

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02577-5 - The History of the Supernatural in All Ages and Nations, Volume 2

William Howitt

Excerpt

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THE

## HISTORY OF THE SUPERNATURAL.



## CHAPTER I.

## MAGIC IN ITS RELATION TO THE SUPERNATURAL.

The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
 Floats, though unseen, among us ; visiting  
 This various world with as inconstant wing  
 As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.  
 Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,  
 It visits with inconstant glance  
 Each human heart and countenance ;  
 Like hues and harmonies of evening,  
 Like clouds in starlight widely spread,  
 Like memory of music fled,  
 Like aught that for its grace may be  
 Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.—SHELLEY.

AS the belief in the supernatural, or spiritualism, has, from the earliest ages, had a constant tendency to degenerate into magic, because human nature has that downward bias, it is very desirable to have a clear notion of what magic is, that we may the more sacredly guard the great gift of spiritual life, which, more or less, is conferred on us, from everything but its own holy uses and objects. For this purpose I here take a summary view of magic, that it may also save me the necessity of farther extended reference to it in the course of this history.

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## MAGIC IN GENERAL.

Magic, in the highest sense of the word, and in its construction into an art, is clearly traceable to high Asia, and to its south-eastern regions. The most ancient accounts of it, if we except Egypt, which may almost be said to belong to that quarter of the globe, are altogether from Asia. The books of Moses make us acquainted with several distinct, artistic, and highly perfected kinds of conjuration, and certain positive laws against it. The same is the case with the Indian Law Book of Menu, who, according to Sir William Jones, lived about 300 years before Christ. We say nothing of the Persians and their Magi. We find the same traces of magic as an art amongst the most ancient Chinese. Amongst the Chaldeans and Babylonians magical astrology and soothsaying are as old as the history of these people, and the same is the case with the Phœnicians.

If we turn from eastern, central, and northern Asia to high Asia, we find Prometheus paying on Caucasus the penalty of endeavouring to make man independent of the gods. Prometheus and Sisyphus are, as far as magic power is concerned, the Faustus of the ancient world. It is in the vicinity of the Caucasus, too, that we find the notorious magic family, which come before us so frequently in Homer and the later writers of Greece and Rome—Æetes, Pasiphae, Circe, and Medea. Homer shows distinctly that magic is not of European, expressly not of Grecian growth. Wachsmuth thinks that the whole family, by a visible syncretism in the early ages of Greece, were deduced from Helios in order to bring them nearer to the national and mythologic sphere, and thence to introduce their magic mysteries into the Greek literature. Circe herself was a goddess, sister to Æetes, both the children of Helios and of Perseis, the daughter of Oceanos. Their magic art is not Greek, but points to Asia; as they, to effect their metamorphoses, were obliged to mix *φάρμακα λυγρὰ* (Odyssey x. 236; Pindar, Pyth. iv. 415), and touch the Grecians with a magic rod.

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## GREEK UNDERWORLD.

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Even the latter and very characteristic magic term *Ἰέλγειν* does not appear in Circe's first conjuration, and she does not use the magic formulæ. In order to defeat her sorcery, human science is not sufficient, but Hermes, a god, is sent to find the *μῶλυ*, Moly. Men cannot easily pluck it — *θεοὶ δὲ τε πάντα δύνανται!* The gods can do all things; and hence we see the reason for their constant invocation in all such magic processes. Let the reader clearly understand this. Notwithstanding this later development of magic in Greece, this foreign art brought from Asia, which strove to make itself independent of the higher gods of the country, the oldest popular faith of Greece, as Hesiod shows, had its under-world, and its good and bad subterranean gods and demons, and along with it, as in all other nations, an original belief in magic power; but this expanded and perfected itself, through the later influence of the East, into an artistic system. The old national under-world was drawn into the sphere of the new magic; the machinery and operations of the arts of sorcery were attached to it, and men sought through the dark and destruction-pregnant powers of fate, what could not be accomplished by the gods of the country. The best commentary on this is in Virgil:—

*Flectere si nequeo Superos, Acheronta movebo.*

The under-world, before the importation of the new Asiatic doctrines of magic amongst the Greeks, was detested, as everywhere else, by both gods and men (Hesiod, *Theog.* 743; Homer *ii.* 4, 157). Terrific monsters haunted it; the hostile races of giants and Titans were banished thither; there stagnated the mysterious Stygian flood. Hence in Lucan *vi.* 432, '*Ille supernis detestanda Deis noverat:*' hence *Erechtho*, the celebrated Thessalian sorceress, '*grata Diis Erebi arcana Ditis operti,*' &c. Hence in the later Greek and Roman magic eras, the original powers of the under-world, *Pluto*, *Proserpine*, &c., are not the masters and protectors of the new foreign art, but it is *Hecate*. This

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power, who in Hesiod had been placed over the elements, in this later mythology is transferred to the under-world with Selene — no doubt, because adjurations, magic arts, and offerings were made by night — Artemis, Persephone, &c., and a whole infernal court and environment of spectres, phantasms, dogs, serpents, &c., being made obedient to the great queen of sorcery.

This includes a complete outline of the origin of magic in Greece and Rome, and of its main features to the latest period. We may now take a hasty glance at it in other regions. Turn again to the East. The belief in good and bad spirits prevailed universally amongst the Chaldeans, Persians, Egyptians, Phœnicians, Indians, Carthaginians, Canaanites, &c.; and everywhere the idea of magic was associated with it. Amongst the greater part of the Asiatics and Africans there could be no conflict betwixt their mythology and this art; for their gods were of the class of powers invoked. As for the Scythians, Germans, Slaves, Celts, Gauls, &c., from the meagre knowledge that we have of their mythologies, the same ideas appeared to prevail as amongst all other people in the same degree of cultivation. Pliny (H. N.) tells us, ‘*Britannia hodieque attonita Magiam celebrat tantis ceremoniis, ut dedisse Persis videri possit.*’ Helmont shows us that the Slaves had their *Zerne-Bog*, their black, bad god; and the very name reveals a dualism, for *Bog* is yet in Polish God, and *Zerne* black. Thus, amid all these people, and still more distinctly amongst the Scandinavians — see the *Eddas* — the faith in magic was universal.

The religion of most of these nations consisted chiefly in a corrupted star and fire worship. The Persians alone appear to have preserved this in any degree of purity. Over the whole East extended the intellectual system, but under the most varied forms, and everywhere connected with dualism. Wherever the Greeks and Romans planted colonies their mythology soon received the Oriental inoculation of the dark and hostile powers. Thus the magic of the Romans and

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Greeks, carried back to those regions, naturally coalesced with the Asiatic ideas and became doubly strong. In Persia, Egypt, and Carthage, this was the case. But it was in the system of Zoroaster that the dual strife assumed the most positive form. Ormuzd and Ahriman stand as the representatives of the two principles in perpetual conflict. In a less distant degree the same is the case in the teachings regarding Osiris, Isis, and Typhon. In the mythologies of both these peoples, prevails the demon system, the good and the bad principle, and each has its subordinate powers. The dualism of the Chaldeans is less known, but Plutarch says that they had two good and two bad gods, and numerous neutral ones.

Dualism lies equally at the foundation of the Indian mythologies. They have whole troops of contending demons or Dews, which do not confine themselves to the theology, but spread through all their poetry, dramas, and tales, as in Sacontala, &c. Sir William Jones, in the *Asiatic Researches*, (ii. 49), points out the relationship of the language of the Zend Avesta to that of the Sanscrit; and Ammianus Marcellinus tells us that Zoroaster made acquaintance with the Brahmins; and Arrian in the Indian expedition of Alexander, and Strabo, also tell us abundance of things about Indian magic, and about the little men three spans high, which proclaim their kinship to our fairies.

The Jews brought back from the Babylonian captivity all the ideas of the Persian dualism, and they accused our Saviour and the Apostles of performing all their miracles by magic, and the great master of sorcery, the devil. Horst, in his 'Zauber Bibliothek,' in quoting a long list of instances from the Gospel narratives, says, 'It is in vain to attempt to clear away from these Gospel narratives the devil and his demons. Such an exegesis is opposed to the whole faith of the world at that time. If we are to make these statements now mean just what we please, why did no single man in the ancient world understand them so? Are we become wiser? Then let us congratulate ourselves on our good fortune: but we cannot,

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on that account, compel those venerable writers to say what they, in their own time, neither could nor would say' (vol. ii. 31).

The Cabbalah contains a most comprehensive account of the magic of the Jews. Of the Kischuph or higher magic; the Monen, the astrological; and the Nischusch, or prophetic department.

'According to the Cabbalah, there is, besides the angels, a middle race of beings, which men usually call the elementary spirits, but known to the Jews under the general name of Schedim (the male being called Ruchin, the female Lilin), and described as the dregs or lowest of the spiritual orders. These spirits of the elements, the head of whom is the better Asmodeus, are divided into four principal classes. The first, which consist of the element of fire, and therefore cannot be seen with the eye, are well disposed to the good. They willingly help and support men. They are white, and understand the Thorah or law, since they stand in connection with the angel-world. They possess many secrets of nature. Solomon made use of them, and addressed himself to their king. The second class, formed out of fire and air, is lower, but yet good and wise, but invisible to human eyes. Both classes inhabit the upper regions. The third class consist of fire, air, and water, and are sometimes apparent to the senses. Their soul, according to Loriah, is of the vegetable nature. The fourth class, besides the former elements, has a component of fine earth, and their soul is of the mineral nature, and can be fully perceived by the senses. All these spirits of the elements eat and drink, propagate, and are subject to dissolution. The greater part of the two last kinds are of wicked disposition, mock, and deceive men, and are glad to do them mischief. Therefore they are under the authority of the evil Asmodeus, who is on the side of Smaëls, the devil. Whence they are called, like the dark satanic spirits, Masikim and M'chablim. There are amongst them some individuals of a more friendly nature, who mean well to men, and employ themselves in all sorts of domestic

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ELEMENTARY SPIRITS.

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services. These two classes divide into different sorts; some live amongst men, others in the waters, a third kind in filthy places, and a fourth in mountains and deserts; each loves that element out of which it had its origin. Some called Jemim are of hideous aspect, and appear bodily in the open day, amongst the mountains.

‘The two higher orders of these elementary spirits, who form the transition link betwixt the visible and invisible, stand bodily next to man, and are very dangerous, being endowed with various extraordinary powers, and having great insight into the hidden kingdoms of the lower nature; and, through their connection with the spirit-world, have some knowledge of the future, but chiefly in natural things. Hence men so soon began to worship them, and make offerings to them.

‘Some of these answer to our Hobthrushes and Brownies, others to the gods of the heathen and the oracles. The higher these spirits, says the Cabbalah, though they can predict something of the future, are not much to be depended upon, because they are more connected with the natural than the spiritual world, and see only through such media. The lower of these natures are still less trustworthy; since, from their lower position, their vision is more obscure, and they often seek to deceive men by lies. These spirits of the elements live in the birds both of the upper and lower air, in beasts, and in the earth and its minerals. Hence the augurs obtained instructions from them through birds of prey, and magicians through stones, metals, and crystals.

‘Maimonides says that it was not only allowed the Jews by their traditions, but commanded them to maintain an intimate connection with their departed friends, not out of curiosity or selfish purposes, but for fellowship in and through God. Therefore the Israelite was bound to pray for his brother who was yet in the region of purification; but only in cases of the highest necessity, and for the good of those left behind, was it permitted to enquire of the dead. They had a feast of blood on such occasions. A hole was

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dug, blood poured in, and over it a table was set at which they ate, and the Schedim or spirits of a middle nature appeared and answered their questions, even about the future. The Jews had the practice of tattooing certain names or pictures on their hands by which they came into rapport with these spirits, and they used many magic ceremonies for the same purposes. They put to flight fierce beasts by the utterance of the sacred name, and cured many hurts and diseases by means of magic.' (Maimonides in *Abodah sarah* 12, *Absch*: 11 *Abth.*)

By the *Monen*, they produced what the Scotch call glamour, making imaginary things appear real; but this delusion would not bear the test of water. (*Trakt. Sanhedrin*, fol. 65).

In the *Sohar* it is taught that, in the hour of death, a higher *Ruach* or spirit is imparted to men than what they had in life, by which they see what they never saw before; see their departed friends and relations. (*Maichi*, fol. 218.; *Trumah*, fol. 141). The Jews, however, believed that the soul was not wholly sundered from all connection with the body, but that the *Habal de Garmin*, the elementary body, or what the Germans call the *Nerve-spirit*, remained in the grave incorruptible, till the resurrection, when it was reunited to the soul. That this *Habal de Garmin* had all the form of the body, and was the real resurrection body. That it had a certain consciousness, and passed the time in pleasant dreams, unless disturbed by the nearness to some wicked or hostile body. Hence the necessity of burying friends together, and enemies far apart. Hence the desire of those who love each other to rest together in the earth. (*Nakanti*, fol. 66).

The soul, in the other world, is held in connection with this elementary body in the grave by the *Zelem* or shade in which it is wrapped, the vehicle of the Greek philosophers. All souls must pass through a condition of purgation; when the purer souls passed into the *Gan Edin* or subterranean paradise, till the general resurrection, and the impure into the place of farther purgation and punishment. In the



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middle, betwixt the outer world and G'hinham or hell, lies the region of the spirits of the elements, or of nature (Sopher Makiäl, fol. 12).

To these spirits of the elements, or Schedim, no doubt St. Paul alludes where, in our vague translation of the passage, speaking of the spiritual powers against which we have to contend, he names amongst them spiritual wickedness in high places, 'but which should be rendered the spiritualities or spirits of wickedness in the upper regions τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις: which the French have more correctly rendered, 'les esprits malins *qui sont dans les airs*,' and Luther 'den bösen Geistern unter dem Himmel.'

As it was in the ancient world both amongst cultivated and uncultivated nations, so it is in the present age. We find the same faith in both classes of spirit-power, in good and bad, and in magic arts everywhere, and even amongst nations who seem to have had, for ages, no intercourse with the Old World—namely, those of America. Locke says, 'We find, everywhere, no other ideas of the powers and operations of what we term spirits than those which we draw from the idea of our own spirits, as we reflect on the operations of our own souls, and carefully note them. Without doubt, the spirits which animate our bodies possess a very inferior rank; whence the belief in higher and more powerful, better or worse spiritual natures operating on the earth, is very natural to the human soul.'

We find these ideas in Greenland, where, according to the missionaries, Kranz and Egede, the inhabitants pay little regard to the good Pirksama; meaning, in their language, He above there; because they know that he will do them no harm, but they zealously worship the evil power, Angekok, from whom their priests, medicine-men, and conjurers are also named; and all the operations of the magicians are supposed to become effectual from the cooperation of Angekok and his inferior spirits. So in Greenland, too, that widely diffused dualism exists. We find, again, very much the same class of ideas and practices in Kamtschatka,

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according to Pallas, Kraschinikow, and others. So, also, amongst the Samojedes and Siberians. Herr von Matjuschkin, who accompanied Colonel Wrangel on the North-pole expedition in 1820, gives us a remarkable account of the incantations of the Schamans in northern Asia. These men enter into a wild dance, in which they throw their heads about in a wonderful manner, every now and then pausing to take some stupefying drink. They finally fall into unconsciousness, followed by convulsions and groans, and wild howls. The Schamans then stare wildly and terribly, and in this state questions are put to them. Matjuschkin says that at Alar Süüt, a day's journey from Werschojansk, he saw a Schaman who, in this state, answered him questions regarding his far-distant friends, which he afterwards found to be quite true. The Schaman could possibly have known nothing of him or his friends. On awaking, like all the clairvoyants, he knew nothing of what had passed.

In Loskiel's 'History of the Missions of the Evangelical Brethren amongst the Delaware and Iroquois Indians,' we learn that these as well as the Illinois tribes and Hurons, and other North American natives, not only believed in good and bad spirits, but in the operations on man through magical and therapeutic arts. In another part of these volumes I have given particular relations of such things amongst the Ojibbeways, from Schoolcraft and Kohl; others from the Mexicans, Peruvians, Caribs, &c. Such is the faith in magic and demon-power also, according to Father Antonio Zuchelli, and other writers, amongst the Africans of Congo and Loango, who pay particular reverence to a black goat; such also amongst the Mandingo negroes; according to Campbell and other missionary travellers, amongst those of South Africa, the Bushmans, the Namaquas, &c. In Dutch Guiana, says Howe, the natives believe in the existence of a host of subordinate evil spirits who produce thunder, storms, earthquakes, and diseases. These they name Yowahoos (probably the origin of Swift's name, Yahoos), and seek, by magic, to win them over, so as to render them innocuous to them.