

**Private Rites, Public Religion:
The Evolution of Public and Private Ritualized Action
in the Book of Genesis**

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Abstract: Rituals exist in degrees on a continuum, and some actions are more “ritualized” than others. The book of Genesis contains ninety-six examples of highly ritualized action. The characters execute some of these rituals in secret, such as when Abraham nearly sacrifices his son Isaac, while other times the characters perform rituals as part of public events, such as the large wedding feast when Jacob marries Leah. Genesis is comprised mainly of the redacted work of three distinct authors who wrote hundreds of years apart, and it is possible to see an evolution in the types of rituals about which the authors wrote. In general and over time, there is a progression away from private ceremonies and towards public rituals. Most ritual actions found in material attributed to the oldest author are performed in private, while the most recent author is seemingly distrustful of private religion and prefers public settings for his narratives. This evolution is either part of an authorial attempt to centralize and control the cult, or else it is a byproduct of that struggle. The progression also sought to safeguard proper cultic observance as the Judean community went into the Babylonian exile. In order to guarantee the continuation of the Israelite religion, texts were written to steer the community away from the observance of secret, private rites and towards the concept of a public religion.