Introduction: Curses, Religion, Aesthetics

I entrust and consign Karpimē Babbia, weaver of garlands, to the Fates who exact justice, so that they may punish her acts of insolence. . . . I adjure you and I implore you and I pray to you, Hermes of the Underworld, that the mighty names of Anankē, Nebezapadaieisen[.]geibebeohera, make me fertile; that the mighty name, the one carrying compulsion, which is not named recklessly unless in dire necessity, Eupher, mighty name, make me fertile and destroy Karpimē Babbia, weaver of garlands, from her head to her footprints with monthly destruction.[1]

Someone had it out for a garland weaver named Karpimē Babbia, a low-status woman who lived in Corinth in the late first or early second century CE. Chthonic Hermes, the goddess Anankē or Necessity, and the justice-exacting Fates are called upon to bring monthly destruction to her entire body, head to toe. Someone – a ritual practitioner with a client, most likely – made this curse by inscribing letters onto a thin lead tablet (Figure 0.1). What they wrote included rhythmic Greek, but also bubbled into a continuous stream of letters and sounds, the meaning of which is still unclear, which scholars call *voces magicae*: magical utterances. The curse-makers then rolled up the lead and pierced it with a nail, depositing it on or near a pedestal at the sanctuary of the goddesses Demeter and Kore, midway up the Acrocorinth, facing the busy city below and the blue of the Gulf of Corinth beyond.

[1] Text and translation: Ronald S. Stroud, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: The Inscriptions* (Corinth XVIII.6; Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Corinth, 2013), 105 (nos. 125/126). For the Greek, see p. 193 n. 147.

Figure 0.1 Double curse tablet against Karpimē Babbia, as found. Stroud, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: The Inscriptions*, fig. 80 (inscription 125/126). Photo: Ino Ioannidou and Lenio Bartzioti, American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Corinth Excavations.

The curse or *defixio* against Karpimē Babbia presumes, theologically, that divinities will work on your behalf. It pleads for justice from the justice-wielding Fates. It uses rhythms and poetics to get the work done. It targets a garland weaver, a worker in leaves and flowers, whose wreaths, donned for celebratory worship, would later wilt. Such garland-weaving women are elsewhere described as both too much and empty – *to polu kai kenon*, dismissed as people who "cull flower-clusters and the fragrance of leaves, stringing and plaiting them pleasantly enough – but a short-lived and fruitless work," in contrast to learned men's work of oratory or piety.[2]

What would happen if we made curses like the one we have just read central to a social history of ancient Christianity? What histories might we write if such objects were central to the stories of those who followed Christ even before the term Christian had been invented, those who

[2] Plutarch *De aud.* = *Mor.* 41F (= *On Listening to Lectures* 8) in Plutarch, *Moralia, Volume I* (trans. Frank Cole Babbitt; LCL 197; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 224–25, my translation. Plutarch, a roughly contemporaneous writer to Paul's letters, writing about the proper rhetorical style, uses this image of female garland weavers as a metaphor for bad rhetoric and elsewhere uses the image of the *stephanēplokos* to critique fruitless or ephemeral work: *Quaest. conviv.* 3 = *Mor.* 645F, *Praec. gr. reip.* = *Mor.* 802E.

sometimes called themselves Jews, sometimes aligned with a particular philosophy, and understood themselves at the same time as Christ-followers? Christians lived among people – they *were* people – who knew well local and trans-local practices to draw the attention of divinity or divinities. If we make curses central to a social history of ancient Christianity, we find Christ-followers in contexts in which ritual cursing was common. We find them cursing and talking about cursing. And the themes we have just seen – of theological-philosophical chutzpah, justice, poetics, and aesthetics – are part of the practices and concerns of ancient Christians, who of course included women and those of low status.[3]

A focus on curses may seem marginal to the study of ancient Christianity – a minority report, a curiosity. But these were important rituals; these were common acts of religion. They only seem marginal to the study of Mediterranean antiquity and ancient Christianity because of scholarly tendencies to compartmentalize so-called magic from so-called religion. A more accurate history of ancient Christianity would enfold as much data from antiquity as possible, scouring not only the writings of Paul but also the writings found in the dirt at the Acrocorinth that shadowed the Corinthian Christ-followers in the city below. It would consider not only the sermons of John Chrysostom but also a curse deposited into an Antiochene well, which invokes the story of the drowning of the Pharoah's chariot. A more ethical history would seek to reconstruct the wide material and sonic world of ancient Christians, using curses as well as the crafted prose of Clement of Alexandria. What you hold in your hands or see on the screen is my attempt to write that history, that book: one that focuses on a few ancient curses and discloses the ways in which they help us to understand ritual, justice-seeking, and aesthetics in the early Christian period.

Curses and amulets have often been labeled as magic and shunted to one side in the scholarly world. They are barely recognized by a larger public interested in early Christianity. Yet they are ritual objects of the ancient world and key materials that fall under the disciplinary purview of religion.[4] Those whom we call early Christians were fully engaged in

[3] Origen *Contra Celsum* 2.49 indicates that Celsus mocked Christians for attracting only those of low status, women, the enslaved, and children to their communities.

[4] Yet see Christopher Faraone's *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 136, who argues that the distinction between prayer, hymn, incantation, and spells is unhelpful; see also *Hexametrical Genres from Homer to Theocritus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 3, on hexameter and ritual context.

this world of ritual. Some of them produced curses or protective amulets; some of them critiqued others for doing the same. I argue that magic is not a useful term to apply to these objects, to the ritual practices that produced them and in which they were used, and to the religious experts who produced and shepherded them. Yet the terminology of magic, whether represented by a range of vocabulary in antiquity or in scholarly analyses, does point to something important. That is, those in antiquity sometimes used terms that indicated that while curses were ubiquitous, they were also often thought to be deviant, dangerous, even feminized as witchy. They were not perceived to be mainstream ritual practices. David Frankfurter uses the term "alterity"; for him, the use of the terminology of magic in antiquity was part of a larger set of "indigenous strategies to evaluate, censure, render exotic."[5] Radcliffe Edmonds describes this as a "non-normative religious activity."[6] Frankfurter explains further: "'magic' or 'magical' can serve as a quality of certain practices and materials that highlights for our scholarly scrutiny features of materiality, potency, or verbal or ritual performance we might not otherwise appreciate as part of a culture's religious world, or aspects of the social location of ritual practices we might not otherwise appreciate."[7]

In this analysis, I "get hung up on the language of ritual texts" and am interested in their "theological perspective," despite Frankfurter's warning:

> We must be extraordinarily careful not to get hung up on the language of ritual texts, whether in the original languages or how it sounds in translation. Where we think there is awe, humility, and a sense of ethics – or, conversely, amoral and mechanistic assumptions about selfish manipulation and command – there may simply be scribal idioms, local conventions, and a fundamental, overarching concern with efficacy on the part of a scribe. . . . To extrapolate an intentionality and a theological perspective on the part of the ancient client or ritual specialist, whether for prayer or magical incantation, comes down in the end to one's own imagination (and, frankly, for the world of biblical and New Testament studies, the projection of normative values).[8]

In the face of this warning, how can I justify my lavish attention on a few curses, and a few ancient Christian writings, which is what you will find

[5] David Frankfurter, "Preface" and "Ancient Magic in a New Key: Refining an Exotic Discipline in the History of Religions," in *GSAM*, esp. xi; on alterity, see 6 and 11.
[6] Radcliffe G. Edmonds, III, *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 5.
[7] Frankfurter, "Ancient Magic in a New Key," 13–14. Thus, for Frankfurter, "magic" becomes less a second order category and more a heuristic for analysis.
[8] Frankfurter, "Ancient Magic in a New Key," 13.

in the chapters ahead? How do I defend my exegetical focus on the language of ritual texts and their idioms and my interest in what they reveal about philosophy and theology? Let me clarify that I have no interest in intention in this book, and a great deal of interest in theology. That is, I do not see the ritual objects of curses as the psychologically fraught rumblings of an individual heart, the fervent and authentic intentions of a troubled mind. They do not provide a window onto some sense of self. Yet the details of their language and their larger ritual functions do teach us something about aesthetics and ethics and theology. I am fascinated with the formal aspects of curses: the very material stuff they are made of, how their inscribed writing appears, what this writing says about their materiality, and how the curses were part of a larger world of incantation, of intonations in community. I investigate how these "actually work on the world" and contribute to "more precision in the study of ritual, ritual power, categories of ritual, and perceptions of ritual in antiquity," a call that Frankfurter has made for the study of ancient magic.[9]

These curses, these ritual objects, had their own technologies.[10] They operated by multiple combined parts, including the fragments of ancient poetry or narrative embedded within their texts, the power of their materiality (such as lead) and language (including unknown languages), the sound of incantation and song, and the place of their deposit. The curses were small assemblages operating together to effect the *technē* or art of the whole. Such objects were also driven by and contributed to the philosophy-theology of antiquity. In the modern academy, theology and philosophy are usually separate disciplines. I hyphenate them together because, in Mediterranean antiquity, they were often linked: we are made in the image of god, says Epictetus (*Diss.* 2.8), whom we usually label a philosopher. Curses are philosophical-theological objects; they are crystallizations of a variety of ways of thinking about the world and a variety of strategies to gain the attention of god(s) and *daimones*, even how to draw down the moon.[11] The aesthetics of such ancient objects – in Greek writings, aesthetics are often described as "varied," "detailed," or multi-colored (*poikilia*) or "variations" or "modulations" (*metabolai*)[12] – illumine in turn ancient

[9] Frankfurter, "Ancient Magic in a New Key," 13–14.
[10] On questions of technology, particularly as used by Alexander Weheliye, see pp. 216–19.
[11] Virgil *Ecl.* 8.69; see also Edmonds, *Drawing Down the Moon*.
[12] See Adeline Grand-Clément, "Poikilia," in *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*, eds. Pierre Destrée and Penelope Murray (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 406–21.

philosophical, theological, and even musicological literatures that reflect upon and debate such themes as the efficacy and beauty of voice, the engagement of divinities, attempts to effect justice, and the structure of the cosmos. Kandice Chuh's *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities 'After Man'* defines aesthetics as both "sensibility as a crucial domain of knowledge and politics" and "the beautiful and the sublime" as constructed by "Western modernity."[13] In this introduction and throughout this book, my references to the aesthetics of curses and incantations recalls both beauty (however contested) and epistemology (how to know through *aesthēseis* or sense perception). I also seek to be sensitive to the ways in which the aesthetics of "Western modernity" has occluded our ability to see a range of aesthetics in antiquity.

Curses are essential parts of everyday theologies in the cities of the ancient world. While personal, they are simultaneously political: they are concerned with power, and embedded in the hierarchical economic, social, and educational frameworks of antiquity. They are even communal: evidence indicates that they are sometimes produced when a petitioning client approaches a ritual expert to commission a curse, and that the expert often uses a template, indicating a larger system of production.[14] Through curses, we glimpse the machinations of religious practice that are rich with signs (*charaktēres*), letter streams that spell nothing we can make sense of (*voces magicae*); these are objects that play with shape and form. From them we see a theorization of language, sound, form, and ugliness and beauty. Curses show that such theorizations happen not only among elites but also among those of lower status, not only in practices of philosophical conversation in the villa garden or the enslaved scribe penning a sophisticated treatise dictated by his master, but also in the ordinary acts of the making of ritual objects.[15] That is, theorization and

[13] Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3, 18.

[14] See e.g., Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 5.

[15] Of course, curses could also occur among those of high status: Ovid's more than 600-line *Ibis*, is a poem of curses, written while in exile. Nicola Denzey Lewis ("Ordinary Religion in the Late Roman Empire: Principles of a New Approach," *SLA* 5.1 [2021]: 108) prefers the term "ordinary religion," but explains: "There have been terminological difficulties as we work to parse the different nuances we mean between 'lived religion,' 'private religion,' 'domestic religion,' 'popular religion,' 'individual religion,' and 'vernacular religion,' each of which may draw on a slightly different theoretical foundation and/or a different core data set." Emma Jayne-Graham (*Reassembling Religion in Roman Italy* [New York: Routledge, 2021], here 3, also esp. 6–7) "argue[s] that ancient lived religion was in fact produced by active engagements between real people (bodies and minds) and

practice are inextricable. While we generally realize that, say, an ancient treatise on love or fate offers a set of theorizations, we often forget that it simultaneously reveals theorization as a set of practices. The philosophical debate inscribed into a treatise is itself a practice, built from practices: practices of education and inscription, the act of discussion between elite men is a practice, the scribe – likely enslaved – who penned the text engages in a practice. So too, the act of cursing presupposes a set of theorizations about divine participation in the world, about the power of emotion, about a pursuit of (in)justice. The practice of cursing materializes theories and theologies.

My book brings attention to curse tablets and the recipes to produce them, showing how such objects were produced in such a way that they (were thought to have) worked like little machines, to effect (what was perceived as) justice. Components of that machinery included poetics and aesthetics, which operated the curse's technology – the mechanisms of its *technē*, its art or craft. The book brings an archaeological eye to such curses, not only studying them as words on a printed page of an edition, but also considering what materials they were made of, how they sometimes used drawings or reversed script, and when possible, their find sites. Because of how *we* receive these materials, as flattened words on the printed page of an edition, we sometimes forget to consider the fulness of ancient rituals. These rituals involved air pushed through the trachea, the scratching of letters onto a surface, lead or papyrus that is folded or rolled, the sound – whatever that sound was – of tongues, and the movement – whatever the movement emerged from – of the hammering of a nail. These rituals involved the plenitude and limitations of the human body, human engagement with other kinds of beings, and interactions between things and humans: a full and resonating ontology.

My own book echoes these themes of aesthetics, variation, and technology, with each chapter triangulating between a curse, a literary text, and a contemporary work of art, whether visual or poetic, thus creating a new space for the interpretation of ancient ritual practices. I attempt an ethical historiography which highlights strivings for justice; which respects understudied ritual objects as manifesting complex philosophical and theological work and as marshalling complex aesthetics; and which attends to objects and practices usually considered marginal and also to

other real things (objects, materials, spatio-temporal locations, and the divine)" and her book highlights "the limitations of traditional approaches to Roman religion which disregard the significance of material things."

people whose names we only know in passing – a Corinthian garland weaver called Karpimē Babbia, an Antiochene vegetable grocer named Babylas, a very angry Jerusalemite woman named Kyrilla, a legally beleaguered Cypriot named Sotērianos.

These ritual objects help us to better understand texts we label as ancient Christian literature. As we'll see in the pages to come, 1 Corinthians, a first-century letter included within the Christian Testament, includes at least one curse and emerged in a city in which curses intertwined with cult practice. Justin's second-century *Apology*, which claims to be a defense sent to the emperors on the occasion of abuses of Christ-followers, appealed to documentation for justice in a cultural context of sophisticated governance and alternative judicial systems, including the use of curse tablets. Clement of Alexandria's second-century *Protreptikos* argued that the New Song which is the Logos is better than the songs of the Greek gods, doing so via Homeric incantation. John Chrysostom, in fourth-century Antioch on the Orontes, sermonizes not only against Jews but also against the use of Jewish scripture to curse, in the very city in which a curse mentioning the drowning of the Pharaoh's chariot was found.

In the first to fourth centuries CE, the phenomena that historians gather under the term "ancient Christianity" were produced by those who did not always name themselves Christian. Many Christ-followers mixed freely with their neighbors of many cultic affinities, even if we know this primarily from other Christ-followers who critique them for doing so. Followers of Christ, like others in antiquity, improvisationally used ritual words and objects at hand to act and think their way to more intimate connection with the divine. Some forms of Christianity came to gather clout – acclaimed as philosophically sophisticated, for example, or associated with religious leaders who would come to be recognized for their civic *leitourgiai* or duties, and for their power. Yet, from the historical and critical vantage of post 1492, historians who rightly consider the principally violent effects and colonial legacies of Christianity might forget that earliest Christianities, if we can even call them that, emerged in diverse ways in the busy, bright, bustling, and sometimes violent streetscapes of cities under the Roman Empire. I say this not to imply that the forms of Christianity that existed before it became a religion of empires glowed pure or unproblematic. Rather, I emphasize the *ad hoc* and experimental qualities of ancient Christian practices, which this book explores.

Ancient religion in the Mediterranean world effervesced with play with voice and signs. It resonated with sounds that, our texts claim, vibrated

between earth and heaven; it clattered with objects humble in their leaden or nailed form, whose very substance was essential to their purpose. Through study of these objects and texts, I seek to sketch different ways of being in the world. These ways of being bound humans to other creatures and things – whether divinities or *daimones* – it's hard to know how to translate this: spirits, demons, divine powers[16] – or objects. These ways of being expressed the assumption that divinities cared or could be made to care about the quotidian; these ways of being assumed that the cosmos was filled with meaning and that there were mechanisms for humans and things to be agents in the world, to transform their circumstances. One might not ethically agree with all the content and strategies of the texts and objects that I discuss in the chapters that follow. I do not. I do not find commendable their sometime use of violent language or imagery to condemn what they perceive to be injustice. Yet, I want to analyze these ritual objects and phenomena in light of Ashon Crawley's idea of the "otherwise" or "otherwise possibilities."[17] Crawley formulates this idea of the otherwise as resistance against the force of white supremacy. I cannot say that the curses in the pages to come rise to the moral urgency and resistive hope with which Crawley intervenes. Some of the curses are hardly utopian: they seek to harm and to limit others, all in the name of justice and because of a perceived injustice.[18] Yet I cautiously take up Crawley's principle of otherwise possibility because, as we have seen, sometimes phenomena classified as "magic" did represent an alterity in antiquity. They were seen as politically deviant, as dangerous in their

[16] I leave the term in the transliterated Greek to help us to recall that a *daimōn* in antiquity could also be a powerfully good force, an inspiring spirit. See p. 55 n. 46.

[17] Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 2. Keri Day, engaging with the problems of neoliberalism, writes theologically, pointing to "radical hope" that "offers the conditions that give rise to alternative social worlds out of which beloved communities can emerge and flourish." Keri Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 161. See also Tina Campt, *Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 24, on the work of Black artists and on her analysis of this work: "It is not a provisional tense, but one premised on the realization of a different future. It is the tense of 'as if.' It is an intentional deployment of aspiration that strives toward a multitude of possibilities."

[18] On ethical historiography, see e.g. Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) and her *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

ability to rout the normal order of things. Curses were forged in a meaning-filled world, sometimes promising in its hopes and expectations that the divine will manifest to enact justice, sometimes terrifying in its expectation that divinities could be harnessed to punish what the practitioner sees as crimes. It was a world in which ritual practitioners experimented with materiality and with language, toying with the beauty and ugliness of poetry, song, and substance, to link their ritual objects and themselves to the power of spirits and divinities. It was a world, I'm convinced, in which everything, every *thing*, mattered.

AESTHETICS AND ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Curses or *defixiōnes* aid those of us who wish to understand aesthetics and religion in antiquity, as well as the worlds of ancient Christians. Close study of curses calls our attention to materiality[19] – the rolled lead, the scratched letters, its placement, often in a shaft – and to a larger world of sound – an incantation and the breath that sustains it, the open float of vowels or the clash of *voces magicae*. To understand better these aesthetics and how they are essential to the operation of ancient religion, the book turns to contemporary art and poetry, particularly works of Black artists whose works theorize materiality and sound. Some readers will be uncomfortable with this move to the contemporary. Yet I need to show my intellectual debts and respectfully to acknowledge how I got here. These recent paintings, multi-media works, and poems began as a source of pleasure and interest separate from my academic work, and then became central to my thinking about history and injustice. Each artist grapples in their own way with the past and present racism that renders Black stories and people marginal. Thus I engage their art not to say that ancient curses or early Christians are the same as these works of art. That is, I do not argue in some simplistic way we should see ancient ritual practitioners whose work was labelled magic, whether Christ-followers or not, in some analogical relationship to these contemporary artists.

[19] Gregory Shaw argues that both hermetic and theurgic mystagogy takes place within the material world ("Taking the Shape of the Gods: A Theurgic Reading of Hermetic Rebirth," *Aries – Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 15 [2015]: 136–69); so too Birger Pearson emphasizes Iamblichus's materialism (Birger A. Pearson, "Theurgic Tendencies in Gnosticism and Iamblichus's Conception of Theurgy," in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, eds. Rich T. Wallis and Jay Bregman [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992], 253–75).