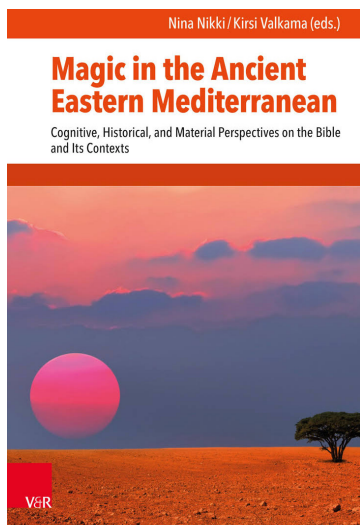


## MAGIC IN THE ANCIENT EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN




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NIKKI, NINA & VALKAMA, KIRSI (EDS.) (2021). *Magic in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean. Cognitive, Historical, and Material Perspectives on the Bible and Its Contexts*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht. 331 pp., 50,00 € [ISBN 978-3-5255-2218-9].

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AFTER DECADES OF DEBATE ABOUT THE DEFINITION OF MAGIC, no scholarly consensus has been reached. Critics such as Jonathan Z. Smith argued that the term was too pejorative for scholarly use;<sup>1</sup> “reformers” insist that with clearer parameters, the term unites and clarifies a set of rituals or beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Reformers dominate this volume. The articles are all to some extent dependent on Istvan Czachesz’s turn to cognitive science for an improved concept of magic. With fourteen papers, the volume is too large for comments on all the articles. This review will focus on the explicit engagement

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1. Smith, 2002.
  2. Sanzo, 2020.

with cognitive science. The volume demonstrates that not all reformers of magic agree on what is needed, even when based on cognitive science.

In his paper, Czachesz argues that a cognitive science approach offers a specific theory for measuring and sorting out ritual efficacy. Following Pascal Boyer on religion, cognitive science posits that the mechanisms in individual brains motivate and explain a common belief in magic as they do in religion. Czachesz's tracks both the participant's mental stance regarding an event and its "visible effects". For the first track, magic depends on a person's beliefs about cause and effect. These beliefs are universally true since they are based on brain functions and not historically or culturally specific systems of interpretation. For the second track, it is necessary to establish scientific guidelines about the efficacy of an event. These tracks merge to offer a religious or magical explanation of a rite: a magic ritual will implicate unseen and unmeasurable forces while religion deals in the perceptible. Each explanation in turn implicates a difference mental stance.

Diagnosis begins with the question: Does a ritual really work or not? Czachesz offers the examples of baptism and healing. From the point of view of the participants, a baptism will always work. These rituals can then easily fit into the category of religion. While a baptism is easily recognized as effective, the effects of a healing rite with an incantation are much more complicated. Czachesz states, "When baptism is performed, every participant agrees that some significant change occurs to the baptized person (and possibly other participants). Most participants, however, would not attribute a comparable effect to singing a hymn or a responsory. Something we will call *ritual efficacy* is at play in the case of baptism" (p. 21). Magic works by drawing on imperceptible forces and asking the participant to accept cause without evidence. Magical beliefs are a special kind of conditioned behavior. Some charismatic individuals may be particularly good reinforcers of these beliefs. Magical utterances are verbal responses "established by the same associative learning mechanism that is at work in superstitious conditioning in general" (p. 27).

Czachesz draws on the popular concept of "blending theory" from cognitive science as employed in the study of magic by Jesper Sørensen.<sup>3</sup> Blending is central to magic since it helps us understand how magical thinking works. In "transformative magical action," essential qualities are transferred from elements belonging to one domain to elements belonging to another domain (e.g., the bread becomes the body of Christ). Blending may be found in religion but it is more central to the distinctive and often striking modes of thought that undergird the employment of magical

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3. Sørensen, 2007.

forces. Magical thinking depends on counterintuitive beliefs that are very hard, or impossible, to disprove. Czachesz states, “Gods and spirits are always counterintuitive because they combine human psychological and other features with elements that contradict expectations about humans: being invisible, being present at more than one physical locations” (p. 35). Magic stretches the counterintuitive through conditioning to even greater lengths so that the difference between religion and magic is one of degree.

The papers in this volume draw on these ideas to varying degrees. According to Martti Nissinen, a cognitive science approach can be used to sort out the magical figures within a religious context. In a conclusion bound to be controversial, in “Magic in the Hebrew Bible”, Elijah and Elisha are characterized as magicians (p. 59). Even though they were also considered prophets, they employed the mindset and techniques of magical thinking that impress and cannot, in the ancient context, be disproven. Also controversial is his claim that “magical acts seem to increase in the course of time” (p. 65); magical thinking increases because other modes of thought do not gain a foothold to push back against magical mental blending.

Nils Korsvoll turns to other reformers of magic for help in analyzing amulets, items whose exact locus of “efficacy is subject to debate” (p. 240). He follows Joseph Sanzo, who argues that magic remains a heuristically useful category that can help locate a subset of rituals that use methods deemed unusual by both ancient and modern writers. Korsvoll correctly insists that the power of amulets cannot be limited to either the “topical reference” of the amulet formulas or their biblical origin (p. 247). This broad stance seems to contradict the claim that magic can be whittled down to specific mental patterned responses.

The marriage between cognitive science and other reformists’ approaches to magic is not an easy one. The articles stray far from the analysis of other reformers such as Sanzo and Radcliff Edmonds.<sup>4</sup> Their argument is that the term magic deserves to be preserved because otherwise there would be no way to distinguish between different types of rituals. They might not agree that magic can be delineated without any concern for cultural systems of interpretation.

Readers will have to decide for themselves whether this approach is convincing and useful. Magic is nestled neatly inside religion, being more extreme forms of ritual and employment of unseen forces unlikely to be proven ineffective. Magical relics are not material symbols that have any meaning for those who use them so much as situational cues that focus attention via unscientific patterns of belief.

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4. Edmonds, 2019; Sanzo, 2020.

Overall, this volume raises many fundamental issues about the study of rituals. Those interested in learning about a cognitive approach will find many of the papers helpful in outlining both its explanatory capacity and its potential problems.

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