

This paper introduces a socio-cognitive approach to the study of early Christian rituals which is based on three principles: multilevel analysis, theoretical pluralism and theory-dependent realism. Multilevel analysis means a mode of analysis that operates across the traditional hierarchies of disciplines or 'levels' of knowledge. In the case of the socio-cognitive approach, boundary crossing happens between the biological or cognitive level and the socio-cultural level, which is the traditional domain of the study of religion. Theoretical pluralism promotes the use of several cognitive theories and approaches. In scientific practice theoretical pluralism is not so obvious, but for a biblical scholar drawing on cognitive science it gives a number of advantages. By applying several cognitive theories of ritual, the scholar is in a position to overcome the limitations of any one cognitive theory and to assess the extent to which the theories used in the analysis are compatible. Theoretical pluralism is also helpful because 'ritual' is, as often noted, a 'fuzzy set' or 'family resemblance' category. The explanandum of the research is specified by the theoretical lens chosen for each analysis, but the use of several theories widens the scope and increases the means to obtain knowledge about the behavioral aspects of Christian beginnings. The fact that ritual is a 'fuzzy set' category also leads to a position that may be called theory-dependent realism. According to this view, the category of ritual is helpful in achieving knowledge about human behavior and social life, but this knowledge comes through different paths, i.e. selected theories and perspectives. It remains for the analyst to decide how much of this knowledge coming from diverse pathways is commensurable with one another and with other solid information. The last part of the paper suggests a model for an analysis of early Christian rituals integrating three perspectives on ritual: 1) ritual as action; 2) ritual and cooperation; and 3) ritual and religious knowledge.