

Ancient Christians and the Power of Curses

Ancient Christians and their non-Christian contemporaries lived in a world of ritual practices which were often labelled magic. Sometimes, they used curses as ritual objects to seek justice from gods and other beings; sometimes, they argued against the use of curses. Curses, and the writings of those who polemicized against them, reveal the complexity of ancient Mediterranean religions, in which materiality, poetics, song, incantation, and glossolalia were used as technologies of power. Laura Nasrallah's study reframes the field of religion, the study of the Roman imperial period, and the investigation of the New Testament and ancient Christianity. Her approach eschews disciplinary aesthetics that privilege the literature and archaeological remains of elites, and that define curses as magical materials, separable from religious ritual. Moreover, Nasrallah's use of art and "research creations" of contemporary Black painters, sculptors, and poets offers insights for understanding ancient rituals of cursing as aesthetic practices that marshal historical fragments to critique injustice.

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Ancient Christians and the Power of Curses

Magic, Aesthetics, and Justice

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to my Anna Adma
with love and respect for all the wonders of your mind
and in memory of your namesake,
my Teta, Adma Khoury Nasrallah

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Preface

Ancient Christians and the Power of Curses: Magic, Aesthetics, and Justice is a bit of an odd book, triangulating between under-studied curses and well-known literary texts from antiquity, and contemporary poetry and visual art as research creations. Bringing together the two apices of curses – usually studied under the rubric of “magic” – and early Christian literary materials allows me to offer a social history that focuses on aesthetics and religion in the first- to fourth-century Mediterranean world. Those who produced and used ancient curse tablets employed multiple aesthetics of sound, language, and materiality and often engaged in poetics to offer “prayers for justice,” to borrow Henk Versnel’s phrase. Curses are ritual objects whose complex work cannot be understood apart from contemporaneous discussions of philosophy-theology and aesthetics.

Then the third apex: contemporary art, which forms the theoretical framework for my interpretation of Mediterranean antiquity. While the material turn in the study of antiquity has engaged many resources in critical theory, such as the work of Karen Barad, it has not attended to the research creation of artists whose work both in visual manifestations and poetry demonstrates deep theorizations of aesthetics, historical materials, and ethics. The book models how we might use art and poetry as a theoretical framework in the study of religion, particularly these artists’ engagement with justice, on the one hand, and with historical fragments, on the other.

Chapters highlight ancient practices of justice and legal archival display (Chapter 1, focusing on Justin’s *Apologies*, a Cypriot judicial curse, and Titus Kaphar’s art), deployments of narrative and materiality

(Chapter 2, focusing on an Antiochene curse, John Chrysostom's homilies, and Glenn Ligon's engagement with Ralph Ellison), glossolalia (Chapter 3, focusing on 1 Corinthians and a Corinthian curse that uses *voces magicae*, elucidated by M. NourbeSe Philip's poetry), and song and incantation (Chapter 4, focusing on Clement's *Protreptikos* and Homeric incantations, with Tyehimba Jess's *Olio* and Braxton Shelley's analysis of the vamp). For those who study early Christian literature, this book reads these texts anew in light of the popular, everyday practices of cursing. It models a practice of treating these curses with the same exegetical tenderness usually reserved for scripture or philosophical-theological texts, and argues that such philosophical or theological treatises are themselves among the many practices and technologies of antiquity. For those who study ancient "magic," this book insists upon the relevance of texts and practices we call ancient Christian, showing overlapping aesthetic strategies and philosophical-theological ideas. For scholars of religion, the book demonstrates, I hope, how contemporary art and poetry materialize theory and criticism, and it provides resources for thinking about the use of historical fragments in the work of seeking justice.

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There are too many people to thank, and too many whom I'll likely forget, so please forgive. The writing of this book was a refuge and a pleasure, and it also felt like a stretch in places, an overreaching of my knowledge and comfort zones. I am the only one responsible for its mistakes.

This book would not have been possible without the support of Beyond Canon at the University of Regensburg. Tobias Nicklas, Andreas Merkt, and Harald Buchinger were the consummate hosts, and I am especially grateful to Tobias and Evi for hospitality at their table and happy memories of beautiful places in Bavaria. Dr. Stephanie Hallinger as coordinator and supporter extraordinaire exemplifies scholarly intelligence and deep human care. Tobias and Stephi model the creation of a supportive, intellectually expansive, and kind community. I am very grateful to various fellows, Lily Vuong and Janet Spittler among them, for their support.

Parts of the book were tested not only at Beyond Canon, but also elsewhere due to kind invitations: at the Shifting Frontiers conference (2019), Books Known Only by Title, Huron at Western, the Societas Novi Testamenti Studiorum in Marburg, CRASIS at the University of Gronigen (via Zoom), a conference titled Divided Worlds, the Danforth Lecture at Princeton University, the Society of Christian Scholars, and the conference Apologists and Empire. Thank you to all those who invited and encouraged, including Liv Lied and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Barry Hartog, Daniel Smith, Caroline Johnson Hodge, Benny Liew, Timothy Joseph, Princeton's Department of Religion, Trevor Thompson, Benjamin Kolbeck, and James Corke-Webster. Those

audiences all improved my work. The SNTS invitation led to the publication of “Judgment, Justice, and Destruction: *Defixiones* and 1 Corinthians,” *JBL* 140.2 (2021): 347–67; the Princeton invitation led to the publication of “The Work of Nails: Religion, Mediterranean Antiquity, and Contemporary Black Art,” *JAAR* 90.2 (2022): 1–21. Both were early experiments with the ideas in this book.

Chapter 1 would have been impossible without conversations with my doctoral student colleagues, now professors, Sarah F. Porter and Jeremy Williams. Jeremy Williams’s *Criminalization in Acts of the Apostles: Race, Rhetoric, and the Prosecution of an Early Christian Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023) and our conversations about critical race theory and his assessments of “criminalization” in the Acts of the Apostles have informed my consideration of issues of crime, punishment, and justice. Sarah Porter’s *Early Christian Deathscapes* (Ph. D. diss., Harvard University, 2022) and conversations with her about Sara Ahmed have informed my discussion of emotions. I am deeply grateful to Ari Bryen, who commented on an earlier version of this chapter and allowed me to read part of his book manuscript. Some of these ideas in this chapter were worked out in “The Formation of a Christian Archive? The Case of Justin Martyr and an Imperial Rescript,” in Alice König, Rebecca Langlands, and James Uden, eds., *Literature and Culture in the Roman Empire*, 96–235: *Cross-Cultural Interactions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 179–202. I am grateful to the editors for the invitation to the conference at the University of Exeter which produced these ideas and this volume, not the least their kindness to my son, who joined me.

Chapter 2 was aided by discussions with the now-Dr. Chance Bonar regarding his paper on health and *defixiones* in the Antioch course. Conversations with Sarah F. Porter, and her insights on Antioch and the language of “love spells” in her dissertation have been invaluable. Participants in Beyond Canon, University of Regensburg, particularly Tobias Nicklas and Jos Verheyden, offered helpful responses to this chapter at a later stage. I am very grateful to research assistants Rikki Liu and Joseph Lee for their help on this chapter. Ms. Julia Gearhart in the Visual Resources program of Princeton’s Department of the History of Art and Dr. Michael Padgett, emeritus, of the Princeton University Art Museum were kind enough to make accessible finds and daybooks and other archival material from the excavators, many unpublished.

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Permissions, early on, from Tyehimba Jess, Glenn Ligon, and M. Nourbese Philip, as well as the agents and executors of other artists, gave me the freedom and privilege to think with their work. JJJJerome Ellis and Anne Carson answered cold call emails and allowed me to use their poetry. I cannot thank these artists enough. Various agents, museums, archives, and kind strangers answered my requests for permissions, and I am grateful.

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my best friend and great encourager, Mother Pelagia, may exceed this book's word count. My children were usually patient as I wrote and always beloved: Marc (what *is* the category of magic, he asked), Beata, and Anna, who have added so much magic to my world. Thank you, thank you.

The book is for my Anna Adma, who with quiet generosity remembers to hide an Easter basket for me or to put something in the Christmas stocking, whose mind works perpetually, and whom I love dearly.

Abbreviations

AJP	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
ANF ₂	<i>Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)</i> , ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 2, <i>The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325</i> . Boston: Christian Literature Company, 1885
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
Audollent	A. Audollent, <i>Defixionum Tabellae</i> . Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1904
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
Barker	Andrew Barker, <i>Greek Musical Writings</i> , vol. 1: <i>The Musician and His Art</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, and <i>Greek Musical Writings</i> , vol. 2: <i>Harmonic and Acoustic Theory</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989
BASP	<i>Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists</i>
Betz	Hans Dieter Betz, <i>The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986
CH	<i>Church History</i>
CIG	<i>Corpus inscriptionum graecarum</i>
CR	<i>Classical Review</i>

CT	John Gager, <i>Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992
Dillon and Hershbell	Iamblichus, <i>On the Pythagorean Way of Life</i> , trans. John M. Dillon and Jackson Hershbell. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991
GCS	Die Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte
GEMF	Christopher A. Faraone and Sofia Torallas Tovar, eds., <i>Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies: Text and Translation</i> . Berkeley: California Classical Studies, 2022
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
GSAM	David Frankfurter, ed., <i>Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic</i> . RGRW. Leiden: Brill, 2019
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
IGPannonia	Péter Kovács, <i>Corpus inscriptionum Graecarum Pannonicarum</i> . Hungarian Polis Studies, 2001
IKourion	T. B. Mitford, <i>Inscriptions of Kourion</i> . Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1971
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of the Feminist Study of Religion</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
Migne PG	J.-P. Migne, <i>Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)</i> (MPG) 48. Paris: Migne, 1857–66
Minns and Parvis	<i>Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, Apologies</i> . Edited with a commentary on the text by Denis Minns and Paul Parvis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009
NA28	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , constituted by Eberhard and Erwin Nestle, eds. Barbara and Kurt Aland, 28th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012.
NovTest	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

List of Abbreviations

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NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PGM	<i>Papyri Graecae Magicae</i>
Preisendanz	K. Preisendanz, <i>Papyri Graecae Magicae Die griechischen Zauberpapyri</i> , 2 vols. Leipzig: Teubner, 1928, 1931. 2nd ed., A. Henrichs, ed. Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1973–74
RGRW	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
RRE	<i>Religion in the Roman Empire</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SC	<i>Sources chrétiennes</i>
SEG	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i> . Leiden: Brill, 1874–
SLA	<i>Studies in Late Antiquity</i>
<i>Supp. Mag.</i>	R. W. Daniel and F. Maltomini, eds., <i>Supplementum magicum</i> , 2 vols., Papyrologica Coloniensia XVI, 1–2. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1990–92.
TAPA	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
TLG	<i>Thesaurus Linguae Graecae</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
WGRW ^{sup}	Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement
YCS	Yale Classical Studies
ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

Note on the Cover

Cover: Valerie Maynard. *Mourning for Maurice*. ca. 1970. Wood and nails. 28 x 20 x 24 in. (71.1 x 50.8 x 61 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art. Purchased with exchange funds from the Pearlstone Family Fund and partial gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., BMA 2020.57. Photo: Mitro Hood.

The cover of this book is graced by Valerie Maynard's sculpture, *Mourning for Maurice*. Deep, large, oval eyes closed; the face retains its rhythmic chisel marks against wood. A pattern of shallow canals radiates under and out from the lower lip, and the forehead is smoothed downward with vertical ridges. The face, tilting right, is surrounded by darker wood that is the bed for dark, thick, hammered nails that form the hair and beard. The object and the title together telegraph sadness and tenderness.

I am grateful to have *Mourning for Maurice* as the cover for my book. It exemplifies one key theme within these pages: the intersection of aesthetic and ritual labor. In *Mourning for Maurice*, the procedure of nailing is reminiscent of Kongolese power figures. The sculpture no longer takes part in that precise ritual, but the affordance of nails and the aesthetic of their bristling power brings a long-standing and general ritual practice or *technē* together with the individual and unique: a quiet, serene face, particular in features and in balding pattern, and, it seems, deeply beloved in loss.

In the pages that follow, I, a scholar who has benefited from white privilege in predominantly white universities, am indebted to the aesthetic and academic labor of Black scholars and artists. I acknowledge that the

Note on the Cover

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ancestor who graces the cover of my book is not my own. During the writing of this book, Valerie Maynard also joined the ancestors. It is my deep hope that I do not appropriate but rather honor her work and the work of the other Black scholars and artists whose research and research-creations have taught me so much.