Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation

Edited by
REIDAR HVALVIK and
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Preface

This book resulted from a research project in the Department of New Testament Studies at the Norwegian School of Theology (MF), Oslo. Some international and mostly national colleagues participated in the two workshops held in Oslo autumn 2011 and 2012, where submitted papers were presented and discussed. The topic, "Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation," covers a vast field of material and texts, and within the limits of this volume only some of them have been covered. Some more contributions were planned, but for various reasons did not materialize. The project was financed by our school, for which we are grateful.

We appreciate very much the interest shown to our project already from its initial phase by Professor Jörg Frey, editor of Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament and Dr. Henning Ziebritzki, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

A special thank is directed to Glenn Wehus who has checked all Greek quotations in the manuscripts, and to Ole Jakob Filtvedt for substantial assistance in compiling the indices.

As we were bringing our project to a close, one of the participants, our colleague and friend through many years, Professor Dr. theol. Hans Kvalbein, passed away. We are glad to publish in this volume what is his last academic contribution. The book is dedicated in gratitude to the memory of him, mentor and friend through years.

Oslo, June, 2014 Reidar Hvalvik and Karl Olav Sandnes

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations, of the names of biblical books and other ancient sources as well as modern periodicals, reference works and serials, follow the rules recommended by the Society of Biblical Literature, as found in Patrick H. Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).

In addition, the following abbreviations, not found in the *SBL Handbook* (1999 printing) have been used:

BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
ESV	English Standard Version
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NABRE	New American Bible Revised Edition
NET	New English Translation
NETS	A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under that Title
VCSup	Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae

Early Christian Prayer and Identity Formation: Introducing the Project

by

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In what is possibly the oldest extant Christian writing, Paul urges his converts to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17 NRSV). The admonition to pray continually is worth observing, since what is done unceasingly becomes naturally conducive in forming people's identity. However, we do not know to what extent this admonition materialized. Nonetheless, prayer permeates early Christian texts, in practices as well as in instructions and admonitions. Thus the prayer-theme takes us to the practices of the early Christ-believers, or alternatively, to texts on their practice. This study proceeds from the conviction that Christian identity finds one of its most distinct expressions in Christian prayer, and also, conversely, that this identity was shaped and gradually formed by prayers. The old dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi*, about faith made visible in prayer, is a helpful reminder here because it assumes coherence between doctrine and the practice of prayer. It is therefore natural that Christian prayer has received much attention, as seen in recent research.[1]

[1] To mention some: Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002); Hermut Löhr, *Studien zum frühchristlichen und frühjüdischen Gebet: Untersuchungen zu 1 Clem 59 bis 61 in seinem literarischen, historischen und theologischen Kontext* (WUNT 160; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Karl-Heinrich Ostmeyer, *Kommunikation mit Gott und Christus: Sprache und Theologie des Gebetes im Neuen Testament* (WUNT 197; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Niclas Förster, *Das gemeinschaftliche Gebet in der Sicht des Lukas* (Biblical Tools and Studies 4; Leuven: Peeters, 2007); Jerome H. Neyrey, *Give God the Glory: Ancient Prayer and Worship in Cultural Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007); Hans Klein, Vasile Mihoc and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, eds., *Das Gebet im Neuen Testament: Vierte Europäische orthodox-westliche Exegetenkonferenz in Sâmbâta de Sus 4–8. August 2007* (WUNT 249; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Geir Otto Holmås, *Prayer and Vindication in Luke–Acts: The Theme of Prayer within the Context of the Legitimating and Edifying Objective of the Lukan Narrative* (LNTS 433; London: T&T Clark, 2011).

Concurrently with the flourishing of research on the prayer topic, studies in the formation of Christian identity have become increasingly essential to understand early Christianity in general. The question of identity is, in fact, interwoven into the fabric of many disputes among New Testament scholars, albeit the debates are not always framed that way. However, the relevance of the renewed interest in prayer to the debate on early Christian identity has not received its due attention; in short, prayer and identity formation have never been considered in tandem. The aim of the present study is to fill this gap.

In *Exploring Early Christian Identity* (2008), the topic of prayer is not explicitly raised; the term is even missing in the index. It is mentioned in the end though, more or less in passing:

> Their faith in Jesus and his unique relation to God, their consequential initiation into a new Messianic congregation through baptism, and the consequences this had had for their common life of prayer (they prayed to Jesus as "our Lord," *Marana*!) and not least for their communion with non-Jews – all this had started a loosening of their moorings from the earlier unquestioned belonging inside the Jewish people, Israel *kata sarka*. To begin with, it was imperceptible, in the long run inevitable.[2]

Bengt Holmberg's observation, conducted somewhat randomly, becomes the focus of the present study. Similarly, James D. G. Dunn in *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* (2010), says that calling upon God through Jesus Christ was "a distinguishing characteristic of the earliest believers."[3]

Back in 2003, however, an anthology appeared with an interest very closely related to ours: *Identität durch Gebet: Zur gemeinschaftsbildenden Funktion institutionalisierten Betens in Judentum und Christentum*, edited by Albert Gerhards, Andrea Doeker and Peter Ebenbauer. The present project parts ways with that important study in mainly two issues. In the first place, their study addresses identity and prayer more or less exclusively vis-à-vis the Jewish background of the emerging Christian movement. They rightly state that "Gebetstexte gehören zu den zentralen und deutlichsten Zeugnisse dieser vielsichtigen und komplexen Differenzierungsgeschichte."[4] Our study pursues

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[2] Bengt Holmberg, "Early Christian Identity – Some Conclusions," in *Exploring Early Christian Identity* (ed. Bengt Holmberg; WUNT 226; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 173–78, 176.

[3] James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 16. Likewise Karl-Heinrich Ostmeyer, "Prayer as Demarcation: The Function of Prayer in the Gospel of John," in *Das Gebet im Neuen Testament* (ed. Hans Klein, Vasile Mihoc and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr; WUNT 249; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 233–47. Ostmeyer says that prayer in the Fourth Gospel is caught up in deviating terminology aimed at establishing a group distancing itself from others.

[4] Albert Gerhards, Andrea Doeker and Peter Ebenbauer, "Identität zwischen Tradition und Neuschöpfung: Liturgisches Beten in Judentum und Christentum als Quelle eines unabschließbaren Prozesses religiöser Selbstbestimmung," in *Identität durch Gebet: Zur*

the question of identity not exclusively against a Jewish background, although this remains a significant part of the present study. Some contributions emphasize the relevance of the Greco-Roman world as well.

In the second place, their investigation focuses on "standardisierte Gebete" of liturgical worship, while our study looks beyond "institutional prayers," by including questions regarding the prayers' contents, as well as how, where and to whom prayers were addressed. The present study is by no means comprehensive, but approaches – through some specific examples – Christian prayer from the angle of identity as it appears in recent studies on corporative identity, and does so in a way not pursued in the above-mentioned study.

This project was partly anticipated by the dissertation of our colleague Geir Otto Holmås, now published as *Prayer and Vindication in Luke–Acts: The Theme of Prayer within the Context of the Legitimating and Edifying Objective of the Lukan Narrative* (2011). In his work, Holmås assesses the *function* of prayer in Luke–Acts. He argues that prayer in this double volume primarily provides the audience with identity and legitimation. The present study can be seen as a kind of follow up of the insights from this work.

Prayer

What do we mean by "prayer"? In his article "Gebet I" in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, Carl Heinz Ratschow introduces the article by saying: "Das Gebet ist allen Religionen als Ausdruck menschlicher Zuwendung zur Gottheit eigen."[5] According to John Chrysostom, prayer is act of conversing with God (*Hom. Gen.* 30.5), thus assuming a profound relationship. According to H. S. Versnel, prayer in Antiquity generally followed a tripartite pattern: Usually it the prayer is was introduced with an invocation. The suppliant would explain why he or she was calling upon the gods. This often included references to familiarity and trust in the deity, which also might include laudatory aspects as well as gratitude. Upon this would follow an actual wish.[6] Early Christian texts give a wide range of terms to describe prayer, such as προσεύχομαι/ προσευχή, εὔχομαι/εὐχή, δέομαι, αἰτέω, ἐπικαλέω, ἐρωτάω. In addition to this, there are a number of terms denoting worship

gemeinschaftsbildenden Funktion institutionalisierten Betens in Judentum und Christentum (ed. Albert Gerhards, Andrea Doeker and Peter Ebenbauer; Studien zu Judentum und Christentum; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 13–19, 14.

[5] *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (ed. Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller; 36 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977–2007), 12:31–34, 31.

[6] H. S. Versnel, "Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer," in *Faith, Hope and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World* (ed. H. S. Versnel; Studies in Greek and Roman Religion 2; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 1–64, 2.

more generally, but which may also include prayer, such as προσκυνέω, λατρεύω, ὁμολογέω, εὐχαριστέω/εὐχαριστία, ψάλλω, λειτουργέω/ λειτουργία, αἰνέω. Some of these terms overlap, sometimes even considerably, with prayer. In short, it is hardly possible to distinguish semantically between them. An example is 1 Timothy 2:1 where δέησις, προσευχή, ἔντευξις, and εὐχαριστία are mentioned side by side; they are held together in the one following preposition (ὑπέρ), uniting them all. To limit this study to texts featuring specific terms, would be tantamount to the exclusion of that which might have a bearing upon our topic.

Accordingly, prayer is not restricted to texts where terms for prayer appear. To proceed from a linguistic-labelling basis will therefore not suffice. In his above-mentioned book, Geir Otto Holmås has discussed the semantic fields involved. He points out that it is necessary not to restrict prayer simply to requests for presumed needs, but by the same token, one must also avoid including any kind of speech addressed to God. There is a risk both in limiting the material too much, and also in extending it too widely. It would also imply a dramatic narrowing of the perspective if we went about this according to a formal definition, such as texts with a direct address to God and/or Christ uttered in the optative or imperative. A working definition, broad enough to include the complexity found in the material itself, is called for. In short, the purpose is to find how and where "prayer" is situated within the wider framework of worship and piety. Academically precise and clear-cut definitions do not always find complete corroboration in the material to be investigated. This seems to be the case with regard to prayer, since it is a phenomenon with many complexities, and hence hard to define. The present volume provides a definition that, due to the nature of the material, tends to be relatively open. The working definition for the contributions will be as follows: *Prayer is a verbal and nonverbal communication with God, proceeding from a relationship of trust. This act of communication usually has a purpose, either in seeking divine assistance, guidance, or some kind of intervention. Since this act of communication is integrated in a relationship, prayer includes gratitude, adoration and praises as well*.

Identity

The second key word in this study is "identity." Identity is, indeed, a complex phenomenon, involving individual as well as collective social aspects. It is a process of shaping, characterized by variety and fragility. Therefore, it is not one continuous uniform process we are delving into. Multiple and nested identities make identity formation a continual shifting process. Finally, Christian identity emerges as a result of many aspects – one of which is

prayer – and therefore it is hardly possible to present it as following one single straightforward line of development. The prayer life of nascent Christianity is a phenomenon at the crossroads between idiosyncrasy and common ground with other people, between verbal and non-verbal aspects, between texts and rituals, between rhetoric and reality, between construction and fact, between texts shaping Christian belief and actual social practices, between what is found in the sources and what is observable in real life, between male and female, between slaves and people of status and means.

The contributors to this volume share the opinion that the role of prayer in the formation of Christian identity is to be sought precisely at these junctions, but they may else hold different views on many aspects involved in this study. To understand the process of identity formation, it is essential not to perceive it solely as a process of "othering" – i.e., what separates the believers from out-groups – but also to include common ground with Jews as well as pagans, be it idiosyncratic or not. Not every aspect of early Christian prayer was distinct; it may still have been characteristic. To take one example, the bodily gestures, i.e., the non-verbal aspects, accompanying prayer did not necessarily separate the Christians from other practioners of prayer in Antiquity, be they Jewish or pagan. However, the interpretation of bodily gestures gradually resonated with Christian faith and identity. It is implied that these gestures developed hardly at all from a given identity, but that they were later interpreted accordingly. In order to catch how the identity formation proceeded, the present volume, with regard to Christian texts, addresses sources from the New Testament until Augustine.

In Jesus' prayer instruction, as rendered in Matthew 6, it is obvious that the prayer of his disciples is seen against the background of who they are, and who they are not. Jesus presents his instruction vis-à-vis Gentiles and certain hypocritical forms of Jewish piety, thus forming an ideal prayer yet within a context of Jewish piety. Luke's Gospel, chap. 11 gives a somewhat different picture, but the nexus between who the disciples are and how they pray is affirmed. The so-called Lord's Prayer is Jesus' response to his disciples urging him to teach them how to pray, "like John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Prayer is shaped by discipleship, and, by the same token, discipleship forms prayer. Whose disciples they are, be they John's or Jesus', is determined by their prayers. In these passages, the Lord's Prayer becomes important primarily because *he* taught it, not because it alters traditional Jewish prayers.

Jesus of the Fourth Gospel addresses prayer in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42) as being in continuity as well as in discontinuity with Jewish traditions. The Jews are included here in the in-group ("we") contrasted with "you" (the Samaritans), but the place of worship is altered from Jerusalem and Gerizim to anywhere, and to worship in Spirit

and truth. The Fourth Gospel implies that Jesus, through his ministry, brings Jewish prayer to a fulfilment.

This is not a monograph covering all necessary sources in order to provide a coherent picture. The aim is more modest; it provides examples of importance in order to understand this process. A simple and direct continuity and coherence between prayer practices, witnessed in later sources, and the New Testament texts and time cannot be taken for granted. Nonetheless, as we enter the hotly debated question of how early in time it makes sense to speak of a specific Christian identity, questions of chronology cannot be evaded, simply because in this question chronology matters. According to Anders Runesson, "(t)he English terms 'Christianity' and 'Christians,' despite their Greek origin and the use of *Christianos* three times in the New Testament, can be applied only anachronistically to a first-century context."[7] The view that real Christian identity is a later phenomenon (from the Constantinian era) can only be tested either by asking what identity really is, or by making reference to texts representing practices and attitudes that claim to be older. From this it follows that when relevant, attempts will be made to move backwards from later Christian sources.

In his important book *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (1999),[8] Gerd Theissen presents a compelling theory of how Christian belief first manifested itself. He speaks of a system of signs holding religion together. He speaks of "myths," foundational beliefs and narratives, rituals, behaviour patterns and a net of social relations. As for rituals, he says that they "replace the traditional sacrifices"; examples of such rituals are the Eucharist, baptism, the laying on of hands, foot washing, and the holy kiss. Surprisingly, he does not mention prayer; neither does this word occur in his general index of subjects. As our project will demonstrate, there is sufficient ground to say that in many early Christian texts prayer was likewise seen as a spiritual sacrifice, and thus of much relevance to Theissen's helpful theory. Prayer practices are to be seen as identity forming behaviour: "Es gilt im Allgemeinen als unbestritten, dass es einen eigen Zusammenhang gibt zwischen Riten und der Identität von Gruppen, Gemeinschaften."[9] Rites mirrors identity, be it an

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[7] Anders Runesson, "Inventing Christian Identity: Paul, Ignatius, and Theodosius I," in *Exploring Early Christian Identity* (ed. Bengt Holmberg; WUNT 226; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 59–92, 71.

[8] Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1999). American edition: *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999).

[9] Gerard Rouwhorst, "Identität durch Gebet: Gebetstexte als Zeugen eines jahrhundertelangen Ringens um Kontinuität und Differenz zwischen Judentum und Christentum," in *Identität durch Gebet: Zur gemeinschaftsbildenden Funktion institutionalisierten Betens in Judentum und Christentum* (ed. Albert Gerhards, Andrea Doeker and Peter Ebenbauer; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 37–55, 37.

already existing identity or the shaping of such. Construing Christian identity from prayer involves practices, values, and ideas not primarily associated with individuals. In the word of Gerard Rouwhorst, what prayer has in common with rituals is that both convey "mehr über die Identität einer Gruppe als die Schriften bestimmter Einzelner Denker oder Theologen."[10]

The Contributions of the Present Study

The questions and topics which set the agenda for the studies presented here are as follows:
– In which ways was identity in nascent Christianity shaped by prayer?
– How did the believers pray? This applies both to the prayers' content and to practices.
– In what way does prayer, and practices associated with prayer, provide insight into an ongoing process of identity formation?
– Since it does not make sense to decide whether prayer or identity comes first, their mutual relationship will be focused on.
– Did prayer among the Christ-believers make any difference with regard to gender and status? This brings into play a contingent perspective on the process of identity formation.

These questions have been addressed in the following contributions, presented here in abstracts.

The investigation starts with MIKAEL TELLBE approaching the question of how to define identity. The social identity of an in-group is generated through common symbols, narratives, acts or rituals, all creating a social dimension. Such identity is shaped through negotiation, dialogue and conflicts with others, or within the group itself. The identity of early Christians is constructed through texts that provide glimpses of complex experiences. In his second contribution, Tellbe addresses the Epistle to the Ephesians, which contains several sections on prayer. This paper is structured according to his contribution regarding identity, and thus serves to exemplify the theories. The author of Ephesians is engaged in the formation and reinforcement of the social identity of a Christ-believing community . The language of worship and prayer serves this process. By praying his own theology, the author sets his teaching within a three-part relationship of author, addressees and God.

LARRY HURTADO investigates the place of Jesus in earliest Christian prayer, finding it to be multi-faceted, significant, and without precedent or analogy in Second Temple Jewish tradition. Jesus functions as heavenly

[10] Rouwhorst, "Identität durch Gebet," 38.

intercessor and advocate, teacher and role model of prayer, recipient of prayer-appeals and cultic invocation, and as the one through whom valid prayer is made to God. Indeed, Jesus' unique status as God's Son serves as the basis for, and the frame within which early believers addressed God as "Father," giving their prayer a distinctive character. Moreover, the place of Jesus in early Christian prayer was an important factor in the early emergence of a distinctive Christian identity.

Prayer in practice involves nonverbal aspects as well. These are addressed by REIDAR HVALVIK. Prayer implies posture, gesture, space, direction and time. All aspects are conducive to expressing or forming the identity of an in-group. Certainly, some of the gestures are universal, akin to the phenomenon of prayer generally, but some have become characteristics of early Christian prayer. They may not be unique, but they still appear as typical for Christians, particularly so in the ways that they are interpreted. Praying towards the east serves as an example here, both of common ground and of Christian idiosyncracy. Hvalvik also presents the common motif of the orans or orante, a (female) figure of a person at prayer, found in early Christian pictorial art.

GEIR OTTO HOLMÅS investigates Matthew and Luke, examining the role of prayer in an on-going process of "othering." Focus is given to the Lord's Prayer and Jesus' assertion that the temple had failed its function as a "house of prayer." Matthew instructively introduces the Lord's Prayer as a means of drawing boundaries, setting appropriate worship over against others ('the hypocrites'). Holmås argues that according to Matthew, the community was taking the place of the temple, which had ceased to be a prayer house under its failed leadership. The Lord's Prayer bears clear marks of a Jewish self-definition. It is with reference to shared traditions and values that the community was exhorted to surpass the righteousness of the hypocrites. Thus boundaries and closeness belong together. In Luke, prayer occupies a special role in defining identity. Here the Lord's Prayer is set over against the Baptist movement. Luke's rendering of Jesus' action in the temple portends Jerusalem's fate due to the city's blindness and unbelief. Nevertheless, Luke emphasizes the continuity with the piety of faithful Israel. The visitation of Jesus as the Messiah was decisive for drawing boundaries. Authentic worship takes place among Jews and Gentiles centered around Jesus, thus fulfilling Israel's hope.

ANNA REBECCA SOLEVÅG investigates how prayer and identity, with particular emphasis on gender and status, is situated in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles. She finds that prayer is a unifying identity marker, but also that different subgroups within the community come into special and variegated forms when prayer is the issue. Studies in early Christian identity must take intersectionality into account, and not speak unqualified or make generalizations about Christians. It mattered if you were a free male, a slave

or an independent woman. The issue of prayer makes this pertinent. From this, it follows that Christian identity was constructed differently within the in-group.

According to OLE JAKOB FILTVEDT, in Hebrews Christ is the ideal representative of the people of God; this is expressed particularly through texts discussing prayer, such as 5:7–10. It is important to grasp how Jesus' role as the brother of the addressees functions within this literature. Jesus demonstrated his character when he trusted his life to God during his sufferings. The argument of Hebrews moves from Christology to exhortation, thus making the identity of Christ and his prayers crucial for how members of God's people were to think about their identity. Similarities as well as differences appear in this analogous relationship. The identity of the Jesus-believers emerges from a tension between present suffering and future perfection, and is cultivated through prayer, for Christ and his followers alike.

CRAIG R. KOESTER's contribution on the Book of Revelation raises the question of how the visionary world in this literature relates to the social world of the early Christians. The heavenly worship depicted does not provide a model for prayer in the communities addressed. However, the Book of Revelation addresses a social context in which identity was a matter of dispute. Within that context, the heavenly worship provides a focus for prayer even among the communities. The heavenly worship transforms elements from Jewish temple worship and Greco-Roman practices in a way that centers prayer on what is distinctive of Christian worship: Jesus the Lamb, and God, whose authority is exercised through the Lamb. Prayer is offered to Jesus as well as to God. This provides a common center for worship, distinguishing its members from others. The identity formation proceeds both from a past defined by Jesus' saving work, and from a promised future; hence it is ongoing, anticipating the coming of the Lord Jesus (Rev 22:20).

The role of the Lord's Prayer comes into play in several papers; it clearly served as a distinctive mark of discipleship from early on. KARL OLAV SANDNES approaches the role of this prayer in shaping a distinct identity, from the angle of the two oldest treatises on this prayer, namely Tertullian and Cyprian, concentrating on the implications of calling God "our God." As the "first prayer" assigned to baptizands, *Pater Noster* brings out the privileged position of those baptized, and serves to reinforce unity and identity among them. These observations taken from the two Latin treatises are not without antecedents in some New Testament passages, albeit not as clear or vocal.

HANS KVALBEIN addresses the Lord's Prayer and the Eucharist prayers in *Didache*, arguing that the latter is in fact patterned on the Lord's Prayer, thus indicating the importance of this prayer. *Didache* witnesses a community that has distanced itself from both Jews and pagans. Although Jewish heritance looms large, a separate community is portrayed nonetheless. This duality

comes through in the Lord's Prayer, where the address "Our Father" and the prayer that God's kingdom may come hardly have Jewish equivalents. *Didache* 8–10 give relevant information on ritual practices, which is essential for understanding the religious identity of this community. Jesus figures prominently in the prayers found here.

REIDAR AASGAARD points out that even at the time of Augustine, matters of identity were important. Augustine's works show a strong awareness in shaping Christians both individually and collectively for the church. Emphasis is given to *Confessions*, which was intended as a means of forming a Christian identity. Prayer includes all dimensions of human life, and thus forms the person in all aspects of his/her life. *Confessions* not only shows an idiosyncratic thinker and unique personality; Augustine emerges also as a child of his time and church. Augustine searches for the self, and finds it in dialogue with God and fellow human beings. Hence, although the formation of Christian identity is very much a formation of his heart, it takes place within the church, as a joint venture with others. The question of identity is an ongoing forward-looking process, which Augustine now experiences only in preliminary and/or limited stages.

ANASTASIA MARAVELA presents Christian Greek papyri from Egypt (3rd – 5th C.E.). In a unique way they are direct witnesses of prayer, ideology and practices, yet they have not received their due attention. Although people addressed God in prayer, for their needs and to offer thanks to him, rather than to give an account of identity, it is nonetheless possible to tease out intimations of identity from these fragmentary texts. The pervasiveness of Jesus and God is the primary identity-creating force. Christian identity in these prayers is crafted through interaction with Old Testament texts or narratives, or with key narrative elements from the Jesus history (*historiola*). These elements serve to explain that it is worthwhile to approach God or Jesus in petitionary prayers. This practice equals Greek pagan prayers, which often included a narrative part evoking actions of the deity being approached or to pieces taken from mythology. At times, the prayers integrate alien elements.

Taking his point of departure from the Valentinian *Apolytrosis*, NICLAS FÖRSTER delves into certain formulae of prayer, conveying a Gnostic identity. *Apolytrosis* was a death ritual, mentioned in Nag Hammadi texts such as the Gospel of Philip, but known primarily from Irenaeus' and Hippolytus' accounts of the Marcosians. From these two authors, we learn how firmly established this ceremony was in the life of these groups. The prayer formula, known as *apolytrosis*, encapsulated Gnostic ideas and prepared the dead – on the journey towards salvation in Plerōma – for the judgment, for which the Demiurge was responsible. The formula worked as kind of a secret code or password. In the third century C.E., the formula was fundamental to Gnostic bishops, who had passed on this formula to believers about to die. Knowledge

of this prayer confirmed and preserved the idea of an elite united with their bishop, and became a particular mark of identity for the Marcosians.

GLENN WEHUS delves into the philosophical writings of Epictetus, for whom his own Stoic identity and view of prayer are intimately connected. Epictetus teaches his students to place their desires and passions only in things that are "up to them," and to consider everything "not up to them" with indifference. This distinction is fundamental to his Stoic identity. Through reason and intellect God has enabled human beings to cope with this difference, and to accommodate to it. Legitimate prayers aim to internalize this distinction. Some prayers are illegitimate in building Stoic identity: petitions and lamentations that are superfluous and reveal their lack of Stoic identity. The Stoic remains in constant communication with God when facing the real life, which is threatening to a Stoic life. Prayer *is* therefore present in Epictetus identity formation *per se*.

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Identity and Prayer

by

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What are we looking for when we set out to examine the interrelationship between identity and prayer? In what way could prayers – personal and collective – express, form and reaffirm identities? The purpose of this introductory chapter is, first, to elaborate on the definition of "identity" and the process of social identity formation. A couple of theories concerning social identity will be presented that I find to be potentially helpful in the task of examining issues relating to early Christian identity formation. These theories will then, secondly, be related to the main task of this research project, namely to investigate how prayers may express and articulate identities and how prayers are used to form and reaffirm identities.

From the outset, I want to make clear that I am not a sociologist but a biblical scholar. As such, I try to read the New Testament texts from new perspectives such as social identity theories and others. Being aware of my limitations in the field of social theories and how to use these theories most effectively, I do however see many possibilities and promising paths to follow as we examine the ancient texts with the help of modern social theories and perspectives. Admittedly, an intrinsic commensurability between ancient and modern societies cannot be demonstrated. Therefore, we have to do this with care, always being aware of the so-called "sociological fallacy," i.e., using modern social theories as though they can be safely transposed across the centuries without further verification.[1]

1. Definitions

Commenting on the concept of "identity," David Horrell points out that this term "has become something of a buzzword in recent social science and in

[1] See Edwin A. Judge, "The Social Identity of the First Christians: A Question of Method in Religious History," *JRH* 11 (1980): 201–17, 210.

studies of early Christianity."[2] In the field of biblical studies, it has become very popular in the last twenty years or so to focus on identity issues and on the process of the formation of early Christian identity, in particular in relation to the process of the so-called "parting of the ways." However, the term "identity" is not so easily defined, belonging as it originally does to theories about the character of the human individual.

Today most scholars agree that we may speak of at least two types of identity. First, there is the more individualistic-focused use of the term (personal identity) and, secondly, there is the collective use of the term (social identity). The personal identity includes the unique personal characteristics of the single individual, while the social identity refers to the memberships the individual claims in various groups or the identity of the collective group. In both uses, identity is seen as a social construct by the subjects under investigation and as something flexible, not as something fixed and static.

1.1. Personal identity

Individual identity may be described as the individual self, defining the self in terms of idiosyncratic personal relationships and traits. The self is here defined as all the statements a person makes that include the word "I." This identity consists of multiple identities or roles; an individual does not just have one identity but several identities, not all of them being important and salient in all situations: a) persons may have multiple role identities within a single group, b) persons may have similar role identities in more than one group, and c) persons may have different role identities within interacting groups.[3] Thus, I have several identities, for example, I am a man, a Swede, a husband, a father, a Christian, a scholar, a pastor, a birdwatcher, etc. Social scientists call this a "hierarchy of nested identities". In the case of the individual, these different identities hang together by the fact of belonging to the same specific human being.[4]

Accordingly, personal identity is the meaning that an individual holds for himself about what it means to be who he or she is. This approach focuses on the individual self, on identities housed in the individual, but also how these

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[2] David G. Horrell, "'Becoming Christian': Solidifying Christian Identity and Content," in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Sciences Approaches* (ed. Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime and Paul-André Durcotte; Oxford: Altamina Press, 2002), 309–35, 311.

[3] Peter J. Burke, "Relationships among Multiple Identities," in *Advances in Identity Theory and Research* (ed. Peter J. Burke; New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2003), 195–216, 200–201.

[4] Bengt Holmberg, "Understanding the First Hundred Years of Christian Identity," in *Exploring Christian Identity* (ed. Bengt Holmberg; WUNT 226; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 1–32, 28.

manifest themselves in social relations or social structures. In social psychology theories concerning identity stress is often put on the interplay of self and social structures. Two of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, Peter Bergman and Thomas Luckmann, say in a classic statement: "Identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society."[5] Their point is that identity, a key element of subjective reality, stands in a dialectical relationship with society. In social psychology, therefore, it can be said that the core of an identity is "the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role and incorporating into the self the meanings and expectations associated with the role and its performance."[6]

1.2. Social Identity

The term "identity" is basically a social concept; identities, whether modern or ancient ones, are shaped and formed in relation to other individuals or groups. The British sociologist Richard Jenkins even argues that "all human identities are by definition *social* identities."[7] As a social construct, "identity" is not static or single; it normally consists of a complex compound of multiple social, ethnic, political and religious factors, and is formed, modified and reshaped in the continuous dialectic process between social relations and social structures, between the individual and society.[8]

As such, "social identity" can be defined in two ways. First, it can be defined as the identity of a social group ("group identity"). This view of identity corresponds mainly to questions such as: Who are we? What distinguish us from other groups in this society? Where do we draw lines between our group and others? This concerns mainly group-members' common sense of belonging together in a particular, ethnic, cultural, religious and social minority group.[9] An in-group is thus generally defined as a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category (cognitive dimension), share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves (affective dimension), and achieve

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[5] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 174.

[6] Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity," in *Handbook of Self and Identity* (ed. Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke; New York: Guilford, 2003), 128–52, 134.

[7] Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 4 (italics his). Jenkins (ibid., 5) defines "identity" as "our understanding of who we are and of who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which include us)".

[8] Cf. the phenomenological discussion of identity in Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction*, 173–80.

[9] Cf. Philip A. Harland, *Dynamics of Identity in the World of Early Christians: Associations, Judeans and Cultural Minorities* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 6.

some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it (evaluative dimension).

Secondly, social science has mainly focused on defining self in terms of group membership, i.e., the individual's self-concepts as it pertains to positions or roles within social groupings. Social identity theorists who follow the lead of the social psychologist Henri Tajfel tend to use the term "social identity" to refer to an individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership.[10] This aspect of identity answers questions such as: Who am I? How am I in this particular situation? How does this relate to who I am in other social groups? How does this self-understanding affect my belonging in this particular group? "Social identity" is thus the outcome of a process, whereby an individual's patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions have been attributed to significant group members and the individual has incorporated these as a mental image. Hence, social identity results in an individual's perception of belonging to a social in-group (e.g., the house of Israel, a kin group, a Jesus group, an "ethnic" group). In becoming part of a group, "individuals do not lose all sense of self, rather, they shift from the personal to the social level of identification. . . The criterion for action shifts from the personal to the social categorical level."[11] Consequently, social identity can be contrasted with the abstracted identity of a group or movement as a whole (e.g., "Israel is the people of God").

As the individual thinks of himself/herself and others as belonging to the group, he or she stereotypes both himself/herself and other in-group members. The interest of the group becomes the interest of the individual, and the norms of the group become the norms of the individual. Identification of oneself as belonging to a group means that the self is experienced as similar to the in-group prototype and interdependent on other group members, but it does not generally mean a loss of the self as a distinctive agent, nor that the individual stops engaging in introspection, not even in collectivistic cultures.[12]

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[10] See Henri Tajfel, "Social Categorization, Social Identity and Social Comparison," in *Differentiation Between Social Groups* (ed. Henri Tajfel; London: Academic Press, 1978), 61–76; idem., *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); idem., *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); John C. Turner, "Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group," in *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations* (ed. Henri Tajfel; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15–40.

[11] Stephen Reciher, Russel Spears, and Tom Potsmes, "Model a Social Identity of Deindividuation Phenomena," *European Review of Social Psychology* 6 (1995): 161–98, 177.

[12] See Rikard Roitto, *Behaving as a Christ-Believer: A Cognitive Perspective on Identity and Behavior Norms in Ephesians* (Linköping Studies in Arts and Science 493/Linköping Studies in Identity and Pluralism 10; Linköping University, 2009), 61.

Both insiders and outsiders think and reflect about identity, and therefore social identity is constantly "negotiated." It is not a static character, nor the essence, or the "soul" of a group, but an ongoing, relational process of self-understanding and self-categorization, often with a strongly ideological perspective.[13] The process of self-definition and social identity formation implies differentiation from one or more "others" by the drawing up of boundary lines, so-called "othering." The "other," or the enemy, becomes an intrinsic part of a group's self-definition; the authors understand themselves and their readers in terms of the "other," by insisting on what one is not. Difference and similarity reflect each other across a shared boundary; as expressed by Jenkins, "at the boundary we discover what we are in what we are not."[14] Hence, the definition of deviants, antitypes and "outsiders" becomes significant as a way of defining the prototypical member, the normative "insider," and the social identity of the group. This process may be referred to as a form of categorization, a process that is based on stereotyping, whether positively (of group members) or negatively (of non-members).

In contrast to the more individualistic tendencies of modern, Western societies and personality development in those cultures, Bruce Malina and others have drawn attention to the primarily collective character of ancient Greco-Roman societies and the dyadic or group-oriented nature of ancient personalities.[15] In collective cultures such as the ancient Mediterranean, the private self so dear to contemporary individualism was considered of little or no interest. In collectivistic cultures, people are socialized into the value that it is not my unique features that are valuable and stable but the features of the social context to which I belong. Malina introduces the concept of "dyadic personality," even arguing that the collectively oriented persons of the Mediterranean world did not find introspection meaningful and interesting, since their identity was confirmed in interaction with others.[16]

2. Identity and Prayer

In studying identity formation in antiquity from the perspective of prayer, in particularly in the Hebrew and early Christian texts, I find it is most helpful to elaborate on social identity theories. This is primarily because that these texts were written in the Mediterranean collective culture with the purpose of

[13] Cf. Holmberg, "Understanding," 29.

[14] Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 79.

[15] Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 58–80.

[16] Malina, *New Testament World*, 66–68. This conclusion has however been questioned by several scholars, see Roitto, *Behaving as a Christ-Believer*, 59–60.

forming the identity of the Jewish and Christian communities. Even the personal and individual prayers of, for example, the Psalms were meant to be read and prayed in a community setting in order to form the identity of the people of God. In the following discussion, I will therefore briefly present some relevant social identity theories that could be helpful as we elaborate on the role of prayer in the process of identity formation.

2.1. Rituals, Identity and Prayer

The social identity of an in-group is ordinarily based on common behavior norms and values.[17] We do things together in order to express our collective identity. In this way, symbols and symbolic acts generate a sense of shared belonging.[18] An aspect of this is ritual, what Catherine Bell calls "the social dimensions of religion."[19]

Rituals are typical examples of identity forming behavior and actions.[20] According to Richard Jenkins, "The enhancement of experience which ritual offers cognitively and particularly emotionally, plays an important role in the internalization of identification."[21] For example, in order to express their belief (identity) early Christ-believing Jews and Gentiles began to replace traditional ritual actions (e.g., bloody animal sacrifices) by new (bloodless) rites, by the Eucharist, baptism, the laying on of hands, foot-washing and by the holy kiss.[22] There is a thus close relation between belief and ritual. Ritual is generally thought to express beliefs in symbolic ways for the purposes of their continual reaffirmation and inculcation.[23] In this way, ritual is symbolic action, representing what the society holds to be of primary importance, or indeed the very structure of the society. Rituals could be seasonal rites commemorating historical events (Easter, Pentecost, etc.), rites of passage (e.g., baptism), rites of communion (the Lord's Supper), or rites of devotions (e.g., prayers and supplications). In this way, rituals communicate the fundamental

[17] See Roitto, *Behaving as a Christ-Believer*, 63–88.

[18] Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 111–12.

[19] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22.

[20] See Gerhard Rouwhorst, "Identität durch Gebet: Gebetstexte als Zeugen eines jahrhundertelangen Ringens zum Kontinuität und Differenz zwischen Judentum und Christentum," in *Identität durch Gebet: Zur gemeinschaftsbildenden Funktion institutionalisierten Betens in Judentum und Christentum* (ed. Albert Gerhards, Andrea Doeker and Peter Ebenbauer; Studien zu Judentum und Christentum; Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2003), 37–55, 38.

[21] Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 150–51.

[22] Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 123–24.

[23] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 182.

beliefs and values of a society or a group. Rituals are "per-formative" in the meaning that they create as well as reflect social reality.[24]

Performative theory is the scientific attempt to conceptualize ritual as a process by which acts and utterances are formalized into performatives, that is, kinds of concrete practice set apart from quotidian life and endowed with creative or generative qualities.[25] While performatives were previously made a subject of discussion under the aspects of stereotyping, rigidity and violence, it is today common to concentrate on productive moments of rituals that contribute to making and forming the identity of communities and individuals. Particularly evident in the work of Roy Rappaport, one of the most important contributions of the theory of ritual performance, is the observation of how identity and ritual correlate.[26] According to Rappaport, the conjunction of cognitive structure and concrete practice takes place in ritualized performance. Identity in this sense, then, is a composite reciprocity of cognition and practice, ideal form and concrete content, conjoined in the ritualized performances that constitute and circumscribe the shared life-world of a community. Thus, rituals are embodied expressions of identity; identity is constituted by the ritual participants becoming aware of their place in the relational field of ritual action. According to Köpping, Leistle and Rudolph, "ritual as performance functions as an extraordinary powerful means to confirm, alter or even subvert individual and collective processes of identity-formation."[27]

Thus, early Christian texts may be examined in light of this performative composite of structure and practice in order to advance our understanding of the performative process behind the formation and maintenance of early Christian identity. For example, performative features in the baptism rite transform reality by actualizing a cognized environment distinct to early Christian communities, thereby providing us a glimpse into the illocutionary process by which a Christian identity was produced.[28] Furthermore, also rituals of prayer expressed this identity; for example, as the early Christ-believers prayed in the name of Jesus they expressed their particular self-understanding as believers in relation to Jesus Christ.

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[24] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (2nd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 142.

[25] For a basic introduction to performative theory, see Klaus-Peter Köpping, Bernhard Leistle, and Michael Rudolph, *Ritual and Identity: Performative Practices as Effective Transformations of Social Reality* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006).

[26] See Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[27] Köpping, Leistle and Rudolph, *Ritual and Identity*, 28.

[28] See Stephen Richard Turley, "Ritual and Identity: A Case Study in Early Christian Baptism" (http://ocabs.org/journal/index.php/jocabs/article/viewFile/54/25), 2. Cf. Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 142.