



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2015.12.16

Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8010-3152-6. 320 pp. \$34.99. Cloth/ebook.

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With this book, Andrew McGowan provides an accessible but scholarly introduction to the evidence for how the first Christians carried out their religion. *Ancient Christian Worship* is structured thematically rather than chronologically, and it is therefore a useful resource for both research and classroom teaching. McGowan also includes an epilogue to address briefly some otherwise uncovered subjects.

In his introduction, McGowan sets up the methodology that informs his study, explaining what worship is in modern terms in order to define the concept in antiquity. He then outlines the corpora, both texts and objects, analyzed in this study and delineates the book's temporal scope—the first through early fifth centuries of the Common Era.

The first of the thematic chapters is titled “Meal: Banquet and Eucharist.” It is not surprising that McGowan begins his study here, since the meal is both one of the most ancient practices embraced by Christians and McGowan's area of special interest. McGowan does the reader a service by beginning the chapter with a discussion of ancient banquet practices in general (20–25) before examining Christian sources. For those who have not read Taussig's *In the Beginning Was the Meal* (2009) or Dennis Smith's *From Symposium to Eucharist* (2003)—and even for those who have—McGowan's succinct overview serves as an excellent reminder of the importance of the ancient Mediterranean context in which Christianity developed. McGowan then surveys the many sources for early Christian meal practice, including New Testament texts, the *Didache*, and patristic sources. This chapter also covers Christian kissing (55–59) before offering a brief discussion of post-fourth-century eucharistic practices (59–62). Over all, McGowan challenges the idea that Christian meal practices developed along a straightforward, clear path from the first century to the present; rather, he points out the diversity of ancient Christian meal practices and their interpretation.

Next, McGowan approaches Christian textual and oral/aural performative practices in a chapter titled “Word: Reading and Preaching.” While it might seem strange not to read next about baptism, an equally prominent and ancient practice, the segue makes sense when McGowan locates the earliest preaching and reading at banquet events (73–76; 79–81). Again, the chapter commences with a section contextualizing Christian practices, this time with reference to Jewish synagogue practices; he is cautious to avoid depicting the relationship between “synagogue” and “church” as linear or uncomplicated and recognizes

that Christians were not yet distinct from Jews in this early period (66–72). Throughout the remainder of the chapter, McGowan examines the evidence for early Christian preaching and reading, observing that the terms associated with this practice are complicated in their development. The chapter also addresses the concepts of scripture and canon (81–92). The juxtaposition of this chapter with the previous one on meal practices prepares the reader to appreciate the subtle development of a Christian liturgy comprising textual and ritual performance.

“Music: Song and Dance” addresses a category of worship that is often overlooked due to a dearth of evidence. McGowan’s careful discussion, however, makes the most of what has been preserved. Referring throughout to scholarship on non-Christian dinner music in antiquity, McGowan uses references to musical instruments and songs in New Testament texts, in particular Revelation, to tease out the implications for worship (112–17). The inclusion of the third-century Oxyrhynchus Hymn (P.Oxy XV 1786), the oldest extant Christian hymn (121–22), is particularly useful in the classroom, since its preserved musical notation allows students to hear the hymn (after a quick Internet search) alongside reading its lyrics. McGowan’s treatment of this subject is especially commendable in that it takes care to focus on the instrumentation as well as on the theological import of hymn lyrics. McGowan’s inclusion of dance is both unusual and valuable; as his discussion of *Acts of John* 94 illustrates, the practice was considered an important component of worship in at least some communities and therefore deserves scholarly attention (128–33).

A chapter dedicated to initiation follows. “Initiation: Baptism, Anointing, and Foot Washing” contains a discussion of what might be the most well known Christian practices apart from the Eucharist. Underlying this chapter is McGowan’s reminder that baptism is as close to a universal ancient Christian practice as we can expect (135), although he discusses the possibility of Christianity without baptism as well (163–64). Beginning with an overview of washing practices in early Judaism, in particular examining evidence from Qumran (137–38), the chapter establishes a milieu for early Christian ritual and theological approach to baptism. After examining textual depictions of Jesus’s own baptism (140), McGowan approaches the writings of Paul and other early Christian documents (141–47). His discussion of the development of the practice in the second and third centuries illustrates the diversity of how baptism was understood, including its relation to sexual activity, and especially to the emerging concept of “original sin.” The frequently associated practices of sealing and anointing are discussed next (153–57), which exhibit more diversity compared with water immersion. Wrapped up in McGowan’s treatment of baptism is the question of authority, which he addresses in a section on hand laying (159–60). Various other initiatory rites are discussed, including catechesis (170–71), the donning of white robes (172–74), and confirmation (174–75), before McGowan concludes the chapter with foot washing (175–81).

Chapter 6, “Prayer: Hours, Ways, and Texts” follows. McGowan first addresses the relationship between Jewish and Christian prayer (184–87) before examining representations of Jesus praying (187–88) and the development of christocentric prayer. McGowan’s use of non-canonical texts such as the *Didache*, as in previous chapters, adds necessary depth to his study. His treatment of Tertullian’s *On Prayer* (190–92) illustrates both the importance of the Lord’s Prayer in early Christianity and the concern for correct praxis among early prescriptivist authors, including Clement and Origen (treated together; 194–97), and Cyprian (197–98). However, of course, actual prayer was likely more diverse, as this chapter’s discussion of the *Apostolic Tradition* illustrates (199–203). The examination of the relationship between prayer and the emerging ascetic movements of the fourth century (203–8) is particularly useful in that it establishes the import of “continuous prayer” in the context of Christians’ participation in the world (or lack thereof), something that is discussed toward the end of the chapter (208–10).

The final chapter, “Time: Feasts and Fasts,” approaches the integral Christian concept of time and its division. Of obvious significance is Sunday (218–23) and its relation to the Sabbath and to the day of the Sun, the latter made explicit by Justin Martyr. The idea of holding a single day for common worship is

not innate (McGowan observes that a day for rest rather than specifically for worship is at the biblical core of the Sabbath), and so the question of how and when Christians settled on Sunday as a day of eucharistic celebration is important. Fast days and other holy times are also covered in this chapter, using the *Didache*, the Mishnah, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and other sources to elucidate how Christian regulation of time both emerged from Jewish observances and at the same time was used in some communities to differentiate emerging Christianity from Judaism (224–32). The final chapter, like the first, touches on feasts and food practices, creating the impression that the book has come full circle. McGowan’s treatment of the relationship between Easter and Passover is particularly welcome in its cautious approach to later Jewish evidence from the Mishnah (229–37). Christmas and Epiphany are discussed toward the end of the chapter, where McGowan addresses some of the non-Jewish influences on early Christian festive time (249–59). As in the other chapters, McGowan is careful to include a diversity of early Christian approaches.

This book is a welcome addition to the work being done on early Christian worship. In particular, I commend McGowan’s careful contextualization of Christian worship using both Jewish and “pagan” examples. Further, McGowan’s treatment explores Christian practices across a wide stretch of geography, providing a comprehensive view of the period’s variety. The format of the book adds to its value as a resource for scholars, since footnotes (rather than endnotes) aid in seeing the sources at a glance. Likewise, three thorough indices—subject, author, and ancient texts—make it easy to locate references quickly. Admirably, McGowan includes discussion of women’s roles in Christian worship throughout the book, rather than relegating women to a separate chapter. One aspect of Christian worship from this time period which could have been addressed more directly is space and location; a chapter specifically on geography, pilgrimage, and architecture would have complemented the existing thematic units.

As a resource for students, the book has especial merit. McGowan expertly introduces the various modes of worship in a way that non-experts can appreciate while maintaining the expected historical rigor. The structure—with each chapter covering a unit of worship—makes it easy to assign stand-alone chapters to students, while the affordable price makes the book more likely to be assigned and purchased as a supplemental textbook in a general class or as the core text in a more focused one. I assigned several chapters of the ebook for sessions of my 2015 class at McGill University, *The Ancient Christian Church: 54–604 CE*, where students found the variety of ancient sources used by McGowan useful in understanding the sheer scope of practices embraced by early Christians. One criticism raised by my students was that the thematic structure of the book made it difficult to discern trends over time; this limitation, however, is easily addressed in the classroom.