

BOOK REVIEW

DeConick, April D., Gregory Shaw and John D. Turner (eds.), *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammadi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature: Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson* (NHMS, 85; Leiden: Brill, 2013). ix + 571 pp. Hbk. \$233 USD.

This Festschrift addresses Birger Pearson's longtime interest, Gnostic ritual. As a *Religionsgeschichte* approach, the volume recognizes Pearson's contributions by short tributes and a *curriculum vitae*, and notes his guiding contributions, such as the recognition of Gnosticism as a first-century Platonic–Jewish amalgam adopted by Christianity. Although variegated in methodology and content, this book's ritual focus unifies the collection as a deliberate step away from the study of Gnosticism as primarily *intellectually* esoteric; thus the work fits well with the current trends of examining text and realia together and utilizing materialist theories of religion. Overall, it is an important contribution to a burgeoning field of study.

The book's experiential (contra philosophical) approach spans five sections addressing initiatory, recurrent, therapeutic, ecstatic and philosophic Gnostic practices. Such an emphasis avoids a priori definitions of the notoriously slippery term 'gnosticism' and its correlates. The cohering value of the work comes from methodologies as diverse as conceptual blending (DeConick) and speech-act/image-act theory (Lesses), and objects as varied as Pliny's therapeutic theory (Janowitz) and the *Book of Thoth* (Butler) employed toward comprehending gnostic varieties of ritual practice in late antiquity. Diversity serves thematic unity in pushing the boundaries of current understanding of Gnosticism, late antique ritual and even religion generally.

The first section, 'Initiatory Practices', explores a familiar scholarly trope in less familiar territory. April DeConick, in 'The Road for the Soul is through the Planets: The Mysteries of the Ophians Mapped', examines an Ophian-Christian 'Seal ritual' diagram discussed by

Celsus and Origen, which she places in a liturgical handbook as an initiatory death-journey description acting as a ‘memory resource’ supporting a ‘specific worldview’ (p. 69), ‘embedded in a complex narrative’ (p. 71). Roger Beck’s approach is more psychosomatic in ‘Ecstatic Religion in the Roman Cult of Mithras’. He compares Paul’s ‘altered state of consciousness’ in 2 Corinthians to Mithraic initiation, which he considers experiential rather than pedagogical. Beck claims these rituals are repetitive (given Mithraism’s perdurance), ideal (achieved by few) and ecstatic. However, inference, not evidence, supports repetitiveness; idealism is assumed, not supported; ecstasy is concluded, not argued. While Beck’s argument is reasonable, evidence is wanting.

Bas van Os approaches initiation by baptism in ‘The *Gospel of Philip* as Gnostic Initiatory Discourse’. He refutes objections to reading the *Gospel of Philip* as baptismal catechesis, and through rhetorical analysis identifies textual units as catechetical steps. This lens for the *Gospel of Philip* is at least plausible, possibly convincing. Elliot Wolfson continues with the *Gospel of Philip* in ‘Becoming Invisible: Rending the Veil and the Hermeneutic of Secrecy in the *Gospel of Philip*’. He points out the *Gospel of Philip*’s secretive communication, where ‘truth is revealed’ but hidden, in ‘diurnal light’ not ‘nocturnal darkness’ (p. 131). Esoteric hermeneutics realize the initiatory rite of becoming invisible. In a more concrete direction, Erin Evans dissects purifications and ascent rituals in using ‘seals’, intermediaries, prayer and *voces magicae* (p. 137) in ‘Ritual in the *Second Book of Jeu*’. Baptisms of water, fire and Holy Spirit utilize olive crowns, verbena, myrtle and ciphers as sensory aids. She concludes, ‘The *Second Book of Jeu* is a ritual handbook that leads...from a series of purifying, possibly initiatory, rituals into preparation for an ultimate postmortem ascent’ (p. 156). Evans’s article is articulate, thorough and productive. Nicola Lewis ends the section with ‘Death on the Nile: Egyptian Codices, Gnosticism, and Early Christian Books of the Dead’, offering an account of Codex Panopolitanus, an Egyptian Christian ‘Book of the Dead’ with comparanda like Codices Tchachos, Berlin and Nag Hammadi. She argues Roman practice alters Egyptian traditions, adopting and eschewing various elements. She notes that Egyptian-esque funerary texts combine with Greco-Roman-gnostic elements gracing Christian graves and observes parallels between funerary and Gnostic

ascension texts. Thus the ‘Initiatory Practices’ section coheres loosely, its value being in the articles’ originality rather than their parallelism.

Section Two (‘Recurrent Practices’) begins with ‘Going to Church with the Valentinians’ by Einar Thomassen. He identifies ongoing rituals of Valentinian Gnosticism, including a consistent Lord’s Day meeting, corporate song and perhaps preaching/teaching. Even Eucharist is Valentinian stock according to Irenaeus and the *Gospel of Philip*. Thomassen constructs a ‘ritual sequence’ within Valentinianism that admits considerable textual support. Another Gnostic practice was repentance, according to Madeleine Scopello’s ‘Practicing “Repentance” on the Path to Gnosis in *Exegesis on the Soul*’. She traces the ‘Gnostic myth of the Psyche’ through phases of ‘prostitution, repentance, and return to Father’, a paranetic trajectory. Since Scopello only claims ritual application in the conclusion, one wonders about its inclusion in this section. She also expunges important intertexts—grammatical-syntactical errors are her major drawback.

If other chapters in this section are lucid, Edward Butler’s ‘Opening the Way of Writing: Semiotic Metaphysics in the Book of Thoth’ is opaque; fruitful reading requires fluency in Demotic transliteration, Egyptian text-markers, mythology and language. Butler develops a ‘metaphysics of semiosis’ through ‘textual materiality’ (conceptions of cosmogonic origins of papyrus and ink), authorial intertextuality (making mortality the ‘locus of ideality’) and ‘textual animality’ (pp. 215-16) in the *Book of Thoth*, but the chapter is a mire. Translations are wooden and argumentation lacks clarity. More accessible is Fernando Bermejo-Rubio’s “‘I Worship and Glorify’”: Manichaean Liturgy and Piety in Kellis’ Prayer of the Emanations’. He examines *P. Kell. Gr. 98* (Εὐχὴ τῶν προβολῶν), a Greek Manichaean prayer set, important given the paucity of Greek Manichaean texts, the text’s completeness (on wooden board) and its parallel to al-Nadim’s description of Manichaean daily prayer (in *Fihrist*). These (probably daily) prayers show how ideological superstructure can support ritual. Related to this is Jason BeDuhn’s study of ‘The Manichaean Weekly Confessional Ritual’. He situates this against fasting in other religions and, noting the ‘risk of constructing a synthetic procedure’ (p. 278), tries to reconstruct confessional ritual in detail. Though this is a study of Western Manichaeanism, Eastern sources appear ubiquitously (though necessarily); BeDuhn hopes the Coptic *Psalm Book* (untranslated) will bolster

Western attestations. For now, this is a usable account of Manichaean confession.

Jorunn Buckley moves from Manichaean to Mandaen ritual prayer in ‘Ritual Ingenuity in the *Scroll of the Exalted King*’. *The Scroll* contains 103 novice prayers for a process of entering a hut, baptizing one’s teacher, and ‘activating’ different ‘fields’ accompanied by ‘prayers, formulas, gestures, [and] certain foods’, resulting in control of personal multiplicity (pp. 308-10). Buckley understands this within a ‘cumulative...priestly esoteric-philosophical project’ (p. 310). I wonder if this should have been in the ‘Initiatory Practices’ section. The ‘Recurrent Practices’ section is a difficult project given little evidence other than inference for whether a given practice was initiatory or ongoing.

Naomi Janowitz begins Section Three, ‘Therapeutic Practices’, with ‘Natural, Magical, Scientific or Religious? A Guide to Theories of Healing’, though her ‘Guide’ is restricted to Pliny as she explores Pliny’s basically Stoic and rhetorically anti-Grecian view of healing. He plagiarizes cures while avoiding their social position. Janowitz concludes that classifying healing theories *is* interpretation, and shows this in the Johannine Gospel’s explanation of Jesus’ healing blindness with spit (Jn 9.32): ‘If he were not from God, He would not be able to do these things’. Grant Adamson moves from the theoretical toward particularity in ‘Astrological Medicine in Gnostic Traditions’. In the *Apocryphon of John* he locates three instances of melothesial doctrine and records Celsus’s, Origen’s and Plotinus’s disparagements of such before expositing the ‘*Ialdabaōth* Gem’ and ‘Silver Foil Amulet’. The former is an Ophite pendant or ring manipulating Ialdabaoth (Ariael), while the amulet has thirty-six ‘names of the great Necessity’ as protection against sorcery, potions, curse tablets, untimely death and other threats; Thomas-son-of-Maxima, its owner, may be a Christian. Adamson concludes that such amulets facilitated Ophite-Gnostic ascent and averted evil, surveying iatromathematics among other Gnostics.

A veteran voice beckons from Marvin Meyer’s posthumous ‘The Persistence of Ritual in the Magical Book of Mary and the Angels: *P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685*’. Meyer introduces *The Magical Book* and cognates, including *P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 684*, an ‘erotic spell of Cyprian of Antioch’ (before he converted at the spell’s failure to seduce Justina, per tradition), and *P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 686*, ‘The Praise of Michael the Archangel’, which prescribes solutions to demons, violence and impotence. *P. Heid. Inv. Kopt. 685* and *686*, both palimpsests, may be from

one Coptic ('Heidelberg') lectionary prescribing 'Pauline' holiday readings. *The Magical Book* begins with ritual prayer and effects strength and healing through first- to third-person shifts. Meyer reads magical tone and lectionarial location as evidence of ritual 'outside the bounds of the organized church' (p. 373), while acknowledging the text's renunciation of magic and sorcery, an argument that seems ideologically driven. Meyer concludes by casting magic/ritual as two views of one entity. This could have as well fit the 'recurrent practices' section. More definitely appropriate here is Rebecca Lesses's 'Image and Word: Performative Ritual and Material Culture in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls', where she reads Aramaic incantation bowls that incapacitate demons through writings, drawings and *charakteres*. These bowls, buried in houses and used individually, 'blocked' demons by binding/encircling them. She develops the bowls' significance through speech- and image-act theory to argue that '[l]anguage is primarily...symbolic' while icons need not adhere to conventions (p. 401); but don't icons adhere to conventions? Overall, Lesses's analysis and theory are robust.

To be fair, the 'Therapeutic Practices' in Section Three could as well be recurrent or initiatory, even ecstatic (Section Four). Thus, a given article's placement in a section need not obviate its significance in other arenas. Likewise, we turn to 'Ecstatic Practices' in Section Four with John Turner's 'From Baptismal Vision to Mystical Union with the One: The Case of the Sethian Gnostics'. He recognizes two Sethian groups whose soteriologies involve (1) enlightenment from a savior through earthly *descents* and (2) self-actualized *ascent* through supra-mundane realms. *Zostrianos* 'bridges the gap' and displaces baptisms with 'transcendental baptisms'. Turner argues that baptisms are ecstatic 'cognitive acts' betraying perceptual shift from 'fragmentation to unity' (p. 425), using texts to demonstrate this ideological transformation. Niclas Förster's object is more obviously ecstatic in 'Marcosian Rituals for Prophecy and Apolytrosis'. Förster's Marcus embodied an intra-Christian faction with esoteric rituals, spiritual empowerment, and oddities like 'angelic counterpart[s]', sexual transcendentalization and 'hyperventilation'. Förster attributes the movement's attraction to elitism, *hic et nunc* redemption and protective Apolytroses, making the study read like social history.

James Davila's 'Ritual in the Hekhalot Literature' could as easily fit in the 'Philosophic Practices' section. *Hekhalot Rabbati*, *Ma'aseh Mer-*

kavah and *Hekhalot Zutarti* attest heavenly throne-room ascent practices, involving fasting, prostration and incantation, and similar ‘Sar Torah Praxes’ impart supernatural Torah knowledge through immersions, fasting, prayer and isolation. Davila interprets *Shi‘ur Qomah* (‘measure of the stature’ [of God’s body parts]), and deduces (*Mer-kavah Rabba*, *Sefer HaShi‘ur*) a ritual-liturgical recitation context, perhaps theurgical, which may include music, *nomina barbara* and seals. Intertextuality probably supports his conclusions, and these practices involve ecstatic elements, if they are not always a defining characteristic. The enthusiasm behind the practices studied in this section gives them thematic unity, while the texts studied are quite diverse.

Section Five, ‘Philosophic Practices’, leads with Zeke Mazur’s ‘The Platonizing Sethian Gnostic Interpretation of Plato’s *Sophist*’. Mazur argues Sethians used Plato’s *Sophist* for metaphysics, recording ‘surprisingly intellectual terms’ (ἐφάπτεσθαι, κατανενοηκέναι, ἐξευρηχέναι, θεωρεῖν) from *Enn.* II.9[33], corroborated in *Allogenes* 50.10-14 and *Zost.* 22–24. *Zost.* 22.1-12 convinces Mazur of influence from *Sophist* 253-254 on ‘species and genera’ separation. Both passages employ *κοινωνεῖν* and address how *ἰδέα* inhabits objects and forms. Mazur traces these trends through *Marsanes* and the *3 Steles of Seth*, adducing that Sethians imbibed *Sophist* ideas for its ‘account of a plethora of divine realities’, epistemic social bifurcation, and disparagement of image-making. Mazur establishes that *διάρσις* dialogue in the *Sophist* perdured in Sethian Gnosticism, which one can examine given the appendix. Moving from Plato to Plotinus, Michael Williams in ‘Did Plotinus’ “Friends” Still Go to Church? Communal Rituals and Ascent Apocalypses’ answers whether Sethians replaced baptism with ‘spiritual ascent’ negatively, stating (1) the texts do not demonstrate this; (2) nor does Plotinus’s dispute; (3) ‘ascent treatises’ appear in codices where water baptism seems ‘operative’. Perhaps ascent rituals did not replace baptism as soteriological expectations.

Next, Kevin Corrigan (‘The Meaning of “One”’: Plurality and Unity in Plotinus and Later Neoplatonism’) refutes arguments that (1) Plotinus’s mysticism is ‘solitary’, (2) negative theology best evaluates Plotinus’s mysticism and (3) Neoplatonism is ‘fatally hierarchical’. First, Plotinus’s *monos* does not exclude community (*Enn.* V–VI). Secondly, Plotinian mysticism is not apophatic but ‘wakes up a divine unity’ that ‘comprehends everything’ per Iamblichus. Thirdly, Neopla-

tonism knows no hierarchy-absent love. Corrigan's arguments are coherent, but does pan-love-theism obviate hierarchy? Finally Gregory Shaw ends the volume with 'Theurgy and the Platonist's Luminous Body', which chases not the 'modern Plato' but the antique hierophant who sought 'not conceptual knowledge but cosmogonic activity'. Combating Platonic dualism's extraterrestrial revelation, Shaw seeks to recover a world theophanic. Neoplatonism, as ritualistic as intellectual, can be theurgy (Iamblichus) or proto-rationalism (Plotinus). Shaw urges the abandonment of rationalism and the embrace of Neoplatonism. Here Shaw is evangelist, not scholar. This final section's studies have an easier task inasmuch as tracing intellectual trends in texts is often easier than defining rituals. The chapters by Mazur, Corrigan and Shaw could as easily find their places within a volume not addressing ritual, but their placement here is not inappropriate.

The work's overarching purpose, to demonstrate the centrality of ritual within late antique Gnosticism(s), is commendably accomplished. While the majority of these arguments are textually supported, the interweaving of material artifacts in many of them is refreshing. The clearest conclusion of the whole is that early Gnostic sects should not be characterized *exclusively* by their intellectual esotericism. Indeed, weighing the relative importance of ritual and thought within Gnosticism seems difficult, especially as these phenomena are mutually informative and only conceptually distinct; one could hardly have endured without the other. This book drives home the point that ritual is an indispensable component of Gnosticism, an anchor to its mature comprehension.

Practicing Gnosis ends with an author/term index, and individual chapters end with bibliographies. Format and content are both palatable and engaging. Sections are for the most part clearly delineated, and several essays complement one another nicely. Overall, the volume's chapters are as useful as stand-alone studies as they are in package form, perhaps more so; however, the opportunity here presented for cross-disciplinary work is welcome, especially since these studies are by scholars leading the way in Gnostic studies as they make a decided turn toward practice.

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