CHAPTER EIGHT

PRAYERS FOR JUSTICE, EAST AND WEST:
NEW FINDS AND PUBLICATIONS SINCE 1990*

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In a number of papers published in the nineteen-eighties and early-nineties, I argued for a distinction between (or within) the general category of Greek and Latin defixiones, on the one hand, and a more specific group of curses on the other. I have proposed a variety of names for this group: ‘judicial prayers’,1 ‘prayers for justice’, ‘prayers for revenge’. After two brief articles in Dutch and French respectively (Versnel 1986; 1987), a more comprehensive study entitled “Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers” (Versnel 1991), which was followed by a number of studies on related subjects,2 has done much to make the category, and the arguments on which it was based, widely familiar.3 Term and concept have been adopted, and

* I wish to express my profound gratitude to Richard Gordon, who as general editor accepted the onerous task to thoroughly scrutinize my text on a wide variety of barbarisms, errors and omissions and whose meticulous care went far beyond the limits of what is usually understood by the word ‘editing’. Remaining mistakes are solely due to the author’s indomitable tendency to continue inserting pieces of text after the editor’s interventions.

1 As this term may provoke confusion with the defixiones iudicariae, relating to litigation between human beings, which are also sometimes called “judicial curses”, we should handle this expression with care, that is, only after precise definition. Richard Gordon prefers the term “vindicative” (not ‘vindictive’), as he wrote earlier and most recently in: Social Control in the Lydian and Phrygian ‘Confession’ texts, in: L. Hernández Guerra and J. Alvar Ezquerra (eds.), Actas del XXVII congreso internacional Girea-Arys IX, Jerarquías religiosas y control social en el mundo antiguo (Valladolid 2002 [2004]), 198. I have no objection to this except that the term (though itself pertinent) belongs to the semantic field of the verb to vindicate, whose meanings are 1) clear of blame, 2) establish the merits or justice of, 3) justify by arguments or evidence. These denotations of the English word ‘vindicate’ do not match the required meaning of “asking a god for justice, vengeance and/or redress for a wrong suffered”. In order to prevent confusion and because ‘prayer for justice’ has become established now I would maintain that expression for future use. The German Vergeltungsgebet”, offered by Graf 2001, 186, equals vindicative prayer but lacks its ambiguity.


3 I have always expressly drawn attention to the work of earlier scholars that in some ways anticipated mine, especially Björck 1938 (passim in Versnel 1991; most
often productively applied in their own work, by such prominent scholars in the field as David Jordan,\textsuperscript{4} Chris Faraone (who contributed to its further development by tracing the Canaanitic background of this type of curse in a recent article on curses against thieves),\textsuperscript{5} and Angelos Chaniotis,\textsuperscript{6} as well as in numerous publications of new texts that display elements at variance with the genre of ordinary defixiones.\textsuperscript{7} Independently, Roger Tomlin, in his magisterial edition of the Bath tablets, had already pointed out that these are “petitions for justice, not

\textsuperscript{4} In many publications of new texts and most explicitly in \textit{SGD} II 5f., where he explains that he uses the term ‘curse tablets’ rather than \textit{defixiones} in the title (as he had done in \textit{SGD} I) because he is convinced that my ‘prayers for justice’ should be considered a different category. Note also his remark in: Three Curse Tablets, in Jordan, Montgomery and Thomassen 1999, 115–24 at 115: “Of the greatest help to our understanding of Greek and Latin curse tablets is H.S. Versnel’s demonstration (1991) that while many curses express aggressive malice on the part of the curser, certain others, which V. calls ‘prayers for justice’, are written in the hope of obtaining vengeance for wrongs suffered”. Jordan here lays particular emphasis on “borderland curses” (what Ogden 1999, 38 calls “cross-over cases”), which display elements of both categories, aggressively malicious \textit{defixiones} and ‘judicial prayers’. For a discussion of this borderland category see below pp. 332–42.

\textsuperscript{5} Faraone, Garnand, and López-Ruiz 2005, 162: “Versnel has completely revolutionized our understanding of this special genre of curse, which now seems quite distinct from the so-called binding curses (\textit{defixiones}) and clearly part of a special subset of curses—a subset that he has aptly labeled ‘prayers for justice’” (162). In this article Faraone adduces numerous texts I had already discussed in Versnel 1991 and subsequent studies, as well as some of those I treat here. See his Table 1, on p. 173.

\textsuperscript{6} In the notices of similar curses in his invaluable \textit{EBGR}, and most recently in Chaniotis 2004.

\textsuperscript{7} See the commentaries on the texts discussed here. I would specifically mention Curbera 1999, 169: “Accanto alle \textit{defixiones} propriamente dette bisogna menzionare dei documenti…che appartengono alla categoria chiamata da Hendrik Versnel ‘judicial prayers’.”