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Coping with Versnel: a roundtable on religion and magic in honour of the 80th birthday of Henk S. Versnel

Kim Beerden, Fritz Naerebout, *Coping with Versnel: a roundtable on religion and magic in honour of the 80th birthday of Henk S. Versnel*. Religions in the Graeco-Roman world, 200. Leiden: Brill, 2023. Pp. x, 390. ISBN 9789004538443.

Review by

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Preview

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review]

Although this collection of essays was put together in honor of the eightieth birthday of Henk Versnel, it is not a Festschrift, but rather “a historiographic volume about the variegated interests of the honorand himself” (ix).^[1] The book derives in large part from a *table ronde* that took place in 2016 near Leiden (in Kasteel Oud-Poelgeest in Oegstgeest, Netherlands, to be more precise), which was devoted to Versnel’s many contributions to the study of ancient religion and magic. The contents proceed from an introductory “personal account” of Versnel’s research to the ten chapters that comprise the bulk of the volume (organized into five thematic parts) to a two-chapter epilogue in which Versnel

graciously thanks the contributors and offers his responses to the prior essays. The book also includes a list of Versnel's publications, a general bibliography, and an index.

In the rather robust, yet whimsical introduction, Kim Beerden and Frits Naerebout first offer a basic biography of Versnel that treats, *inter alia*, his upbringing, personality, struggles, and feuds. They then take the reader on an intellectual tour of his research, extracting eight maxims from his publications that model how an ancient historian should operate. You need, e.g., to get your facts right [#1], but you also need theory [#2], especially one that is eclectic [#3], and you have to provide etic definitions (#5). They also isolate four threads running through Versnel's work, along with relevant lists of his publications. This latter section helps the reader trace the development of his ideas on topics such as sacrificial ritual and rituals of reversal. As Beerden and Naerebout concede, their attempts to systematize Versnel's work fly in the face of his own characterization of his intellectual outputs: a serendipitous and haphazard voyage of discovery. The editors do not hide their criticisms of Versnel's work, critiquing, for instance, the dearth of sustained engagement with material evidence in his publications. Again, this is not a *Festschrift*.

The three essays in the first part, "Inconsistencies and Other Complexities," take inspiration from the intricate model of Greek religion presented in Versnel's *Coping with the Gods* (2011). This part includes an essay by Jennifer Larson that bolsters Versnel's claims of contradiction and inconsistency in Greek religious thought by attending to selected concepts drawn from the Cognitive Science of Religion (e.g., dual process theory; hyperactive agency detection); a chapter that uncovers parallels between Versnel and ancient scholars (especially Aristotle and Aristarchus) as it relates to inconsistencies in archaic literature (Casper de Jonge); and an essay that argues that divine metonymy engendered, participated in, and responded to an ambiguous ancient Greek discursive theology that understood the human-divine interface as imminent and transcendent, linguistically anthropomorphic and ineffable (Tim Whitmarsh). All three

authors in this section engage productively with Versnel's thoughts on inconsistency, especially as it relates to the study of ancient Greek religion.

The second part, "Myth and Ritual," comprises Robert Segal's historical survey and assessment of the principal myth-ritualists in western scholarship, and Michael Konaris's critical summary of Versnel's approach to the myth-ritual interface, which emphasizes Versnel's methodological rejection of monolithic interpretations and his "stress on the co-existence and synergy of different layers of meaning" (154). Although a bit out of place in this volume,^[2] Segal's overview of the myth-ritualist theorists would be a useful reading for an undergraduate or graduate seminar in the history of religion or similar course.

Part 3, "Magic, Prayers for Justice, and Emotion," is devoted to Versnel's keen interest and major contribution to the study of ancient magic and adjacent fields of study. This part includes a strong defense of Versnel's immensely influential category "prayers for justice" as part of a broader methodological discussion of trends, types, categories, and exceptions in ancient curse studies (Christopher Faraone); a slightly modified version of David Frankfurter's critical assessment of the (lack of) utility of magic as a rubric in the history of ancient religion, which (already in the originally published essay) engages with Versnel's work on the subject;^[3] and Angelos Chaniotis's chapter on the development of emotive display from the Hellenistic period to the early Christian world, which underscores the intertwined relationship between experience, narrative, belief, and ritual. Faraone's essay was particularly welcome, as it not only correctly stresses Versnel's acknowledgement of "borderline cases" between "prayers for justice" and curse tablets, but it also uses Versnel's nuanced approach to argue for a much broader methodological corrective to those whose deconstructive impulses rely on exceptional cases. Faraone rightly highlights that detractors of a wide range of issues in ancient curse studies, including the "prayers-for-justice" rubric and the overrepresentation of male-oriented erotic curses, have relied on scant or ambiguous data.

The final two parts, “Saving Death” (Part 4) and “Henotheism” (Part 5), consist of only one essay each. In the former part, Christina Eschner situates Paul’s notion of Jesus’s vicarious death *for* others within its ostensibly Greek “pagan” and Jewish literary contexts, emphasizing the widespread military and apotropaic dimensions of prepositions like ὑπέρ in such texts (not merely meaning “for” in a general sense, but, more specifically, “instead of [*anstelle von*]” and “for the protection of [*zum Schutz von*]”). In the latter part, Nicole Belayche challenges what she sees as Versnel’s claim that inconsistency is intrinsic to “henotheistic tendencies” in polytheistic contexts (see below), countering that henotheism is completely compatible with any polytheistic system. What sets apart the henotheism-polytheism interface starting from the Hellenistic period, she argues, is “the multiplication and diversification of the ways in which deities were exalted—superlatives, repetitions and *heis theos* being the best expressions” (279). Belayche further notes that this development worked in dialogue with an ever-increasing competitive arena within and between gods and humans and with a universalist trend.

Finally, a two-chapter epilogue, penned by the honorand, closes the volume. In the first essay Versnel expresses his heartfelt gratitude to the contributors and explains the way his response was put together (see below), while the second chapter treats issues in each of the preceding chapters—naturally, with more attention to some than to others. As Versnel admits, “personal circumstances” required that his final response be synthesized by the editors based on notes he had written (pp. 283–84). While the editors should be congratulated for their valent effort in undertaking such a challenging task, this response is digressive and in places woefully underdeveloped. For instance, in his reply to Frankfurter’s robust engagement with the category “magic,”^[4] Versnel (via the editors) simply notes that he does not agree with Frankfurter’s challenge to the category “prayers for justice” and then leaves the reader hanging with the following critique: “I cannot share [Frankfurter’s] enthusiastic welcoming of the ‘material turn’: it is not obvious to me how he wants to maintain

the importance of material culture for the world of magic” (pp. 314–15). Although Frankfurter’s largely pessimistic assessment of the category “magic” can be (and has been) subjected to critical reflection,^[5] he is certainly correct in the value he attributes to materiality in the study of magic—an approach to magic that Frankfurter has, in my judgment, skillfully articulated and illustrated over the years, and one that he shares with many other scholars.^[6] Versnel’s dismissive posture toward the material turn in magical studies is regrettable, especially since it is not accompanied by any further discussion or analysis.

Versnel was particularly struck in a positive way by Larson’s essay (whom he references several times), noting how her study revealed to him the great extent to which his research intersects with the Cognitive Study of Religion. Not all essays, however, elicited positive responses. Versnel especially sets his sights on Belayche’s essay, highlighting first that he has never argued that henotheism—as a category—is inconsistent with polytheism, but only that “*henotheistic tendencies...gave rise to inconsistencies*” (320–21 [emphasis in the original]). He then specifies several differences between their respective approaches to henotheism, underscoring, inter alia, his emphasis on “religiosity” over her stress on socio-political interpretations of devotional language in non-Christian Greek texts and his historical framing of henotheism in contrast to her functionalist approach to the term.

For a volume centered around a scholar whose work was so prolific and wide-reaching, there is a remarkable amount of coherence to it. The theme of (in)consistency suffuses several of the essays (e.g., those by Larson, de Jonge, Whitmarsh, Segal, Belayche, and, of course, Versnel). Although Segal’s contribution only gestures in passing to the work of Versnel, most of the essays engage frontally with his work, at times relating his research to broader questions in the study of ancient religion (see especially the chapters by Larson, Faraone, Konaris, and Belayche). In the end, the editors should be congratulated for putting together this fitting tribute to Henk Versnel, who sadly passed away earlier this year.

Authors and Titles

Introduction: An Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of Human Life; *A Personal Account of the Scholarship of Henk Versnel* (Frits G. Naerebout and Kim Beerden)

1. Cognitive Science of Religion and the Work of Henk Versnel (Jennifer Larson)
2. “One Must Not Ask Questions Such as These”: Ancient and Modern Scholars on Inconsistencies, from Aristotle to Versnel (Casper C. de Jonge)
3. Divine Metonymy: Theology and Rhetoric (Tim Whitmarsh)
4. The History of Myth and Ritual (Robert A. Segal)
5. Transitions, Reversals, Inconsistencies: H.S. Versnel on Myth and Ritual (Michael D. Konaris)
6. The Typical and the Outlier in Ancient Greek Cursing: Prayers for Justice, Erotic Curses and other Important Categories (Christopher A. Faraone)
7. Ancient Magic in a New Key: Refining an Exotic Discipline in the History of Religions (David Frankfurter)
8. My God! Religion as Emotional Experience in the Hellenistic World and the Roman East (Angelos Chaniotis)
9. Jesus Christus als neue Alkestis und neuer Kodros: Das Sterben “für” andere Menschen bei Paulus und im paganen Kontext (Christina Eschner)
10. Henotheism, a ‘Consistent’ Category of Polytheism (Nicole Belayche)
11. Foreword to an Afterword (Henk S. Versnel)
12. Response (Henk S. Versnel)

Notes

[1] Versnel was the honorand of a more traditional Festschrift in 2002 (H.F.J. Horstmanshoff et al., *Kykeon: Studies in Honour of H.S. Versnel* [Leiden: Brill, 2002]).

[2] Segal gestures to Versnel's own extensive survey of the myth-ritual theory (Henk Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion*, Vol. 2: *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* [Leiden: Brill, 1993], 15–88) and has a brief—though positive—concluding discussion of Versnel's conciliatory approach.

[3] For the original version, see David Frankfurter, "Ancient Magic in a New Key: Refining an Exotic Discipline in the History of Religions," in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 3–20.

[4] It should be noted that it was David Frankfurter and Henk Versnel together that originally conceived of the *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*. For this reason, Versnel agrees with much of what Frankfurter says in his essay on magic, despite his disagreement with the two ideas mentioned in the text.

[5] See, for instance, Joseph E. Sanzo, "Deconstructing the Deconstructionists: A Response to Recent Criticisms of the Rubric 'Ancient Magic,'" in *Ancient Magic: Then and Now*, ed. Attilio Mastrocinque, Joseph Sanzo, and Marianna Scapini (Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2020), 25–46, at 40 n. 88.

[6] See, for instance, Dietrich Boschung and Jan N. Bremmer, eds. *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015); Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage, eds., *The Materiality of Magic: An Artefactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxbow Book, 2015).