

REVIEW ARTICLE

Documenting— and Rethinking— Liturgy in Early Christianity

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The Christian liturgical papyri. An introduction. By Ágnes T. Mihálykó. (Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity, 114.) Pp. xvi + 453 incl. 36 figs. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019. €89. 978 3 16 155786 6; 1436 3003

Much current work on early Christianity depends, implicitly or explicitly, on the assumption that lay people actually attended church services (and, hence, listened to and considered sermons by major Church Fathers) more than a few times a year. Whether they attended as ‘Christians’, or simply to engage in various types of material devotion, or out of interest in the religious content to be found in a church, the assumption is that they came.

Is this a reasonable assumption? Ramsay MacMullen certainly disputed it, at least for the third and fourth centuries, in his *The second Church*, arguing that Christians spent far more time in cemeteries, dancing and lighting candles to saints, than listening to sermons in churches.¹ But if we bracket the historical importance of sermons for a moment—at least those that do not explicitly indicate large audiences—then there is still liturgical performance to consider, as both an attraction to laity and a cultural influence: indeed, as a force in the process of Christianisation. As Ágnes Mihálykó frames it at the beginning of her elegant and important new book,

¹ Ramsay MacMullen, *The second Church: popular Christianity A.D. 200–400*, Atlanta, GA 2009.

Turning points in [the laity's] lives were marked by church services: baptism; for some, ordination or consecration as a monk; and finally the funeral. It would therefore be expected that whatever they heard, prayed, or sung in church had an effect on them. It influenced their beliefs, was adopted in the verbiage of their protective and healing practices, and left its mark on their literary, epistolary and other documentary productions. As holidays of the liturgical week or year structured the rhythm of life, they serve as timestamps in documents and literary texts. Liturgical gatherings in the church created communities, and going to a certain church with a certain rite defined one's membership in a congregation. (p. 1)

I will return to the substance of her claim here, but at the very least it argues for a new consideration of liturgy, not simply as the area for liturgiologists to trace the evolution of the *Benedictus* or the *Sanctus* in narrow ecclesiastical confines, but rather, as Mihálykó suggests, as the performative setting from which amulets, folktales and holiday processions endlessly extended.

Mihálykó's book is based on an Oslo dissertation and bears many of the hallmarks of that origin, from its clear delimitation of a *corpus* of papyri (only 323, in fact, once she has excluded marginal cases) to its systematic attention to formal and linguistic features. But the questions and ideas that her work inspires should bring this recondite field of study into greater relevance for the development of Christian culture, for the study of popular religion and for the uses of writing in early Christianity.

The book is organised in a straightforward manner. Chapter i justifies the *corpus* of liturgical fragments on which she will focus her discussions. 'Papyri' will include wood tablets and ostraca as well as papyri proper, while 'liturgical' covers materials that pertained practically to the chief performances of liturgy—especially the eucharist and baptism, Easter and Christmas. She does not include biblical passages *per se*, nor incantations that sounded like liturgical prayers, nor rituals associated with healing or exorcism. The strict delimitation allows her to proceed with a manageable book, but it also prompts the reader to wonder what liturgy really means, that it should be supported by only this narrow range of texts. Chapter ii discusses major literary sources for the Egyptian Christian liturgy (Sarapion of Thmuis, Canons of Athanasius, the *Life* of Apa Pesynthius and others) and offers a synthetic picture of the major liturgical rites of the eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours and baptism, noting that at least in late antiquity these were performed in local variations (pp. 52–3). Chapter iii reviews the bases for dating the written artefacts: paleography and associated writings (for example, on the reverse of a papyrus). Few papyri come from the third and fourth centuries (twenty-three, compared to many more biblical and parabiblical texts). From the fifth through seventh centuries come eighty-four papyri as well as 102 ostraca from Western Thebes. The remaining 109 come from the late seventh through tenth centuries. It may not be surprising that liturgical texts were not amply produced in the third and fourth centuries, when

ecclesiastical centralisation was only developing, but one might wonder what kinds of texts, if any, supported liturgy in that period.

Chapter iv, on the provenances of liturgical papyri, is one of the most interesting in the book, since it shows the remarkable idiosyncrasies and fluidity of materials intended (in principle) to lend consistency to worship. Mihálykó discusses artefacts from (predominantly monastic sites in) the Fayyum and Oxyrhynchus, Hermopolis, Herakleopolis, Aphrodito and Panopolis, and the extensive monastic complex of western Thebes, with its quite diverse hymns and hymn compilations. Western Thebes merits special attention, since it provides the largest number of liturgical manuscripts, most of which were actually inscribed on potsherds or pieces of limestone (and raising the question: how did a monk 'use' a substantial limestone liturgical text?). Based on the large number of liturgical texts from western Thebes Mihálykó offers a special review of liturgical practices there (pp. 140–52): vigils and feasts for particular saints, prayers for the soul at burial, lamp-lighting and incense-offering prayers, prayers for the Nile flood and a view of the eucharist, especially the Sanctus prayer, as conjuring the real presence of divine beings.

Chapter v addresses the 'materiality' of the liturgical papyri (in the archaeological sense of physical media, not that of material-religion studies): codices, single sheets, ostraca, as well as indications of musical or tone notation. Her conclusion is that, while one might assume a utilitarian choice of media for collective singing or prayer – codices or large-lettered pages to share among performers – in fact there was no typical medium for liturgical texts. Single sheets and ostraca, rarely notated for singing, prevail. This tendency in the *corpus* itself suggests both that writing materials were chosen for their sheer availability and that performance was clearly not the only function for liturgical texts – that these sheets, notes and transcriptions could migrate among a variety of devotional/performative contexts. Thus chapter vi, 'Uses of liturgical papyri', investigates two other principal uses for liturgical texts: amulets and writing exercises.

'Liturgical amulets', like scriptural amulets, have received much attention in recent years, particularly through the incisive publications of Theodore de Bruyn (and, for scripture amulets, Brice Jones and Joseph Sanzo).² The broad consensus is that, if once we imagined that scripture fragments reflected scripture reading (and maybe contemplation) and hymnic fragments likewise reflected liturgical performance, now we recognise the central utility of 'material scripture' – amulets especially for healing and protection in a landscape rife with scorpions, snakes and demons. This new consensus in fact recognises that Scripture in any semi-literate societies will have 'iconic' value and power beyond the

² Joseph E. Sanzo, *Scriptural incipits on amulets from late antique Egypt*, Tübingen 2014; Brice Jones, *New Testament texts on Greek amulets from late antiquity*, London 2016.

‘informative’ sense with which moderns are most familiar.³ And so also for liturgical fragments, which appear in many of the Christian ‘magical’ papyri included in Preisendanz’s *Papyri graecae magicae*: clearly people saw apotropaic value (*inter alia*) in certain prayers and acclamations, regardless of how the liturgical passages functioned performatively.⁴ But how does one tell the amulet from the text meant for performance or liturgical souvenir? Although in some cases – miniature codices, wooden tablets – the amuletic function is fairly clear from the context, with papyri Mihálykó follows De Bruyn in using folds as a tentative gauge, since this feature would seem to indicate that someone had transformed the written document into something small and personally portable. (Of course, as she points out, other factors could also have led to folds.) In the end, if ‘few liturgical papyri were unambiguously used as amulets’ (p. 198), Mihálykó does discuss at least fourteen artefacts that probably had this function; and certainly a good number of ostraca and single-sheet liturgical fragments may well have passed through stages as efficacious or protective objects for bodies, for monastic dwellings or for animals.⁵ As for writing exercises, often assessed through the quality of the writing, Mihálykó finds this context much harder to assess in the case of liturgical materials.

But if not as amulets or writing exercises, what did one do with a liturgical text, especially an abbreviated or fragmentary one? Mihálykó’s category ‘aids for performing the service’ is purposefully vague, since few papyri bear indications of use to direct liturgy or coordinate singing; and literary evidence points to the importance of memorisation anyway. Mihálykó proposes functions like the *aide-mémoire*, communication of prayers and hymns across distances, and personal contemplation. Whereas a liturgical codex might well serve in a directive capacity during performance, ostraca like those used in western Theban monasteries pose a mystery, given the natural difficulty in wielding such objects in performance.

If virtue lay in memorisation, why inscribe hymns and prayers at all? Chapter vii endorses the position that the earliest (fourth-century)

³ On these categories see James W. Watts (ed.), *Iconic books and texts*, Sheffield 2013.

⁴ Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri graecae magicae: die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*, ed. Albert Henrichs, Stuttgart 1973, ii. 209–32; Theodore de Bruyn and Jitse H. F. Dijkstra, ‘Greek amulets and formularies from Egypt containing Christian elements: a checklist of papyri, parchments, ostraka, and tablets’, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* xlviii (2011), 163–216; Theodore de Bruyn, *Making amulets Christian: artefacts, scribes, and contexts*, Oxford 2017, ch. vi.

⁵ This is especially so in the case of ostraca and limestone chips: Paul Allan Mirecki, ‘A seventh-century Coptic limestone in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford’, in Paul Allan Mirecki and Marvin W Meyer (eds), *Magic and ritual in the ancient world*, Leiden 2002, 47–69; Raquel Martín Hernández and Sofía Torallas Tovar, ‘The use of the ostrakon in magical practice in late antique Egypt’, *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* lxxxi/2 (2014), 780–800.

writing of prayers represented an effort at theological precision, while subsequently it reflected an interest in circulating liturgical materials to encourage and frame local ecclesiastical activities – processions, special rites, or even the improvement of a church’s repertoire. Writing did not, however, lead to rigidity or fixity in the wording of prayers: the papyri reflect constant change across Egypt. The evidence of hymn collections seems to indicate less lay participation than a culture of specialists: singers or, in the case of the Manichaean Psalm-books, a distinctive religious subculture.

In chapter viii, on the languages of the liturgy (Greek, Coptic), we find that the gradual shift to Coptic from Greek over the late antique and Byzantine periods did not represent any particular ‘democratisation’, as was once thought. Liturgical performance did not presume the comprehension of performers or audiences, so an unfamiliar language would not matter; and prayers themselves functioned as empowered ritual speech, not informative content.

A concluding chapter (ix) points out the most important elements in the data for the understanding of liturgy in Egypt: that liturgical texts ‘tend to be informal copies on single sheets or ostraca ... Codices are much less frequent’ (p. 280); that the *corpus*, which really begins in the fourth and fifth centuries, reflects an effort on the part of bishops concerned with orthodoxy; and that diversity of texts and customs nevertheless still prevailed. Finally, Mihálykó emphasises the importance of the Theban ostraca, a rich archive of one region’s uses of liturgical materials.

Overall, Mihálykó provides the liturgiologist, the historian of Egyptian Christianity and the student of late antiquity in general with an invaluable resource: an authoritative review of the first-hand evidence for liturgy and a series of informed and provocative directions for further study. A judicious use of hagiographical materials informs her conclusions about liturgical structure, and a very thought-provoking use of the Manichaean liturgical texts from Kellis and Medinet Madi brings the ‘orthodox’ materials into an intriguingly broader context for thinking about the beginnings of Christian liturgy.

The implications of the Manichaean materials for the discussion of Egyptian Christian liturgy are only one of the many directions in which Mihálykó sends us. There are larger questions as well, such as her opening assertion about the social or lay relevance of liturgy in the growth of Egyptian Christianity. Given the predominantly monastic provenances of these liturgical fragments, the book actually does not provide evidence for this assertion. Of course, demonstrating the historical impact of liturgy was not her goal, but in raising the issue of the popular reception and cultural use of liturgy in late antique Egypt, she encourages those of us who do not view Christianisation as the wholesale adoption of new spatial/ritual customs to investigate liturgy. And here the evidence for amulets that Mihálykó adduces may allow the historian to move closer to

the world of lay reception and interaction. De Bruyn's work has already elaborated on the innovative work of Christian scribes in formulating amulets using Scripture, liturgy and *historiolae*,⁶ while Mihálykó narrows the demography of the liturgical scribes to monks or ecclesiastical specialists. In either case we see the mediation of liturgical acclamations (like the *trisagion*), Psalms or even prayers for ordinary people in everyday circumstances. It would be particularly useful to pursue this 'magical' evidence specifically as a gauge of popular interaction and appropriation of liturgy – beyond, that is, monastic settings.

This book also follows a growing consensus among Coptic scholars that liturgy and liturgical formulation served as the main influence on the large body of Coptic incantation texts – for protection, for blessing substances, for healing, and even for cursing and erotic pursuits – composed between the fourth and tenth centuries and extant on papyrus and leather.⁷ The heavenly beings invoked and the liturgical formulations reflect a demographic overlap between those who performed, transcribed, composed and contemplated liturgy and liturgical power and those who composed these incantations. For example:

I adjure you by Orphamiel, the great finger of the Father; I adjure you by the throne of the Father; ... I adjure you by the sun; I adjure you by the entire host of angels on high; ... that you keep any person who may wear this amulet from all harm and all evil and all sorcery and all injury induced by the stars and all the demons.⁸

Another, which invokes 'cherubim and seraphim, ... Gabriel, ... Abraxiel, Emmanuel ... twenty-four elders and the four creatures who support the throne of the Father', conveys the curses of a mother against her daughter-in-law.⁹ Several such incantations run for ten or twenty codex pages, calling into ritual presence a host of esoteric angels and elements of the Godhead, following which is appended a series of quotidian applications for oil or water infused with the incantation.¹⁰ A good number of texts specify the quasi-eucharistic sanctification of water or wine in a chalice or

⁶ De Bruyn, *Making amulets Christian*.

⁷ Siegfried G. Richter, 'Bemerkungen zu magischen Elementen koptischer Zaubertexte', in Bärbel Kramer (ed.) *Akten des 21. internationalen Papyrologenkongresses*, Stuttgart 1997, 835–46; Jacques Van der Vliet, 'Literature, liturgy, magic: a dynamic continuum', in Paula Buzi and Alberto Camplani (eds), *Christianity in Egypt: literary production and intellectual trends in late antiquity*, Rome 2011, 555–74, and 'Christian spells and manuals from Egypt', in David Frankfurter (ed.), *Guide to the study of ancient magic*, Leiden 2019, 322–50.

⁸ Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith (eds), *Ancient Christian magic: Coptic texts of ritual power*, San Francisco, CA 1994, no. 62.

⁹ *Ibid.* no. 93.

¹⁰ For example, London Hay 10391 and Heidelberg Kopt. 686, *ibid.* nos 127, 135; Malcolm Choat and Iain Gardner (eds), *A Coptic handbook of ritual power (P. Macq. I 1)*, Brepols 2013.

the infusion of oil with heavenly powers, to be directed to a patient's healing or protection: for example,

You must send me today your 7 holy archangels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Suriel, Zetekiël, Solothiel, Anael, that they may stretch out their 7 fingers by name and seal the oil that is in my hands, in the name of the Father, etc ... At the moment that [patient's name] will be anointed with this oil, you must take away from him all sicknesses and all illnesses and all magic and all potions.¹¹

Or

Let the gates of heaven open and the angels of light come to me, so that I may complete the holy praise; ... I adjure you today by the chorus of the stars of heaven, that you send me the archangel Michael upon this water and this oil that are placed before me, and [that] he [should] bless them and consecrate them, so that if they are poured upon the body of [patient's name] all the suffering that is in his body may be taken away from him.¹²

What should we make of these materials? It would seem that the culture of liturgical exchange, especially in monastic settings, which Mihálykó so richly documents, gave rise to innovation: extensions of the familiar, orthodox ritual utterances for pragmatic ends. Furthermore, it was not simply the odd deviant monk who engaged in these liturgical innovations but anyone versed in liturgical culture:

Prayers were seen as effective language with immediate power [Mihálykó observes] ... This is especially true of the anaphora, whose recitation alone was able to conjure the seraphim and the cherubim to the side of the altar and transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ with automatic effect. (p. 278)

Perhaps we misunderstand liturgy when we personalise or 'spiritualise' it according to modern sensibilities. Perhaps, rather, we should imagine its function and even its imaginative engagement with supernatural beings in illocutionary terms, as the calling-into-reality of celestial beings and their attributes, to infuse substances on an altar.¹³ In this context it is unsurprising that the social world that arose to cultivate those verbal practices sought multiple ways to extend their powers.

For obvious reasons of delimitation Mihálykó does not pursue this quasi-liturgical literature or its textual or demographic overlaps with the liturgical papyri (although she well knows their existence: p. 21). But any book of this kind does not need more than to open, or indicate, doors to subsequent areas of investigation. These quasi-liturgical incantations

¹¹ Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian magic*, no. 63.

¹² *Ibid.* no. 135.

¹³ On this feature of ritual speech see Wade T. Wheelock, 'The problem of ritual language: from information to situation', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 1 (1982), 49–71.

would certainly seem to be one important new direction in the study of the liturgy in Egypt.

A final direction in which Mihálykó points us would be the potential uses and material agency of individual liturgical passages on papyrus or ostraca. Mihálykó uses the presence of folds to distinguish probable from only possible amulets (pp. 192–6), yet the preponderance of her materials consists in single sheets (or ostraca) with random prayers and hymns. Clearly they could not all be amulets, and yet the alternative function – ‘to facilitate the performance of liturgy’ (p. 281) – is not only quite general, but suggests inevitable migrations in the uses of the papyri: from *aide-mémoires* (as Mihálykó proposes) to souvenirs of liturgical power? *Apotropaion*? The large number of ostraca and limestone chips used for inscribing liturgical passages in Western Thebes suggest that, in late antique and early Byzantine Egypt, a substantial (even weighty) object with liturgical phrases on it would always have been more than an *aide-mémoire*. In its material presence it would have reified and conveyed the memory and agency of those liturgical phrases. One of those Theban monks, the holy man Frange (whom Mihálykó briefly discusses), seems to send people such material blessings regularly: ‘Since you said to me “write [on] a large chip and send it to me so I can place it before the animals”, behold, I have sent it.’¹⁴ Apa Frange’s own sense of the material efficacy of his written words may well illuminate a regional culture in which liturgical fragments were inscribed and circulated: not as cheat-sheets or collectors’ items but as intrinsically potent objects, even unfolded.¹⁵

Clearly there are other questions in the study of liturgy that Mihálykó’s book inspires, but one of the benefits of having a study like this – focusing on primary sources, largely unmediated by hagiographical or historiographical perspective – is the possibility of addressing a much larger question: What is liturgy that it should arise at a certain point in religions? How does it serve the self-conception of institutions and, on the other hand, the popular experience of centralisation, or regionalisation, among local cultures? How is it received or appropriated by laity? What sorts of subcultures does it inspire – for example, in the contemplation of heavenly beings or the preparation of amulets and incantations? Given how often this term is employed as a category or element of Christianity (and Judaism, for that matter), it would be helpful for scholars to sharpen its meaning and implications – both historically and comparatively.

¹⁴ O. Frange 190, ed. Anne Boud’hors and Chantal Heurtel in *Les Ostraca coptes de la TT 29: autour du moine Frangé*, Brussels 2010, i. 158.

¹⁵ See, for example, Mirecki, ‘Seventh-century Coptic limestone’. In general see David Frankfurter, ‘Charismatic textuality and the mediation of Christianity in late antique Egypt’, in Laura Feldt and Jan N. Bremmer (eds), *Marginality, media, and mutations of religious authority in the history of Christianity*, Leuven 2019, 47–67.