

# ANCIENT CHRISTIAN WORSHIP



EARLY CHURCH PRACTICES IN SOCIAL, HISTORICAL,  
AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Andrew B. McGowan

**B**  
**Baker Academic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

© 2014 by Andrew B. McGowan

Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McGowan, Andrew Brian, 1961–

Ancient Christian worship : early church practices in social, historical, and theological perspective / Andrew B. McGowan.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-3152-6 (cloth)

1. Worship—History—Early church, ca. 30–600. I. Title.

BV6.M39 2014

264.009'015—dc23

2014009065

Unless indicated otherwise, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Unless indicated otherwise, translations of other ancient texts are those of the author.

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*  
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission.

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

For Brian and Cate



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Abbreviations xi

1. Introduction: *The Origins of Christian Worship* 1
2. Meal: *Banquet and Eucharist* 19
3. Word: *Reading and Preaching* 65
4. Music: *Song and Dance* 111
5. Initiation: *Baptism, Anointing, and Foot Washing* 135
6. Prayer: *Hours, Ways, and Texts* 183
7. Time: *Feasts and Fasts* 217

Epilogue: *The Making of Christian Worship* 261

Bibliography 263

Index of Subjects 279

Index of Modern Authors 285

Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Writings 289



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book contains original scholarship, but it also synthesizes the work of many other scholars who have done so much over recent decades to advance knowledge of ancient liturgy, meals, ritual, and other aspects of early Christianity. I am honored to have had many of them among my teachers, colleagues, and friends. While I hope dependence on others' research is properly acknowledged, the intended audience of this volume has necessitated that many notes point to resources in English that will elucidate complex questions, and not necessarily to the whole of a wider body of scholarship.

I particularly thank those who offered various forms of direct advice and assistance, especially Harold Attridge, Paul Bradshaw, Felicity Harley-McGowan, and Alistair Stewart, who each read one or more chapters. James Ernest, a colleague in early Christianity as well as a patient and conscientious editor, also offered important questions and improvements in reading the drafts. I have had important and helpful conversations with Joan Branham, Patout Burns, Jeremy Hultin, Robin Jensen, Clemens Leonhard, Jodi Magness, Hindy Najman, and Gerard Rouwhorst. My colleagues in the Society of Biblical Literature Meals in the Greco-Roman World Group have been stimulating and supportive colleagues over some years; I mention among them, representatively rather than comprehensively, Dennis Smith, Hal Taussig, Angela Standhartinger, and Matthias Kinghardt. My own limits, rather than theirs, are reflected in the results.

Most of this book was written while on a sabbatical from Trinity College, Melbourne, spent at Yale Divinity School. Those who allowed me to leave the

one and be welcomed at the other, particularly my Trinity colleagues Campbell Bairstow and Bill Cowan, and again Harold Attridge, who was dean of Yale Divinity School at the time, all have my gratitude.

I offer this to those in whose company I first experienced the distinctive life of the Christian community, my parents.



# ABBREVIATIONS

## General

---

ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AT	author's translation
BCE/CE	Before the Common Era/Common Era
BCP	Book of Common Prayer
ca.	circa (about, approximately)
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series latina. Turnhout: 1953–.
cf.	confer (compare)
chap./chaps.	chapter/chapters
ICC	International Critical Commentary
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
NHC	Nag Hammadi Codices
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PG	Patrologia graeca. Edited by J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–86.
PO	Patrologia orientalis
v./vv.	verse/verses
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

## Old Testament

---

Gen.	Genesis	Lev.	Leviticus
Exod.	Exodus	Num.	Numbers

Deut.	Deuteronomy	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Josh.	Joshua	Isa.	Isaiah
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Jer.	Jeremiah
Ps./Pss.	Psalms/Psalms	Dan.	Daniel

### New Testament

---

Matt.	Matthew	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
Rom.	Romans	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	Heb.	Hebrews
Gal.	Galatians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Eph.	Ephesians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

### Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

---

4 Macc.	4 Maccabees	<i>Odes Sol.</i>	<i>Odes of Solomon</i>
<i>Let. Aris.</i>	<i>Letter of Aristeas</i>	Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon

### Dead Sea Scrolls

---

1QH <sup>a</sup>	<i>Thanksgiving Hymns</i>
1QS/1QSa	<i>Rule of the Community/Rule of the Congregation</i>
4QD <sup>b</sup>	<i>Damascus Document<sup>b</sup></i>

### Josephus

---

<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	<i>War</i>	<i>Jewish War</i>
-------------	---------------------------	------------	-------------------

### Philo

---

<i>Contempl. Life</i>	<i>On the Contemplative Life</i>
<i>Spec. Laws</i>	<i>On the Special Laws</i>

### Mishnah and Talmud

---

<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud	<i>t.</i>	Tosefta
<i>m.</i>	Mishnah		
<i>Ber.</i>	<i>Berakot</i>	<i>Roš Haš.</i>	<i>Roš Haššanah</i>
<i>Meg.</i>	<i>Megillah</i>	<i>Ta'an.</i>	<i>Ta'anit</i>
<i>Pesaḥ.</i>	<i>Pesaḥim</i>		

## Apostolic Fathers

---

<i>Barn.</i>	<i>Letter of Barnabas</i>
<i>1–2 Clem.</i>	<i>1–2 Clement</i>
<i>Did.</i>	<i>Didache</i>
<i>Herm. Mand.</i>	<i>Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate(s)</i>
<i>Herm. Sim.</i>	<i>Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude(s)</i>
<i>Herm. Vis.</i>	<i>Shepherd of Hermas, Vision(s)</i>
<i>Ign. Eph.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Ephesians</i>
<i>Ign. Magn.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Magnesians</i>
<i>Ign. Phld.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Philadelphians</i>
<i>Ign. Pol.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To Polycarp</i>
<i>Ign. Rom.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Romans</i>
<i>Ign. Smyrn.</i>	<i>Ignatius, To the Smyrnaeans</i>
<i>Mart. Pol.</i>	<i>Martyrdom of Polycarp</i>

## Patristic and Other Early Christian Sources

---

### Ambrose

*Myst.*      *On the Mysteries*

*Ap. Const.*   *Apostolic Constitutions*

*Ap. Trad.*    *Apostolic Tradition* (attributed to Hippolytus)

### Augustine

*Conf.*      *Confessions*

*Exp. Pss.*    *Expositions on the Psalms*

### Clement of Alexandria

*Paed.*      *Paedagogus (Christ the Teacher)*

*Strom.*      *Stromateis*

*Ep. Apost.*   *Epistula Apostolorum*

### Eusebius

*Comm. Ps.*   *Commentary on the Psalms*

*Eccl. Hist.*   *Ecclesiastical History*

*Gr.*<sup>1</sup>        *[First Greek] Life of Pachomius*

### John Chrysostom

*Hom. on Col.*   *Homilies on the Letter to the Colossians*

**Justin Martyr**

*1 Apol.*     *1 Apology*  
*Dial.*     *Dialogue with Trypho*

*Mart. Perp.* *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*

**Methodius**

*Symp.*     *Symposium*

**Socrates of Constantinople**

*Eccl. Hist.* *Ecclesiastical History*

**Tertullian**

*Apol.*     *Apology*

**New Testament Apocrypha**

---

*Acts Thom.* *Acts of Thomas*     *Gos. Pet.*     *Gospel of Peter*  
*Frag. Oxy.* *Fragment Oxyrhynchus*

**Papyri and Inscriptions**

---

<i>CIJ</i>	<i>Corpus inscriptionum judaicarum</i>	<i>P.Ryl.</i>	Greek Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester
<i>P.Oxy.</i>	Oxyrhynchus Papyri		

# 1



## INTRODUCTION

### *The Origins of Christian Worship*

Christian worship—the set of communal practices of prayer and ritual characteristic of the followers of Jesus—is as fundamental to the church as its doctrine. Yet worship has also been contentious just as long as it has existed. The earliest surviving discussion of a Christian assembly is not a clear description of common order but an exasperated judgment of liturgical failure: “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat” (1 Cor. 11:20 AT).

Early Christian literature about worship tends to emulate Paul’s ambition, if not his exasperation: much of what has come down to us was written to encourage, critique, and change what Christians were doing, not to describe it. There is nothing quite like a Book of Common Prayer (BCP), Directory of Worship, or a hymnal from the ancient church. A historical picture of ancient Christian worship is thus constructed not only from records of praise, ritual, and prayer but also from witnesses to debate, development, and instruction.

This makes the tasks of the historian and reader more complex, but more interesting too. The history of early Christian worship may not be a serene tour through idealized house churches full of believers “of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32), as even a very early account nostalgically put it, but a diverse and challenging journey through the history of Christianity itself. For what

these Christians confessed and contested when they wrote about “going to church” is not just about what might now be called “worship,” but involved their deepest beliefs and aspirations, and their embodied practice as well as their inner faith. Then as now, worship practices could be problematic and divisive, as well as engaging and inspiring.

## The Challenge of “Worship”

### *Tracing “Worship”*

If worship has always been contentious, the modern reader brings a particular unwitting difficulty to ancient Christian practice. Not only is ancient worship different from our own (whichever “our” that might mean), the language we use has shifted, even in quite recent times, sometimes without a corresponding awareness of that change.

This challenge is illustrated by tracing how the English word “worship” has changed drastically in meaning. Today “worship” can often mean communal prayer and ritual, as it will be used for the most part in this book; but for some, “worship” is more like a personal belief or orientation, which is inward in essence, if necessarily expressed in outward and communal forms.<sup>1</sup> In some parts of contemporary Christianity, however, “worship” means a particular genre of music, often used in gatherings (as in the first definition) but intended to express and affirm personal devotion (as in the second). If the last of these definitions is most strikingly specific or even idiosyncratic, all of these uses are actually quite modern; not very long ago, “worship” meant something rather different.

The form for Holy Matrimony in the first English BCP in 1549 included these words at the time of the giving of a ring by groom to bride: “With this ring I thee wed; this gold and silver I thee give; with my body I thee worship; and withal my worldly goods I thee endow.” Although these spousal duties were religiously grounded, “worship” here does not imply some overly romantic devotion, nor does it play fast and loose with what pertained properly only to God. The sixteenth-century groom was referring not to “worship” of his wife as some inward disposition that he would manifest from that point on but to what he was actually doing by giving his bride tokens of his property,

1. Note, for instance, the way “worship” is used in Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); this study pays little attention to communal practice but emphasizes how Jesus was viewed and understood.

including a ring. This sharing of wealth was itself “worship”—a ritual, but also a literal form of reverent service, the founding example of a set of acts and dispositions inherent in marriage rather than merely a sign pointing to them.

A little later, “worship” is deemed appropriate by the translators of the King James Version of the Bible (KJV) to render a particular set of Hebrew and Greek words about obedience, service, and bodily performances related to them; God or gods are the sole referent. The actions described as “worship” are not those noted as modern definitions (rituals, beliefs, or songs); “worship” in the KJV is not a synonym for “praise” or for “faith.” As in the BCP marriage service, it refers to a whole set of dispositions, a relationship rather than just a ritual; but it also refers to physical performances that both reflect and enact such relationships, and most often to literal practices of bowing or prostration (see the series of “worship” actions in Gen. 24; cf. Matt. 4:9; 8:2; 28:9; etc.). “Worship” includes participation in sacrificial rituals such as those of tabernacle or temple (Gen. 22:5; 1 Sam. 1:3), within a broader notion of obedience or service, but does not equate to them or derive its meaning from them.

The bodily acts at the center of “worship” in these early modern cases, primarily of prostration and gift, are not merely signs pointing to something else called “worship” but really are “worship”; they may be said to “effect what they signify,” to borrow from well-known language about sacraments. These performances thus exemplify theorist Catherine Bell’s suggestion that “the molding of the body . . . primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not merely communicate subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinate kneeler in and through the act itself.”<sup>2</sup>

In these cases, and also in the ancient ones underlying the KJV, “worship” refers not only to specific ritual performances but also to a wider reality they create and represent. That wider reality, or “worship,” is obedience or service, not gatherings, nor beliefs, nor song, nor ritual, except within that wider whole. Prayer and communal ritual nevertheless served, along with personal and physical acts of bodily “worship,” to create and express that obedience and service. For the ancients, therefore, such language was not specifically about liturgy any more than it was about music, and it had as much to do with what we would call politics and ethics as with what we call worship.

Although a millennium separates these two early modern texts from even the most recent ones discussed in the body of this book, their thought world

2. Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 100.

seems closer to that of the ancient church (and to the usages reflected in the Bible) than to our own. Not just semantically but at a deeper conceptual level, activities for which words related to “worship” were used in the premodern world denote not a specific realm of activity like “liturgy” but the orientation of all forms of human activity, including the liturgical or ritual, toward a particular allegiance.

Modern participants and practitioners of the somewhat different actions now variously labeled “worship” could all properly insist that their activities are still, or at least should be, intimately related to such reverence and service to God. Yet there is an unmistakable difference between these various metonymies and the older senses of “worship.” The old is about embodied life and ethics, the new about inner life and aesthetics. No one in the ancient church could have asked about “styles” of worship.

### *“Worship” in Translation*

“Worship” has nevertheless in the modern world become a distinct kind, or kinds, of practice, forms of human activity whose relationship to faith and discipleship is constructed along quite different lines from those that prevailed in ancient Israel, early modern England, or—most important for our purposes—the ancient church that appeared and grew in the Mediterranean world in the first few centuries of the common era.

Language, like ritual, exists in history and necessarily changes, and so these differences are matters for reflection rather than refusal. What can be problematic, however, is the failure to acknowledge the change, and thus (for example) to imagine that references to “worship” in ancient settings are about the same things we may call “worship” now. Such slippage is common, and indeed hard to avoid, given that the Bible itself is still usually rendered into English using the same equivalences made familiar when the KJV was translated. When patriarchs, kings, and apostles are now depicted “worshipping” God, something is arguably lost in translation.

Where modern translations attempt to depart from those early modern patterns of rendering the biblical text, however, they can confuse things further. So, for instance, a ritual prescribed in Leviticus for the grain offering (*minḥab*) is rendered thus in the KJV: “And when any will offer a meat offering unto the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour; and he shall pour oil upon it, and put frankincense thereon: And he shall bring it to Aaron’s sons the priests” (Lev. 2:1–2a). The modern reader is likely to be confused by the KJV reference to “meat” in the older sense of “food,” and the New Revised



Standard Version (NRSV) fixes that; however, the new translation transports the ancient Israelite sacrificer to the world of twentieth-century Protestantism by gratuitously inserting its own idea of “worship”: “When anyone presents a grain offering to the LORD, the offering shall be of choice flour; *the worshiper* shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it, and bring it to Aaron’s sons the priests” (Lev. 2:1–2a, emphasis added). Leviticus, the book of the Bible most concerned with acts of communal ritual, does not actually use any word translatable as “worship” here or otherwise, with one problematic exception: in reference to making idols and prostrating or bowing to them (Lev. 26:1). The modern translators introduced this idea to gloss the type of activity they saw going on in the text.

Where ancient talk of “worship” was about the whole of service or devotion, modern “worship,” even though diverse, refers to more distinctive and discrete things. While then as now there was communal eating and drinking, music, symbol, prayer, Scripture, teaching, and those other things that now constitute “worship” as variously understood, we must admit something difficult at the outset: in the ancient world, what we now call “worship” did not quite exist.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430), whose works are a valuable source for the liturgical practice of his own North African church and others in the late fourth century, indicated that this puzzle about the language of “worship” was real in his time also, and suggested that the semantics of Latin were no more adequate to the task than we find modern English:

To make offerings and sacrifice, and to consecrate our possessions and ourselves . . . is the worship [*cultus*] that is due to the divinity . . . and since no Latin term sufficiently exact to express this in a single word occurs to me, I shall avail myself, where needed, of Greek. *Latreia*, whenever it occurs in Scripture, is rendered by the word “service” [*servitus*]. But that service that is due to humans, referring to which the apostle writes that servants must be subject to their own masters, tends to be referred to by another word in Greek, whereas the service that is paid to God alone by worship [*cultus*], is always, or almost always, called *latreia* in the usage of those who wrote down the divine oracles for us. So if we only used the word “worship,” it would not seem to be due exclusively to God; for we also speak of “worship” of humans, whom we celebrate with honors, whether in memory or in the present. (*City of God* 10.1.2)

It may by now seem faintly encouraging to find the problem of translating “worship” arising in ancient as well as in modern contexts. Augustine’s reflection suggests two things: first, that, as already seen, language itself changes

and may not be completely adequate to convey the same ideas or describe the same practices across cultures or over time; and second, that there may nonetheless be a recognizable (if not readily defined) commonality of action and purpose across these same barriers, through which women and men are seeking to enact divine service.

### *“Worship” in the New Testament*

It should not now come as a surprise that words usually translated as “worship” in English versions of the New Testament (NT) are not primarily concerned with the conduct of Christian assemblies or communal rituals. Like their equivalents in the Hebrew Bible, these terms are concerned either with reverence and obedience or with bodily performances that enacted them; of the references to “worship” in most English translations, a great many in Greek are actually related to *proskynēsis*, prostration. So when, for instance, the apostles are depicted “worshipping” the risen Christ, they are not singing, reciting prayer, or (only) experiencing a feeling or attitude; they are flat on their faces (Matt. 28:17). Of course this is ritual—but not ritual intended to convey something else. “Worship” is about the body and about service.

“Worship” language in the NT can also indicate dispositions of piety and reverence on the part of a person or community (Rom. 12:1). This includes specific utterances, actions, or events, including ritual (John 4:20; 12:20; Acts 8:27; 24:11), as well as acts of charity and justice (James 1:27). “Worship” in the NT texts is not, however, tied strongly or distinctively to prayer or to Christian gatherings or communal activities. Of course practices traced to the command of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:24b, 25b; Matt. 28:19) or to apostolic authority might be regarded as “worship” in the senses outlined above, as a part of obedience and service. Still, the fact that this possibility is not directly taken up in NT documents is striking. There are various reasons for this silence, including the issues already raised, and also the continued existence of other gatherings and practices (especially the rituals of the temple, initially) that were more customarily regarded as communal forms of “worship” or service to God. Whatever its basis, however, this acknowledgment takes us to something of a fork in the road.

On the one hand, there is the biblical language or concept of “worship,” which suggests the reverent orientation of the whole person and of communities toward God—and sometimes just being flat on your face to make that real. This “worship” does include both speech acts and physical performance and may take place in the domestic and personal realm, as well as in the communal

and public; but communal rituals of the Christian community are not actually presented as “worship” in the NT. “Worship” language in the NT texts suggests a great deal about ethos or a Christian way of life, but relatively little about the specifics of distinctive liturgical practice or performance.

On the other hand, there is a collection of distinctive practices attested and urged in Scripture, specific actions characteristic of the Christian community, which assume and embody proper reverence and service toward God, even if not always or anywhere labeled “worship.” Christians eat (1 Cor. 10:16–17; 11:17–34; Jude 12), baptize (Acts 2:41; Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 1:13–17; 15:29; etc.), fast (Matt. 6:16–18; Acts 13:2–3; 14:23), pray (Acts 1:14; 6:4; 14:23; Col. 4:2), teach or proclaim (1 Cor. 12; Col. 3:16), and more; these actions all have ritual elements such as prescribed forms of words, bodily performances, and use of particular objects and substances. Their uneasy relationship with the language or concept of “worship” does not make them any less essential to the emerging Christian movement. This list could be expanded to include less clearly communal or ritual actions, such as practical acts of concern for the poor (Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1–2; James 1:27); if for present purposes we focus on the foundations of liturgical practice, or “worship” in the narrower modern sense rather than the ancient one, this is not to say that such a limitation best expresses the understandings of the earliest Christian communities about their distinctive actions.

Baptism and Eucharist have a particular place among these practices, and their continuation by the Christians was connected with the example and teaching of Jesus directly through NT texts. Each of these has its own rationale(s)—that is, sets of meanings that flesh out the ways it is constitutive of Christian identity for individuals and communities. So, for example, Paul suggests that baptism effects the incorporation of its members into the body (1 Cor. 12:13), which is itself made by sharing in the one broken bread (1 Cor. 10:17).

### *Creating Worship*

In this book, “worship” henceforth means these practices that constitute Christian communal and ritual life, as reflected in the NT itself and thereafter, not merely or specifically what the NT itself calls “worship.” As the story of how this sort of “worship” develops, however, we may continue to bear in mind the other sense or senses in which the word was used. Since the Christians of the first four centuries did not have a concept of “worship” as a distinct form of human activity that linked these practices over against other forms of ritual or obedience, to narrate early Christian life entirely as though it did

would be misleading. We will also use the term “liturgy,” which, while it has a clearer modern set of references in the communal rituals of some Christian groups, has also changed in significance, originally referring to forms of public service or philanthropy, but in the early Christian period came gradually to be applied to the “service” that was Christian communal prayer and practice.

If the more specific idea of worship or liturgy as communal ritual and prayer is recent in some respects, we can see it beginning to form at least conceptually in early Christianity itself. In his *First Apology*, written in the mid-second century, the Christian teacher Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165) addresses a defense and description of Christian practice to the Roman emperor, linking some of these characteristic performances and gatherings such as Eucharist and communal prayer and comparing them favorably to Roman sacrifices:

We praise [God], to the best of our ability, through prayer and thanksgiving for all we have been given to eat, as we have been taught is the only honor worthy of him; not to consume by fire what he has created for our sustenance, but to use it for ourselves and those in need. And in thanksgiving for our existence, and for all the means of strength, for the various kinds of created things, and for the changes of the seasons, we offer him prayers for our persistence in immortality through faith in him in verbal processions and hymns. (*1 Apol.* 13.1–2)

Justin’s references to “thanksgiving” (*eucharistia*) in relation to food alludes to the Eucharist, as he makes clearer later in the same important work, which we will encounter at various points in what follows. He thus places the distinctive sacramental actions of the Christians within a bigger picture, with the ritual and the worldview as two sides of the same coin; “thanksgiving” among a small group of Christ-believers is both the whole of their life and a meal of bread and wine.

## Sources and Method: Diversity and Development

### *Texts and Objects*

“Worship” in the sense employed here is about bodies and spaces and objects, as well as about words. Words, however, are most of what survives to give direct indications of early Christian practice, at least until the third century; and we cannot always be entirely clear how typical or representative these words are. Nevertheless, a rich set of surviving texts will be the first resort for much of this book.

Material evidence and the results of archaeology do contribute fundamentally to imagining the world in which Christianity emerged. The earliest Christian objects may actually be texts, or rather manuscripts, such as the many papyri found a century or so ago at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt; many of these had some sort of ritual or communal use, as sacred texts for reading.<sup>3</sup> If until the third century it is difficult to point to other material evidence that relates to actual Christian ritual, some of the activities of the early communities can be illuminated by evidence for common practices in the wider world of the ancient Mediterranean, such as for communal dining.

When objects and spaces with specifically Christian origins do become available for examination, they are often funerary in character; catacomb paintings and sarcophagi provide a disproportionate amount of the earliest Christian art. The images and symbols they bear emphasize the hope of resurrection and how the afterlife was imagined, rather than how worship was conducted. If we should avoid romantic fantasies about persecuted Christians huddling in the catacombs for regular worship, we can nevertheless glean some wider elements of ritual practice from such places and objects, in addition to the more immediate sense these give of actual funerary observances.<sup>4</sup>

From the third century on we are also able to begin considering actual spaces and their use by groups of Christians. The oldest surviving “church”—a misnomer by most counts, but at least a space dedicated to the activities of Christian communal rituals—from Dura-Europos in Syria provides a new sort of opportunity to consider baptismal ritual. From the fourth century, architectural and other evidence starts to become considerably more common, but few other accoutrements of worship—vessels, books, and such—from the period within the scope of this study have survived.

### *The New Testament Texts*

The most valuable texts for examining the origins of Christian worship are those collected in the NT. For our purposes their value is twofold. First, they are, as a group, the oldest set of texts illustrating any aspect of early Christian gatherings; there are only a few others that can claim to be as ancient as even the latest of these. Second, they are themselves artifacts or elements of Christian worship; their collection and preservation, and even composition,

3. See now the discussion in AnneMarie Luijendijk, “Sacred Scriptures as Trash: Biblical Papyri from Oxyrhynchus,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 64 (2010): 217–54.

4. Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. 8–31.

owe much to the liturgical practices of the ancient communities among whom these works came to be read as Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

This does not mean, however, that NT documents can be read as simple windows onto the earliest Christian practice. Much depends on genre. The Gospels themselves may be more valuable than some assume as evidence for communal practice after the emergence of the Christian movement, since their composition and use reflects not only the practice and teaching of Jesus but also the concerns of his followers subsequently. On the other hand, it is tempting for some to imagine that prescriptive texts in the NT—such as many of the letters are in part—give a straightforward indication of what was actually done. The fact that Paul advocates or criticizes a certain custom in a letter may or may not actually mean that his readers instantly complied with his wishes; it probably does mean that they were not doing what he wanted to begin with.

Modern efforts to create or reform liturgical practices in terms such as “NT worship” reveal a different sort of problem. There are principles that can be discerned about issues such as order, participation, edification, and mutual regard (1 Cor. 12–14), yet the contexts in which these virtues were sought cannot always be established straightforwardly. Baptism and Eucharist are grounded in specific injunctions of Jesus (1 Cor. 11:24–25; Matt. 28:19), and otherwise assumed or discussed, but the forms they took are hardly specified. So these documents manifestly do not present a systematic description or prescription for Christian gatherings; they do assume various practices as available for assessment and critique. Reading the NT as a liturgical source thus requires some imaginative construction of these assumed practices; such construction must of course be accountable to the evidence for what actually took place, and appropriate critical attention must be given to how imagination tends to favor present experience and preferences.

### *Jewish Evidence*

In 1949 a leading scholar of Christian liturgy, Gregory Dix, famously stated that “our understanding of our forms of worship underwent a radical transformation when it finally occurred to someone that Jesus was a Jew.”<sup>6</sup> Most of a century later, there have been many important developments in the study of early Christian worship that reflect this obvious but long-underemphasized

5. See further chap. 3 on reading and preaching, below.

6. The quip is recounted by one of the hearers, Thomas J. Talley, in “From Berakah to Eucharistia: A Reopening Question,” *Worship* 50 (1976): 115.

reality. Yet our sense of what it meant to be a first-century Jew has also changed significantly.

In the same year that Dix spoke about Jesus and Judaism, archaeologists were undertaking the initial excavation of Cave 1 at Qumran, the source of the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>7</sup> The library discovered at Qumran revealed a diversity and richness of Jewish thought that was contemporary with Jesus and whose character was often quite distinctive over and against better-known texts, such as the rabbinical monuments of Mishnah, Tosefta, and Talmuds, on the one hand, and the Hellenized reflections of urbane Jews like Philo and Josephus, on the other.

Consideration of the Jewish matrix within which Christianity emerged remains fundamentally important to consideration of early Christian ritual practice, but this is not a simple matter. Many published works simplify or objectify Jewish practice, however sympathetically, as a neat backdrop against which the actors of early Christian liturgy can be imagined performing their rituals. Ancient Judaism was in fact a diverse and dynamic set of traditions; all of the sets of texts just mentioned are potentially important as evidence for Jewish belief and practice, but none provides a simple or uncontested picture of such.

The Dead Sea Scrolls themselves were initially hailed by some as shedding direct light on the milieu of Jesus, or at least on John the Baptizer. Among the texts found at Qumran, those particularly concerned with the life of the sectarian community that produced them expand our sense of how diverse Jewish thought and practice may have been, but invite only indirect comparison with John or Jesus. They do, however, corroborate and enrich evidence from some of the other texts regarding forms of Jewish prayer and a widespread interest or concern about the temple and its rituals.<sup>8</sup>

Rabbinic literature may be the most often misused of Jewish sources. Voluminous in scope, and systematic in some respects but celebrating indeterminacy in others, these tractates include traditions as old as Jesus or older, but also reflect the continuing realities of the periods up to their compilation: around 200 CE for the Mishnah and Tosefta, but much later for the Talmuds.<sup>9</sup> This does not make them less important texts, but they are documents of an ongoing tradition that continued to interact with Christianity after the time

7. James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 61–96.

9. See the discussions in Jacob Neusner, *The Classics of Judaism: A Textbook and Reader* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

of Jesus, and are not merely depictions of a homogenous Judaism from which Christianity departed. As we will note below, rabbinic evidence for practices such as the Passover seder, baptism of proselytes, and patterns of scriptural reading, which around Dix's time were sometimes treated simply as direct influences on Christianity, must now be viewed more as parallel or, better, interwoven strands of later ritual development.

### *Church Orders*

There is Christian literary evidence not in the NT canon, some of it perhaps as old as some scriptural writings, that provides more specific information about liturgical practices and concerns. Preeminent, at least in liturgical focus, among these documents is a "church order" genre, which offers a sense not only of what was regarded by its real authors as the appropriate or ideal forms of worship practice but also of what kind of implied authority was deemed appropriate to establish it.

The oldest of these church orders is generally known as the *Didache* ("Teaching"), which has been transmitted along with suggestions (in varying titles) that its "teaching" came either from the twelve apostles or from the Lord himself, through them, to the nations.<sup>10</sup> The *Didache* (ca. 100?) includes a catechetical summary, instructions for baptism and Eucharist, and rules for leadership practice. Its successors predictably add more detail and substance, including principles and texts for other forms of gathering, for daily prayer, and for what we might see as ethical and organizational matters and not just the narrowly liturgical—another reminder that their categories and ours may not coincide. Church orders written or compiled across the third to fifth centuries—prominent among them the works known as the *Apostolic Tradition*, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, *Apostolic Constitutions*, and *Testamentum Domini*—not only attempt to prescribe proper worship practices but also continue to place their ambition for good liturgy in the hands of older and higher authorities, to whom the works or their contents are earnestly if implausibly attributed. Over time, general attributions to apostolic authority in these works give way to supposed direct quotes from the apostles, and in some cases to teachings ascribed to Jesus himself.

The names of these works, confusing as they are to the newcomer, are all intended to be rather transparent; the church orders do not present themselves

10. Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 57.



as distinct compositions but as records of apostolic or even divine sanction for what they describe. The authors and communities whose interests they represent were generally not conscious inventors of liturgical practice, but, in their own minds at least, inheritors and defenders of acts and words whose antiquity and authority were far greater than their own. A modern reader may reach different conclusions about both of those claims, but ought not blithely to ignore their significance. This also means that these documents fit awkwardly into typical modern ideas of original authors or autographs; they are rather “living literature,” among which every version and every manuscript has its significance.<sup>11</sup>

The most interesting and problematic of all these may be the work often referred to as the *Apostolic Tradition* and associated with Hippolytus, a presbyter and would-be bishop in Rome early in the third century. This is a text that can only be reconstructed with moderate certainty from fragments and borrowings, but which was (or versions of which were) certainly used by a number of other later works dating from about 400 onward. Scholars in the early twentieth century established a likely form and content of this “Egyptian Church Order,” as it was initially and more modestly referred to; they also grew more confident it could be attached to a place and a name, to the extent that it became routinely referred to as the work of one Hippolytus of Rome and called the *Apostolic Tradition*. That confidence—not so much about a basic form of the document but about its specific origin—now seems excessive, and the supposed assurance of an early Roman provenance needs to be considered critically.<sup>12</sup> Still, this *Apostolic Tradition* (as we will continue to refer to it, for convenience, at least) was certainly an early and very influential work of the church order genre, and is a precious witness to some (probably) fourth-century compiler’s highest liturgical and pastoral ideals, as well as to those of earlier writers or communities—some even as early as the elusive Hippolytus—who provided its sources.

### *Other Works*

Few other literary works from the early church are as directly focused on worship as these, but few have no relevance at all. Writings of apologists

11. Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 2002), 5.

12. A circumspect position is taken in the most comprehensive recent commentary; see Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Artridge, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); a plausible revision of the case for Roman origin is made in Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

like Justin, whom we have already encountered, include attempts to defend Christian practice from ignorance or slander. From the third century on there are extended exegetical works, such as those of Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–ca. 254), that began life in homiletical contexts and thus provide us with direct evidence for what will come to be seen as the ministry of the Word and with incidental evidence for other practices. Letters from significant figures like Cyprian (d. 258) and Augustine sometimes address questions of worship practice directly.

These rich resources of patristic literature offer various possibilities for reading and reflection. Some readers today have and will seek to draw prescriptive theological pictures from them; some of these “fathers” whose more extensive writings have survived certainly offer sacramental theologies whose similarities and differences from later ones are important. While sacramental theology will appear in this book from time to time, our concern is descriptive more than prescriptive. That is, these chapters attempt to reconstruct a sense of what was said and done in various ancient churches, not of what ought to have been done, even in the view of the most persuasive or authoritative ancient writers.

There are also surviving liturgical texts in the more immediate sense—that is, words used in worship. Apart from those contained in the church orders, some prayers and hymns have come down from well-known authors like Ephraem of Nisibis (ca. 306–73) and Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339–97), but others have come without attribution, speaking with a collective voice of the past rather than an individual one. These are all words composed by a relative few, but spoken or sung by many, women and men, young and old, speakers and hearers in Latin, Greek, Syriac, and Coptic, among other languages.

In addition to these relatively well-known and authoritative texts and authors, there were others that were looked at askance by them but that are not necessarily less interesting to us. Early Christianity was characterized by processes of community formation, involving both ritual and theory, from the earliest times; a strand that we know as “catholic” or “orthodox” emerged in and through a variety of controversies and contests across the period that is the subject of this book, but was not always and everywhere the most or only obvious way to be Christian. And what characterized that orthodoxy, as it emerged in the period of the creeds and councils, cannot be assumed to have been part of the thought or the practice of every earlier group.

Losers rarely write history, so the evidence for early Christian diversity in worship is as difficult to establish as for other things. There are important

reports and critiques of certain practices passed on by the victorious—by Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 200), Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 225), and Cyprian for the second and third centuries, and by Augustine and John Chrysostom (347–407) for the fourth. Some of the other voices have survived more directly, however. These include works of a quasi-scriptural nature, such as apocryphal gospels and acts, which reflect a variety of positions often not in keeping with the eventually normative tradition, and some of which contain indications of how their authors and early readers thought, sometimes surprisingly, about matters such as baptism and Eucharist. The movement sometimes referred to as gnosticism has left some direct literary remains, such as those documents that survived in the cache of Coptic texts from Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.<sup>13</sup>

We will consider the practices of these groups as they arise, and their importance is not merely a matter of curiosity. As the Christian movement grew and developed, its ritual, like its theology, was in formation. The particular forms of gatherings and the actions and utterances that came to characterize them were not always the organic development of what was already obvious to the earliest Christians, but involved dialogic processes—controversies, often—both internal and external. Jewish and Greek and other communities and traditions provided points of contrast, imitation, and competition. Internal differences—about the extent of Scripture, the elements of the Eucharist, and the forms of baptism—all gave shape to the practices that were to emerge in more or less familiar forms; and these emergent practices were to some extent choices, reflecting decisions about what to do and what not to do.

There are also texts conveyed as inscriptions, whose witness has a different and very significant character. Specifically Christian inscriptions, like other material evidence, take some time to appear and are few in number until the fourth century; and like other material evidence, they are somewhat skewed toward the funereal. However, these texts, whose audiences were somewhat different from those of literary works, add some remarkable thickness and diversity to the picture—for example, witnessing to the existence of at least some women who were clergy at periods when this has often been regarded as impossible,<sup>14</sup> or indicating that the difficulty of holding some traditional

13. On this see the different positions held by David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), whose discussion includes some important treatments of ritual and sacramental issues, and Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

14. Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000).

beliefs along with the new ones of the gospel was not always so self-evident to those mourning the departed.<sup>15</sup>

## Scope

This study begins with the earliest evidence for Christian belief and practice, and ends not long after 400. The reasons for this chronological scope are those that have often led to a working definition of the “early church” that spans those centuries; just as this period sees the emergence of relative clarity around the canon of Scripture and creedal definitions of doctrine, it also sees the formation of liturgical patterns that would remain fundamental to Christian practice thereafter.

Nevertheless, the picture constructed here has not been formed purely with the intention of explaining those practices that persisted and that underlie present ones. There are paths pursued in this book that go nowhere in terms of subsequent liturgical history, but that were walked on with faith and hope by the ancients: dancing, foot washing, and kissing are some examples whose inclusion is important to construct an ancient picture and not merely to illuminate a modern one.

It may be clearer how these early centuries are fundamental to present Christian identity in the cases of creeds and canon—which continue to have widely acknowledged authority across modern Christian traditions—than that of liturgy. While in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some mainline Protestant traditions the connections between the rituals of Eucharist and baptism as traced here will be easy to see, the forms of worship in many other Christian groups today are not consciously based on these models. This raises some interesting questions regarding how each of these forms of Christian practice (including intellectual practice) really are or should be determined; some Protestants would be surprised to know that many of the Reformers understood their liturgical task as being to restore ancient models rather than to construct worship anew purely from NT texts—a problematic notion in any case.

However, even the varied forms of baptism and Eucharist, or Lord’s Supper, across the enormous diversity of contemporary Christianity allow some perception of older shapes and texts; every Christian liturgical practice is, after all, “reformed” in some sense, not really invented from whole cloth or

15. For instance, the epitaph of Licinia, which invokes Jesus as “fish of the living” on a stele, also refers to the Roman *Dii Manes*; see Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 51.

outside of history. Ancient approaches to words spoken and sung are at least of comparative interest for modern preachers and performers; and the practice of daily prayer, which will be considered here in some detail, arguably underlies the typical Protestant service of the Word, even if its practitioners are often unaware of the precedent.

The story of Christian worship across this time involves both continuity and change. This book does not seek to present the change either as minimal (as though the shape of Christian worship was always and immediately obvious, and merely gathered some inconsequential detail as it went along) or as so radical as to amount to discontinuity (as though the Constantinian revolution imposed ritual practice on a group previously characterized only by spontaneity and freedom of action).<sup>16</sup> The history of Christian worship, like the history of Christianity itself, is probably ill served by either of these grand narratives. Christian worship does, however, have a real story, which like any other worth telling has foundational elements that are developed, others that appear as genuine novelties, and some that appear and then fade or die. Within this narrative, the efforts of Christians to seek, serve, and praise the Maker of all things as revealed in Jesus Christ is the sustained theme.

16. On the Constantinian revolution see Paul F. Bradshaw, “Ten Principles for Interpreting Early Christian Liturgical Evidence,” in *The Making of Jewish and Christian Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Two Liturgical Traditions 1* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 3–21.