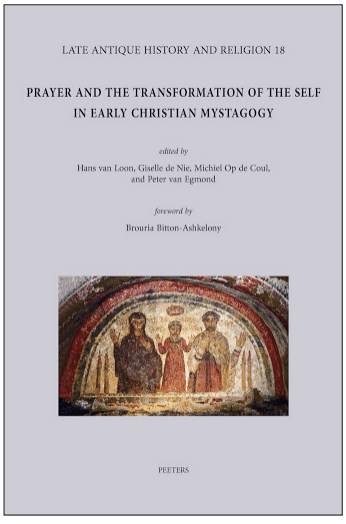
Prayer and the Transformation of the Self



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Prayer and the Transformation of the Self in Early Christian Mystagogy is a collection of articles of which most originally was presented at the *Second International Congress of the Netherlands Centre for Patristic Research* held in Utrecht in August 2014. Mystagogy has been a central topic at this centre for a longer period. The volume can thus be considered the fruits of an extensive research cooperation under the direction of Paul van Geest.

The volume is massive as it includes 21 articles, a foreword by Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony from Hebrew University, and indices of biblical references, names and writings, modern authors, and subjects. The volume is well-edited and has a beautiful dust jacket and an inviting lay-out. The contributions to the volume are divided into the following sections: foreword, introduction to the theme, beginnings, Eastern Fathers, Western Fathers, comparisons, and reception.

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The foreword, as mentioned, is written by Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony from Hebrew University who is a leading scholar on the topic of prayer in Late Antique Christianity. Bitton-Ashkelony calls her contribution "Discerning *Mystagogia* and *Pedagogia*" and adds the title of the volume as subtitle. Connecting "*mystagogia*" and "*pedagogia*" she identifies mystagogy as a pedagogical process that is driven by prayer aiming at the transformation of the self. She develops this identification of mystagogy by quoting Hans van Loon's definition "Mystagogy is regarded as a guided process of transformation, in which believers acquire an inner balance by a certain order of life, in that they become more receptive to God's being and operation. Without losing touch with everyday life and the community of faith" (p. XII). Further, she includes Cathrine Bell's performance theory to explain the transformative perspective of mystagogy: "In combining prayer, mystagogy and self-transformation, many of the ideas and practices discussed here appear in light of Cathrine Bell's performance theory, according to which ritual is understood as 'a set of activities that does not simply express cultural values or enact symbolic scripts, but actually effects changes in people's perceptions and interpretations'" (p. XIII). Having explained these important definitions, she briefly presents the history of research on the topic and explains how the present volume challenges and advances the state of the art. The second part of Bitton-Ashkelony's foreword presents the content of the individual contributions in the volume.

The second part of the volume called "introduction" includes two contributions: "*In oratione forma est desideriorum*. The Transformation of the Self and the Practice of Prayer in Early Christian Mystagogy" by Paul van Geest and Giselle de Nie, and "From Sacrificial Reciprocity to Mystagogy: Communal and Individual Initiation through Prayer" by Gerard Rouwhorst. Paul van Geest and Giselle de Nie's article opens with important definitions of mystagogy as they have been developed by Paul van Geest and the centre he is leading. The article explains how early Christian prayers differs from Graeco-Roman and Jewish prayer because the aim of Christian prayers is to invoke and support a transformation process of the individual and to initiate the individual into the Christian community: "In the Early Church, the mystagogue's objective was first and foremost to initiate a process intended to effect an existential transformation through rituals, the explanations of stories and images from biblical traditions, and catechesis. Furthermore, personal development in early Christian mystagogy went hand in hand with the introduction of the initiate into the community, and his or her taking on of a new identity, either in the group of beginners or in the group of advanced students" (pp. 5-6). The authors claim that the sermons and treatises of Late Antique Christian theologians should be considered first and foremost as mystagogical texts aiming at this initiation and transformation

of Christians, and not as doctrinal texts. The second part of van Geest and Nie's article is a second presentation of all the individual articles in the volume. This is a bit redundant of Bitton-Ashkelony's article. Gerard Rouwhorst writes about prayer in Greek and Roman religions and in biblical and post- biblical Judaism. Prayers in Greek and Roman religions are according to Rouwhorst defined by reciprocity: the prayers are 'given' to the gods in the hope that the praying persons will receive from the gods what they are praying for. Prayer in biblical Judaism is characterized by their connection to the sacrificial cult and thus by their institutionalization. This institutionalization of prayers was continued and strengthened in post-biblical Judaism which had the consequence that prayers tended to have a fixed structure and content. The institutionalizing of prayers was continued in Christianity, but Christianity also developed new forms of prayers which can best be characterized as "mystagogical" meaning that they were sometimes removed from the institutional settings aiming at transformation of the self of the individual Christian. Rouwhorst explores this development during the first centuries CE. Rouwhorst's article is thus very informative and a most helpful background for understanding the following articles that mainly focus on individual authors' understanding of prayer and mystagogy.

These first three contributions define very important definitions of prayer and mystagogy. They are the most valuable part of the volume because they advance the topic theoretically, present convincing definitions, and give an overall impression of the theme. Most of the following articles are also good and well-written, but they mostly present individual cases of prayer and mystagogy. More importantly they do not all relate to or discuss the definitions and theories presented in the first three contributions. In the following I will present all these articles and comment on them briefly.

Part 1: Beginnings

Henk Bakker ("'So on Earth': Liturgy from Heaven") presents the Book of Revelation read as a mystagogical text through which John as the mystagogue reveals the mysteries about the end of time to his readers. The article thus represents a more traditional understanding of "mysteries" as divine secrets to be revealed by seers through texts. The article interesting as it is in itself does not add much to the overall theme of the book where mystagogy is explained as related to prayer and initiation into the Christian community. This differs from when Benno Zuiddam ("Scripture as Initiator, Standard, and Prototype of Prayer in Clement of Rome's First Letter to the Corinthians") interprets Clement of Rome's First Letter to the Corinthians as an instruction in how to use prayer in relation to the reading of Scripture. According to Zuiddam Clement of Rome understands prayer as answers to the reading of Scripture

and thus as part of a mystagogical instruction in how to live as a Christian. Peter-Ben Smit ("Prayer and Participation in the Eucharist in the Work of Ignatius of Antioch") writes in the opening paragraph of his article that "The Eucharist is obviously a liturgy of prayer, and, as an ongoing practice of communion, it aims at the performance of being Church, that is, of being in communion with God and with each other through being in Christ" (p. 81). This leads him to argue that the Eucharist is an "embodied prayer" and a "performance of identity". The Eucharist as Ignatius understands it can thus be understood as a mystagogical process initiating the members of the community into their new identity as Christians. The article thus presents a fine example of how the editors' definitions of prayer and mystagogy is used actively in the concrete interpretation.

Part 2: Eastern Fathers

The second part of the volume opens with Marcel Poorthuis article "Origen on Parables and Prayer: Tensions between the Esoteric and the Universal". The article asks whether Origen's idea of parables as secret codes, which can only be broken by a few already initiated, militates against the idea that mystagogy is a process of initiation of the uninitiated into the mysteries of the faith (p. 97). Poorthuis' conclusion is that there is no contradiction in Origen at this point. According to Origen, the parables hide the truth for those unable to understand it but reveals it to those who are at a spiritual level that allows them to understand the truth. Thus, the parables are useful at all stages of the mystagogical process. The author finds a similar understanding of parables in Rabbinic literature.

Michel van Parys OSB ("Remembering God: Basil the Great's Mystagogy of Prayer") explains Basil's understanding of mystagogical prayer employing four approaches to the theme: prayer without ceasing, prayer of the Psalms, remembering God and a description of Basil's own attitude towards prayer. He reaches the conclusion that according to Basil "remembering God" is the main aimsof praying. Nienke Vos ("Gregory of Nyssa as a Mystagogue: Macrina's Final Prayer in Context") provides a fine example of how fruitful it can be to interpret a text, which usually is seen as belonging to a well-established genre, from a new perspective. In this case, Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina* is normally interpreted as a hagiographical text – which it obviously is, but Nienke Vos interprets it as a mystagogical text. This means that the author focusses on the different forms of prayer in the text and their function. The text contains liturgical prayers, personal prayer, and prayer connected to healing. The text ends with a prayer, which Gregory puts into the mouth of Macrina. Through this prayer, Gregory teaches his audience how to pray and how to participate in the

mystagogical process which transforms body and soul. Macrina's life and death becomes an example of this process. Joseph Lucas ("Descending to Ascend: Prayer as Initiation into Divine Judgement in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*") takes the readers of the volume into the world of early Christian asceticism and its use of prayer. His idea is that the humiliation and self-condemnation of the ascetics was their way of preparing for the judgement. They descended in order to ascend. Prayer combined with the reading of Scripture was their way into this process. Henk van Vreeswijk ("John Chrysostom on Prayer, Song, Music, and Dance") shows that prayer and songs according to John Chrysostom were an integrated part of the mystagogical process, but that he at the same time excluded the use of music and dance. This seems to be the main argument of this article. Nathan Witkamp ("'In the Posture of One Who Prays': The *Orans* Position in Theodore of Mopsuestia's Baptismal Rite") explores the involvement of the body in prayer and mystagogy especially as it is presented by Theodore of Mopsuestia. Reading Theodore's baptismal homilies he shows that the baptizant probably stood in the orans position during large parts of the baptismal ritual. The mystagogical aim of this was to teach the initiand that he through baptism was initiated into a community which relied on God's mercy and therefore the initiand had to learn the attitude of prayer and humility. This is a good example of how mystagogy is an embodied process. Hans van Loon's article ("Prayer and Fasting in Cyril of Alexandria's Festal Letters") reads Cyril of Alexandria's festal letters as mystagogical texts asking what they tell us about Cyril's view on prayer and fasting. Cyril does not seem to be a strict ascetic, but he recommends a light fasting abstaining from superfluous and excessive eating and drinking. This fast should be combined with prayer and thanksgiving for the salvation in Christ. Again, this article presents new insights in a specific corpus of text reading them through the lens of mystagogy.

Part 3: Western Fathers

Metha Hokke ("The Concluding Prayers in Ambrose's *De institutione virginis* and *Exhortatio virginitatis*") analyses these two texts as sources for understanding Ambrose's considerations about virginity. Prayer plays a role in the texts, but Hokke does not manage to relate Ambrose's texts directly to the theme of this volume. Paul van Geest ["'*Ergo sic time Dominum, ut speres in misericordia eius*' (En. in ps. 146.20): Augustine on the Relationship between the Fear of God and Personal Prayer"] asks whether Augustine finds a relation between the fear of God and prayer. At the basis of reading of the *Confessions*, *Epistula 130*, and *Enarrationes in Psalmos* he reaches the conclusion that Augustine considers the fear of God to be that which encourages the Christians to enter the first stage of the mystagogical process. Subsequently

Augustine downplays the role of fear and combines it with hope which becomes the leading motive in the mystagogical process. Paula Rose ("*Spiritui requies adquirenda est*: Augustine and the Prayer for the Deceased") also writes about Augustine's use and understanding of prayer. Her point of departure is Augustine's attitude towards the prayer for the deceased. Paulinus of Nola asked Augustine about his view on the tradition of burying the dead close to the saints (*ad sanctos*). This leads Augustine to reflect on the most appropriate attitude towards the deceased. His considerations lead him to prefer a more spiritual care for the deceased through prayer instead of the traditional burials *ad sanctos* and celebrations at the graves. The author of this contribution sees this as a "mystagogical turn" from outward rituals to inward spiritual contemplation of the fate of the deceased (p. 278). This conclusion is most likely correct, but it seems to go against another trend in the volume to emphasize the "embodied" nature of the mystagogical process. Laela Zwollo's article ("Prayer, Desire, and the Image of God: Augustine's Longing for God in His 'Prayer to the Holy Trinity'") is the third article on Augustine. Augustine is certainly important for the Western tradition, but in this volume, he almost seems to be *the* Western tradition. Zwollo analyses Augustine's "Prayer to the Trinity" at the end of *De trinitate*. In this treatise Augustine understands human beings as the image of the Trinity. In his prayer Augustine asks God to improve the image of the Trinity within him. Augustine thus shows that even in his maybe most speculative theological treatise he is considering himself as being included in a mystagogical process that step by step leads him towards God.

Part 4: Comparisons

Andrew Louth ("The Lord's Prayer as Mystagogy from Origen to Maximus") compares Origen's, Gregory of Nyssa's and Maximus Confessor's interpretations of the Lord's Prayer as mystagogical practice. He shows that the role and interpretation of the Lord's Prayer changed according to changes in catechetical practice provoked by the shifting political and social status of Christianity. Willemien Otten ("West and East: Prayer and Cosmos in Augustine and Maximus Confessor") compares Augustine and Maximus Confessor in order to see if their cosmology includes a mystagogical potential. The idea seems to be that a Platonic theologically loaded cosmology could provide a pathway for a mystagogical process towards the divine. Otten finds that even if Augustine represents a shift from cosmology to Christology both his and Maximus' theology provides mystagogical potential. Michael Bakker ("The Mystagogical Psychology of the Greek Fathers and Prayer: A Diachronic Study") provides a very technical but at the same time highly interesting analysis of which "part" of human beings that is active in praying: is it the heart or is it the nous? Bakker compares

authors from the entire Greek Patristic tradition from the first to the twentieth century – thus using the Greek's definition of "patristics". The three papers in part four of the volume is thus quite different having only the comparative element in common.

Part 5: Reception

The volume concludes with two articles placed under the heading "reception" of which Giselle de Nie's paper "Prayer Images as Transformers in Gregory of Tours: Desert and Relic Cult Traditions" is the first. De Nie begins by asking the question how people can pray to an invisible God. She continues by showing how the monastic tradition most often handled this situation by creating mental images while praying. Only in the Evagrian tradition such mental images were excluded. Later on in the Western tradition as evidenced by Gregory of Tours monks began to pray to saints and to the relics of them. The prayer images thus changed character and became more and more physical. From the reviewer's point of view this enlightening article should have been placed in section three on the Western Fathers. This would of course have left Mary Carruther's article "'The Dessert', Sensory Delight, and Prayer in the Augustinian Renewal of the Twelfth Century" alone in the reception section. However, Carruther's article could easily have been put in the Western Fathers section as well, since it deals with how the Latin rhetorical tradition, which Augustine's writings are used as illustrations of, is received in the 12th cent. Augustinian revival in Western monasticism. The author convincingly shows how this rhetorical tradition is central to prayer praxis in Augustin as well as in the 12th cent. Western monasticism.

This volume is a rich collection of articles that all discusses mystagogy and prayer in one way or another. The volume sets new standards and a new agenda for studying prayer end mystagogy in Early Christianity. One of the strengths of the volume is that it combines articles that provide theoretical considerations about its theme, gives an overview over the source material and the historical developments of the theme with contributions that provide detailed analysis of specific authors and texts. In most cases these specialized articles relate to the theme and the general considerations. In a few cases, this is not clearly the case. However, this is the nature of collected volumes stemming from conferences and it does not in any way disturb the overall impression of the volume being solid, coherent, and well-edited.