

Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 30

BYZANTINA SYMMEIKTA 30



Book Review: B. BITTON-ASHKELONY - D. KRUEGER, Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities, 5th to 11th Centuries, Routledge 2017.

Niki TSIRONI

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.24709](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.24709)

Copyright © 2020, Niki TSIRONI



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

TSIRONI, N. (2020). Book Review: B. BITTON-ASHKELONY - D. KRUEGER, Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities, 5th to 11th Centuries, Routledge 2017. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 30, 399–402. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.24709>

B. BITTON-ASHKELONY – D. KRUEGER, *Prayer and Worship in Eastern Christianities, 5th to 11th Centuries*, Routledge 2017, pp. xvii + 312, including indices of scriptural references and general index. ISBN 9781472465689, 97813156011977 ebook.

Recent decades have witnessed an upsurge in the study of evidence sourced from the periphery of the Byzantine Empire. It is what is termed in this book ‘Eastern Christianities’, designating a mine of information essential to the understanding and appreciation of Byzantine Christianity, especially in the early and middle Byzantine period that comes to a close in the eleventh century. The time span the book covers, including the critical period of the rise and expansion of Islam, forms a distinct part of Byzantine history, especially as far as the formation of its religious identity is concerned, and the authors have wisely extended its scope to cover this formative period. Moreover, the book delves into the realms of prayer and worship, topics to a great extent neglected until recently. This book, edited by Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony and Derek Krueger, is a valuable addition to the scholarly bibliography in the field. Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony [Associate Professor and Martin Buber Chair in Comparative Religion, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel], with her rich contribution to the study of prayer and spiritual currents of the Eastern Mediterranean, joined forces with Derek Krueger [the Joe Rosenthal Excellence Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA], well-known and established scholar in the field of Byzantine studies who has offered us a number of original and erudite studies on the body, the self and various aspects of the theological, liturgical and hymnographic tradition of Byzantium.

The present volume includes an impressive lineup of scholars covering topics that throw light on the prayer and worship of the Eastern Mediterranean, notwithstanding the editors themselves, who tackle the “Theories of prayer in Late Antiquity from Maximus of Tyre to Isaac of Nineveh” (pp. 10-33) and

“The transmission of liturgical joy in Byzantine hymns of Easter” (pp. 132-150), analysed by Brouria Bitton and Derek Krueger respectively. Prayer and worship in the present volume are theoretically approached as expressions of religious identity, inextricably linked to theological speculation and doctrinal formulation, engendered by the remarkable diversity of local traditions within the geographical span of Eastern Christianities. The contributors to the volume cover specific topics of interest, study influential personalities and spatial frameworks. The body as a means through which the person reaches out to God through prayer is studied by Sabino Chialà (“Prayer and the Body according to Isaac of Nineveh”, pp. 34-43), who shows how theory and practice mutually influence one another, while Columba Stewart (“Psalms and Prayer in Syriac Monasticism: Clues from Psalter Prefaces and their Greek Sources”, pp. 44-62) explores the reception of the Psalms in Syriac monasticism, taking into consideration the thought of St Athanasios and Evagrius of Pontus. Indeed, the Psalms played an important role in the expression of feelings of supplication, joy or affliction as Columba Stewart shows, but also formed part of other prayers as building blocks as Leah Di Segni demonstrates (“Expressions of Prayer in Late Antique Inscriptions in the Provinces of Palaestina and Arabia”, pp. 63 -88). The Psalms, along with other Biblical quotations constituted part of the prayer vocabulary, often found in inscriptions, and employed for the expression of public as well as private invocation of the divine. Epigraphs are found at the centre of Di Segni’s contribution and are drawn upon by Ann Marie Yasin in her article on the early Byzantine churches (“Renovation and the Early Byzantine Church: Staging Past and Prayer”, pp. 89-115), in which she examines the church as a performative context, i.e. as a stage affecting the content and the expression of prayer and devotion. Alterations in church buildings, Yasin argues, influence significantly the rituals and the accompanying movement of the faithful in the sacred space. Special attention is given to the epigraphs which act as records of benefaction but also as expressions of devotion through prayer.

The importance of the Eucharist and the various traditions that flourished in the Eastern Mediterranean from the fifth century onwards, as well as its perception as magical medication is dealt with by Volker Menze (“The Power of the Eucharist in Early Medieval Syria: Grant for Salvation or Magical Medication?”, pp. 116-130). In this article the traditions of Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches come alive through hagiographical narratives related to the preparation and consummation of the Eucharist. The author brings hagiographical texts to bear on the study of the Eucharist, such as the Life of Peter by St John Rufus and the writings of John

Moschus. Moreover, he explores evidence deriving from the bread stamps used for the Eucharistic bread and which bore inscriptions thoroughly analyzed in this chapter. The Liturgy as “a source of commonality between confessions” (p. 151) is treated in the contribution of Jack Tannous (“Greek Kanons and the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy”, pp. 151-180), who traces the emergence and spread of the kanons in the Eastern Mediterranean. Tannous studies the Greek kanons and their translation in Syriac along with their use in the liturgical context of Miaphysite (sic) ritual and devotion. The article stresses both bilingualism (if not multilingualism) in the Christian East as well as borrowings and overlaps in the hymnography of Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian churches, thus revealing instances of convergence and divergence in Byzantium and the Syrian East. Drawing on liturgical manuscripts, Daniel Galadza (“Various Orthodoxies: Feasts of the Incarnation of Christ in Jerusalem during the First Christian Millennium”, pp. 181-209) scrutinizes the celebration of Christmas and Epiphany (Theophany) in Palestine from the fifth century onwards, thus shedding light on the transformation and eventually Byzantinization of the Hagiopolite liturgical tradition. Looking in depth into these traditions with respect to Byzantium and Jerusalem specifically, it becomes evident that boundaries between Chalcedonian and Monophysite practices were far from clear-cut, as they encompassed disparate customs and rituals of devotional, ecclesiastical, monastic, linguistic and ethnic communities. Syriac and Arabic versions of the anonymous hagiographical account, known as the *Story of a Woman from Jerusalem*, are employed by Sergey Minov (“The Therapy for Grief and the Practice of Incubation in Early Medieval Palestine: The Evidence of the Syriac Story of a Woman from Jerusalem”, pp. 210-238) as guide for the study of Christian attitudes towards loss among the Christians of Palestine (providing ample comparative material) in the early and middle Christian period. In his most illuminating essay, Minov assesses the importance of this text in relation to incubation practices of the Graeco-Roman world, their assimilation by Christians, as well as the development of the Marian cult in Palestine and the Byzantine world. His appendix with the original text translated into English adds value to an already outstanding study. The volume concludes with an article by Hillel Newman (“Apocalyptic Poems in Christian and Jewish Liturgy in Late Antiquity”, pp. 239-253) who deals with the apocalyptic poems in Christian and Jewish Liturgy in the period of Late Antiquity. Romanos the Melode, the eloquent hymnographer of sixth-century Byzantium, becomes the vehicle for the study of affinities between the Byzantine kontakion and the Hebrew *piyyut* in their expression of apocalyptic imagery. In this chapter the common roots

and references of both Christian and Jewish traditions are brought to the fore, and the author provides a profound philological and cross-cultural study based on the hymn on the Second Coming of Romanos and the Hebrew *piyyut* composed in Palestine during the same period. Overall, the volume succeeds in throwing light on obscure aspects of the traditions of Byzantium and the Christian East in all their diversity. It is certain that this book has initiated a number of discussions that will be further advanced in the future.

NIKI TSIRONI
Institute of Historical Research/NHRF