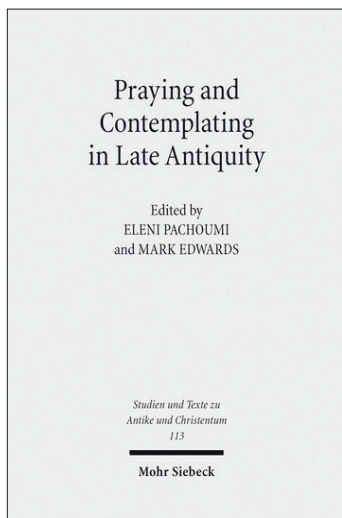


PRAYING AND CONTEMPLATING IN LATE ANTIQUITY



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PRAYER IS A DIFFICULT TOPIC TO DEAL WITH. As an essential element in most world religions, much ink has been spilt in attempts to define prayer, its phenomenological and lexical forms, and its various meanings, contents, and contexts. Embodiment, materiality, rhetoric, and emotion are just some of the wide range of crucial aspects involved in prayer in this regard. Of all the varied phases of the ancient world, it is late antiquity that provides us with the richest resources for considering this topic, offering up a cornucopia of treatises, discourses, and practices of prayer that shed light on all these aspects. This depth of reflection inspired a number of new approaches to prayer and to related methods for seeking the divine, such as dreams, oracles, divination, healing, and contemplation.¹

1. Krueger and Bitton-Ashkelony, 2017.

The present volume, edited by Eleni Pachoumi and Mark Edwards, contributes to the study and understanding of these various aspects of prayer. The editors have assembled twelve renowned specialists in the field and together they provide both a valuable overview of the topic and fresh insights into the relationship between the human and the divine, as expressed, achieved, and conceptualised through dreams and contemplation between the 3rd and the 7th cent.. Above all, this volume contributes to the recent development in research which aims to scrutinise the interaction between religious and philosophical thought and practices.² To this end, the contributions include new approaches to philosophy (Dillon, Finnamore, Wildish, Hankey), studies based on literary criticism (Kotzé, Trzcionkowski), studies on discourse and the history of thought (Trzcionkowski, Bosman, Dickie), and, as is suggested by the key term *interaction*, studies on the syncretistic developments that took place in late antiquity (Finamore, Neil, Pachoumi, Edwards, Hilton, and, again, Trzcionkowski).

The volume's reflection on new approaches to philosophy has a strong start with John Dillon's discussion of prayer and contemplation in the Neoplatonic tradition (ch. 1). While most scholars are inspired by and acquire their innovative frames from fields that are close to classics or from religious and cultural studies, Dillon takes a distinctively unique approach, consulting Sufi prayer traditions in order to shed new light on the Neoplatonic approach to prayer, which he identifies as "techniques of transcendental meditation". In crossing boundaries of time and space and revealing transcultural techniques of prayer and experience, Dillon shows that the comparative study of philosophy is able to complement recent large-scale comparative studies of prayer based on cognitive science and neuroscience.

The same holds true for approaches to the efficacy of theurgic prayer language (Mark Wildish, ch. 4) and the conceptual design of the experience of contemplation (Wayne Hankey, ch. 5). Wildish treats the efficacy of prayer as something that is independent from the form and content of language but intrinsic to the activity (*energeia*) of language itself, an approach that strongly recalls concepts of performativity. Hankey's approach, by contrast, is notable in its resemblance to aesthetic approaches to religion and religious philosophy. This can be seen in his observation that poetic meters in Boethius' *Consolatio* are deployed in order to drive mind and body together in prayer towards contemplation, helping the soul to rise to the level of intellect, which is true happiness, freedom, and power. Another link to practice, persuasion and emotion is offered by Annemaré Kotzé's chapter on Augustine's *Confessiones* (ch. 9). Kotzé deploys post-structural narratology to show that the

2. Timotin, 2017.

narrator manipulates his address to God in order to reach out to his different audiences. In doing so she identifies two essential, and for most parts understudied, aspects of prayer that have only very recently been brought to the fore by scholars. These are the rhetoric of prayer in terms of the orator-audience relationship and the elicitation of emotions in the act of prayer.

Turning now to the approaches to syncretism in the volume, here we find a picture that is far more complicated than a mere putting together of pieces. Instead, the chapters collected here show how various philosophical and religious traditions merge together to create unique philosophical standpoints. Iamblichus, for example, seems to have located himself as contributing to a long philosophical debate about dream visions in order to better understand and conceptualise divination in dreams and divine interactions, thereby gaining a better grasp of the nature of divine union. As John F. Finamore (ch. 3) illustrates in his examination of this long discourse, Iamblichus in fact provides a comprehensive explanation of how dreams operate and how they are to be interpreted by bringing together an expanding range of philosophical, religious, and also medical explanations of the phenomenon. Similarly, as Bronwen Neil (ch. 8) points out, the church father Origen was no mere adaptor of Platonist thought. As Neil's close examination of the vocabulary of contemplation (*theoria*) and dream visions (*phantasia*) shows, Origen merged Jewish and Christian prophecy with Neoplatonic mystical ecstasy, thereby providing a uniquely Christian explanation for visions encountered in dreams.

In addition to its bringing together of philosophical, medical, and Christian concepts of prayer, dream visions, and contemplation, the volume also makes a strong point about the interactions of magico-religious and philosophical thought, and indeed the syncretisms between them. This syncretism is to be found in the principles of theurgic unions, as expressed in the philosophical treaties of Proclus, Iamblichus, and Plotinus, and in how far these principles resemble those found in magical papyri (Eleni Pachoumi, ch. 2). Again, these syncretisms are no mere collages of ideas and practices but combinations that evolve into something new and unique. As Mark Edwards (ch. 7) points out in the case of Christian magic, exorcisms or any Christian spell may well have been appropriated primarily from existing magical spells and discourses. Nevertheless, they draw on unique Christian ideas of humility and deference, invoking only God and Jesus, or at least using Jesus' name and authority to affect the result at which they aim.

Other approaches resemble a notion of syncretism that is better known under the name of Lévi-Strauss' concept of *bricolage*, which has often been helpful to scholars who have sought to elude the structuralist top-down approaches in the study religion. One such example is found in Lech Trzcionkowski's chapter (11), which reveals

the *Hieroi Logoi in 24 Rhapsodies* not as essentially or coherently Orphic but, rather, as a result of an eclectic enterprise that seeks to compete with the powerful Christian anthropogony. Similarly, individual agents also appropriated Christian dogmata and creeds in a syncretic, *bricolant* way, as John Hilton's study of the Emperor Julian's public and private prayers makes us aware (ch. 6). Whilst Julian unveils himself in his letters as being very conscious of the responsibility of the emperor to maintain the proper relationship between mankind and the gods, his personal prayers seem to have been motivated by rather Christian convictions, for they were directed towards achieving self-restoration and salvation.

The final main theme of this volume is the illustration of the power of discourse in the history of religion. Just like Lech Trzcionkowski's examination of the *Hieroi Logoi*, Philip Bosman's study on the Christian contestation of oracular practices (ch. 12) and Matthew W. Dickie's approach to the meaning of the experience of a mystic initiation (ch. 10) make us aware that we are confronted by multiple forms of experiences and contemplation as well as by multiple discursive structures built around them. Whereas Bosman traces the hostile attitudes of the Christian apologists back to pagan oracle criticism and Platonist apology for oracular practice, Dickie sheds light on the impact that the Platonist philosophy had on popular ideas about the purpose of initiation in mystic cults. As he points out, it was individual Platonists who were priests and other officials of these cults and who re-interpreted this ritual action in accordance to their Platonic philosophy, thereby offering the other participants and their audience a new perspective on their actions.

Ultimately, this volume gathers together compelling philosophical, historical, and literary-critical approaches to prayer and contemplation, and, indeed, to the processes and meanings of contemplation. In doing so, the volume provides a better understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine, as expressed, achieved, and conceptualised through dreams and contemplation. Not necessarily as a whole, but certainly in its pieces, the volume ties in with current debates about the interaction between religion, theurgy, magic, and philosophy as seen through the lens of discursive formation and lived practice. The chapters collected here make us aware that their traditions and concepts do not float around by themselves. Rather, what exist are the individuals behind these traditions, operating and thinking, indeed forming and nuancing them, if we frame the matter in terms of the notions of discourse and bricolage. Not the least of its virtues is that this volume reminds us that these individuals did not merely fabricate knowledge about contemplation and prayer. On the contrary, they performed and thereby experienced their prayers as contemplation. Taken as a whole, this volume therefore provides a good foundation for a stronger interaction with further fields of social and cultural sciences.

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