

C. Stenschke
Biblich-Theologische
Akademie Wiedenest
and Department of
Biblical and Ancient
Studies, University of
South Africa, E-mail:
stenschke@wiedenest.de

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REVIEW

EARLY CHRISTIAN PRAYER AND IDENTITY FORMATION

HVALVIK, R. & SANDNES, K.O. (eds.). WUNT 336. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014). Viii + 421 pp., ISBN 978-3-16-153520-8

This volume originated in a research project at the Norwegian School of Theology (MF) in Oslo. The project brought together Norwegian and international scholars to two conferences held in 2011 and 2012, respectively. The proceedings of these meetings cover a vast field of texts and issues. In their introduction, “Early Christian prayer and identity formation: Introducing the project” (pp. 1-12), Hvalvik and Sandnes note, regarding the close connection between prayer and identity, that the admonition to pray continually in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 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 materialised. 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 (p. 1).

Noting the recent scholarly interest in prayer and in the formation of Christian identity, the authors

observe that the relevance of the renewed interest in prayer to the debate of early Christian identity has not been sufficiently accounted for, “in short, prayer and identity formation has never been considered in tandem. The aim of the present study is to fill this gap” (p. 2). The editors also define what is meant by prayer (p. 3f.) and observe that 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 (p. 5).

The editors emphasise that the process of identity formation must not be perceived solely as a process of “othering”, but must also include common ground with Jews as well as pagans, be it idiosyncratic or not. The 15 essays included in this volume seek to answer the following questions one way or another:

- 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 (p. 7).

The remainder of the introduction consists of abstracts of the articles (pp. 7-12). I shall now discuss the essays.

Mikael Tellbe (*Identity and prayer*, pp. 13-34) discusses the question of how to define identity. The social identity of an in-group is generated through common symbols, narratives, acts and rituals which together create a social dimension. Negotiation, dialogue and conflicts with others or within the group shape identity.

In *The place of Jesus in earliest Christian prayer and its import for early Christian identity* (pp. 35-56), Larry Hurtado examines the place of

Jesus in earliest Christian prayer. It is multifaceted, significant, and without precedent of analogy in early Judaism:

Jesus functions as heavenly 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 (p. 7).

Reidar Hvalvik (*Praying with outstretched hands: Nonverbal aspects of early Christian prayer and the question of identity*, pp. 57-90) notes that prayer implies posture, gesture, space, direction and time. He argues that these aspects are conducive to expressing or forming the identity of an in-group. While some of the gestures are universal, akin to the phenomenon of prayer generally, 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 in which they are interpreted.

In *Prayer, 'othering' and the construction of early Christian identity in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (pp. 91-113), Geir Otto Holmas studies the role of prayer in the ongoing processes 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". In Matthew, the Lord's Prayer serves as a means of drawing boundaries, setting appropriate worship over against others ("the hypocrites"). In Luke, prayer occupies a special role in defining identity. In this instance, the Lord's Prayer is set over against the Baptist movement.

Mikael Tellbe (*Prayer and social identity formation in the Letter to the Ephesians*, pp. 115-135) traces how the letter uses the language of worship and prayer in the formation and reinforcement of the social identity of an early Christian community: "By praying his own theology, the author sets his teaching within a three-part relationship of author, addressees and God" (p. 7).

Anna Rebecca Solevag (*Prayer in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles: Intersections of gender and class*, pp. 137-159) describes how prayer and identity are situated in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles. While prayer is a unifying identity marker, different subgroups within the community come into special and variegated forms when prayer is the issue. Therefore, studies in early Christian identity must take intersectionality into account – Christian identity was constructed differently within the in-group.

In *With our eyes fixed on Jesus: The prayers of Jesus and his followers in Hebrews* (pp. 161-182), Ole Jacob Filtvedt observes that the argument of Hebrews moves from Christology to exhortation, thus making the identity of Christ and his prayers crucial for how Christians were to think about their identity. Similarities as well as differences appear in this analogous relationship. The identity of Christians emerges from a tension between present suffering and future perfection, and is cultivated through prayer, for Christ and his followers alike.

Craig R. Koester (*Heavenly prayer and Christian identity in the Book of Revelation*, pp. 183-207) argues that the heavenly worship depicted does not provide a model for prayer in the communities addressed. However, as Revelation had its origin in a social context in which identity was disputed, 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 centres 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 centre 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) (p. 9).

In *'The first prayer': Pater noster in the Early Church*, pp. 209-232), Karl Olav Sandnes turns to the two oldest treatises on this prayer, namely Tertullian and Cyprian, and concentrates on the implications of calling God "our God". As the first prayer assigned to baptisands, the *Pater noster* emphasised their privileged position and served to reinforce unity and identity among them.

Hans Kvalbein (*The Lord's Prayer and the Eucharist Prayers in the Didache*, pp. 233-266) argues that the latter is, in fact, patterned on the Lord's Prayer, thus indicating the importance of this prayer. The prayers in Chapters 8-10 provide important evidence for the development of the Christians' identity as a religious community. While the identity of the group prayer in the *Didache* owes much to Jewish traditions, it appears simultaneously as a new and different community.

Reidar Aasgaard, *'What point is there for me in other people hearing my confessions?'* *Prayer and Christian identity in Augustine's Confessions* (pp. 267-290) argues that Augustine's works show a strong awareness in shaping Christians both individually and collectively. His *Confessions*

were intended as a means of forming Christian identity. Prayer includes all dimensions of human life, thus forming people in all aspects of their lives. Augustine searches for the self and finds it in dialogue with God and fellow human beings.

Anastasia Maravela contributes *Christians praying in a Graeco-Egyptian context: Intimations of Christian identity in Greek papyrus prayers* (pp. 291-323). Although these papyri are direct witnesses of prayer, ideology and practices, they have not received their due attention. In these prayers, 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.

Niclas Förster examines *Prayer in the Valentinian Apolytosis: A case study on gnostic identity* (pp. 325-342).

Glenn Wehus contributes *'Bring now, O Zeus, what difficulty thou wilt': Prayer and identity formation in the Stoic philosopher Epictetus* (pp. 343-369).

In closing, Reidar Hvalvik and Karl Olav Sandnes provide an epilogue entitled *Prayer and identity formation: Attempts at a synthesis* (pp. 371-381). They argue that prayer is indeed a catalyst for questions pertaining to identity (p. 371). Christian identity formation is a dynamic process; praying fixed prayers together is an important ritual. Prayer is evidence of "performed theology" and is Christocentric in its orientation and focus. Viewed from the role of prayer, there is evidence that Christian identity, albeit fragile and complex, was taking shape already in the first century.

Indexes of sources, modern authors and of subjects and names round off this inspiring volume.