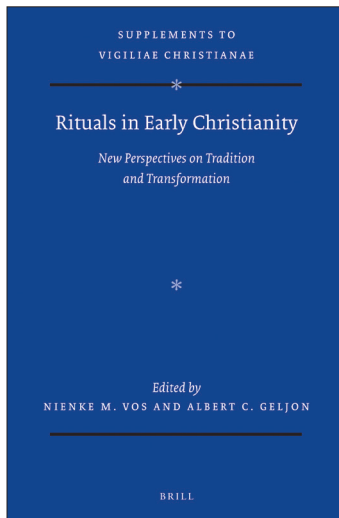


## RITUALS IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY



VOS, NIENKE M. & GELJON, ALBERT C. (eds.) (2021). *Rituals in Early Christianity. New Perspectives on Tradition and Transformation*. Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 164. Leiden & Boston: Brill. 363 pp., 125,00€. [ISBN: 978-9-0044-4097-5].

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THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS PRESENTS case studies on rituals in Early Christianity. The first and final contribution, both written by Nienke M. Vos, provide a theoretical and summarizing framework for an adequate reading of the papers. It is a volume of conference proceedings. Focus of interest is not primarily in the origin of certain rituals, but in their transformations: what happened to them? This is in accordance

with a new paradigm in ritual studies emphasizing not the origins, but how traditions are negotiated, shaping the identity of communities. Vos's presentations are helpful in laying out the background of this study and summarizing the contributions, but they are relatively meagre on theoretical assumptions and the results of the project. Theoretical questions are more substantially addressed by Gerhard Rouwhorst in *A Paradigm Shift in the Study of Early Christian Rituals: Methodological Perspectives*. What Vos hints at is here worked in a helpful way. To a hitherto dominant diachronic perspective is now added the social dimensions of rituals in their dynamic to construct the identities of communities and mark boundaries vis-à-vis others. Rouwhorst emphasizes that while religion is matters of belief, rituals are matters of *doing* something; hence, it involves body and practices. In his second contribution, *The Origins and Transformations of Early Christian Feasts*, Rouwhorst follows this up, illustrating his point of transformation, that "pre-Christian ritual traditions played an important role in the formation of Christian feasts" (p. 47). The celebration of Epiphany is taken as example.

In addition to these frame-setting contributions are found the following pieces: Rianne Voogd, *Is the Instruction to Greet One Another with a Holy Kiss a Pauline Transformation?*; Jan N. Bremmer, *Eucharist and Agapè in the Later Second Century: The Case of the Older Apocryphal Acts and the Pagan Novel*; Hans van Loon, *The Terminology of Mystery Cults in Cyril of Alexandria*; Paula Rose, *Augustine's Reassessment of the Commemoration Meal: Quod quidem a christianis melioribus non fit*; Jutta Dresken-Weiland, *Ideas of Afterlife in Christian Grave Inscriptions and their Context in Contemporary Christian Sepulchral Culture in Rome*; Karel C. Innemée, *Clothes Make the Magistrate: The Birth of Ecclesiastical Dress*; Joop van Waarden, *The Emergence of the Gallic Rogations in a Cognitive Perspective*; Nienke M. Vos, "Father, Give me a Word": *Transforming Traditions and Spiritual Direction in Early Christian Monasticism*; Jacques van der Vliet, *Tradition and Innovation: Writing Magic in Christian Egypt*; Leon Mock, "I Will Wash My Hands in Innocence; so I Will Go Around Your Altar" (Ps 26:6): *The Washing of Hands in Rabbinic Judaism*; Mariëtte Verhoeven, *From Justinian I to Mehmed II: Transformation and Continuity of Rituals and Liturgical Disposition in Hagia Sophia*. To this come helpful indices on personal and geographical names, subjects and terms, modern authors and of references. This makes it a very helpful volume to turn to. Furthermore, the volume is very helpful organized. Figures and pictures accompany the texts at several places and are listed on p. IX. Pp. 193-195 give a list of clothes in Roman empire, seldom found elsewhere. The bibliographies are throughout organized in primary and secondary sources, which makes this a tool for further research. Regarding the primary sources it is indeed helpful to be introduced to recent and relevant text-editions for sources that

are often overlooked. In the view of the present reviewer the contributions of Jan N. Bremmer, Paula Rose, Karel C. Innemée and Nienke M. Vos were particularly illuminating in pointing out how Christian ritual and practices negotiated pagan traditions.

The volume covers a lot of ground by taking in sources and material often neglected. In this way the perspective is considerably widened compared to most studies on early Christian practices. But “ritual” covers in this way possibly too much for such a volume. Here are addressed baptism, eucharist, *agapê*, dressing, prayer, burial and commemoration of the dead, holy kiss, rogation days or rites of penance, spiritual direction, and church buildings. No doubt, this is all impressive and relevant to the topic of the volume, but it is hardly prone to present a volume with consistency. In my view, the volume would have benefitted from keeping more consistently to the transformation perspective and digging more deeply into that. It does come into play more or less throughout, so it is clear that this is a steering idea. But the volume’s concentrating on diverse case studies in transformation somehow diverts from considering what transformation is and what goes on in that process. It is an impressive volume in material but lacks somewhat in thinking the material through in light of synthesizing theories. To this comes that “Early Christianity” which figures in the title is not defined, although it here includes material from time much later than what is usually considered early Christianity, albeit that is always a negotiable label.

The book is certainly a welcome contribution to research on Christian ritual in the first centuries CE but is also illustrates a common challenge for conference volumes. They tend to become too diverse.