were baptized and received the Spirit became “body parts” or “members” of Christ’s own body (1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Romans 12:4–6). Thus, the body parts should not envy nor contend with one another since they were all necessary. If one body part began to suffer, this would be felt throughout the whole body (12:25–26). Through ordinances the members were also united with the Spirit. Although the gift of the Spirit bestowed a diversity of gifts among the members of Christ, the members were all joined to “the same Spirit” (12:4). After baptism, the members likely would drink from a single sacramental cup and thus “drink into one Spirit” (12:13).⁴⁴ We can see that baptism, reception of the Spirit, and drinking from a common cup were meant to unite the members into the

body of Christ: “There is one body, and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:4–5). In baptism all became “Christ,” so there “is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27–28).

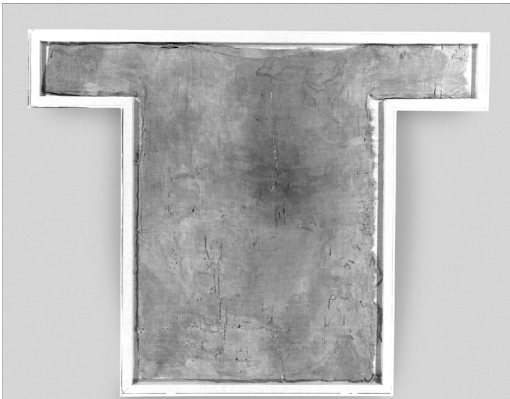


Figure 2. Tunic framed as if worn, 4th–7th century AD, Kharga Oasis, Byzantine Egypt. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York, 33.10.48.

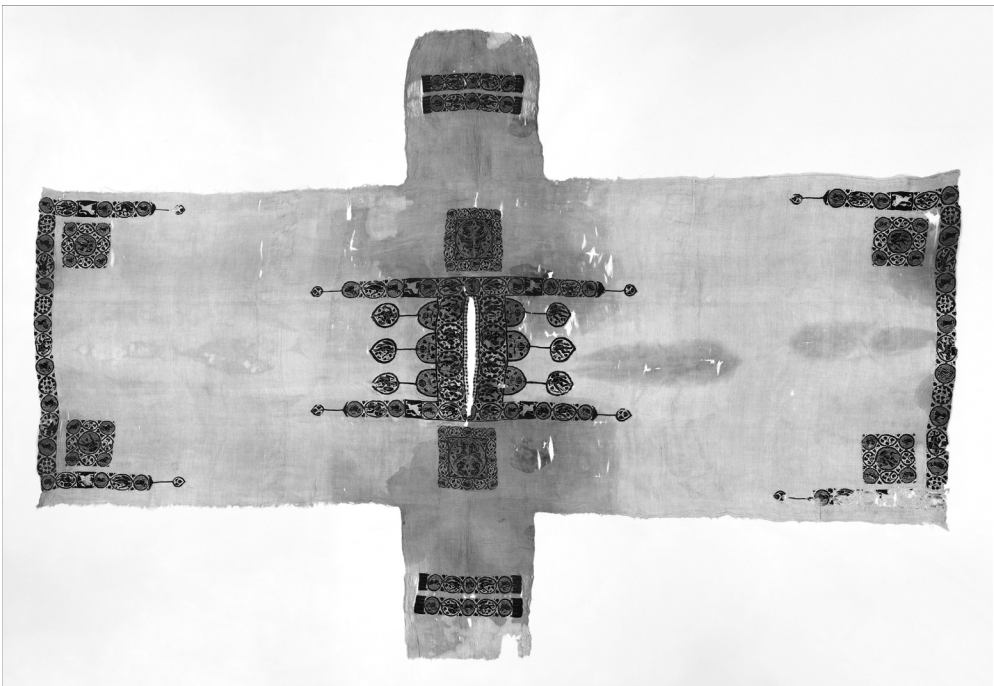


Figure 3. Tunic spread out on a flat surface, likely from the 5th century AD, said to be from Akhmim, Egypt. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York 26.9.8.

The Washing and Dusting of the Feet

One of these rites is the washing of the feet. After Jesus had eaten the Passover supper with his disciples, the Gospel of John recounts that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples (13:2). In contemporary scholarship, footwashing has been called “the sacrament that almost made it.”⁴⁵ In comparison with the popularity of the ordinance of communion in the Christian world at large, footwashing has historically been neglected in the Christian tradition (though there are a number of exceptions to this rule).⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the textual evidence seems to support the notion that this was more than just an example of humility on Jesus’s part. Jesus told Peter, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me” (13:8). In this passage the Greek word μέρος (*meros*) refers to words such as *place*, *portion*, *lot*, or *destiny* and frequently invokes the fate of the saved or the damned (Matthew 24:51; Luke 12:46; 15:12; Revelation 21:8; 22:19).⁴⁷ The idea that only the feet needed to be washed for a person to be “clean every whit” suggests that the cleansing was believed to be physical as well as spiritual in nature (John 13:10).

While it is true that footwashing was a common gesture of hospitality in the home, it was also performed in the house of God. Originally Moses was commanded to take off his shoes before approaching God on the holy mount, for he stood on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). Afterward, when the tabernacle was constructed, the priests were commanded to wash their hands and feet before approaching the altar (Exodus 30:18–21; 40:30–31). A number of first-century sources indicate that footwashing was required for priests before serving at the temple altar. For the Alexandrian Jew Philo, “men are sanctified when washed with water,” and “one should not enter with unwashed feet on the pavement of the temple of God.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, Philo believed that walking on the temple pavement was “highly symbolic”:

By the washing of the feet is meant that his steps should no longer be on earth but tread the upper air. For the soul of the lover of God does in truth leap from earth to heaven and wing its way on high, eager to take its place in the ranks and share the ordered march of sun and moon and the all-holy, all-harmonious host of other stars, marshalled and led by the God Whose Kingship none can dispute or usurp, the kingship by which everything is justly governed.⁴⁹

In short, the washing of the feet allegorized, for Philo, the salvific ascension of the soul through the heavens to join God amid the cosmos. While we cannot be certain that early Christians viewed Jesus’s footwashing through this cosmological lens, the text of the Gospel of John supports the general idea that Jesus’s footwashing was a sacred ordinance related to salvation. After Jesus had washed the disciples’ feet, he then commanded them to “wash one another’s feet” (13:14). This last command might indicate that there were certain early Christian communities that believed it was important to continue the practice of the washing of the feet (compare Luke 7:38, 44, 47–48; 1 Timothy 5:9–10).⁵⁰

In a somewhat related manner, the New Testament also mentions the dusting of feet. If members of a household refused to receive the missionaries into their home, then as a consequence they also declined to perform common hospitality rituals such as footwashing

(Acts 13:51). In such settings, the disciples were forced to dust off their own feet, which had become dirty from their many travels on dusty roads. There was also a symbolic dimension to foot dusting. Inasmuch as footwashing could convey principles such as hospitality, forgiveness, and even salvation in God's kingdom, foot dusting signified the opposite. The feet were dusted as a testimony against such households in the Day of Judgment (Luke 9:5; Mark 6:11; Matthew 10:14–15). In this context, the feet of God's servants became, as it were, vicarious feet for God, whose feet were a symbol of his judgment (1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:22; Romans 16:20). As odd as it may seem to modern people—whose feet live in comparative luxury—the mere foot could invoke some of the weightiest spiritual issues of the New Testament era.

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, we have glimpsed a few aspects of Christian worship practices and rituals during the New Testament era. We have seen a variety of rituals both similar to and different from those practiced in our own day. My hope is that contemporary readers will be positively motivated by these examples. Although we have seen a diversity of rites and worship practices, their common aim seems to have been to point people toward principles such as faith, dedication, unity, and love for God and others. History, then, can be an aid for those who seek such ideals. However, what history can give us in the present era is only part of its value.

What a history of such rituals takes from us may also be of equal benefit. It takes a gesture of empathy to place ourselves in the position of people whose ways and culture may seem removed from our own. The long-dead people of the past take real patience and toil to learn their stories. With our head stuffed in old books, we often find ourselves taking that dusty extra mile with individuals who can no longer give anything physical in return (Matthew 5:41–42). For those readers who enjoyed walking a first mile of early Christian liturgy, I invite you to continue to explore new pathways by consulting the sources in the notes.



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Further Reading

Alikin, Valerij A. *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011.

Bradshaw, Paul F., and Maxwell E. Johnson. *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation*. London: SPCK, 2012.

Brown, Matthew B. *The Gate of Heaven: Insights on the Doctrines and Symbols of the Temple*. American Fork, UT: Covenant Communication, 1999.

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- O'Loughlin, Thomas. *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians*. New York: Perseus, 2011.
- Taylor, Nicholas. "Baptism for the Dead (1 Cor. 15:29)?" *Neotestamentica* 36 (2002): 111–20.
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- Wainwright, Geoffrey, and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Notes

1. Lucetta Mowry, "Revelation 4–5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 71, no. 2 (1952): 84.
2. Text and commentary found in Michael W. Holmes, Joseph Barber Lightfoot, and John Reginald Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 334–44; and Frank Hawkins, "The Didache," in *The Study of the Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1978), 55–56.
3. Maxwell E. Johnson, "The Apostolic Tradition," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 60.
4. The King James Version translates ἀναίδεια (*anaideia*) as "importunity," but it can also be translated with words such as *shamelessness* or *impertinence*. See the relevant entry in Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
5. International Standard Version. The Greek continuous or progressive aspect of the present tense allows for the translation "keep on asking" and so forth. Moreover, the neighbor's persistence suggests that this progressive aspect is most appropriate.
6. The verb προσεύχομαι (*proseuchomai*) is divided into two parts. The prefix *pros* means "toward," and *eucho-mai* means to "pray" or "wish."
7. See entry for προσκυνέω in Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); commentary found in Thomas Allen Seel, *A Theology of Music for Worship Derived from the Book of Revelation* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1995), 34–37.
8. Note that the same verb εὐλογέω (*eulogeo*) is also in the Passover rite. Jesus "blesses" or "consecrates" the bread and wine. See entry for εὐλογέω in Joseph Henry Thayer, trans. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977).
9. See Lawrence J. Johnson, *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Sources* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 1:62.
10. Jesper Svenpro, "Archaic and Classical Greece: The Invention of Silent Reading," in *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 50–52.
11. Others include 1 Peter 1:18–22; 2:21–25 and Romans 1:3–4. Robert J. Karris, *A Symphony of New Testament Hymns: Commentary on Philippians 2:5–11, Colossians 1:15–20, Ephesians 2:14–16, 1 Timothy 3:16, Titus 3:4–7, 1 Peter 3:18–22, and 2 Timothy 2:11–13* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 5; and Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), vii–viii.
12. Leonard Thompson, "Cult and Eschatology in the Apocalypse of John," *Journal of Religion* 49, no. 4 (1969): 347, 343.
13. Mowry, "Revelation 4–5," 84.
14. Josephine Massynbaerd Ford, "The Christological Function of the Hymns in the Apocalypse of John," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 36, no. 2 (1998): 207.

15. Allen Cabaniss, "A Note on the Liturgy of the Apocalypse," *Interpreter's Forum* 7, no. 1 (1953): 79; see also Andrea Spatafora, "Heavenly Liturgy and Temple in the Apocalypse," *Theoforum* 46 (2015): 186.
16. Mowry, "Revelation 4–5," 78–79.
17. Otto A. Piper, "The Apocalypse of John and the Liturgy of the Ancient Church," *American Society of Church History* 20, no. 1 (1951): 19.
18. Thompson, "Cult and Eschatology," 344.
19. Mowry, "Revelation 4–5," 10–11.
20. See Revelation 4:10–11; 5:11–14; 6:9–10; 22:8–9; and Mowry, "Revelation 4–5," 10–11.
21. Spatafora, "Heavenly Liturgy," 186.
22. Note the connection made between Passover and such dances in Jean Daniélou, *Philo of Alexandria* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2014), 8.
23. Andrei A. Orlov, "Celestial Choirmaster: The Liturgical Role of Enoch-Metatron in 2 Enoch and the Merkabah Tradition," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14, no. 1 (2004): 3–29, esp. 19–20.
24. Translation is mine. The phrase κύκλω τοῦ θρόνου (*kuklō tou thronou*) is used in Revelation 4:6; 5:11; 7:11. Throughout the chapter passages that are quoted in Greek are taken from Eberhard Nestle et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2015). See entry for κύκλω in Liddell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.
25. The same language is used for the circle of elders as for the "circle" of prismatic light that forms a halo around the divine throne. In both cases the phrase κυκλόθεν τοῦ θρόνου (*kuklothen tou thronou*) is used (Revelation 4:3–4). That these are circles can be seen from the discussion above and the linguistic similarities discussed in the previous footnote.
26. "I will sing in the middle of the assembly": ἐν μέσῳ ἐκκλησίας ὑμνήσω (*en meso ekklesias humneso*).
27. Mowry, "Revelation 4–5," 77–78; and Ford, "Christological Function of the Hymns," 208, 213, 215, 217, 220.
28. Cheslyn Jones and Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Study of Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 2008), 168.
29. Valerij A. Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2011), 108.
30. Alikin, *Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 104.
31. Michael Philip Penn, *Kissing Christians Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 19.
32. Alikin, *Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 256.
33. See relevant entries for προσκυνέω and κυνέω in Liddell, *Greek-English Lexicon*.
34. Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 43.
35. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 43.
36. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, 43–44.
37. Alikin, *Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 256.
38. See discussion in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 363n11.1.
39. See entry for τεκμήριον in Liddell, *Greek-English Lexicon*.
40. James Montgomery, "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief," in *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 29.
41. See entry for βαπτίζω in Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*.
42. See ἄωθεν in Liddell, *Greek-English Lexicon*.
43. Bissera Pentcheva, "Cross, Tunic, Body: Theology through the Phenomenology of Light," in *La stauroteca di Bessarione. Atti delle giornate internazionali di studio La stauroteca di Bessarione*, ed. Peter Schreiner Valeria Poletto (Venice: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere e arti; Gallerie dell'Accademia; Istituto ellenico; Centro tedesco di studi veneziani, 2018), 257–79.
44. Sacramental references usually mention one singular cup: 1 Corinthians 10:16; Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:17.

45. Robert M. Herbold, "Footwashing and Last Things," *Christian Century* 9 (1983): 205; and John Christopher Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1991), 180ff.
46. It is practiced among Catholics and the Orthodox (Eastern and Oriental) on the Thursday of Holy Week, but the rite is not usually practiced amongst Protestants. Exceptions to this include Seventh-day Adventists, Anabaptists, the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), and some Baptist denominations.
47. See entry for μέρος in Liddell, *Greek-English Lexicon*.
48. See discussion and primary source citations in Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 290.
49. Kerr, *Temple of Jesus' Body*, 291.
50. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 2014), 600. Sacramental references usually mention one singular cup (1 Corinthians 10:16; Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:17).