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Construction of Jewish Magic

Increasing attention has recently been given to what is labeled "Jewish magic" as the background and comparative material for interpretation particularly of Jesus's exorcisms. Jewish "magical texts" and "magical bowls" from late antiquity (like the Greek "magical papyri") offered many examples of adjuration of spirits and demons. More strikingly, the heretofore unanticipated texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls dealing with strange spirits were taken as evidence for the practice of exorcism by Judeans more closely contemporary with Jesus.

Orientalist Stereotypes in Biblical Translations

Moving into even a cursory investigation of what has become the scholarly composite of "Jewish magic," however, brings us up against the confusing and multilayered influence of Orientalism, ancient as well as modern, in Western scholarship of ancient Near Eastern culture in general and of Judaism in that cultural matrix.[1] The English terms *magic* and *magician* are of course derived from the Latin *magus/magia* and the Greek *magos/mageia* and all the negative connotations of practices that are devious, suspicious, dangerous, illegal, and even punishable by death. Well before modern

1. The groundbreaking history and criticism of modern Western Orientalism, in which the origins of biblical studies in its ancient Near Eastern context is heavily implicated, is Said, *Orientalism*. One of the classics of ancient Greek Orientalism is the *History* of Herodotus. For the link between ancient and modern Orientalism, see Toner, *Homer's Turk*.

scholars developed their composite construct of magic, however, not only the threatened Roman elite but intellectuals of the newly established Christian church denigrated a wide range of practices as magic. And, as mentioned in the previous chapter, these practices and the esoteric knowledge that accompanied them were identified with the East, mainly with Egypt and Mesopotamia, as well as Persia (where the Magi came from). In early modern times, well before Sir James Frazer and early anthropologists labeled the beliefs and practices of conquered and colonized "primitive" peoples as "magic," Protestant intellectuals polemicized against Catholic rituals as "magic."

Christian and Jewish biblical scholars, by their training deeply rooted in this intellectual heritage, are working on the basis of the Orientalism resulting from all of these layers of influence. In fact, Orientalist stereotypes are deeply inscribed in the standard modern translations of the Bible as well as in the fields of biblical studies and Jewish history. Numerous biblical texts are concerned to differentiate Israel or Judah from hostile neighboring peoples or imperial regimes. The two most obvious examples, perhaps, are the narrative of the contest between the wise men at the court of Pharaoh and Moses and Aaron, and the portrayal of Daniel and the other Judean scribes in conflict with the wise men at the Persian imperial court. Moses and Aaron are performing unusual feats that are then mostly matched by Pharaoh's wise men. Daniel and his friends are trained in all the same forms of courtly wisdom that would qualify them to serve in the Persian court (Dan 1:4). In distinction from the Israelite heroes of the narratives, however, the Egyptian and the Persian wise men are labeled "magicians" and "sorcerers" and "enchanters" in nearly all of the standard English translations, including the RSV and the NRSV (Exod 7:11, 22; 8:7; 9:11; Dan 2:2, 4:7; etc.). At least the translators of the NRSV are consistent; when they come to the description of the collapse of the monarchy and its officers in Jerusalem (in Isa 3:1–3), their list of the royal officers that Yahweh will take away, in addition to the warrior and soldier, judge and counselor, includes "diviner and elder, skillful magician and expert enchanter." The staff of the Jerusalem monarchy was simply a smaller-scale version of the Egyptian and Assyrian imperial regimes. The officers at the court were indeed skillful and expert wise men; *magician* and *enchanter* are seriously misleading terms.

These wise men at the imperial courts were the highly educated staff of the regimes, trained and functioning in various specialties, such as interpretation of omens, astronomy/astrology, and forms of divination, which

were all helpful to the regime. These are the intellectuals who produced the multiple forms of high knowledge, such as the astronomy from which the ancient Greeks borrowed. As the legendary figure of Daniel illustrates, and as biblical scholars are now beginning to recognize, learned Judean scribes also cultivated this higher learning—various forms of wisdom, such as meteorology, cosmology, botany, and interpretation of omens and signs—and adapted it for the needs of the temple-state. The "Book of the Luminaries," included in the book of *1 Enoch* (chs. 72–82), is an example of cosmological wisdom inherited from the Assyrians and Babylonians.[2] Perhaps because of its association with the magi, but also certainly because it was threatening and suspect to the Roman imperial elite and the Christian church, this wisdom of the East became labeled generally as magic. And despite the negative connotations the label has stuck in Western academics.[3]

Rabbinic Discussions

Scholars of Jewish magic, in contrast with those of Greco-Roman magic, always knew that the principal texts on which they based their concept were polemical. The touchstone of all subsequent discussion of "magic" in Jewish tradition was the ban, in Deut 18:9–14, on certain ancient Near Eastern wisdom and ritual practices, particularly those that had become standard in royal regimes, such as divination, soothsaying, augury, and "sorcery." Centuries later, as the rabbis became the intellectual leaders in (rabbinic) Judaism, the Mishnah (*m. Sanh.* 7:11) included a definition of a deviant so threatening that he merited punishment: "The *mechashef* (usually translated "magician") if he actually performs an action is liable to punishment, while the one who merely creates illusions is not liable." The *mechashef* was included in a list of dangerous deviants such as sexual perverts, idolaters, and those who misled people. Women were more likely than men to be suspect. Rabbinic discourse becomes much more elaborate in the Babylonian Talmud, at *b. Sanhedrin* 65a–67b. Rabbinic scholars who have studied the discussion, however, admit that they are not sure exactly what deviant practices the rabbis were concerned about.

In any case, like some of the ancient Greek accusations, the rabbinic discussions proscribe unauthorized knowledge and ritual practices as

2. VanderKam, *Enoch*, chs. 3–4; Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries,* 156–57.

3. One of the principal scholarly journals in which biblical scholars as well as Assyriologists and others publish is the *Bulletin of the American Society of Oriental Research*.

dangerous to the community and offensive to the divine. In scholarly discussions of these biblical and rabbinic references, *magic* became the standard term and concept for ritual practices that were disapproved, viewed as suspicious or dangerous, or simply forbidden. This was understood as part and parcel of the official attempt to define Israelite culture and its practices in opposition to or distinction from those of the peoples round about—and from whomever on the inside of the society might be tempted to dabble in or resort to those ritual practices. Modern scholarly presentation (not just the classic surveys by Ludwig Blau and Joshua Trachtenberg,[4] but more recent studies and review essays) accept the rabbinic sources' viewpoint, and assume that there were indeed ancient Jewish magicians practicing Jewish magic.[5] Pertinent to the context of Jesus's mission, a review essay in a standard handbook concluded that most Judeans in the late second-temple period believed to some extent in the power of magic.[6]

Mystical Texts and Protective Inscriptions

When scholars began to delve into esoteric and mystical Jewish texts from late antiquity and medieval times (some of them only recently discovered), the engagement of the texts with spirits and demons and heavenly powers led scholars to classify them as magical.[7] Indeed, the *Book of Mysteries* (*Sepher ha-Razim*) and other such texts are even discussed as "magical manuals of spells and incantations," the "stock-in-trade of working magicians."[8] Similarly, when amulets and bowls with esoteric Hebrew inscriptions were discovered, mainly in Syria, they too were classified as magic.[9] That these texts and inscriptions had much in common with biblical and rabbinic texts, however, led to their recognition as genuinely Jewish expressions. Thus the tendency among scholars of such material was to relax the

4. Blau, *Aljüdische Zauberwesen*; Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic.* Criticism in Schiffman and Swartz, *Incantation Texts*.

5. For example, Veltri, *Magie und Halakha*; and the overview of research in Becker, *Wunder und Wundertaeter*.

6. Alexander, "Incantations."

7. Schiffman and Swartz, *Incantation Texts*; Margalioth, *Sepher Ha-Razim*; the latter book, which is a reconstruction of modern scholarship, is often referred to as a "magical handbook."

8. Alexander, "*Sepher Ha-Razim,*" 170.

9. Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls.*

distinction between genuine religion and deviant magic and to make magic a subdivision of religion. After all, even the rabbis themselves evidently had knowledge of mysteries and delved into certain esoteric practices.[10]

The complex way in which the composite construct of Jewish magic has developed, however, leads to questions about whether the concept magic is appropriate—or necessary—for understanding these texts and amulets and bowls. Whether or not knowledge and rituals designated as magic are contrasted with or viewed as a subset of knowledge and rituals designated as religion, what differentiates the one from the other? What is gained in clarity or illumination to classify Jewish texts from late antiquity as "magical" that share so much of the content and concerns of rabbinic texts or of those previously understood as mystical? When does Merkavah mysticism and the Hekhalot literature somehow become magic? If the adjurations in the *Book of Mysteries* are similar to those known from rabbinic texts, what makes them magical rather than rabbinic? Invoking pagan gods and offering incense to the host of heaven had been practiced for centuries in Israelite/Judean society, as we know from the attempts of the Deuteronomic and rabbinic authorities to suppress such practices. What makes them magic in texts of late antiquity?

A recent argument for the distinctive reality of Jewish magical piety expressed in magical texts is their combination of an emphasis on the power of the name of God, appeals to the intermediacy of (benign) heavenly forces (angels) in mediating divine attention to human needs, and the use of divine names and ritual practices for the needs of particular individuals.[11] Each of these components, however, and often the combination, are found in other Jewish expressions (e.g., texts, ritual practices) that are considered religious or mystical but not magical. Interpretation would be more intelligible and appropriate by simply dropping the modern concept of magic and focusing on just such questions as the power of the *name* of God (and the *names* of superhuman powers), the need for and appeal to intermediary heavenly forces, and people's needs (for protection, special knowledge, reassurance, and the like).

The inscriptions on bowls and amulets are mostly appeals for or means of reassurance about protection: in general, from demons, from named persons, and for babies, for healing. They often include words, phrases, or

10. Discussed in the early research of Jacob Neusner. See Neusner, *History of the Jews,* vols 4 and 5; several chapters collected in Neusner, *Wonder Working Lawyers.*

11. Swartz, "Magical Piety," 171.

longer passages from Scripture, most of which also were included in weekly prayers and liturgies (which, given the largely oral communication and paucity of written scrolls, the scribes who inscribed the messages would have been more familiar with). This leads to the obvious question: how the "magical" bowl or amulet differed from (personal) prayer and scriptural or liturgical piety. How are appeals to God for protection on bowls somehow "magical" while the same or similar language in weekly prayers is genuinely "religious"?[12] How does the citation of a prophetic line from Zech 3:2 ("may the LORD rebuke you, O Satan/Accuser") somehow become a "magical formula" when inscribed on a bowl? How do phrases from the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:3), used in the New Year service, followed by a doxology that was also used in daily prayers, become elements of magic when inscribed on bowls? How can scriptural or liturgical appeals to Almighty God become spells or incantations when inscribed on bowls but expressions of piety when used to describe how a youth is protected by reciting Torah (*m. Qiddushin* 4:14)?

It is a commonplace that words have power. In prayers and rabbinic piety, the recitation of words in prayers, liturgies, and learning of Torah had power to protect. What is less familiar to scholars embedded in modern print culture, however, is that written words had a special power for people in cultures where communication was largely oral, and where writing was unusual. Scripture had a special authority that was a function of it standing "written"; it had the numinous power of writing (in societies where this was rare). The quotation formula "it is written" was an appeal to that higher authority. Similarly, inscriptions on bowls or amulets had protective power in the face of a field of powers, some of which might be hostile or maleficent.

What has become classified and discussed at length as Jewish magic is thus largely Jewish and ancient Near Eastern ritual practice of divination and the related knowledge of heavenly bodies/powers/gods, their interrelations, and their relations to human affairs. The Jewish texts from late antiquity that have been (inappropriately) classified as Jewish magic, however, portray a relation to superhuman powers strikingly different from that represented in Greek "magical papyri," also from late antiquity. Whereas the hymns and prayers in the papyri are used to gain control of a daimon or

12. Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls,* are evidently aware that scholars are imposing a modern construct onto Jews of late antiquity, with "fanciful interpretations and unreasonable speculations" (23), that the ancient Judeans would say that they were practicing healing and protection, in reliance "not on magical powers, but on the power of God and his angels" (36)—but Naveh and Shaked continue to use the construct.

superhuman power (an assistant to do the practitioner's bidding), the Jewish prayers and inscriptions seek protection against demons or superhuman powers that threaten to do one harm. With regard to the healings and exorcisms of Jesus, the Jewish texts misleadingly labeled magical, like the "magical papyri," offer little illumination or material for comparison, with one possible exception. The Jewish texts from late antiquity do indicate that people were seriously concerned about the hostility of superhuman forces or spirits.

Prayers for Protection among the Dead Sea Scrolls

Given the centrality of intimate knowledge of and/or protection against the heavenly bodies and superhuman powers in the Jewish texts that were classified as magical, it is not surprising that some of the texts that came to light in the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls were taken as magical. Qumran texts interpreted as examples of magic include particularly psalms or prayers of defense against spirits, such as the *Psalms of the Maskil* (4Q510 and 4Q511), the *Apocryphal Psalms* (11Q11), and the adjuration *Against Demons* (4Q560), along with texts of divination (4Q318 and 4Q186).[13] Interpreters paid particular attention to the passage in the *Genesis Apocryphon* (20:16–32) that they interpreted as exorcism, and some took the psalms of protection as texts of exorcism, making them potentially significant for interpretation of the exorcisms of Jesus.

For this investigation of whether Jesus's healings and exorcisms can be understood as magic, the two key—and interrelated—questions are whether these Qumran texts are examples of magic, and whether they are appropriately understood as evidence of or interest in exorcism. The *Songs of the Maskil* (4Q510, 4Q511, and perhaps similarly 4Q444 and 6Q18) are apotropaic psalms or prayers for protection.[14] The teacher-leader "proclaims the majesty of (God's) beauty to frighten and ter[rify] all the spirits of the angels of destruction and the spirits of the bastards, demons, Lilith, 'howlers and yelpers,'" who might lead

13. Alexander, "'Wrestling,'" 319, calls these "magical texts" that indicate the Qumran sect "had a deeply magical outlook on life." Lange, "Essene Position on Magic," holds that magic was an integral part of Jewish belief in the second-temple period. Schiffman, *Reclaiming*, 351, understands magic in Qumran texts and Judaism generally very broadly as "eliciting God's help in warding off the forces of evil." For a more circumspect critical review, see Brooke, "Deuteronomy 18:9–14 in the Qumran Scrolls."

14. Eshel, "Genres of Magical Texts."

astray "the sons of light," to which the community responds by blessing (God's) name (4Q510 1:4–8). One of the very specialists in Jewish "magical" texts who claims these psalms as an expression of a deeply "magical worldview," however, admits that they are "conspicuous for the absence of *materia magica,* of technical magical rituals and formulae and of divine names" (and of *nomina barbara*).[15] There is nothing magical about these psalmic prayers for protection, which simply presuppose the same worldview of a struggle between the two Spirits (the Prince of Light and Belial) most familiar from the opening covenant renewal ceremony in the *Community Rule* (1QS 3–4).

The *Apocryphal Psalms* (11Q11; and 4Q560) are incantations or adjurations addressed directly to the hostile spiritual force, that "YHWH will strike you . . . to destroy you . . . and [will send] against you a powerful angel . . . [And] the chief of the army of YHWH [will bring] you down . . ." (11Q11 4–5). "The absence of technical magical praxis is once again striking."[16] These psalms are hardly magical. And although they do presuppose a worldview in which exorcism could function, they stop short of exorcism. Recitation of these adjurations/incantations, speaking the very name of Yahweh, declare directly to the hostile superhuman spirit(s) that God will surely strike/defeat (and again, contain/control) them. If, as has been suggested, these psalmic adjurations were pronounced over or in defense of a person who had fallen ill, then they are also ritual acts of protection, warning off the hostile spirit(s) in anticipation of God's action, but are not (yet) a casting out or defeat of a spirit that had taken possession of the person.

The supposed exorcism of Pharaoh by Abram in the Genesis Apocryphon (20:17–32), which some have also classified as magic, occurs in a very different, narrative genre, and assumes a somewhat different worldview, in which God still has control of spirits. Indeed, God has sent the spirit to protect Sarai and Abram, and the spirit afflicts, but does not possess, Pharaoh and his household. Abram is the agent in alleviating the affliction. But he cannot act until Pharaoh ceases the behavior for which he is being afflicted. Then Abram prays for and lays hands on Pharaoh's head, and the spirit departs. Given these standard religious practices by Abram himself, this is

15. Alexander, "Incantations," 323–24.

16. Ibid., 326. Cf. the rather uncritical discussion of Penney and Wise, "'By the Power of Beelzebul.'"

hardly an act of magic. And, like the psalms from Qumran, it is not (yet) an exorcism of a spirit that has taken possession of a person.[17]

Eleazar's Exorcism and Solomon's Wisdom

Perhaps the case of "Jewish magic" most widely cited in relation to the exorcisms of Jesus is Josephus's claim to have witnessed how a Judean named Eleazar, before the soon-to-be emperor Vespasian and his officers, drew a demon out of a man through his nostrils by placing a ring to his nose that had under its seal a root prescribed by King Solomon (*Ant.* 8.45–49).[18] This is an exorcism, drawing out a spirit that had possessed a person. But there is no evident basis for believing that Josephus and his readers understood it as magic. This is clearest from the literary and cultural-historical context of Eleazar's exorcism as an illustration of Solomon's great wisdom. As noted in ch. 3, above, the Greek and Roman cultural and political elite sometimes accused foreigners as well as people of lower rank of performing harmful rituals (some of which were considered threatening to the established political order). Augustus had ordered two thousand of what were thought to be "magical" scrolls burned in 13 BCE. During and after the great revolt of 66–70, in the aftermath of which Josephus composed the *Antiquities,* there was great suspicion of and hostility to "the Judeans," not a context in which to boast of great acts of *mageia* by Solomon, the renowned king of the Judeans.

Far from presenting Eleazar's feat as a case of *mageia*, Josephus touts it as an impressive illustration of the great wisdom (*sophia)* that God had granted to the philosopher-king Solomon (*Ant.* 8.21–49). Solomon had not only composed many books of odes and songs, parables and similitudes, that displayed his wide general knowledge of trees, birds, animals, and fish, all of which he had studied "philosophically," but Solomon had gained knowledge of the art (*techne*) used against demons/spirits (*daimonon*) for the benefit and healing (*therapeia*) of people. He also composed songs (*epoidas*) by which illnesses could be relieved, and left behind forms of exorcisms with which those possessed by spirits (*daimonia*) could drive them out, never to return. There thus does appear to have been a Judean tradition

17. Sorenson, *Possession and Exorcism*, 64–74, discusses most of these Qumran texts with an overly broad understanding of possession and exorcism.

18. Critical analysis of Josephus's account of Eleazar's exorcism in Duling, "Eleazar Miracle."

of exorcism. Strange as its cases may seem to modern readers, however, exorcism was evidently not understood as *mageia* among the Judean cultural elite any more than it was among the Hellenistic-Roman elite in the first century. Josephus certainly does not seem to be worried that his boast of Solomon's great wisdom and its efficacy in exorcism would result in Roman accusations that Jews were practicing magic.

There is thus more among the texts that have been classified as Jewish magic than there is in what was claimed as Greco-Roman magic that may provide background and comparative material for the healings and particularly the exorcisms of Jesus. The psalmic appeals for protection and the adjurations of hostile spirits, along with sections of the *Community Rule* and the *War Rule*, offer a window onto the scribal elite's understanding of the contending heavenly spiritual forces in the historical context in which Jesus worked. And Josephus's report of Eleazar's exorcism before Vespasian suggests at least some practice of exorcism was known in Judea at the time. There is no justification, however, for taking any of these texts or practices as magic, or for projecting the concept of "Jewish magic" onto the context and mission of Jesus.