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978-0-521-87457-1 - Ancient Jewish Magic: A History

Gideon Bohak

Excerpt

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There are many different tunnels in historiography. Among the narrowest and darkest are the ethnic tunnels. And of all the ethnic tunnels, none is quite so dark and narrow as that which is called “Jewish History.”¹

A book on ancient Jewish magic calls for no apologies. The last good book on this fascinating topic appeared in 1898, and much has changed in the intervening century – not only the perspectives from which we examine “magic,” but also the evidential basis on which such an examination must be based. When Ludwig Blau wrote his authoritative study, the only available sources were the rabbinic writings and a few documents of Greek magic which display strong Jewish influences. In our own times, we are almost too blessed with new sources – not just a few rabbinic passages unknown to or unnoticed by Blau and many more Greek magical texts of which he was still unaware, but also thousands of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Judeo-Arabic magical texts of whose very existence he was entirely ignorant. Much of this material has not yet been published, but by reading all the published sources and many of the unpublished ones one may gain a wide enough view of this large field to allow a broad sketch of some of its main features, as shall be done in the present study. And in order to clarify its scope and limitations, we may begin by explaining the three words which make up its title.

“Ancient” is perhaps the easiest term to define. The present book covers the development of Jewish magic from the Second Temple period to the early Middle Ages, or – to be slightly more specific – from about the third century BCE to the seventh century CE. Its heart, however, lies in the period which is nowadays known as “late antiquity” – from about the third century to about the seventh century CE. As shall become clear in Chapter 2, the coverage of the earlier period is beset by the relative dearth of evidence, the reasons for which shall be discussed there. The late-antique evidence, on

¹ Fischer 1970, p. 144.

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the other hand, and that evidence whose origins go back to late antiquity, is both abundant and varied, and thus allows a reliable reconstruction of at least some aspects of late-antique Jewish magic. It is to this reconstruction, especially of the western branch of late-antique Jewish magic, as practiced mainly by the Jews of Palestine and Egypt (as against the eastern branch of late-antique Jewish magic, as practiced by the Jews of Babylonia), that most of the present book shall be devoted (Chapters 3 to 6). Occasionally, we shall add a word or two about the “afterlife” of ancient Jewish magic in the Jewish magic of later periods, but a full survey of this issue is beyond the scope of the present study.

“Jewish” is a more tricky adjective. In speaking of “Jewish magic,” we shall be looking for magic as practiced by Jews, for Jewish or non-Jewish clients, and as borrowed from them by non-Jews. This does, of course, raise both theoretical and practical difficulties. On the theoretical level, one may ask whether everything done by ancient Jews is indeed “Jewish,” and whether the practitioners’ ethnic origins, or religious affiliation, are at all relevant in the study of magical practices. On the more practical level, one must always recall that when we look at a specific magical document, especially one written in such a universal language as Greek was in late antiquity, it sometimes becomes quite difficult to decide whether the person who composed it was a Jew or not. This, however, is an issue to which we shall repeatedly return, and which need not detain us here. Moreover, we shall devote some attention to the question of how “Jewish” ancient Jewish magic really was, and see how in spite of many borrowings of non-Jewish magical technology, ancient Jewish magic was in fact distinctly Jewish. It is for this reason that one is justified in devoting a separate study to ancient Jewish magic, rather than studying it as one side-branch of ancient magic as a whole.

As was already hinted above, and as we shall note at greater length in Chapter 3, ancient Jewish magic seems to fall into two distinct traditions, a western branch and an eastern one. But as our knowledge of the eastern branch of ancient Jewish magic is destined to be transformed in the very near future by the publication of hundreds of new incantations bowls, we shall focus here mainly on the western branch, and on the Jewish magical texts of Palestine and its closest neighbors, from present-day Egypt to Syria and Turkey. Thus, we could easily add the word “Palestinian” to the title of this book, were it not a loaded adjective which might be misconstrued by its potential readers.²

² Let me also stress that by referring to the area between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean as “Palestine” – rather than “Eretz Israel,” “the Land of Israel,” or “the Holy Land” – I am making no

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“Magic.” When Blau wrote about ancient Jewish magic, the meaning of that term was hardly in doubt. But the century which separates his work from ours has seen a tectonic shift in the way scholars use many of their favorite terms, and “magic” has seen perhaps the greatest changes of them all. Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to define, or eliminate, this term, and while a full survey of all the definitions of magic offered and rejected over the years seems quite unnecessary here, several points should be made clear at the outset. First, we may follow Evans-Pritchard and the cultural anthropologists and insist that the most difficult issue in the study of foreign cultures (including those of our distant forefathers) is the problem of translation. In studying such a culture, we must try to understand its own terms (what anthropologists now call an “emic” interpretation), for if we merely impose upon it our terms (an “etic” interpretation), we are bound to distort the picture that emerges from the evidence pertaining to that culture. Thus, in the study of another culture’s magic, we would be better off first trying to understand whether the culture we are studying has such a category at all (apparently, not all cultures do), and what that category entails – which practices are included under it, which attitudes are displayed towards it, and whether and how its mechanisms and rituals are explained by members of that society. All these variables vary enormously from one culture to the next and even from one period to another, and any study of ancient Jewish magic, as of the magical activities of any other human group in any period in its history, must take account of such considerations.

So much for the theory. Unfortunately, when it comes to practicing it, things are not that simple. As we shall see throughout the present study, ancient Jews did indeed use a whole set of terms and adjectives which often seem to be closely related to our own concept of “magic,” but never offered any clear-cut definition of what was meant by these terms. Moreover, unlike some ancient Greek or Roman writers and rulers, and some Christian religious and political leaders, ancient Jews rarely labeled people as “magicians,” or punished them for practicing “magic.” Thus, an “emic” definition of ancient Jewish magic that is based on the Jewish literary sources is simply not available. Even more disturbing, the hints provided by some of the relevant sources are not necessarily valid when it comes to a different period or a different social group within the Jewish world. Thus, while rabbinic literature does provide us with a good sense of the *rabbis’* conception of “magic” (as we shall see in Chapter 6), their views hardly help us elucidate the concepts of “magic” of the different religious groups within the Jewish

political statement about the current dispute between Israelis and Palestinians, but merely adhering to what seems like standard English usage.

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society of the Second Temple period (see Chapter 2). And when we move to the later Geonic period, and to the Karaite attacks on Rabbanite magic, or to the earlier biblical period, and the Torah's discussions of magicians and diviners (see Chapter 1), we find ourselves again in very different historical and social contexts, each with its own definitions of magic – or the lack thereof.

This being the case, we must resort to an etic definition of magic, at least as a heuristic device for setting aside those phenomena in our sources which we would like to study in the present book. Unfortunately, the decision to adopt an etic definition does not yet solve our problem, for a quick glance at the relevant literature will reveal that scholars and lay-persons alike can hardly agree on what *we* mean by “magic,” that is, on the emic definition of this term within our own culture. In the present study, we shall take our cue from those scholars who have wisely decided to focus less on the identification of magical *practices* and more on the identification of magical *texts and artifacts*, whose classification as such often proves much easier. The implications of this choice for the study of ancient Jewish magic will be explained in Chapter 1, but we must also note that the focus on “Jewish magic” comes at the expense of texts and practices which sometimes were related to it, but were not an integral part thereof. In what follows, we shall mostly ignore all the highly technical disciplines which usually go under the name of “occult sciences,” including such divinatory techniques as astrology, physiognomy, chiromancy (=palmistry), palmomancy (=twitch-divination), *gorallot* (=sortes, the use of divinatory lots), geomancy, calendology, hemerology, bibliomancy, divination from natural phenomena (thunders, earthquakes, etc.), or the interpretation of dreams, and such transformative techniques as alchemy. Some of these specialized disciplines had already been in use by Jews from very early times, as a few Qumran fragments eloquently demonstrate and as may be gathered from stray remarks in Josephus or in rabbinic literature, while others are first attested in the Cairo Genizah. In the present study, however, we shall leave them all aside and focus only on the magical technologies utilized by ancient Jews. This is not to deny the possibility that in some instances the practitioners of the magical technologies and those of the occult sciences were the very same people, or that these different disciplines occasionally influenced and cross-fertilized each other. But when we examine the manuscripts in which they were inscribed, both at Qumran and in the (much more extensive, and much better preserved) Cairo Genizah, we repeatedly find the magical spells and recipes and the occult sciences inscribed in different manuscripts, or in different sections thereof. Thus, it would seem

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more advisable for the different disciplines to be studied separately, or in clusters of closely related disciplines, and by scholars who have mastered the required expertise, which often is not only arcane, but also highly technical.

“Ancient Jewish Magic” is a large topic, which could, and should, be studied from many different disciplinary perspectives – be it philology (which would include the description or publication of as many ancient Jewish magical texts as possible, the identification of textual parallels and sources, and the analysis of their textual transmission), phenomenology (what kinds of magical techniques were used in ancient Jewish magic? for which aims? using which *materia magica*?), sociology (who practiced magic? who were the clients? what were the economic aspects of these transactions?), comparative religion (how does ancient Jewish magic resemble, or differ from, the magical beliefs and practices of other cultures and other historical periods?), or ritual studies (what mechanisms are operated by the magical procedures, and what kinds of changes could they bring about?). In the present study, however, we shall focus mainly on one aspect of ancient Jewish magic, its cultural make-up, and what it tells us about its origins and transformations and about the people who practiced it. To approach such questions correctly, we must study both the Jewish and the non-Jewish magical traditions of antiquity, and we must approach them historically, beginning with the earliest evidence and tracing its gradual development. We must also develop tools which would enable us to trace at least the broader contours of the different stages of ancient Jewish magic, from the Second Temple period to the Muslim conquest, and separate earlier phenomena from later ones. And it is here, in the historical approach, that the present book differs most from all previous treatments of Jewish magic. For, as was rightly noted by Moshe Idel, most of the earlier treatments of Jewish magic – whether ancient or medieval – were written by practicing rabbis, not by historians.³ Sound as their scholarship might be – and in some cases it was very sound – it was often characterized by an ahistoric approach which confused early and late, mixed ancient phenomena with modern phantoms and apologetics, and misused some of the basic tools of philological enquiry. And the great interest in things Jewish evinced by many scholars of ancient magic as a whole has only made things worse, for it often led to fanciful hypotheses on “Jewish” magical words, symbols, and practices, unfettered by an intimate familiarity with ancient Jewish culture as a whole. Thus, the present book seeks to provide both an outline of the development of

³ See Idel’s Foreword to the new reprint of Trachtenberg 1939, p. ix.

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the Jewish magical tradition in antiquity and an example of how the Jewish magical texts and artifacts could be analyzed and contextualized within the wider frameworks of ancient Jewish society and culture, and of ancient magic as a whole. It also seeks to point to areas where there is need for further research, and to the types of research which might prove most productive for the future study of ancient Jewish magic. Needless to add, the discovery and publication of new sources, and further analysis of the existing sources, are bound to make the present study obsolete, but when this happens, it will have achieved its goal. We come to praise a topic, not to bury it.

One final note. When Blau wrote his pioneering work, it was still customary to begin a study on magic – if one chose to write one at all – by apologizing for the choice of such an “unseemly” topic and for dealing with “superstitious” and “irrational” practices. Moreover, both before and after his time, any study on Jewish magic was written within the framework of two all-encompassing cleavages which generated much polemics and apologetics. The first was the ongoing debate, not to say *Kulturkampf*, within the Jewish people, between the rationalist reformers and modernizers on the one hand, and the tradition-bound conservatives on the other. This cleavage is especially apparent in many of the earlier scholarly discussions of how “contaminated” the Jewish tradition (and especially the Talmud) really was by magic and superstition, with the ancient sources used as ammunition in modern debates, and the modern debates shaping the reading of the ancient sources. The second major cleavage was the Christian–Jewish schism, and the recurrent use of the medieval stereotype of Jews as magicians, the Devil’s own henchmen, as a central pillar of some of the most virulent forms of medieval anti-semitism. Thus, any data pertaining to Jewish magic, and especially “black” magic, was often apologetically handled, or instinctively ignored, by Jewish scholars. In more recent times, however, the post-Holocaust decline of Christian anti-semitism, and the post-modern realization that “rationality” is not the only – and certainly not the best – yardstick with which to measure cultures, created an intellectual climate which is far more open to the study of Jewish magic. Perhaps the best sign of these new attitudes, and of this newly found ability to approach Jewish magic *sine ira et studio*, is that a full century after the discovery of the Cairo Genizah, and long after the study of almost all other types of Genizah texts, the Genizah magical texts are finally being scrutinized by scholars in Jerusalem, New York, Berlin, Princeton, and Tel-Aviv. Slow as this process may seem, its direction is plain to see; the bridge has been crossed, and the road ahead is clear. If anything, one might begin to worry

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lest the pendulum might swing too far and create an academic vogue which would ultimately lead to too much stress being laid on Jewish magic, a process that is well known to anyone who has followed the place of Kabbalah within the academic study of Judaism in the wake of Gershom Scholem's pioneering studies. Hopefully, the rise of interest in Jewish magic, after such a long period of neglect, will not lead to a disproportionate estimation of its importance within the history of Jewish culture as a whole, but to its incorporation as one more aspect of Jewish cultural creativity, and fully deserving of a critical historical analysis.

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CHAPTER I

Jewish magic: a contradiction in terms?

INTRODUCTION

In their reaction to Jewish magic, students of Jewish culture and history often reenact the famous joke about the man who goes to the zoo for the first time in his life. Staring for a long time at the giraffe, and noting all its peculiar features, he finally turns around, mutters to himself “There is no such animal,” and leaves the zoo. Perhaps the best example of this attitude to the Jewish magical tradition is provided by the works of Solomon Schechter and Shlomo Dov Goitein, the founding father and the re-founding father of Genizah scholarship. Going over the vast hoard of fragments found in the used-texts-storage-room of a medieval synagogue in Cairo in search of those texts they found interesting, these brilliant scholars had to sift through the thousands of magical texts strewn there; in their voluminous works, however, hardly a trace of such encounters will be found. Combining the works of both scholars, with Schechter’s preference for literary texts, Goitein’s for the documentary, we would arrive at a reasonably comprehensive coverage of most types of Genizah materials – with the glaring exception of its numerous fragments which deal with magic, divination, and the occult sciences, fragments which both scholars simply treated as if they did not exist.¹ In fact, it took a complete outsider – an Indian anthropologist and novelist – to admit that “a very large number of the documents in the Geniza . . . consist of magical formulae, and treatises related to esoteric rites.”²

While the deliberate neglect of Jewish magic might be characteristic especially of older scholarship, still constrained by age-old Jewish apologetics and the Enlightenment’s disdain for all forms of magic and superstition, it

¹ For Schechter’s view of Jewish magic, see his famous reference to “the fool by his amulet,” quoted by Wasserstrom 1992, p. 160, and by Reif 2000, p. 85. For Goitein’s views of magic, see Goitein 1967–93, vol. I, pp. 323–24 and 346, and esp. vol. V, pp. 336–77; see also Frenkel 2002, pp. 52–55; Cohen 2006.

² Ghosh 1992, p. 263.

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is in no way uncommon in contemporary scholarship as well. Thus, to give just one example, a recent encyclopedia of medieval Jewish civilization has useful entries on many aspects of Jewish culture in the Middle Ages – and not a word on magic.³ It is, moreover, quite symptomatic that the serious study of the Genizah magical texts began when a talmudic expert in search of rabbinic manuscripts in the Cambridge Genizah collections ran into a recipe, written in excellent Mishnaic Hebrew, for winning the chariot races by harming the other competitors and felt he could not ignore it even if he found it utterly revolting.⁴ Another impetus for the study of Genizah magical texts was the desire to find new texts in Palestinian and Babylonian Jewish Aramaic, and yet another was provided by the hope that these texts might shed some light on the history of Jewish mysticism, which is now very much in vogue. The study of Jewish magic as an independent, and important, component of Jewish culture is only in its infancy, although the need for such a study has often been recognized.⁵

Given the almost total neglect of Jewish magic in previous scholarship – with Blau's book on rabbinic magic and Trachtenberg's on medieval Jewish magic as the major exceptions – one might begin a book on ancient Jewish magic with a detailed analysis of what earlier students of Jewish history and culture have said about Jewish magic, and especially what they have not. Such a survey would try to understand why the general outlook of most Jewish scholars was so hostile to the Jewish magical tradition that it mostly denied its very existence and ignored its abundant remains, and why even non-Jewish scholars showed so little interest in these remains. This survey, however, will not be undertaken here, both because several such studies have already been written and because it would be more conducive for the present study to examine only the main arguments adduced or assumed by previous scholars to support their conviction that "Jewish magic" is a contradiction in terms.⁶ Since this conviction never was based on the analysis of Jewish magical texts and the claim that they were not magical at all, but on the a priori assumption that Jewish magic simply *could* not exist and the benign neglect of the relevant sources, it would perhaps be

³ Roth 2003. Other recent encyclopedias do not ignore Jewish magic – see, e.g., Chajes 1999; Alexander 2000.

⁴ Margalioth 1966, p. xvi.

⁵ For the desirability of such a study, see, e.g., Gruenwald 1980, pp. 225–26 and Hengel 1984, p. 23, end of n. 38: "Eine neue grundlegende Untersuchung der jüdischen Magie im Vergleich mit dem gemeinantiken Phänomen ist ein dringendes Desiderat." For the growing attention granted to Jewish magic in recent scholarship, see *Pe'amim* 85 (2000) (Heb.) and *Mahana'im* 14 (2002) (Heb.) – two collections of studies entirely devoted to this topic.

⁶ For previous surveys of the scholarship, see Harari 1998, pp. 59–98; Gruenwald 1996. See also Lorberbaum 2004, pp. 27–82.

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best to dismantle that barrier before turning to the Jewish magical texts themselves. Thus, the aim of the present chapter is not to demonstrate the existence of Jewish magic as a distinct sphere of Jewish culture, at least from late antiquity onwards; the following chapters will provide enough evidence of that to convince even the most ardent skeptics. Our task here is to try to understand why so many intelligent people, scholars and laymen alike, have so vehemently insisted that no such animal could even exist.

Adopting a bird's eye view, we may note five different reasons for this common assumption. The first and most important is that the practice of magic is supposed to be explicitly forbidden by the Hebrew Bible, which might mean that Torah-observant Jews would shun it altogether. If so, the Jewish magical texts and practices we do find must be attributed to antinomian heretics, peddling their illicit wares on the margins of Jewish society and forcefully persecuted, or, at most, barely tolerated, by the Jewish establishment. A second reason is that magic is conceived as superstitious and irrational, and therefore presumably limited to the lowest and least-educated classes of Jewish society, and only grudgingly tolerated by the enlightened establishment. And a third reason is that magic is seen as intrinsically un-monotheistic, since it tries either to appeal to forces other than God or to force God to act against His Will. If some Jews tried to walk down that road, they must have been stopped and punished once their offence was discovered, for it was a road not to be taken by Jews.

To these three types of arguments, each of which has a long history in the study of Judaism, two more may be added, which have only been raised quite recently. On the one extreme we find those scholars who, adopting the view that "magic" is not a definable set of beliefs and practices, but a derogatory label one affixes to other people's religion, are now claiming that in Jewish culture too there is no such thing as magic, and that here too "magic" is just a derogatory label, always reserved for the religious activities of "the other." On the opposite extreme, we find those scholars who, reacting against the age-old claim that Judaism knows no magic, are now insisting that Judaism of all periods was shot through with magical beliefs and practices, so that one cannot even talk about Jewish religion without immediately talking about Jewish magic. In spite of the great differences between these two claims, and between them and the first three, they all share one thing in common, in that they deny the existence of a specifically magical tradition as one distinct expression of Jewish culture. It is this bottom line – and the ensuing neglect of the Jewish magical texts and artifacts – which is common to all five types of claim. Thus, if we are to