

CONTINUITY AND INNOVATION IN THE MAGICAL
TRADITION: A JERUSALEM SYMPOSIUM AND ITS
WIDER CONTEXTS

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The present book has long roots. Its seeds were sown when the three editors first began discussing the possibility of organizing a research group at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Jerusalem, with an international group of scholars working on different aspects of magical texts and practices in the various cultures of the ancient and medieval world, “pagan,” Jewish, Christian and Muslim. These deliberations resulted in a full proposal, titled “Occult Powers and Officiants in Non-official Cults within Near Eastern Cultures,” which we submitted to the Institute and which was approved for a period of half a year, from March to August 2006. During this period, the group’s eight members—Tzvi Abusch, Gideon Bohak, Alexander (Sandor) Fodor, Yuval Harari, David Jordan, Reimund Leicht, Dan Levene and Shaul Shaked—met for a weekly seminar as well as on numerous informal occasions, compared notes and discussed each other’s work, all in a remarkably friendly and cooperative manner. Toward the end of this period we organized a three-day conference (July 17th–19th, 2006), focused on the theme of “Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition.” In addition to the group’s regular members, eleven other scholars were invited to present their work. In choosing our participants we made every effort to bring together a group of scholars who are deeply involved in the study of one or more ancient or medieval magical traditions, but are also open to communication across disciplinary boundaries and outside their own narrow linguistic expertise. This resulted in a most interesting and stimulating encounter between experts in different ancient and medieval cultures whose subject matters and research methods share much in common, as will readily be seen from the papers gathered below.

While these papers deal with magical texts in numerous different languages—and none of the participants in the conference could boast a reading ability in all the languages and scripts covered by the other participants—they often employ the same analytic techniques

and encounter similar textual, ritual and cultural phenomena. Thus, our emphasis in the present volume is not so much on the contact between different magical traditions (although this issue comes up in some of the papers) as on the recurrence of similar phenomena in magical texts as far apart as the Akkadian cuneiform tablets and an Arabic manuscript bought in Egypt in the late-twentieth century. Such similarities demonstrate to what extent many different cultures share a “magical logic” which is strikingly identical, and in particular they show the recurrence of certain phenomena when magical practices are transmitted in written form and often preserve, adopt and adapt much older textual units.

This brings us to one central theme of the present volume. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the magical traditions covered in the following papers is their scribal nature; rather than being “old wives’ tales” (as such materials used to be referred to dismissively in the past), the magical materials covered here were the purview of scribes and scholars, or, at the very least, of literate individuals who received much of their detailed knowledge in written form or memorized large chunks of text and then reproduced it orally or in writing. These practitioners copied, edited, revised and used their textual sources, transmitted them to their colleagues and disciples, and in some cases composed entirely new texts, often made up of older textual materials. Thus, they may be seen not only as active magicians, serving their clients, being paid for their services and being encouraged, tolerated or persecuted by the religious and secular authorities, but also as men (possibly also as women) of letters, whose scribal and editorial activities are intertwined with their magical ones, since it is these activities which form the basis of their special knowledge. Most of the papers in the present volume deal with one aspect or another of the complex interplay between continuous transmission, sometimes over remarkably long periods of time, and innovation, gradual or abrupt, as well as transformation, borrowing and adaptation of magical knowledge in different periods and places from ancient Mesopotamia to the Middle Ages and beyond.

Another feature of the scribal character of the magical technology is the growing emphasis over a period of time on specialization and on the distinction between different branches of knowledge. Thus, one feature of ancient and medieval magic is a growing demarcation of different fields of knowledge and action, often with different specialists, technologies and terminologies for each of these specific fields. Thus, one more major theme covered by the papers below is that of

the separation, or overlaps, between magic and divination, magic and medicine, magic and astrology and magic and mysticism in different societies in Antiquity. While these relations are differently reconfigured in each culture and society, the very emergence of these distinctions and overlaps seems common to all the cultures covered by the present volume, and is in part the result of the growth of highly complex bodies of magical and related knowledge.

The focus on processes of continuity and innovation, and on the delimitation of the magicians' specific expertise, is bound to yield some surprising results. Thus, to give just one example, magicians often boast of the hoary Antiquity of some of their recipes and rituals, and even attribute them to sages of old, like Solomon or Zoroaster. Yet most practitioners of the magic arts were ill-equipped to assess the real age of the textual materials they handled, and did not really care how old these materials were, as long as they were deemed ancient enough to be exceedingly potent. The academic scholar, on the other hand, often approaches these texts with a deep seated hermeneutics of suspicion, virtually taking for granted that neither Solomon nor Zoroaster had anything to do with their composition or dissemination. However, the same scholar is forced to admit that some of the magicians' textual materials (though not necessarily those deemed to be ancient by the magicians themselves) are in fact extremely old, and in some cases the scholar can even reconstruct their origins and development with some precision. The scholar is also sensitive to the relations between the magicians' productions and actions and those of some of their contemporaries in related fields, and is always looking for such connections and the clues they provide with regard to the identity of the anonymous practitioners, their social standing, and the breadth and depth of their knowledge outside the field of magic. Modern scholars are in fact looking over the shoulders of the ancient magicians and muttering, "Look, this is an edition of a much older recipe...but this piece is newly made up... and this bit is borrowed from another culture or translated from another language...and here the author is slipping into the realms of divination, or showing off with some medical terminology...and there the style is that of a mystic of the same period, with a somewhat different twist." Such mutterings, though couched in a more scientific language and supported by the necessary philological apparatus, form the backbone of the following studies.

To highlight the diversity of the present volume, and the common threads that run through the papers, which are arranged in a rough chronological order, beginning with Mesopotamia and Egypt and

ending in the Middle Ages, let us briefly summarize the contents of each paper.

In the first essay, Tzvi Abusch uncovers the textual and redactional history of some of the elaborate incantations of the *Maqlû* anti-witchcraft rituals from ancient Mesopotamia. Focusing on two specific incantations, he shows that the repetitions and inconsistencies they display are best explained as resulting from a gradual process of textual expansions and interpolations of older and shorter spells. Such processes are also evident when different tablets with the same incantations are compared, as they too display variants which are due not to scribal errors but to conscious editorial activities. Thus, the later texts are made up of numerous primary and secondary units, with the latter sometimes inserted into the former and sometimes between them, and with recurrent repetitions and resumptions which reveal the original shape of the units. As we shall see, an analysis of the Babylonian incantation bowls of more than a millennium later reveals a surprisingly similar picture.

Turning from Mesopotamia to Egypt, Joachim Friedrich Quack searches for the Egyptian precedents for the *charitesion*, the magical procedure which seeks to give charm and grace to a specific individual, a procedure which is well attested in the Greek magical papyri and related texts. Quack traces the use of the Egyptian words for “favor” and for “love” from the second millennium BCE to the Roman period, and especially the numerous occurrences, both in non-magical texts and in some hymns and spells, of the notion of finding favor with the gods and with the king and thus acquiring protection from one’s enemies as well as personal success. By this analysis Quack can show that many of the elements of the Greek *charitesion* are already attested in pre-Hellenistic Egyptian culture. He then turns to a detailed examination of the Demotic and Greek *charitesia*, showing that some of their salient features may be Egyptian in origin, and offering some important guidelines for anyone who seeks to define the cultural origins of a specific magical text or practice.

Still in Roman Egypt, where Quack ends his survey, Jacco Dieleman focuses on the Greek, and especially the Demotic, magical papyri. His starting point is the fact that the Greek magical papyri display much Egyptian influence, but are certainly not Greek translations of earlier Egyptian documents. He also notes that the Demotic magical papyri are written in a language and script which were only accessible to Egyptian priests but are certainly not copies of copies of

older Egyptian priestly texts. By surveying the different forms and genres of Egyptian magical recipes and recipe-books from Pharaonic to Roman Egypt, Dieleman can show both the continuity of some forms and the emergence in the Demotic magical papyri of recipe-types and magical practices which did not exist in pre-Hellenistic Egyptian medicine and magic. Thus, he concludes that the Demotic magical papyri were produced by Egyptian scribes who had access to older Egyptian temple libraries, but were in no way confined to using what they found there, as they also had access to some more recent magical technologies, and may even have developed some of these technologies themselves.

From the Egyptian temples of the Roman period we turn to the contemporaneous developments in the Greek-speaking world. First, Fritz Graf provides a detailed analysis of two very different sources, an inscription from Ephesus and a passage from Porphyry's philosophical writings. These illustrate the complex relations between magic and divination in Late Antiquity. In the first example, an Apolline oracle identifies a plague as brought about by witchcraft, and offers a *Maqlû*-type description of how this sorcery will be dissolved if the citizens carry out the prescribed rituals, but does not try to identify the culprit(s) who perpetrated the magical attack. In the second case, the same god suggests the use of magical rites to free a specific person from the demons that were binding him down to his material nature and to enable him to achieve contact with the divine. Thus, Graf suggests, "magic" could be seen in one context as the source of an evil plague and in another as a tool to be used for noble beneficial aims, and both views can be documented in earlier Greek texts as well. In both contexts, moreover, "magic" and "divination" were not seen as overlapping activities. This would change with the triumph of Christianity, which saw the pagan oracles as demonic in nature and equated divination with magic.

The second paper to deal with the Greek-speaking half of the Roman Empire is by Christopher Faraone, and it too seeks to illustrate the relations between magic and a related field of knowledge, medicine, with the help of two very different examples. The first is the notion, which was shared by magicians and doctors alike, that the womb often moves within a woman's body and thus generates various gynecological disorders which were interpreted as "uterine suffocation." Here we can see that some of the magicians were kept abreast of the medical knowledge and terminology of their time, including their

assumptions about the shape of the uterus, often depicted on uterine amulets. A similar picture emerges from Faraone's second example, an amuletic gemstone with an elaborate inscription whose contents display remarkable similarities with the structure of the popular medical handbooks of the time. Thus, rather than seeing Greek and Roman doctors as learned scientists, set apart from the ignorant magicians on the margins of their society, Faraone develops a view of physicians and magicians as deriving from the same social circles and sharing some of their knowledge and terminology.

Turning from Greeks and Romans to Jews, Ithamar Gruenwald uses the insights gained from recent studies of ritual to analyze the place of magico-theurgical practices in the corpus of ancient Jewish mystical texts known as the Hekhalot literature and in ancient Jewish magic. First, he stresses that the aim of such practices is the transformation of reality or of the practitioner who uses them, thus creating a unique world governed by their own ritual theory. Then, by analyzing one specific example from *Sefer Ha-Razim*, the Hebrew "Book of Mysteries," probably written in Byzantine Palestine, Gruenwald exposes the internal ritual logic of an extremely detailed magical recipe whose aim is "to speak with the moon or with the stars about any matter," and especially matters of love. Rather than being a hodgepodge of strange practices and "superstitions" (yet another term used by past scholars to dismiss such materials), the ritual turns out to be consistent with its own assumptions and presuppositions, and quite in line with what we find in other magical traditions.

With the next paper we move from the late-Roman Empire back to Babylonia, but more than a full millennium after the period covered by Abusch's paper. Looking at the Jewish incantation bowls of the Sasanian period, Shaul Shaked focuses on three bowls which were produced for a single client by three different scribes, and show a great degree of textual overlap. By looking at these bowls synoptically, and analyzing their similarities and differences, Shaked shows how a single textual unit could be used in different ways by different scribes, how different textual units served different functions within the bowl-texts, and how some smaller units served as bridges between the larger textual units, which the scribes then mixed and matched according to the specific circumstances. Among the factors that seem to have influenced the layout of the bowl texts, mention may be made of the physical size of the bowl, or the names of the client or clients who

commissioned them. Thus, while it is not always clear whether these practitioners used written books of magical spells, as we know the Jews of Byzantine Palestine did, it is quite clear that they had access both to oral prototypes and to actual bowls, and used these sources when producing their own bowls.

Dan Levene's paper is also devoted to the Babylonian-Jewish incantation bowls, but here the emphasis is on one specific sub-genre of bowls, those which identify themselves as a *qybl'*, a kind of counter-spell intended to return aggressive magical actions upon their perpetrators. Like Shaked, Levene too points to the similarities and differences between the texts on "parallel" bowls, but his main interest lies in the relations between the *qybl'* texts and the bowls on which they were written, which were apparently often bound together in pairs, one bowl facing the other, tied with cords and sealed with bitumen. The effect of this arrangement was to create a dark space between the bowls, symbolizing the spells' "counteractive" nature. This observation opens the way for the identification of more bowls that display the remains of the bitumen used to seal them, and an analysis of their texts reveals some similarities with the *qybl'* bowls, including the frequent recurrence of the Yaror demons. Such similarities between the texts of the spells and the manipulations exercised on the objects on which they were written, once again indicate the complex ways in which magical know-how was transmitted and used among the bowl-producers of late-antique Mesopotamia.

From Jewish magic we turn to the Jewish interest in astrology. Kocku von Stuckrad begins his essay with a survey of the biases and misleading categories that still plague the study of ancient astrology, and turns to a detailed analysis of the numerous astrological elements in the *Testament of Solomon*, and especially the attempt to control different cosmic powers. He then focuses on the veneration of planets, especially of the Sun, evident in the above-mentioned *Sefer Ha-Razim*, and notes how this practice, which is supposed to be forbidden by Jewish law, is amply paralleled in the Greek magical papyri. Finally, an analysis of the ascents to heaven described and prescribed in the Jewish mystical texts known as the Hekhalot literature illustrates yet another facet of the Jewish infatuation with the heavens and their contents in Late Antiquity. Such examples, von Stuckrad argues, prove that the neat borderlines scholars used to envision between magic and astrology, or between "Jewish" and "Christian" texts and practices, are

mostly artificial. While some ancient Jews kept such fields of knowledge as astrology at arm's length, others adopted it with zeal even if it contravened some of their forefathers' religious regulations.

Still focusing on astrology and on its Jewish practitioners, Reimund Leicht takes us in a somewhat different direction, by tracing the gradual development of the Jewish interest in astrology, and especially the planets. He begins his paper by noting that both in the biblical corpus and in the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, there is little evidence of Jewish interest in astrology, and no evidence of Jewish familiarity with planetary astronomy or astrology. He then moves on to rabbinic literature, which shows that toward the end of the second century CE, or the beginning of the third, the rabbis' interest in the luni-solar calendar made them study which days and hours are governed by which planets. This included the acceptance and adaptation of some astrological predictions relating, for example, to the fate and character of seasons which begin, or persons who are born, under the influence of a certain planet. This important shift in the Jewish view of astrology also paved the way for a whole host of later Jewish astrological texts, and in fact marks the birth of what may be seen as the "Jewish" branch of ancient and medieval astrology.

With Yuval Harari's paper we move from astrology to divination through dream inquiries, a common practice among Jews and non-Jews alike. The paper offers a detailed survey of the uses of dreams in ancient societies, and especially in the Jewish world, from the Hebrew Bible to the Middle Ages, followed by a brief survey of late antique and medieval Jewish magical practices for gaining material success. At the intersection of the manipulation of dreams and the desire for financial success, Harari locates the highly specific phenomenon of dream inquiries intended to find out the location of a hidden treasure. He then re-edits one such dream request found in the Cairo Genizah, first published a long time ago, but misunderstood by its original editors. In his discussion Harari tries to reconstruct the possible circumstances surrounding the production of this text.

From Genizah dream requests we turn to Genizah *rotuli*—that is, to long and narrow vertical parchment scrolls which were in use in early Genizah times for various purposes, including the writing of magical recipe books. Surveying the extant fragments of three such *rotuli*, and focusing on the one which is both the oldest and the best preserved, Gideon Bohak assesses the importance of this unnoticed stage in the transmission of Jewish magical literature. As the magical recipes on

this *rotulus* are all aggressive in nature, and can be shown to have originated in late-antique Palestine, they provide an unusually revealing perspective on some aggressive magical aims. They also demonstrate some unorthodox magical technologies used at least by some Jews in the pre-Muslim period. These texts were still being transmitted as late as the ninth and tenth centuries. As most of these recipes seem to have gone out of circulation in the later periods, Bohak suggests that they might have been seen as excessively violent in the eyes of the Jewish public in the medieval period.

Last but not least, Alexander Fodor examines a modern magical manuscript bought in Egypt in 1973, which includes, *inter alia*, an Arabic version of the *Sword of Moses*, a Jewish book of magic written in Aramaic and Hebrew some time in the first millennium CE. Through a detailed analysis of some of the recipes provided by the Arabic text and their constant comparison with the previously-known versions of the *Sword*, Fodor shows that the Arabic version restructures the original text in order to fit it into a wider textual framework. The Arabic version strips away much of the specifically Jewish flavor of the original text, and adds some unmistakably Egyptian-Arabic elements to the resulting text. This analysis provides an interesting indication of the cultural context of at least one of the redactors of the Arabic text, who may have been a Coptic Christian. The recurrent influence of Jewish liturgical formulae and Hekhalot-related materials on the magical procedures presented by the Arabic text shows that its textual forerunners must have undergone some editorial revisions by Jewish editors long before being translated into Arabic. Thus, a single Arabic manuscript bears witness to a whole millennium of continuity, innovation, translation and adaptation in two or three different magical traditions.

These are the main contours of the papers gathered below. We tried, as editors, to exercise a light touch, and to let the scholars follow their own mode of academic writing in matters of article length, density of footnotes, and depth of philological or historical analysis. Thus, some of the papers included in the present volume include some notes and discussions whose full merits and implications we cannot judge, as we lack the specific linguistic and historical expertise. Yet we remain convinced that the study of ancient and medieval magical texts, with their unique styles, complex terminologies and varying states of preservation, can only be fruitful and worthwhile when carried out by competent scholars who patiently read and re-read their sources and dissect

them with the finest philological tools. We are at the same time convinced that for such studies to be useful to scholars beyond the narrow fields of Akkadian, Egyptian, Greco-Roman, Jewish or Islamic Studies, they must use the minute philological analysis to support wider-ranging arguments, and especially to highlight textual, historical and phenomenological processes which might be valid in other cultures as well. In the present volume, we have tried to bring together a whole set of such papers, each of which should prove important for scholars in its specific discipline and useful for students dealing with magic of other times and places.

Finally, it is a duty and a pleasure to thank all the bodies and institutions that made this volume possible. First and foremost, the Institute for Advanced Studies in Jerusalem and its director, Professor Eliezer Rabinovici, hosted us for six months in a most gracious and scholarly environment, and thus made the entire project feasible and delightful. The Institute's associate director at the time, Pnina Feldman, with the members of the administrative staff, Shani Freiman and Dalia Avieli, made every effort to assure the success and well-being of the group, including the conference whose results we publish here. Throughout this period, Naama Vilozny served as the group's research assistant, and helped the group and each of its members, in a most devoted and pleasant way; she was replaced for part of the time by Shahar Shirtz, a very competent and knowledgeable helper. The conference itself was funded both by the Institute for Advanced Studies and by The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. We are grateful to both institutions for their support.

Professors Guy G. Stroumsa and David Shulman have kindly accepted our volume for this series, Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture, which seemed like the obvious venue for a book on magic conceived and nourished in Jerusalem. The book itself was meticulously edited by Esther Rosenfeld, who went over each paper with a keen eye and endless patience. Ortal-Paz Saar proofread the entire manuscript, and prepared the Index. We are grateful to both of them for making this a much better book than it would otherwise have been. And, last but not least, our Brill editors, Maarten Frieswijk and Marjolijn Schaake, have made every effort to ensure a smooth, professional and extremely friendly production process. Without the joint efforts of all these "invisible hands," the present book, with all its linguistic and typographical complexities, would never have been completed.

Two of the editors of the present volume should like to acknowledge with sincere gratitude the extra effort undertaken by their friend Gidi Bohak, who performed the major part of the editorial chores. It is our joint hope that the end result will be found to be a useful and worthwhile contribution to the study of magic.